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BITTUL MI-MITZIUT: THE ANNIHILATION OF THE EGO IN THE EARLY HASIDIC THOUGHT OF DOV BER, THE MAGGID OF MEZRITCH

My thesis focuses on Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch (c. 1702—1772), commonly known as “the Great Maggid,” one of the early leaders of Hasidism, and the main disciple of the acknowledged founder of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel Ba’al Shem Tov (known as the “BeShT,” an acronym of Ba’al Shem Tov), and, according to general consensus, the successor to the Besht as the leader of the nascent Hasidic movement. The primary goal of the thesis is twofold: first, to present to the reader an analysis of the main components of the Maggid’s thought, especially those aspects which focus on the nondual nature of the world, the essential identity between God and the human being, and the annihilation of the ego, which can be defined as the sense of separateness within an individual. Second, to translate and comment on a number of passages from the Maggid’s main work, *Maggid Devarav L’Ya-akov* (first edition: 1781), as well as *Or Torah* (1804) and *Tzava-at Ha-rivash* (1792). Because many of these passages have never been fully translated in English before, it is my hope that the translations presented here contribute to the burgeoning field of Hasidic scholarship. In addition, a small number of translations are presented from some of the Maggid’s disciples, including Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh. I relied on secondary literature in the field of Hasidic scholarship from such authors as Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, Daniel Matt, Miles Krassen, Norman Lamm, Gershom Scholem, Joseph Weiss, Joseph Dan, Lawrence Kushner, and Moshe Idel.

The thesis is divided into five chapters, with two appendices that include the Hebrew texts and my full translations. The appendices include translations and commentaries that were prepared but did not go into the actual body of the thesis itself. Chapter one introduces the Maggid of Mezritch and his Hasidic milieu. Chapter two, entitled “God and the Self,” outlines the Maggid’s view of the ego, its dualistic perspective, and the nature of the mind and emotions. Chapter three, entitled “The Self and God,” introduces the concept of *ayin*, the divine nothingness that is the source of all being. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the ultimate identity between the individual soul and the *ayin*. Chapter four, “*Unio Mystica*,” presents the Maggid’s view on the annihilation of the ego, and the merger of God and self. The final chapter briefly mentions the Maggid’s use of prayer as a technique for achieving ego annihilation, as well as the “aftermath” of this mystical process, *hishtavut* or equanimity.

***BITTUL MI-MITZIUT: THE ANNIHILATION OF THE EGO IN
THE EARLY HASIDIC THOUGHT OF DOV BER,
THE MAGGID OF MEZRITCH***

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**Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
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Chapter One: Dov Ber, The Maggid of Mezritch

An Introduction to the Hasidic World

This thesis is an attempt to immerse the reader in the mystical worldview of Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezritch (c. 1702—1772), commonly known as “the Great Maggid,” one of the early leaders of Hasidism. Hasidism itself is best described as a mystical or spiritual revival movement within the eighteenth century Judaism of Eastern Europe. While many books have been written in English on the Hasidic movement as a whole, only a select few focus on the homiletical material of Hasidism’s first three generations of *tzaddikim* (“righteous ones,” a term used to describe the movement’s rabbis). Because of the often difficult and abstruse nature of the Hasidic homily, many of these early works remain inaccessible to most people whose primary language is English. These works are therefore largely untapped resources of immense religious power, containing spiritual ideas which are relevant even in a modern theological context. Much of this thesis, therefore, focuses on the translation and explication of the writings of the Maggid, especially his seminal work *Maggid Devarav L’Ya-akov* (first edition: 1781), which is one of the earliest Hasidic texts to be published. The other primary works of the Maggid include *Or Torah* (1804), *Or Ha-Emet* (1899), and *Tzava-at Ha-Rivash* (1792), which contains the teachings of both the Maggid and the Ba'al Shem Tov. In addition, certain works by the Maggid’s disciples will also be translated and examined, as they often shed valuable light on the Maggid’s thought.

The Maggid was a prominent disciple of the acknowledged founder of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel Ba'al Shem Tov (known as the "BeShT," an acronym of Ba'al Shem Tov), and, according to general consensus, the successor to the Besht as the leader of the nascent Hasidic movement. The initial meeting between master and disciple is a story couched in legend. Before meeting the Besht, the Maggid had already made a name for himself as a scholar, kabbalist, and *maggid* or preacher. He was an ardent devotee of the ascetic practices of Lurianic Kabbalah, fasting often and depriving himself of most material comforts. Unfortunately, his body was frail, and his ascetic discipline often left him in poor health. His attempts to find a cure for his physical ills led him, at some point in the middle of the eighteenth century, to travel to see the Besht, who had gained renown as a healer. The Maggid regarded the Besht—who was prone to teach using parables about everyday life, a style unfamiliar and suspect to the Maggid—with skepticism, and at first regretted losing the time on the road which should have been devoted to study and prayer. According to Simon Dubnow's version of this familiar story,¹

The Maggid, (disappointed with what he had heard from the Besht so far) ... decided to stay only the one night and to return home. In the middle of the night, however, the Besht sent his servant to summon him, so that he might ask a question on a point in the kabbala based on R. Hayyim Vital's book, *Etz Hayyim*. The Maggid examined the text in question, and answered the query in accordance with the simple meaning (*peshat*) of the text. Whereupon the Besht rebuked him, saying that he obviously had not understood it at all! The Maggid then looked again at the passage in question, and responded that "the simple reading was indeed as I stated previously" ... The Besht then commanded him to stand, because the passage in *Etz Hayyim* contained the names of several angels. Immediately, "the whole house became suffused with light, a fire burned all around, and they (both) sensed the presence of the angels who

¹ Simon Dubnow, "The Maggid of Miedzyrzecz," in *Essential Papers on Hasidism*, ed. Gershon David Hundert (New York: New York University Press, 1991), p. 61. This story has been told and retold numerous times by numerous scholars, including Elie Wiesel, Jacob Schochet, and Martin Buber.

had been mentioned." At this point, the Maggid heard the Besht say, "The simple reading is as you say, but your manner of studying the text lacked soul." Afterward, the Maggid remained with the Besht to study "deep and great wisdom."

This story is told to show how the Maggid was "converted" to the Hasidic way. But the actual point of the story is that from the Besht the Maggid learned that while intellectual knowledge of the kabbalistic mysteries was important, it paled in comparison with a *living* knowledge of those same mysteries. The Maggid learned this lesson very well, laying out a system of mystical thought which took classical Kabbalah and subtly transformed it from theosophy to psychology, from a system centered on the world of the Godhead to a system which saw all the mystical truths of the *sefirot* (God's manifestations which form the basis of the divine world in classical Kabbalah) taking place deep within a person's own being. The Maggid's system focused on the inner life of the *hasid*. As we will see later, many of the mystical constructs of classical Lurianic and Zoharic Kabbalah, such as *tzimtzum*, the *Shekhinah*, and *shevirat ha-kelim*, became dimensions of the individual psyche. The traditional model of Jewish life, with its focus on study, prayer, and the performance and adherence to the *mitzvot*, was maintained externally by the Maggid; however, the Maggid focused primarily on the internal experience of the Jew as he did his external practices. In a story retold by Elie Wiesel, "Rebbe Levi-Yitzhak of Berdichev was asked, 'What did you discover at the Great Maggid's school' — 'I discovered that God exists, that He is of this world, of all worlds.' — 'But, Rebbe, everybody knows that!' — 'No,' answered the illustrious Rebbe of Berdichev. 'They say it everywhere, but in Mezeritch they know it.'"²

² Elie Wiesel, *Souls on Fire* (New York: Random House, 1972), p. 56.

If the leadership of the Hasidic movement had ended with the Baal Shem Tov, or even if it had continued with one of his other disciples, such as Pinhas of Koretz or Jacob Joseph of Polonoye, the movement may have been nothing more than an interesting but short-lived spurt of religious fervor in the middle of the eighteenth century. The fact that Hasidism continues to this day, and has made a huge impact in the lives of thousands of Jews, is mostly due to the influence that the Great Maggid had on the nascent movement soon after his initial meeting with the Besht. The Maggid's talents were not only to be found in the power, intelligence, and spiritual innovation of his thought; he also displayed a remarkable sense of administrative and leadership skills. It was his personal charisma that was able to attract disciples who themselves were scholars and future Hasidic *rebbe*s of the highest rank. Additionally, it was his talent for leadership which propelled the movement forward throughout Eastern Europe. One important factor in the spread of Hasidism was, ironically, the Maggid's aforementioned weak physical disposition, which made it difficult for him to travel. While his own master, the Besht, was known as an itinerant healer, and while the style of other *maggidim* of the day was to wander from town to town, the Maggid "set up shop" in Mezritch and for the most part remained there. His own students would either travel to see him sporadically, or would stay in Mezritch for an extended period of time. The Maggid's immobility made it necessary for his own disciples to spread out over Eastern Europe in order for the movement to expand. This they did, establishing Hasidic dynasties of their own. The list of the Maggid's disciples constitutes a literal "Who's Who" of Hasidic masters: Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk, Shneur Zalman of Lyady, Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, Elimelekh of Lizhensk, Aaron of Karlin, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl, Ze'ev Wolf of Zhitomar, Abraham of Kalisk,

Pinhas Horowitz, Shmelke Horowitz of Nikolsburg, Shlomo of Lutzk, Zusia of Anipol, Hayyim Heikel of Amdur, Israel of Kozhnitz, Jacob Joseph, the Seer of Lublin, and a host of others. The Maggid sent these rabbis to communities throughout Eastern Europe, and each offered his own interpretation of their master's teachings, quoting him often in their own works.

According to Arthur Green, a scholar of Kabbalah and Hasidism,

Dov Ber was a mystic intoxicated by the single idea of *devequt* ('attachment to God') as a return to the state of primal nothingness. He taught a panentheistic doctrine that bordered on acosmism: the transcendent God also fills all the worlds; his life-force is the only true vitality in all of being. The outer human self as well as the exterior appearance of all reality are the infinitely varied garb of God. As the devotee learns to transcend such externals, he will find only the One, that no-thing that is in fact the only Being. Paradoxically, this highly abstract immanentism was combined frequently with entirely personalistic religious metaphors.³

As stated above, the Maggid, following the Besht, focused on the internal religious experience of the human being. This focus naturally placed the concept of *devequt*, an idea found in classical Kabbalah, at the forefront of his thought. *Devequt*, literally "cleaving," is a union with God, an experience of merger with the divine. For the Maggid, *devequt* became the primary goal of religious life, the end to which prayer, meditation, study, and *mitzvot* became the means. In fact, both the Besht and the Maggid taught that it was possible—even desirable—for a person to experience *devequt* at all times, no matter in what activity he or she was engaged. Green's description of the

³ Arthur Green, "Dov Ber of Mezhrich," in Mircea Eliade, *The Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 1993), p. 431.

Maggid as one who was "intoxicated" is an apt description of early Hasidism in general. The experience of *devkeut* was described as an experience of supreme ecstasy, one in which the *hasid* experienced absolute divine joy.

The Maggid was not only interested in a system which called for the temporary experience of a transcendent God. The discussion of *devekut* in his work led to an even more startling notion: the idea that God encompasses all of reality, and in fact is the only true reality. Green alludes to this when he states that the Maggid "taught a panentheistic doctrine that bordered on acosmism." Both of these terms—panentheism and acosmism—represent an extreme mystical theology, a radical monism which sees the entire universe as an inseparable unity. Panentheism, as opposed to pantheism, is the notion that everything is contained within God, that there is nothing which is not God. The classical mystical description of the transcendent God in Kabbalah is *Eyn Sof*, literally "without end," a term which depicts the infinite God as an absolute unity. Thus, while the finite world is completely contained within God, *Eyn Sof* is not *only* the world. In this way, God is both immanent—in that the entire world *is* a manifestation of God's own essence—and transcendent—because God is infinite, and therefore no finite thing can contain Him. This follows the midrashic statement which says "God is the place of the world, but the world is not His place."⁴ In addition to panentheism, the Maggid's thought at times bordered on acosmism, which states that nothing but God exists, and the world is a mere illusion. In acosmism, nothing that we see in the world has independent

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 68:9.

existence. Being a manifestation of God, which is the only thing that is real, the objects of the world are ultimately not real.

The acosmic and panentheistic worldviews shaped how the Maggid felt about the spiritual journey of the individual Jew. If the ultimate truth of the universe is that everything is part of God, then according to the Maggid's system the ultimate goal of the religious journey is to experience that truth at all times. As we shall see, the Maggid employed a number of Hebrew terms to describe this goal, including the primary term *bittul mi-mitziut*. *Bittul* literally means "annihilation" or "nullification," and in this context refers to the mystic eliminating his or her own false perception of the world. This perception is typically dominated by *mitziut*, which means "material reality." Thus, *bittul mi-mitziut* is a phrase used by the Maggid to illustrate the experience of the one who can see past the corporeal nature of the world, to the true divinity within.

This thesis is an examination of what can truthfully be called the spiritual psychology of the Maggid of Mezritch. Because he was primarily interested in internal reality, his homilies focused on the various dimensions of the human psyche. He discussed the individual self and God, and explained in detail the relationship between the two, both from God's perspective and the perspective of the individual. Chapter two presents and explains the nature and function of the different components of the human psyche—ego, soul, mind, emotions, and so on—that for the Maggid are involved in the attainment of the ultimate experience of God. In chapter three, the key term *ayin* ("nothingness") is shown to be the Maggid's primary description of God's and our true

nature, in addition to being the source of all religious transformation. Chapter four focuses on ethical versus mystical humility, and the elimination of the individual sense of separateness. The final chapter discusses the "aftermath" of ego annihilation, especially the sense of equanimity which is the result of *bittul mi-mitziut*.

Chapter Two: God and the Self

A Sense of Separateness

ADONIJAH SON OF HAGGITH PROMOTED HIMSELF, BOASTING "I WILL RULE!"⁵

According to the Maggid, God is infinite, filling all and enlivening everything. At this very moment, GOD'S PRESENCE FILLS THE ENTIRE WORLD.⁶ While this is usually just an expression of God's immanence, the Maggid saw the world as illusory, having no actual existence of its own. From this acosmic perspective, all there is to be seen in the universe is God Himself. The Maggid based many of his teachings on this principle, frequently quoting the verse "there is no place devoid of Him"⁷ to show how nothing except for God had an independent existence.

But if God is all there is, then why is it that we can't experience that truth all the time? The Hasidic masters, in their zeal for *devekut* to God, asked themselves the same question. If God, who is One, is the *only* One, and we, who seem to be many, can only see multiplicity, then it follows that there must be something preventing us from experiencing the true unity of the universe. What is it, then, that hinders us?

The standard answer to this question—attributed to a number of different *tzaddikim*, including Menachem Mendel of Kotsk⁸ (1787-1859), Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, Uri of Strelisk⁹ (1757-1826), and the Maggid himself—was a uniquely

⁵ I Kings 1:5.

⁶ Isaiah 6:3.

⁷ *Tikkunei Zohar*, tikkun 57.

⁸ Cf. Lawrence Kushner, *God Was in this Place, & I, I Did Not Know* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1994), pp. 39-40.

⁹ Tzvi M. Rabinowicz, *The Encyclopedia of Hasidism* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), p. 48.

Hasidic reading of the verse from Deuteronomy in which Moses, recalling the giving of the Torah at Sinai, acted as an intermediary between God and the people: I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU AT THAT TIME TO RECOUNT TO YOU GOD'S WORDS.¹⁰ Purposefully altering the literal sense of the words, "Rabbi Dov Ber, the Maggid of Mezritch, interprets the verse I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU in this way: It is the 'I' which separates us and keeps us from experiencing God."¹¹

The "I," or *anochi*, is synonymous with the ego. This is not the ego as it is popularly understood, in the sense of being conceited or holding a high opinion of oneself. Rather, the ego as described by the Maggid and numerous other Hasidic masters is the dimension of the psyche that is responsible for the illusory perception of our own separate individuality. The ego is the center of consciousness through which we view the world. It is the identity to which we cling so fiercely. But God's infinite nature does not tolerate separateness, and therefore when we hold on to our egos, we simultaneously push back the awareness of the Divine all around us. This awareness of self, ego-consciousness, is a screen blocking the way to God. This is the *anochi* of I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU.

If the ego-state of *anochi* is defined by the awareness of boundaries, limits, and differentiation, its opposite can be described as the *non-awareness* of one's individual self, or of separateness and distinction. In other words, the opposite of the ego-state of

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 5:5.

¹¹ *Ma'amrei Hasidim*, found in *Ituray Torah* (Compiled by Aaron Jacob Greenberg, Tel Aviv: Yavneh, 1976), Vol. II, p. 257.

anochi, which is by definition finite, is the awareness of infinity and absolute unity. If *anochi* is the limited consciousness of the separate ego, its opposite is the boundless and unified consciousness of God. As we shall see, the Maggid states that both states of consciousness are available to each of us at certain times. This opens the possibility that one's own consciousness can experience the boundless consciousness of the divine. According to the Maggid, this experience in itself is a direct encounter with God. Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, a disciple of the Maggid, describes these opposite perspectives in the text below and elsewhere as *yesh* and *ayin*. *Yesh* is a Hebrew word literally meaning "there is." In the mystical thought of the Maggid and his disciples, the word *yesh* can also be translated as "something," which in this context signifies that a thing has a definite and distinct corporeal existence. Because it is the nature of the ego to think that it (meaning the individual person) has a separate and discrete corporeal existence, *yesh* is used by the Maggid and his disciples as a euphemism for the ego. Its opposite, *ayin* (literally "nothing"), which will be discussed in detail later, is the "nothingness" that is the classical mystical description of a particular aspect of God.

However, when a person perceives himself as a separate self, and *not* as the divine Nothing, he is on the level of "somethingness," the level of ego. It is then that he sees God only as the One who "formed"—that is, in the past tense. In other words, he feels that God already created him. This is why we say the blessing "who *formed* man with wisdom."

In this context, "wisdom" is on the level of ego-consciousness, and the blessing consequently uses "formed" instead of "forms."¹²

He feels that God already created him. That is, God created him in the past as a one-time event. He therefore experiences his connection to God only through that past event, and not through a continual state of identity. This exemplifies the ego-state of perceived independent existence.

"Wisdom" is on the level of ego-consciousness. In other words, God created human beings with egos "built in." As infants, we learn to separate our own consciousness from that of our parents, and from that of the rest of the world. We do this instinctually, and this is the meaning of "wisdom" in this context: God created us with *wisdom*, i.e., the ability to perceive duality, to differentiate between separate objects. This separateness is an illusion, however, and therefore the mystical goal is to experience the world not from the human perspective (the level of *yesh*), but from the divine perspective (the level of *ayin*).

Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov (ca. 1731-1786), a disciple of the Baal Shem Tov, and both a contemporary and student of the Maggid, described the ego in a similar way:

I heard the following teaching from the Maggid, Rabbi Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov¹³ on the verse I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU¹⁴—

¹² *Kedushat Levi* (Jerusalem, 1958), *Bereishit*, p. 5.

¹³ Here, I skipped the various praises typically given to a Hasidic *tzaddik*: "Rabbi, preacher, man of God, our teacher, our master, may his righteous and holy memory be for a blessing."

¹⁴ Deuteronomy 5:5.

When a Jew experiences himself as a separate entity—especially when he feels superior because of his distinguished Torah knowledge or his worship of God—he creates a barrier between himself and God. This is the meaning of the “I”—the one who experiences himself as “something,” and imagines himself to be on the level of separate existence [*yeshut*], “stands between” God and himself. In other words, the ego makes a division or screens off a person from God.¹⁵

Experiences himself as a separate entity. *Machazik b'atzmo*, literally “to take hold of oneself.” Here, the Zlotchover is using a common early Hasidic expression which describes an individual’s ego-state—the state of awareness in which one perceives clear boundaries and limits between oneself, the world, and God.

This passage emphasizes the primary reason for our inability to experience *devekut*. The human tendency towards self-interest directs our consciousness away from God and focuses it on our own individuality and perceived sense of worth, as well as our autonomy and (what we imagine to be) immortality. While pride, haughtiness, and similar emotions are particularly illustrative of the ego’s more extreme states, the idea of self-interest encompasses *all* emotional states which are primarily self-directed, including false modesty and depression. According to Daniel Matt, “The mystic is acutely aware of

¹⁵ Kalonymous Kalman Halevi Epstein, *Sefer Ma'or Vashemesh* (Jerusalem: Even Yisrael, 1991), *Parashat Va'etchanan*, s.v. לא את אבותינו.

the gap that allows for separate existence.”¹⁶ This “gap”—a reference to the ego—is described both as an attachment to one’s individual self, and the assertion of one’s will. In the thought of the Maggid, the individual will is incompatible with the divine *ayin*, and therefore, it stems the flow of divine *hiyyut* (vitality) from reaching one’s external consciousness, although the flow of *hiyyut* never truly ceases. In fact, consciousness itself can be described as a continuously flowing manifestation of this same *hiyyut* or “vitality,” albeit in a limited or contracted form. Because awareness or consciousness can be “pointed” at something (e.g., “direct your awareness over here”), it can be said to have a direction, beginning with the individual and culminating in the object of his or her awareness. According to the Maggid and his disciples,¹⁷ the direction of the flow of consciousness can either be internal or external, depending upon the *kavvanah*, intention, and *madreigah*, spiritual level or level of attainment, of the individual. When it is external, the “source” or end-point of consciousness is the objects of our perception, the things we see and hear in the world. When it is internal, the flow of consciousness goes back to its divine source. For most people, the source of consciousness is the corporeal world, in which case one’s consciousness is attached to *yeshut*, to “somethingness,” or the world of separate existence. For the spiritual elite, however, the source of the flow of consciousness is the divine *ayin*: “We must first remove the vitality from our corporeal thoughts and from our own being (השטות של עצמינו - *ha-yeshut shel atzmeinu*): that is, so

¹⁶ Daniel Matt, “*Ayin*: The Concept of Nothingness in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah*, ed. Lawrence Fine (New York: New York University Press, 1995), p. 91.

¹⁷ Cf. the text translated below by Shelomo Lutsky, the disciple of the Maggid who wrote the second introduction to *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*.

that we may enter the gate of the Nothing, and we are then easily able to be attached by our root to the Cause of all Causes."¹⁸

In Hasidic thought, the ego is identified as the root source of impurity and evil. Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745-1813), one of the most important of the disciples of the Maggid, the founder of the *Habad* movement, and the author of the seminal Hasidic work the *Tanya*, said "the essence of idol worship is to take oneself for a *yesh*."¹⁹ Because it is the nature of the ego to identify itself as the literal center of the universe, this perspective naturally creates a feeling of empowerment. Each human being, trapped within the secluded boundaries of his ego, feels empowered to act in any way he sees fit. Yoram Jacobson, head of Kabbalah and Hasidism studies at Tel-Aviv University, sees this as being "psychologically enslaved to (oneself), to the law of (one's) existence as a separate and distinct entity."²⁰ The Maggid compares this situation to that of Adonijah son of Haggith in the book of Kings, who in his arrogance presumed to declare himself the successor to King David. The human condition is like Adonijah in that we imagine that just as we are the "ruler" of our own inner state, we are also in control of the external world. Perceiving the world in this way cuts us off from our divine root, and creates negativity and strife:

**If you have an "evil eye," when you look at an object with wonder,
and think "how beautiful this is," you make that object a separate**

¹⁸ *Shemu'ah Tovah*, p. 70b, quoted in Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 175-176.

¹⁹ *Likkutei Torah*, Leviticus, 28a, quoted in Rachel Elior, *The Paradoxical Ascent to God* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993), p. 144.

²⁰ Yoram Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought* (Tel Aviv: MOD Press, 1998), p. 63.

thing unto itself, which is likened to the verse A QUERULOUS MAN ALIENATES HIS FRIEND.²¹ Your contemplation separates that thing from its source, from its *hiyyut*, which is its divinity. This type of contemplation—brought on by the evil eye—makes “vessels.” In other words, the breaking was essentially caused by everyone saying “I will rule.”²²

The word *malchut* (kingship or rulership) is interpreted in this way: the idea that an object or an attribute is seemingly a separate thing unto itself is known as the “rulership” or the “completeness” of that thing ... All things have this quality of “rulership” which makes them a separate object unto themselves ... But no thing truly exists this way [i.e., as a separate object], except within its own divinity. Everything needs to draw from its divine source, without which everything would be null and void.²³

You make that object a separate thing unto itself. In other words, you see that object not as divine, but as having its own separate existence, which, in the Maggid’s monistic system, is an impossibility, and akin to heresy.

²¹ Proverbs 16:28.

²² Cf. I Kings 1:5.

²³ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov* (Critical edition with commentary by Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1990), section 73.

This kind of contemplation separates a thing from its source, from its *hiyyut*, which is its divinity. Here the Maggid subtly makes a statement of identity between the *hiyyut* and *elohut*, which is divinity itself. This is important because it shows that God's *power* is not something separate from God's *essence* (i.e., God's *divinity*). Thus, there is no difference between the statement that God's power is contained within all material being and the statement that all material being is identical with God's essence.

This type of contemplation ... makes "vessels." This is an allusion to the Lurianic concept of the *shevirah*, the "breaking," which the Maggid interprets psychologically. The "vessels" were essentially containers, which, in the Lurianic myth of creation, were not able to properly hold God's light. They shattered, resulting in the creation of the material universe, trapping some of God's light in the universe while simultaneously being the root cause of evil in the world.

The breaking was essentially caused by everyone saying "I will rule." "Plotinus (*Enneads* 5:1:1) sees self-assertion and the wish to belong to oneself as causing the soul's ignorance of its divine source. Azriel identifies Adam's sin as his assertion of will, which split him off from the divine."²⁴ "I will rule" is the essential statement of the ego—it establishes

²⁴ Daniel Matt, "Ayin," p. 106, n. 126.

the ego's *modus operandi*. The ego sees itself as the center of its own universe, and its own source. Schatz Uffenheimer states that the Maggid essentially makes a new interpretation of "the Breaking," seeing it as separating existence from God, or setting existence on its own, rather than the Lurianic notion of an essential flaw in God's plan for creation.

Malchut. Schatz Uffenheimer: Here the Maggid explains the use of the term *ana emloch*, "I will rule." He states that the meaning of the "ruling" of a thing is that the thing sees itself (or is seen) as a separate being, standing only on its own authority.

