



The Ten Sefirot

PART I

Alef–Dalet–Nun–Yud

Things Hidden and Revealed: Elements of a Modern Mystical Theology

Adonai [*alef dalet nun yud*] is the ark for the Name YHVH....the name Adonai does not contain everflow and blessing except from the blessed Name YHVH, and one cannot enter into the realm of YHVH without going through the Name Adonai.¹

The Ark built by the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings was made of wood overlaid all about with gold. A decorative box, its entire value derived from what it was designed to carry: the stone tablets witnessing the covenant between God and Israel. The Ark itself, made with care and the greatest respect for the sacred, was intended to appear beautiful. It was a vessel meant to be filled with that which gave it purpose. By itself the Ark was just a shell, filled with nothing; but its very emptiness indicates the potential for something to fill that void. What gave the Ark meaning and made it holy was not the vessel itself, but what the vessel contained. The vessel itself was only a shell; one must look inside, beyond the beautiful exterior, to find its true significance.

In daily life, we are surrounded by outer shells that mask inner reality. Surface appearances can be quite convincing: American popular culture emphasizes the value of artificially created appearances; the essence of marketing is to manipulate perception. What appears to be reality may be a façade; often, therefore, it is impossible to understand the meaning of what is seen. Appearances may very well be deceiving.

This perceptual predicament is no less true with regard to religious teachings. Writing in 1587 in Venice, Moshe Cordovero warned students of mysticism not to

¹ Joseph Gikatilla, *Shaarei Orach*, pp. 86–87.

judge the book of books, the Torah, by its “cover”:

Come and see: a garment is visible to all. Those fools, when they see a man in a garment that appears good to them, seek no farther. They think that the garment is the actual thing. [However], the essence of the body is the soul. Just so, the Torah has a body. The commandments of the Torah are called the “body” of the Torah. This body is clothed in a garment made up of the stories of the Torah. ... all the words and stories are garments.²

Cordovero compared the surface appearance to a garment. This is the shell, the vessel in which the thing of value is carried. The garment is the Ark; it carries what is valuable within it.

This is the essence of a mystical approach: one approaches what is apparently concrete reality by assuming that what is seen is only a veil. Reality is inner, not immediately apparent. Interpreting a verse from Proverbs, Maimonides explained:

The wise king said, “a word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in vessels of silver.”³ ... a golden apple overlaid with a network of silver, when seen at a distance, or looked at superficially, is mistaken for a silver apple, but when a keen-sighted person looks at the object well, he will find what is within, and see that the apple is gold.⁴

Careful – close reading beyond appearances is required if one would discern beyond the distracting surface to the reality within.

Such careful investigation beyond the surface is not without danger. For generations, Kabbalists have transmitted the sober truth from teacher to student that seeking the truth behind the veil is dangerous. For some, discovering the discrepancy that exists between the apparent and the real causes an intolerable intellectual stress, which leads, in extreme cases, to psychic trauma. In many more, less dramatic instances, those who explore the hidden without the appropriate preparation may come away disbelieving, disillusioned, or disaffected. A

² Moshe Cordovero, *Or Ne'erav*, I.2

³ Proverbs 25.11

⁴ ben Maimon, Moses [Maimonides], *Guide for the Perplexed*, p. 6.

mystic investigation of Torah always dispels long-held impressions and sometimes challenges deeply needed beliefs.

Another danger of the investigation of the hidden is that one who seeks the deeper meaning at the heart of life may be tempted to dismiss the surface level of appearances as evil, or, at the very least, as meaningless. One must guard against such a temptation, which is a clear sign of going dangerously astray. The “silver filigree” level of the world’s apparent reality must be respected; it is the level on which we live, the level on which every life is guided and judged by ethics and defined by the morality of one’s choices. It is not possible to reject surfaces in one’s quest for depths; Judaism does not negate any aspect of God’s creation; wholeness is not achieved by amputation.

Appearance is symbolized by the Ark. Everything, even the simplest surface impression, is a perception pregnant with potential meaning, waiting to be discovered. One’s first impression is key: one must first contemplate a closed gate if one would ascertain how to open it. For the mystics, one cannot approach the truth of YHVH, with all the hidden knowledge implied by that Name, without perceiving and coming to understand, and appreciate, the Ark of surface impressions symbolized by the Name *Adonai* spelled out the way it sounds, with the Hebrew letters *alef-dalet-nun-yud*.

This first name of God, the first gate approached by those who seek, holds the surface level of our lives. If we are to see the evidence of God’s presence in the world at all, we must seek it in the surface level of life, in the world of everyday errands and shopping and business and friendly relationships and family interactions. This surface level, filled as it is with veils and hidden levels, is vitally important because it is the place where we live out the ethics of our lives. This is the level of *asayah*, “doing” in the most prosaic sense of the word, and it is at this

level that we learn to look for hints of the golden apple – the opportunity to connect with God by caring for the Creation. At first, one may see a piece of garbage flung into one’s path; but with mystical study and practice, one learns to see the presence of God, waiting to be realized, in the release of all its potential power. That power is realized, for instance, in the simple, world-affirming act of recycling or properly disposing of that garbage and thereby healing one small part of the world.

Adonai is the name of God associated with the initial level of the mystical structure called the *sefirot*. This name is not hinted at, nor is it veiled. It is the actual spelling out, in Hebrew letters, of the Hebrew word that means “our Master.” It is an aural “veil” for the unsayable, for it is the name used by religious convention whenever we vocally refer to the unpronounceable Tetragrammaton, the ultimate four-letter word, which is *YHVH*. At the same time, the word *Adonai* exists and is used throughout the Tanakh and the liturgy, and for the mystics it has its own special significance. This collection of letters, which can mean either God or a much lesser master, is a sign to us of the beautiful silver filigree of ordinary reality, which holds the golden apple within it.

The ineffable Name *YHVH* is the one that teaches us the essence of our Blessed Creator and everything is subordinate to it, but the Name *ADoNaY* is the key to the entrance through the first gate. The Name is the lowest level of God’s Names. ... *ADoNaY* contains the same root as *AD’Nay heHatzet* (the foundations for the pillars in the courtyard).⁵

Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla explains that the lowest, and therefore the closest, level to us of the system of *sefirot* is associated with the name *Adonai* spelled out as אדני. This name symbolizes everything important about this initial level of our investigation of the *sefirot*. First, it spells out a Name of God, which seems to offer a welcome clarity and concreteness, except that this name is used primarily to

⁵ Joseph Gikatilla, *Shaarei Orah*, pp. 15, 17.

articulate another name of God that is spelled not at all that way. Here is something that is not what it seems. Like the Ark, it signifies a presence. Its own existence is not the point. Second, naming is an inexact exercise at best – to name a person may seem to evoke her essence, but a name can be changed, and no name belongs uniquely to one person. The God of the Jews is called by many names and, more, can be called on without a name's being used at all. Third, Rabbi Gikatilla teaches that the name *Adonai* is called "the lowest level of God's Names". This is not to assert that this name is less valued but, rather, that it speaks of God's foundational stability – like the foundations, or sockets, that securely held the pillars of the Israelites' wilderness tent sanctuary.

One of the mystics' most provocative inferences is that, since we reflect God, God can be understood, in a way, as a reflection of us. The similarity is no more certain, or perceptible, than that between a flower and its rippled, vague image in a moving stream, but it is there. When we imagine our own created selves as reflections of the attribute of *Adonai*, we see that we, too, are made up of surface appearances and deeper levels of meaning. We also are only partly named and only sometimes nameable. And, the mystics assert, we too are vessels meant to carry, and transmit, a sacred essence.

But what is it that each of us is to carry? As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel has written, each of us is a messenger who forgot the message.⁶ We do not know the effect of our actions across space and time, but, as physicists have discovered and ethicists have long taught, no energy, no act, is wasted. Human deeds have an effect throughout the systems of which we are a part: of the world, of the self, which is of the world, and of God, in which the self has a part, called by the mystics

⁶ Heschel, *Who Is Man?* p. 31.

helek Eloha mima'al – “a part of God above.”⁷

What does it mean to be a part of God in the world? To put it a different way, what does it mean, in Jewish mystical terms, to be a self? To ask this question is to take the first step of a mystical journey. To embark on the mystical path toward wholeness, one must start where one finds oneself, with oneself. One must start on the ground where one stands and realize that wherever one is standing, one is standing before God.

When one stands for prayer in a sacred space, one often faces the contemporary equivalent of the Israelites' Ark. Few modern synagogue Arks look like the original, but they are each still vessels, holding the Torah – full of potential meaning, waiting to be explored. Written on or above some Arks one finds the words, *shiviti Adonai l'negdi tamid*, “I have set *Adonai* before me always.”⁸ One may not always manage to summon the *kavvanah* necessary for prayer – such is to be human – but one may, at least, strive to keep the message of these words in sight, and ponder what they mean. To do so is to keep oneself in mind not only of that before which one stands, “*Adonai*,” but also of the one doing the standing, “me.” The mystical journey that is this monograph considers both words and what they mean.

The Paradox of Selfhood

“If I am not for myself, who will be for me? If I am only for myself, what am I? and if not now, when?”⁹

What is the human self? A moral quandary, an existential puzzle, a psychological problem that resists resolution? The self will never be known completely, because

⁷ The phrase is found in Job 31.2, where it refers to one's destiny; in the 16th century the usage emerged which referred to the human soul as an actual part, *helek*, of God. See, among others, *Reishit Hokhmah haShalem*, 362.

⁸ Psalm 16.8

⁹ M. Avot, 1.14.

we cannot fully know ourselves; something of the self of each of us will remain hidden from us: "the roots of existence are never plain, never flat: existence is anchored in *depth*."¹⁰ One's personal meaning is inextricable from the group meaning of which one is a part: one self-defines as an American, a Jew, a mother, a member of a book group, a brother, a registered Democrat, a vegetarian – and the meaning of one's life is a mixture of all these characteristics of self and also of the self that is the sum of the characteristics. As systems theory has taught us, we can only grasp the true nature of a human being, or of a tree, in its living context: "one cannot study the life of a tree by *excavating its roots*."¹¹

This is what is the matter with us: we are bleeding at the roots because we are cut off from the earth and sun and stars. Love has become a grinning mockery because, poor blossom, we plucked it from its stem on the Tree of Life and expected it to keep on blooming in our civilized vase on the table."¹²

Therein lies the first indication of the inescapable paradox inherent in human life. In the search for a stable sense of self in the world, although we are surrounded by people, we may be bleeding at the roots; we may find ourselves wandering from loneliness to uncertainty, and back again. We may make bad choices because of the longing for certainty: "The devil you know," it is said, "is better than the devil you don't know." Thus we may choose to stay with an unhappy relationship rather than risk the unhappiness of being lonely. We may fight change rather than risk the chance of a new horizon's promise. We may wonder what may be beyond a gate, yet never bring ourselves to step through to see.

The self is a paradox. Not even the idea of a self can exist by itself. On the most basic level, one cannot communicate one's own individuality except by using communally agreed upon sounds called language. I cannot say "I," in other words,

¹⁰ Heschel, 31.

¹¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Who Is Man?* p. 31

¹² D. H. Lawrence, *A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 323.

unless you, listening, understand what I mean by that word. Ironically, the idea of what an individual is comes, as do all commonly held ideas conveyed by a common language, from a social discourse that defines the idea communally. Sociologist Robert Bellah¹³ and his colleagues, studying American individualism and community, noted that, when our ability to connect to those around us in significant ways weakens, we do not necessarily develop greater freedom to be ourselves. The more we consider ourselves as individuals, liberated by our own self-exclusion from norms set by the establishment, the more, apparently, we look for validation: “When one can no longer rely on tradition or authority, one inevitably looks to others for confirmation of one’s judgments. Refusal to accept established opinion and anxious conformity to the opinions of one’s peers turn out to be two sides of the same coin.”¹⁴

Life is lived with others, inevitably, but much depends on the quality of the relationship; who are the “peers?” and what is the ground of their authority, those whose opinions influence one’s own life choices? Recall the mystic Rabbi Gikatilla’s¹⁵ image of the tent sockets that secured the *Mishkan*, the ancient Israelite sacred space that sheltered the Ark. The sockets, and their interrelationship, are the element on which the entire structure depends. They are the foundation, which must be secured first; their placement signifies the beginning of the building of the tent. Nothing, not even a tent socket, is unimportant in the effort to create a sacred space; no small act of a human being is without ethical impact. Each of us is like one of those sockets, holding the sacred space together simply by holding on, by doing the work we were created for. Through the uncertain appearances and the dimly perceived deeper meanings, we strive for the integrity of a simple tent

¹³ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 147–148.

¹⁴ Robert Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart*, pp. 147–148.

¹⁵ Joseph Gikatilla, *Shaarei Orah*,

socket, holding its peg securely. Gikatilla compares the 100 sockets that secured the tent to the 100 blessings which each Jew is expected to be able to recite each day. The grounding of the world will be strong as long as we look beneath the surface of our lives to recognize the blessings that support our existence. This kabbalistic insight is foundational: life is full of blessings and is grounded in God.

Each of us is a tent-peg, holding up one small part of the universe. The chaos theory in physics and the systems approach to psychology both affirm the religious insight that everything is connected to everything else, and everything affects everything else, that each human being is so intimately connected to everything and everyone else in the world that the only choice left is the determination of the quality of that link. Without sufficient contact and trust among individuals, the link weakens and breaks, and when one can no longer rely on a social connection with one's neighbors, what used to be a small matter to be decided over the backyard fence can become, absurdly, a matter for civil litigation. When, on the other hand, one makes a conscious effort to build spiritual awareness of the good that is within human reach, through block parties, proposing to work on that hedge together, or creating a neighborhood watch, the link among individuals and the surrounding community is expressed in acts of caring and in empathic, supportive relationships.¹⁶

The idea of the self and its purpose is a central concept for us as we attempt to make sense of our existence, yet as we focus on it we become increasingly aware of the difficulty of doing so. The inevitable necessity for others in our lives becomes clear in psychological research that reveals three "main, universal experiences by which bodies becomes selves and that ...constitute the essential

¹⁶ See Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, for more on the decline of "social capital" and its effects on American community.

nature of selfhood”:

The first of these is the experience of *reflective consciousness*. Human consciousness can turn around in a circle, so to speak, and become aware of its source. ... The second root of selfhood is the *interpersonal* being. The interpersonal aspect of self is the focal one in love and hate, in rivalry and competition, in trying to live up to someone’s expectations or worrying about what impression one is making. ... the third root of selfhood is the executive function. This is the active *decision-making* entity that initiates action, exerts control, and regulates the self. ... The moral responsibilities of one’s acts and choices are also an important basis for creating the unity and continuity of the self.¹⁷

Our sense of self, then, is first a product of “reflective consciousness,” an “inner” identity, and an answer to the question Who am I? The process of integrating all that makes me what I am – experiences, teachings, influences, awareness, revisions, insights, and indoctrinations – is how my self expresses its “I-ness.” The transitory nature of personal growth invites us to think of our selves as engaged in an ongoing project of *becoming*, a never-ending process of defining who we will be. As Rabbi Nakhman of Bratslav puts it in the parable below, each of us spends a lifetime fleshing out the reflection of God’s image that is our life. In so doing, we are bringing a portrait of the King – our own image, a unique reflection of God’s – to the King.

