

The Snail in the Shell:

Creative Images of God, World, and Self in Hassidic Texts

God is a snail wrapped in the shell of our world, a tree stretching from heaven to earth, a nursing mother; we are God's ladies-in-waiting, walking and skipping and falling and standing up in our search for holiness. Explore these strange, beautiful, new images are deeply rooted in the centuries-old texts of the early Hassidic spiritual masters.

God Is Here: Reimagining the Divine — Rabbi Toba Spitzer

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.

Why Hassidut?

The Entire Jewish Library As A Playground.

It's not uncommon for a Hassidic *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.

An Inward Journey

Hassidic 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. Without denying the *p'shat* (surface, contextual) meaning, Hassidic texts imagine that everything is also functioning on a spiritual level.

Joyful Omnipresence

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 be-gashmi'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.

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 Hasidic 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.

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.

The Snail and the Shell will be available in 2026. To stay up to date on news regarding this book and be among the first to order, visit www.izzunbooks.com.



The Snail And The Shell: Vayigash (Toldot Ya'akov Yosef, on Vayehi)

"The Generations of Jacob Joseph" (Genesis 37:2)

Ya'akov Yosef of Pollonye (1710-1784, Ukraine)

One of the main students of the Baal Shem Tov, alongside Dov Ber (the Maggid of Mezeritch), and author of the first published Ḥasidic book, which was reported to have been burned by his detractors as a heretical work. Ya'akov Yosef began his career as an established rabbi and opponent of Ḥasidism, as well as an extreme ascetic, until he was famously inspired by a personal encounter with the Baal Shem Tov himself. He soon embraced him as a teacher and abandoned his ascetic practices, in following with the emerging Ḥasidic outlook on finding joy and sanctity in physicality. Ya'akov Yosef attracted only a small group of followers, unlike Dov Ber – his "rival" for the mantle of leadership after the Baal Shem Tov's death – whose large circle of disciples helped spread Ḥasidism throughout Eastern Europe. Instead, he served as a communal rabbi in a number of places, eventually settling in Pollonye. While Dov Ber left no written record of his own teachings, Ya'akov Yosef's writings – gathered by editors from his notebooks – are regarded as foundational Ḥasidic texts. His sermons tend to be intricate and complex, quoting numerous rabbinic, *halakhic*, and Kabbalistic sources. He embraced and helped perpetuate major Ḥasidic theological tenets, such as the immanent presence of God in all moments and in all things, and the eternal spiritual and universal applicability of every line of the Torah (even parts that seem esoteric or extraneous). Ya'akov Yosef's work is also a primary source for original teachings from the Baal Shem Tov, who himself left no written book of teachings.

It is taught in *Berakhot* 32a: "A person must prepare their praise of the Omnipresent, and only then pray afterwards." But in *Avodah Zara* 7b there is someone who reaches the opposite conclusion!¹ He 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*

דאיתא בברכות (ל"ב א) לעולם יסדר
אדם שבחו של מקום ואחר כך יתפלל
וכו', ובמסכת עבודה זרה (ז' ב) איכא
דסבירא ליה איפכא, וביאר, דמר אמר
חדא ומר אמר חדא ולא פליגי, דכתב
הרמב"ן כי כח הפועל בנפעל, ובריא
העולם כולו כהדין קמצא דלבושיה
מיניה וביה (בראשית רבה כ"א, ה')

¹ *Berakhot* 32a [...] *Avodah Zara* 7b | The opinion that one must prepare their praise first and only then 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*:

