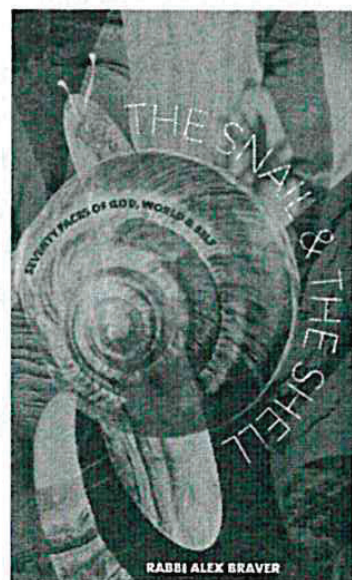
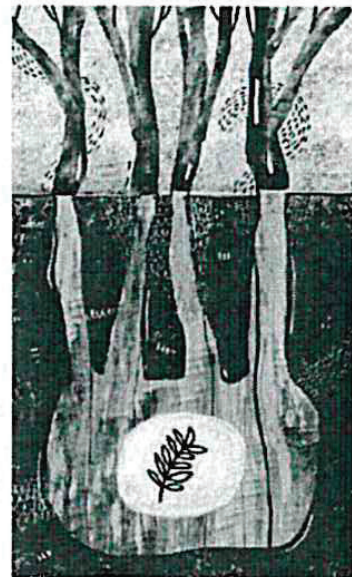
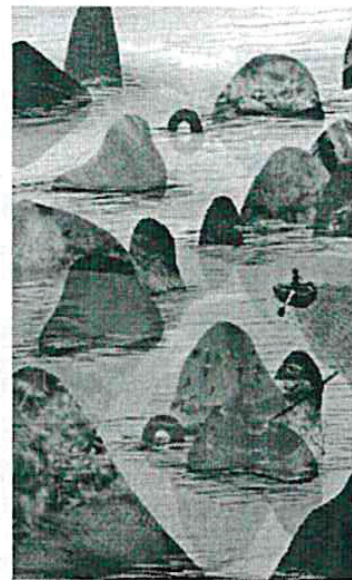
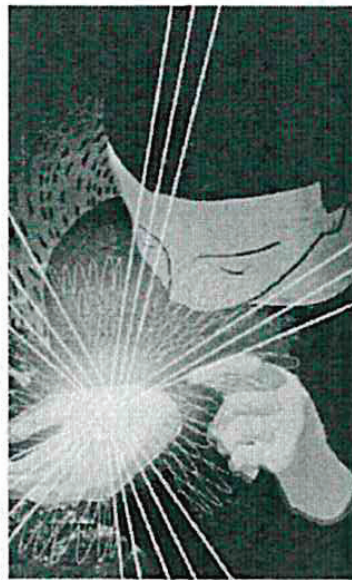




can learn it! Rather, grasping blessed divinity – which each and every person can uniquely grasp, and which each and every person could never manage to explain to another – is itself called “secret.”

Like the parable of the blind men, who encounter an elephant and each describe it by touching just one part of its body, we can each only see and describe our experience of God from the perspective in which we are trapped. Listening to and learning from others’ descriptions can help us imagine a fuller picture of what we ourselves cannot grasp on our own. Put another way, the more we learn from each other’s personal, limited understandings of divinity, the fuller picture we can gather together about what it means to live meaningfully in relation to God.

Rabbi Toba Spitzer, in her book *God Is Here: Reimagining the Divine*, shares a similar insight about the power of metaphors in our spiritual lives:

When it comes to God, the metaphors we use are extremely important, because those metaphors will shape our experience in profound ways, and will affect how we interact with the world around us. As [the authors of *Metaphors We Live By* George] Lakoff and [Mark] Johnson argue, “New metaphors have the power to create a new reality . . . In most cases, what is at issue is not the truth or falsity of a metaphor but the perceptions and inferences that follow from it and the actions that are sanctioned by it.” If we want our spiritual lives to be wholesome, to promote deeper understanding and right action, then the metaphors we use to think and talk about the realm of the sacred are crucial.