Once upon a time there was a King who collected portraits of all the other kings in the world. But there was one king whose portrait the King did not have. One day the King called his wisest counselor to him. “Go and fetch me the portrait of that king whom no one has ever seen,” he commanded. The counselor went on his way. He traveled and traveled and finally arrived at that kingdom of the king that no one had ever seen, and after some considerable effort, he managed to catch a glimpse of that king whom no one had ever seen. He created the image, and he began to journey back home, to bring it to his King. But the journey back took him much longer than he thought it would. He wandered this way and that, without finding a clear road to take him back. It took him the rest of his life to bring the image of the king to the King.¹⁸

¹⁷ Roy F. Baumeister, “The Self and Society, pp.192–193.

¹⁸ From Nakhman of Bratslav, *Maaseh miMelekh Anav*,

Every day, experiences and choices add a stroke here, erase a line there, of the portrait of the King that one's life reflects; the entirety of one's life is necessary to live out before one can possibly know what that life means.

The second component of one's sense of self is the "interpersonal," the part of us shaped by the formative influence of relationships with others. In Jewish tradition, this sense of necessary connectedness is expressed in the reverence taught for parents and teachers, and the value placed on study partners: *aseh l'kha rav, v'knei l'kha haver*, "arrange for yourself a teacher, get yourself a study companion."¹⁹ The first two components, obviously, do not stand alone; they exist interdependently. Our sense of self is based on relationships with others even as we internalize the experience, even as the language we use to think about the self is based on our communications with others. In one research project, a young woman, asked how she would describe herself, said, "I don't know....No one has told me yet what they thought of me."²⁰ This admittedly extreme, but recognizable, example illustrates the impact that others may have on an individual's sense of self.

The quest for identity ... exhibits a basic human need, the need to structure one's personal identity in relation to others, to identify oneself with what lies outside the self, to find roots and establish connections to the past as well as to the future.²¹

The necessity of a community to which to belong takes on greater urgency if "personal identity is best understood not as an essence or a core, but as a web knit from the various identifications and commitments that one makes with various social groups."²² If it is true that each of us finds our sense of individual selfhood out of the background, or framing, of the groups to which we belong, then we

¹⁹ Mishnah *Avot* 1.6.

²⁰ Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing*, p. 31.

²¹ Yael Tamir, "Some Thoughts Concerning the Phrase: 'A Quest for Identity,'" p. 21.

²² May, 125.

develop a sense of self most effectively if we become “joiners.” In short, to be human is to see oneself as part of some group or groups; the only choice we have is determine which groups will shape us. Here is the decision-making function of the self: what kind of vessel will I be? what will I carry? what will others learn from what I transmit, by my words and acts?

It is not clear how to find the place where one belongs, the path to walk toward one’s truest self – one’s portrait of the King. The work of integrating the self in the context of a meaningful community demands the right balance between the element of self and that of community. This work of integration is similar to the effort one makes continually to balance all the vital elements of a life that can conflict, such as family and work, tradition and relationships, and mobility and the desire for rootedness. It is work that is done throughout an entire lifetime and will never be finished.

A necessary precondition for participation with others in the building of real community is that each of us becomes aware of the balance necessary in our own lives if we are to gain a coherent sense of meaning and thus the integrating of all the various parts of our selves into a clear sense of identity, i We must be aware of oneself before we can introduce that self to others. And, as the rabbis of the Talmud taught, before we can judge others we must apply the same standard to ourselves; in other words, the outward and inner impulse to judge must be balanced. Before we can point out to a neighbor that her trees needs pruning, much less offer help, we must “clean up our own field first.”²³

In Jewish tradition, the community stands together as one at Sinai to enter into the covenant relationship with God, and one another, as the Israelites put it:

²³ BT *Baba Metzia* 107b

na'aseh v'nishmah, "We will do and we will obey."²⁴ The entire world, come what may, is understood from each person's secure place within that "we"; we are in this together, and we can depend on one another. The *Mishkan* was the first project the Israelites undertook after entering that covenant. The task was to create a place to evoke God's presence among them, which was possible only if they all participated "from the heart," with complete dedication to the communal ideal of creating sacred space. To create the sacred communal space, each Israelite was to bring an offering "willingly, from the heart."²⁵ Only with an offering brought with the intangible and irreplaceable quality of *kavvanah*, "intention," is it possible to create a truly sacred communal space, which is to say, a space in which God may be evoked. Such a sanctity is mediated by the quality of community, since holiness can be evoked only through the practice of justice among human beings toward one another and toward the world: *haEyl haKadosh nikdash b'tzedakah*, "the holy God is sanctified by justice."²⁶ In other words, God is present among us only when we are willing to commit to being present to each other.

This kind of belonging to a community does not mean that each of us must conform to the same mold, each behaving in exactly the same way and acting in the same way, as if we were all identical reflections of God's image.

How great is the Holy Blessed One! A man stamps many coins with the same seal and they are all alike; the Holy Blessed One stamps every human being with the seal of the first human being, and not one of them resembles another. Therefore each one is bound to assert, "for my sake was the world created."²⁷

This teaching is deeply paradoxical on more than one level. We are all alike, yet not one of us resembles another – and all of us carry the image of God. Thus each one

²⁴ Exodus 24.7
²⁵ Exodus 25.2
²⁶ Isaiah 5.47
²⁷ M. Sanhedrin 4.5

of us is the center of the universe; and, while that assertion could encourage a dangerous tendency toward self-absorption, at the same time, it also maintains that one's neighbor, created equally in God's image, is also the center of the universe. "Love your neighbor as yourself"²⁸ is not a command regarding an emotional state but a high ideal of justice: treat every other self in the way you yourself want and expect to be treated – with the same caring, the same consideration, the same respect.

The profound impact of this kind of holy community is that it has the potential to save the individual from existential loneliness by the securing of a place in God's presence – and all it symbolizes: home, wholeness, belonging. Such a place is envisioned by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger:

Midrash Tanhuma quotes: *ki lekakh tov natati lakhem, Torati* "I have given you good teaching, [my Torah]" [Prov. 4.2]...each one of Israel has a particular portion within Torah, yet it is also Torah that joins all our souls together. That is why Torah is called "perfect, restoring the soul" [Ps. 19.8]. We become one through the power of Torah; it is "an inheritance of the assembly of Jacob" [Deut. 33.4]. We receive from one another the distinctive viewpoint that belongs to each of us. The same was true in the building of the *Mishkan*. Each one gave his own offering, but they were all joined together by the *Mishkan*, until they became one. Only then did they merit the *Shekhinah* [presence of God] among them.²⁹

The Vision Born of Community

The medieval ethicist Eleazar Azikri lived in Sefat during the flowering of Jewish mystical study and speculation there. In *Sefer Haredim* he described founding a community called *Sukkat Shalom*, dedicated to Torah study and prayer. It would never have occurred to Azikri to defend the necessity of community – Jewish life in that day, like all premodern life, was founded on the assumption that people are born into communities that define their lives. The quality of one's behavior within

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Leviticus 19.18

²⁹

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, *Sefat Emet, Terumah* 3, p. 36.

the community one called home, however, was very much his concern. One of his analogies brings us back to our primary mystical symbol, the flaming tree, which became the menorah.

Azikri compared the seven branches of the menorah to the seven branches of the primary ancestors: four Matriarchs and three Patriarchs. In the menorah, the branches constitute the Jewish version of the family tree. The light that we, their spiritual descendants, are to kindle regularly in that menorah is called the *ner tamid*. Azikri compared it to each one of us:

We are commanded to bring pure olive oil to light the *ner tamid*, this means good olive oil, with a good smell, and it makes a good light. Similarly we bring ourselves, and if we are not good, i.e. if we are full of sin, then the light we create is smelly and nasty and no good for the *ner tamid*. This is a case of *midah k'neged midah* as R. Yosef Yaavetz taught: one who is constant in service to God will be constantly refreshed, and will not dry out in the days of the sun, nor in those of the rains – then “God will be my salvation, and I will trust in his mercy forever”, but if he will be inconstant in service, then God will be inconstantly present.³⁰

This is the lesson of the *ner tamid*, the “regularly kindled light”: a mutual and dependable and regular giving of the self to the other is the essence of community; a person’s choice to give of himself or herself only partially, in less than full participation, will cause the *ner tamid* to be improperly illuminated, and the entire community will suffer from loss of light. Only in the willingness to give oneself to caring for another, responding to and nurturing another’s hunger for integration and meaning, can one achieve a sense of meaning, through the sharing of the struggle for wholeness that is also one’s own.

Each person builds the sense of self in community, learning to balance the conflict of internal desire, and communal compromise by learning: in texts, by watching the role modeling of others, and by trial and error. Thus, if one is

³⁰ Eleazar be Moses Azikri, *Sefer Haredim*, p. 219

fortunate, one participates in building a community that supports the quest for balance and wholeness for each individual within it and yet functions as a community. The balance between the tendency to focus primarily on one's own fulfillment and the inclination to secure the well-being of the community even at one's own expense is difficult to find and no easier to maintain. No martyrs need apply: sociologist Nel Noddings observes that the one caring must, as a prerequisite, care for herself.³¹ Or, as expressed in a statement attributed to the Talmudic sage Hillel 2000 years ago: "They said about Hillel the Elder [that] when he would rejoice at the Joy of the Water Drawing Place he said: If I am here, everything is here, but if I am not here, who is here?"³²

There is some indication that now, at the dawn of the 21st century, we are emerging from the age of the glorification of the individual. Given the demonstrable interdependence of human life, how does one develop a realistic sense of self?

Sociologist Gergen sees a shift from a more radically independent stance in Western culture toward a

relational view of morality, in which moral decisions are viewed not as products of individual minds, but the outcome of interchange among persons. This is obviously the case when moral decisions are reached through active dialogue and negotiation, but it is also true when moral decisions appear to emanate from a single person. An individual's "good moral reasons" necessarily derive from the culture's repository of sensible sayings. ... When individuals declare right and wrong in a given situation they are only acting as local representatives for larger relationships in which they are enmeshed. Their relationships speak through them.³³

As Robert Putnam has noted, for certain reasons, people do choose to come together to work for a common purpose.³⁴ Neighborhood associations form to share the security concerns of those who live on the same block; parents whose children

³¹ Nel Noddings, *Caring*.
³² BT *Masekhet Sukkah*, 53a.
³³ Gergen, pp. 168—169.
³⁴ Putnam, Robert, *Bowling Alone*.

attend the same public school band together to support its educational resources; people who share a love of the outdoors may become friends after meeting on an organized group hike. There are goals that are reached more easily when one is part of a group.

Modern individualist Americans are perhaps rediscovering an old truth: that if we focus only on ourselves, we will quite possibly begin to feel a nagging sense of increasing distance from others. This insight, that something is wrong with the loneliness that comes with our sense of independence, is the first step toward overcoming our alienation from one another. If it is true that an authentic sense of self, and thus the capacity to appreciate truly and explore the meaning of our lives, is dependent on the quality of our community, then much depends on finding a way for the individual to find belonging in the group – to rediscover one’s meaning as a tent socket, one among many, all being necessary. Do we feel a lack in the distance that separates us from others because, on some level, we know that we are meant to be united in strong, dependable community? Where is the gate to stronger, deeper, and more supportive community?

For one who would explore a mystic’s path to meaning, organized religious communities provide a meaningful framework for connecting to others not only in shared space, but also through time. The organized religious community is, among other things, a communal expression of the preciousness of time; it is a constant reinforcement of the idea that life must be lived mindfully – that each moment carries within it unimagined potential for redemption. This religious approach to time presents a conflict with other time valuations expressed in American society. Americans are urged to buy *now, last chance, don’t miss it, and double the value if you act in the next five minutes*. In the headlong rush of an average day, one runs to make a meeting or catch a bus, waits to buy or do something, and multitasks

whenever possible. Time itself becomes a value, even a commodity.

Religious communities, what Robert Bellah calls communities of memory, see time in a very different way:

The communities of memory of which we have spoken are concerned in a variety of ways to give a qualitative meaning to the living of life, to time and space, to persons and groups. Religious communities, for example, do not experience time in the way the mass media present it – as a continuous flow of qualitatively meaningless sensations. The day, the week, the season, the year are punctuated by an alternation of the sacred and the profane. Prayer breaks into our daily life at the beginning of a meal, at the end of the day, at common worship, reminding us that our utilitarian pursuits are not the whole of life, that a fulfilled life is one in which God and neighbor are remembered first. Many of our religious traditions recognize the significance of silence as a way of breaking the incessant flow of sensations and opening our hearts to the wholeness of being.³⁵

A community of memory is a community of the shared meaning conveyed by that memory over time; Jewish meaning is supported by the memories that Jews retell over and over to each other, paradigmatically at the Pesakh Seder. How do Jews know what it means to be Jewish? Literally, by taking time to tell the stories that inform that meaning.

The quality of Jewish time, and, thus, lived Jewish reality, is grounded on Jewish communal memory; what is not remembered is lost to the community, at least on the conscious level of self-understanding, as if it had never been. In the same way, as memories of what has been are shared with those who need to learn and own them, the common ground of meaningful belonging is prepared: theologian Rachel Adler points out that remembering is “re/membering”, and re/membering “is the restoration of wholeness.”³⁶ We cannot name the Jewish God if we do not remember the story of the covenant relationship; we cannot name ourselves within the Jewish community if we do not share those memories. “In

³⁵ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart*, p. 282.

³⁶ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, p. 3.

every generation each Jew must see himself as if he himself went forth free from Egypt.³⁷

A community of shared memory is a community with a clear framework on which one can rely; those who find their place within it find secure grounding in the sense of meaning it offers. This need not be the meaning of greatest popularity: fulfilled Jewish communities that constitute very small minorities in their societies can and do exist. The degree of their success depends on the depth of the commitment of each individual to the community; this is Azikri's³⁸ olive oil for the *ner tamid*. The Jew who is going to erev Shabbat services on Friday evening cannot help but be aware that her journey toward the synagogue intersects with the worst rush hour of the American week. Even stranger is the trip to join with one's religious community for Yom Kippur, that sacred day when Jews fast and pray all day long. All around, the restaurants are open and businesses ply their regular trade. To attempt to balance both worlds equally would indeed be an unsatisfying tack. Only one who is grounded securely in the sincerity of an inner integrity that is complete and whole will negotiate the alienation of American society successfully. And only she will know opportunities for deep, meaningful, and supportive belonging with a community that will give her a place to face, and learn, the lessons of her life. Such a person walks through the door of the synagogue and feels that it is home.

The paradox of the self is not, however, resolved. The ongoing challenge of each self, finding oneself within one's various communities, is, by way of living mindfully within those communities, to develop a wholeness, a sense of identity strong enough and deep enough to weather all the questions and storms of an

³⁷ BT *Pesakhim* 116b.

³⁸ Eleazar be Moses Azikri, *Sefer Haredim*.

individual life. This integration is not merely important for the person and her inner sense of wholeness; as the mystics show us, it bears on the well-being of the world.

To learn how to become oneself, among all the other selves of the world, is the everyday, mundane, and deeply holy path that leads one toward a spiritual sense of oneness with the world and with God. How neither to overestimate nor to underestimate one's place in the world is not easy; to come to understand how one's needs and talents best fit against those of one's companions cannot be accomplished alone. One must keep before one's mind's eye both the image of the tent socket and that of *Adonai*, in whose image one is created and before whom one stands.

Judaism teaches that the ideal of wholeness must apply to oneself precisely as it applies to one's surroundings. This idea is often expressed in Jewish spiritual terms. Even the Hebrew word for "peace," *shalom*, derives from the same root as the word "wholeness." This ultimate integration is an expression of wholeness on human and cosmic levels, which Jewish mystical tradition knows as Paradise. The paradox is that, to be a whole self, we must reject the question for our own small individual sense of oneness and become fully part of the all and know it to be the Oneness to which we belong. To give up our own individual sense of oneness is to know the great oneness we become when we are part of the All.

