

Neurology & Pain Management

JULIAN UNGAR-SARGON, M.D., Ph.D.
123 McKinley Avenue
Rensselaer, IN 47978

Re-visioning God: Acceptance after Sin

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Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me. Behold, You desire truth in the inwards parts, And in the hidden part You will make me know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

(Psalm 51: 5-10)

R. Adda son of R. Hanina said: Had not Israel sinned, only the Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua would have been given them, [the latter] because it records the disposition of Palestine [among the tribes].¹ Whence is this known? "For much wisdom proceedeth from much anger". (Eccl. I: 18)

Talmud Nedarim 22b

תלמוד בבלי מסכת נדרים דף כב עמוד ב

אמר רב אדא ברבי חנינא: אלמלא (לא) חטאו ישראל - לא ניתן להם אלא חמשה חומשי תורה וספר יהושע בלבד, שערכה של ארץ ישראל הוא, מאי טעמא? +קהלת א+ כי ברוב חכמה רב כעס

He should accustom himself that immediately when he stirs from his sleep he should say, [Modeh Ani...] 'I am thankful before you, Living and Eternal King. Who has returned to me my soul with compassion, great is your faithfulness.' He should [then] say with a joyful heart

¹ But the other books, consisting mostly of the rebuking of the prophets, would have been unnecessary.

even in Yiddish [i.e. the language he usually speaks] **'Blessed is the Exalted G-d who has given to me this mitzvah of tzitzis that I am surrounded with.** And the Mitzvah of washing ones hands in the morning to remove the impurity from my two hands.'

Tzetz Katan, R. Elimelech of Lizensk Para. 9.

Much of what I am working on recently is focused on developing a notion of the Divine that is non-toxic. The way we were raised included assumptions about God, forgiveness, grace, sin and punishment, based on ancient texts and traditions. The Church and Synagogue embodied notions of God that were handed down generation to generation. Some voices of dissent were either suppressed or diluted in the sweep of history. Much of the recovery work in which one's powerlessness over illness pain and events in one's life requires the assistance of a Higher Power in order to endure and suffer better. The exact nature of this Higher Power therefore requires better elucidation despite philosophical arguments to the contrary. We can no longer afford the luxury of negative theologies² despite their better precision. I need a working hypothesis with which to give hope strength and recovery for my patients (and myself of course!) a working notion of God that will reflect an inner self that is less toxic than the one we were brought up with.

For that I need to start with the notion of forgiveness. To forgive is the starting point since so much toxicity contains resentments of the past and in order to project a saner satisfying and nurturing image of the divine we need help to clean house to somehow get rid of these toxic resentments. Forgiveness seems to me to be the key. Let us examine this. I include as will be noted forgiveness of self which is the hardest act to accomplish.

The definition of forgiveness is as follows:

for-give (fuhr giv') v. <-gave, -giv-en, -giv-ing>

1. to grant pardon for or remission of (an offense, sin, etc.); absolve.
2. to cancel or remit (a debt, obligation, etc.): to forgive the interest owed on a loan.
3. to grant pardon to (a person).
4. to cease to feel resentment against: to forgive one's enemies.
5. to pardon an offense or an offender.

OBJECTS OF FORGIVENESS.

Just who is being forgiven, and by whom?

Forgiving others. The quality of mercy we exhibit to others is an integral part of the archetype we will project onto a benevolent Divine image. We begin with finding the space in one's heart to love others unconditionally and remove all resentments held against others.

Being forgiven by others. The same logic applies as with forgiving others. Cosmetic forgiveness between humans can be a compassionate act. However, genuine forgiveness is a very personal matter and of course so difficult.

² I mean by negative theology that of Maimonides who basically states that we can only make statements of what God is not rather than positive statements about His attributes.

Being forgiven by God. If we picture a revisioned image of God, He will not keep records, nor will He carry grudges. The universal system of justice He has created will take care of correction and forgiveness since it carries His attribute of mercy above all. We will examine the 13 attributes by which He has given us the gift to overcome His attribute of strict justice below. This unconditionally loving God was never taught to me as a child and requires me to overhaul the toxic shame and guilt that was inculcated into me as a result of the absence of this quality.

Forgiving ourselves. Just as humans can eventually truly forgive each other, self-forgiveness is also possible although even harder to accomplish. Low self-esteem ,self-loathing stand in the way constantly. We assuredly agree that many, if not most human beings know guilt, shame, remorse and self-loathing to excess. How do we get rid of these before we can truly see the perfection of the Creator within ourselves as we are intended to do? **Knowing that we are forgiven is a requirement for the spiritual life.**

Already in the Midrash there is a discussion as to whether, following the destruction of the Temple the Divine Presence did or did not leave the Land of Israel, the Temple Mount, or even the people.