As we reexamine ancient metaphors for God and create new ones, we need to be mindful of the implications of each one. What does it hide, and what does it highlight? How might we be encouraged to act in our lives, given a particular way of thinking about God? With multiple metaphors for the divine at hand, we can begin to explore both our own spiritual experiences and the wisdom that has been handed down by our religious traditions.

God can’t just be Father and King anymore. We now know how the “Father” image reinforces patriarchal and sexist ideas, even as it conveys

┌ *The Entire Jewish Library As A Playground*

It's not uncommon for a Ḥasidic *drashah* to begin with a verse from the Torah portion of the week, jump to another verse from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, then reference a Talmudic saying, a medieval commentator, and a snippet of the mystical Zohar, before radically re-reading each of these sources (often completely out of their original context) to create an entirely new idea. For those interested in a pure *p'shat* (simple, contextual) reading of that first verse from the weekly Torah portion, this might be infuriating. But for those interested in seeking emotional or spiritual truths – or even for those just interested in creative interpretive virtuosity – following the thread from one source to another can be thrilling. These texts manage to be both innovative and inventive on the one hand, but deeply enmeshed in the language and dynamics of traditional Judaism on the other. Often, the images and metaphors highlighted in this book are not images the Ḥasidic rebbes invented, but images they've lifted and recontextualized from earlier Jewish sources.

An Inward Journey

Ḥasidic texts never assume that the Torah – or really, almost any traditional Jewish text from the Hebrew Bible onward – speaks only in one voice or on one level. In doing this, they follow the lead of many earlier strands of Jewish tradition, including the Zohar, the foundational text of Jewish mysticism:

Woe to the human being who says that Torah presents mere stories and ordinary words! If so, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words and better than all of them! To present matters of the world? Even rulers of the world possess words more sublime. If so, let us follow them and make a Torah out of them! Ah, but all the words of Torah are sublime words, sublime secrets!

(Zohar 3:151b, trans. Daniel Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*)

Without denying the *p'shat* (surface, contextual) meaning, Ḥasidic texts imagine that everything is also functioning on a spiritual level. Laws about ethical behavior, and regulations about ritual purity, lines of Biblical poetry, or even mundane details and lines of dialogue in stories all might be describing dynamic processes happening within divinity

and within the human soul or psyche. In some ways, this is a radical re-reading of the Jewish tradition. In other ways, it is the most traditionally Jewish interpretive strategy of all: assuming that the Torah remains eternally relevant.

By searching intensely for meaning in otherwise obscure or seemingly irrelevant texts, Hasidic texts often find ways to weave together unconventional or even strange images with ideas about God, the soul, and what it means to live a spiritually meaningful life. Their drive to squeeze meaning out of every word of Torah is a gift for us: It gives us access to all sorts of creative language we might otherwise never have discovered ourselves.

Joyful Omnipresence

Hasidic texts, for the most part, are not systematic theologies but collections of sermons and reflections based on the weekly Torah portion. Oftentimes, they were delivered orally on Shabbat (especially around a table for Saturday afternoon Seudah Shlishit [Third Meal]), and then copied by students after Shabbat (to avoid the restriction against writing on the Sabbath). Sometimes the *rebbe* would proof the notes afterwards. These collections were often published posthumously.

Still, there are some common themes among many of these texts, emphasizing a number of ideas that were present but underrepresented in earlier Jewish thought. These include serving God with joy (i.e. "Serve the Eternal with joy, come into God's presence with singing" [Psalm 100:2]), and seeing God as deeply immanent within our world (i.e. "There is no place empty of God [*leit atar panui minei*]" (Tikkunei Zohar 122b). The fact that God is present even within the mundane, physical things of this world served as support for the idea of *avodah begashmi'ut* – spiritual service through physicality and the corporeal world. Eating intentionally and with proper blessings, mindfully and ethically earning our wages, engaging with *mitzvot* that involve physical rituals like wearing *tefillin* on our bodies, or even having sex as part of a sacred and committed relationship, can all be pathways to serving God, just as much as prayer and Torah study.