There is a Hasidic saying: *mi she ayn lo makom b'shum makom, yesh lo makom b'kol makom* – "if you don't have a place in any place, you have a place in any place."³⁹ The word *Makom*, "Place," is an ancient name for God. While an individual may feel a lack of certainty of temporal place, the teachings of Jewish mysticism reassure that one's very being is intrinsically linked with God.

³⁹ Cited by Rabbi Louis Jacobs, transmitted by Rabbi Byron Sherwin.

First, one must find one's place within the wandering. One who does not know that place is ready to seek. To one who can admit uncertainty regarding the meaning of self and of life, the path toward meaning will open – and only to that one. Paradoxically, the certainty of our own individual lives is found outside us as we learn

not to measure meaning in terms of our own mind, but to sense a meaning infinitely greater than ourselves. On the certainty of ultimate meaning we stake our very lives. In every judgment we make, in every act we perform, we assume that the world is meaningful.⁴⁰

And what of autonomy? To one who asserts that the only authentic source of meaning is that found inside the self, the following question might be posed: if someone who chooses to represent himself in court "has a fool for a lawyer," how shall we define one who attempts to become his own ethical guide and spiritual arbiter? How shall we judge the meaning of a life if it is entirely self-defined and self-referential? And what might be at stake if one's self-definition is wrong?

What exactly is this "inner self" we are supposed to be true to? What does it include and what does it exclude? What if it turns out that this true self includes some fairly nasty – or, even worse, banal – characteristics, traits we would prefer not to think of as really *us*? What if many of our deepest and most personal thoughts and desires are actually products of the latest fads and fancies purveyed by the media? ... What if the whole notion of the innermost self is suspect? What if it turns out that the conception of inwardness presupposed by the authenticity culture, far from being some elemental feature of the human condition, is in fact a product of social and historical conditions that need to be called into question?⁴¹

The grounding of our lives cannot be a foundation that we ourselves create; none of us can create our own world without the danger of meeting a day on which we experience a crisis of faith in ourself, and in our self-sufficiency.

The ideals we strive after, the values we try to fulfill, have they any significance in the realm of natural processes? The sun spends its ray upon the just and the wicked, upon flowers and snakes alike. The

⁴⁰ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man*, p. 107.

⁴¹ Charles Guignon, *On Being Authentic*, pp. 9–10.

heart beats normally within those who torture and kill. Is all goodness and striving for veracity but a fiction of the mind to which nothing corresponds in reality? Where are the spirit's values valid? ... It is such a situation that makes us ready to search for a voice of God in the world of man: the taste of utter loneliness; the discovery that unless God has a voice, the life of the spirit is a freak; that the world without God is a torso; that a soul without faith is a stump.⁴²

The basic social structure of human nature is what it has always been as far back as we can see: we are individual human beings with hearts that beat independently of one another and yet know that our lives depend on every other. When we are together, at the best of times, there is a synergy, which has been called by multiple different names and that Jewish mystical tradition refers to as the *Shekhinah*, “the indwelling presence” of God. The source of Creation, the life of the world, the connective tissue among and between, what Arthur Green has called the “deep structure” of the universe.⁴³ It is something beyond us to which we belong and only within which, paradoxically, we can find ourselves and our connection to one another.

Balancing Paradox – Theological Needs of a Modern Jewish Community

Seeing the Self by Way of the Other

Modern Jewish scholars and teachers pose many valuable questions for the American Jewish community to grapple with as we struggle with the challenges of defining meaningful Jewish existence. This monograph is based on the premise that, while the questions may be drawn from political, sociological, and cultural categories of human awareness, the best answer is theological. If the challenge is to balance self and other, individual and world, American and Jewish, and all the other complementary opposites between which we live, a mystical theology of connectedness, of a mutually committed covenant, offers a promising path.

⁴² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, p. 101.

⁴³ Arthur Green, *Ehyeh*, p. 20.

Theology is an articulation of the meaning of life from a religious perspective. Implicit in that statement is a method of constructing that articulation, which begins with God and the relationship between God and the world and, more specifically, between God and the Jewish people. Jewish theology proceeds from the core concept that we are not autonomous, independent, self-sufficient creatures, but that we live in interlinked, dependent, dense, and all-surrounding webs of connectedness. In Jewish theology, we begin with the awareness that there is an Other in the world and that our lives are defined in terms of self and other. Thus, Jewish experience is not autonomous but heteronomous, which is to say that the source of authority for each Jew's existence reaches beyond the self to the self-defining realization that there is an other – and an Other.

This is not an abstract concept; it is interaction with the specific other who faces me that defines my moral existence and teaches me of a commanding Other, called God. In a philosophy built on familiar Jewish ethical concepts, Emmanuel Levinas taught that "justice well ordered begins with the other"; justice may not first be built abstractly as an idea but must be birthed in the reality of human relationship. Only by transcending individuality can a person touch God's presence. We are dependent for our moral existence on the other who brings us out of ourselves, for only thus are we enabled to develop our own personal relationship with God. It is through recognizing another human being in all her need and beauty, face to face like the *kheruvim* on the Ark, that I become fully myself. The "face" of another human being whose need I feel must not be a construct of my assumptions, created to accommodate my comfort level. Granted, there is nothing more difficult than witnessing someone else's need, if it triggers our own sense of lack as well. But only on the day when I can truly see the Other as she truly is, can I begin to see myself clearly as well.

To hear his destitution which cries out for justice is not to represent an image to oneself ... the face summons me to my obligations and judges me. ... my position as *I* consists in being able to respond to this essential destitution of the Other, finding resources for myself. The Other who dominates me in his transcendence is thus the stranger, the widow, and the orphan, to whom I am obligated.⁴⁴

The way we respond to our connectedness – not only that which we choose, but that which is unchosen, such as family relationships or certain unavoidable existential realities – “has in many ways more in common with the older, religion-linked versions of morality and a good society than with the modern Western liberal ideal.”⁴⁵ To justify morality on a philosophical basis, rather than as a religious commandment, is a project of the modern era. Philosophy can be dry, though, whereas religion insists on personal connections, emotional loyalties, and the complete psychological commitment of faithful belief. While a commitment to that which already grounds and defines us can lead us dangerously backwards, it need not; we might choose, rather, to note that there may be some profound and enduring human truth on which the idea of connectedness touches. This “less individualist version of individuality” is not defined by an individual’s assessment of some private sphere, but “becomes defined by responses to dependency and to patterns of interconnection, both chosen and unchosen.”⁴⁶

The Balance

A prominent tangible symbol of the Jewish idea of justice is the *mishkal*, the scale, that simple device in which a central shaft balances two pans, each hanging from either end. Consider the scale in the hands of depictions of the goddess of justice; this is a Roman image. In the older image, which may well influence the ancient

⁴⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, p. 215.

⁴⁵ Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, p. 24.

⁴⁶ Annette Baier, *Moral Prejudices*, reflecting on Carol Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, pp. 170–173.

Jewish concept, the Egyptian goddess *Ma'at*, whose name connoted truth, order, and balance, is depicted as weighing the worth of a human life, symbolized by placing the heart on her scales. The truth came out in the balance. In ancient Israelite practice, the *mishkal* was the basic tool of commerce. In one pan was placed a weight that reflected an agreed-upon value: a *shekel's* worth, for example, of small rocks. In the other pan, a *shekel's* worth of barley would be weighed out.

Just scales, just weights and just measures you shall have; I am YHVH your God who brought you out of Egypt.⁴⁷

In an agrarian society with an economy based on trade of unlike objects, the first step was an agreed-upon measure of value, the *shekel's* worth of weight. The most basic expression of justice in this system is keeping one's thumb off the pan in which the weight is placed when the value of a sale is measured. The balance must be true and just.

The Jewish experience is deeply rooted in both universal and specific justice; in the ideal as well as in the application in relationship. The establishment of justice is upheld by Biblical and Rabbinic tradition as a primary value: the verse *tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, "justice, justice shall you pursue," is interpreted to require us to run after opportunities to establish justice among members of our community; and Rabbinic commentary asserted that the repetition of the phrase meant not only to hurry about it, but to ensure that both the ends that were desired, and the means by which they were reached, were just. The prophets declared that the value of our lives was based on our treatment of the vulnerable members of our community – the widows, orphans, and strangers in our midst. Attention to the specific needs of the individual for whose sake we exert ourselves in the cause of justice is part and parcel of that aspiration. One's *tzedakah* is valued more highly when it is carried

⁴⁷ Leviticus 19.36

out in a way that seeks to avoid humiliation of the needy human being to whom one would reach out.

Rabbi Yonah said: the verse doesn't say "happy is the one who gives to the poor" but rather, "happy is the one who *uses his insight when giving* to the poor" (Psalm 41.2), meaning: consider this person carefully to discover which way is best to be privileged to do the *mitzvah* of *Tzedakah* in this particular situation.⁴⁸

Robert Alter suggests that it is the recognition of the fundamental human reality of interrelationship which shaped the writings of the Tanakh: "the ancient Hebrew writers developed a narrative art because only through narrative could they convey a view of human life as lived reflectively, 'in the changing medium of time, inexorably and perplexingly in relationship with others'."⁴⁹ The story of the Jewish search for meaning is told in stories of interaction – human with human and human with God. These are stories of acting in ways that are, or are not, rooted in justice, and the quality of justice expressed between human beings directly reflects the integrity of each actor's relationship with God, as well as with other human beings.

How are we to recognize consciously and intentionally the relationships in which we are enmeshed? How are we to accept the common humanity we share with neighbors? We pass homeless men and women on the street and try not to see them. We choose and drop friends easily enough when there is no sense of mutual responsibility. We, who are fundamentally creatures of the herd on the very level of survival, nevertheless are shy and awkward in a group of strangers and not so ready to commit beyond the level of convenience, even when we "join" a "community". For Jews who contemplate their own place in the chosen, self-conscious Jewish community, the challenge of seeing what American Jews have in common with those to the right or left on the religious spectrum is difficult enough

⁴⁸ *Leviticus Rabbah* 34.1

⁴⁹ Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, cited in Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, p. xviii

to meet; how much more so is the effort to sense the elemental links of connectedness between American and Israeli Jews?

A Jewish theology of balance and the principles that derive from it, proceeding from a Jewish conceptualization of God, embraces all of life and its meaning. Its truths and applicability must withstand the honest and thoughtfully considered existential challenges that emerge from every aspect of a Jew's life. The word "truth" in Hebrew is *emet*, a word spelled with the first, middle, and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet; truth in Judaism circumnavigates the world, open to all. A true theology of Judaism is constructed of a methodology enabling the learning from, and incorporation of, new truths that have yet to be discovered; a theology of balance recognizes that there are extreme imbalances in religious life at present, and new emphasis must be placed upon the neglected side of the scale.

More explicit methodological considerations emerge as theologians grapple with the language in which the theology will be expressed and the context it must address. God is an eternal truth, but our understanding of that truth changes and grows. Thus theologians faces new questions in the interface between the two, and one of their challenges is to articulate the sense of the dialogue between them and the new synthesis emerging from the dialectic. A theologian seeks the "*de'ah, binah v'haskel*," the "knowledge, understanding and enlightenment" we ask for in the daily prayers. These theological principles "should illuminate life." They must "help us to understand the experience of religion, the religious experience of our people, and the religious experience of an individual."⁵⁰ A theology of balance, using the structure of meaning offered by the *sefirot*, sees all the imbalances as naturally-occurring and inevitable. It offers a path toward rebalance and wholeness that, because it accepts opposites as part of a natural whole, does not shy away from

⁵⁰ Susannah Heschel, *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity*, p. 158.

paradox and conflict, but sees the only meaningful path as leading right through the thicket of such difficulties. One must look in order to see. And one must remember to look at the moment of greatest blindness and most acute difficulty, even in the face of what one already knows with certainty.

Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and he saw a ram caught in the thicket by its horns; Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a sacrifice in the place of his son. Abraham named the place *Adonai Yireh*, and it is called by that name to this day: in this place God was seen.⁵¹

At the last possible minute, Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked and saw; Moses turned aside and looked, and saw. Somewhere in that thicket is the redemptive discovery, the path forward, which we will otherwise overlook.

The Problem of Methodology

As we consider the question of methodology, with its presuppositions of categories and concepts to be neatly articulated, we come to the fork in the road of Greek logic and the radically different Biblical mindset. Theologians deal with a problem that is also common to every translator: how not to betray the meaning of the original insight or teaching, when it must be transmitted in a language or in categories of thought never dreamed of in the original utterance or its context. The materials for the construction [of a Jewish theology] are the teachings about God and His relationship to man contained in the Bible and extended, elaborated on, and interpreted in the Rabbinic literature, in post-Talmudic thought down to the present day, and in the living experience of the Jewish people throughout the ages. The central methodological problem is that of discrimination. Not everything that has come down to us from the past is durable.⁵²

⁵¹ Genesis 22.13-14

⁵² Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, p. 13.

The problem is one of a plethora of content; a tremendous amount of material exists in the Jewish family attic. How can we know which elements of the past are essential and which are merely definitive of a certain time or place? The situation of modern Jews facing the traditional *siddur* is a good example: it has repetitions, garbled phrases caused by generations of Gentile typesetters' mistakes, and additions brought by the significant events that occurred during each generation of Jewish communities. The *siddur* has been described as the scrapbook of the life of the Jewish people: not everything in that *siddur* is timeless, but all of it together describes the history and formative experience of the Jewish people. How to discern the most important refrains in all that varied song and story, that which is strong enough to continue to support the present, and welcome future additions?

Some hold that Judaism does not have a theology and that both the word and the concept of theology are foreign to Jewish life. One may answer that perhaps the limits of the concept are too rigid (a common problem among medieval philosophers, who worried over paradoxes that they thought their way into). Jews think about their religion and detect internal meaning and coherence in its teachings, as much as any other religious group does. An open society, particularly one such as America, which tends to minimize difference and discourage diversity, challenges modern theologians to articulate what is distinctly Jewish.

Judaism is a way of thinking, as well as a way of living. The task of Jewish theology is to establish the nature and the parameters of Jewish religious thought, to articulate coherently the authentic views of Judaism, and to demonstrate how the wisdom of the Jewish religious teachings of the past can address the perplexities of contemporary Jewish existence in a manner that is compatible with the thought and life of the Jewish faith-community at a given juncture in time and space. The four criteria that characterize a valid Jewish theology are identical to those of any valid theology. These are: authenticity, coherence, contemporaneity, and communal

acceptance.⁵³

A congregational rabbi relates the story of leading a discussion on Jewish questions of life and thought with a drop-in group of parents during a regular learning session. After a discussion of Zionism occasioned by the approach of Israel's Independence Day, one mother was moved to ask, "Do all peoples have a homeland?" "That's the idea," was the response. "What about Christians?" she continued. "What's their home?" This fundamental difference between Judaism, a religious expression of an essentially extended tribal family, and Christianity, an evangelical religion, had become clear to her as never before. She had been taught only of the similarities that the two monotheistic religions shared and the so-called Judeo-Christian ethic. She had no sense of a way of thinking that was specifically Jewish and that would require her to see herself as essentially different from her Christian neighbors. In an open society like America's, the contextual challenge for modern Jewish theologians begins with the social pressure many Jews feel to avoid feeling fundamentally different.