All things have this quality of "rulership" which makes them a separate object unto themselves. In other words, everything in the universe has the potential to be seen as something separate—something split off from God. The Maggid is dealing with the nature of human experience, which tends to see the world as a world of separate objects. The potential exists for seeing duality in everything and in everyone. This is what the ego does. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, a דבר סתם — something that is *just* an object, and not part of divinity—is a fictitious term in the thought of the Maggid.

A Temporary Construction

The very feeling of power given to us by our own egos traps us in the endless exertion of what we perceive to be our own independent will and desire. We tend to regard virtually every success or failure as if it were of our own making, and we therefore exalt and suffer accordingly. But the Maggid tells us that any sense of *malchut*, or rulership that we have over the world and even our very being itself is ultimately false, illusory. According to Shneur Zalman of Lyady, the *yesh*, or ego—both terms indicating the ultimately mistaken sense of separateness experienced by each individual—was created as a necessary evil, so that human beings and God could take delight in the material world. However, like the *sukkah*, the *yesh* was created as a temporary construction, not a permanent structure. The *being* of the world exists primarily to bring itself to *nothingness*. If this is true, then all of our achievements and all of our disappointments are also temporary, and by dwelling on them as our primary reality, we succumb to the enticements of the ego into dwelling in a world of illusion. In his work *Yosher Divrei Emet*, Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh (1740-1795), a disciple of the Maggid and Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov stated:

Things in the world are the opposite of what people think. When they don't attach themselves to the Creator, and see only the [material] world, they imagine themselves to have an [independent] existence. They think that they are great, but how can they [truly] be great, since they exist one day and not the next? Their days pass like a

shadow, and even their whole lives are empty. Thus, if they perceive themselves to be something, they are in reality nothing.²⁵

As long as our consciousness is directed back to our own selves—to our sense of separateness—we attach ourselves to the illusory world and not to God. The path of Hasidism is the perpetual struggle to redirect the flow of one's consciousness from oneself to God, from the transient to the Eternal. Ironically, while the ego is the component of the psyche which will be gradually eliminated on the spiritual journey, as the center of our consciousness, the ego is also the part of us which directs and leads us on that journey. Thus, the ego is the primary instrument of its own destruction. This is a paradox which sets us up spiritually as our own worst enemies. Because the ego naturally resists its own nullification, it leads us on the path while simultaneously trying to derail us from the path. For example, any success or spiritual attainment that we gain typically leads to a feeling of pride in our accomplishment. But pride itself is a psychological mechanism of the ego which artificially inflates our own sense of independent existence, and therefore hinders us from experiencing the divine element within us which is our true essence. Many Hasidic masters were fond of quoting the talmudic passage in which God, referring to the haughty individual, says "He and I cannot live together in the world."²⁶ The Maggid cautions us to not be "drawn into the haughtiness or pride which causes one

²⁵ *Yosher Divrei Emet*, section 14, in *Likkutim Yekarim* (Jerusalem: Mosadot Toldot Avraham Yitzchak, 1997), p. 117b.

²⁶ *Sotah* 5a. Cf. also *Arakhin* 15b: "The Holy One says, He and I are not able to live in the same dwelling."

to forget the Creator ... When one serves God every moment, there is no opportunity to be arrogant, to love pride or other character-traits that are evil."²⁷

The World of Duality

In the following texts, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev and the Maggid posit a difference between the "incomplete" consciousness of the ego, and the infinite and fully complete consciousness of the divine:

The level of the divine Nothing transcends nature, while the level of the ego is bound to nature.²⁸

If a man has pride, he clings to his "I," and cannot cling to God. If he is strictly an "I," he's living only in half—he's partitioning himself off from God (because of his ego). When he experiences the state of *ayin*-consciousness, he then begins to live in full: his *aniy* becomes *ayin*.²⁹

Bound to nature. Here, Levi Yitzchak states that the ego views the world as an expression of finite time and space. The experience of *Ayin*, on the other hand, is boundless and timeless.

²⁷ *Tzava-at Ha-Rivash* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1998), sections 49 and 52, translation by Jacob Immanuel Schochet, pp. 42-43.

²⁸ *Kedushat Levi, Bereishit*, p. 5.

²⁹ *Or Torah* (Brooklyn, NY: Kehot Publication Society, 1986), section 189.

His *aniy* becomes *ayin*. This is a common word-play of the Maggid. *Aniy*, "I," *aleph nun yud* (אנ"י), contains the exact same letters as *ayin*, spelled *aleph yud nun* (א"י). By simply switching the *yud* and the *nun*, the *aniy* becomes the *ayin*. This represents the transformation of the individual from a finite view of the world to the infinite perspective of the divine.

As stated above, the Maggid, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, and after them Shneur Zalman of Lyady and his disciple Aaron of Starroselje, assert that there are two perspectives on the world. The first is God's perspective, and from God's point of view, the material world—the world of duality—has no actual existence. If anything, the material world is but a particular manifestation of the divine. The second perspective is that of the ego. Ego-consciousness not only perceives the material world as real, but because the divine world is incomprehensible to the human mind, it is not seen by the ego as having any definitive reality. Hasidism uses the dichotomy between *yesh* and *ayin* to describe these two perspectives. From God's point of view, the material world is literally *ayin*, nothing, and the divine world—the only thing which has actual being—is *yesh*. The ego sees the opposite: the material world is experienced as the only concrete reality, and is therefore perceived as *yesh*, while God, who is beyond the boundaries of the ego's comprehension and experience, is typically not experienced at all, and is therefore considered to be *ayin*.

Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer notes that "It is man's natural existence, subject to his self-interest, pride and desire for personal greatness, which blocks the path towards unity.

By the very nature of natural existence, individual life is life in multiplicity; spiritual life can only be that life in which one encounters the one exclusive, authentic reality, which contains the unity of all opposites and the blurring of all the individuals which are paradoxically incorporated in the Divine 'Nothing.' ³⁰ The *status quo* of human experience is duality. The ego in its natural unchecked state sees the world as finite, fragmented, and differentiated. According to the Maggid, seeing the unity underlying this duality is not a commonplace event. It is not human nature to see God everywhere, nor is it human nature to *want* to see God in all places and at all times. The ego craves corporeality; we are naturally drawn to the material world, and because we live in an embodied form, we are almost trapped by the body and mind's need to continually fulfill our desires.

To see the Oneness of being requires effort on our part. The personal transformation necessary for this type of unitive vision isn't handed to us indiscriminately; rather, the Maggid tells us that we must focus our efforts on achieving this experience. "The change in consciousness that derives from the assumption of the immanent element of the divine presence in all existence implies a **human obligation** to lay bare the divine element in all things and gain knowledge of the unity of existence despite the multiplicity that greets the eye and to nullify the distinct and separate existence of things in one's thought."³¹ Because of this ideology, the Maggid—following his own teacher, the Ba'al Shem Tov—placed *devekut* (communion with God) at the top

³⁰ Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 168.

³¹ Rachel Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 14 (emphasis mine).

of his scale of religious values. In the spiritual system of the Maggid, religious practices such as prayer, meditation (*hitbodedut*), study, and *mitzvot*, were valued not as external routines, but because of the internal experience of *devekut* they engendered. The very fact that we make a distinction between the external act and the internal experience of that act is a result of the ego's differentiated perception of the world. Rachel Elior calls the enveloping of the infinite within the finite "the divine dialectic."³² This divine dialectic is seen as an organic, dynamic process, in which the nondual nature of the universe is never compromised. Human perception, however, changes the divine dialectic into a more static sense of duality: inwardness and outwardness, holy and profane, and so on. The Maggid feels that every external act contains the seeds of an inward-directed experience.

In the Talmud, the *tzaddikim* are compared to a planted tree.³³ Just as seeds are in the tree, and all the energy that is in the tree is also contained within the seed, which comes out in the fruit of the tree, so does the *tzaddik* draw out all the divine sparks which pertain to the root of his soul from every thing in this world, and elevate them to their Creator.

Thought is the instrument of the intellect, and speech is the instrument of thought. Praying without *kavvanah* is the "breaking of the vessels," and subsequently the vessels are devoid of divine vitality.

³² Rachel Elior, "The Paradigms of *Yesh* and *Ayin* in Hasidic Thought," in *Hasidism Reappraised* (London: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1997), p. 170.

³³ Kiddushin 40b.

When you divest yourself from corporeality, that which is the mere outer covering, you then can see the inner nature of the vessel; in other words, you can see the divine vitality and light of the letters of the prayers. When you divest yourself from corporeality and envelop yourself within the words of the prayers, you unite with God, who is Himself enveloped within the words. Take care that you don't lose your state; strengthen yourself to go even higher.

When you want to understand a certain word and you strive to understand that word, then you elevate yourself to the World of Thought, and draw understanding to yourself from the divine Wisdom. When you study the words of a *Tana* you should think that the name of that *Tana* is the body, and the intellect of those words that the *Tana* said are the mind, and all the *Tana'im* and *Amora'im* are the attributes of God and His *Shekhinah*. You thus repair the World of Speech and the World of Thought through study.

When you think evil words, which come from the side of Judgment, then He concentrates His thought in those same evil words. You distance yourself from the expansion of the divine Mercy (*Hesed*) from *Eyn Sof*, and judgment dwells on you. When you think of corporeal things He concentrates His thought to that place. Wherever

you think of God you draw down His essence to that place, for thought is a complete structure.³⁴

Divine sparks. These sparks are discussed in Lurianic Kabbalah, and they form the basis for *tikkun olam*, the essential religious “work” required of each Jew. The material world contains numerous divine sparks—parts of the Divine light which were “trapped” in the world at the time of the *shevirah*, the breaking of the vessels which contained God’s light. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, the *tzaddik* acts like a magnet for the scattered divine sparks surrounding him. But he is not able to gather together every random spark, only those that are connected to the root of his soul. According to Lurianic thought, the root of one’s soul is found in a specific place in the spiritual body of *Adam Kadmon*, the divine primordial blueprint—the “genetic code”—of the human being and the universe. These fundamental principles of Lurianic Kabbalah, including the gathering of the sparks, are given a unique interpretation by the Maggid, who uses them to discuss God’s immanence in the world and the psychology of the human mind.

Praying without *kavvanah* is the “breaking of the vessels,” for the vessels are devoid of divine vitality. The letters of prayers are often called vessels in Hasidic thought, because the letters allow you to “ascend”

³⁴ *Maggid Devarav L’Ya-akov*, section 28.

to the divine realm. Praying only the words, without proper intention, is akin to the "breaking of the vessels" because one is emptying the prayer of *hiyyut* by sticking only to the literal words of the prayers.

Envelop yourself within the words. Praying with *kavvanah* is the path toward *devekut* with God, because you strip away the physical nature of the words and penetrate to their spiritual essence. This process acts as a catalyst for the experience of God. Schatz Uffenheimer explains that the pronunciation of the words is only an external action, and not a true inner expression of prayer.

Draw understanding to yourself from the divine Wisdom. Here, rational understanding is seen as a reflection of divine Wisdom.

All the *Tana'im* and *Amora'im* are the attributes of God and His *Shekhinah*. Schatz Uffenheimer: "God and His *Shekhinah*" are expression for *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* in Kabbalah. According to the Maggid's passage, "God" here is an expression for the World of Thought, and "His *Shekhinah*" is the World of Speech. The mention of the *Tana* or the *Amora* in study is similar to the mention of "the vessel" or the World of Speech in prayer. Thus the Maggid finds a way to compare study and prayer, and shows that both activities are different manifestations of the same process of ascension to the divine realm.

This passage elucidates a number of important points. As do many of the early Hasidic masters, the Maggid singles out the *tzaddikim* as having special tasks on the earth. In this passage, the *tzaddik* has the role of elevating the divine sparks that are found within all corporeal objects. It's not enough for the *tzaddik* to simply see with his eyes the objects that make up the material world. The eye by itself cannot perceive the divinity underlying all of reality. Being physical in nature, it can only see physicality or outwardness. Therefore, it is essential that the *tzaddik*—and this idea is ultimately extended to all of us as well—develop an inner eye, a method of **recognition**, a systematic way to pierce through the veil of illusion that masks the pulsating divine consciousness found in all things. It is simply not enough for the *tzaddik* to have an intellectual understanding of this idea; in order for the sparks to be raised, the *tzaddik* must come to the experience of *ayin*.

The Maggid next gives two examples of external practices which require an internal dimension in order for them to be spiritually efficacious. He first likens prayer without the proper mystical intention (*kavvanah*) to the “breaking of the vessels,” the catastrophic event leading to the creation of the corporeal world in Lurianic Kabbalah. The vehicles of prayer, the letters and words of the prayers themselves, have, as do all material things, an outer shell which covers their true inner nature. According to the Maggid, God Himself—God's very essence—can be found enveloped within the words of the prayers. The object is therefore not to treat the literal meaning of the words as the main essence of the prayers you say, for the literal meaning is the mere outer shell. It is

almost idolatrous to not pray with *kavvanah*, for this denies the possibility of the recognition of God's immanent presence in all things.

The Maggid sees study in the same way as prayer. When you study, God's essence is contained within the words of the text you are reading. True understanding of the text doesn't come from the individual rational mind. Like prayer, the words of the text are only the outer layer. Peeling away this outer layer connects you to the sages who spoke the words you are studying. These sages are themselves outer representations of the many manifestations of God. Because the human mind is a contracted form of the divine Intellect, the process of study in the Maggid's system is the expansion of the mind from a limited individual state to a greatly expanded divine state.

You Are What You Think

The final point derived from the above passage has to do with the very nature of thought itself. In the tradition of the Besht, the Maggid notes that because God's essence is contained within all things, including thoughts and emotions, even the negative thoughts which impose themselves on our minds (often when we least expect and want them) contain that very same essence. However, evil or negative thoughts enable us to see only the strict or stern aspect of the divine. Focusing on corporeality and indulging in licentious or negative thoughts internally essentially creates a corporeal, licentious, and negative universe for us to live in externally. In her commentary to this passage, Schatz Uffenheimer point out that the innermost spiritual essence of a man can be placed into any thing that he thinks about, whether it's a corporeal thing or a spiritual thing. Based on

this understanding, there's no essential difference between **thought** and **being**. In other words, our own thoughts have the power to shape our experience of the world. The way we perceive the world and ourselves is a product of the contents of our minds and emotions. This in turn dictates how we will interact with others and live our lives. The Maggid encourages us to maintain the purity of our minds so that the world we perceive will similarly be pure.

The one who constantly desires God, wherever he looks he sees God, whose energy enlivens all that he perceives, as we know from the verse YOU ENLIVEN EVERYTHING.³⁵ The opposite is true for the one who doesn't desire God in his thoughts: he only sees corporeality. Although when asked, he says that God does enliven everything, he does not actually experience this.³⁶

In this text, Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh, following the ideas of his teachers Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov and the Maggid, notes the organic connection between perception and reality. It is not enough to merely understand intellectually the nature of God's immanence: in order to *see* God in the world, the *hasid* must pursue this truth as an internal encounter. The experiential unfolding of God's presence in one's thoughts and one's heart, which results from the constant longing for God, radically changes one's apprehension of the material world. "You are what you think"—the

³⁵ Nehemiah 9:6.

³⁶ *Yosher Divrei Emet*, section 14, in *Likkutim Yekarim*, p. 116a.

Maggid teaches us that the very nature of the universe we live in is not as permanent and fixed as we might think. In fact, our world is almost entirely determined by the nature of our thoughts.

The Divine Qualities of the Mind

The Maggid's view of the psyche is similar to his view of the world itself: while one's thoughts and feelings may appear to be the separate psychological instruments of the individual mind, in truth they too are manifestations of the divine power. The external purpose of the mind is to create distinctions in our perception of the world, classifying, naming, and assigning significance to each of the objects of our cognition, thereby shaping our emotional reaction to those objects. However, because the psyche itself is intimately connected to God's own consciousness, the true purpose of the mind and heart (used here in the modern sense as the seat of our emotions) is to connect all our thoughts and feelings back to their root in the divine mind. Regarding thoughts as only thoughts, and feelings as only feelings, results in a mistaken perception of the world and ourselves.

"Torah and God are one."³⁷ But isn't God infinite and the Torah finite? Didn't the prophet see [the measurements of the Torah], as written in the Gemara?³⁸ This can be understood by considering that the power of the one who acts is found in the thing acted upon. For example: a man speaks wisely or makes a work of art. The creative

³⁷ Zohar Acharei 73a.

³⁸ Cf. Eruvin 21a, based on Zechariah's vision in Zechariah 5:2.

energy of the artisan is in the piece he made and in the words he spoke. The one who does this is able to continue to speak or to create wisely. The Torah, which comes from God, is Wisdom, and its power comes from the power of its creator, which in truth is *Eyn Sof* (infinite).

There are a number of levels to the intellect: *maskil* (consciousness), *sechel* (thought), and *dibur* (speech). Each one is connected to the other. Both speech and thought exist within time, since today you may have one thought and tomorrow another. There is an attribute which connects divine consciousness (*maskil*) with the time-bound intellect (*sechel*), but this attribute cannot be comprehended, because it is the *ayin* (divine nothingness), which is the *hyle*. This is illustrated in the parable of an egg turning into a chicken.³⁹ There is a moment when it is neither an egg nor a chicken. No person can determine that exact moment, however, for it is then in a state of nothingness (*ayin*).

The same truth holds when human intellect comes from divine consciousness, or when speech comes from thought—you cannot comprehend that which connects them. ... The *tzaddik* is emblematic of this moment of transformation. How is the letter *tzadi* formed? From a *yud* and a *nun*. This is that which joins together the human

³⁹ See also sections 30, 60, and 178.

intellect (*sechel*) with divine consciousness. The *nun* reverses itself when there is shame at the lower level. This is the connection between the upper and lower levels, and the human *tzaddik* receives from the levels above. ...

You must realize the state of *ayin* in order to bind everything together, like Moses, who said IF NOT (i.e., 'if *ayin*'), THEN ERASE ME...⁴⁰ Moses wanted to elevate Israel after they had worshipped the Golden Calf, and he himself attained the state of *ayin*-consciousness when he said ERASE ME. It was through his attainment that all things were connected to the upper divine world, which happens when any person achieves this state.

It's written in the Talmud that "a lion doesn't roar amid a basket of straw, but rather amid a basket of meat."⁴¹ Because of the corporeal nature of the world, all sorts of transgressions take place—eating, drinking, sexual acts. However, when you transform your consciousness into *ayin*, you are then able to separate from these transgressions and make a complete return (*teshuvah sh'leimah*).⁴²

⁴⁰ Exodus 32:32.

⁴¹ Berachot 32a.

⁴² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 56.

Isn't God infinite and the Torah finite? See Bereishit Rabah 8:1 – the Torah preceded the creation of the world by two thousand years, and is thus finite temporally.

The measurements of the Torah. In other words, because the Torah had specific measurements, it is by definition finite.

The one who does this is able to continue to speak or to create wisely. That is, he is able to perpetuate his creative acts.

Its power comes from the power of its creator, which in truth is *Eyn Sof*. Schatz Uffenheimer: The idea that the Torah is the wisdom of God is often expressed in Jewish thought, and in Kabbalah it is a symbol of the *sefirah Hokhmah*. In this passage, the Maggid emphasizes the point that the Torah is in fact the actual potency of divine Wisdom, which is endless. This is how the Maggid explains the finite (Torah) and the infinite (God) being one.

There are a number of levels to the intellect: *maskil* (consciousness), *sechel* (thought), and *dibur* (speech). Schatz Uffenheimer: The first two levels, *sechel* (also known as *machshavah*, thought) and *dibur*, exist within the boundaries of time, while the final level, *maskil*, transcends time. *Maskil* is the “mystical enlightenment” which goes beyond discursive

thought. This is similar to certain Eastern notions of consciousness: the idea that the mind has one function [to produce thought and speech], whereas there is another layer of consciousness within the psyche that transcends the individual mind.

This attribute cannot be comprehended. It cannot be comprehended or grasped by the human mind.

Hyle. *Hyle* is the philosophical notion of matter which is co-eternal with God. The *hyle* is matter in its pre-"created" form, and as such it is formless. *Hyle* exists in a state which lies between the potential and the realized. Schatz Uffenheimer states that classical Kabbalah already put forth the idea that the divine *Hokhmah*/Wisdom was a symbol of the *hyle*. However, according to the viewpoint of the Maggid, *Hokhmah* is also a symbol of the divine *ayin*. *Ayin* thus inherits the connection to the *hyle*, albeit in a changed form. For the Maggid, the foundation of material existence (previously the *hyle* as "formless matter") is now the dialectical point of transformation from one thing to another, and not "primal matter."

You cannot comprehend that which connects them. Just as it's impossible to determine the exact moment an egg becomes a chicken, so is it impossible to determine the moment of transformation from intuition to rational thought, and from rational thought to speech.

How is the letter *tzadi* formed? From a *yud* and a *nun*. Schatz Uffenheimer: The *nun* is a symbol for *Binah*, and the *yud* is a symbol for *Hokhmah*, which is *Ayin*. The letter *tzadi* (whose form resembles a *nun* with a *yud* written on top of it) is the combination of the two letters. The *yud* is the *maskil* (divine consciousness) and the *nun* is the *sechel* (the human intellect). The word *tzaddik*, represented here by the letter *tzadi*, is symbolic of the *sefirah Yesod*, which is "that which joins [them] together." From the kabbalistic perspective, *Hokhmah* and *Binah* "flow" together into *Yesod*.

The *nun* reverses itself when there is shame at the lower level. As stated above, the lower part of the letter *tzadi* is a *nun*; the top half of the *nun* can either face toward the top part of the *tzadi* (which is the letter *yud*), or away from it. The Maggid states that when there is "shame" below—when a person experiences himself or herself as nothing—then the *nun* faces the *yud*, establishing a connection between the divine and the human.

This is the connection between the upper and lower levels. The connection between the two is the continuous stream of *Shefa*, the divine effluence which flows from the upper levels to the lower levels.

The human *tzaddik* receives from the levels above. From the *sefirot* above.

A lion doesn't roar amid a basket of straw, but rather amid a basket of meat. According to Rashi, a lion can be driven to state of dangerous hyperactive excitement when it has an overabundance of meat to eat. However, the lion doesn't act in this way when it has straw, simply because straw is not what it craves. Similarly, human beings are surrounded every day by what they "crave"—which is the corporeal delights of the world—and may be prone to "over-excitement"—i.e., numerous transgressions based on the pursuit of pleasure rather than the pursuit of God.

The formula "the power of the one who acts is found in the thing acted upon," כח הפועל בפועל, employed by the Maggid a number of times,⁴³ is, according to Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, used to both discuss God's absolute immanence in the world as well as to establish an *identitive* connection between Creator and created, and not merely a "connection of function."⁴⁴ God's imprint, as it were, is on the created universe, and the essential spiritual task of the *hasid* is to seek out that imprint not merely within the objects of the created world, but within oneself as well.

⁴³ Cf. sections 6, 44, 120. The formula was found in the *Kuzari* (5, 20).

⁴⁴ *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, commentary to section 56, p. 83.

The Maggid delineates three different layers of consciousness, each one more subtle and more spiritual in nature than the one before it. The first two layers, speech and thought, are distinctly human in nature, and therefore are described as existing within time and space. In other words, at face value human speech and thought are finite. They are temporary expressions of consciousness, and as such lack permanent meaning. Human existence itself would be just as finite and meaningless if there was a true border to our consciousness. However, the Maggid sees the intellect as a chain, stretching from the finite to the infinite. Therefore, speech and thought only exist inasmuch as *divine* speech and *divine* thought are infused within them, animating them and allowing them to achieve some type of transient existence.

The complex theosophy of classical Kabbalah was transposed in the thought of the Maggid from the realm of the Godhead into the psychological realm. All the processes and attributes of the divine mind are embodied within each individual in a more gross and infinitely less subtle form. The immanentist philosophy embodied by the axiom *koach ha-po'al benif'al* views the human mind as the last link on a chain of consciousness which extends back to the supernal mind. From the divine perspective, the human activities of thinking, feeling, and speaking are merely corporeal embodiments of divine energy which, with the proper intention, can be traced back to their divine root. This root is the pool of consciousness from which all human intuition, inspiration, thought, and speech emerge and are animated. It is called by the Maggid *kadmut ha-sechel*, which literally means "the pre-existent intellect" or the "preconscious," but in modern psychological terms is better known as the "unconscious." The *kadmut ha-sechel*

is more akin to Jung's "objective psyche," also known as the "collective unconscious," than it is to a Freudian understanding of the unconscious.

Thought requires the preconscious, which rouses thought to think.

This preconscious cannot be grasped...Thought is contained in letters, which are vessels, while the preconscious is beyond the letters, beyond the capacity of the vessels. This is the meaning of: 'Wisdom comes into being out of nothingness.'⁴⁵

The Maggid's preconscious is thought in an undifferentiated form. Human thought is divine thought in a contacted state, the undifferentiated becoming distinct. The process within the mind whereby a human being is able to think or to speak is analogous to the process described by the Maggid as *tzimtzum*, the ever increasing cloaking or covering up of divinity. In this case, the divine preconscious, which is formless, is first clothed in a specific spiritual form known as *Divine Speech* and *Divine Thought*. It is then clothed in layers of materiality, until it can finally be manifest in a corporeal and distinctly human vessel, such as an idea, a letter, or a word. A key notion in the Maggid's thought is that "spiritual union [between God and man] can be attained because the body's limitations do not ultimately obstruct the continuum between the divine source and the soul."⁴⁶ In other words, even when clothed in the gross nature of the physical world, the products of the mind never lose their divine root. It is for this reason that

⁴⁵ Dov Baer of Mezritch, *Or ha-Emet*, ed. by Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev (Bnei Brak: Yahadut, 1967), 15a, translated by Daniel Matt, "Ayin", p. 87.

⁴⁶ Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1998), p. 113.

thought itself is the instrument with which a person can penetrate through the veil of illusion and recognize the divine status of the created universe.

The Maggid's use of the talmudic dictum of the lion amid a basket of meat is a reflection of his wariness toward earthly desires and the corporeal world in general. Although the Maggid, following in the footsteps of the Ba'al Shem Tov, was an advocate of *avodah be-gashmiut*, the worship of God through corporeality, he understood that this method was extremely sophisticated and fraught with dangers, simply because of the high proclivity of the human body toward treating the corporeal world as a separate entity, and not as a gateway to the recognition of divine immanence. The Maggid knew that the world as it appears to the senses is an endless source of fascination for the human mind and body. The mere knowledge of the panentheistic nature of the universe is not enough to overcome the siren-like power of the physical world. In this case, the Maggid felt it was a spiritual imperative that the *hasid* achieve some level of apprehension of this essential truth. He advocated a system in which the person, through a continual effort of the mind, discriminates between superficial appearance and divine substance. Anything less than this traps the mind in the snare of corporeality, which the Maggid likened to idol worship.