Perhaps this emphasis on joyfully seeking out God's presence hidden even in counterintuitive places – our everyday thoughts and deeds, our mundane physical actions and needs, and the entirety of the world

around us – inspired these Ḥasidic rebbes to seek out and reinterpret unusual images and metaphors from within the Jewish tradition.

A Product Of Its Time And Place

These texts emerged in a particular context: the world of Eastern European Jewry, from the mid 18th-century to the mid 20th century. Antisemitism was in the groundwater, so to speak, culminating in the Shoah that almost completely destroyed European Judaism, not to mention radically altering the course of Ḥasidic Jewish life. Many Jews in this period lived very separate lives from their non-Jewish neighbors, while still remaining under Christian hegemony. It is in this environment that many negative ideas about non-Jews found their way into these texts.

In fact, Judaism has long lived in the tension between universalism and particularism, from the Bible's particularistic "treasured people" with a universal mission as a "light unto the nations" onward through the ancient Sages living under Roman and Babylonian rule, to medieval rabbis and commentators studying and debating and fleeing and emulating their Christian and Muslim neighbors. In the 21st century, antisemitism has not only stubbornly refused to be stamped out, but has also surged in ways both shocking and ultimately not surprising. Still, today we live in a world where non-Jews are our neighbors, friends, colleagues, spouses, and family members. Some strands of our tradition that denigrate non-Jews, seeing them as subhuman or emblematic of the forces of evil – while perhaps understandable given the oppressive context in which they emerged – need to be acknowledged, understood in their context, and then forcefully disavowed, reinterpreted, or minimized.

Another area where these texts remain firmly rooted in the values of their time and place is around sexuality and gender. These texts were almost exclusively written by men, with an intended audience of men. The assumption is that everyone is obviously heterosexual and cisgender. Queer people, for the most part, are entirely absent from these texts. Drawing on a long tradition within Jewish mysticism, masculinity and femininity serve as symbols for opposite spiritual ideas and tendencies, though God (and therefore human beings) contain elements of both. For the most part, though, I don't think these texts are actively, directly harmful or denigrating to queer people, though our erasure and invisibility is itself a form of harm.

Women's roles for Jews in this period were distinct from men's, and while many women found (and still find) great meaning in that distinctiveness, many others now see (and probably then saw, too) a "separate but unequal" system. Serving as a communal prayer leader, access to higher levels of Torah study, the performance of certain rituals, and greater freedom from domestic responsibilities were all reserved for men. Some texts assume that women are suited for these roles because of a certain innate spiritual makeup inherent in womanhood. These are ideas I certainly do not hold, and I am glad that most of the Jewish communities in which I have participated (including Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, Renewal, and nondenominational spaces) have largely worked to move past this framing.)

This act of choosing to lift up particular values and strands of tradition while sidelining others is itself a deep part of our tradition. Jews who emphasize our particularistic destiny need to grapple with why God creates the first human being in God's own image, and only generations later begins the Jewish project with Abraham and Sarah. Jews who believe Judaism only stands for universal ethical values need to ignore large swaths of the Torah that emphasize God's unique relationship with, and detailed ritual demands for, one seemingly random tribe in the Levant.

For the most part (though not entirely), I've tried to select texts without negative depictions around gender, sexuality, and ideas about non-Jews. On the other hand, I've chosen some of these texts precisely because they tackle these issues in ways that I think are interesting, even if they don't completely accord with my values. Still, some texts in this collection have beautiful insights that I feel are marred by spiritual blind-spots around these issues. When those issues come up, I've tried to note it, either in the Remez footnotes or in my Drasha reflections. I apologize in advance for failing to completely address all these issues or for missing some sensitivities due to my own ignorance. Any such failures are my own.

Why Me?

I grew up going to a Jewish community day school in the suburbs of Los Angeles, and to a synagogue that was the result of a merger between

explained that even though one said one thing and the other said the other, they actually are not in disagreement.  Ramban writes that "the power of the Maker is in that which is made."² The entirety of the world, all creation, is "like a snail whose garment is a part of its body," (Bereishit Rabbah 21:5).³

In all types of affliction, there is a holy spark from God (blessed be God's name), only it is covered up by many garments. This is the subject of: "*seven choice maidens were given to her from the King's house,*" (Esther 2:9).⁴ When you apply your heart to understand that God is also with you here, then the garment will be revealed and removed, and the pain will be negated. 