The American liberal Jew's mindset tends to be shaped more by the founding documents of American society – the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution – than by Jewish foundational texts. Often, the first condition of liberal Torah study must be reiterated: the perspective of the ancient Hebrews, who are modern Jews' spiritual ancestors, is radically different. Many liberal American Jews are still circling warily around the idea that Judaism's earliest antecedent beliefs are quite different from their Protestant-dominated American assumptions about religion. The God of the Torah is not perfect and is not omniscient. The doctrine of monotheism, fully understood, challenges Jews to grapple with surprisingly sophisticated ancient teachings, such as Isaiah's insight

⁵³ Byron Sherwin, *Toward a Jewish Theology*, p. 9.

that God creates light *and* darkness, good *and* evil.

Many Jews have assimilated far more of their religious thinking from the latent Christianity in American society than they have – or have had the opportunity to learn – from Jewish theological teachings. But it leaves them disturbed. They wonder how to defend or even explain the “vengeful Old Testament God” of Judaism, who “visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, even unto the third and fourth generations” in the book of Exodus⁵⁴ to their liberal, sophisticated post-Christian, atheist, or “spiritual, not religious” friends. They never think to question the mindset behind the question. The unspoken assumption is that the Jewish God is a highly anthropomorphized, personally involved deity who holds the Jewish people to unrealistic and arrogant standards (as with “the Chosen People” doctrine), and then regularly, if arbitrarily, blaming and punishing us for our inevitable failures.

A rather different reading of the text hardly ever occurs to American liberal Jews. To comprehend what the ancient Hebrews understood about God in the Torah requires a radical openness, a willingness to be confronted by something other than what one expects. One must turn the verse under consideration a different way, as the rabbis taught: *hafokh bah v'hafokh bah d'kula bah*, “turn it over and over again, for everything is in it.”⁵⁵ For example, consider the foregoing verse in Exodus another way: in situations like alcoholism, the sin of the alcoholic person who does not become healthy will affect the life and health of that person’s children. A curse that falls on three and four generations is reasonable in the context of the ancient Israelites, who lived in tribally organized human communities, very often with three and four generations of family living in the same tent, or in close proximity. Of

⁵⁴ Exodus 34.7

⁵⁵ M. Avot 5.22

course, three and even four generations would be hurt by the sins of the elders who ruled over their lives.

Everything hangs on the effort it takes to make sense to modern American liberal Jews that they might consider the nature of God in a way that is very different from the way they have been conditioned to think about God in a society largely religiously shaped by Protestant values. Only then do they have the chance to consider that another way to learn about God is to discern God's presence, and will, in the way the world works. The statement "God willed it that way" is still applicable, but the thinking behind it is quite different. Rather than seeing the world set up as a board game and a deity arbitrarily moving pieces around, this construction sees everything that happens, even that which seems arbitrary, as inevitable occurrences to be accepted as the natural course of life and, therefore, as empirical evidence of God's presence in their lives. The typical modern liberal American is far more influenced by a species of Calvinist determinism, and a rather awful ideal of a casually caring, or not, God. One prays and hopes for a limited amount of divine compassion in the same way one hopes for fair weather for the weekend, with about as much faith that one's prayers make a difference in the cosmos.

The ancient Hebrew understanding of God is radically different, and unfortunately most *siddur* translations do not illuminate this difference. American liberal Jews, usually without any Hebrew literacy in their intellectual arsenal, have no way to distinguish between the miserly Calvinist's view and the Jewish mystical vision of the compassion flowing forth boundlessly from the Source of Creation, evoked as easily as in the recitation of a simple, heartfelt blessing. An interesting insight into the ancient Hebrew mind lies in considering the Hebrew word *olam*, which communicates both the concepts of the physical "world" and the temporal

quality of “forever.” God is referred to in the Hebrew of the Torah with similarly unbounded terminology. For the Torah, the world is not “that way” because God arbitrarily willed it to be so, like an interior designer choosing between wood and stone for a floor. The world and the way it works are, rather, an ongoing opportunity to learn about the endlessly deep and profound way in which God works.

New Theological questions

We live in a modernity that is so different from past experience that at least one major Jewish thinker, Rabbi Yitz Greenberg, has suggested that we are living at the cusp of a “Third Era,” which is as unlike the previous Rabbinic period as that period was unlike Biblical Jewish civilization. A major task, then, of a modern Jewish theology is once again to find the order that may be derived from apparent chaos. Judaism harbors within it the potential to address that which was not dreamed of by earlier generations and is outside the boundaries of Jewish experience. But which traditional truths must a Jewish theology uphold and which can be challenged? Can a Jewish theology be authentic if it supports some traditional assumptions, such as the secondary status of women; can it be contemporary if it does not favor egalitarianism? How much communal acceptance is enough to stave off chaos? Theologian Rachel Adler points out that the way forward is not clear, because it has never been orthodox, despite the insistence of conservative elements.⁵⁶

The nature and methodology of theology are more open questions in Judaism. Biblical and Rabbinic Judaisms embody a variety of theologies in forms that do not call themselves theology: narrative, prayer, law, and textual exegesis. Although in every period of

⁵⁶ The word “orthodox” refers to the concept of only one correct and true doctrine, especially in religious usage.

postbiblical Judaism there have been influential theologies utilizing philosophical forms and categories...there is no standard way of systematizing their Jewish content.⁵⁷

The problem may not be with what is possible in Jewish thought as much as with the structure of the methodology created to make it coherent. Adler warns of the burden an inadequate methodology can place on us as we attempt to think our way toward an authentic sense of Jewish meaning. Consider the category of *halakhah*, created by "members of a Jewish male elite" who

constructed the categories and method of classical *halakhah* to reflect their own perspectives and social goals and have held a monopoly on their application. Borrowing a term from the post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, I have called classical *halakhah* a methodolatrous system. The method becomes a kind of false god. It determines the choice of questions, rather than the questions determining the choice of method. Questions that do not conform to the system's method and categories are simply reclassified as non-data and dumped out.⁵⁸

How does one succeed in the effort to see in a new way when the permitted views are already legally defined? When one seeks a new way to understand the value of women's involvement in what have been traditionally considered exclusively male areas of religious activity, Adler points out, "the Talmud's characteristic question [is] 'How do we know that they are excluded?' The presumptions select the questions. The categories shape them."⁵⁹

If theologians must accord tradition the respect of an equal partner in dialogue, as Martin Buber suggested, it is difficult to envision a discussion if one's interlocutor does not countenance it at all.⁶⁰ The theologian in this area is rather like the first human, given the task of naming the animals and, thus, bringing them completely into being. If we cannot name a thing, it is not fully there.

⁵⁷ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, p. xvi

⁵⁸ Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, p. 28.

⁵⁹ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, p. 29

⁶⁰ At least not halakhically. There are aggadic examples of women teaching Talmud and demonstrating halakhic wisdom superior to men's. This seems to be typical of the interestingly subversive quality sometimes demonstrated by *aggadah* but by definition does not bear upon the halakhic issue.

Abraham Joshua Heschel similarly presents a Jewish tradition that speaks for itself, in its own categories.

...theology starts with dogmas, philosophy begins with problems. Philosophy sees the problem first, theology has the answer first....In religion...the mystery of the answer hovers over all questions.⁶¹

The task is not to prove that God exists and that there is a world that transcends and gives meaning to the self, but to articulate that knowledge in a way that can be understood. The form of thinking adequate to the theological task is not detached conceptual thinking but situational: "The beginning of situational thinking is not doubt, detachment, but amazement, awe, involvement."⁶²

Religion must be understood in its own terms, but intellectual honesty is also required.

Criticism of religion must extend not only to its basic claims but to all of its statements. Religion is liable to distortion from without and to corruption from within. Since it frequently absorbs ideas not indigenous to its spirit, it is necessary to distinguish between the authentic and the spurious. Furthermore, superstition, pride, self-righteousness, bias, and vulgarity, may defile the finest traditions. Faith in its zeal tends to become bigotry. The criticism of reason, the challenge, and the doubts of the unbeliever may, therefore, be more helpful to the integrity of faith than the simple reliance on one's own faith.⁶³

A theology of the *sefirot*, which is a theology of wholeness, embraces the assertion that all life's religious attitudes, from belief to criticism to cynicism to doubt, are vital to the complete inclusiveness of the approach. Everything is as it has to be in the world that God created; whether or not the order of Creation makes sense to human beings may be intellectually stressful but is not significant to Creation's legitimacy. For the mystics, since God created all that exists, everything is necessary: not only the cherished teachings of Jewish tradition, but also that which

⁶¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, p. 4.

⁶² Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, p. 5.

⁶³ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God In Search of Man*, p. 10.

defiles both the tradition and its teachings, have a place in the understanding of the world's structure, as the system of the *sefirot* expresses that structure.

In terms of mystical theology, some strong and necessary sparks are to be found within the criticism and the bigotry – one must dig deeply to see them, but they are there, because that is how this world is created to be. The good and the bad are confused, mixed up together in impenetrable thickets of history. Yet even in darkest, deepest exile, one may at any moment turn and see God's presence, even in a thornbush, even in a thicket.

Memory and Belonging

When, in their first encounter, God appears to Moshe speaking out of a burning bush that Moshe turns to see, God shares the most intimate, and certainly least comprehensible, version of the Divine Name: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, "I will be [or "was," or "am"] what I will be [(or "was" or "am")]. God goes on to say to Moshe, *Zeh zikhri l'dor dor*, "My Name is my memory in [or for, or to] each generation." Rachel Adler describes the task of theology as focusing on the memories we tell ourselves, the stories we share with one another, and the archetypal myths that inform our sense of what it means to be Jewish. Each generation struggles with them until their meaning for that generation's time is revealed.

That is the classic act of Torah study. It began with the work of the ancient scribes, who not only recorded the stories that became the Tanakh, but interpreted, as in *Devarim* or *Divre haYamim*, and added, as in the early Aramaic translation of the Tanakh known as *Targum Yonatan*.⁶⁴ In this way, disparate stories became a

⁶⁴ For example, an early Aramaic translation of the story of Cain and Abel in *Bereshit* supplies the cause, missing in the Hebrew version, of the murderous argument between the brothers as a theological dispute; Cain held that *leyt din v'leyt dayyan*, "There is no justice and there is no judge," which is an important religious issue for the *Targum* author's time.

corpus that transmitted meaningful guidance for Jewish life and belief; in each generation they are again considered, again interpreted, again mined for meaning.

Adler⁶⁵ proposes that we see the narratives that transmit the Jew's sense of Jewish self-awareness, of collective *zikaron*, not only as the literal translation of the word "memory" but as the stories they have become for their listeners. A story requires a story teller and a responsive audience. A story is related differently to different audiences. The story teller is conscious of the listeners' ability to hear and, thus, participate in, the story. Only in the dialogue between the two sides, that is, teller and listener, does the story reach its resolution and achieve its purpose. Recent scholarly inquiry into the development of printed Scriptural texts shows that for a long time, Jews transmitted and interpreted the Torah orally – as a story meant to be heard. The Hebrew verb for the reading of Torah itself, *k.r.ʿ*, preserves the sense of reading aloud.⁶⁶ To this day, the Torah is ritually read aloud as the high point of the Shabbat liturgy.

What Is Seen in the Struggle

Jewish theologies – Jewish stories – express Jewish ideas of God and how we are in the world. *Targum Yonatan's* author speaks the old truths in a way the people of its own day can hear them. Rabbinic literature from the Talmud to the *Shulkhan Arukh* brings a true thread of the old into each new insight. And the mystics are unafraid to follow learning and insight to its logical conclusion, to do the meaningful work of attempting to understand the new and different places to which they will be led. One of the earliest insights of Jewish belief, conveyed in Jacob's night encounter with the messenger of God, is that the people of Israel finds meaning and purpose

⁶⁵ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism*.

⁶⁶ see David Stern's "The First Jewish Books and the Early History of Jewish Reading", .

in the theological questioning, in the struggle with God, and with other humans.

Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day. When he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob's thigh was strained, as he wrestled with him. He said: Let me go, for the day is breaking. He said: I will not let you go, unless you bless me. He said unto him: What is your name? He replied: Jacob. And he said: Your name shall be called no more Jacob, but Yisra'el; for you have wrestled with God and with men, and you are able. And Jacob asked him, and said: Tell me, I pray, your name.' And he said: Why do you ask my name? He blessed him there. Jacob called the name of the place *Peniel*: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. The sun rose upon him as he passed over *Peniel*, and he limped upon his thigh.⁶⁷

What did Jacob see that caused him to realize that he had been face to face with God? He struggled for his life with that messenger of God, by a river named Yavok (associated in the text with the Hebrew verb *he'avek*, to "wrestle"). To cross over, he first had to commit to the struggle, and only then did he find the blessing in it. The way to bridge that difficult, turbulent river was not easy, and it marked him for life; but in it he found an experience of the real perceived presence of God.

Bridging between the current theological situation of the Jewish community and the actual teachings of Jewish theology promises to be a struggle. But the ability to think clearly about our religious situation is critical when the highly assimilated Jewish community is ever-more susceptible to the effect of "outside" influences. This assimilation comes at the expense of clarity, even of awareness, of Jewish belief.

Historically, some Jewries were more theological than others. The more advanced the culture they lived in and the more vigorous its philosophical life, the more they had to theologise. Mediaeval Spanish Judaism was more theological than Franco-German Judaism, Maimonides more than Rashi. In these terms, we live in Spanish and not Franco-German conditions, and we too need theology. How much? More, I would say, than we are getting.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ *Bereshit* 32.25-32

⁶⁸ Martin Himmelfarb, Introduction to "The Condition of Jewish Belief", Symposium in *Commentary*, August 1966, cited in Louis Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology*, p. 7.

The balance is a difficult one. The borrowed philosophies of the dominant culture in which Jews live at any given moment in Jewish history, and in the language of which they feel compelled to respond to that culture, may prove an awkward balance against the ancient transmitted traditions. For example, in the early modern period, classical Reformers used the universalist, Enlightenment model of their host culture to eradicate the special status assigned women in Orthodoxy. Because “all men are created equal,” Reform Judaism included women by categorizing them as “honorary men.” But making women honorary men made them deviant men. It required viewing their differences from men as defects in their masculinity. The experience of classical Reform illustrates a defect that feminist legal critiques have identified in the universalist understanding of equality. A quality predicated on ignoring the differences that constitute distinctive selves both conceals and legitimates injustice. An institution or enterprise is fully inclusive only if it includes people as they really are.⁶⁹ But justice begins with the lived reality one faces, not with an abstract ideal.

A theologian has no recourse but to refer to the outside sources that influence Jewish readers of the time. He or she must speak the language that Jews understand⁷⁰ and respond to the perceived need of the community. Modern Jewish theology must help radically self-conscious and self-centered Jews to rediscover the communal truths that premodern Jews were born into and took for granted; it must show us a way to re-integrate the shattered vessel that was premodern Jewish community. Although we should in no way idealize the shtetl, which in reality was often a destitute, desperate, and disease-ridden place, the nostalgia for

⁶⁹ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, p. 25.

⁷⁰ Sherwin: “It used to be that ‘Jewish’ was the Jews’ first language, and the language of the dominant culture in which they lived was their second language. Now that has been reversed, and ‘Jewish’ is the Diaspora Jew’s second language” (personal communication, February 2006).

that vanished way of life should not be dismissed, for it is really a longing for a secure sense of Jewish identity. At the beginning of the modern period, in the 17th century, the Eastern European shtetl's mostly Jewish population allowed its inhabitants to maintain a cultural insulation from non-Jewish influences that is no longer possible in the modern world. The world of predestined, certain Jewish identity and culture has been replaced by a world in which Jewish life cannot be based upon any kind of cultural isolation.