χ ινηξ χ ωαρπ ,υνα ωχρ αρσν

ωρυα ωβηφα ω,ηω ε'νωηχ χρφ τκα σγ ινφβ ρχ κτυνα ρ'ντ υασε κφηωχ εωυ (χ ευεχ φ) σ'νωω ωγυρ ωηω ωανυ χ
 οηναχ εω (δε οα) ρντβα οηνακ ωβηφωω ωεκ,ξβ ε'νωηχ χρφωανυ ηασε κφηωχ εω (τ η οηκω,) ρντβα υφυ,χ
 (δ οηκω,) ρνυτ τυω ιφυ ευδυ οα ηχκυ ηβηγ υηωυ (ζ χ ω'νσ) ρντβα κφηωω λυ,ν ωβη φωω ω'ζζ τκ ρνυτ τ'νρ υτξφ ιηφω
 κτ (τ τρζγ) ρνυτ αρυφ ων ωτρυ τχ υ,αυσεχ τυω ηρω χρφ τυωα π'νγτ ωκξ υασε ρων η ββγηυ τρετ εω κτ ηκυε
 κ,υφν ω'ζζ ωβηφωω ιητ οκυγκ τφτ ρ'ντ οαν ζζ υβητ οηωκτω χρφ τυωα π'νγτ ιωκ ρντ οηκαυρηχ ρατ οηωκτω
 π'νγτ ητβη ρ'ντ οστ ηβχ υβφχη υηπγγ υζφη υηβηγ (τη οηκω,) χη,φυ υβκ,φ ρφτ σνυγ ωζ ωβω (χ ρηα) ρντβα ηχργν
 υβ,ηα λκνω ωυμυ ωυχδ κσδν υχ ωβχυ ξσρπ υκ ωηωα λκνκ καν οστ ηβχ υβφχη υηπ γγ υζφη υηβηγ οηναχ υ,βηφωα
 κμγ,να ην κφυ οκαν υρφα κυψη υ,φτκνχ ραφ,να ην κφ λκνω ρντ υ,φτκνχ οηεξυγ υη ωηα οηκγυπ υφυ,κ
 ωρυ,ω ρυνακ υφυ,χ κτραηκ ω'νχεω ι,βα οκυγω ωζ ξσρπωυ οηφκνω ηφκν λκν ωζ λκ νω ξυνησχ ι,βη υ,φτκνχ
 π'νγτ ω'νχεω ;τ οβωηδ ηρω ωρναν υβητα ηνυ υηβπκ ισγ ιδ ηρω ωρυ,ω ,τ ρνυα τυωα ην ρντυ οωνγ ωβ,ωυ
 οστ ηβχ υβφχη υηπγγ υζφη υηβηγ ασενω ,ηχν υ,βηφω εκξνφ ωτρβ τυωα

Midrash Rabbah - Exodus II:2

NOW MOSES WAS KEEPING THE FLOCK. It is written: But the Lord is in His holy temple (Hab. II, 20). R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Before the Temple was destroyed, the Divine Presence dwelt therein, for it says: The Lord is in His holy temple (Ps. XI, 4); but when the Temple was destroyed, the Divine Presence removed itself to heaven, as it is said: The Lord hath established His throne in the heavens (ib. CIII, 19). R. Eleazar says: The Shechinah did not depart from the Temple, for it is said: "And Mine eyes and My heart shall be there

perpetually" (II Chron. VII, 16). So it also says: With my voice I call unto the Lord, and He answered me out of His holy mountain, Selah (Ps. III, 5); for although it was laid waste, it still retained its holiness. See what Cyrus said: He is the God who is in Jerusalem (Ezra I, 3), implying that though Jerusalem is laid waste, God had not departed from there. R. Aha said: The Divine Presence will never depart from the Western Wall, as it is said: Behold, He stands behind our wall² (Song of Songs II, 9), and also: His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men³ (Ps. XI, 4). R. Jannai said: Although His Presence is in heaven, yet "His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men".

A Parable (mashal) God was here like a King who had an orchard, wherein he built a tall tower and commanded that workmen should be engaged to do his work there. The King said that the one who was proficient in his work would receive full reward, but one who was indolent in his work would be handed over to the Governments. (Explication:)The king in the parable is the King of kings, and the orchard is the world in which God has placed Israel to keep the Torah; He also stipulated with them that he who keeps the Torah has the entry to Paradise, but he who does not keep it is faced with Gehinnom. Thus with God; though He seems to have removed His Presence from the Temple, yet 'His eyes behold, His eyelids try, the children of men'.

This complex midrash contains the differing opinions as to the withdrawal of the divine presence after the destruction of the temple. Differing views reflected in different rabbis' references to biblical verses reflect their experience of the absences of God in the world now that His abode was destroyed. The parable stretches the metaphor of absence with the king not revealing whether he is or is not present in the tower. Yet the Torah seems to be a substitute for the Temple since the task is now to toil in the orchard of the king. Later the midrash concludes that Moses as well as David represent God in the world since through His righteous ones, His presence is felt (albeit they are held to a stricter standard and judged accordingly).