This is the meaning of: "prepare their praise of the Omnipresent." This is the praise that "*the whole earth is filled with God's*

pray afterwards is based on Moses' prayer to cross over into the Land of Israel in Deuteronomy 3:24-25. The opposing position in Avodah Zara 7b claims that Moses is exceptional, and therefore can't be taken as an example of how regular people should pray.

2 the power of the Maker is in that which is made | I couldn't find this exact expression in Ramban. In Art Green's translation and commentary on the Me'or Einayim's first text on Bereishit, he notes the difficulty in pinning down the provenance of this phrase, attributing a version of it to the Ra'avad's introduction to Sefer Yetzira:

The phrase is rooted in medieval philosophical Hebrew, and usages reminiscent of it are found in many places including Maimonides, Guide, 1:55. The use of this phrase to refer explicitly to an immanent divine presence within creation, rather than simply to state that the world is God's handiwork and in that way reflects its Maker, is an innovation of R. Dov Baer of Mezritch.

3 Bereishit Rabbah 21:5 | This *midrash*, examining the statement that an angel is "*clothed in linen,*" (Ezekiel 9:2), explains that the angel's garb is spiritual and therefore part of the angel's own self, "like a snail whose garment is part of its body." Our text transforms this idea into a metaphor for God and the universe: The universe may look like it is just God's external "garment," but it is actually an integral part of God's own self, just like a snail looks to be "wearing" its shell, even as the shell is itself a part of the snail's body.

4 Esther 2:9 | In Sefer Baal Shem Tov on Behukkotai, the Baal Shem Tov uses the story in Esther 2 of the maidens forced to appear before Ahashverosh from his harem as a (problematic) metaphor for stray or distracting thoughts. Each "maiden," representing a stray thought, is really a hidden holy spark demanding our conscious attention in prayer; she just needs her moment to be revealed before the "King," here representing our conscious attention:

She wants to cling to her Root, and the time has come to rise up in holiness. So, now, a person needs to really, really arouse oneself, because this thought has not come for nothing, if not to be raised up!

Even distracting thoughts in prayer contain holy sparks, since they, too, are part of God's universe, which itself is nothing but a garment made of divinity itself. God's light and presence are hidden everywhere, even in the most unexpected places.

ROSH HASHANAH

SHATTERING THE WORLD TO SEE WHAT'S INSIDE

DEGEL MAHANEH EPHRAIM

P'SHAT

The *shofar*, according to this text, has a goal beyond awakening us to the need for repentance. Its blast can shatter the facade of the world around us, so that we can see God's presence inside. Seeing the world in this way doesn't take us beyond our experience of reality, but instead brings us to a deeper level of awareness.

REMEZ

"Happy is the people who know the joyful shout [teru'ah]; the Eternal, they walk in the light of Your presence [PaNekha]," (Psalms 89:16).¹

It seems this can be explained by way of the verse: *"My soul thirsts for God, the living God; O when will I come to appear before [P'Nei] God!" (Psalms 42:3).* Everything – like eating and drinking and commerce and the like – contains within it a thing that gives it its life-force.²

This is the meaning of: *"My soul thirsts for God..."* The numerical value of *"God [Elohim]"* is the same as the word *"nature [ha-teva]"*.³

1 Psalms 89:16 | "Teru'ah" refers to a type of shofar blast. It may be related to the Hebrew roots "רעע" [to strike or shake], or "רעע" [to strike or shatter].

2 life-force | This is a classic Hasidic idea – that within every action, and within every part of the physical or natural world, there is a spark of God's holiness that animates it and gives it its vitality [hayut].

3 "nature [ha-teva]" | The numerical values of the Hebrew letters in "God" [Elohim] and "nature" [ha-teva] are both 86. The numerical coincidence works to make a panentheistic point: God is present within nature ... but,

"...the living God..."