Putting the Pieces of the Modern Jewish Self, and Community Back Together

In the premodern Jewish world, theology, as a way of thinking about God and the meaning of life, was more or less clearly aligned with Jewish praxis, which is to say that what we did was more or less a clear reflection of what we believed. That is no longer true in the modern world. Life has changed so fast that theology struggles to keep pace; and in a world that has encouraged Jewish identity to fragment into a partial definition of self for many Jews, coherence and integrity have become primary pathways toward meaning. Rachel Adler defines praxis as "more than the sum of the various practices that constitute it. *A praxis is a holistic embodiment in action at a particular time of the values and commitments inherent to a particular story.*" She offers a way of defining a modern goal for Jewish praxis based on the fact that, when Jewish society met the modern world,

its praxis became both impoverished and fragmented. Some communal practices were taken over by the secular state. Other practices were jettisoned by congregations because they appeared foreign and "Oriental". Still others were abandoned by individuals because they had come to see themselves as "private citizens" with minimal obligations to other private citizens. It became impossible to imagine a unified way to live as a human being, a citizen, and a Jew.

A contemporary Jewish praxis would reduce our sense of fragmentation. If we had a praxis rather than a grab bag of practices, we would experience making love, making *Kiddush*, recycling paper used at our workplace, cooking a pot of soup for a person with AIDS,

dancing at a wedding, and making medical treatment decisions for a dying loved one as integrated parts of the same project: the holy transformation of our everyday reality. Furthermore, we would experience ourselves less as fragmented enactors of divergent roles in disparate spheres – public/private, ritual/ethical, religious/secular, duty/pleasure – and more as coherent Jewish personalities.

We cannot simply resurrect the old premodern praxis, because it no longer fits us in the world we now inhabit. Some of its elements are fundamentally incompatible with participation in postindustrial, democratic societies. The old praxis can be preserved intact only if we schizophrenically split off our religious lives from our secular lives and live two separate existences with two different sets of values and commitments. But the obligation to be truthful and the yearning to be whole are what made us progressive Jews in the first place. To be faithful to the covenant requires that we infuse the whole of our existence with our religious commitments. How is that to be done in our specific situation?⁷¹

Part of the answer to Adler's question is, in good traditional Jewish fashion, to look for familiar organizing principles that are part of the dominant culture but that, in their own, non-Jewish way, echo Jewish principles and values. In a modern American Jewish congregation, there is a very developed sense of personal responsibility regarding environmentalism: recycling, vegetarianism, and other practices that respect and conserve natural resources. Within the "green" philosophy are principles that are easily re-stated in Jewish terms. Beyond that, the fundamental stance of the Jewish person who is committed to "recycling, reducing, and re-using" is far less self-absorbed and far more communally conscious than that of the average American. Those committed Jews are already living in a way that is consistent with Jewish communal norms. They might be receptive to the idea that Judaism offers a praxis similar to that which already informs their lives and that what Judaism can offer them is not very different – only deeper, broader, and more enduring.

Jewish theology and praxis must be grounded in the soil in which Jews have always been rooted: Torah. It is in the act of study that the mystics find the

⁷¹ Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism*, p. 26. Italics in the original.

possibility of revelation at all moments, that is, all moments when a student is prepared to look for what is not easily seen – a bush that burns yet is not consumed, a memory that demands the gift of the heart and yet does not diminish the giver. For the mystics, immersion in Torah study opens the door to that “convergence of interpretation and revelation,” in Elliot Wolfson’s phrase, which is the highest potential of Torah study its highest potential. Not from new inventions, but out of the plunging deeply into the communal memory conveyed by study, new Jewish visions of theology and of praxis will emerge.

And, because study is an experience not of the individual but of the community, the person immersed in study finds that the true spirituality of the Torah-study experience requires the community. Rabbinic teaching holds that “when two study Torah together, the Divine Presence is with them.”⁷² The meaning of the modern Jewish community will be found not in building a physical *Mishkan*, but in creating the potential for revelatory contact with God – for seeing God, in the way that the Torah relates that Moshe and Jacob did – in any space occupied by that Jewish community. This is not a new idea; it is received wisdom, in which we must find new depths and new teachings.

How Kabbalah Leads One to, and beyond, One’s Self

Repairing the breaches, and healing the torn links that are meant to connect all human beings, is the goal of all acts of reaching beyond the self and into the world. In Judaism it is a given that “we all stood together at Sinai”. Community is *sine qua non*; the personal is inextricable from the communal. The term *Kabbalah* itself means “that which is received” from others – those who came before and those who learn alongside one. One does not study, mysticism or anything else, alone.

⁷² BT *Berakhot* 6a.

The mystics teach this central, unifying truth in terms of exile and redemption: alienation from each other is a significant aspect of the human experience of exile. Exile in the geographical sense, which recalls traumatic destruction and dislocation, is intimately linked to exile in the spiritual sense. Homes are destroyed and the Jews are sent from the sacred place they built as a community and through which they knew God's presence. In classical Jewish terms, Jews are in exile from God's presence because the sacred space was destroyed, and redemption is symbolized as the rebuilding of that sacred space in Jerusalem and the restoration of God's presence there. Redemption, in Jewish tradition, is about rebuilding, restoring, and coming home – all acts that require interaction and communal connection. Jews cannot achieve redemption as individuals – only as a meaningful community. Mysticism offers one a path to explore and heal the connections of one's own life and the life of the world, to set oneself on a path of practice of restoration and thus to find a way to connect to sacred community.

The book at the center of this mysticism, the *Zohar*, is itself a commentary on the Torah, interspersed with a series of stories about a group of companions who delve into the holy mysteries of Torah study together. The word *Zohar* is Hebrew for "brilliance" or "splendor". The *Zohar* records mystical speculation about the nature of God and the meaning of human life, which had been transmitted through generations only among small circles of initiates. Written in a mystifying form of ancient Aramaic, hinting at even more mystifying theological ideas, it cannot be studied without a guide. Despite its opacity, the *Zohar* is nevertheless an absolutely typical Jewish work. It epitomizes Jewish learning in every generation and in every field of study, because it both draws on earlier wisdom, celebrates the synergy of shared learning, and encourages fascinating new insights.

Kabbalah has been described as an attempt to see the entire Torah as God's

biography. The early Hasidic masters, mystics that they were, offered a corollary: to study Torah fully

is to consider the teaching of every verse for one's own self, created in the image of God. To inquire into one's own life is inevitably to consider one's effect on the world, one's reflection in the cosmos. In Jewish terms, it is to recognize and act upon one's essential connection to the three pillars of the world's existence and stability: *Torah*, *avodah*, and *g'milut hasadim* – study, prayer, and acts that fulfill our relational responsibility.⁷³ Each of the aspects of this three-fold path to personal meaning leads us to others. Study is traditionally done in *hevruta*, which provides the benefit of the synergy of shared learning. Prayer, including meditation, self-assessment, and other modes, traditionally requires a *minyan*, a group, to invoke holiness. Finally, acts that fulfill relational responsibility demand that we first engage the other to ascertain what is required in each situation.

The Jewish framework of the concepts and acts that guide us along this path is the *mitzvah* system. A *mitzvah* is not, as popularly defined by many, a "good deed," nor is it merely a rigid list of imposed 'commandments' that, in 613 laws define the entirety of Jewish life. Rather, the *mitzvot* are the ever-evolving expression of the central Jewish idea of obligation. Life is a gift: what is one's responsibility during life? All *mitzvot* can be divided into two categories: *beyn adam l'adam*, "between human and human," those which pertain to one's relationship to others, that is, the world; and *beyn adam l'Makom*, "between human and God," those having to do with one's link to God.

The fundamental understanding that the *mitzvot* are equally an expression of

⁷³ *Hesed*, "kindness" or "mercy", is a Biblical term defined by Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, as the kindness one may ask from – and owes to – another within a mutually covenanted community. In the Jewish community, then, *hesed* is the kindness we may ask from God and that we owe God, as well as each other, because of the covenant relationship we share.

individuality and of community opens many mystical doors. Interpreting our reality from the Sinai experience, where we stood as a group to enter into the covenant relationship with God, teaches us that it is impossible to embark on an authentic Jewish path to personal fulfillment by ourselves, , apart from our communities. To discover and realize our own sense of personal identity, we look to the world around us. We know that it is natural to consider what others will think of what we wear, how we behave, and what we say; *kal v'homer*, "how much the more so," at the deepest levels of our being, we become who we are in relationship.

Is Kabbalah Jewish? – Definition of Terms

A few basic definitions will be helpful before our introductory considerations are complete: the word Kabbalah is derived from the Hebrew verb denoting "receiving." The term *m'kubal*, kabbalist, was first applied to mystics of medieval Europe (living mostly in what is today Spain and Italy). They described themselves as transmitting ancient knowledge that they had received; they were not creating new sacred texts but seeking more deeply into those which they received. They were, however, developing radically new interpretations for the old mystical wisdom created by the generations that preceded them; thus, the *Zohar* makes repeated reference to "old-new" words. Thus one kabbalist could say, "I would have expected that this had come from Moshe at Sinai if I had not myself invented it." A sense pervades the *Zohar* that even an innovative approach somehow was potentially meant to be elucidated all along; only being immersed in the ancient sources can lead to a new understanding of the old words.

The term "old-new" is key to understanding Kabbalists. The early Kabbalists had a deep respect for the wisdom they sought and for its antecedents. They sought to portray themselves not as innovators but as faithful transmitters of that

which had come before them. The approach presents them to us as profoundly conservative in their stance toward Jewish tradition. They sought to conserve the value of that which they studied, to guard its meaning, and to protect it. They were probably observant and certainly knowledgeable Jews who apparently explored the mystical texts of earlier generations in small groups, just as the *Zohar* depicts Rabbi Shimon bar Yokhai doing with his students and learning companions. Scholars assume that it is quite possible that the *Zohar* itself was created as a result of such small-group study and that it is a product of more than one author.⁷⁴ Although they themselves were creating it, they saw it as the wisdom of the Talmudic Master Shimon bar Yokhai, who lived a millennium earlier; this should not be understood as simple forgery, but more as an expression of the “old-new” essence of what they understood themselves to be transmitting.⁷⁵

Those students of mysticism considered the subject of their study to be sufficiently esoteric as to be kept secret from most of the Jews of their community. An old doctrine articulated in the Talmud forbids expounding mystical matters in groups (a ruling from which their admittedly small groups were apparently excepted). There is a traditionally transmitted warning that one may not delve into Kabbalah until one is 40 years old, is married, and has a beard.⁷⁶ Understood within the context of Jewish culture, it is possible to extrapolate several requirements for Kabbalah study: one must be well-versed in basic Jewish knowledge, for such is assumed of a mature Jewish adult. Second, one must be well-along in one’s

⁷⁴ The *Zohar*’s authorship is currently attributed either partially or fully to Moshe de Leon of Castile, but the scholar Yehudah Liebes has recently put forward the theory that the work is more accurately defined as a true group project. The tradition that holds it to be a sacred text on the level itself of the Talmud, if not the Torah itself, attributes it to the first-century Talmudic Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai.

⁷⁵ On the authorship and nature of the *Zohar*, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 213–235; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah*, pp. 1–7; Arthur Green, “The *Zohar*,” pp. 27–66; Yehudah Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 85–138.

⁷⁶ Moshe Idel, in *Kabbalah*, describes this as a prohibition originally applied specifically by one Kabbalist to his teachings, a prohibition that was then transmitted as a general warning that became applicable to all Kabbalah.

emotional and social development, be married, most likely have several children, and have a good job to support them. One can imagine the social connections, through friends and work, that are well-developed in most of our lives by the age of forty. Third, one must be male – this injunction is obvious from the idea of a beard. But, we can also assume that the beard is meant to connote a requirement of a certain maturity and level of Jewish observance. Overall, the impression is that Kabbalah study is not for just anyone; rather, in Jewish mystical tradition, such study is ideally reserved for the psychologically well adjusted, communally responsible, learned, male, adult Jew.

Within the context of the egalitarian approach to Jewish study that moderns assume, we may question the limits placed around the study of Jewish mysticism. We have, in similar ways, recognized the justice of opening other doors to Jewish knowledge beyond their traditional bounds – to women, for example. Yet our progressive approach does not allow for wholesale erasure of all distinctions, and we should take each aspect of the requirements for Kabbalah study on its own merits. Since Jewish mystical writings have a deep grounding in Jewish sacred literature – Tanakh, Talmud, Midrash – it is unlikely that someone will be able truly to appreciate mystical study in any depth without some familiarity with those sources. We may be able to understand the stricture against women's involvement with mysticism as an educational caution and respond that in our own day, when education is egalitarian, so too should access be to the mystical texts. Further, it is easy to appreciate the additional richness of learning afforded when our study partners offer a mature perspective on human nature and communal behavior.

And what of the requirement that students of Kabbalah be Jewish? It is true that all religious cultures contain a mystical element; it is even true that scholars find some interesting similarities among all mystical expressions. Yet significant

differences sometimes exist among the mystical teachings and certainly in the way they are acted upon. Although Jews and Christians encounter the same Torah, they may do so with very different assumptions and expectations. A 2000-year-old interpretative tradition has built on itself, layer after layer, in both Judaism and Christianity. It is demonstrable in the choice of words in translations, in the direction of interpretative commentaries, which betray their inevitable pre-existing bias in the inner meanings they uncover within the texts, and even in the reactions Jews and Christians have to certain terminology. Christians call the Jewish Torah the "old" testament, which they have superseded with their own sacred texts. American culture, with its basically Christian religious sensibility, has inherited many unarticulated assumptions about Jewish texts. Jews either do not share these assumptions or find themselves confused about them, depending on their level of knowledge and the extent to which they have internalized non-Jewish American assumptions. An interpretative culture is a vast and complex sea of latent and patent assumptions, of which the student is often unaware.

Jewish law commands us not to set a stumbling block before the blind; yet that is what we do if we ignore the assumptions, the expectations, the interpretative culture, and the intellectual and religious grounding of Kabbalah study. Doing so is to invite the unprepared to encounter the incomprehensible. Worse, it is to empty the term "Kabbalah" of its meaning, for, unless it is a transmission of received wisdom, it is not Kabbalah. The early sources warned of the dangers inherent in sharing mystical knowledge with the unprepared. Mis-study of the texts may or may not prove dangerous to those incapable of truly understanding them, but it certainly will be dangerous to the texts themselves. The kabbalists are right: the wisdom is old-new. Unless it is old, there is nothing new in it.

Again, the term *Kabbalah* means “received,” the word for Jewish tradition is *masoret*, which is also translated as “transmission.” Jewish tradition, fed by received wisdom, is grounded in the assumption that what is received will be carefully, faithfully transmitted. Study in Jewish tradition is inextricably linked to practice, which is to say, we practice what we learn or have not learned. To share in the received wisdom – that is, to become wise – is to respond not only to our own need to learn and discover, but also to our attendant responsibility to the interlinkages of community that make the study possible. This community is ideally founded and maintained according to the wisdom in which individuals seek immersion. To learn Torah, in its widest sense, as a Jew open to Jewish learning and sensitive to the ethics of that learning, is to recognize the moral imperative – the command – that must inform learning.

The Heart of the Matter: The Sefirot

Once one is ready to consider existence not as whether, but as how, one is connected to all life, one can begin to study usefully the *sefirot* for insights into the self and its place in the world. On a baseball field, outfielders choose their position vis-à-vis everyone else on their team; when a Jew walks into a sanctuary to participate in prayers, she or he looks for the right empty seat. As one finds one’s place in any community, one is dancing one’s part in a giant and complex waltz. The *sefirot* offer a simple visual example of this. one’s place within the *sefirot* may be seen as occupying any *sefirah* at the moment: the sefirotic system itself represents all the individuals in any given group situation in which one finds oneself. Systems theory, especially as developed into theories of family dynamics, show clearly that the role each person plays in any group is influenced by the other parts being played in that group. The whole system is an interactive organism. Each

individual encounters life as a part of many systems, many groups, and within a larger whole in which all human beings find themselves.