The Root of All Emotions

The following text concisely presents the Maggid's views on the true value of our emotions, and the proper way to experience the world of the senses.

When you bring anything in this world to its root, you can transform it from what it had been previously ... It is the same when you bring yourself to your root; that is, to the state of *ayin*. When you reduce yourself, like *Hokhmah*, which reduces itself, the qualities of love and awe and the rest will be changed within you, and will all be experienced for God alone. When these qualities are attached to material things, they are separate branches, for that which you love you cannot fear, and vice versa. But when these qualities are attached to God, they are a complete unity. The state of *ayin* brings everything together, and it is not possible to reach the level of Wisdom unless you experience awe, for "without awe there is no wisdom."⁴⁷ When your awe of the Creator is whole, you will spontaneously experience love. "A man's way—which is love—is to pursue a woman,"⁴⁸ that is "*It is for her fear of God that a woman is to be praised.*"⁴⁹

This is the meaning of SHOULD YOU SAY IN YOUR HEARTS, "THESE NATIONS ARE MORE NUMEROUS THAN WE."⁵⁰ ... You have in your heart all seventy nations (THESE NATIONS), which is a reference to the attributes of love and fear, mentioned above, that are still directed

⁴⁷ Mishnah Avot 3:17.

⁴⁸ Kiddushin 2b.

⁴⁹ Proverbs 31:30.

⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 7:17. This verse was first cited at the beginning of section 78, which I have not included in my translation.

outwardly (i.e., not inward, towards God)—such as a desire (love) for material things and a fear of punishment, which is an external fear. And so it is for all the different attributes. This is the state of **THAN WE**, (which can also be read “from *me*”); that is, I see everything according to my own reasoning, for I have not yet fully connected to God. **YOU NEED HAVE NO FEAR OF THEM, BUT REMEMBER ...**⁵¹ This means that from the very essence of these various attributes you will come to remember God.⁵²

I see everything according to my own reasoning. This is the state of the ego, which is fooled into thinking that what it experiences is the absolute truth, simply because it can't comprehend anything beyond its own authority. Thus love and fear which are directed to external things are seen by the ego as having true substance. What the Maggid tells us is that these emotions only are real when they are re-directed back to their source, back to God.

According to the Maggid, the paradox of human life is that the very things that the ego attaches itself to—material desires, emotional states, and so on—are the very things which can also free the mind from being trapped in physicality. The pull of the senses is so strong that we naturally tend to treat the objects of the senses as if they had actual

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 7:18.

⁵² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 78.

existence, thereby denying the one basic truth of human life: that God is one, and that nothing else exists other than that Oneness. Fortunately, the divine root of all our thoughts and emotions is said to be the source of pleasures much more powerful than any that earthly delights can offer. However, the power of the experience of *devekut* must be tasted before the pull of the senses can be weakened even slightly. This can only happen when we develop a more discriminating awareness which is able to see the divine source behind all things. According to Elior, "existence and nothingness are determined by the contemplating consciousness and not by the usual empirical data."⁵³ This contemplating consciousness is a psychical function within us that is not our typical ego-state; rather, it represents a deeper, more subtle layer of consciousness which is not destroyed along with the ego in the state of *bittul mi-mitziut* (annihilation from the sense of separate existence).

Emotions such as fear, love, awe, etc., are called "qualities" or "attributes" by the Maggid, who uses them to differentiate between the experience of duality or multiplicity in the material world (in this state, love and fear are seen as opposing forces) and the experience of the Oneness of God (where all these qualities are unified). Our typical human emotional state is such that we experience hundreds of emotions daily, all directed at this or that thing, appropriately or inappropriately. This is what the Maggid calls "separate branches." However, when we experience the state of *ayin*, all these emotions return to their divine source: love becomes the more full and complete divine love, fear becomes awe or reverence for God, pain becomes an intense longing for God, and so on. Thus our emotional states are mirrors for the potential divine state of *ayin*, and we can

⁵³ Rachel Elior, *Paradoxical Ascent to God*, p. 14.

use those emotions – “redirected” toward their divine source – to experience God. Our emotions, like our thoughts, have a tendency to become attached to the objects of the world, and we subsequently feel that those objects are the true source of our emotions. When we fall in love, for example, the external object of our love is seen as the source for the powerful emotions we experience. However, the Maggid warns us not to make this mistake—the true source of *all* our emotional states is God, and it is incumbent upon us to not to treat our thoughts or emotions as “separate branches,” but rather to re-connect them back to their root. Both thoughts and emotions are seen as a form of spiritual energy, and based on the principle *koach ha-po'al benif'al*, these energies are identical to divinity. It is the function of the human mind to recognize this truth, and not to treat each emotion as a *davar*, a separate object. “The Godhead does not ‘think’ as a separate persona with its own thoughts, but it manifests itself as the source of thought. More than it thinks itself, it is thought by man or ‘contracted’ within his intellect.”⁵⁴

There are only seven types of thought. They correspond to the “seven days of creation.” Each [of these] has an *erev* (evening) and a *boker* (morning) ... The [seven types of thought] are then “love of God” and “love of sin;” “fear of God” and “bad fear” such as hatred; “[good] glorification” of glorifying God and “bad [glorification]” of self-glorification; and likewise with *nitzu'ach* (endurance; victory), *hodayah* (acknowledgment; thanksgiving; praise), *yessodot* (foundations) i.e., the sense of bonding...

⁵⁴ Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 207.

Thus if you happen to think of a "bad love," say to yourself: "What have I done? I have taken a part of the World of Thought and brought it to a place of filth!" This will effect that you be subdued and come to the [level] of dust, thus bringing the thought to the attribute of *ayin* (naught). Then you will come to the World of Love by reminding yourself: "If I love this object, as, for example, a woman, who is but a 'putrid drop,'⁵⁵ how much more should I love God!" ... Likewise, when you see something of which you are afraid, say to yourself: "Why should I be afraid of this? It is but a human like myself—let alone if it is but an animal or beast! As the awesome God, blessed be He, is vested in that being [enabling it to exist], how much more should I fear [God] Himself!" The same applies to glorification. When people praise you, or you sense pride in the midst of prayer, or people exalt you for your concentrated study, bring yourself to a sense of awe—i.e., shame—before God.⁵⁶

The "seven days of creation." This is a name for the seven lower *Sefirot*, from *Hesed* to *Malchut/Shekhinah*. In this section, the Maggid ultimately lists only the first six, leaving out the attribute that corresponds to *Malchut*.

⁵⁵ *Avot* 3:1.

⁵⁶ *Tzava-at Ha-Rivash*, section 87, translated by Jacob Immanuel Schochet, pp. 74-77.

Each [of these] has an *erev* (evening) and a *boker* (morning). This is a reference to the positive and negative sides of each emotion or thought.

How much more should I fear [God] Himself! Schochet points out that this shouldn't cause one to ignore danger, or not remove oneself from a dangerous situation.

According to the Maggid, there are only seven types of emotional states, each of which corresponds to one of the seven lower *sefirot*. Thus, all human emotions have a specific root in the divine world of emanation. By focusing on the emotion itself and divesting one's energies away from the object of that emotion, it is possible to trace the emotion back to its root in the divine realm, thereby experiencing it in its pure form. This is the essential religious task of the *hasid*. For example, thoughts of a sexual nature are said to have their root in *Hesed*, the *sefirah* which corresponds to God's love or mercy. While sexual love seems powerful and compelling in the moment, it is fleeting and shallow, a pale reflection of the divine love of *Hesed*. The same is true of all emotions and thoughts—they are all contracted forms of the pure divine states embedded within the *sefirot*. At the highest level of awareness—the state of *ayin*—even the differentiation between the divine attributes becomes nullified, and all are experienced simply as God's Oneness. This is the state of pure divine consciousness.

God contracted His *Shekhinah* in order to dwell in the lower worlds. Every spark is taken from its own particular world. For example, an object of love: the love that is in it is derived from the World of Love, which is to say that there is absolutely a root source from which the love for any given thing that engenders love is derived. In order to draw closer to the essence of this root, consider the spiritual nature of the root of love itself, as mentioned above. We see, of course, that this root is nothing but the divine vitality of the Creator, which contracted itself, as it were, in order that it could be experienced as the quality of love. There is certainly a divine vitality and spirituality which is not experienced as the quality of love, but rather as some other quality, such as fear, conceit, or any of the other attributes. While they are all the divine vitality and spiritual essence, each one is not experienced in the same way as the others, for each was contracted (from the divine vitality) differently, and are therefore perceived differently. However, their inner essence is the same, since they are all derived from the same divine vitality and spirituality, as mentioned above, and are all drawn from the one inseparable root ... These attributes are called "worlds" (עולמות) because the vitality of the Creator is concealed (מתעלם) and contracted into the specific experience of each of them. They are also known as "measures" because each is understood and

experienced as a particular quality and measure, and not in any other way.⁵⁷

“Worlds” (עולמות) ... concealed (מתעלם). This is a common kabbalistic word play. The word for “world” shares the same Hebrew root (עלם) as the verb “to conceal,” and therefore the mystics says that the *Eyn Sof*, the infinite God, is disguised as the world. In this case, “worlds” refers to both the *sefirot*, which are also concealments for *Eyn Sof*, and the attributes (emotions, qualities, etc.), which, if raised back up to their root, also conceal the divine Essence.

According to this passage, every quality—anything that can be used to describe an object, person, or emotion—has its root, as explained above, in a particular “world” or *sefirah* (divine manifestation). The perception of any quality—such as beauty, pride, or fear—simultaneously contains within it three distinct levels of consciousness. The first level is the mundane or corporeal level, where the quality itself is still affixed to its object. For example, in a well known story from the thirteenth-century kabbalist Isaac of Akko, quoted in the sixteenth-century text *Reshit Hokhmah*,⁵⁸ a man noticed a beautiful princess coming out of a bathhouse, and was transfixed by the sight of her. For this man, the quality of beauty was powerfully attached to— even inseparable from—the physical source of that beauty, the princess. At this level, the divinity inherent in the attribute of

⁵⁷ Sh'lomoh of Lutzk, *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, second introduction, p. 5.

⁵⁸ *Reishit Hokhmah, Sha'ar ha-'Ahavah*, 4:1, p. 426. This text was quoted in Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 61-62.

beauty remains concealed and unapprehended, due to the force of the attraction to the material object.

The second level is the level of the *olamot*, or "worlds," in which the attribute is perceived not only in connection with its object, but also as a manifestation of a particular *sefirah*. In the story of the man and the princess, the man went to a graveyard, mistakenly thinking that the princess planned to meet him there for an illicit rendezvous. As he waited, he focused all his thoughts on her, thinking of nothing else but the beauty of her form. In this way, he removed his thoughts from all other corporeal things, and meditated only on the now-abstract beauty of the princess. At this point, the man began to see the princess' beauty as a manifestation of divine beauty. He eventually separated his thoughts from *all* corporeal things, including the princess herself. This is the level of the *olamot*, and here the man communed with God.

The third level is the level of the divine *ayin*, the level where even the particular nature of *sefirah* is nullified within the simple unity of the divine Nothing. Our story concludes by saying "after a short time he cast off all sensual things and he desired only the Divine Intellect, and he became a perfect servant and holy man of God."⁵⁹ Even though each attribute has a particular quality of its own, derived from its *sefirotic* root, nevertheless its inner essence is the same as that of all the other qualities, "since they are all derived from the same divine vitality and spirituality, as mentioned above, and are all drawn from the one inseparable root." The point here is clear: *any* quality can bring you

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

back to the undifferentiated state of *ayin*. Isaac of Akko comments that "he who does not desire a woman is like a donkey, or even less than one, the point being that from the objects of sensation one may apprehend the worship of God."⁶⁰ The idea is not to turn away from the material world and embrace pure asceticism—this is a lesson the Maggid learned from the Besht, who warned him to decrease his ascetic practices—rather, we can, through continual contemplation, learn to see the divine in *all* things, in every quality or attribute. According to Norman Lamm, "by means of this contemplation, man reverses the process of descent or flow from the Ein Sof [brought down by the experience of a particular quality]. This return, whereby man 'reveals' the (hidden) immanence of God in any object, quality, or experience, leads him on to joy and rapture."⁶¹

These three levels can also be applied to the view we have of ourselves. We each think of ourselves in a particular way, and these various ways are the very attributes that the Maggid discusses. Therefore, each of the qualities that we apply to ourselves has its own divine root. Whatever we think about ourselves, however we define ourselves, we are typically still on the first level, where the qualities are attached to their object, which in this case is our own self! These are the most difficult attributes to separate from their objects and elevate to the divine realm, simply because they make up what we think of as our own identity. The ego naturally has a difficult time "losing" any part of its own identity. Nevertheless, the Maggid sees this process of "divine recognition" as essential to the human condition.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism* (New York: The Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press, 1999), p. 25, n. 65.

Tzimtzum: Divinity Concealed and Revealed

The essential quandary in the mystical conception of the world's creation is this: how does the Infinite, in its state of absolute and undifferentiated oneness, become the finite? How can there be room for the material universe if God's infinite light is spread everywhere? One possible answer comes from Isaac Luria's notion of *tzimtzum*. In classical Lurianic Kabbalah, *tzimtzum* is described as an act of God's withdrawal. God contracts His own Self, leaving a vacuum in which the world can be created. While in this system there is naturally still a connection between the infinite God and the finite world—the bond is maintained by the sparks of God's light which remain embedded in the world—the connection is not necessarily one of *identity*. In other words, in the Lurianic system, some semblance of duality is asserted: The Creator remains ultimately and essentially separate from the Creation. On the surface, then, Luria's *tzimtzum* upholds the basic theology of traditional rabbinic Judaism, namely, theism.

As early as the seventeenth century, disciples of Lurianic Kabbalah began to argue that the concept of *tzimtzum* was never intended to be taken literally. Those who did take *tzimtzum* literally envisioned a completely transcendent God, as mentioned above, while those who interpreted it metaphorically saw that true *tzimtzum* was impossible, for—and here they were simply following pre-Lurianic immanentist Kabbalah, based on the Zohar and Tikkunei Zohar—there can never truly be any place that is devoid of the Divine Presence. The literalists argued that the doctrine of *tzimtzum* was the answer to the question of how the infinite becomes finite. If this is the case, then a non-literal

interpretation of *tzimtzum*—in other words, one in which the finite isn't truly finite, but merely a manifestation of the infinite—defeats the actual purpose of the concept itself! In addition, the literal interpretation of *tzimtzum* was more comfortable for some because of its implications of the origins of evil. In the Lurianic system, evil stems not from the *Ein Sof* Itself, but from the *Sitra Achra*, the "Other Side" of the *sefirotic* tree, which is a consequence of the cosmic accident known as *shevirat ha-kelim*, the "breaking of the vessels." A non-literal or symbolic interpretation of *tzimtzum* maintains that the *Ein Sof* remains the source of everything, including evil. This was an unacceptable idea for many kabbalists in the seventeenth century.⁶²

The non-literal interpretation of *tzimtzum* takes its cue from nondualistic theories such as that posited by Moses Cordovero, who ironically was considered to be Isaac Luria's teacher when Luria first arrived in Safed.

Before anything emanated, there was only Ein Sof. Ein Sof was all that existed. Similarly, after it brought into being that which exists, there is nothing but it. You cannot find anything that exists apart from it. There is nothing that is not pervaded by the power of divinity. If there were, Ein Sof would be limited, subject to duality, God forbid!

⁶² For a further discussion on the literalist versus symbolist interpretation of *tzimtzum*, see Louis Jacobs, *Seeker of Unity* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1966), p. 55f.

Rather, God is everything that exists ... Nothing is devoid of its divinity ... There is nothing but it.⁶³

According to Cordovero, *Ein Sof* is both infinite and non-dual. Therefore, anything else that exists in the universe must simply be a part of *Ein Sof*. To imagine otherwise would be to create duality in the universe, which, according to Cordovero, is simply not possible. In addition, the non-literalists, taking their cue from Malachi 3:6—which says *ki Ani Adonai lo shaniti*, FOR I, ADONAI, HAVE NOT CHANGED—state that it is not possible for there to be any changes within *Ein Sof*, and therefore *tzimtzum* as a literal event is similarly not possible.

Because the early Hasidic movement was influenced by Cordovero as much as it was influenced by Luria,⁶⁴ the early Hasidic masters, who tended to favor more panentheistic and nondualistic notions of God in any case, were much more inclined to interpret *tzimtzum* non-literally. In fact, many of the *tzaddikim* took their cue from the Maggid himself, who, as he typically did, radically reinterpreted *tzimtzum*, placing it into a more “psychologized” setting.

God contracted, as it were, His divine light, just as a father limits his intelligence and talks baby-talk for the sake of his young son.⁶⁵

⁶³ Moses Cordovero, *Elimah Rabbati* (Jerusalem: Ahuzat Yisra'el, 1966), 24d-25a, translated by Daniel Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah* (Edison, New Jersey: Castle Books, 1997), p. 24.

⁶⁴ Cf. Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic*, pp. 33-43.

⁶⁵ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 1.

For the sake of his young son. In other words, the father does this so that he can communicate with his son on his son's level. Otherwise, the father would be speaking on an adult level, and there would be no possibility of communication between the two. This is the Maggid's way of describing God's relationship to human beings.

According to the Maggid, the light of *Ein Sof* is infinite and unchanging. However, God's light in an unfiltered state does not allow for any other existent to exist, for nothing could withstand the unadulterated presence of the *Ein Sof*. According to the Maggid,

If [God's power] were to be drawn down below without being covered up (בלי צמצום), the lower worlds would not be able to withstand it; because of this, the attribute of concealment is necessary in order to conceal and to lessen that which is drawn down.⁶⁶

As in the Lurianic myth, the process of *tzimtzum* is necessary in order for the world to come into being. However, whereas in Luria *tzimtzum* is a withdrawal of *Ein Sof* into itself, leaving a space which can be described as *not Ein Sof*, the Maggid's view of *tzimtzum* is that God deliberately covers or filters His light so that the material world can exist. In some cases—such as the text above describing the father who talks baby-talk—

⁶⁶ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 80.

the Maggid sees *tzimtzum* not as relating to the creation of the world, but simply as the method through which God's light is revealed to human beings.

God undergoes numerous contractions, through many worlds, in order to achieve a unity with man, who otherwise would not be able to endure God's luminescence.⁶⁷

God also contracts Himself so that they are able to experience God's divinity without a screen or a shield.⁶⁸

Because God's undifferentiated light is so powerfully bright, human beings cannot endure it or experience it until that light is filtered or concealed in successive *tzimtzumim*, at which point it is possible for us to see it. From the divine perspective, *tzimtzum* is a covering of the divine light; however, from a human perspective, it is the revelation of that light. *Tzimtzum*, a doctrine which before the Maggid seemed to emphasize God's absolute transcendence, has now become reinterpreted—literally flipped around—by the Maggid to emphasize God's immanence in the world. The act of concealing or filtering in no way implies that the pure light of *Ein Sof* undergoes change. In this way, the absolute nonduality inherent in God is maintained while the existence of the finite world is simultaneously explained in relation to that nonduality. *Tzimtzum* exists only in the human mind still caught in ego-consciousness as a way for the mind to experience God's

⁶⁷ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 24.

⁶⁸ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 132.

presence in the world. "Consequently, all reality may be understood as an infinite divine essence enveloped within a finite, concrete 'garment.'" ⁶⁹

Forgetting Ourselves

The Maggid's reinterpretation of the doctrine of *tzimtzum* naturally led to a reinterpretation of the subsequent theory in the Lurianic myth, the *shevirat ha-kelim*, or the "breaking of the vessels." According to Luria, the creation of the material world within the empty space vacated by God during the *tzimtzum* process—along with the concurrent origin of evil in the world—was the result of a divine accident, in which the pure emanation of God's light into a series of vessels was contaminated by the inability of the more corporeal vessels to contain the brilliance of the light. The vessels shattered, causing most of the light to return to its source in *Ein Sof*. The husks of the vessels—called *kelipot*—formed the basis of the corporeal world, along with the remaining sparks of divine light which were trapped in the *kelipot*.

As stated above, the Maggid didn't interpret *tzimtzum* as a withdrawal of *Ein Sof* into itself, allowing for the flow of divine light into an empty space. Rather, he gave *tzimtzum* a psychological interpretation, seeing it as the necessary concealment of God's light so that the human mind could experience its own divine source. "Since the Hasidic explanation of the *tzimtzum* did not include the idea of an inherent conflict with the Godhead, there was no basis for a cosmic catastrophe like the one in the Lurianic

⁶⁹ Rachel Elior, "The Paradigms of *Yesh* and *Ayin* in Hasidic Thought," *Hasidism Reappraised*, p. 170.

system."⁷⁰ Rather than see the breaking of the vessels as an accident, the Maggid views it as a necessary process in the formation of the illusion of a separate material world. According to the Maggid, God receives great delight in the actions of the *tzaddikim*, who are able to turn *yesh* ("something," also a euphemism for the ego) into *ayin* ("nothing"). In order for this to happen, however, the *tzaddikim*, and by extension the whole world, must first view themselves as "something." That is, the illusion of separate existence must first be created. In other words, for the goal of the *hasid's* spiritual journey—the annihilation of the ego—to occur, the ego itself must be formed. The Maggid, and his disciples after him, see the breaking of the vessels—the *shevirah*—as the emergence of the ego from out of the unity of *Ein Sof*.

If not for the *shevirah*, there would be no evil and no corporeality. Instead, all of creation would be united in *devekut* with the Creator, just as the celestial beings are. Even animals would be in this state, which would resemble the future time of the Messiah ... However, the *shevirah* caused distancing, hardening, forgetting, and separation from God.⁷¹

God is the only true existent, and yet we experience a world of separation, a world of multiplicity. We experience ourselves as separate individuals when in fact the opposite is true. If our souls are divine, then how is it that they—which are by definition infinite—

⁷⁰ Joseph Dan, *The Teachings of Hasidism* (New York: Behrman House, 1983), p. 18.

⁷¹ Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh, *Yosher Divrei Emet*, section 18, in *Likkutim Yekarim*, pp. 119a - 119b.

are contained within a finite thing (i.e., the human body)? The Maggid tells us that the *shevirah* caused us to forget our true nature, hiding from us the fact that the containment of the soul is merely an illusion, a "scheme" of God's which allows us to experience ourselves as separate individuals. The Maggid suggests that *tzimtzum* and the *shevirah* are games of concealment by God, covering up the reality of the absolute oneness of *Ein Sof*. It is this collective amnesia which allows the world to be perceived by the human consciousness as having a certain reality. If the world is seen this way, then our own minds and egos are certainly no exceptions. We perceive ourselves as having individual consciousness, but the truth is that our actual essence is our divinity. Our own consciousness is but a reflection of God-consciousness, albeit in a contracted state, due to *tzimtzum*.

At first, when the *sefirot* were barely drawn out from their divine root, the attribute "I will rule" was still embedded in them as it is in the root ... The *sefirot* were, in the beginning, subsumed within the root, as well as the attribute "I will rule," and even afterwards this attribute was still within them. But now this attribute is no longer connected to them, and it has therefore separated from the root, meaning that their *hiyyut* has separated and spread outwards. Afterwards, during the time of the *tikkun* (repair), the *tikkun* will take place because of the divine name *Mah* (מ"ה), by way of the verse AND WHAT ARE WE? (וְנַחֲנוּ מֶה?)⁷²

⁷² Exodus 16:7.

The act of breaking was a necessity for the world. If every object and attribute were still attached to the root and were as nothing to themselves, none of the worlds could have come into existence. If this material world was still continually united with its Creator—without any forgetting (of this union)—its existence would be eradicated, its essence united with the root, with *Ayin*. Because everyone would experience themselves as nothing, they would therefore do nothing. Because of their great shame and awe of the root, their own separate existence would be annihilated, and they would be united with the source, the divine *Ayin*. The same would be true in all the worlds. Thus, there needed to be a *shevirah*, for this caused a forgetting of the root, and because of this each of us is able to act on our own. Through Torah and prayer we attach ourselves to the root, to *Ayin*, and experience the verse AND WHAT ARE WE? By this we raise the sparks of the material world, and thus of every world until they reach the highest elevation, causing great delight to God ...⁷³

“I will rule” was still embedded in them. This section represents the Maggid’s radical reinterpretation of the Lurianic notion of the *shevirat ha-kelim*, the “breaking of the vessels.” Based on Schatz-Uffenheimer’s comment, the Maggid sees the *shevirah* as a necessary step—not a tragic

⁷³ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 73.

occurrence—in terms of the creation of the world and of our own independent action (which, as we will see, is crucial in order for the *tikkun* to take place). As long as the *sefirot* are all fully embedded in their divine source—the *Eyn Sof*—then independent action is impossible, because the attribute “I will rule,” the sense of separate existence that defines the ego, is also still contained within the *Eyn Sof* and not in the universe of creation. While the attribute of “I will rule” is ultimately an illusory one—because *nothing* exists which is not God, or which is not part of the divine chain from the Infinite to the finite world—it is necessary for us to act. Ironically, the highest act that we can perform, and therefore the purpose of human life, is to eliminate the very attribute which was at first responsible for our own sense of independent action. Independent action is *not* seen as a desired state of affairs, but rather a “necessary evil.”

The *tikkun* will take place because of the divine name *Mah* (מ"ה), by way of the verse AND WHAT ARE WE? This is an allusion to Lurianic thought, in which this particular name of God has a specific role in the *tikkun*. מ"ה is considered to be a divine name in part because its numerical equivalent (45) is the same as a certain way of spelling the letters of God's ineffable name: ו"ה, ו"ה, ו"ה, ו"ה (=45). In the thought of the Maggid, the name מ"ה is connected with *Ayin* and the experience of egolessness, because of the verse from Exodus quoted above, which can also be read “and we are *Mah*” or “we are *Ayin*.” This reading transforms the verse

from a question into an existential statement describing the experience of nothingness. For the Maggid, the annihilation of the ego is a crucial element in the *tikkun*.