In a Midrash (Sifre to Numbers) working through the verse "and not to defile the land which you will be residing in" (Num. 35:34) the rabbis struggle with the cause and effects of the Hurban or the destruction of the Temple(s). The notion of spilling blood and senseless hatred causing murder is the predominant theme and the effects is the withdrawal of the divine presence the shechina. However the midrash is at pains to point out that the people of Israel remain "beloved" (pink highlight words) of the Almighty despite all the national sins.³

ספרי במדבר פסקא קס"ה ולא תטמא

ולא תטמא את הארץ אשר אתם יושבים בה, מגיד הכתוב ששפיכת דמים מטמא הארץ ומסלקת את השכינה ומפני שפיכות דמים חרב בית המקדש⁴... מיכן אמרו בעון שפיכת דמים שכינה מסתלקת ומקדש מטמא: אשר אני שוכן בתוכה, **הבינים ישראל שאף על פי שהם טמאים שכינה ביניהם שנא' השוכן אתם בתוך טומאתם** [ואומר בטמא את משכני אשר בתוכם] ואומר ולא יטמאו את מחניהם (במדבר ה' ג) ואומר ולא תטמאו את הארץ אשר אתם יושבים בה. ר' נתן אומר **הבינים** ישראל שבכל מקום שגלו שכינה עמהם גלו למצרים שכינה עמהם שנאמר הנגלה נגלית אל בית אביך בהיותם במצרים לבית פרעה (שמואל א' ב כז). גלו לבבל שכינה עמהם שנאמר למענכם שולחתי בבלה (ישעיה מג יד). גלו לעילם שכינה עמהם שנאמר ושמתו כסאי בעילם והאבדתי משם

³ Rashi, quoting this Midrash Sifre 161 and Talmud Yoma 57, commenting on the verse "For I the Lord God rest among the children of Israel" (Ibid.) writes: "even at a time when they are impure, the shechina dwells among them"...

⁴ מעשה בשני כהנים שהיו שוין ורצין ועולין בכבש וקדם אחד מהם להבירו בתוך ארבע אמות נטל סכין ותקעה לו בלבו בא רבי צדוק ועמד על מעלות האולם the midrash inserts at this point this story of the two priests who were racing up the rampart to the altar and one killed the other. This horrific story is brought as evidence that the laws of purity were more precious than spilling blood and caused the ultimate destruction of the temple דרוק על מעלות האולם ואמר שמעוני אחינו בית ישראל הרי הוא אומר כי ימצא חלל באדמה וגו' (שם/דברים כ"א/א) בואו ונמדוד על מי ראוי להביא את העגלה על ההיכל או על העזרות געו כל ישראל בבכייה ואח"כ בא אביו של תינוק [ומצאו מפרפר] אמר להם אחינו הרינו כפרתכם עדיין בני מפרפר וסכין לא נטמאת ללמדך שטומאת סכינים חביבה להם יותר משפיכות דמים. וכן הוא אומר וגם דם נקי שפך מגשה הרבה מאד עד אשר מלא את ירושלם פה לפה (מלכים ב' כא טז)

מלך ושרים (ירמיה מט לח). גלו לאדום שכינה עמהם שנאמר מי זה בא מאדום חמוץ בגדים מבצרה (ישעיה סג א). וכשהם חוזרים שכינה חוזרת עמהם שנאמר ושב ה' אלהיך את שבותך ורחמך (דברים ל ג) והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב ה' אלהיך ואומר אתי מלבנון כלה אתי מלבנון תבואי תשוב מראש אמנה מראש שניר וחרמון ממעונות אריות ומהררי נמרים (שה"ש =שיר השירים= ד ח). רבי אומר משל למה הדבר דומה למלך שאמר לעבדו אם בקשתני הריני אצל בני כל זמן שאתה מבקשני הריני אצל בני וכן הוא אומר השוכן אתם בתוך טומאותם (ויקרא טז טז) ואומר בטמאם את משכני אשר בתוכם (שם טו לא) ואומר ולא יטמאו את מחניהם אשר אני שוכן בתוכם (במדבר ה ג) וא' ולא תטמא את הארץ אשר אתם יושבים בה אשר אני שוכן בתוכה כי אני ה' שוכן בתוך בני ישראל.

“And thou shalt not defile the land which you will dwell upon it” the verse tells us that spilling blood defiles the land and causes the shechina to withdraw and that because of spilling blood the Temple was destroyed. “Which I dwell in it” beloved are Israel that despite their impurity the shechina remains with them. As it is written “who dwells with them “... Rabbi Nathan said “beloved are Israel for wherever they maybe exiled to the shechina remains with them...” and when they return to the Land of Israel it will also return with them... Rebbe said to what may it be compared (parable) to a king who says to his confidant “anytime you request something from me I will be with my sons, anytime you need me I will be with my sons”...

Rabbi Nathan quotes verses to prooftext each of the four exiles with a specific verse to back up his claim. Using the parable of a king who notifies his advisors that he will be with his children if he is sought, the explication seems to suggest that God himself remains with us no matter where Israel is exiled.

The above two examples of many midrashim whose exegetical purpose is to give solace to a post-exilic community inasmuch as other faith communities were justifying their supremacist claims to truth by pointing at the lowly exiled state of the Jewish people. The very fact of the loss of the land of their ancestors pointed to a lack of God's choice and covenantal ongoing relationship. The Midrash comes to refute and resist that interpretation of history by insisting on the ongoing special relationship as well as the maintenance of divine providence despite exile.