What is required for one to experience life as part of an embracing and empowering human community is a willingness to see what a theology of the *sefirot* teaches: that each of us is surrounded by the invisible links that connect us to all others and each of us, is connected, in turn, to the world; that each of us affects the whole the world through our natural condition of interconnectedness. Just as a stone thrown into a pond creates ripples that affect a leaf floating halfway across and disturbs the snail on the other side; the quality of our interconnectedness, and the ethics of our choices, touches and influences everything else in ways that we may never know.

The mystics vary in their precise teachings regarding the nature of the *sefirot* but within the variations a well-known graph of 10 attributes, emanations, or characteristics are depicted.⁷⁷ They are variously defined as aspects of the world and of the human community within it, as human beings know the world. The graph is also a “map” of the characteristics of God according to human experience as described in the Torah. Therefore, inasmuch as we are created in God’s image, the graph is also, perforce, a depiction of the individual inner essence of each of us.

What does it mean to be created in God’s image? For the mystics, it is a clear indication of human purpose. God is the *Yotzer*, the Artist who fashions, and the human is the *yetzirah*, the artwork.

vayivra Elohim et ha-adam b'tzalmo,
“God created *ha’adam* in God’s own image,”

b'tzelem Elohim bara oto,
“in the image of God they were created”

zakhar unekeyvah bara otam,

⁷⁷ see graph at end of this section.

“male and female God created them”.⁷⁸

We are created in the Image of God. It follows, then, that by studying the artwork, we might gain some insight into the Artist. Thus the great halakhist and mystic the Maharal of Prague taught,

Job said “out of my flesh I see God” (Job 10.9), for when a person considers his appearance and body, he can begin to learn something about God We find in the *Gemara* (Yevamot 49b) that Menashe confronted Isaiah, “your teacher Moses said that *man may not see Me and live*, and you have said *I beheld God on a great and mighty throne*”.... it is impossible to see God because God is different from everything else...Isaiah saw God in the way that we see the physical; we see the outer layer, the clothing, as it were.⁷⁹

“In the way that we see the physical,” or, better, “through the level of the physical,” we see echoes of deeper levels, deeper layers of reality. The physical body is only the beginning of our explorations into understanding the reality of our lives and the Life of the World. But, although it is “only” the surface layer, it is to be respected: it is God’s creation, and “in the way of the physical” it bears God’s image. We must take great care of the physical vessel, nurture it and sustain it, if we would seek out its teachings and if we expect it to help us go beyond the way of the physical.

God does not actually have hands, or eyes, or feet, rather “there is a [part of the] world which is called Hand of God, Eyes of God, Feet of God, and all the rest of the body parts. There is no actual form or shape or appearance like this in the Upper Realms, nor can such even be imagined, God forbid; *v’ayn lo guf v’lo d’mut*, “he has no body nor likeness,” etc.⁸⁰ Rather, in the lower world there is likeness, which connects to its root in the upper world. Our eyes, for example, are sustained from that part of reality which we associate with God’s Eyes; they are called eyes not because of a physical likeness but in a likeness of function.⁸¹

We resemble God not in actual physical terms, but in our understanding of how our

⁷⁸ Genesis 1.27

⁷⁹ Rabbi Judah Loew of Prague, *Derekh Hayyim*, p. 143.

⁸⁰ A phrase from Moses ben Maimon [Maimonides] Articles of Faith

⁸¹ Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh*, 102b.

physicality affects the world. Our power is to heal, or repair, the lower manifestation of the upper reality, and, in so doing, to heal or repair the *Shiur Komah* – God’s presence in the world – as it is expressed through the anthropomorphism of the Torah and its anthropopathism as well.

Just as in the upper world there is a compassion which is called *Ayna Pekikha* [Open Eye] which forever watches over the compassion of the world and its needs, and this is called Eyes [of God], just so referring to the rest of the body parts, which are named by their functions, not their likenesses. The point of the human’s creation is to repair the *Shiur Komah*. When a person does a mitzvah with her own hand, the part of the world which is called “Hand of God” is repaired.⁸²

It is our ability to do, to create, to act upon the world, that creates the potential for our perfection as human beings. For a Jewish mystic, the act of fulfilling the *mitzvot* is not only “the means whereby we can attain true perfection” but to go beyond the desire to perfect the human, toward God. “All of man’s strivings should be directed toward the Creator, blessed be He.”

A man should have no other purpose in whatever he does, be it great or small, than to draw nigh to God and to break down all separating walls, that is, all things of a material nature, between himself and his Master, so that he may be drawn to God as iron to a magnet. He should pursue everything that might prove helpful to such nearness, and avoid everything that is liable to prevent it, as he would avoid fire. In the words of the Psalmist, “my soul cleaves to You; Your right hand upholds me safely” (Ps. 63.9).⁸³

The *sefirah* of *Hesed* in visual representations of the ten *sefirot* is located in the middle triad of three (the tenth is below them), on the right side. *Hesed* is the first of the lower seven *sefirot* to emerge into existence, as the Zohar explains: it is the first offspring from the womb *Binah* after it is pierced by the light-point of *Hokhmah*.

First to manifest is *Hesed*, the grace or love of God. The emergence of God from hiding is an act filled with love, a promise of the endless showering of blessing and life on all beings, each of whose birth in a

⁸² Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk, *Noam Elimelekh*, 102b
⁸³ Moshe Hayim Luzzatto, *Mesillat Yesharim*, pp. 34–36.

sense will continue this process of emerging from the One. This gift of love is beyond measure and without limit; ...a love for each specific form and creature that is ever to emerge. This channel of grace is the original divine *shefa'*, the bounteous and unlimited love of God. ... *Hesed* represents the God of love, calling forth the response of love in the human soul as well. *Hesed* in the mystic's soul is the love of God and of all of God's creatures, the ability to continue this divine flow, passing on to others the gift of divine love.⁸⁴

That description of *hesed* offers the opportunity to consider its existence, and its effect upon one's own life, in several ways. First, the conditions that make human existence possible come about as an act of love. This is true both cosmically and physically. Second, love is an expansive quality, limitless and never ending, and it is an outright gift. Money cannot buy it and logic cannot explain it. Third, love flows to and through each human being, and therefore to and through the world of which human beings are a part.

[T]he love of companions is by way of the soul. The will of the soul is toward love; even though physical bodies are separate, one from another, souls are spiritual, and there is no spiritual separation between them; they are all unified.⁸⁵

The natural human response is to reflect that love, to be like a mirror in the hands of the women at the entrance to the *mishkan*. Fourth, to experience life from a mystical perspective includes the understanding that one functions as a channel for this love. To be a channel implies that one has the ability to transmit what one contains. In a world where individuals sometimes feels helpless to make a positive impact, this is a wonderfully empowering teaching.

It is true that there is a long way between this ideal presentation and the broken world in which we live, in which we must acknowledge even that the act that physically began some of our own human lives was not one of love, and that love is often strangled by deprivation, dysfunction, and destruction. But the mystics

⁸⁴ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, pp. 42–43.

⁸⁵ Elijah Vidas, *Reyshit Hokhmah haShalem*, p. 361.

insist that love is the wide river in which we are meant to swim, even though it is dammed up behind our fear and our violence. We all have the ability to clear the channel, and to re-establish what is meant to be an endless flow.

The activities of *Hesed* abound. ... First, grace – as indicated by its name – benefiting us, being good to us. Also, nullifying the power of the aliens who accuse and vex us. The effects of this quality are found in all things that partake of whiteness, such as gems whose color is white, whose virtue derives from *Hesed*. Among its actions is Love. Although love is aroused by the left, its essential purpose is on the right. Another of its actions is drawing a person toward wisdom through the power of *Hokhmah*, above on the right. Another is including *Gevurah* within itself in order to execute judgment tinged with love.⁸⁶

We play our part and find the meaning of our lives by finding our own personal connection to the *shefa'* at the heart of existence and making ourselves into the vessels that will both be filled with it and bring it to others as generously as it is given to us. We do this in astonishingly simple ways that are nevertheless very difficult: in the case of *hesed*, our task is simply, and impossibly, to remember always to act kindly, in mercy, and with generosity.

Meeting God: Or, the Integration of All of One's Self

We do not easily compare ourselves to God, for we know how imperfectly we reflect our Source. So we look to expressions of God where we find them in Jewish literature. For the mystics, God's essential nature, as demonstrated through the *sefirot*, is most clearly understood in the Torah, which they see as, literally, God's biography. A related insight that is very useful is to recognize the Torah's stories as projections of what is always going on inside of our own selves. If the Torah is God's story, then it is also ours, since we are reflections of God. Thus each of the characters whose stories are told in the Torah is an expression of a different

⁸⁶ Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, p. 44.

aspects of God's nature – and our own. The mystics see each of the *sefirot* expressed in the life stories of the major characters of the Tanakh. These stories, in turn, inform the character of the Jewish people's religious approach to life and to God. Thus the divine flow moves through the generations and through history itself, and all students of Torah is invited to see themselves as following in Abraham's footsteps.

The Kabbalists saw *Hesed* as the faith of Abraham, described by the prophet as "Abraham who loved Me" (Is. 41.8). Abraham, the first of God's true followers on earth, stands parallel to *Hesed*, the first quality to emerge within God. He is the man of love, the one who will leave all behind and follow God across the desert, willing to offer everything.⁸⁷

An exploration of the *sefirot* as a key to finding our own sense of personal meaning requires that we follow Abraham's example. Abraham was commanded to go out *mi'artzekha, mimoladet'kha, umibeyt avikha*, "from your land, from your home, and from your father's house," and set off toward a destination that he did not know. "From the land" means to put aside the culture and society in which we were raised and the nationalism we learned; "from home" is to become open to questioning the preconceptions we have about who we are and where we belong; "from father" means to find the balance between honoring our parents and discovering our own truth.

We return to the Hasidic teaching that interprets the famous (albeit grammatically ambiguous) command to Abraham, *lekh l'kha*, as "Go to yourself." If you would find the true path of your life, if you would find God, it is suggested, you must look within. This is not to say that the only God you can know about is defined by your own inner feelings; rather, the teaching is as old as the mitzvah of pilgrimage to Jerusalem. You must go yourself; you cannot send someone else for you on this journey. And you must bring yourself, your inner self: your sincerity,

⁸⁷ Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, p. 43.

your honesty, your commitment. You cannot leave out the parts of you that you would rather hide or deny, and you cannot make contingency plans.

It is taught that one must commit to one's search for meaning *b'khol levavkha*, "with all your heart." The mystics note that this form of the word *lev*, heart, in which the simple form of the word is amplified with the addition of another letter, *bet*, to become *levav*, seems like a doubling of the word heart. This doubling signifies that one must bring both one's "good" heart and one's "evil" heart, both the good inclination and the evil inclination. This is the discipline of *kavvanah*, of "intention." In this overstimulated and noisy world of ours, we might define *kavvanah* as "paying complete attention with all the aspects of oneself." One who explores the path of the *sefirot* will be challenged to pay attention, first and foremost, to oneself, as a necessary condition of ascending the ladder. But we will continue to struggle with our evil inclination and our moral lapses. As the midrash relates, even Abraham struggled with his sense of confidence and faith. If such a path was difficult for the Father of our People, *kal v'homer*, "how much the more so" for us? Yet, if we remember that we are created "little lower than the angels," and if we hold on to the ladder with our people's famous stubbornness, though we will fall sometimes, we will yet find a way to rise.

To achieve a real integration of the self, we must find ways to accept our past reality, our past decisions and acts, at the very least as the necessary learning we gained to arrive at the present point in time. We are made up of all that we have been. Our efforts to build something of worth in this world necessitate that we summon all that is within us. Jewish tradition records that the building of the *Mishkan* in the wilderness required a long list of different materials and that each of the Israelites was needed to bring something in order for the *Mishkan* to be completed. The Izbitzer rebbe taught:

[I]t says in the holy *Zohar* (Shemot 148a) that these elements [the different elements of the *Mishkan*] correspond to the foundational elements found in the human being, meaning that one should deliver all one's elements and abilities to God, that God may rule over them according to the blessed divine will.⁸⁸

In our essential structure, physically, emotionally, intellectually – and, most of all, spiritually – we are a Tabernacle, waiting to be constructed. How, then, to bring all the disparate parts together into a structure that might be raised to praise God?

Recall the three pillars that hold up the world. These pillars define the three significant aspects of Jewish experience: Torah, that is to say, learning; *Avodah*, prayer, or processing the learning; and *gemilut hasadim*, acting upon the learning. These three pillars can also be understood as receiving, absorbing, and assimilating what has been received and given, and giving.

The mystical approach to the individual practice of study, prayer and acts recognizes the fundamentally communal and interdependent nature of individual life and helps us to find our place in it. Of course, there are other Jewish approaches to this same basic human question; the mystical approach can provide guidance for those who are drawn to the deeper, hidden meanings behind the prosaic nature of our days and who are attracted to and intrigued by mystery and paradox. For the mystics, every word and every act are potentially world-shattering, or world-repairing; “the Kabbalist perpetually seeks cosmic significance in what most people would regard as mundane.”⁸⁹

Exploring the *sefirot* and attempting to learn from that exploration and live by its teachings area lifelong struggle to rise beyond basic human nature, toward the realization of our human potential to be “little lower than the angels.” Within the framework of this system for understanding the meaning of all life, we are

⁸⁸ *Mei haShiloah*, 87

⁸⁹ Avi Weinstein, in his introduction to Joseph Gikatilla, *Gates of Light, Sha'are Orah*, p. xviii.

challenged to develop our own sense of purpose, our response to the gift of life.

One end of the *sefirotic* ladder as Jacob saw it in his dream was *mutzav artza*, “planted upon the earth,” and the other end was *rosho magia shamaymah*, “Its head reached the heavens.” Angels – in Hebrew, literally “messengers” of God – were ascending and descending upon it. A wonderful image: in general, we do not expect people who have their feet planted firmly in reality also to have their heads “in the clouds,” but this is what the ladder does; it bridges heaven and earth. How else would the messengers be able to bring their communications back and forth between the different realms?

From the point of view of Jewish mysticism, this ladder expresses the yearning of the created for the Creator, of the imperfect for the perfect.: iIt is the longing we all know for something beyond us, something that we cannot quite articulate but that we know we need in order to be complete. The image of the ladder invites us to set our sights higher and to realize our connection not only to the things of the world around us in which our feet are planted, but also to something beyond us and not quite perceptible – that which the soul can sense but not name. The ladder points toward the object of our striving – upward and outward, toward a sense of exaltation, and also upward and inward, toward a true and centered sense of self. We struggle upward, rising and falling all the time, in our spiritual journey toward the self we might become.

The Maggid of Koznitz, Rabbi Israel Hapstein, considers our ability to progress spiritually, and the support of the Eternal in that rising, in a Torah commentary. He cites the ultimate statement of the human challenge: “For I am the Eternal, who brings you up [*ma’aleh*] from the land of Egypt, to be your God;

you shall be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11.45)⁹⁰

For Hasidic theology, that the text uses the word *ma’aleh*, “causes to rise up,” is significant. It is the Eternal that draws the seeker toward the heights, even as the human yearns for that *aliyah*, that “rising up” toward Eternity. This Biblical text, therefore, can be seen to express neatly the Hasidic idea that it is the initiative of God, arousing us toward God, that helps us even to begin to develop the urge to strive upward and forward: God is the causative *ma’aleh*, “who brings up,” as the verse states. And with that help we are the *olim*, “those who ascend.” God brings us up from Egypt, and we rise up to *Eretz Yisrael*; God brings us up toward holiness, and we rise toward holiness, with God’s help, to God.