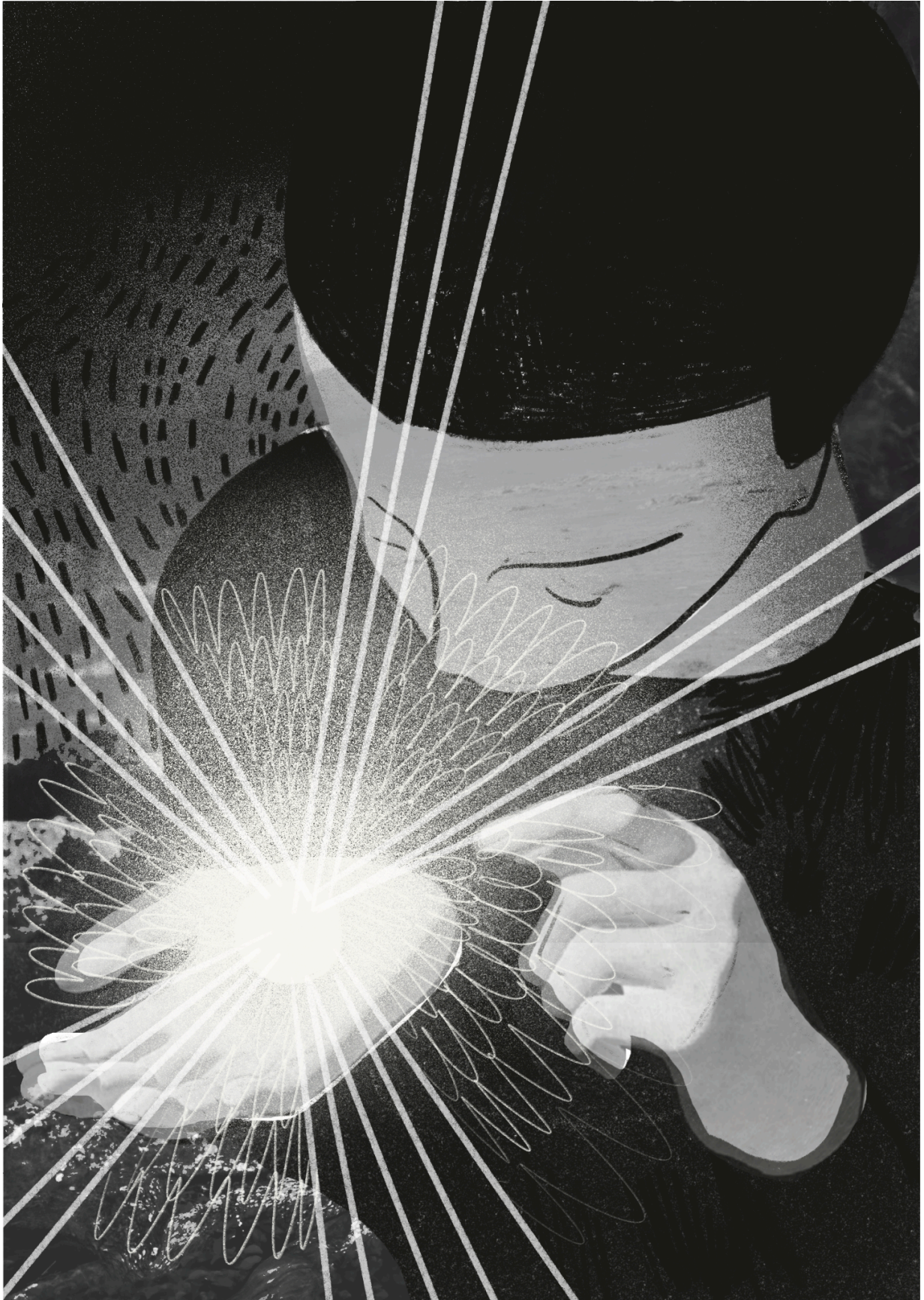
The phrase is rooted in medieval philosophical Hebrew, and usages reminiscent of it are found in many places including Maimonides, Guide, 1:55. The use of this phrase to refer explicitly to an immanent divine presence within creation, rather than simply to state that the world is God's handiwork and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

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. [...] 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.