The true essence of one's craving for something is [not for the thing itself, but rather] for that which gives it its life-force, via the natural world.⁴

"...O when will I come to appear before [P'Nei] God!" – The "inwardness [PeNimi'ut]" of the natural world.

This is the meaning of the verse: *"God ascends amidst acclamation [teru'ah]; the Eternal, to the blasts of the horn,"* (Psalms 47:6). This is about what happens when one "shatters" the natural world – which is itself only a garment for inwardness, and whose entire purpose is only on behalf of that inwardness.⁵

This is the meaning of: *"God ascends..."*
There is an ascent of the natural world.⁶

"...amidst acclamation [teru'ah]..."

When one "shatters" the natural world, as described above.

"...the Eternal, to the blasts of the horn."

The inwardness of the natural world goes by the blessed Divine Name [*"the Eternal,"* i.e. the Tetragrammaton], which itself

as we'll see below, is also beyond nature. For more on this numerical connection, see, for example, Moshe Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim* 12:2, and the chapter in this volume, "The Heel and the Head: Vayishlah– Degel Mahaneh Ephraim."

4 The essence of their craving ... | The "living God" that they thirst for is actually that inner spark of divine vitality hiding within the natural, physical, everyday world. Even when you have a craving for something physical – food, drink, money, or even sex – it is just an echo of a deeper spiritual craving.

5 "shatters" the natural world | Playing off the multiple meanings of "teru'ah" as both a type of shofar blast and also as "breaking" or "shattering." The verse is now read to mean that when we manage to "shatter" the outer appearance of the physical, mundane world, we discover the inner divine vitality that sustains it.

6 there is an ascent of the natural world | This is a tough phrase to translate, because of the prepositional prefix to the word "ha-teva." It could mean "of the natural world," or "to the natural world." I see two possibilities for how to translate the phrase in its entirety, which has an important but subtle difference. The way it's translated above – "there is an ascent of the natural world" – seems to imply that it is the natural world itself which experiences ascent: By "shattering" the natural world and discovering the inner divine spark within it, the natural world itself is uplifted. The other way one might translate this is "[God has] an ascent [in] to the natural world." Meaning, it is God who "ascends" and infuses the natural world more fully with God's own presence.

transcends the ways of the natural world.⁷

This is the meaning of: *"the Eternal, to the blasts of the horn"* – the numerical value of the word "shofar" is equal to the value of the word "God" [Elohim] when each of its letters is spelled out fully, as is known from the writings of the Arizal.⁸

This is the meaning of the verse: *"Happy is the people who know the joyful shout [teru'ah]..."*

[Happy are] they who know how to shatter the garbs of the natural world. Then...

"...the Eternal, they walk in the light of Your presence [PaNekha]."

... [they will walk] in the light of inwardness [PeNimiut], which goes by the blessed Divine Name, and which is the light of the presence [P'Nei] of the living Sovereign.⁹

Understand.

7 the blessed Divine Name | The two different names for God used in the verse – "God" and "the Eternal" – are being used to refer to two different aspects of divinity. In this text, "God" refers to the way that God is present and immanent within the physical, natural world. "The Eternal" refers to the "inwardness" within that physical, natural world – the divine spark itself – which also transcends our world and our capacity to understand it.

8 the numerical value ... the writings of the Arizal | The math doesn't seem to quite add up in the way it's described here. By my count, spelling out each letter of "Elohim" [אלהים] and then adding up all those totals gets us to 300, while the numerical total of the word "shofar" is 586. The answer to this question may come from Pri Etz Hayyim, Sha'ar Ha-Shofar 1, which describes the practice of reciting six verses before the sounding of the shofar, and links that practice to the word "Elohim" numerologically:

First, one says six verses, the first letters of which spell out *k'ra Satan* [tear up Satan]. The verses are: [Lamentations 3:56, Psalms 119: 160, 122, 162, 66, 108]. One should focus on the idea of "tearing up Satan," the numerical value of which is 730 (but by my count, 729?) This is equal to the value of the word Elohim [when all the letters are fully spelled out] = 300, plus five times the regular value of Elohim (86 x 5) = 430, which together also equal 730.