In the following mystical texts I will be presenting a nuanced and different notion of forgiveness and sin. I will be translating texts written by the followers of the Baal Shem Tov. They formed a radically new way of relating to God, the path of *devekut* or “attachment”, a technical term implying a constant awareness of the Presence of God both within and without. Based on mystical texts such as the Zohar which claimed that there was no place in creation that God was absent from, these Rebbes made such claims the foundation for their radical theology. However we will not address the philosophical implications (which are admittedly quite problematic). What then can be said about sin addiction and evil? Is God present even in those places of darkness and immorality?

Below I hope to articulate a notion of the divine that is more fitting for the recovery work in pain and suffering and to articulate a space where God is present in affliction too.

A. Tzetzal Katan: The Four Cornered Talis.

Reb 'Melech (as he is affectionately called)⁵ speaks in **Tzetzal Katan**⁶ paragraph 9 (quoted above in prefaced quotes) of being “surrounded by the talis” or the tzitzis, the four cornered ritual garment. Being surrounded implies a front and back dimension which have deep mystical

⁵ Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk 1717-1787 *Noam Elimelech* has been published in an annotated edition by Gedalyah Nigal (Jerusalem, 1978). The introduction to that work deals at length with major themes in Elimelech's writings. The most complete legendary biography is the *Ohel Elimelech* by A. H. Michelson (1910; reprint, Jerusalem, 1967).

⁶ Tzetzal Katan was written by Reb Elimelech “a small epistle” containing some 17 paragraphs dealing with the heart of Divine worship. It contains the most exacting demands of the heart including daily meditations regarding *mesiras nefesh* or readiness for self-sacrifice.

significance. Facing the front means facing the divine and the light in an I-Thou confrontation whereas facing the back implies an I-It kind of relationship with the shadowy darker side of the divine and life. Yet Judaism demands we see the Lord everywhere for “there is no place devoid of him” (Tikkunei **Zohar**, Tikkun 57).⁷ Sin, the devil, the *sitra achra* and the evil inclination all have their place within the divine scheme of things and are placed in the *achorayim* or the back of reality, in the front/back world of light and shadow. This is no dualistic world of gods and devils, rather there is a theological insistence that even evil derives ultimately from God. However the issue becomes what happens to our relationship to God after sin, after we have committed crimes of a ritual and moral nature. What is the mechanism of forgiveness and restitution? The Bible spends a large portion of Leviticus dealing with the sacrificial cult and the fixing of sins and we are told that prayer is in major part a substitute for the sacrifices once performed in the Temple. However the question remains as to whether God is changed by our sin and what is the relationship with him in the presence of or after sin.

“In the Beginning (Gen 1:1), there arose in His thought to create the world with only the Attribute of strict justice⁸ and heaven forefend that we should (interpret this midrash) think about The Holy One Blessed be He who is unique in His truth that there might be a change of mind (i.e. initially wishing to create the world with Strict Justice then changing to include the attribute of Mercy)...

“For in truth a person must serve the Creator in all possible manners not to sin before Him with any transgression or even a hint of sin so that even the lightest of the light misdemeanors appear in his eyes as strict ones, and this Tzaddik (Saint) can exist with only the Attribute of Strict Justice (Middas Hadin) ...

“However these men of exalted spiritual stature are few and far between, who could withstand and endure life with only the Attribute of Strict Justice, and therefore He had to conjoin the Attribute of mercy (in creating the world). And in truth God initially saw both these two levels of person simultaneously i.e. the saint and the penitent, and this is what arose in His thought initially so that initially he had the saint in mind that could live with Justice alone. Then seeing that the world could not exist for the nature of things is that not everyone can be a saint, so He conjoined the Attribute of Mercy. But in truth he thought and foresaw all simultaneously with any change in His mind subsequently.

“And this is the meaning of the verse “I am the Lord your God, in truth...” meaning he who walks in the path of truth in worshipping God, not to sin, then even the Attribute of Strict Justice (Middas Hadin) is (for him) really Mercy, since he has no need to fear the Middas Hadin.

“And this is the meaning of the text (Talmud Babli: Rosh Hashanah, 17b⁹) ‘I am God, before man sins and after man sins’ for before he sins the Middas Hadin is

⁷ For an even more radical demand see below on the extract from Rabbi Nachman of Breslov.

⁸ “The Lord God made heaven and earth” (Gen 1:1). This may be compared to a king who had some empty glasses. Said the king: ‘If I pour hot water into them, they will burst; if cold, they will contract [and snap].’ What then did the king do? He mixed hot and cold water and poured it into them, and so they remained [unbroken]. Even so, said the Holy One, blessed be He: ‘If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and of mercy, and may it then stand!’ Hence the expression, ‘THE LORD GOD.’ (The Rabbis hold that Adonai (the Tetragrammaton) refers to God under His Attribute of Mercy, while Elohim describes Him as a God of judgment.) Midrash Rabbah - Genesis XII:15

⁹ “And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed” (Ex. 34:6) R. Johanan said: Were it not written in the text, it would be impossible for us to say such a thing; this verse teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe round Him like the reader of a congregation and showed Moses the order of prayer. He said to him: Whenever Israel sin let them carry out this service before Me, (i.e. the 13 Attributes of mercy) and I will forgive them.

identical with mercy and even after he sins then "I am the Lord" i.e. in the Attribute of mercy .