"The Maggid psychologizes [the *shevirat ha-kelim*] to explain the gap that allows for the human sense of self."⁷⁴ In other words, for the Maggid, the breaking of the vessels was necessary so that human beings would temporarily forget the root of their existence, causing them to act "independently." The highest act we can strive for is to re-attach ourselves to the root of all being. In actuality, the very idea of re-attachment is an illusion, simply because our original detachment from God is not ultimately real; rather, we need to *remember* our divine root and our perpetual connection to it. However, this task is made more difficult by the fact that our "forgetting" is seemingly so complete: "Egotism is a natural condition of human birth. It is so deeply rooted in human consciousness that one is not ordinarily aware of its presence ... [The ego] is not distinguishable as long as a person has known no other state ... It is only possible to become aware of [the ego] through a transformation of consciousness ..."⁷⁵

The Maggid presents a psychologically sophisticated picture of the journey of the soul. From its original undifferentiated state of identity with God, the divine nature of the soul is concealed by the ego, which breaks away from its root in order to establish its separate existence in the world. Eventually, using the spiritualized practices of Torah

⁷⁴ Daniel Matt, "Ayin," p. 91.

⁷⁵ Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth*, p. 96.

study, prayer, and meditation, the soul undergoes a process of *teshuvah*—a literal “return” to the state of *ayin*, albeit in a more mature form—in which that which was forgotten is now remembered. According to the Maggid, this process—the spiritual birthright of every human being, although in truth only the elite were expected to reach the highest heights—brings great delight to God. Like the infant who learns to separate her own body from her mother’s, the *shevirah* as interpreted by the Maggid represents the striving of the ego to establish itself as an autonomous entity. The Hasidic rabbi Simchah Bunem of Przysucha, of the third generation of disciples of the Maggid, sees this forgetting and separation as the metaphorical result of the “sin” in the Garden of Eden:

Before the Sin, man continuously contemplated God. This was the unity of wisdom (*hokhmah*) with his soul: every part of his soul contemplated God’s wisdom. However, he was not aware of this, because the entire essence of his being was enveloped in this contemplation at all times. But, after the Sin, even though at times man is able to contemplate the greatness of God, the contemplation is not constant, and he is invariably conscious of this contemplation, since he knows that he contemplates. This is the meaning of BEHOLD, MAN HAS BECOME LIKE ONE OF US⁷⁶—which can be read, “like one by himself,” TO KNOW—that he knows of this contemplation.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Genesis 3:22.

⁷⁷ Simchah Bunem of Przysucha, *Kol Simchah* (Jerusalem: 1996), p. 9a.

The unity of wisdom with his soul. This represents an undifferentiated state of consciousness, or an absolute state of identity between his soul and God.

He was not aware of this. That is, he didn't have a sense of a *separate* consciousness; in other words, he had no ego, and lived in a state of perpetual *devekut* with God.

At times man is able to contemplate the greatness of God. Although on occasion he can experience glimpses of God, man no longer is in the state of "identity consciousness."

Since he knows that he contemplates. In other words, now man is "aware" of himself, meaning he has a sense of individuality, separate consciousness, or an ego. "In the course of formation of self-consciousness, a dichotomy is created between subject and object, and thenceforth he stands over against himself and observes himself."⁷⁸

Like one by himself. This is a play on the Hebrew word **כְּאֶחָד**, which in the original context means "of us," but which can also be read as "of himself" or "by himself." The fact that he is aware that there is a separate

⁷⁸ Yoram Jacobson, *Hasidic Thought*, p. 67.

"he" which engages in the act of contemplation indicates that ego-consciousness has been "broken off" from its true state of divine identity.

Chapter Three: The Self and God

Behind the Curtain, There's Nothing

At the heart of the Maggid's mystical theology is the concept of Nothingness, expressed most often by the Hebrew term *Ayin*. In classical Kabbalah, *ayin* is identified as the very first *sefirah*, Keter (crown). This manifestation of God was thought to be so unknowable and unattainable that it was almost completely identical to the *Ein Sof*. As the infinite and eternal source of all being, Keter is completely undifferentiated, literally described as "no thing."

As he did with so many ideas in Zoharic and Lurianic Kabbalah, the Maggid reinterpreted the concept of *ayin*, expanding it to incorporate multiple meanings and dimensions. Rather than equate *ayin* with the first unattainable and indescribable *sefirah*, the Maggid identified *ayin* with the second of the *sefirot*, Hokhmah. He based this identification in part on a passage from the Talmud (*Sotah* 21b), which cited what became in early Hasidic literature a well known and much used proof-text from Job (28:12). The original context of the verse was in the form of a question: BUT WHERE CAN WISDOM BE FOUND? The Hebrew, *v'chokhmah me-ayin timatzé*, was reworded by the Maggid as "and wisdom is found from *ayin* (*me-ayin*)," thus juxtaposing literarily Hokhmah and *ayin*. Equating *ayin* with wisdom enabled the Maggid to connect the idea of nothingness with the psychology of the human mind, thus transforming what had been predominantly theosophical into something primarily experiential.

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE FIELD THAT THEY ARE REAPING.⁷⁹ This will be explained in conjunction with the verse A GENEROUS MAN (literally, "a good eye") IS BLESSED.⁸⁰ The "eye" refers to wisdom,⁸¹ and in truth gazing (i.e., with the eye) is a lower level of wisdom. The one who has a "good eye"—in other words, good wisdom—brings blessings to whatever he looks at. When you contemplate any object, you come to understand that that object is nothing (*ayin*) from the divine perspective. It is utterly nothing except for the divinity which dwells within it, for the energy of the one who acts (i.e., God) is contained within that which is acted upon (the object). Apart from this divine energy the object is nothing, exemplified by the verse AND WHAT ARE WE?⁸² Through this contemplation, you draw down more *hiyyut* (divine vitality) to that object from its divine source of life, causing that object to unite with absolute *Ayin*, from which all existence emerged *ex nihilo* ("something from nothing"). This is the meaning of A GOOD EYE IS BLESSED—that is, bringing blessing to the various objects it gazes upon.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ruth 2:9.

⁸⁰ Proverbs 22:9.

⁸¹ See Hayim Vital, *Eitz Hayyim*, gate 4, chapter 1.

⁸² Exodus 16:7.

⁸³ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 73.

"A good eye." Here, the Maggid takes a folk superstition about the magical powers of the "evil eye" and the "good eye" and transforms it into a mystical axiom on the beneficial power of spiritual contemplation.

It is utterly nothing except for the divinity which dwells within it. This is what it means to look at something from the perspective of true wisdom; in other words, real wisdom is accurately perceiving the true nature of reality, which is that material existence is only real as a manifestation of Divinity. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, the one who gives existence to all being is the same one who dwells in that being. As explained previously, this is known as "the energy of the one who acts is contained within that which is acted upon." This is not the power of action from an external perspective, but as an immanent existence that sustains all phenomena.

AND WHAT ARE WE? [*v'nachnu mah*]. Spoken by Aaron and Moses, this verse is used often by the Maggid to express the experience of egolessness. This phrase, taken out of its original context, can be seen as either a question or a statement: *we are what (mah)*, with the word "what" representing *ayin*.

In this text, the Maggid uses the term *ayin* in two distinct ways. First, he applies it to the objects of the corporeal world, which are described as having no true existence

from God's perspective. In this case, the word is meant literally—all objects of this world are *nothing* in relation to the infinite presence of the divine. This nothingness is the basis for the acosmic tendencies in the Maggid's system. Nothing truly exists except for God, and all things are only enlivened and sustained by the divine vitality (*hiyyut*) which stems from the supernal *ayin*. In this sense, the world exists inasmuch as it is "made up" of God; otherwise, the world has no true existence. *Ayin* as the divine source of all things is the second meaning of the word employed by the Maggid in this passage. In this sense, *ayin* doesn't refer to actual nothingness—meaning a void or a vacuum—but rather a fullness of being. *Ayin* is the pre-existent consciousness, the pool of *hiyyut* from which the entire divine world emanates.

All that was, and all that will be are contained within pre-existent consciousness (*machshavah k'dumah*) ... all letters and words and thoughts—everything—are there, and anything that is done at any given time is drawn from there.⁸⁴

Because of its inherent "unconscious" or pre-conscious status, the divine *ayin* cannot be comprehended by the mind. However, there is a clear difference between rational comprehension and experiential knowledge, and the Maggid makes it clear that while the source of all being cannot be understood by the mind, it can be *experienced*. But the experience of *ayin* can only be attained at the expense of the individual ego, which becomes "as nothing" in relation to the divine Nothing.

⁸⁴ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 125, p. 216.

THERE WAS A RAM, CAUGHT IN THE THICKET BY ITS HORNS.⁸⁵

The Zohar⁸⁶ explains that this is the one year old ram which was created at the twilight of the first Shabbat. Twilight is an "in-between" time, between day and night. Every material thing contains four elements: fire, water, wind, and earth. These elements are opposites to each other: water extinguishes fire, and wind scatters earth. Something needs to join these opposing forces together, and this is the quality of *Ayin*. When water extinguishes fire, the fire loses its material existence and enters the state of *ayin*, of Nothingness. The same is true regarding love and fear: when you love a certain material thing, you don't fear that thing at the same time, and when you fear it, you don't also love it. However, within God love and fear are one,⁸⁷ since He joins them together. And the power of the One who acts is contained within the object acted upon.⁸⁸

Ayin is also called Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), based on the verse WISDOM—FROM WHERE (*me-ayin*, which can also be read as "from *Ayin*") CAN IT BE FOUND?⁸⁹ *Hokhmah* is known as Beginning (*reishit*), from the verse THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM IS THE FEAR

⁸⁵ Genesis 22:13. This quote comes from the end of the *Akeidah* story. Abraham sacrifices this ram in place of his son Isaac.

⁸⁶ Zohar I:120b.

⁸⁷ See *Sifre Va'etchanan*, piska 32, s.v. 'ואהבת את ה'.

⁸⁸ Cf. The *Kuzari* 5, 20.

⁸⁹ Job 28:12.

OF GOD.⁹⁰ It's known as Beginning in the sense that it has a number, and the meaning of its number, which is "one," is unity. But "first" is the start of counting, (and if *Ayin* was known as the "first") then there would be a level which transcends *Hokhmah*.

Day is known as "light," when a person sees the light of God; night is known as "darkness," when a person doesn't see God's light. It is *Ayin* which joins them together. This joining of day and night is twilight, the time between day and night. We see this in the *Akeidah*, for Abraham lifted up Isaac to the quality of love. GOD [ELOHIM] TESTED ABRAHAM⁹¹ – *Gevurah* ascended by the power of love, and it was certainly *Ayin* that was needed to make this elevation happen. "And it was a one year old ram"—the word "year" (*SHaNah*) can be read as an expression of transformation (*SHiNui*). This means that it is through *Ayin* that transformations can happen, as we see in the verse GOD FOUNDED THE EARTH THROUGH WISDOM [HOKHMAH].⁹² God dwells in *Hokhmah*, which is a level below Him. *Hokhmah* is an emanation from God, God's primordial thought.⁹³

⁹⁰ Psalms 111:10.

⁹¹ Genesis 22:1.

⁹² Proverbs 3:19.

⁹³ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 6.

THERE WAS A RAM, CAUGHT IN THE THICKET BY ITS HORNS. The Maggid begins this section in typical rabbinic homiletic fashion, beginning with a biblical text which seemingly has no bearing on the actual theme he wants to discuss. The interpretation of the verse will lead to his actual topic, which will then ultimately wind back around to the verse, making the piece circular in nature.

The twilight of the first Shabbat. In the Hebrew text, "twilight" is *Bein ha-Sh'mashot*, literally "between the suns." In a number of midrashic texts, this is the time God reserved for certain unique creations, including the ram from Genesis 22:13.

Between day and night. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, twilight is the time of *Ayin*, which is neither day nor night.

The quality of *Ayin*. *Ayin*, the divine state of Nothingness, lies at the root of all created things. The *Ayin* is the "ground of Being," the underlying force without which nothing could exist. While all material things appear to be dualistic in nature, with opposing elements comprising those things, the Maggid explains that there is an essential unity behind the apparent duality.

Enters the state of *ayin*. As stated above, unlike classical Kabbalah, which equates *ayin* with the unknowable *sefirah* of *Keter*, the Maggid equates *ayin* with the *sefirah* that comes after *Keter*, *Hokhmah*. When something enters the state of *ayin*, it loses its unique or particular qualities, and becomes unified with its divine source.

The same is true regarding love and fear. Like the elements, love and fear exist as opposing forces within each of us. These emotional states have their source in the *sefirot* *Hesed* and *Din*, "Mercy" and "Judgment," which according to Schatz Uffenheimer similarly return to *Ayin* when they are "extinguished."

The power of the One who acts is contained within the object acted upon. This is a philosophical statement used numerous times by the Maggid. In other versions of this same *derash*, the Maggid gives a *mashal* (illustrative example) for this phrase. He compares it to an artisan who creates a vessel. The power or creative energy of the artisan is contained within the vessel he created. In this way, the Maggid indicates that God's power and vitality is to be found within all of creation. In this section, the phrase can also be seen as indicating that every material thing has the state of *ayin* within it.

THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM IS THE FEAR OF GOD. The juxtaposition of the two words, "beginning" and "wisdom," creates a relationship between the words.

It's known as **Beginning** in the sense that it has a number. In other words, it is known as "beginning" because it is the *first* of the *sefirot*, and therefore is given the "number" one. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, although the word "one" is not actually in the verse from Psalms, "beginning" is seen as equivalent as "one." The Maggid sees *Ayin* as the beginning of the *sefirot*, and indirectly interprets this beginning as being the place within which all the *sefirot*—and therefore all of existence—are united.

But "first" is the start of counting, (and if *Ayin* was known as the "first") then there would be a level which transcends *Hokhmah*. Schatz Uffenheimer: If *Hokhmah* was known as "first,"—that is, first and not "beginning" or "one"—then this would mean that there might be something preceding it; however, according to the Maggid, there is no greater unity than *Hokhmah*.

It is *Ayin* which joins them together. The experience of *Ayin* is the moment of transformation, the moment when a person passes from

darkness to light. This is the essential “mystical moment,” the experience of God within.

Twilight. Here, the Maggid returns to the themes found at the beginning of the *derash*.

Abraham lifted up Isaac to the quality of love. In the symbolism of Kabbalah, Isaac represents the *sefirah* *Gevurah* or *Din*, which is the quality of judgment, sternness, or fear. The *Akeidah* itself was the transformation of Isaac—his elevation from *Gevurah* to *Hesed*, the *sefirah* of mercy and love. The point of the Maggid’s interpretation is that no transformation happens without reaching *ayin*, for *ayin* is the place where all opposites are united. *Ayin* is not merely a “location,” physical or divine—it is an *experience*, a state of egolessness brought on by prayer, meditation, or other contemplative practices.

GOD [ELOHIM] TESTED ABRAHAM. “Elohim” is a symbol of *Gevurah*. This verse is therefore interpreted as the clash of two opposing forces, *Gevurah* (represented by Isaac) and *Hesed* (represented by Abraham). It is through this dialectical process that transformation ultimately happens.

GOD FOUNDED THE EARTH THROUGH WISDOM [HOKHMAH].

That is, it was through *Hokhmah*—*Ayin*—that God caused the earth to be created. This creation is the ultimate transformation, from *ayin* to *yesh*.

In this text, *ayin* is more than just a state of nothingness; it represents the source of all being. Everything that exists has its origin in *ayin*, in the pool of divine Consciousness. Every attribute, thought, emotion, and material object can be traced back to its root in *ayin*. At this level, the distinction between the world and God dissolves, leaving a simple unity. In addition, the Maggid demonstrates, through a number of examples, that the attribute *ayin* is the state of ultimate equilibrium. *Ayin* is the unifying factor, the place in which all opposites are united, all tensions dissolved. According to the perspective of the intellect, opposites such as water and fire, day and night, and the rabbinic categories of fear and love can never be joined together, as they represent the very foundation of duality, in which every thing or category has its opposite. Logically, fire is always in opposition to water, just as up is always in opposition to down. Within *ayin*, however, all things are united, including all opposites. Within *ayin*, there are no paradoxes, and logic itself is upended in favor of an absolute unity. The *sefirot* themselves find their resolution within *ayin*, and the perpetual tension which exists between opposing *sefirot*—such as *hesed* and *gevurah*, symbolized by Abraham and Isaac—is eliminated in favor of the harmony of the divine Nothing. Because paradoxes can't exist within the divine Nothing, all things become possible: the nothing can become the something, the infinite can become finite, and time and space themselves no longer are bound to their own linear nature. Creation, and, as we will see, transformation, can

only take place because the divine *ayin* acts as the catalyst and the permanent ground of all being.

God created the world *ex nihilo* (i.e., making something out of nothing), and the *tzaddikim*, through their actions, make something turn into nothing. This is analogous to the sacrifices: the animals are the *yesh* (something), corporeal things, and the *tzaddikim* who sacrifice them to God turn them into *ayin* (nothing), into something spiritual in nature.

Ayin was at the beginning, and *Ayin* will be at the end. This is why the word "I" (*aniy*) is written with the same letters as *ayin*, for the ego (the "I") that exists in this world will turn into *ayin*.

The *tzaddikim* are able to do this only after the completion of the four worlds, after Shabbat and the Sabbath rest, which signal the completion of creation. Before Shabbat the *tzaddikim* were not able to perform the actions which would enable them to turn *yesh* back into *ayin*, because at that point the *yesh* was not fully completed.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 190.

The *tzaddikim* who sacrifice them to God turn them into *ayin*.

According to Schatz Uffenheimer, God creates corporeality, and the *tzaddikim* “burn” it, thereby restoring its spiritual essence to its Source.

The *tzaddikim* are able to do this after the completion of the four worlds. The point here is that God created the world of materiality with the intent that the *tzaddikim* would ultimately experience the “destruction” of that world through the grasping of the divine *ayin*. The beginning of the creation process contained the seeds of the reversal of that very process. The *tzaddikim* are able to reverse the creation process, but this necessitated the creation of *all* the worlds, with their varying levels of corporeality, from the highest spiritual world of *Atzilut* “down” to the lowest material world of *Asiyah*, where our physical world is contained.

Psychologically, this “full completion” alludes to the necessary developmental step of breaking out of the infantile state of our early childhood in order to develop strong and secure egos—even though the ultimate goal of religious life is to break down and “destroy” that ego. This is why the Maggid states that the *yesh* needs to be “fully completed” before it can be turned back into *ayin*. Schatz Uffenheimer states that before the emanation process was completed, it wasn’t possible to speak of an experience of *yesh* in its full meaning, and thus there was no room to bring *yesh* back to its source in the divine *ayin*. This annihilative process (*bittul ha-yesh*) does not return us to the same state of unconscious egolessness that we experienced as infants, but represents a transformed

level of consciousness, one in which we are able to contain in an embodied form divine Consciousness. This is *ayin* as the beginning and inevitable end of all being. Nothingness in this context is seen as a continuous cycle, from *ayin* to *aniy*—representing the *yesh* or “somethingness”—and back again to *ayin*. However, God does provide us with signposts along the way, and one of these is Shabbat. Lawrence Kushner says “Shabbat is a day that not only communicates how something came from Nothing, but how something can also return to Nothing.”⁹⁵ For six days, we dwell in the *yesh*, the material existence of the universe. Shabbat gives us a weekly glimpse at the *ayin*, while at the same time pointing to the *yesh* of the week to come. The endless cycle of weekday/ Shabbat/ weekday is, according to the Maggid, the cycle of Nothingness/ego/Nothingness. The ultimate goal is to remember the *ayin* during the week, and, finally, to turn every weekday into Shabbat.

The Source of Transformation

In the following text, the Maggid makes use of a parable from the world of nature to describe what he considers to be the very essence of spiritual growth.

When you bring anything in this world to its root, you can transform it from what it had been previously. For example, if you wish to make a large amount of wheat from a grain of wheat, you must bring it to its root, which in this case is the power of the growing process in the earth. The growth can only happen in the ground and not in any other

⁹⁵ Lawrence Kushner, *The River of Light* (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publishing, 1993), p. 117.

place; additionally, it will not grow until rain falls and dampens the wheat, causing its original form to be destroyed. This brings it to the state of nothingness (*ayin*), which is the primordial matter, or divine Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), the root of everything. We see this in the verse **YOU HAVE MADE THEM ALL WITH WISDOM.**⁹⁶ At this point the power of growth takes hold of the wheat, and a large quantity comes from it.⁹⁷

According to the Maggid, because *ayin* is the source of all being, it also represents the moment of transformation. In the example given above, the grain of wheat can only turn into a large amount of wheat by first "relinquishing" its original state of being. Only by becoming nothing can it become something else. When the grain of wheat's original form is destroyed, it returns momentarily to its source in the divine *ayin*. It is this "return" which is the source of all transformation, for the state of *ayin* is likened to a pool which refreshes and replenishes. A thing must go from having a form to formlessness, and then back to form again, renewed by the power of the divine *ayin*. In the Zohar, one of the names for the *sefirah* Hokhmah is "Beginning," *Reishit*. The Maggid, who as we know equates *ayin* with Hokhmah, sees the return to Nothingness not only as an end to what was, but as the beginning of a completely new form.

⁹⁶ Psalms 104:24.

⁹⁷ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 78.

Ayin is the place in which "world, mind, and self dissolve momentarily ... and then reemerge. Every object, every thought is revealed as *ayin*'s epiphany. *Ayin* ... is the moment of transformation from being through nonbeing to new being."⁹⁸ Any object in the world—including our own sense of separate self—by definition has fixed limitations and borders, simply because of the perceived nature of the corporeal world. For that object to break out of those boundaries, it must first annul itself and merge into divine Nothingness. The reason for this is simply that in *ayin*, nothing exists in reality except for *ayin*, but everything exists in potential. Therefore, the boundless and undifferentiated state of *ayin* contains within it limitless possibilities. This is why according to the Maggid all miracles which transcend nature must first bring nature itself to *ayin*.⁹⁹ *Ayin* opposes all restriction and constriction. Something small can be transformed into something great (e.g., the wheat in the above passage) by merging itself into *ayin*, where the distinction between small and great doesn't even exist. Thus, the one can become the many, the finite the infinite, and so on.

"A boundless heritage was given to Jacob."¹⁰⁰ It arose in God's Will that there should be *tzaddikim*. God received pleasure from them in the Primordial Will, and thus the "World of Pleasure" was created. At this point there wasn't a created world at all. God received pleasure in the Primordial Will from all the *tzaddikim* who would come afterwards. At that point, there was only a simple unity; God then

⁹⁸ Daniel C. Matt, "*Ayin*," p. 92.

⁹⁹ Cf. *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, section 30.

¹⁰⁰ Shabbat 118a.

decided to create Israel and the material world, and He therefore drew down the attribute of *Ayin* so that the pleasure of separation would exist. Love was drawn down to this world, and the world's existence came into being.

The attribute of *Ayin* joins together the *hyle* that is inherent in all opposing things and makes one thing come from another. For example: a chicken which comes from an egg. When the state of *ayin* enters into the "somethingness" of the egg, its specific reality is annihilated into the Nothingness of *Eyn Sof*, and afterwards it becomes something different than what it previously was. *Ayin* both separates and joins together the beginning of the creation process (the "thought" of God) and the end result of creation.¹⁰¹ This is the "drawing down" that took place between the first thought and the end of creation—divine Wisdom emerged, and this was the gate of *Ayin*. Thus, this drawing down is called "a boundless heritage," since it is close to *Ayin*.¹⁰²

"God imagined the amount of pleasure that the *tzaddikim* would be able to bring to the 'Primordial Will,' which is *keter*. From this thought the essence of the 'World of Pleasure' was created—this is *Hokhmah*.

¹⁰¹ Kuzari 5, 73.

¹⁰² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 178.

The creation was the 'drawing down of *Ayin* into the worlds'—that is, their emanation and creation in steps. As the world came into being, so did the criterion of the 'pleasure of separation,' which is different from the permanent pleasure that is in the oneness of the 'World of Pleasure' (*Hokhmah*).¹⁰³

The attribute of *Ayin* joins together the *hyle* that is inherent in all opposing things and makes one thing come from another. This explains the chain or the continuity between all things and *Ayin*.

Ayin both separates and joins together the beginning of the creation process (the "thought" of God) and the end result of creation. The "first thought" is connected here, apparently, to the divine Will that is identified with *Keter*, that thus the thought's essence is the divine Wisdom, which is *Ayin*.

According to this text, the process of creation—both of the divine world and the material world—consists of the "drawing down" of *ayin* from its state of absolute unity into the world of differentiation. *Ayin* is the one constant presence in the creative process, existing both at the beginning as divine nothingness, and at the end stage of creation as the attribute that binds all things together. Creation itself is described by the Maggid and

¹⁰³ Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, critical edition of *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, commentary to section 178.

many of his disciples, including Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev,¹⁰⁴ as a continual "drawing down" of divine influx from *ayin*. If at any given moment this influx was to cease, the universe itself would also cease to exist. Thus, it is the drawing down of *ayin* which gives all things life. Similarly, the influx from *ayin* is the cause of all transformation, which in this case can be described as "giving new life" to something or someone. After entering the state of *ayin*—temporarily divesting oneself from one's previous state of being—a person reemerges from nothingness into a new state of being, invigorated by the additional influx of *ayin* into the material world. Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev says "when one attains the level of ... gazing at *ayin*, one's intellect is annihilated. ... Afterwards, when one returns to the intellect, it is filled with emanation."¹⁰⁵ The moment of transformation only occurs when a person or thing has entered into a state of nothingness. Therefore, the emergence of a new being, or an intellect enriched with new vitality and insight, can only happen when the person is willing to surrender his old self completely, to lose any vestige—however temporarily—of his previous existence. When this happens, the transformative power of *ayin* takes hold, and the ego—normally trapped within the boundaries of limited time and space—gives up its control over the person's consciousness, allowing the incomprehensible and unknowable moment of merger into the divine nothing to occur.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. *Kedushat Levi*, Bereishit.

¹⁰⁵ *Kedushat Levi* (Jerusalem, 1972), 71d, translated in Daniel C. Matt, "Ayin," p. 87.