9 inwardness [PeNimiut] [...] presence [P'Nei] | The light of God's presence can be discerned when we look to the inner life, and to the inner spark within all things.

DRASH

I've been through my fair share of High Holy Days on both sides of the pulpit, and so I know by now a handful of "takes" on the meaning of the shofar. One of the most common is the shofar as "spiritual alarm clock," from Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:4: "Awaken, sleepers, from your sleep! Rise up, slumberers, from your slumber!" The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 33b) compares the *shofar* to whimpers, wails, moans, and cries. The Bible imagines the *shofar* variously as a call to revelation (Exodus 19:16, 20:15), to debt-forgiveness and the release of slaves (Leviticus 25:9), or to messianic redemption (Isaiah 27:13).

Here, though, the *shofar* is about breaking open – not just breaking yourself open, but breaking open the world around you (or perhaps just your perception of it), like cracking open a geode to see fabulous crystals inside what at first looked just like a rock. It can be a sort of cosmic, transcendent experience – to see the "inwardness" of the universe humming along just beneath the surface of our day-to-day lives.

There are certain moments that inevitably bring about this "shattering open." Certainly the births of my children made me feel like the world was split open, with a hidden inner beauty and possibility that had been there the whole time laid bare. My wedding day, with my husband and I surrounded by our most beloved family and friends dancing like crazy, was a similar moment. Even my mother's death was a kind of "shattering," opening up a fragility and preciousness beneath all things in those moments when I could see past my own grief to notice it.

The contention of the High Holy Days – and of Judaism in general – is that we can cultivate these sorts of moments through a lifetime of practice, rather than waiting for a celebration or tragedy to force them upon us. With the proper intention, the shofar can shatter the shell around the world and show us its insides. Daily prayer and ritual can cultivate the possibility of seeing such moments, as can meditation, study, volunteering, or advocacy. The bitter herbs on Passover, the gragger on Purim, the Shabbat candles each week,

each are invitations to peer past the curtain, to see the inner sanctity hiding behind every moment and every thing.

S O D

- What peak moments have you experienced that "shattered" the world around you, allowing you to see something deeper beneath? Have you ever been able to cultivate similar experiences with regular spiritual practice?

- What do you focus on when you hear the sound of the shofar? Does it change from year to year?

The translation exercise gets at the wide range of possibilities for understanding this short, six-word Hebrew phrase that almost every Jewish child learns in preschool and that has been recited at deathbeds and martyrdoms for millenia. This declaration of God's "oneness" actually contains within it the potential for immense variation in meaning.

Faced with God's utter transcendence, God's utter unknowability, our total inability to comprehend or express the capital-T truth about divinity, we can either stand in silence before the enormity of it all ... or we can explode into language, playfully trying out all sorts of metaphors and images, possibilities upon possibilities, like a child playing dress-up, costume after costume. God is like a father, a king, a flow of energy, a vast ocean, a heavenly tree, a warrior, a divine mother, a teacher, a judge, a bright light, a cosmic womb. As long as we recognize that there is something within and beyond the garments – that they are just metaphors and are not meant to be worshipped directly themselves – we can embrace the creative possibilities of exploration. Each new costume captures a new aspect of the divine, some new refracted possibility of what an infinite God might contain – just like each person's unique experience and imagination captures something unique about divinity that only they can grasp. This, in so many words, is the entire idea behind this book – images upon images of God and of us.

This game of "dress-up" has opened a whole new way for me to think about my own spiritual life. It lets me embrace and explore traditional images that I feel less excited about – God as King, Judge, Warrior, Father – because I can try to glean some of the truth from these images while still understanding that they are just costumes. At the same time, it gives me the freedom to imagine and discover other images, many of which I've been thrilled to discover echoed in strands of traditional Jewish sources: God as energy, as flowing water and rays of light, as Mother, as reflected in the human body. It also gives me permission to imagine new, modern images: the big bang, the gravity that sustains planetary orbits, the electricity firing between our neurons, the sunlight captured in our spiritual solar panels, a God that exists both within and beyond gender.