This difficult passage from Reb Elimelech's magnum opus **Noam Elimelech (Pashas Pekudei)** insists on a reading of the midrash (Genesis Rabba 12:15) that resists a developmental approach to the attributes God made use of in creating the world, firstly strict justice followed by a realization that the world could not handle it so He used the attribute of mercy subsequently. The Rebbe refuses such a reading since it would imply God changing His mind. Rather than a temporal approach Rebbe suggests the decision was made simultaneously because of two types of people, the saint and the ordinary person, the one who could live with strict justice alone, never sinning, and the latter needing the quality of mercy in order to continue relating to God after sin. He then quotes from the Talmud (Rosh Hashana 17b) in an exegesis of a Biblical passage referring to the same typologies. This famous pericope in Exodus chapter 34 when Moses appeared before God after the sin of the golden calf. By invoking 13 attributes of mercy¹⁰ and triggering God's forgiveness he was told that covenantally speaking, Israel should continue to invoke these same 13 attribute in order to receive a similar favorable response in the future. I believe that the words that exegetically "triggered" Reb Elimelech's imaginative midrashic connection was the quote from Reb Johanan who said "God as it were drew His robe round Himself and showed Moses the order of prayer". This "drawing of the robe around" is the same surrounding of the tzitzis mentioned in our introductory quote from Tzetal Katan. However his point in referencing this Talmudic passage is to point out that God remains unchangeable and unchanged just as in the Genesis Midrash. In creation His conjoining the two archetypes of strict justice with mercy was a simultaneous not sequential gesture so too here His attitude to Israel remained the same before and after the sin of the golden calf. By invoking the 13 attributes of mercy, Israel would be assured of His unchanging commitment to the covenant.

B. Kli Yakar: Sifsei Daas.

In a commentary on his Tzetal Katan, The *Maadanei Melech* explains the specific expression of 'surrounding' the body with the Mitzvah (commandment) of tzitzis and quotes the **Sifsei Daas**¹¹ of Rabbi Shlomo Efraim:

"And so does the Holy One Blessed be he (also) wraps Himself in a talis that has four tzitzis and on each corner eight threads and five knots, equaling the numerical value of the word *echad* (1+8+4=13). It turns out that two (of the four tzitzis) are in front of Him and two are behind Him, the two in front representing twice the value Of *echad* i.e. $13 \times 2 = 26$ or the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton YHVH (10+5+6+5=26) before man sins, for then he relates to God in a complete love and desire. The two tzitzis that are behind God, represents the numerical value of 26 (again twice *echad* or $13 \times 2 = 26$ again equaling the YHVH) meaning **God's**

'The Lord, the Lord': **I am the Eternal before a man sins and the same after a man sins and repents.** 'A God merciful and gracious:' Rab Judah said: A covenant has been made with the thirteen attributes that they will not be turned away empty-handed, (when they recite them) as it says, "Behold I make a covenant." (ibid. 10). Rosh Hashana 17b.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת ראש השנה דף יז עמוד ב

ויעבר ה' על פניו ויקרא, אמר רבי יוחנן: אלמלא מקרא כתוב אי אפשר לאומר, מלמד שנתעטף הקדוש ברוך הוא כשליח צבור, והראה לו למשה סדר תפלה. אמר לו: כל זמן שישראל חוטאין - יעשו לפני כסדר הזה, ואני מוחל להם. ה' ה' - אני הוא קודם שיחטא האדם, ואני הוא לאחר שיחטא האדם ויעשה תשובה. אל רחום וחנון, אמר רב יהודה: ברית כרותה לשלש עשרה מדות שאינן חוזרות ריקם, שנאמר +שמות לד+ הנה אנכי כרת ברית.

¹⁰ "And God came down in a cloud...and passed before him and proclaimed: ' Hashem, Hashem Kel rachum ve- chanun, erech apayim ve-rav chesed ve-emet, notzer chesed la-alafim'..." (Ex 34:5-8)

¹¹ Written by Rabbi Shlomo Efraim of Luntchitz –author of the famous Kli Yakar commentary on the Bible- 1550-1619 and disciple of the Maharshal, Rabbi Shlomo Luria. 6. Pesikhta Lekach Tov on Deut. Parshat Reeh 22a.

presence even after he sins and repents for after one sins one is disposed to the backside of God so to speak **nevertheless His love does not budge from them.** As the Rabbis say¹² “either way He calls us His children (*banim*)” For (the root of banim/children) ben equals 52 which is twice YHVH (26x2=52). Meaning four times *echad* (13) i.e. in front of Him and behind Him (each two corners).”

In this numerological meditation the Kli Yakar finds meaning in the *gematria* or calculations of the word *echad* meaning unity or the doxology of the verse *Sh'ma* (Hear O Israel) that last word which proclaims the unity of the divine in the upper as well as the lower worlds. Claiming that even after sin God remains ever-loving because encrypted into the very numerical value of this word *echad* is the number 13 which is exactly half the value of the Tetragrammaton YHVH or God's compassionate Self (=26). The two corners of the tzitzis (containing 8 threads and 5 knots=13=numerical value of *echad*) then add up to this compassionate number 26. He then recalls the Talmudic dictum that “either way” we remain His “children” the Hebrew for child being Ben (=52) which is twice the value of His compassionate Name meaning two in front and two behind Him. The Behind of God representing His love after we have sinned and revealed His back, so to speak. He is everywhere and in every situation; however we describe His presence as behind after sin.