The mystical term for coming close to God, *deveikut*, “cleaving,” derives from the Biblical command to cleave to God:

You must observe all these commandments that I have commanded you, and do them; love YHVH your God, walk in all God’s ways, and cleave to God.⁹¹

Love YHVH your God, listen to God’s voice, and cleave to God, for this is your life and the length of your days.⁹²

The mystics understood *deveikut* as that form of mystical experience which focuses on achieving a sense of connection, or even unification, with God. By linking the fulfillment of *mitzvot* with *deveikut*, the Torah text itself testifies that there is no higher purpose for a human act. A holy act such as the mitzvah of Torah study lends itself perfectly:

The essence of immersing oneself in Torah is to cleave unto the inner spiritual light of *Ayn Sof* [that which is without end] which is within the letters of Torah. This is called *limmud l’shmah*, “learning for its own sake.”⁹³

⁹⁰ *Avodat Yisrael, parashat Shemini.*

⁹¹ Deuteronomy 11.22

⁹² Deuteronomy 30.20

⁹³ *Keter Shem Tov*, 180

There are three definitions of the mystical goal of *devekut* as developed in Jewish thought. The first envisions *devekut* to be, in the Talmudic image, like the sticky cleaving of two dates.⁹⁴ Citing this image, the Rambam describes the human intellect as, at its highest realized potential, coming as close to the Divine intellect as possible – yet each intellect, the human’s and God’s, retains its separate character. The second form of *devekut* is envisioned as a union between the human and God: the human spark swallowed up in the Divine bonfire, the single drop of water within the sea. The third understanding of *devekut* is that of a reunion between the human soul and its source, to which it longs to return; this reconnection of the part to the whole develops in the late 16th and early 17th century as an interpretation of the verse that describes the human as *helek eloha mima’al*, “part of God above.”

Devekut as an indirect connection was defined by some ancient Talmudic authorities, such as the school of Rabbi Ishmael, to be *imitatio dei*: thus, they taught, one could achieve *devekut* by choosing “to walk after [i.e. to emulate] the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked ... as He visits the sick ... as He comforts mourners ... [so ought you to do likewise].”⁹⁵ In contrast, the school represented by Rabbi Akiba’s teachings maintains that an actual attachment to God is possible:

In this world Israel cleaves to the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it is said: “You that cleave unto God” [Deut. 4:4]. However, in the time-to-come they will become like [God]. For as the Holy One, blessed be He, is a consuming fire, as it is written – “The Lord your God is a consuming fire” [Deut. 4:24], so shall they be a consuming fire as it is written: The light of Israel shall be or a fire, and his Holy One for a flame.” [Isa. 10:17]⁹⁶

Techniques for achieving *devekut* are not clearly defined in Talmudic literature, but

⁹⁴ BT *Sanhedrin* 64a.

⁹⁵ BT *Sotah* 14a

⁹⁶ cited in Byron Sherwin, *Mystical Theology*, p. 126.

the clear implication of the Rabbinic teachings regarding *imitatio dei* is that one comes close to God through fulfilling the *mitzvot*. The Torah names those who keep the *mitzvot d'vekim b'Adonai*, "You who cleave to *Adonai*."⁹⁷ For scholars such as Maimonides and Rabbi Judah Lowe of Prague, who valued the perfection of the intellect, *devekut* was a goal reached by study of Torah.

For the Kabbalists, the idea of *devekut* is further developed into the art of cleaving to a specific *sefirah* to repair and strengthen the connections between the *sefirot* and the human world below, so as to enable divine abundance to flow down:

This is how a person merges himself with these qualities in thought, speech and action. For thought is the meditation we mentioned, speech is reciting the verse, and action is coming to the *beit Knesset* and bowing towards the sanctuary. Before the *Amidah*, he stands in the *beit Knesset*, his mouth a wellspring flowing with prayer, unifying *yesod*, the source of the wellspring, and the well into which it opens, which is the *beit Knesset*. And he rectifies the *Shekhinah* with all the power of his concentration during prayer.⁹⁸

The word *Shekhinah* in Talmudic tradition means "immanent presence of God"; that presence is located in the lowest *sefirah*, which is nearest to the human level of existence. The *sefirah* is called *malkhut*, "kingdom," referring to the world, which God, manifest as King, rules. But this *sefirah*, which serves as the link between upper and lower, is also identified with the *Shekhinah*, because it is this *sefirah* which bridges that which is beyond human perception and the human ability to sense the holy as an immanent reality. It is the place where one can sense and access the link between heaven and earth, between God and humanity.

In this context, Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizhensk notes that the date palm is both male and female. The part that is female receives; the male part gives. Like the date palm, the *Shekhinah* is both female and male in function; it receives as a

⁹⁷ Deuteronomy 4.4

⁹⁸ Moshe Cordovero, *Tomer Devorah*, pp.42–43

vessel, and it gives forth.⁹⁹

The medieval mystic Ibn Gabbai related the teaching of R. Isaac the Blind, who identified the essence of “the religious life of the enlightened ones and those who contemplate [God’s] name” as *uvo tidbakun*, “and to Him you shall cleave.”¹⁰⁰

The worshiper ought to contemplate and intend during his worship to unify the great name and join it by its letters and include in it all the [supernal] degrees and unify them in his thought, up to *'Eyin Sof*. And the reason that it is said: “and to him you shall cleave” is to hint to thought, which must be free and pure of everything and subdued, cleaving above in an everlasting and forceful cleaving, in order to unify the branches to [their] root without any separation. And thereby will the person who unifies cleave to the great name.¹⁰¹

Just how this is to be done is the question that a myriad of mystical techniques were developed to answer. Such techniques are known as theurgic: they are believed to have an effect on God. A mystic who practices such techniques relies on the logic that every person has an effect on All by virtue of being part of it.

The theurgic approach to Jewish mysticism asserts that the nature of God can be influenced by human actions. As developed by the Zohar and Lurianic Kabbalah, the *sefirot* that constitute the reality of God are in disarray, alienated from one another, and out of balance. The mystic’s task, and the goal of the mystical experience, are to realign and reunite them through the fulfillment of *mitzvot*, especially prayer and Torah study, with the appropriate *kavvanah*. The reason for the *mitzvot*, then, is for the sake of the *tzorekh gavohah*, the “need on high,” which only the mystic can meet. Ibn Gabbai explained the basic concept of *tzorekh gavoha*: through creating the appropriate energy in the sefirotic system, the *sefirot* are activated and the divine abundance of emanation which powers and

⁹⁹ *No’am Elimelekh*, Elimelekh of Lizhensk, Vol. 1, 19b. This is an interesting echo of the ancient depiction of the first human as androgynous, and will be explored in more depth below, in the Lesson on *Malkhut*.

¹⁰⁰ From a seminar on Kabbalah with Art Green, Hartman Institute, Jerusalem, 7 July 2004.

¹⁰¹ Ibn Gabbai, *Avodat haKodesh*, cited by FIRST NAME Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 54.

nourishes all creation, called *shefa*, is sent down, through the *sefirot*, to the lower reaches. Ibn Gabbai explains using the Zohar's interpretation of Psalms 37.3, *b'takh b'Adonai va'aseh tov*, "The deeds below awaken the deeds above, the awakening below brings about the awakening above."¹⁰² The theurgic effect is explained in another mystical source using the metaphor of one's shadow, from the verse *Adonai tzilkha al yad yeminkha*, "God is your shadow at your right hand":

as you are there with God, so God is there with you....For that which exists on high is aroused according to the arousal of that which exists below. In this way the upper resembles the lower, in the way of a form and its shadow: they are linked and interrelated one with the other. The shadow is aroused according to the arousal of the form. Similarly, the actions which arouse the lower regions have an effect on the upper regions – good actions or evil. ... the upper regions listen and respond to the lower regions, and this opens the upper source and brings forth abundance of blessing and light.¹⁰³

According to this theory of theurgic mysticism, God needs human acts, human doing, in order to be fully manifest. The mystic, then, seeks to respond to this need of God for the sake of God. In the kabbalistic system, the impulse that stimulates action comes from the lowest, nearest regions, which, we have noted, are identified with the *Shekhinah* and the community of Israel. This lower level is identified as feminine in the *sefirotic* system, which is not necessarily an unusual association. What is unusual is that the effect the mystic seeks to have on the upper regions, for the sake of *tikkun*, comes from precisely that lower level, which, understood as female, might be thought to be more often acted on than instigator. This understanding of the initiative power of the lower regions is expressed by the mystic interpretation of Genesis 2.5-6:

No shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because God had not sent rain upon the earth...but a flow would well up from the ground and water the whole surface of the earth.

¹⁰²

Sefer haZohar, Vayikra, Behar, 110.b, cited in *Avodat haKodesh*

¹⁰³

Beit haBekhira, sha'ar hagadol, 46.

The lower flow, which wells up from below, interpreted by this model as the “feminine waters,” precedes the upper flow, identified with the rain, the “male waters.” Thus the more powerful partner in the dialogue, the “upper” God of *Ayn Sof*, is dependent on the weaker partner, the “lower,” mere human, mystic.

In the 16th century, in Tzefat, Rabbi Isaac Luria formulated a mystical theology that posited three stages for Creation: *atzilut*, “emanation”; *shevirah*, “shattering”; and *tikkun*, “repair.” In the beginning, God withdrew to make room for creation and sent a light into the resulting empty space, from which the first *sefirot* were created. The *sefirot* are vessels containing the light of God. When the divine light began to fill the vessels, the first three vessels survived intact, but the lower seven were shattered. They fell into the abyss, and sparks of divinity were trapped within them.

Tikkun involves the ongoing restoration of, according to Lurianic Kabbalah, 288 orphaned sparks, which can be anywhere. The purpose of human existence is to help God by seeking out and restoring the sparks, which takes place only through the doing of *mitzvot*. The sparks can be hidden anywhere, in animals and plants, anywhere at all. “The human task, according to Luria, is essentially a contemplative one,” which is to say that every physical act, every ritual act, every moment of human existence should be lived with *kavvanah*, understood as an abiding mystical awareness of the ongoing mission of looking for sparks of holiness everywhere.

Every religious action, regardless of the kind, requires contemplative concentration on the *partzufim* and various combinations of the divine name in order to “raise up the fallen sparks.”... every action done in the world below – the material world – accompanied by concentration on the dynamics being initiated through such action ... [causes the ascension of] the two hundred and eighty-eight sparks that were

believed to be attached to the broken vessels.¹⁰⁴

And in all the complicated details of mystical theology, “the crucial point here is that such reunification depends entirely on the efforts of human beings.”

To take one example of the power of a mitzvah according to this theology, consider the regular and prosaic act of daily prayer. Here, prayer is understood as a way to facilitate the repair of the *sefirotic* system, and so the exact letters and words are of supreme, cosmic importance. For example, on Shabbat, to sing *L’kha Dodi* with the appropriate *kavvanah*, intention, is to strive to bring about the unification of the Divine Name and the *sefirot* associated with it. The act of praying, not only by experts in the practice,¹⁰⁶ with the appropriate concentration on the appropriate *sefirot* brings about a *yikhud*, “unification” between them. One applies oneself to the work of facilitating *yikhud* only for the benefit of the *tzorekh gavoha*, the “need on high”; if there is any benefit to the one praying, it is welcome, but it is not the point. The mitzvah is done *al shem yikhud kudsha berikh hu v’shikhintei*, “for the purpose of the unification of the Holy Blessed One and his *Shekhinah*.”

The responsibility to unify God and redeem the world through mindful performance of *mitzvot* is not meant to encourage us to arrogance. The Hasidic rebbe Simkha Bunam advised that “everyone must have two pockets, so that he

¹⁰⁴ Lawrence Fine, *The Contemplative Practice of Yehudim*, p. 70.

¹⁰⁶ Morris Faierstein (“God’s Need for the Commandments in Medieval Kabbalah,” p. 57) notes that “authors differed [on] the issue of whose *mizvot* contribute to *tzorekh gavoha*. Is this concept applicable only to the deeds of a small elite whose worship has the proper *kavvanah* and is directed solely to the sefirotic world for the purpose of *zorekh gavoha*, or can anyone who performs a *mitzvah* properly contribute to *zorekh gavoha* even though he does not fully understand the kabbalistic basis of his act? In medieval Kabbalah, prior to Cordovero and Luria, in the sixteenth century, the issue remained unresolved.”

can reach into the one or the other, according to his needs. In his right pocket are to be the words 'for my sake was the world created', and in his left, 'I am earth and ashes'.¹⁰⁷ The difficulty, of course, is in recognizing the need of the moment. Considering that need leads mystics to *musar*, the mystical teaching of Jewish ethics.

Musar: The Sefirot as community

The central importance of Jewish ethical acts places each individual in a position that would create untenable anxieties without the guidance of communal ethical norms. First among them is the constant awareness that our every act is significant. How powerful, then, are our failures, our lapses from our own hopes for ourselves.

Mipney khata'eynu galinu m'artzeynu, "Because of our sins we were exiled from our home" is a well-known and oft-cited Talmudic axiom. The ethical teaching that correct fulfillment of the *mitzvot* will lead to the end of the exile, however, is theurgic mysticism. Also part of mystical theology are the beliefs, taught by the mystical ethicist Eliezer Azikri, that coming to know God is a commanded part of a properly fulfilled mitzvah and that proper *kavvanah*, inner intention, is necessary. Azikri interprets the familiar phrase written above many Arks in many synagogues, *da lifney mi atah omeyd*, "Know before whom you stand," with a mystical appreciation:

"If in my laws you walk" – the meaning of these words is that you should be laboring in Torah. God did not say "if in laws you walk" but "in my laws", that is to say, you must pay attention to the one from whom the laws come, and similarly in acts, "you shall observe my commandments and do them." Only thus is the Holy One exalted.¹⁰⁸

Azikri asserts that the Jewish exile was meant to last for only 1000 years, but

¹⁰⁷ in Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: Later Masters*, p. 249.

¹⁰⁸ Eliezer Azikri, *Sefer Haredim*, p. 35.

because of sin it has been extended. Jewish sins are three: not seeking to know God, as “every ass knows its master”; laziness in fulfilling *mitzvot*; and the lack of *teshuvah*, which will perfect the Jewish people if done correctly and allow us to repair the destroyed altar of God. For a mystic, *teshuvah* is not just the act of rebalancing one’s relationship with God and the world through making reparation for a transgression; it brings about the unification of the Jewish people within the unity of God, that unity which Jews help to create by way of *mitzvot*. *Teshuvah* is the turning that is at the heart of the ability to see what might yet be in the world; it is a necessary skill for a mystic. Azikri quotes the *Zohar*, in which it is written that a *bat kol*, a “still small voice,” is heard “calling out ‘*shuvu banim shovevim*’ [“return, errant children”], and that *bat kol* goes forth from Horeb, woe to us for we do not hear it.”¹⁰⁹ Horeb, of course, is where the burning bush first caused Moshe to turn and to see.

What one sees, according to mystical theology, is that at any moment, any *mitzvah* that anyone does may tip the ethical balance of the entire world, and its fate, toward redemption. The opposite act, an *averah*, transgression, may tip the balance of the world toward destruction; the Hebrew is related to the verb “to cross over,” as in to overshoot one’s boundaries or to tip a scale out of balance by going too far. This is an understanding of human life and behavior that is both demanding and compassionate: it constantly focuses on the balance between the knowledge that we are “but dust and ashes”; and, at the same time, it insists that we remember that we and all other human beings are “created in the image of God.” We may seem weak to ourselves, but we are capable of tipping the world’s balance toward redemption or destruction by our own individual acts.