An Identitive Connection

FACE TO FACE GOD SPOKE WITH YOU.¹⁰⁶ The meaning of this is that God looks after the inner essence of the Jew who is burning with desire (for Him). This is why the text says **FACE TO FACE GOD SPOKE WITH YOU ON THE MOUNTAIN FROM WITHIN THE FIRE**, showing that our own inner essence contains God's inner essence, which each person experiences according to his own inner capacity to do so.¹⁰⁷

At the deepest recesses of a person's being lies the divine essence. This idea, espoused by the Maggid and other Hasidic masters, represents the extreme end of the Hasidism's radical monistic theology. As Arthur Green notes, "Hasidism, indeed Judaism, comes as close as it ever has to violating that ultimate taboo of western religion, that of the devotee proclaiming 'I am God.' At the psychological-devotional root of this entire complex of ideas stands the experience of the negation or transcendence of self, and the discovery, in the wake of that experience, that it is only God who remains."¹⁰⁸ In any nondualistic system of religion, there ultimately cannot be a division between subject and object, between a person's true essence and God. The entire Hasidic spiritual enterprise is based on the knowledge that not only can God's essence be experienced, but that the goal of the *hasid* is to recognize that there is no essential difference between his

¹⁰⁶ Deuteronomy 5:4.

¹⁰⁷ Kalonymous Kalman Halevi Epstein, *Sefer Ma'or Vashemesh, Parashat Va'etchanan*, s.v. **לֹא אֶת אֲבוֹתֵינוּ**.

¹⁰⁸ Arthur Green, "Hasidism: Discovery and Retreat," in Peter Berger, ed., *The Other Side of God* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press, 1981), p. 122.

soul and God. In fact, the *only* discernible between the soul and God is that the soul is temporarily contained within a human body. As discussed above, according to the Maggid the world was created—or rather, is continuously being created—by the drawing down of *ayin* through a series of emanations which culminate in the material world. Being part of *ayin*, the *sefirot* are seen as ultimately identical with *ayin*. Similarly, the panentheistic perspective sees the world as part of the Godhead, and therefore the human soul is naturally also identical with the Godhead. Although often reticent to state this idea explicitly, the *tzaddikim* of the early generations of Hasidism interpreted certain biblical verses in light of this startling truth, such as this text from Yitzchak of Radvil, one of the sons of Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov, and a disciple of both the Besht and the Maggid.

AND THEY SAW THE GOD OF ISRAEL.¹⁰⁹ Doesn't it say MAN MAY NOT SEE ME AND LIVE¹¹⁰? Also, doesn't the Zohar state "you cannot know Me at all."¹¹¹ But a man's essence can know the essence of God, whereas in the corporeality of his body he cannot possibly see or hear the voice of God. However, the holy soul, which itself is God, can perceive the divine essence when the corporeal body is stripped away. Therefore, standing at Sinai as only souls, they perceived that they were identical with the God of Israel. This is what they saw.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Exodus 24:10.

¹¹⁰ Exodus 33:20.

¹¹¹ *Tikkunei Zohar* 1.

¹¹² Yitzchak of Radvil, *Or Yitzchak*, p. 182b, cited in Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidut K'mistika* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1976), pp. 68-69 (translation mine).

And [regarding the Exodus from Egypt], it is said [in the evening service], "Thy children saw Thy sovereignty, as Thou didst split the sea before Moses. 'This is my God,' they responded ..." When the Lord split the sea before Moses, the glory of God's sovereignty was revealed to Moses, because there was no separating curtain of corporeality between them. It was then they recognized that they were, in fact, "Thy children" (*Rau sheheim banekha*) that is, that they were themselves truly of His substance, as the child is of the substance of the father ... "This is my God,' they responded." [By spelling it with an *aleph* instead of an *ayin*, the Hebrew for "responded"—*anu*—can be read:] "We." Which gives us: "This is my God—we ourselves!" (*Ze Eli, anu ... Anu b'atzmenu, ze Eli!*).¹¹³

This last statement is one of the few which boldly state in such an explicit way the absolute identity between God and man. An interesting implication of this idea is that *devekut* in truth is *not*, from the divine perspective, representative of a union between a human being and God. This is because the term "union" implies a coming together of a subject and an object. If the soul and God are identical, then there is either only a subject or only an object. Therefore, it is an axiomatic impossibility that there could have been two things, such that one could unite with the Other. *Devekut*, rather than being an actual combination of two things, should be described more appropriately as a process whereby something is taken away. This is why, as we will see later, the Maggid chose to

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, translated by Samuel Dresner in "The Holiness of Man," *Judaism* 37:146 (1988): pp. 157-159.

emphasize the term *bittul mi-mitziut* as the ultimate spiritual achievement: as stated previously, the term *bittul* means "annihilation" or "nullification," and most accurately reflects theologically the nondualistic system presented by the Maggid.

If, because of their *devekut* with God, they perceive themselves as nothing, then in their thoughts all their energies are uniting with God as they were previously. They are in a very high state, like the branch which returns to its root and unites completely with its root. The root is *Eyn Sof*, and therefore the branch is also *Eyn Sof*, for its sense of separate existence has been nullified. This is comparable to a single drop of water which falls into the ocean. The drop returns to its root, and thus becomes one with the waters of the ocean. It can no longer be recognized as a separate entity at all.¹¹⁴

As stated above, the only true difference between the soul and God is that the soul is temporarily "housed" within a corporeal body. The "drop of water" metaphor used above is reminiscent of this truth. Another metaphor, even more appropriate than the drop of water, is that of the waves and the ocean. As human beings, we are the waves, made up of exactly the same material as the rest of the ocean, which naturally represents the infinite *Eyn Sof*. In fact, there is no real difference at all between the waves and the ocean, except for the fact that the waves momentarily take a separate form, only to merge back into the ocean after their time as a wave is through. The difference between us and the

¹¹⁴ Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh, *Yosher Divrei Emet*, section 14, in *Likkutim Yekarim*, p. 117b.

waves is twofold. First, we think that, as waves, we are *truly* separate from the ocean in some essential way, forgetting, however, temporarily, that we are identical with a much larger whole. Second, we have the ability as humans to “merge” back into the ocean—to become “Nothing,” to annihilate our egos, losing all vestiges of individuality—*before* our time as a wave is up. In other words, we can recognize and experience our identity with God while still remaining in our bodies. This is the *madreigah* of the *tzaddik* in Hasidic thought.

Chapter Four: *Unio Mystica*

The Annihilation of the Ego

The following text is a typical Hasidic interpretation of Genesis 28:16, in which Jacob realizes with amazement that the place where he just spent the night is permeated with God's presence. The interpretation relies on the fact that the word *anochi* in the verse is redundant. This serves as the basis for reading *anochi* not just as "I," but, as discussed previously, as a euphemism for the ego, or the sense of separateness.

SURELY GOD IS IN THIS PLACE, AND I DID NOT KNOW IT¹¹⁵ ...

SURELY GOD IS IN THIS PLACE—If in truth the Divine Presence is here, if I caused the Holy One to dwell in this place, it is because I DID NOT KNOW IT (my "I," *anochi*, I did not know)—I nullified my ego within me, my "I," and I was no longer aware of any sense of separate selfhood, not even the smallest part of individual intention. Rather, everything is for God's sake, may He be blessed, and for the sake of the unification of the Holy One, Blessed is He, and His *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁶

In the following text, Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, in his commentary on *Parashat Bereishit*, describes the experience of divine nothingness:

¹¹⁵ Genesis 28:16.

¹¹⁶ *Tiferet Sh'lomo*, quoted in *Ituray Torah*, Volume 2, p. 257.

When a person experiences the state of divine Nothingness, he knows that by himself he is nothing, and that it is only God who gives him his existence. It is then that he recognizes God as the One who “forms”—in the present tense—for he realizes that God is continually creating, even at this very moment.

It is therefore said in the writings of Isaac Luria that the expression “God is King” is an aspect of the state of the divine Nothingness. Saying “God is King”—stated in the present tense—means that God is continually sustaining life by giving us divine vitality. This is the state of divine Nothingness—knowing that we are nothing, and that it is only God who gives us our existence.¹¹⁷

In this text, Kalonymous Kalman Halevi Epstein, referring to Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov’s commentary to Deuteronomy 5:5 (mentioned above), discusses the elimination from an individual of the sense of separateness. Here, he uses the word *davar*, “thing,” to describe the ego.

FACE TO FACE GOD SPOKE WITH YOU ON THE MOUNTAIN FROM
WITHIN THE FIRE.¹¹⁸ The inner attainment of God happens when a
person experiences himself as the divine Nothing, and through awe

¹¹⁷ *Kedushat Levi, Bereishit*, p. 5.

¹¹⁸ Deuteronomy 5:4.

and fear has eliminated from within himself the sense of a separate existence—alluded to by the phrase WITHIN THE FIRE —and not when he considers himself to be a separate entity (לדבר), superior in learning and piety. This is why this verse (verse 4) is followed by I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU (verse 5), as explained by the Maggid (of Zlotchov). When you are on the level of the ego, this “stands between,” etc., and you create a barrier which prevents you from experiencing God’s divinity.¹¹⁹

The above texts explicate the concept which lies at the heart of the Maggid’s mystical theology: the annihilation of the ego and the merger of the individual self into the absolute unity of *ayin*. In the terminology of the history of religion, this merger is known by its Latin nomenclature, *unio mystica*. In mysticism in general *unio mystica* represents the pinnacle of mystical experiences, the most supreme of all possible spiritual levels of attainment. If the Maggid’s system can be said to have a goal, then the annihilation of the separate sense of self most certainly would be it, as it represents the “end stage” of the mystical journey.

Because the Maggid’s extant works are comprised of homilies and sayings written down by his disciples, rather than a full work specifically written in book form, the Maggid’s thought was essentially non-systematic. He accordingly employed numerous

¹¹⁹ Kalonymous Kalman Halevi Epstein, *Sefer Ma'or Vashemesh, Parashat Va'etchanan*, s.v. לא את אבותינו.

phrases to indicate ego-annihilation, and, while each phrase carried its own specific nuance, they all pointed to the same overall idea.¹²⁰ The Maggid's descriptions of ego-annihilation typically incorporated three main concepts: first, the idea that at the height of mystical experience is the state of *ayin* (*midat ayin*, *b'chinat ayin*, or *madreigat ayin*). Here, *ayin* represents both negative and positive characteristics: the ego is annihilated, and is therefore considered to no longer exist, while the consciousness of the individual merges with and becomes identical to the divine *ayin*. The phrases used by the Maggid to indicate this idea include: לבוא למדרגת אין (*lavo l'madreigat ayin*—coming to the level of *ayin*), מביא עצמו לאין (*meivi atzmo l'ayin*—bringing oneself to *ayin*), ימשיך את עצמו לאין (*yamshich et atzmo l'ayin*—taking or extending oneself to *ayin*), מחזיק את עצמו לאין (*machazik et atzmo l'ayin*—experiencing or attaching oneself to *ayin*), and עוצם לאין מחשיב את עצמו לאין (*machshiv et atzmo l'ayin*—perceiving oneself as *ayin*).

The second concept used by the Maggid is *gashmiut*, or corporeality. Here, one who has annihilated his ego is described as having stripped himself or separated himself in some essential way from the illusory nature of the corporeal world. The Hebrew phrases to indicate this concept include לפרש את עצמו מכל גשמיות (*l'faresh et atzmo mikol gashmiut*—separating oneself from all corporeality or materiality) as well as התפשטות מגשמיות (*hitpashtut migashmiut*—the stripping away of corporeality).

The third and final concept is undoubtedly the most influential, and the one in which most of the Maggid's disciples who were inclined to discuss ego-annihilation

¹²⁰ Cf. Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, critical edition of *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, index of terms.

adopted in their own works. This third concept is that of *ביטול* (*bittul*), meaning “nullification” or “annihilation.” While other masters such as Shneur Zalman of Lyady adopted the phrase *ביטול היש* (*bittul hayesh*—annihilation of the *yesh*, the sense of “somethingness,” or the ego), the Maggid’s primary term for ego-annihilation was *ביטול ממציות* (*bittul mi-mitziut* —annihilation of material reality, which also is a euphemism for the ego).

According to Niles Elliot Goldstein, author of a book on the Maggid’s view of the fear of God, “for the Maggid, it is not *devekut* that marks the climax of the spiritual quest, but *bittul mi-mitziut*. If the concept of *ayin* is the assumption that the world itself has no real existence apart from God, then the notion of self-annihilation is the *consciousness* of that fundamental nothingness.”¹²¹ As with most mystical paths, the experience of ego-annihilation is not attained immediately, but rather is the result of a long and often arduous process, in which the *hasid* traverses numerous stages. The acts of prayer, meditation, and the performance of *mitzvot* lead to the experience of *devekut*, a communion with the divine. *Devekut* is not thought to be a one-time event, but rather a series of experiences which, through time, become more and more deep and increasingly subtle, sending the mystic upward through the Godhead. It is only at the height of *devekut* that a union or merger with the state of *ayin* is achieved. However, merging with the infinite *ayin* is only possible if one’s limited sense of finite and discrete consciousness is either loosened or eliminated completely. When this happens, the ego—the component of

¹²¹ Niles Elliot Goldstein, *Forests of the Night* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson Inc., 1996), p. 95.

the psyche responsible for the illusory perception of separateness from God and from the world—is removed as the center of one's consciousness, and is replaced by the soul, which, as we've seen previously, is identical with God's own Consciousness.

The annihilation of the ego as discussed by the Maggid does not refer to the complete extinction of the human being. Based on the texts, the Maggid uses *bittul* in two different ways. First, *bittul* can refer to the complete eradication of something or someone's physical existence. This is akin to actual death, a state in which someone actually becomes "nothing," or non-existent, but not in the sense of nothing as the divine *ayin*. This state of extinction is clearly not the intended goal, but rather a potential danger of the mystical path. The second use is *bittul* as the annihilation of the sense of separateness. This does not mean that the person is no longer capable of living in the corporeal world, nor does it mean that his actual personality is eliminated in favor of some sort of trance-like state, where the body functions but without a corresponding conscious awareness; rather, this type of *bittul* implies the complete transformation of the person's consciousness, predicated on the experience of union with the divine *ayin*. While a person in this state recognizes that phenomenologically there is a need to perceive distinctions in the physical world, those distinctions have no real meaning. Essentially, this person has realized the identity which exists between his own consciousness and God, and is living in this reality. Every action he takes is God's action, and every thought, God's thought. This last statement is not seen in this system as metaphorical, but rather as a literal truth. The limited consciousness of the ego is completely replaced by the infinite consciousness of the divine.

You should think of yourself as nothing (*ayin*), and totally forget yourself. Your prayer should be made only for the sake of the *Shekhinah*, and you will then be able to transcend time, and experience the World of Thought, where everything is equal: life and death, sea and dry land ... Abandon your ego and forget your troubles so that you can experience the World of Thought, where all is equal. You cannot do this if you cling to the corporeality of this world, for then you cling to division, to the dual nature of the created world, to the difference between good and evil. When you do this, how can you then transcend time, where there is a complete unity? Therefore when you think of yourself as something (*yesh*), and your prayers focus on your needs, God cannot envelop Himself in you, for He is *Eyn Sof*, infinite. No vessel can contain Him, unless you think of yourself as nothing (*Ayin*).¹²²

Think of yourself as nothing (*ayin*). According to Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, this passage concisely explicates the basic issues of a true mystical path: "1) To see oneself as *ayin*/nothing – this is [the Maggid's] ethos; 2) To completely forget one's individual interests; 3) To pray for the spiritual elevation of the *Shekhinah* (i.e., the divinity that dwells in all things); and 4) To long to 'transcend time,' and reach the World of

¹²² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 110.

Thought.”¹²³ Together, these four issues form the core of the Maggid’s notion of *bittul mi-mitziut*.

It should be noted that in the above text, “thinking of oneself as *ayin*” doesn’t mean merely *imagining* oneself to be “nothing.” Interpreted in this way, the phrase could be seen only as a product of fantasy. Rather, this is, as mentioned previously, one of the many ways in which the Maggid uses to describe *bittul mi-mitziut*, which transcends the level of thought, imagination, and fantasy.

World of Thought. The “World of Thought” is seen not as an intellectual or rational state of being. Rather, the “World of Thought” represents the divine Consciousness, from which the entire universe comes into being. Divine Consciousness cannot be comprehended by the mind—it can only be *experienced*.

Time and space are expressions of the ego’s finite and differentiated perspective of the world. It is the nature of the mind to classify and to compartmentalize, placing each and every sensory perception into a hierarchy and taxonomy of events based on past experiences. Without this ability, we wouldn’t be able to survive in the world, simply because there would be no perceptible difference, for example, between a traffic-filled highway and a deserted country road. The experience of *ayin* transcends time and space.

¹²³ *Maggid Devarav L’Ya-akov*, section 110, commentary.

The ego no longer perceives itself as a separate entity. While the individual mind continues to see distinctions by necessity, as mentioned above, the person experiencing *ayin*-consciousness is no longer caught up in the mind's differentiations—they exist only as temporary manifestations of God, and are perceived as such. As we shall see in the text below, thinking of ourselves merely as a products of biology or physiology cuts us off from our true nature, which is completely bound up in the Godhead.

Two Forms as One

HAVE TWO SILVER TRUMPETS (ChaTZoTZeRoT) MADE;¹²⁴ that is, two half forms (ChaTZi TZuRoT), in accordance with the verse UPON THIS SEMBLANCE OF A THRONE, THERE WAS A SEMBLANCE OF A HUMAN FORM ON IT FROM ABOVE.¹²⁵ A person (ADaM - אָדָם) is only dalet ('ד) and mem ('מ), and Speech dwells within him. Only when he enters into union with God, who is the Master (ALuPho) of the world (i.e., the "ALePh," אָלֶפֶת, of the world), does he become truly human (ADaM).

God undergoes numerous contractions, through many worlds, in order to achieve a unity with man, who otherwise would not be able to endure God's luminescence. A man must completely divest himself from corporeality, so that he can ascend through all the worlds and

¹²⁴ Numbers 10:2.

¹²⁵ Ezekiel 1:26.

achieve a unity with God, annihilating his very existence. At this point, he is call human (ADaM). This is the meaning of UPON THIS SEMBLANCE OF A THRONE (KiSei), for God is covered (meKhuSeh) there; this is to be understood along with the verse A HUGE CLOUD AND FLASHING FIRE.¹²⁶ A CLOUD—at first, a man is hooded in darkness, and he is unable to pray ecstatically. Afterwards, A FLASHING FIRE—he prays with ecstasy...

A SEMBLANCE OF A HUMAN FORM. When a man is awakened below, so is God's realm above similarly awakened. If love is awakened in the *tzaddik*, it is also awakened in all the worlds. The same is true with all attributes. This happens when a man, in a state of profound purity, brings himself to a place above all the worlds and achieves a unity with God, who thinks only to benefit man, as Ben Zoma said, "the whole world was created just to serve me."¹²⁷ All the worlds and attributes are under his (i.e., the man who achieves this pure state) authority, like a king over his troops; as King David said, YOUR PIOUS ONES (*chasidecha*) SING WITH JOY.¹²⁸ ... Thus, what the *tzaddik* wants, God also wants. Therefore, even the sexual acts of the patriarchs are part of the whole Torah, and are written in the Torah

¹²⁶ Ezekiel 1:4.

¹²⁷ Berachot 58a.

¹²⁸ Psalms 132:9.

itself. If the verses JACOB COHABITED WITH RACHEL AS WELL¹²⁹ or JACOB LOVED RACHEL¹³⁰ were missing, the Torah would be invalid. This is because the patriarchs and matriarchs were unified with God, and God derived great pleasure from them, and the Torah was made from this. The Zohar therefore states “the Torah and God are one.”¹³¹ Although their actions were grossly material in nature, God had great joy from them.

This is the meaning of TWO SILVER TRUMPETS—man by himself is a half-form, only “DaM” (“blood”—the biological form), and God is known as the Master (ALuPho) of the world. Only when they are united together is a complete form made. SILVER—this is an expression of desire, that you will always desire God, and that God will love you.¹³²

This *derash* is a comment on the essential unity between man and God. The passage can also be explained in terms of a continuum that exists between God and the material world—although it appears that there is a separation between God and man, and therefore a duality, the Maggid tells us that this dichotomy in fact doesn’t exist. The “upper” world and the

¹²⁹ Genesis 29:30.

¹³⁰ Genesis 29:18.

¹³¹ Zohar Acharei III:73a.

¹³² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 24.

"lower" world are merely manifestations of each other, and both are forms of God.

Two half forms. A play on words. The two half forms represent God and man, who join together in a unity.

A person (ADaM - אדם) is only dalet (ד) and mem (מ). The Maggid continues to play with the Hebrew letters: the first letter of the word for "person," the letter *aleph* (א), as we will see, represents God. This leaves the second and third letters, *dalet* (ד) and *mem* (מ). These two letters together spell *dam* (דם), the word for blood. This represents the corporeal or physical person, and the Maggid will go on to explain that this physical form alone is incomplete and ultimately empty without the spiritual component that only God can provide.

Speech dwells within him. "Speech," sometimes presented by the Maggid as the "World of Speech," represents the *Shekhinah*, the "lowest" rung of the Godhead in Kabbalistic thought. According to Norman Lamm, "even in his 'merely' biological state, man is capable of having the Shekhinah dwell with him. But Kabbalah requires that man assist in the reunification of the Shekhinah (the feminine element) with the Holy One (the male element, representing the upper sefirot). In this state, therefore, man is still

unfulfilled, for the Shekhinah, the aspect of God that accompanies him, is unconnected to the Holy One."¹³³

Annihilating his very existence. As noted previously, this key phrase (*bittul mi-mitziut*) refers here not to the actual physical destruction of a person, but the psychical destruction of the ego, the elimination of the sense of a separate self. Man still continues to "exist" even after this *unio mystica* is achieved; however, he exists in a completely transformed state, detached from materiality while still living in the physical world. This is the highest form of *devekut*, the merging of a person's individual consciousness with the consciousness of *ayin*.

A CLOUD—at first, a man is hooded in darkness. This is a description of man's spiritual state before he achieves *devekut* with God, and especially before *unio mystica*. A man can still pray, but he doesn't reach the stage of *hitlahavut*—ecstasy.

When a man is awakened (below), so is God's realm similarly awakened. This is the kabbalistic notion that what a person does on earth similarly affects the divine realm.

¹³³ Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, pg. 144, n. 30.

YOUR PIOUS ONES SING WITH JOY. Here, the translation doesn't quite convey what the Maggid is saying. He takes this verse out of context, most likely because of the word *chasidecha*, "Your *Hasidim*," i.e., "Your *tzaddikim*."

Even the sexual acts of the patriarchs are part of the whole Torah. This is the aspect of Hasidic thought known as *avodah begashmiut*, "service (of God) through corporeality," where even the most grossly material acts—eating, drinking, sexual activity—were considered to be service to God.

SILVER—this is an expression of desire. A play on words—the word for silver is **KeSeF**, while a word for "desire" in Hebrew is **KiSuF**.

In this text, the idea of ego annihilation becomes a spiritual imperative. The human being as an entity in the physical world is incomplete. In fact, the Maggid implies that most of us don't even "deserve" the title typically used for a person, *adam*. The only true person is the one who has merged completely with God. Interestingly, both God and man are described as a "half-forms," becoming truly whole only when both forms are joined together. Ironically, it is only when a person "annihilates his very existence" that he becomes a real person. At issue here is what is meant by a man's "form." From the context of the passage, it seems clear that the form referred to is not necessarily the actual physical form. If this were so, then the annihilation of that form would simply be physical

death. This is not the Maggid's intention. Rather, by "form" he means the *psychological* form of the individual, who perceives himself to be mere flesh and blood, and who similarly thinks of himself as a discrete and unique individual, the subject before whom all else an object. This is the form which requires elimination, even as the physical form maintains its existence.

One of the differences between the person who has annihilated this "form," and one who hasn't, is that in the former, all the "attributes are under his authority, like a king over his troops." As seen before, an attribute is a term describing, among other things, emotional states of being. According to the Maggid, before *bittul mi-mitziut* a person isn't always in control of his own emotional states. In fact—and the common examples in the Maggid's thought, following his teacher the Besht, are sadness, feelings of pride, sexual feelings and intruding thoughts during prayer and meditation—emotions come and go seemingly "as they please," controlling a persons actions. Rather than ruling over them, his emotions rule him, often dictating what he does or says, how he acts, and where he goes. However, the one who has achieved *bittul mi-mitziut* is no longer controlled by his emotional states. The attributes are under his control, and are no longer ruled by the arbitrary nature of the world. Therefore, even the most corporeal acts such as eating, drinking, and sexual acts do not pull him away from his state of unity with God. In fact, all of his emotions are now said to be experienced solely *for* God, and therefore even though his acts appear to be corporeal, they are in truth purely spiritual, and not the result of desires which control him:

FROM ALL YOUR SINS BEFORE ADONAI YOU SHALL BE PURIFIED.¹³⁴ This will be explained along with the verse HER HUSBAND IS KNOWN IN THE GATES.¹³⁵ It's written in the Zohar, "each person according to his qualities."¹³⁶ God connects Himself to man through the qualities of love and fear. HER GATES HAVE SUNK INTO THE GROUND.¹³⁷ This refers to the fact that a thing which is on the level of *ayin* is not a part of the *shevirah*, because the *shevirah* only refers to those things which have corporeal stature. If you experience the state of *ayin* because of your *devekut* to God, you are likened to a minister of a court. When standing before the king, even the greatest minister of the land is in his own eyes small. He wishes no glory for himself based on the strength of his own authority, such as is given to him when he is in his own house, where others are fearful and shamed before him. When he is before the king, he and all his individual qualities are nullified because of his own sense of awe and shame before the king.

Thus it is when you have united with the King of Kings: all your desires are annihilated, and your love is only for God. This is what is meant by "*tzaddikim* before the *Shekhinah* resemble a candle placed

¹³⁴ Leviticus 16:30.

¹³⁵ Proverbs 31:23.

¹³⁶ Zohar Vayera, I:103b.

¹³⁷ Lamentations 2:9.

before a torch”¹³⁸—the *tzaddik* is one who is always connected to God.¹³⁹ When you are continuously experiencing God before you, you don’t regard yourself as having any existence at all, like the candle before the torch; however, when you are not connected to God in this way, then your desires return to you. This is what is meant by **HER GATES HAVE SUNK INTO THE GROUND**—the one who has grasped hold of the “land,” the one who is nothing in his own eyes. The “gates” (from the previous verse) are your individual qualities and desires; when you no longer have these qualities, then you are not a part of the “breaking,” and this is what is meant by **FROM ALL YOUR SINS** (i.e., all your qualities and desires) **BEFORE ADONAI YOU SHALL BE PURIFIED** (or cleansed, meaning nullified).¹⁴⁰

It’s written in the Zohar. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, the Maggid is interpreting “gates” (שַׁעֲרִים) as an expression of qualities or attributes (שִׁיעוּר וּמִידָה).