For me the notion that God wraps Himself in a talis or Tzitzis strains the philosophically-minded because of its profound anthropomorphism.¹³ The imagery of God as a *Shaliach Tzibbur*¹⁴ wrapped in a talis leading His people in prayer brings up the fact that the congregation stands behind Him and sees the back of Him or at least the back two corners of the talis. The metaphor is stretched to the limits by suggesting in a kabalistic way that His back is only facing His people when they have sinned. Yet we are comforted by the fact that he has essentially not changed whatsoever and His love remains unconditional.

C. Baal Shem Tov; Mesiras Nefesh in Prayer/Davening.

In another passage written by **Reb David from Mikolayiv** God's presence before and after sin is situated deeply within the Hassidic and mystical tradition. In a mystical mediation on the same word *echad* he quotes a teaching directly from his master the Baal Shem Tov as follows:

“I heard this great mystery regarding the pronunciation of the last word of the *Sh'ma*¹⁵ (*echad*) and the *yichudim* unifications one has to have in mind when reciting this last word, and the mystery of prayer, how a lowly human being can become capable of raising the feminine waters¹⁶ of the Holy sparks from below to

¹² פטיקתא זוטרתא (לקח טוב) דברים פרשת ראה דף כב עמוד א

בנים אתם. א"ר יהודה אם נוהגים אתם מנהג בנינים. הרי אתם בנינים. רבי מאיר אומר **בין כך ובין כך** אתם קרוין בנינים לה' אלהיכם. וכה"א (הושע ב) והיה במקום אשר יאמר להם לא עמי אתם (לאמר) יאמר להם בני אל חי.

¹³ For further discussion on this topic see my thesis “Imaging/Imagining the Divine” Brandeis University PhD Thesis 2000. Chapter One.

¹⁴ One who leads the community in prayer.

¹⁵ The doxology ‘hear [*Sh'ma*] O Israel the Lord Our God the Lord is One’

¹⁶In Kabbalah the universe is split between upper and lower realms and the influence between the lower and upper is expressed in the masculine/feminine dichotomy. The secret of the operation of the feminine side of every human, the operation that the Kabbalists call “*the Raising of the Feminine Waters*” – *Ha'alat man*. A basic principle of the Kabbalah is

above through his agency alone, anytime, until the messiah arrives whereupon mankind will have become completed spiritually in ways incomparable. When he will be able to make unifications until infinity in his thoughts...and when all the thoughts and externalities of the *sitra achra* (the 'other side') will be nullified for they will have no vitality left or sparks of holiness at all. Then there will be neither death nor sickness for "He will swallow up death for all time" [Isa. 25:8], and no one suffering sickness..

"Initially he must attempt to remove all evil thoughts from his mind and forsake them with a genuine regret and cleave his mind to performing a positive commandment ...for He enlivens all living things even the husks (klipot) and externalities and all evil attributes and vices in the mystery of "and His kingdom permeates over all" (Ps. 103:19). And he does good to the evildoers as well as the good ones, and even in the presence of a harsh sin there too is His presence for it is impossible to exist without Him and without Him the world would return to chaos, even in the darkest places there is some of His power present as in the mystery of the 11 components of the incense¹⁷ (one of these components Chelbona was actually evil smelling. So why was it included with the rest of the aromatic sweet Temple spices? "R. Hana ben Bizna in the name of R. Hisda the Righteous said, 'A fast in which none of the sinners of Israel participate is no fast. Chelbona has an unpleasant odor and nevertheless, it is included in the spices for the incense offered in the Temple". Rashi comments that the evil smelling Chelbona is included "to teach us that it should not be unimportant in our eyes to include among us - in our assemblies, our fasts, and our prayers - the sinners of Israel. They should be numbered with us.")¹⁸ ...

"however when a man humbles himself knowing he has rebelled against the King of the world, and from that lowly place of darkness and death he meditates and nevertheless his faith remains strong in the Lord God the Lord is One (*echad*) in the mystery of the great unification reaching infinity, and even in the place of real death His vitality permeates for there is nothing besides Him and His power and vitality may He be blessed. And were it not for the divine soul within him participating in this particular act sinfulness from even before he transgressed, the sin would not have had the power to divert him and rebel...

"in the act of penitence there is a turning from back to back to face to face, and because of his penitence he releases the holy sparks in the mystery of the feminine waters, and they run and are passionate in their return to God, those very vitalities of the husks (kelipot) that were present initially when he they caused him to sin, they were the vitality that were gathered in the husks nevertheless the Holy One

learned from the verse "from my flesh I shall behold God" (Job 19:26) – for "in the image of God He created him; male and female he created them" (Gen. 1:27) – and the phenomena of the human body are a examples and allegories to what also takes place in the higher worlds, within the divinity. The natural human inclination for sexual union is evidenced by the raising of "the feminine waters", the vaginal fluids, as the natural preparation for union and for satisfaction. The action of drawing up water from the well characterizes "the theurgical action" of humans – how a man returns and influences his Maker through "the Raising of **Ma'N**". For the kabalistic theurgical act of "the raising of **Ma'N**" there is demanded much effort, in controlling the natural inclination as well as its complete release, in order to enable the experience of the supreme joy.