Recall our image of the ancient Israelite measure of value, the scale. Even as

¹⁰⁹ *Sefer Haredim*, 225.

a scale will not function without both opposing pans suspended in a balance, Jewish ethics, or *musar*, does not function without a constant act of thoughtful balancing. *Musar* is part and parcel of Jewish daily life and law, and it is also a meta-ethic that informs and overarches it. It is an expression of a general sense of Jewish morality and also the attitude that focuses on the ethic of every behavioral gesture. *Musar* is the ultimate practice of balance in all dimensions. It is the source of the Jewish caricature: on the one hand ... yet, on the other hand ...

Jewish ethics recognizes and addresses “the tensions which exist between the ideal and reality”; it balances between the demands of a *mitzvah* and of its context.¹¹⁰ This tension is regularly demonstrable in Jewish tradition in the meeting of form and content, of *keva* and *kavvanah* – and, for mystics, between the transcendent and the immanent, between the longed-for and the lived. Life, in all its constant uncertainty, is most vibrant in its creative potential in the space between a continuum’s two poles – and in the discomfort of conflicting opposites when they meet. Each time, an ethical decision must be made not only on the basis of precedent but also on a close consideration of the matter at hand and its unique circumstances. “A living morality is not assessed as a system of values but, as Martin Buber has observed, in the way it determines an ought, and an ought not only in the here and now.”¹¹¹

These are the creative parameters of ethical Jewish choice. In the classic statement, “I set before you this day life and blessing, death and evil,”¹¹² the Torah is content to command in vague and general terms to choose life and leaves the details to be determined in the given situation. The struggle to live according to an ethical ideal is a daily reality. The *yetzer hara’*, the “evil impulse,” is hard to control.

¹¹⁰ Louis Jacobs, *Jewish Values*, p. 116.

¹¹¹ Shalom Rosenberg, “Ethics,” p. 202.

¹¹² *Devarim* 30.19.

Every day, every moment, we learn, we judge, we choose:

Free will is given into the hand of each human being to improve his ways, to correct his behaviors, to straighten his paths, and to choose the path of life and good, as it is said, "See, I set before you this day life and good, death and evil" (Dev. 30.14), "choose life" (Dev. 30.19).¹¹³

In a mystical theology, being an ethical person is of ultimate importance, because of the power of human actions to bring God's presence more fully into the community. It is the ultimate act of personal responsibility, since no one, not even God, can do it for one. It is the ultimate act of prayer: to *be* the change we pray to see in the world. As Abraham Joshua Heschel is reported to have said after joining Martin Luther King's Selma march, if it was time to pray for equal rights, in this case it was his legs that were doing the praying.

It is written (Ex. 23), *va'avadtem et Adonai Eloheykhem uvarekh et lakhmo*, "And you shall serve Adonai your God and each shall bless his bread." The beginning of the verse is in the plural and afterward it continues in the singular. This is because that which is related to matters of holiness must be done in the community of Israel and in the name of all Israel, and therefore it is written *and you (plural) shall serve*. But in matters of physicality, even when the community eats together, each one's eating is for his own body, and is not for the need of his companion. So we find that matters of Torah and prayer, even if one engages in them alone, they are in the name of (*I'shem* also means "for the sake of") all Israel, but matters of physicality, even if they are undertaken in a community, each one is an individual in this.¹¹⁴

That excerpt recalls the Talmudic teaching¹¹⁵ that one who seeks to be judged on his own merit will find that his merit depends on others, and one who seeks to be judged on the merit of others will find his destiny dependent on his own acts. The acts, and the destiny, of the individual and the community are inextricably intertwined, since we are all interconnected within God.

One scholar of Jewish ethics describes *musar* as the act of "descending in

¹¹³ *Ma'alot haMiddot*, 206.

¹¹⁴ *Emet v'Emunah*, p. 12 n. 56.

¹¹⁵ BT *Berakhot* 10b

order to ascend.”¹¹⁶ On the simplest level, one might suggest that “descending” is an indicator of humility; avoiding arrogance, after all, is an important aspect of rising toward God and coming close to God through connecting to other human beings. The mystical level of the idea is intriguing, for it recalls the Talmudic mystics who were referred to as *yordei haMerkavah*, “those who descend to the Chariot.” The reference is to the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, which is a major early source of mystical speculation owing to its description of the prophet’s vision of a strange and obscure manifestation of God’s presence. In the text, a chariot is not named, but something like one is described, borne aloft by “living creatures,” and riding in it is something that Ezekiel hesitatingly describes as a vision of God.

Over the heads of the living creatures there was the likeness of a firmament, like the color of the terrible ice, stretched forth over their heads above...and when they went, I heard the noises of their wings like the noise of great waters, like the voice of the Almighty, a noise of tumult like the noise of a host. ... As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of YHVH. When I saw it, I fell upon my face, and I heard a voice of one that spoke.¹¹⁷

This vision took place by the river Kevar, in Babylon, during the early days of the first Exile of the Jewish people, and it is this detail which leads to an interesting interpretation that may help us understand the term “descend” applied to a vision of God – which is, after all, much more often associated with movement upward. The scholar David Halperin, in an exhaustive examination of the impact of Ezekiel’s vision on Jewish belief and liturgy, notes the special context of another celebrated opportunity to behold a vision of God, in the crossing of the Red Sea. This midrash begins with a reference to Ezekiel’s vision:

¹¹⁶ Hillel Goldberg’s study of Israel Salantar makes this interesting point. (“Israel Salantar and *Orkhot Zaddikim*,” p. 33).

¹¹⁷ Ezekiel 1.22-28, excerpted

Rabbi Berekiah said: See how great were those who went down to the sea! ... The living creatures who bear the throne do not recognize the Likeness, and when their time comes to recite the Song, they ask: 'Where is He? For we know not whether He is here or there; but wherever He is "Blessed be the glory of God from His place."' But each of those who went up from the sea pointed with his finger and said: "This is my God, and I will glorify Him". God said to Israel: 'In this world you have said only once before Me: "This is my God," but in the time to come you will say it twice,' for it says, And it shall be said in that day: "This is our God, for whom we waited, that He might save us; this is the Lord, for whom we waited" (Isaiah 25.9)¹¹⁸

Even the strange "living creatures", with their close proximity to the chariot they carry, are not sure where to seek God's presence, according to this ancient tradition; the Israelites who crossed the Sea in the escape from Egypt, however, clearly saw, and even pointed to, the presence of God. In Hebrew, those to whom Rabbi Berekiah refers to are *yordei hayam*, "those who went down to the Sea"; and, later, after the vision, they are referred to as *oleh hayam*, "those who came up from the Sea".

Ezekiel's vision also comes about after he goes down to the water, in this case, the waters of the River Kevar. Perhaps, Halperin suggests, the early mystics are called "descenders to the Chariot" because the experience they strove to recreate for themselves was directly modeled upon that of those who go down to the water. Halperin sees here a reference, potentially, to a much more complex concept even than the revelatory moments when the Sea parted and the Israelites crossed on dry land; the Red Sea a stalking-horse for some more primal, august, and ominous body of water; a mirror, fixed within Israel's history, in which those other waters are reflected ... [perhaps] of the chaos-waters that existed at the beginning of creation; which, according to the first chapter of Genesis, God had to divide and limit before he was able to create the earth.¹¹⁹

The descent toward the water, toward the Sea, is a movement backward in time, backward toward the primeval Chaos, "the face of the deep" described by Genesis, out of which creation itself emerged. It is at the boundary between chaos and the imposed order that made life possible, that the mystics seek a vision of "God, for

¹¹⁸ Exodus Rabbah 23.15

¹¹⁹ David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot*, p. 227.

whom we waited”.

For the mystics, it is in the parting of the waters above and the waters below that God’s presence is seen in the act of balancing heaven and earth. This is the primary insight of mystical theology: one’s acts are intended to balance heaven and earth, and God is in the balancing.

Seeing What Is Between Heaven and Earth

It is a paradoxical predicament, the human situation. The ladder is both *mutzav artzah*, firmly fixed on the earth, and *roshe magia’ hashamaymah*, with its head “in heaven,” as it were, in the clouds. We are inescapably both rational and spiritual, and so we must learn to balance these conflicting opposites if we are fully to embrace our humanity. Not only are we like a ladder that links heaven and earth, but spiritually we also find ourselves standing on a ladder, up which we are drawn by a vision of the Eternal, toward the heights, only to fall back. In an age that has seen the collapse of confidence in science, we seek certainty and a sense of meaning in some other source. We rise and fall on the ladder, mostly fall. Some of us come to religion; others are attracted to false gods of patriotism, money, power, celebrity, acquisition, fads, cults, and other kinds of shallow belonging. Still others drown their sense of desperation in addictive behavior.

And then there are those who have the courage to live in this situation and find it in themselves to face uncertainty without resorting to hypocrisy; who prefer difficult questions to the panacea of easy, misfit answers; who, for the sake of their children, if not for that of the child within themselves, want to search for real meaning and who come to understand by experience the truth that they can follow that path only by “doing justice, loving goodness, and walking modestly with your

God."¹²⁰ They are the messengers of God. We see them rising and falling, trying and failing, making the very journey of their lives a sacred pilgrimage. They are the legendary Thirty-Six, the righteous for whose sake the entire human world – miserable and corrupt as it is – continues to exist. Each of us can aspire to become one of these angels, these ordinary human beings who keep one eye on the ladder always. It is those Thirty-Six for who the *or ganuz*, the Light at the End of the World, is waiting.

Having been created and put into this worldly place, the Jewish mystics understood the human task to be preparing the place and in so doing, preparing the Place.

since God is not just static being but also dynamic becoming, God needs us as we need God. ... we are here to be transparent vessels of [God's] power and creativity, the healthy and supple limbs, if you like, through which It enacts Its dance in the real. Without our conscious, willed, inspired participation, God is incomplete; God needs us to realize God's design in and for the world.¹²¹

As we are the limbs of a will of which God is the essence, we are all part of the same reality.

Lo yihyeh b'kha el zar, el lo yihyeh b'kha zar. "There shall be no foreign [or strange] God among you," that is to say, God will not be foreign [or strange] within you.¹²²

Once we arrive at the realization that to reflect God's image means to echo God's essence, then it follows that our inner sense of being, or our soul, is an extension of God. Thus, though we often consider the idea of God to be "foreign" to our own being, somehow different from us in essence and thus something to be discovered and figured out, in truth God is not strange or foreign to us – rather, God is of us. As the Kotsker put it one night while considering the sleeping faces of his students,

¹²⁰ Micah 6.8; Knohl's translation in *The Divine Symphony*

¹²¹ Daniel Matt, *Zohar*, p. xvi.

¹²² *Emet v'Emunah*, p. 7 n. 20.

“How frail a dwelling for so great a God.”

Whatever is lacking in you, the same lack is in the *Shekhinah*, for the human being is a piece of God above (*helek Elohi mima'al*). Any lack in a part is a lack in the all, and the all feels the lack of the part.¹²³

If each of us is a reflection of God individually, then it follows that all of us – the world itself, as the aggregate of all human actions and interactions – is also a reflection of God. Each of us generates either a positive or a negative ethical energy, and everything that happens does too – and all that reflects back at God. Put another way, everything written in the Torah, although it seems to be a narrative of events or a collection of commandments, is actually a window into the nature of God. Which is, also, of course, a view of our own nature – and a way to draw forth a sense of the meaning of our nature and our lives.

The realization that we are active conduits of energy from God and back to God gives each of us a vitally significant role in the life of the world. Our choices strengthen either the potential good of the world or the potential evil that is also inherent within it. Within us. Within God. The recognition that we play an active part in the life of the universe of which we are a part leads to a breathtaking definition of the purpose of the *mitzvot*.

It is written, “and keep my commandments, and do (*asa'*) them” (Lev. 26.3). R. Hama son of R. Hanina expounded: ‘If you keep the Torah,’ [says God] ‘I shall consider it as though you had made (*asa'*) the commandments,’ [the text may also be translated]: “and make them”. R. Hanina b. Pappi expounded: He told them: If you keep the Torah I shall consider it as if you had made yourselves.¹²⁴

The mystical book *Sefer haYikhud* goes even further to assert:

Whoever keeps my commandments, I regard as if he has made Me...literally, [since] whoever blemishes below, blemishes above, and

¹²³ Baal Shem Tov, *Tzavaa'at haRivash*, 6b

¹²⁴ Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, *Beit HaBekhirah, Shaar haGadol*. p. 47b. The vital status of human activity in the creation of the world will be discussed in more depth below in the introduction to the Ten Lessons.

whoever purifies himself below, adds strength ... above.¹²⁵

The purpose of a human being is to imitate God and in so doing, quite literally and vitally to create God's presence in the world. As we do so, however, because we are only human, we stumble along, faced with the daily effort to balance that which is within ourselves. As heaven balances earth and day balances night, there are a good inclination and an evil inclination in the world – and, therefore, in human nature, which itself is a microcosm of the cosmos. All of nature demonstrates balances between opposites that require each other in order to exist; male and female are required for several modes of reproduction, and every magnet has a positive and a negative polarity. The earth itself balances positive and negative electromagnetic fields between each pole. We humans, just one more part of the creation, are composed of such opposites as well. This is an insight into not only our physical makeup, but also our morality.

The aphorism, "It's always darkest before the dawn," is usually construed to mean that one's situation can seem pretty desperate doomed before the light of relief appears. Darkness is often a metaphor for evil, or at least for negative feelings, of apprehension and even terror, regarding the unknown. But mysticism sees a more complex reality in darkness. The *Zohar* begins its interpretation of the Torah's account of creation with these words:

A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the head of Infinity – a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all....it yielded radiant colors.¹²⁶

It is darkness out of which light appears; darkness is the first condition. It is a necessary condition for light. As one ancient Rabbinic commentator observed: "The eye is composed of a white part and a dark part. One sees only through – only out

¹²⁵ Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 185.

¹²⁶ Daniel Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 107–108.

of – the dark part.”¹²⁷ Anyone who has been on a stage under bright spotlights knows this experience. The one who is in the light cannot see the audience; all is dark. But those sitting in the audience watching the stage, who are in darkness, can clearly see that which is illuminated. The Aramaic term for blindness is *sagei nahor*, “filled with light.”

This paradox of seeing is a powerful metaphor for much more. The initial act of creation takes place, as the *Zohar* describes it, as a point of darkness that spawns light. Creation itself is an act that comes out of darkness. The light that comes forth from the darkness is the original light of creation, appearing when, according to the Torah’s account, God uttered the words *yehi or*, “let there be light.”¹²⁸ This light appeared days before the sun and moon were created; it was a different kind of illumination. “The light created by the Blessed Holy One in the act of Creation flared from one end of the universe to the other.”¹²⁹ With it one could see all of Creation; we might say, with it one could see creatively. “It is the light of the eye.”¹³⁰ It is the artist’s illumination, the intimation of a greater seeing, the hint of enlightenment.

In you is the Source of Life;
in Your light we see light.¹³¹

This is the light echoed in Moses’ burning bush and memorialized in every *menorah*. It is this light we shall seek in our exploration of the *sefirot*.

¹²⁷ *Tanhuma - Tetzaveh*, 6

¹²⁸ Genesis 1.3

¹²⁹ *Daniel Matt, Zohar*, p. 194.

¹³⁰ *Daniel Matt, Zohar*, p. 192.

¹³¹ Psalm 36.10