God connects Himself to man through the qualities of love and fear. According to Schatz Uffenheimer, the Hasidic ethos—described here as the pair of attributes, love and fear—is a condition for mysticism.

¹³⁸ Pesachim 8a.

¹³⁹ See Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, pp. 108-109.

¹⁴⁰ *Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov*, section 51.

The *shevirah* only refers to those things which have corporeal stature.

Ayin wasn't affected by the *shevirah* because it was too close to *Eyn Sof*. From the perspective of *ayin*, there never was a "breaking," and the universe continues to be an undifferentiated divine whole. A person who experiences *ayin* and is "nothing" in his own eyes, not seeing himself as having an (individual) essence, is not "broken." This person's "qualities"—i.e., his emotions and his consciousness in general—are completely unified and directed toward God. Like *ayin*, there is no longer a sense of *shevirah*.

According to this text, when you've reached the level of *ayin*, you no longer experience yourself as being a part—meaning a separate, discrete part—of the corporeal world, described here as the world of the *shevirah*, the world of "brokenness." This is the experience of true unity with God, in which there is no struggle and no internal conflict. A person in this state of union with God no longer is controlled by his desires, because all his desires are described as either completely gone or directed solely toward God. No longer being a part of the *shevirah* reverses the process of "forgetting" one's true self which plagues all created beings. The person in this state perceives the world as it truly is from God's perspective— not as a multiplicitous entity, but as a manifestation of God's essence. Indeed, this person's perspective is identical with God's, because the individual will has been nullified, and in its place is God's own will. In another text, the Maggid compares the person in this state to a shofar:

Know that the World of Speech speaks through you, and without it you would not be able to speak at all. We see this in the verse O GOD, OPEN MY LIPS.¹⁴¹ Similarly, without the World of Thought you would not have any thoughts at all. This is like a shofar, because whatever is blown into a shofar, that same sound emerges from it. However, if the one who is blowing into it were to stop, then the sound would no longer come out. Thus, if God were to absent Himself from you, you would no longer be able to speak or to think.¹⁴²

In truth, the parable of the shofar as an expression of God's *hiyyut* or divine vitality flowing through all of life applies to all human beings at all times. However, the vast majority live under the illusory impression that their thoughts and words are their own, that they control everything they say and do. Those who have annihilated their own egos, on the other hand, recognize and experience their own identity with God. Therefore, their will is similarly identical to God's will: their actions are God's actions, and their words are God's words. Again, this is not intended to be metaphorical, but the literal truth. According to Moshe Idel, "notwithstanding his apparent extinction, the mystic is portrayed as omnipotent, since he 'is comprised in Him, blessed be His name, and in his hand is [i.e., he is able to do] everything.' This is an interesting paradox indeed: by the extinction of one's personality in the divine ocean, one achieves the status of an archmagician, probably because of the utmost identification of the person to the

¹⁴¹ Psalms 51:17.

¹⁴² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 106.

omnipotent divinity.”¹⁴³ In a similar vein, Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer states “true religious life implies total and utter identification with the activity of God, which is His will—a state of identification or unity that can only be attained by complete suppression of the human will. The first conclusion drawn from this identification of the human will with God is that the action of the perfect man is equivalent to the action of God Himself.”¹⁴⁴

Humility

According to the Maggid, the process of the annihilation of the ego cannot take place unless we first go through a stage of extreme humility. “Making oneself small” and “thinking of oneself as nothing” are both phrases which can indicate either ethical humility—in the sense of lessening oneself before others—or mystical humility—the annihilation of the ego—in the Maggid’s thought.

**BETTER TO BE LIGHTLY ESTEEMED AND HAVE A SERVANT THAN
TO PUT ON AIRS AND HAVE NO FOOD.¹⁴⁵ It is not a sign of serving
God if you only know yourself. When you regard yourself lightly, then
you are on the level of serving God. When you “put on airs,” (i.e.,**

¹⁴³ Moshe Idel, “Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism,” in *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: An Ecumenical Dialogue* (New York: Continuum, 1996) p. 41.

¹⁴⁴ Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, *Hasidism as Mysticism*, p. 65.

¹⁴⁵ Proverbs 12:9.

elevate yourself—serve only your ego), then you “lack bread”—that is, you lack the divine effluence.¹⁴⁶

If you only knows yourself. That is, if one only caters to one's ego.

The level of serving God. There is a play on words here. The Hebrew for “have a servant,” *eved lo*, can also be read as “His servant,” or “serving Him.”

Divine effluence. In Hebrew, *shefa*. This is a term for the flow of divine blessing or vitality from *Ein Sof* through the world of emanation to the corporeal world.

Pride is considered a major obstacle to *devekut* with God. Before there can be *bittul mi-mitziut*, the Maggid explains that one must first control one's sense of pride or self-exaltation. If the ego is defined as the sense of separateness we each have, then pride is an additional layer of awareness of individuality which strengthens the already self-aware ego. According to the Maggid, the “bigger” our ego is, the less we are able to endure the pure light of God's own being. Those who have humbled themselves are described as being “small,” and because of their smallness, they are able to experience God's divine light without a screen or a shield.

¹⁴⁶ *Or Torah*, section 352.

“In the future God will take out the sun from its sheath.”¹⁴⁷ Know that THE LORD GOD IS SUN AND SHIELD.¹⁴⁸ The nations of the world are haughty and vulgar, as we see in the verse I CANNOT ENDURE THE HAUGHTY AND PROUD MAN.¹⁴⁹ Accordingly, the nations cannot endure God’s divinity, except through some type of substitute, such as the name Elohim. However, about Israel it is written JACOB IS SO SMALL,¹⁵⁰ and DAVID IS THE SMALLEST,¹⁵¹ meaning they diminish themselves, and thus God also contracts Himself so that they are able to experience God’s divinity without a screen or a shield. Therefore, while the *tzaddikim* take delight in God’s divinity and are able to endure it, the nations of the world, because they are filled with pride (*b’gadlut*), are not able to endure it, and are therefore decaying. The main reason that Israel is so humble (*b’katnut*) is that they cling to the awe of the Creator. This awe is divine Wisdom, as we see from the verse THE AWE OF GOD IS WISDOM.¹⁵² This means that they continuously perceive God’s power within them; if not for this power, they would have no real existence. “God’s power” is nothing but the divine *ayin*, which leads to shame and awe.

¹⁴⁷ Avodah Zarah 3b.

¹⁴⁸ Psalms 84:12.

¹⁴⁹ Psalms 101:5.

¹⁵⁰ Amos 7:5.

¹⁵¹ 1 Samuel 17:14. This verse literally means that David was the *youngest*.

¹⁵² Job 28:28.

Among the *zaddikim* themselves we find distinctions: Abraham said I AM BUT DUST AND ASHES,¹⁵³ while David said I AM A WORM, LESS THAN HUMAN.¹⁵⁴ Both of these statements imply a small degree of existence, whereas Moses said AND WHAT ARE WE?¹⁵⁵ Moses was in a state of *ayin*, as is seen from the verse MOSES WAS A VERY HUMBLE MAN, MORE SO THAN ANY OTHER MAN ON EARTH.¹⁵⁶ He experienced God's essence in a way that all the other prophets who came before and after him did not. Thus, the more each of the *tzaddikim* unite with God through awe—which is divine Wisdom—the higher their experience is. Jacob, who was the chosen one among the patriarchs, attached himself to awe, as is seen from the verse JACOB WAS GREATLY FRIGHTENED.¹⁵⁷ ... Everything that happened to Jacob also happened to Joseph¹⁵⁸, and thus he also attached himself to the divine Wisdom—or awe—which diminishes those who experience it. Therefore, Jacob said to Esau, I HAVE PLENTY,¹⁵⁹ meaning that he was content with what he had, because he was on the level of Wisdom, which is the level of *ayin*, which doesn't desire anything. Esau, on the other hand, said I HAVE ENOUGH,¹⁶⁰ an expression of pride.

¹⁵³ Genesis 18:27.

¹⁵⁴ Psalms 22:7.

¹⁵⁵ Exodus 16:7.

¹⁵⁶ Numbers 12:3.

¹⁵⁷ Genesis 32:8.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Bereishit Rabbah 84:6.

¹⁵⁹ Genesis 33:11.

¹⁶⁰ Genesis 33:9.

Consequently, HE RULED ... AND HE DIED¹⁶¹—he was brought down from his high position because of his ego ...

This teaches us about connectedness (*hitkashrut*), which is experienced as a result of the state of extreme humility (*katnut*), which is the state of divine Wisdom. You cannot be connected to another person unless you diminish yourself, and see yourself as nothing compared to the other person.¹⁶²

They are able to experience God's divinity without a screen or a shield. This passage discusses the ego: those who are "bigger"—meaning their egos get in the way of the direct experience of God—are less able to withstand God's Presence, whereas those who are "smaller," with smaller egos, can experience God more directly.

Filled with pride. The Hebrew here is *gadlut*, which is most easily understood as pride, but could also be read as being filled with ego. This doesn't mean necessarily "conceited," as we tend to think when we hear the term ego. Because the ego is the sense of separateness, being in *gadlut* in this case means the inability to relinquish even a little of the control we think we have over our own consciousness.

¹⁶¹ Genesis 36:32-33.

¹⁶² *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 132.

“God’s power” is nothing but the divine *ayin*. Here we have a statement of identity between God’s “power,” i.e., God’s immanence in the world, and God’s essence, which is *ayin*. This is important for establishing the ultimate identity between the world and God—not a true pantheistic notion, because God still maintains transcendence.

Which leads to shame and awe. Schatz Uffenheimer: The knowledge of God’s closeness is the basis for humility (which is the result of feeling awe or fear in the face of God’s Presence).

Both ethical and mystical humility involve the lessening of self in some way. The former deals primarily with moral virtues: becoming humble in this case means to rid ourselves of negative qualities—such as anger, pride, sadness, and so on—that hold us back from being fully pious and from serving God with a whole heart. Concerning humility, the Maggid says that for the “one who makes himself small and does not consider himself to be of any worth, God contracts His *Shekhinah*, and she dwells in him.”¹⁶³ In terms of the true annihilation of any sense of separateness, however, the qualities mentioned above are all merely “symptoms” of the ego. Eliminating or lessening them addresses only the symptoms, and while this is seen as a necessary first step, it does not address the “disease” of the ego itself. In *Yosher Divrei Emet*, Meshullam Feibush Heller of Zbarazh discusses both types of humility, one at the beginning of the spiritual journey and one at the end. He states that “the first humility is distancing oneself from

¹⁶³ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 191, p. 297.

pride and the 'branches' (i.e., results or byproducts) which stem from pride, such as anger and the like." This is clearly ethical humility, in which a person perfects his moral virtues. The humility at the end, however, involves "effecting an effacement of the heart due to true awe of God."¹⁶⁴ The phrase "of the heart" seems to indicate that this is a type of humility which goes beyond external characteristics of one's personality.

If ethical humility—the "humility at the beginning" according to Meshullam Feibush—is a lowering of the self, especially in the presence of one greater than one's own self, then mystical humility is not just the lowering of the individual self, but the abandonment or the nullification of that very self. Here, it's understood that any semblance of ego at all—the ego being understood as that aspect of ourselves that considers us to be individual, unique, and discrete or independent entities—even the smallest (read: most humble) ego possible, is still an affront to the absolute unity of the divine. The adherence to the ego almost amounts to heresy, in that its very presence constitutes a denial of the non-dualistic reality that is God. In the lengthy text quoted above, Abraham, Jacob, and David are all cited as paragons of humility. However, as humble as they were, and as small as they felt themselves to be, their humility was not completely the mystical type of humility, because implicit in the idea of "smallness" itself is, as the text points out, some degree of awareness of existence. To say "I am but dust and ashes" is to see oneself as having a separate existence, albeit a very lowly one. Therefore, while the patriarchs and David are examples of ethical humility, Moses is singled out as the epitome of mystical humility, because by stating "we are *mah* (what),"

¹⁶⁴ *Yosher Divrei Emet*, section 7, in *Likkutim Yekarim*, p. 112b.

he rejected for himself even the smallest degree of separate existence. According to this text, Moses experienced himself completely as a manifestation of God, a temporary wave which will soon merge back into the ocean of divinity. In Moses, the Maggid sees the finest example of *bittul mi-mitziut*, ego annihilation.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The Mystical Journey

If the focus of the Kabbalah of Luria and his followers was the Godhead and the realm of the divine, the focus of the Hasidism of the Great Maggid is clearly the psyche of man. However, it can also be accurately stated that the Hasidism of the Maggid is the most God-focused of all streams of thought within Judaism, because it sees God everywhere, in everything, as the only true existent in the world. In the thought of the Maggid, these two seemingly opposite emphases, a God-centered system and a human-centered system, in truth do not oppose each other; in fact, the Maggid's system sees them as being indistinguishable. By focusing on the spiritual psychology of the self, while at the same time maintaining the constant awareness of the all-pervasiveness of God, the Maggid arrives at a conclusion that identifies the soul of man or the psyche of the individual with God. In other words, if nothing exists except for God, then we ourselves are God! As we've seen, according to the Maggid the purpose of religious life is the realization through mystical experience of this essential truth. The "raising of the sparks"—so crucial to the Lurianic system—has been replaced with the "annihilation of the *yesh*"—the destruction of the ego. In any spiritual or psychological system, it is important to differentiate between the various components of the psyche, and their function within the overall structure of the personality, as well as their relationship to God. For the most part, the Maggid doesn't do this explicitly; however, his homilies are filled with descriptions of how the psyche of an individual—using language that would be familiar to classical kabbalists and rabbinic Jews—interacts with, and ultimately merges

with, God. For example, in the following passage, the Maggid gives a practical description of the spiritual journey of the individual.

During prayer, you should place your focus entirely on the forms of the words, continuing from letter to letter until you forget your own corporeality. Imagine that the letters are attaching to each other and joining together—this is a great delight! And if it is a great delight in the material world, how much more so is it in the spiritual world. This is the world of *Yetzirah* (formation).

You will then come to the letters in your thought, and no longer hear what you are saying. This is the world of *Beriyah* (creation). Next, you enter the state of nothingness (*ayin*), where all your physical senses are nullified. This is the world of *Atzilut* (emanation), the state of divine Wisdom (*Hokhmah*).¹⁶⁵

During prayer. In this passage, the Maggid describes the mystic's "upward" journey in prayer. During this journey, the mystic's sense of corporeality—and therefore his own sense of himself as a separate individual—is gradually diminished, until he reaches the highest state of ecstasy, where the letters of the prayers,—which act as catalysts for his mystical state—his own recitation of the words, and his own sense of

¹⁶⁵ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 57.

corporeality no longer exist. The Maggid's language is that of classical Kabbalah, which imagined the universe as being constructed of four co-existing "worlds," or levels of reality¹⁶⁶: 1) *Asiyah*, the world of "action," corresponds to our own physical and spiritual worlds, and is the nexus point between physicality and spirituality. The Maggid's *derash* makes no mention of this world, simply because he assumes that this world is our starting point. In the *sefirotic* tree, *Asiyah* corresponds to *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*; 2) *Yetzirah*, the world of "formation," is the world of "speech" and the world of the angels, corresponding to the six middle *sefirot*, from *Hesed* to *Yesod*; 3) *Beriyah*, the world of "creation," is the world of thought, the world of souls and of God's Throne; *Beriyah* is the "something" (*yesh*) which came out of the "nothing" (*ayin*), and thus is the first created thing. *Beriyah* therefore corresponds to *Binah*; *Atzilut*, the world of emanation (Kaplan calls this the "Universe of Nearness," because *Atzilut* is related to the root *etzel*), is the world of the *sefirot*, the world known as Nothingness (*ayin*), corresponding to *Hokhmah*.

In the above passage, the Maggid explains that the mystical journey is a gradual ascent, a process which takes the *hasid* from corporeality to spirituality, from the *ani* to the *ayin*. At the peak of this process is the ultimate state of God's absolute oneness. This represents the highest level of *devekut*, in which all the physical senses that keep us

¹⁶⁶ See Aryeh Kaplan, *The Light Beyond*, p. 59, quoting Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, and notes 11 and 12 on the same page for a brief description of these four worlds. Also see Isaiah 43:7.

bound to the material world are nullified, and in which one's individual consciousness has been replaced by an all-pervasive divine consciousness. According to Miles Krassen, "for a person with expanded consciousness, creation is experienced as truly pantheistic. God is not merely an idea that is held constantly in mind, but an in-dwelling reality. Once this presence has been recognized for what is real within an individual's consciousness, it is realized that such a presence is essentially unlimited. It is to be found everywhere."¹⁶⁷

The *hasid* in this state of *bittul* sees God everywhere and in everything. However, even though the Maggid's system represented the radical end of Jewish theology, it doesn't depict the *hasid* in the throes of *bittul mi-mitziut* as a zombie in a trance-like state, dead to the actual world. This picture goes against the grain of Jewish life in general, which stresses living in the world. But according to the Maggid and his school of thought it is entirely possible to live in the world of separation and distinction while *simultaneously* experiencing a continuous *devekut* with God. Although ego annihilation truly represents the ultimate loss of the sense of separation and distinction, the person experiencing this still has the ability to be conscious of the corporeal world. According to the following text, externally, this person appears to be living in the world—in other words, he seems to be experiencing the typical ego-state of separateness and duality; however, internally, no matter what his actions are on the outside, his experience remains that of *ayin*, of divine unity.

¹⁶⁷ Miles Krassen, *Uniter of Heaven and Earth*, p. 119.

The one who has achieved proper *devekut* with God is able to do anything he wants [in the world]. Although it appears that he is experiencing separateness, he is only experiencing God.¹⁶⁸

Equanimity: The Inner Balance of *Ayin*

At the end of the mystical journey, the individual ego becomes identical with the divine *ayin*. In terms of the Maggid's interpretation of Lurianic Kabbalah, the one who has achieved ego annihilation has, within himself, reversed the process of *tzimtzum*. God no longer needs to conceal Himself from this person, because there no longer is an ego which needs "protection" from the brilliance of God's light. In addition, this person has performed the ultimate *tikkun* (repair) by recognizing that the *shevirah* (which, as we have seen, previously caused him to forget his true divine identity) was in fact an illusion from the perspective of *ayin*. The result of this state of *bittul mi-mitziut*, or what I call the spiritual consequence of ego annihilation, is *hishtavut*, a term best translated as either "equanimity" or "equipoise." In these final texts from *Tzava-at Ha-Rivash*, equanimity is described as an internal state of absolute balance as a result of one's constant *devekut* to God:

Hishtavut (equanimity) is a very important principle. Whether you are considered to be ignorant, or very learned in Torah, it should all be the same to you. Equanimity is the result of constant *devekut* with the Creator—being absorbed in *devekut* leaves no time to think of these

¹⁶⁸ *Likkutim Yekarim*, section 52.

things, since you are continuously engrossed in the effort to unite with God on high.¹⁶⁹

I HAVE PLACED GOD BEFORE ME AT ALL TIMES.¹⁷⁰ *Shiviti* ("I have placed") is an expression of *hishtavut* (equanimity). Anything that happens to you—whether people praise or criticize you, or anything else—it should all be the same to you. The same principle applies to food: whether you eat delicacies or any other kind of food, it should all be the same to you, since through this perspective the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil impulse) has been completely removed from you.¹⁷¹

Whatever happens to you, you should say "this, too, comes from God, and if it seems proper for Him..." Your intentions should be entirely for the sake of Heaven; from your perspective, there are no differences. This is a very high level.

Shiviti ("I have placed") is an expression of *hishtavut*. Here, the Maggid notes that the root of *shiviti* is the same as the word *hishtavut*. He therefore reads the verse from Psalms as "I have attained the state of equanimity, [because] God is before me at all times." The latter half of the verse is the equivalent of a state of *ayin*, while the first half can be seen as the consequence of that state.

¹⁶⁹ *Tzava-at Ha-Rivash*, section 10.

¹⁷⁰ Psalms 16:8.

¹⁷¹ *Tzava-at Ha-Rivash*, section 2.

It should all be the same to you. Miles Krassen translates this as "one's inner state should remain in balance."¹⁷² This translation correctly emphasizes the true nature of *hishtavut*, which should be seen as an internal experience of harmony which remains firm regardless of external circumstances.

The state of *hishtavut* is one of perpetual inner *sh'leimut*, wholeness or completeness. Regardless of what happens in the external realm, the inner experience of the *hasid* in *hishtavut* is that everything is truly one with God. There no longer is a sense of separation or distinction; the entire universe becomes an absolute unity within this person's psyche. His emotions and the attributes of the world are all for him derived entirely from their divine source, and he regards himself as having no existence at all apart from *ayin*. According to Moshe Idel, "the retreat from the experience of union with God was not conceived as a return to a state of mind, or soul, in which one experienced an abyss between oneself and God, a state that implied a fall of the soul."¹⁷³ Rather than conceiving of an inevitable "fall of the soul," the Maggid saw that the "aftermath" of ego annihilation was *hishtavut*, the inner experience of the all-pervasive presence of the *Eyn Sof*.

¹⁷² Krassen, p. 56.

¹⁷³ Moshe Idel, *Hasidism*, p. 223.

Afterword

In this thesis, I have endeavored to present the Maggid's thought as a mystical system which emphasizes the *experience* of God, and which includes the possibility that the individual can gradually eliminate any sense of differentiation and distinction, and recognize the divine presence in all things. I have shown that in the Maggid's system, while it is true that "there is no place which is devoid of God," this truth is not a typical everyday experience for most people. The reason for this is that the ego—known as the "I," *ani*, *anochi*, or *yesh*—which is the illusory sense each of us has that we are separate individuals, possessing a discrete and unique consciousness, prevents us from experiencing our true divine selves. The Maggid describes the experience of the ego as a state of perpetual duality, in which all things, attributes, and emotions are treated as if they too had a separate and distinct existence. As we have seen, the ego emerges out of the *ayin*. *Ayin* in this case is described as divine consciousness, which contracts itself—this is the Maggid's interpretation of *tzimtzum*—to become the individual mind. However, this "contraction" is in reality just a cover or a cloak—in truth there is no difference at all between the individual and God.

The ego's perspective of duality, in which every thing has its irreconcilable opposite, disappears in the face of *ayin*. *Ayin* is seen by the Maggid as the source of transformation, as well as the unifier of all opposites. Even the individual *sefirot* become nullified inside of *ayin*, which is the source of all.

Based on this mystical perspective, the Maggid felt that *bittul mi-mitziut*, the annihilation of the ego, or the elimination of the sense of separateness, was the true goal of the mystic. However, by “mystic” the Maggid and his disciples didn’t mean to refer to anyone and everyone. While the Hasidic movement in general is thought of as a “popular” movement, the truth is naturally more complicated. A true innovation of the early *tzaddikim* was seeing the experience of *devekut* as being available to everyone. In fact, the Besht and the Maggid encouraged all their followers to see *devekut* as a primary religious goal. However, it is clear—especially in the writings of the Maggid’s disciples—that *bittul mi-mitziut* was felt to be reserved for the spiritual elite, as similar experiences were held for the elite in classical Kabbalah. Even with this past exclusivity, the mystical thought of the Maggid contains much that is relevant today. Concepts such as *yesh*, *ayin*, *devekut*, *kadmut ha-sechel* (the “unconscious”), *hishtavut*, and even *bittul mi-mitziut* seem timeless, and fit in with a modern psycho-spiritual view of the world. In fact, many of the Maggid’s ideas have parallels in the mystical traditions of other world religions, both east and west, ancient and modern. While couched in the particular idiom of rabbinic Jewish thought, albeit in a radical format, the Maggid’s system of seeing God everywhere and in all things reaches beyond its own specific milieu, and can be seen as a universal truth.

Appendix: Translations

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov

Second Introduction: Sh'lomo of Lutzk

God contracted His *Shekhinah* in order to dwell in the lower worlds. Every spark is taken from its own particular world. For example, an object of love: the love that is in it is derived from the World of Love, which is to say that there is absolutely a root source from which the love for any given thing that engenders love is derived. In order to draw closer to the essence of this root, consider the spiritual nature of the root of love itself, as mentioned above. We see, of course, that this root is nothing but the divine vitality of the Creator, which contracted itself, as it were, in order that it could be experienced as the quality of love. There is certainly a divine vitality and spirituality which is not experienced as the quality of love, but rather as some other quality, such as fear, conceit, or any of the other attributes. While they are all the divine vitality and spiritual essence, each one is not experienced in the same way as the others, for each was contracted (from the divine vitality) differently, and are therefore perceived differently. However, their inner essence is the same, since they are all derived from the same divine vitality and spirituality, as mentioned above, and are all drawn from the one inseparable root ... These attributes are called "worlds" (עולמות) because the vitality of the Creator is concealed (מתעלם) and contracted into the specific experience of each of them. They are also known as "measures" because each is understood and experienced as a particular quality and measure, and not in any other way.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 6

THERE WAS A RAM, CAUGHT IN THE THICKET BY ITS HORNS.¹ The Zohar² explains that this is the one year old ram which was created at the twilight of the first Shabbat. Twilight is an "in-between" time, between day and night. Every material thing contains four elements: fire, water, wind, and earth. These elements are opposites to each other: water extinguishes fire, and wind scatters earth. Something needs to join these opposing forces together, and this is the quality of *ayin*. When water extinguishes fire, the fire loses its material existence and enters the state of *ayin*, of Nothingness. The same is true regarding love and fear: when you love a certain material thing, you don't fear that thing at the same time, and when you fear it, you don't also love it. However, within God love and fear are

¹ Genesis 22:13. This quote comes from the end of the *Akeidah* story. Abraham sacrifices this ram in place of his son Isaac.

² Zohar I:120b.

one,³ since He joins them together. And the power of the One who acts is contained within the object acted upon.⁴

Ayin is also called Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), based on the verse WISDOM—FROM WHERE (*me-ayin*, which can also be read as “from *ayin*”) CAN IT BE FOUND?⁵ *Hokhmah* is known as Beginning (*reishit*), from the verse THE BEGINNING OF WISDOM IS THE FEAR OF GOD.⁶ It’s known as Beginning in the sense that it has a number, and the meaning of its number, which is “one,” is unity. But “first” is the start of counting, (and if *ayin* was known as the “first”) then there would be a level which transcends *Hokhmah*.