ובכל מיני צער יש שם ניצוץ הקדוש
ממנו יתברך שמו אלא שהוא בתוך כמה
לבושים, וזהו ענין שבע הנערות
הראויות לתת לה מבית המלך (אסתר
ב', ט'), וכאשר יתן לב להבין שגם כאן
הוא יתברך שמו אתנו עמו, אז הוסר
ונתגלה הלבוש ונתבטל הצער:

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.



A Full Moon Forever: Shabbat Ha-Hodesh (Ma'or Va-Shemesh)

“Luminary and Sun” (Psalms 74:16)

Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1753-1825, Poland)

Student of Elimelekh of Lizhensk (*Noam Elimelekh*) and of his student Ya'akov Yitzhak HaLevi Horowitz (the Seer of Lublin, *Divrei Emet*). A deeply original thinker, Epstein argued for an increasingly pluralistic view of Jewish law acknowledging each *Tzaddik's* [“Righteous One,” usually referring to a Hasidic leader] ability to follow their own path in the service of God

To understand the inward nature of this matter, let's begin with our Sages' comments on the verse: **“God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night, and the stars,”** (Genesis 1:16) – the moon was diminished because she complained and said, *“It is impossible for two rulers to make use of one crown!”* (*Hullin 60b*).⁴

The matter of the diminishment of the moon comes from the fact that it receives light from the illumination of the sun. [...] In the future, the moon's defect will be fully repaired, as it is written: **“And the light of the moon shall become like the light of the sun,”** (Isaiah 30:26).

It is known that the quality of *Malkhut* [Nobility] is called “moon,” since she herself has nothing but what she receives from the nine uppermost *Sefirot*, she being only a small point. Our entire purpose is to build up the *Shekhinah* [the feminine, indwelling presence of the divine], drawing into her the nine points from the nine uppermost *Sefirot*, so that she might – including herself – contain all ten.⁵ Then she will be built up to her full stature, as if with her own head and limbs. As we perform our deeds and our sacred-service to the Creator (may God's name be blessed and exalted) as Jews, these are drawn into *Malkhut*, building her up and

להבין הענין בפנימיות נקדים מאמר חז"ל על פסוק ויעש אלהים את שני המאורות הגדולים וגו' שנתמעטה הלבנה ע"י שקטרגה ואמרה אי אפשר לשני מלכים להשתמש בכתר אחד

וענין מיעוט הלבנה הוא שמקבלת אורה מאור השמש ומאמצע החודש עד סופו היא מתקרבת אל השמש מעט מעט וכל מה שמתקרבת יותר מתמעט אורה יותר עד המולד שאז היא קרובה מאד להשמש ולכן אינה נראית כלל אז ומהמולד ואילך חוזרת ומתרחקת מהשמש מעט מעט ומתרבה אורה עד ט"ו בו שאז היא כנגד השמש ממש ואור השמש מאיר אל עבר פניה ונשלם פגימתה ולעתיד תתמלא פגימת הלבנה כאמור ויהי אור הלבנה כאור החמה

וידוע שמדת מלכות נקראת ירח דלית לה מגרמא כלום רק שמקבלת מהט' העליונות והיא רק בבחי' נקודה קטנה וכל מגמתינו לבנות קומת השכינה ולהמשיך לתוכה ט' נקודות מט' העליונות שתהי' ג"כ כלולה מיו"ד ואז

⁴ *Hullin 60b* | The quotation appears slightly differently in the Talmud:

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi raises a contradiction. It is written: “God made the two great lights...” and it is also written “...the greater light [...] and the lesser light,” (Genesis 1:16). The moon said before the Holy Blessed One, “Ruler of the Universe, is it possible for two kings to serve with one crown?” God said to her, “Go and diminish yourself.”

⁵ *Malkhut* | *Malkhut*, or the *Shekhinah*, is at the bottom of the *Sefirotic* tree. It receives all the energy that flows through the upper nine *Sefirot*, making them all accessible to us below.