All of Israel, the collective entity of "**Knesset Yisrael**", the carrier of messiahship, the craving for the perfection of the world, are aggregated and

¹⁷ The Torah specifies 11 organic herbs and spices to be specially prepared for burning the daily *ketores* as a pleasant smelling offering in the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) and later in the Bais Hamikdash (Temple). The strong but pleasant aroma permeated the air of Jerusalem from the twice daily offering (Talmud Yoma 39b). The Torah specifically mentions four ingredients that comprised the Ketores; Nataf, Shecheilet, Chelbona, and Levona. (Exodus 30; 34,35)

¹⁸ Chelbona (galbanum) and Levona (frankincense) are varieties of gum resins.

Blessed be he receives them like a father and sin reunited more and more in the mystery of the feminine waters ...

“A Parable to explain this mystery as follows: a princess with her children were banished and held in captivity for some years in another kingdom. Later the king and queen were informed that the princess was in dire straights and suffering in captivity. And that she had regretted having rebelled against the king her father and desired greatly to return to his original position. The king and his consort then went to the treasure house where they took out some royal gifts and precious gems and pearls and handed them over to the king's son in order that he take them to the princess and bring her back with royal pomp **but also to give a small portion to her jailors** in order that they no longer pursue her...

“And the explication of the parable goes as follows: the Tzaddik in the lower world is the intermediary between the prisoners and the Almighty. Now in exile it becomes necessary to give the *sitra achra* a portion (as a bribe) in the mystery of the 11 spices (chelbona being the one evil smelling spice included among the other sweet smelling fragrances) unlike when the Messiah arrives in that time there will be no need to bribe him at all. Now however in the period of exile a man still needs to accept upon himself the 4 types of court-imposed death sentence with great love and joy in order to receive the vitality that is trapped there and elevate those holy sparks in feminine waters upwards like a son who goes up to cleave though his father with a great desire having not seen him for many years and (in such a death) the body is the portion) that is give over to the *sitra achra* so that the *sitra achra* will not get too close to holiness at the time of the unification ...

This wonderful evocative parable of the princess chained in prison whose suffering causes the king and queen to relent after years, and send the son to rescue her by bribing her guards resonates in other myths and fairy tales as well as a genre of such stories in the Zohar. However it is usually the queen or consort who is banished along with her children by the king who later relents and allows them back. The point of the parable seems to be that the guards too need to be bribed. So too the *sitra achra* or evil needs its due. God controls everything but evil needs to be bribed to lay off holiness so that holiness may return to its source without hindrance. God's vitality permeates all creation, so that without His presence even sin cannot go anywhere. The only way out is through the role of the tzaddik whose *mesiras nefesh* allows in death to bribe the *sitra achra* with his very body allowing the soul to elevate without hindrance, the princess to return to her former position.

This whole approach, of seeing God in everything, even in sin, allows for reformulation and re-imaging of the notion of God and our personal relationship to Him. God is so present in everything, without Him I cannot even sin! Thus my regret and penitence is a realization more of His omnipresence and power in my life rather than beating up on myself the way I usually do! Shame and guilt are then impediments to the joy of seeing Him even in the sin! The relationship i.e. *devekut* comes before everything else (the princess is allowed home because of her regret and yearnings to return) and the worse impediment turns out to be depression and guilt which leads to alienation and isolation.

D. Reb Nachman: demand for being *baki*¹⁹ in both spiritual directions.

¹⁹ *Baki* meaning expert. Usually used in connection and description of one who has mastery of Talmudic texts in an encyclopedic manner rather than in-depth analysis.

In **Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav** we see the demand to see God even in the darkest moments of life the starkest. In Hi magnum opus *Lekutei Mehoran Torah 6* he develops his theme based on the verse in Psalm 139:8,

“If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.”

“For if a person wishes to walk in the paths of *t’shuva* (penitence) he must gird his loins, and strengthen himself in the ways of the Lord constantly, whether on the ascent or the descent²⁰. Which is the aspect of “If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there”. Meaning whether he is fortunate to be on the spiritual rise or a high spiritual level, nevertheless he should not remain there, nor be satisfied with his level, rather he should be a professional in attitude to recognize and believe that he needs to rise even further and further, which is the meaning of being an expert at the art of *ratzo*²¹ and “If I ascend to heaven, You are there” (on the ascending spiritual ladder of coming closer to the divine). But so too for the opposite so that even were he to fall (spiritually) God forbid, to any place he falls, **even to the darkest depths of the *sheol*** even so he should not give up on himself and become hopeless ever, always seeking and searching for the Holy One blessed be He, and strengthen himself in any place he finds himself with whatever he can, **for even in the deepest *sheol* is to be found the Holy One Blessed be he, and even there he can cleave himself to Him may he be blessed.** And this is the aspect of “if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there”, which is becoming expert in *the art of shov* (see note 17) for one cannot become professional in the ways of *t’shuva* without being first professional in these two arts (*ratzo and shov*). And our Rebbe was quite emphatic about this subject calling it expertise.