Day is known as “light,” when a person sees the light of God; night is known as “darkness,” when a person doesn’t see God’s light. It is *ayin* which joins them together. This joining of day and night is twilight, the time between day and night. We see this in the *Akeidah*, for Abraham lifted up Isaac to the quality of love. GOD [ELOHIM] TESTED ABRAHAM⁷ – *Gevurah* ascended by the power of love, and it was certainly *ayin* that was needed to make this elevation happen. “And it was a one year old ram”—the word “year” (*SHaNah*) can be read as an expression of transformation (*SHiNui*). This means that it is through *ayin* that transformations can happen, as we see in the verse GOD FOUNDED THE EARTH THROUGH WISDOM [HOKHMAH]. God dwells in *Hokhmah*, which is a level below Him. *Hokhmah* is an emanation from God, God’s primordial thought.

Maggid Devarav L’Ya-akov, section 24

HAVE TWO SILVER TRUMPETS (ChaTZoTZeRoT) MADE;⁸ that is, two half forms (ChaTZi TZuRoT), in accordance with the verse UPON THIS SEMBLANCE OF A THRONE, THERE WAS A SEMBLANCE OF A HUMAN FORM ON IT FROM ABOVE.⁹ A person (ADaM - אָדָם) is only dalet (ד) and mem (מ), and Speech dwells within him. Only when he enters into union with God, who is the Master (ALuPho) of the world (i.e., the “ALePh,” אָלֶף, of the world), does he become truly human (ADaM).

God undergoes numerous contractions, through many worlds, in order to achieve a unity with man, who otherwise would not be able to endure God’s luminescence. A man must

³ See *Sifre Va’etchanan*, piska 32, s.v. וְאֵהָבָה אֶת ה’.

⁴ Cf. *The Kuzari* 5, 20.

⁵ Job 28:12.

⁶ Psalms 111:10.

⁷ Genesis 22:1.

⁸ Numbers 10:2.

⁹ Ezekiel 1:26.

completely divest himself from corporeality, so that he can ascend through all the worlds and achieve a unity with God, annihilating his very existence. At this point, he is called human (ADaM). This is the meaning of UPON THIS SEMBLANCE OF A THRONE (KiSei), for God is covered (meKhuSeh) there; this is to be understood along with the verse A HUGE CLOUD AND FLASHING FIRE.¹⁰ A CLOUD—at first, a man is hooded in darkness, and he is unable to pray ecstatically. Afterwards, A FLASHING FIRE—he prays with ecstasy...

A SEMBLANCE OF A HUMAN FORM. When a man is awakened below, so is God's realm above similarly awakened. If love is awakened in the tzaddik, it is also awakened in all the worlds. The same is true with all attributes. This happens when a man, in a state of profound purity, brings himself to a place above all the worlds and achieves a unity with God, who thinks only to benefit man, as Ben Zoma said, "the whole world was created just to serve me."¹¹ All the worlds and attributes are under his (i.e., the man who achieves this pure state) authority, like a king over his troops; as King David said, YOUR PIOUS ONES (chasidecha) SING WITH JOY.¹² ... Thus, what the *tzaddik* wants, God also wants. Therefore, even the sexual acts of the patriarchs are part of the whole Torah, and are written in the Torah itself. If the verses JACOB COHABITED WITH RACHEL AS WELL¹³ or JACOB LOVED RACHEL¹⁴ were missing, the Torah would be invalid. This is because the patriarchs and matriarchs were unified with God, and God derived great pleasure from them, and the Torah was made from this. The Zohar therefore states "the Torah and God are one."¹⁵ Although their actions were grossly material in nature, God had great joy from them.

This is the meaning of TWO SILVER TRUMPETS—man by himself is a half-form, only "DaM" ("blood"—the biological form), and God is known as the Master (ALuPho) of the world. Only when they are united together is a complete form made. SILVER—this is an expression of desire, that you will always desire God, and that God will love you.

¹⁰ Ezekiel 1:4.

¹¹ Berachot 58a.

¹² Psalms 132:9.

¹³ Genesis 29:30.

¹⁴ Genesis 29:18.

¹⁵ Zohar Acharei III:73a.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 28

In the Talmud, the *tzaddikim* are compared to a planted tree.¹⁶ Just as seeds are in the tree, and all the energy that is in the tree is also contained within the seed, which comes out in the fruit of the tree, so does the *tzaddik* draw out all the divine sparks which pertain to the root of his soul from every thing in this world, and elevate them to their Creator.

Thought is the instrument of the intellect, and speech is the instrument of thought. Praying without *kavvanah* is the "breaking of the vessels," and subsequently the vessels are devoid of divine vitality. When you divest yourself from corporeality, that which is the mere outer covering, you then can see the inner nature of the vessel; in other words, you can see the divine vitality and light of the letters of the prayers. When you divest yourself from corporeality and envelop yourself within the words of the prayers, you unite with God, who is Himself enveloped within the words. Take care that you don't lose your state; strengthen yourself to go even higher.

When you want to understand a certain word and you strive to understand that word, then you elevate yourself to the World of Thought, and draw understanding to yourself from the divine Wisdom. When you study the words of a *Tana* you should think that the name of that *Tana* is the body, and the intellect of those words that the *Tana* said are the mind, and all the *Tana'im* and *Amora'im* are the attributes of God and His *Shekhinah*. You thus repair the World of Speech and the World of Thought through study.

When you think evil words, which come from the side of Judgment, then He concentrates His thought in those same evil words. You distance yourself from the expansion of the divine Mercy (*Hesed*) from *Eyn Sof*, and judgment dwells on you. When you think of corporeal things He concentrates His thought to that place. Wherever you think of God you draw down His essence to that place, for thought is a complete structure.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 46

GO FOLLOW THE TRACKS OF THE SHEEP, AND GRAZE YOUR KIDS BY THE TENTS OF THE SHEPHERDS.¹⁷ This is according to the example of a man who wasn't able to raise his son. It was said that this was because he didn't act with humility, as seen in the verses: WISDOM IS WITH THOSE WHO ARE UNASSUMING¹⁸ [i.e., humble], WISDOM PRESERVES THE

¹⁶ Kiddushin 40b.

¹⁷ Song of Songs 1:8.

¹⁸ Proverbs 11:2.

LIFE OF HIM WHO POSSESSES IT.¹⁹ Therefore humility brings life to his son. Humility corresponds to the quality of awe—awe before God, the desire for something other than materiality. The power of awe for God leads to *ayin*, because through this [awe] one considers oneself as nothing (*ayin*). *Ayin* is called Wisdom, as is seen in the verse WISDOM, FROM WHERE (me-ayin: 'from *ayin*') CAN IT BE FOUND.²⁰ From wisdom comes life, as was mentioned above. This relates to the verse PLEASE SAY THAT YOU ARE MY SISTER, THAT IT MAY GO WELL WITH ME BECAUSE OF YOU, AND THAT I MAY REMAIN ALIVE THANKS TO YOU.²¹ A man and his wife are known through their unity, closeness and their intimate words, but due to their great humility, "he (Abraham) did not look even at his wife."²² This applies to Isaac as well, based on the verse ABIMELECH ... SAW ISAAC FONDLING HIS WIFE REBBEKAH.²³ Isaac and Rebbekah didn't appear to be close like a husband and a wife typically are.

Commentary

GO FOLLOW THE TRACKS OF THE SHEEP. According to Rashi's commentary, this verse is interpreted to mean "follow in the ways of your forefathers."

To raise his son. In other words, he wasn't able to educate his son, as a father is obligated to do.

He (Abraham) did not look even at his wife. According to the Talmud, Abraham was so humble that he didn't even look at his wife, and therefore was not aware that she had retained her beauty.

According to Schatz-Uffenheimer, this passage is atypical for the Maggid, in that he isn't really giving a mystical interpretation, but rather an almost purely ethical one.

¹⁹ Ecclesiastes 7:12.

²⁰ Job 28:12.

²¹ Genesis 12:13.

²² Bava Batra 16a.

²³ Genesis 26:8. Isaac had told Abimelech that Rebbekah was his sister, just as Abraham had done with Sarah.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 51

FROM ALL YOUR SINS BEFORE ADONAI YOU SHALL BE PURIFIED.²⁴ This will be explained along with the verse HER HUSBAND IS KNOWN IN THE GATES.²⁵ It's written in the Zohar, "each person according to his qualities."²⁶ God connects Himself to man through the qualities of love and fear. HER GATES HAVE SUNK INTO THE GROUND.²⁷ This refers to the fact that a thing which is on the level of *ayin* is not a part of the *shevirah*, because the *shevirah* only refers to those things which have corporeal stature. If you experience the state of *ayin* because of your *devekut* to God, you are likened to a minister of a court. When standing before the king, even the greatest minister of the land is in his own eyes small. He wishes no glory for himself based on the strength of his own authority, such as is given to him when he is in his own house, where others are fearful and shamed before him. When he is before the king, he and all his individual qualities are nullified because of his own sense of awe and shame before the king.

Thus it is when you have united with the King of Kings: all your desires are annihilated, and your love is only for God. This is what is meant by "*tzaddikim* before the *Shekhinah* resemble a candle placed before a torch"²⁸—the *tzaddik* is one who is always connected to God.²⁹ When you are continuously experiencing God before you, you don't regard yourself as having any existence at all, like the candle before the torch; however, when you are not connected to God in this way, then your desires return to you. This is what is meant by HER GATES HAVE SUNK INTO THE GROUND—the one who has grasped hold of the "land," the one who is nothing in his own eyes. The "gates" (from the previous verse) are your individual qualities and desires; when you no longer have these qualities, then you are not a part of the "breaking," and this is what is meant by FROM ALL YOUR SINS (i.e., all your qualities and desires) BEFORE ADONAI YOU SHALL BE PURIFIED (or cleansed, meaning nullified).³⁰

²⁴ Leviticus 16:30.

²⁵ Proverbs 31:23.

²⁶ Zohar Vayera, I:103b.

²⁷ Lamentations 2:9.

²⁸ Pesachim 8a.

²⁹ See Norman Lamm, *The Religious Thought of Hasidism*, pp. 108-109.

³⁰ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 51.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 55

TAMAR SAT DOWN AT THE ENTRANCE TO ENAIM ... WHEN JUDAH SAW HER, HE TOOK HER FOR A HARLOT, FOR SHE HAD COVERED HER FACE.³¹ "Tamar" is comprised of the words *tam* (pure, innocent) and *mar* (bitter). The intruding thought seems bitter, but in truth is pure. For example, I HAVE SEEN SLAVES ON HORSEBACK, AND NOBLES WALKING ON THE GROUND LIKE SLAVES.³² "Horses" refers to the letters of prayer. When an intruding thought rides on them, and a man sees this, he is indeed astonished that a slave would ride on the horse of the king. However, when he pays closer attention, he sees that in fact the letters themselves are holy; it is only their configuration that is bad. If he then meditates on those letters, he can bring them to the World of Change, and other configurations can be made from these words; words of Torah can be made from nonsense.

This is the meaning of TAMAR SAT DOWN AT THE ENTRANCE TO ENAIM. She is the one through whom all look to God. WHEN JUDAH SAW HER, HE TOOK HER FOR A HARLOT. The word for harlot, *zonah*, can be read as *zo na'eh* – "this one is beautiful," i.e., this one is a limb of the *Shekhinah*. But a question arises: if this one is a limb of the *Shekhinah*, why is she clothed in nonsensical words? The answer comes from the rest of the verse: FOR SHE HAD COVERED HER FACE.³³ In other words, her true essence (her innerness) was concealed.

Commentary

Intruding thought. This is a common term in the thought of the Ba'al Shem Tov and the Maggid. The "strange" or "alien" thought is a thought which disturbs one who is praying, and takes him out of his state of *gadlut*, the state of elevated consciousness. The term implicitly refers to thoughts of a sexual nature, but can also refer to any thought which intrudes on one's prayer experience.

World of Change. Schatz-Uffenheimer: The "World of Change" is another name for the divine "World of Thought." This is the world of *ayin*, of divine Consciousness, where in the thought of the Maggid all transformations are said to occur.

She is the one through whom all look to God. Schatz-Uffenheimer says that Tamar here symbolizes the *Shekhinah*, who in Kabbalah is the "entrance" (*petach*) to the other *sefirot*. The play on words is *petach Enaim*, which is the context of the Bible literally means the "entrance to Enaim," but in the *derash* of

³¹ Genesis 38:14, 15.

³² Ecclesiastes 10:7.

³³ Genesis 38:15.

the Maggid means the "opening through which the eyes (*einaim*) can gaze upon God."

A limb of the *Shekhinah*. In other words, the one previously thought to be impure is now taken to be a part of God, imbued with holiness.

Her true essence (her innerness) was concealed. This is a common Hasidic play on words: "face" in Hebrew is *panim*, and "innerness" is *penimiyut*. Whereas Tamar simply covered her face, the Maggid interprets this as the *Shekhinah* being "dressed" in the form of the world itself, and specifically the thoughts which hinder true prayer.

Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov, section 56

"Torah and God are one."³⁴ But isn't God infinite and the Torah finite? Didn't the prophet see [the measurements of the Torah], as written in the Gemara?³⁵ This can be understood by considering that the power of the one who acts is found in the thing acted upon. For example: a man speaks wisely or makes a work of art. The creative energy of the artisan is in the piece he made and in the words he spoke. The one who does this is able to continue to speak or to create wisely. The Torah, which comes from God, is Wisdom, and its power comes from the power of its creator, which in truth is *Eyn Sof* (infinite).

There are a number of levels to the intellect: *maskil* (consciousness), *sechel* (thought), and *dibur* (speech). Each one is connected to the other. Both speech and thought exist within time, since today you may have one thought and tomorrow another. There is an attribute which connects divine consciousness (*maskil*) with the time-bound intellect (*sechel*), but this attribute cannot be comprehended, because it is the *ayin* (divine nothingness), which is the *hyle*. This is illustrated in the parable of an egg turning into a chicken.³⁶ There is a moment when it is neither an egg nor a chicken. No person can determine that exact moment, however, for it is then in a state of nothingness (*ayin*).

The same truth holds when human intellect comes from divine consciousness, or when speech comes from thought—you cannot comprehend that which connects them. ... The *tzaddik* is emblematic of this moment of transformation. How is the letter *tzadi* formed? From a *yud* and a *nun*. This is that which joins together the human intellect (*sechel*) with divine consciousness. The *nun* reverses itself when there is shame at the lower level. This

³⁴ Zohar Acharei 73a.

³⁵ Cf. Eruvin 21a, based on Zechariah's vision in Zechariah 5:2.

³⁶ See also sections 30, 60, and 178.

is the connection between the upper and lower levels, and the human *tzaddik* receives from the levels above. ...

You must realize the state of *ayin* in order to bind everything together, like Moses, who said IF NOT (i.e., 'if *ayin*'), THEN ERASE ME...³⁷ Moses wanted to elevate Israel after they had worshipped the Golden Calf, and he himself attained the state of *ayin*-consciousness when he said ERASE ME. It was through his attainment that all things were connected to the upper divine world, which happens when any person achieves this state.

It's written in the Talmud that "a lion doesn't roar amid a basket of straw, but rather amid a basket of meat."³⁸ Because of the corporeal nature of the world, all sorts of transgressions take place—eating, drinking, sexual acts. However, when you transform your consciousness into *ayin*, you are then able to separate from these transgressions and make a complete return (*teshuvah sh'leimah*).

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 57

During prayer, you should place your focus entirely on the forms of the words, continuing from letter to letter until you forget your own corporeality. Imagine that the letters are attaching to each other and joining together—this is a great delight! And if it is a great delight in the material world, how much more so is it in the spiritual world. This is the world of *Yetzirah* (formation).

You will then come to the letters in your thought, and no longer hear what you are saying. This is the world of *Beriyah* (creation). Next, you enter the state of nothingness (*ayin*), where all your physical senses are nullified. This is the world of *Atzilut* (emanation), the state of divine Wisdom (*Hokhmah*).

³⁷ Exodus 32:32.

³⁸ Berachot 32a.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 73

KEEP YOUR EYES ON THE FIELD THAT THEY ARE REAPING.³⁹ This will be explained in conjunction with the verse A GENEROUS MAN (lit., 'a good eye') IS BLESSED.⁴⁰ The 'eye' refers to wisdom,⁴¹ and in truth gazing (i.e., with the eye) is a lower level of wisdom. The one who has a 'good eye'—in other words, good wisdom—brings blessings to whatever he looks at. When you contemplate any object, you come to understand that that object is nothing (*ayin*) from the divine perspective. It is utterly nothing except for the divinity which dwells within it, for the energy of the one who acts (i.e., God) is contained within that which is acted upon (the object). Apart from this divine energy the object is nothing, exemplified by the verse AND WHAT ARE WE?⁴² Through this contemplation, you draw down more *hiyyut* (divine vitality) to that object from its divine source of life, causing that object to unite with absolute *ayin*, from which all existence emerged *ex nihilo* ("something from nothing"). This is the meaning of A GOOD EYE IS BLESSED—that is, bringing blessing to the various objects it gazes upon.

On the other hand, if you have an "evil eye," when you look at an object with wonder, and think "how beautiful this is," you make that object a separate thing unto itself, which is likened to the verse A QUERULOUS MAN ALIENATES HIS FRIEND.⁴³ Your contemplation separates that thing from its source, from its *hiyyut*, which is its divinity. This type of contemplation—brought on by the evil eye—makes "vessels." In other words, the breaking was essentially caused by everyone saying "I will rule."⁴⁴

The word *malchut* (kingship or rulership) is interpreted in this way: the idea that an object or an attribute is seemingly a separate thing unto itself is known as the "rulership" or the "completeness" of that thing ... All things have this quality of "rulership" which makes them a separate object unto themselves ... But no thing truly exists this way [i.e., as a separate object], except within its own divinity. Everything needs to draw from its divine source, without which everything would be null and void.⁴⁵

At first, when the *sefirot* were barely drawn out from their divine root, the attribute "I will rule" was still embedded in them as it is in the root ... The *sefirot* were, in the beginning,

³⁹ Ruth 2:9.

⁴⁰ Proverbs 22:9.

⁴¹ See Hayim Vittal, *Eitz Hayyim*, gate 4, chapter 1.

⁴² Exodus 16:7.

⁴³ Proverbs 16:28.

⁴⁴ Cf. I Kings 1:5.

⁴⁵ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov* (Critical edition with commentary by Rivka Schatz Uffenheimer, Jerusalem: Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1990), section 73.

subsumed within the root, as well as the attribute "I will rule," and even afterwards this attribute was still within them. But now this attribute is no longer connected to them, and it has therefore separated from the root, meaning that their *hiyyut* has separated and spread outwards. Afterwards, during the time of the *tikkun* (repair), the *tikkun* will take place because of the divine name *Mah* (מַיָּה), by way of the verse AND WHAT ARE WE? (וְנַחֲנוּ מַה)⁴⁶

The act of breaking was a necessity for the world. If every object and attribute were still attached to the root and were as nothing to themselves, none of the worlds could have come into existence. If this material world was still continually united with its Creator—without any forgetting (of this union)—its existence would be eradicated, its essence united with the root, with *ayin*. Because everyone would experience themselves as nothing, they would therefore do nothing. Because of their great shame and awe of the root, their own separate existence would be annihilated, and they would be united with the source, the divine *ayin*. The same would be true in all the worlds. Thus, there needed to be a *shevirah*, for this caused a forgetting of the root, and because of this each of us is able to act on our own. Through Torah and prayer we attach ourselves to the root, to *ayin*, and experience the verse AND WHAT ARE WE? By this we raise the sparks of the material world, and thus of every world until they reach the highest elevation, causing great delight to God ...

Maggid Devarav L'Yaakov, section 78

When you bring anything in this world to its root, you can transform it from what it had been previously. For example, if you wish to make a large amount of wheat from a grain of wheat, you must bring it to its root, which in this case is the power of the growing process in the earth. The growth can only happen in the ground and not in any other place; additionally, it will not grow until rain falls and dampens the wheat, causing its original form to be destroyed. This brings it to the state of nothingness (*ayin*), which is the primordial matter, or divine Wisdom (*Hokhmah*), the root of everything. We see this in the verse YOU HAVE MADE THEM ALL WITH WISDOM.⁴⁷ At this point the power of growth takes hold of the wheat, and a large quantity comes from it.

It is the same when you bring yourself to your root; that is, to the state of *ayin*. When you reduce yourself, like *Hokhmah*, which reduces itself, the qualities of love and awe and the rest will be changed within you, and will all be experienced for God alone. When these

⁴⁶ Exodus 16:7.

⁴⁷ Psalms 104:24.

qualities are attached to material things, they are separate branches, for that which you love you cannot fear, and vice versa. But when these qualities are attached to God, they are a complete unity. The state of *ayin* brings everything together, and it is not possible to reach the level of Wisdom unless you experience awe, for "without awe there is no wisdom."⁴⁸ When your awe of the Creator is whole, you will spontaneously experience love. "A man's way—which is love—is to pursue a woman,"⁴⁹ that is IT IS FOR HER FEAR OF GOD THAT A WOMAN IS TO BE PRAISED.⁵⁰

This is the meaning of SHOULD YOU SAY IN YOUR HEARTS, "THESE NATIONS ARE MORE NUMEROUS THAN WE."⁵¹ ... You have in your heart all seventy nations (THESE NATIONS), which is a reference to the attributes of love and fear, mentioned above, that are still directed outwardly (i.e., not inward, towards God)—such as a desire (love) for material things and a fear of punishment, which is an external fear. And so it is for all the different attributes. This is the state of THAN WE, (which can also be read "from me"); that is, I see everything according to my own reasoning, for I have not yet fully connected to God. YOU NEED HAVE NO FEAR OF THEM, BUT REMEMBER ...⁵² This means that from the very essence of these various attributes you will come to remember God.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 106

Know that the World of Speech speaks through you, and without it you would not be able to speak at all. We see this in the verse O GOD, OPEN MY LIPS.⁵³ Similarly, without the World of Thought you would not have any thoughts at all. This is like a shofar, because whatever is blown into a shofar, that same sound emerges from it. However, if the one who is blowing into it were to stop, then the sound would no longer come out. Thus, if God were to absent Himself from you, you would no longer be able to speak or to think.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 110

You should think of yourself as nothing (*ayin*), and totally forget yourself. Your prayer should be made only for the sake of the *Shekhinah*, and you will then be able to transcend

⁴⁸ Mishnah Avot 3:17.

⁴⁹ Kiddushin 2b.

⁵⁰ Proverbs 31:30.

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 7:17. This verse was first cited at the beginning of section 78, which I have not included in my translation.

⁵² Deuteronomy 7:18.

⁵³ Psalms 51:17.

time, and experience the World of Thought, where everything is equal: life and death, sea and dry land ... Abandon your ego and forget your troubles so that you can experience the World of Thought, where all is equal. You cannot do this if you cling to the corporeality of this world, for then you cling to division, to the dual nature of the created world, to the difference between good and evil. When you do this, how can you then transcend time, where there is a complete unity? Therefore when you think of yourself as something (*yesh*), and your prayers focus on your needs, God cannot envelop Himself in you, for He is *Eyn Sof*, infinite. No vessel can contain Him, unless you think of yourself as nothing (*ayin*).

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 120

In the book *Eitz Hayyim*⁵⁴ it's written that before the *tikkun* the *sefirot* emerged with each *sefirah* directly below the previous one [*zeh tachat zeh*]; therefore, they fell and were broken, and they were then reconfigured in lines.

This principle can be understood according to the verse EVERYTHING CAME FROM DUST, AND EVERYTHING RETURNS TO DUST.⁵⁵ Our sages said regarding the word *b'hibar'am* (WHEN THEY WERE CREATED⁵⁶): "Don't read it as 'when they were created' (*b-HiBaR'aM*) but rather as 'for (the sake of) Abraham' (*b-'aVRaHaM*)," because the worlds were created for Abraham's sake.⁵⁷ Abraham's own ascendancy was due to his saying I AM BUT DUST AND ASHES,⁵⁸ and this statement sustained everything [i.e., the whole world].

The verse EVERYTHING CAME FROM DUST... can also be interpreted in this way: just as we see that dust [i.e., earth] is the most material or substantial of the elements, we find that the *hiyyut* is *ayin* in a contracted state, and so all the worlds, even the most spiritual, came into being as a result of this same contraction. No world could have come into being on its own, because everything was the simple unity of *Eyn Sof*.

Know that "the last thing created was the first thing conceived in thought."⁵⁹ Thus the most material of all things—the end of the process of creation—must perforce have been present at the beginning of the process. We find that the end of the creation process is

⁵⁴ Gate 2, chapter 3.

⁵⁵ Ecclesiastes 3:20.

⁵⁶ Genesis 2:4.

⁵⁷ See *Zohar, Lech L'cha* 6b.

⁵⁸ Genesis 18:27.

⁵⁹ *L'cha Dodi*, Shlomo Alkabetz, 16th century, Safed.

connected to its conception, and although they are great opposites, they are connected in the underlying simple unity.

This is "don't read it as 'when they were created'⁶⁰ (*b-HiBaR'aM*) but rather as 'with a *heh* He created them' (*b-H BaR'aM*). This refers to the small *heh*. This world was created with a *heh*. The material world was contained in the beginning of divine Thought and was known as the pre-existent Torah; all words and thoughts were included within this infinite Torah. In this Torah, there is no connection to "before and after" at all, for the end of the creation process was contained in the beginning.

CAN TWO WALK TOGETHER WITHOUT HAVING MET?⁶¹ At first glance, one wonders how the Divine spirit can dwell in corporeality. This is because the two "met each other" in primordial Thought where all differences were erased. Thus there is a connection between the two, and this is seen in the verse HE IS NOT PARTIAL TO PRINCES, THE NOBLE ARE NOT PREFERRED TO THE WRETCHED; FOR ALL OF THEM ARE THE WORK OF HIS HANDS.⁶²

According to the Zohar,⁶³ there is a *yud* at the beginning and a *yud* at the end [of the letter *aleph*]. The *yud* both begins and ends with a tip, which teaches that the end of the whole creation—the most material of all things—existed at the beginning of divine Thought, and there is a connection and a complete unity between the end result and that which was pre-existent. Therefore the *aleph*, which is a wonder, is written in the form of a *yud* at the top and a *yud* at the bottom.⁶⁴ The line in the middle teaches us about the continuity that extends from the pre-existent to the end of all the levels of the universe, with the end taking the form of a *yud* just as the beginning did.