And the main point is that a person who is on the lowest possible spiritual level nevertheless he should still strengthen himself and believe that even there he has hope, for even there God is to be found, in the aspect of “if I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there”. The he will bring upon himself the sanctity of the Holy Name of YHVH.

Reb Nachman’s demand is to see God even in the darkest depths of the *Sheol* the netherworld of the denizens of evil. Even there He is to be sought and found, “for there is no place devoid of Him” (Tikkunei **Zohar**, Tikkun 57) which therefore must include even the depths of despair and *Sheol*. Reb Nachman talks for longing and yearning, searching and seeking to find God in the world where He is not apparent. In the apparent absence the Rebbe demands we nevertheless seek Him. Even after sinning, in the deepest depths of the netherworld where sinners are sent he is to be sought, and man is never to give up or give up hope on himself. Despite his spiritual state despite his low level spiritually, despite his sin and wherever he has fallen he must not give up hope. God can be found even there.

²⁰ Meaning whether he is on the way upward spiritually or falling into a spiritual depression.

²¹ Literally ebb and flow in Hebrew: ***Ratzo V'Shov***: (Chassidic term; lit. “run and return”) *ratzo* is a state of longing to cleave to G-d; the passionate desire of the soul to transcend its material existence, to “run forward” and cleave to its Source; *shov* is the soul’s sober determination to “return” and fulfill its mission in the body, the resolve to live within the context of material reality, based on the awareness that this is G-d’s ultimate intent. The term is based on the verse: “And the [angelic] beasts were running and returning” (Ezekiel 1:14).

The paradoxical notion of *ratzo and shov* used elsewhere in chassidic literature as the ebb and flow towards and from God in *devekut*, in ecstasy, using the metaphor of the angelic beings in Ezekiel, as they fly towards then away from the divine, Reb Nachman makes no romantic use of such themes. For him the ebb and flow is the very moving up towards the divine due to spiritual work and the flow is away due to sin. In this starkly dualistic either/or world he demands the same expertise (*bekiyut*) to become expert (*baki*) a master in the art of keeping close to God in searching and yearning *no matter which direction whether falling or rising!*

Reb Nachman's disciple Reb Noson of Nemirov in his **Lekutie Halachot**²² (Laws of tzitzis) also connects the legal requirement of *atifah* of actually wrapping the talis around the head during the recital of the blessing with the 13 attributes of mercy.

“And this is what the Rabbis said (Talmud Rosh Hashana 17) that God wrapped Himself in a talis like *Shaliach Tzibbur* and showed Moses the of service to invoke the 13 Middot of Mercy etc. For the 13 middot of mercy that God revealed to Moses after the sin of the golden calf was the revelation of His goodly ways and his mercies and compassion as it states “carrying the sins of the people etc” Therefore He revealed these middot whilst wrapped in a tzitzis for the thread (*chut*) tzitzis is the equivalent of the thread of kindness (*chut shel chesed*) through which all sins are forgiven.”

Reb Noson connects the wrapping with the acts of forgiveness through the word *chut* the thread, a thread of the tzitzis and the thread of kindness. The expression means an enchanting charm which is best expressed by Rashi in regards to a bride. The question in the Talmud is how to praise the bride and celebrate the marriage since we are commanded to make the couple rejoice. One of the ways we do so is by praising her beauty. However what if she is not beautiful, whether one can speak falsehood is the question discussed in the Talmud. As usual the Talmud expresses two opposing opinions. The opinion who insists on the truth, one can still properly fulfill the *mitzva* of celebrating the marriage, by recognizing that despite his judgment, others - namely the groom - view the bride as attractive. Even ignoring the subjectivity of beauty, the heightened emotions of the wedding certainly make the woman "*na'a ve-chasuda*" in the eyes of her beloved.²³ The *chut shel chesed* a thread of charm is possessed by all brides by the mere fact of the wedding. Reb Noson makes an ingenious connection between the charming effects of the 13 middot of mercy on God and the 'threads of charm' of the Tzitzis.²⁴

In the texts analyzed in this essay I have tried to show a consistent pattern albeit in different styles and approaches towards the issue of seeing or at least yearning to come close to God despite sin and a low spiritual level. God's presence is felt on the national level (Midrash) as well as the existential level (Hassidic texts). In all there is a commonality

²² Likutei Halachot, Hilchot Tzitzis 8.

²³ The Shitta Mekubetzet appears to take this stance in assessing Beit Hillel when it quotes an old manuscript version of Rashi (Mahadura Kama) which declares that even though she is unattractive it is possible that she possesses a "*chut shel chesed*" (an enchanting charm).

²⁴ The notion of charming God is also seen in Reb Nachman's first torah (Likutei Mehoran) where he speaks of prayer as opening the heart of God to forgive by the notion of *chen* or charm. "Through *chen* an opening is made in the heart of the one who is besought".

of spirit that lacks the usual moralistic-pietistic rhetoric of self induced shame and guilt. These are felt to cause depression and not useful in the service of God with the heart and with joy. In my re-visioning God for those suffering in pain and illness this model is a more useful and healing model for a Higher Power than the punitive strict and arbitrary conception many of us grew up with. The archetype articulated is one of unconditionally loving despite sin which reflects a character of openness and loving kindness.