This same idea can be expressed by the upper waters and the lower waters.⁶⁵ Even in the most lowly of all things, such as idols, there is a divinity which enlivens those things and even completes them...

Divinity exists within everything, enlivening everything. The essence of the divine vitality stems from its connection with divine Thought (or pre-existent divine Consciousness). The principle underlying this connection between the *hiyyut* which gives everything life and its divine source is that since you are truly nothing without this *hiyyut*,

⁶⁰ Genesis 2:4.

⁶¹ Amos 3:3.

⁶² Job 34:19.

⁶³ Zohar Terumah, 177a.

⁶⁴ See Zohar Balak, 193b.

⁶⁵ Here, the Maggid refers to the *sefirotic* system, with water as a symbol of the *sefirot*. See Zohar Noach, 62a.

then you are nothing *but* the *hiyyut*. The *hiyyut* is one with the primordial divine Consciousness—a complete unity.

If you wish to experience divinity within yourself, then you need to understand that the source of all of your comprehension and experience—everything that is in you—is nothing but God, who gives you life, and without whom you would truly be nothing. This is how you can prepare for experiencing God within. This in-dwelling is LIKE AN EAGLE WHO ROUSES HIS NESTLINGS, GLIDING DOWN TO HIS YOUNG,⁶⁶ which “reaches but doesn’t reach.”⁶⁷ It is not necessary for you to experience this,⁶⁸ for if you do then you will be completely nullified from reality.

If you have within you even the slightest bit of pride, such that you experience yourself as something separate, then you are not truly connected to the Divine, since you are not “nothing.” This explains “each one emerging below the next” [*zeh tachat zeh*]⁶⁸—which is akin to a person experiencing himself on a certain level below the Root, when in truth the perspective of *mah* [“what”] is his real existence.

Commentary

Each *sefirah* below the previous one. Here, the Maggid is describing basic Lurianic Kabbalah theory on the creation—according to this theory, the *sefirot*, or manifestations of God, were first emanated in a straight line. This resulted in an unstable system, and the *sefirot*, unsupported, were not able to handle the divine light which emanated from the *Eyn Sof*. After the *shevirah*, the “breaking,” the *sefirot* were reconfigured (and it’s in this sense that the word *tikkun* is used here by the Maggid), and were emanated out in three vertical lines, forming the “Tree of Life,” the familiar sefirotic diagram.

Reconfigured in lines. According to Schatz-Uffenheimer, the three lines are known as *hesed*, *din*, and *rachamim* (presumably, *tiferet*).

EVERYTHING CAME FROM DUST, AND EVERYTHING RETURNS TO DUST. Schatz-Uffenheimer states that later the Maggid explains that this refers to *sof hama’aseh*, the end of the process of creation, the most corporeal level, which—based on the verse—was inherent in the process’s beginning, or *in the beginning of Thought*, which is the most spiritual level.

This is the essential monistic position—that the material world is only a corporeal or gross extension of the divine world; the process of “creation” is not ultimately a process of **separation** between the physical and the spiritual; in fact,

⁶⁶ Deuteronomy 32:11.

⁶⁷ Talmud Yerushalmi, Hagigah 2:1.

⁶⁸ “This” refers to the Transcendent God, which is experienced not as such, but in an immanent form.

that separation doesn't even exist. The world is part of God; the world is "made up" of God—there is no duality.

"Don't read it as 'when they were created' (*b-HiBaR'aM*) but rather as 'for (the sake of) Abraham' (*b-'aVRaHaM*)." This is a play on words: both phrases are formed with the same letters, with the *heh* and the *aleph* switching places.

Because the worlds were created for Abraham's sake. As he often does, here the Maggid connects the ontological with the ethical. The world was created for Abraham because he went on to say I...AM BUT DUST AND ASHES. (Genesis 18:27) This, according to the Maggid, is "true humility," which is one thinks of oneself as Nothing, as is found in many other places in the writings of the Maggid.

Abraham's own ascendancy was due to his saying I AM BUT DUST AND ASHES, and this statement sustained everything [i.e., the world]. This passage is really about the divine unity underlying all things, even the most material. The greatest achievement a human being can have is not anything external or physical, it's the recognition of this divine unity, and the concurrent recognition that our own sense of individuality doesn't exist in the way that we previously had imagined; rather, we too are part of the divine unity, and any pretensions we have of being separate individuals are mere *illusions* of grandeur. The Zohar and the Maggid here seem to be saying that the world was created—and continues to be sustained—for the sake of human beings achieving this recognition of the ultimate truth.

Just as we see that dust is the most material or substantial of the elements. Because this text is about the ultimate unity underlying everything, it seems that this statement is pointing out that just as dust, while seemingly insubstantial, is nevertheless composed of the most material of the elements, earth, so the *hiyyut*, the manifestation of the divine that is the most "material" (because of its presence in the material world), is similarly composed of the most spiritual of all things, the *ayin*. In other words, no matter what form something takes, it is still identical with its root.

This part of this text is the radical monistic world view of the Maggid: everything comes from the Divine Nothing, and therefore everything ultimately *is* the Divine Nothing. Because at one time everything was at one with the *ayin* in the form of a complete and utter unity, there can be nothing that doesn't come from that complete unity, even the most corporeal and material of things (i.e., earth). The *hiyyut* is the *ayin* in a contracted state—it is this *tzimtzum* or contraction that allows for the existence of the world as well as our ability to experience God in the world.

Schatz-Uffenheimer says that the Lurianic concept of *tzimtzum* is understood by the Maggid as the criterion for the immanent existence of God in the world. This existence is known as *hiyyut*, which gives life to all being. Paradoxically, *hiyyut* is called *ayin*, since it exists completely within the divine *ayin*. The *tzimtzum* limits or defines a border to the *ayin*, and this is responsible for the creation of the world.

In Lurianic thought, *tzimtzum* is a part of the creation process, a condition that first must be met in order for creation to then happen; in the thought of the Maggid, *tzimtzum* is the creation process itself—it's the very basis for the existence of materiality.

Hiyyut. Literally "life, living,"—often translated in Hasidic texts as "divine vitality," the immanent presence of God in the material world, or the divine "life force" which both makes up and sustains the world.

Come into being on its own. That is, separate from the process of the contraction of the *Eyn Sof*.

Know that "the last thing created was the first [thing conceived] in thought." In its original context, the "last created" is probably a reference to the *Shekhinah* (or *Malkhut*), the last of the *sefirot*. Here, the Maggid is referring to the material world as the "end" of the creation process. The world was contained within the "divine thought," in the *sefirah Hokhmah*, and the whole process is one complete chain. In any event, before there was anything material, there was one unity.

The beginning of the process. Literally "the beginning of Thought," referring to the first divine impulse to create both the Godhead and the material world. According to Schatz-Uffenheimer, this first divine thought is the *sefirah Hokhmah*.

The small *heh*. In the Masoretic text of the *Tanakh*, the *heh* in *b-HiBaR'aM* is written smaller than the other letters.

This world was created with a *heh*. According to Schatz-Uffenheimer, in other places, the Maggid explains that this *heh* is the *heh* of the "breath of God," which comes out when God "speaks."

Pre-existent Torah. According to the Ba'al Shem Tov, all of reality is comprised of letters, which form the building blocks of creation. These letters are not the letters of the *aleph-bet* that we're familiar with; rather, they are "primordial," pre-existent letters. The Torah that the Maggid refers to is the source of these primordial letters, and within this Torah is contained the "blueprint" for the creation of the entire universe. Here, the Maggid combines

midrash, Kabbalah, and his own brand of mysticism into a system of thought where the more traditional language of theistic rabbinical thought is combined with his own radical non-dualistic concepts.

In this Torah, there is no connection to “before and after,” at all, for the end of the creation process was contained in the beginning. Before the material world emerged out of the Divine unity, time itself didn’t exist, and everything was one with God. Thus, there was no such thing as the “beginning” or “end” of the creation process, and the material word—the “end” of this process—existed *as* God, only later manifesting itself within time.

HE IS NOT PARTIAL TO PRINCES, THE NOBLE ARE NOT PREFERRED TO THE WRETCHED; FOR ALL OF THEM ARE THE WORK OF HIS HANDS. The material and the spiritual seem to be opposing forces, but in fact because everything came from the single unity of the *Eyn Sof*, from the divine perspective there are no real differences at all.

There is a *yud* at the beginning and a *yud* at the end. According to Schatz-Uffenheimer, this section is referring to the letter *aleph*, which is comprised of two *yuds*, with a *vav* in between them. The “princes” of the quote from Job refers to the “upper” *yud*, while the “wretched” refers to the “lower” *yud*.

The line in the middle teaches us about the continuity that extends from the pre-existent to the end of all the levels [of the universe], with the end taking the form of a *yud* just as the beginning did. Here, the *aleph* represents for the Maggid the entire universe, from the *Eyn Sof* “down” to the material world. Just as the *aleph* begins and ends in the same way—with a *yud*—so too is the material universe, which is the “end” of the process of creation, ultimately the same as the “beginning” of the process, *Eyn Sof*.

Since you are truly nothing without this *hiyyut*, then you are nothing but the *hiyyut*. Here an identity is established between all of life and God—because any existing thing only exists through the *hiyyut*, without which nothing could actually exist, and because the *hiyyut* is itself identical with its source (the “primordial divine Consciousness”), then life itself is only the *hiyyut*.

The *hiyyut* is one with the primordial divine Consciousness—a complete unity. Schatz-Uffenheimer says that “here the Maggid establishes an identity between the divine element that is immanent in a person and its transcendent foundation.” This is critical for the Maggid’s system of thought. If we are nothing but the immanent God within us, and that immanent divinity is identical with the transcendent God, then we are essentially identical to God Himself. The experiential realization of this truth is the essence of Hasidic mystical thought.

This is how you can prepare for experiencing God within. According to Schatz-Uffenheimer, the Maggid is now beginning to make a connection back to the beginning of his *derashah*, regarding the verse "*everything came from dust, and everything returns to dust.*" She states that "the intent is to emphasize the essential psychological principle of mysticism, which is the diminishing of [ego-] consciousness."

Completely nullified from reality. Being "nullified from reality" is typically the goal of the mystical path as described by the Maggid, where it usually refers to the stripping away of the corporeal world and of the ego such that a person is able to experience God directly. However, here the Maggid distinguishes being "nullified from reality" with being *completely* nullified: in other words, there is a danger—when confronted with the Transcendent God—of *actual* death, not just ego death. This is why the Transcendent God "reaches but does not reach," because the actual "reaching" of the Transcendent God would be too much for a human being to handle.

He is not "nothing." "Nothing" and "something," *ayin* and *yesh* in Hebrew, form the basic dialectic which drives the life of the mystic. "Somethingness" is the state of ego-consciousness, the experience of separateness, of boundaries. "Nothingness" is egolessness, in which a person experiences himself or herself as not a discrete, separate individual, but as part of the Godhead, which in truth is the only thing that exists.

This explains "each one emerging below the next" [*zeh tachat zeh*]—which is akin to a person experiencing himself on a certain level below the Root. The Maggid now returns to the very beginning of his *derash*. The *sefirot* originally emerged out of *Eyn Sof* one after the other, in a hierarchy, each one taking its own place below the one before it. According to Lurianic theory, the *sefirot* were unsupported by one another, each one existing as if separate from the rest. The *shevirah* was caused by this instability, necessitating the *tikkun*, or reconfiguration of the *sefirot* into the three "lines," as described above. As is typical of his system, the Maggid treats Luria's theory as a psychological truth. He sees this original state of the *sefirot* as very much like the state most of us find ourselves in—experiencing ourselves on a level "under" God. We differentiate between ourselves and the rest of the world. This viewpoint—seeing all things as if each had its own separate existence—is the perspective that mysticism attempts to obliterate, leaving in its place the experience of *mah*, the experience of Nothingness. *Mah* comes from the verse "for what are we?" (Exodus 16:7), used often by the Maggid as a symbol of the ego-less consciousness.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 132

"In the future God will take out the sun from its sheath."⁶⁹ Know that THE LORD GOD IS SUN AND SHIELD.⁷⁰ The nations of the world are haughty and vulgar, as we see in the verse I CANNOT ENDURE THE HAUGHTY AND PROUD MAN.⁷¹ Accordingly, the nations cannot endure God's divinity, except through some type of substitute, such as the name Elohim. However, about Israel it is written JACOB IS SO SMALL,⁷² and DAVID IS THE SMALLEST,⁷³ meaning they diminish themselves, and thus God also contracts Himself so that they are able to experience God's divinity without a screen or a shield. Therefore, while the *tzaddikim* take delight in God's divinity and are able to endure it, the nations of the world, because they are filled with pride (*b'gadlut*), are not able to endure it, and are therefore decaying. The main reason that Israel is so humble (*b'katnut*) is that they cling to the awe of the Creator. This awe is divine Wisdom, as we see from the verse THE AWE OF GOD IS WISDOM.⁷⁴ This means that they continuously perceive God's power within them; if not for this power, they would have no real existence. "God's power" is nothing but the divine *ayin*, which leads to shame and awe.

Among the *zaddikim* themselves we find distinctions: Abraham said I AM BUT DUST AND ASHES,⁷⁵ while David said I AM A WORM, LESS THAN HUMAN.⁷⁶ Both of these statements imply a small degree of existence, whereas Moses said AND WHAT ARE WE?⁷⁷ Moses was in a state of *ayin*, as is seen from the verse MOSES WAS A VERY HUMBLE MAN, MORE SO THAN ANY OTHER MAN ON EARTH.⁷⁸ He experienced God's essence in a way that all the other prophets who came before and after him did not. Thus, the more each of the *tzaddikim* unite with God through awe—which is divine Wisdom—the higher their experience is. Jacob, who was the chosen one among the patriarchs, attached himself to awe, as is seen from the verse JACOB WAS GREATLY FRIGHTENED.⁷⁹ ... Everything that happened to Jacob also happened to Joseph⁸⁰, and thus he also attached himself to the divine Wisdom—or awe—which diminishes those who experience it. Therefore, Jacob said to Esau, I HAVE PLENTY,⁸¹ meaning that he was content with what he had, because he was on the level of Wisdom, which is the level of *ayin*, which doesn't desire anything.

⁶⁹ Avodah Zarah 3b.

⁷⁰ Psalms 84:12.

⁷¹ Psalms 101:5.

⁷² Amos 7:5.

⁷³ 1 Samuel 17:14. This verse literally means that David was the *youngest*.

⁷⁴ Job 28:28.

⁷⁵ Genesis 18:27.

⁷⁶ Psalms 22:7.

⁷⁷ Exodus 16:7.

⁷⁸ Numbers 12:3.

⁷⁹ Genesis 32:8.

⁸⁰ Cf. Bereishit Rabbah 84:6.

⁸¹ Genesis 33:11.

Esau, on the other hand, said I HAVE ENOUGH,⁸² an expression of pride. Consequently, HE RULED ... AND HE DIED⁸³—he was brought down from his high position because of his ego ...

This teaches us about connectedness (*hitkashrut*), which is experienced as a result of the state of extreme humility (*katnut*), which is the state of divine Wisdom. You cannot be connected to another person unless you diminish yourself, and see yourself as nothing compared to the other person.⁸⁴

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 178

"A boundless heritage was given to Jacob."⁸⁵ It arose in God's Will that there should be *tzaddikim*. God received pleasure from them in the Primordial Will, and thus the "World of Pleasure" was created. At this point there wasn't a created world at all. God received pleasure in the Primordial Will from all the *tzaddikim* who would come afterwards. At that point, there was only a simple unity; God then decided to create Israel and the material world, and He therefore drew down the attribute of *ayin* so that the pleasure of separation would exist. Love was drawn down to this world, and the world's existence came into being.

The attribute of *ayin* joins together the *hyle* that is inherent in all opposing things and makes one thing come from another. For example: a chicken which comes from an egg. When the state of *ayin* enters into the "somethingness" of the egg, its specific reality is annihilated into the Nothingness of *Eyn Sof*, and afterwards it becomes something different than what it previously was. *Ayin* both separates and joins together the beginning of the creation process (the "thought" of God) and the end result of creation.⁸⁶ This is the "drawing down" that took place between the first thought and the end of creation—divine Wisdom emerged, and this was the gate of *ayin*. Thus, this drawing down is called "a boundless heritage," since it is close to *ayin*.

⁸² Genesis 33:9.

⁸³ Genesis 36:32-33.

⁸⁴ *Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov*, section 132.

⁸⁵ Shabbat 118a.

⁸⁶ Kuzari 5, 73.

Maggid Devarav L'Ya-akov, section 190

God created the world *ex nihilo* (i.e., making something out of nothing), and the *tzaddikim*, through their actions, make something turn into nothing. This is analogous to the sacrifices: the animals are the *yesh* (something), corporeal things, and the *tzaddikim* who sacrifice them to God turn them into *ayin* (nothing), into something spiritual in nature.

Ayin was at the beginning, and *ayin* will be at the end. This is why the word "T" (*aniy*) is written with the same letters as *ayin*, for the ego (the "T") that exists in this world will turn into *ayin*.

The *tzaddikim* are able to do this only after the completion of the four worlds, after Shabbat and the Sabbath rest, which signal the completion of creation. Before Shabbat the *tzaddikim* were not able to perform the actions which would enable them to turn *yesh* back into *ayin*, because at that point the *yesh* was not fully completed.

Itturay Torah on Genesis 28:16

From Tiferet Sh'lomo

SURELY GOD IS IN THIS PLACE, AND I DID NOT KNOW IT⁸⁷ ... SURELY GOD IS IN THIS PLACE—If in truth the Divine Presence is here, if I caused the Holy One to dwell in this place, it is because I DID NOT KNOW IT (my "I," *anochi*, I did not know)—I nullified my ego within me, my "I," and I was no longer aware of any sense of separate selfhood, not even the smallest part of individual intention. Rather, everything is for God's sake, may He be blessed, and for the sake of the unification of the Holy One, Blessed is He, and His *Shekhinah*.

From M'amrei Hasidim

Rabbi Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezritch, interprets the verse "I stood between God and you"⁸⁸ in this way: It is the ego which separates and keeps a person from experiencing God.

⁸⁷ Genesis 28:16.

⁸⁸ Deuteronomy 5:5.

From Samson ben Pesach Ostropoler

According to the mystics, Jacob saw his own name engraved on the *merkavah*, the Divine Chariot. And thus when he said "I did not know it," he meant "I knew that on the *merkavah* there were a lion, an eagle, and a *cherub*, spelling (as an acronym) *ANoCH*, but I did not know that on the *merkavah* was *ANoCH-iY*: lion, eagle, *cherub*, and Jacob."

Kedushat Levi, Bereishit, p. 5

WHEN GOD BEGAN CREATING THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH...⁸⁹ The basic idea to be derived from this verse is that the Creator created everything, *is* everything, and that the flow of divine effluence never ceases. In every moment God sends down divine effluence to His creation—to all the worlds, celestial palaces, angels, and all holy beings. It is for this reason that we say (in the daily morning service) "who **forms** light and **creates** darkness," rather than saying "who **formed** light and **created** darkness." The verb "**forms**" is in the present tense because God is continually "forming," constantly sending down divine vitality to all life. Thus, all existence is from God, who is perfect, and whose perfection is included in everything.

Therefore, when a person experiences the state of divine Nothingness, he knows that by himself he is nothing, and that it is only God who gives him his existence. It is then that he recognizes God as the One who "forms"—in the present tense—for he realizes that God is continually creating, even at this very moment.

However, when a person perceives himself as a separate self, and *not* as the divine Nothing, he is on the level of "somethingness," the level of ego. It is then that he sees God only as the One who "formed"—that is, in the past tense. In other words, he feels that God already created him. This is why we say the blessing "who *formed* man with wisdom." In this context, "wisdom" is on the level of ego-consciousness, and the blessing consequently uses "formed" instead of "forms."

It is therefore said in the writings of Isaac Luria that the expression "God is King" is an aspect of the state of the divine Nothingness. Saying "God is King"—stated in the present tense—means that God is continually sustaining life by giving us divine vitality. This is the state of divine Nothingness—knowing that we are nothing, and that it is only God who gives us our existence.

⁸⁹ Genesis 1:1.

The level of divine Nothing transcends nature, while the level of the ego is bound to nature.

Commentary

Perceiving yourself as the divine Nothing: As in the thought of R. Levi Yitzchak's master, the Maggid of Mezritch, the "divine Nothing" has more than one meaning. First, it refers to the *sefirah* Hokhmah, which in the Maggid's system is equivalent to *ayin*, Divine Nothingness. This is the level of the Godhead immediately after the state of divinity which represents the absolute Transcendent God, about which nothing can be said. Second, the state of "nothingness" refers to the state of egolessness, in which the illusion of individual self-hood has been dropped, and a person experiences the true "Self," or one's own true consciousness, which is in fact identical with God, who can be defined simply as unitary Being, or ultimate Consciousness.

Thus, there are two essential experiences in terms of one's perceived consciousness. The first experience is the normative, ego-based consciousness. This experience is defined by duality—the ultimately false perception of multiplicity in the universe, or the notion that the objects of the world have a separate existence from God. The second experience is the mystical, God-based consciousness, which is defined by a radical non-duality—the perception of the ultimate unity of all things.

Sefer Ma'or Vashemesh, Parashat Va'etchanan

I heard the following teaching from the Maggid, Rabbi Yehiel Michel of Zlotchov⁹⁰ on the verse I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU⁹¹—When a Jew experiences himself as a separate entity—especially when he feels superior because of his distinguished Torah knowledge or his worship of God—he creates a barrier between himself and God. This is the meaning of the "I"—the one who experiences himself as "something," and imagines himself to be on the level of separate existence [*yeshur*], "stands between" God and himself. In other words, the ego makes a division or screens off a person from God....

FACE TO FACE GOD SPOKE WITH YOU.⁹² The meaning of this is that God looks after the inner essence of the Jew who is burning with desire (for Him). This is why the text says "Face to face God spoke with on the mountain from within the fire," showing that our

⁹⁰ Here, I skipped the various praises typically given to a Hasidic *tzaddik*: "Rabbi, preacher, man of God, our teacher, our master, may his righteous and holy memory be for a blessing."

⁹¹ Deuteronomy 5:5.

⁹² Deuteronomy 5:4.

own inner essence contains God's inner essence, which each person experiences according to his own inner capacity to do so. This inner attainment of God happens when a person experiences himself as the divine Nothing, and through awe and fear has eliminated from within himself the sense of a separate existence—alluded to by the phrase *WITHIN THE FIRE*—and not when he considers himself to be a separate entity (*לדבר*), superior in learning and piety. This is why this verse (verse 4) is followed by *I STOOD BETWEEN GOD AND YOU* (verse 5), as explained by the Maggid above. When you are on the level of the ego, this “stands between,” etc., and you create a barrier which prevents you from experiencing God's divinity.

Or Torah, section 189

Pride prevents service to God.

If a man has pride, he clings to his “I,” and cannot cling to God. If he is strictly an “I,” he's living only in half—he's partitioning himself off from God (because of his ego). When he experiences the state of *ayin*-consciousness, he then begins to live in full: his *ani* becomes *ayin*.

Or Torah, section 352

BETTER TO BE LIGHTLY ESTEEMED AND HAVE A SERVANT THAN TO PUT ON AIRS AND HAVE NO FOOD.⁹³ It is not a sign of serving God if you only know yourself. When you regard yourself lightly, then you are on the level of serving God. When you “put on airs,” (i.e., elevate yourself—serve only your ego), then you “lack bread”—that is, you lack the divine effluence.

Tzava'at Ha-Rivash, Section 10

Hishtavut (equanimity) is a very important principle. Whether you are considered to be ignorant, or very learned in Torah, it should all be the same to you. Equanimity is the result of constant *devekut* with the Creator—being absorbed in *devekut* leaves no time to think of these things, since you are continuously engrossed in the effort to unite with God on high.

⁹³ Proverbs 12:9.

Tzava'at Ha-Rivash, Section 2

I HAVE PLACED GOD BEFORE ME AT ALL TIMES.⁹⁴ *Shiviti* ("I have placed") is an expression of *hishtavut* (equanimity). Anything that happens to you—whether people praise or criticize you, or anything else—it should all be the same to you. The same principle applies to food: whether you eat delicacies or any other kind of food, it should all be the same to you, since through this perspective the *yetzer ha-ra* (evil impulse) has been completely removed from you.

Whatever happens to you, you should say "this, too, comes from God, and if it seems proper for Him..." Your intentions should be entirely for the sake of Heaven; from your perspective, there are no differences. This is a very high level.

Yosher Divrei Emet, section 14

Things in the world are the opposite of what people think. When they don't attach themselves to the Creator, and see only the [material] world, they imagine themselves to have an [independent] existence. They think that they are great, but how can they [truly] be great, since they exist one day and not the next? Their days pass like a shadow, and even their whole lives are empty. Thus, if they perceive themselves to be something, they are in reality nothing ...

The one who constantly desires God, wherever he looks he sees God, whose energy enlivens all that he perceives, as we know from the verse YOU ENLIVEN EVERYTHING.⁹⁵ The opposite is true for the one who doesn't desire God in his thoughts: he only sees corporeality. Although when asked, he says that God does enliven everything, he does not actually experience this ...

If, because of their *devekut* with God, they perceive themselves as nothing, then in their thoughts all their energies are uniting with God as they were previously. They are in a very high state, like the branch which returns to its root and unites completely with its root. The root is *Eyn Sof*, and therefore the branch is also *Eyn Sof*, for its sense of separate existence has been nullified. This is comparable to a single drop of water which falls into the ocean. The drop returns to its root, and thus becomes one with the waters of the ocean. It can no longer be recognized as a separate entity at all.

⁹⁴ Psalms 16:8.

⁹⁵ Nehemiah 9:6.

***Yosher Divrei Emet*, section 18**

If not for the *shevirah*, there would be no evil and no corporeality. Instead, all of creation would be united in *devekut* with the Creator, just as the celestial beings are. Even animals would be in this state, which would resemble the future time of the Messiah ... However, the *shevirah* caused distancing, hardening, forgetting, and separation from God.

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