<p>uniting her — the <i>Shekhinah</i> — with the Holy Blessed One.⁶ In the future, their union will be completed, and “the earth filled with knowledge of the Eternal,” (Isaiah 11:9).</p>	<p>נבנית קומתה בבחי' ראש ואברים וכפי מעשי עם בני ישראל ועבודתם לבוראם ית"ש ויתעלה כן ממשיכין לתוך מדת המלכות שתבנה קומתה וליחד קוב"ה ושכינתו ולעתידי לבא יהי בשלימות היחוד ומלאה הארץ דעה את ה'</p>
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⁶ uniting her | in Kabbalistic theology, performing *mitzvot* with proper intention helps to reunite the exiled, feminine aspect of the divine — the *Shekhinah* — with the masculine element of the divine — called The Holy Blessed One. The feminine *Shekhinah* is represented by *Malkhut*, the lowest *Sefirah*, while the Holy Blessed One is represented by the central *Sefirah* of *Tiferet* [Harmony]. Reuniting these two separated aspects of the divine is meant to symbolize and effect a cosmic repair for all things that are broken and estranged. Before performing *mitzvot*, Kabbalistic tradition is to recite an “intention” saying that the *mitzvah* is “for the sake of unifying the Holy Blessed One and his *Shekhinah*.”



Playing Dress-Up: Va'ethanan (Kedushat Levi)

"Levi's Holiness"

Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev / The Berdichever Rebbe (1740-1809, Poland, Belarus, and Ukraine)

A child prodigy from a rabbinic family, Levi Yitzchak became a student of Dov Ber (the Maggid of Mezeritch) and a "convert" to the early Hasidic movement, while still serving as a standard community rabbi rather than as a "rebbe" of a Hasidic court. Parts of *Kedushat Levi* were first published in 1798, with the full edition appearing after his death in 1811. Levi Yitzhak was known as the "Defender of Israel," and is remembered in many anecdotes and stories as praying to God on behalf of the Jewish people, arguing for their merit even when they seemed to be sinning. One version of a tale involves him encountering a Jew violating the fast of Yom Kippur by eating in public. He asked the man if he knew that this was forbidden, and the man said, "Yes." Levi Yitzchak lifted his eyes to heaven and said, "Oh God, look at this righteous Jew, who refuses to lie on Yom Kippur!"

"Listen, Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is one"
(Deuteronomy 6:4).

The general idea is that when Israel prays and says "God, the great..." then the Blessed God garbs God's own self in Greatness [Gedulah]. When Israel says "...the mighty..." then the Blessed God garbs God's own self in Might [Gevurah]. When they say "...the awesome," (Siddur, Amidah), then God garbs God's own self in Awe [Nora]. This aspect of God is called "mother" [em], like the word for cubit [amah], which is used for measuring.⁷

But Israel needs to cling to that which is garbed – to the Root itself, from which the garb emerges – so that there be no (heaven forbid!) actual separation. This is called "reaching yet not reaching" (Zohar 1:16b).⁸

This is what happens when we proclaim God's unity by saying "Listen, Israel, the Eternal..." – this refers to that aspect of God which is still not garbed. And "...is our God" refers to the aspect of God that contracts itself, so that it can be garbed in Israel's prayers. But in truth, Israel still needs to cling to the Root. This is the second "the Eternal," – meaning, return to the Root. And

שמע ישראל (דברים ו, ד).

הכלל, כשישראל מתפללים ואומרים האל הגדול, אז השם יתברך מתלבש עצמו בגדולה, וכשישראל אומרים הגבור השם יתברך מתלבש עצמו בגבורה. וכשאומרים הנורא, אז מתלבש עצמו בנורא. וזה שהשם יתברך מלביש עצמו על ידי תפלת ישראל נקרא אם, לשון מדידה, לשון אמה המודדת.

אבל צריכין ישראל לדבק בזה שנתלבש בהשורש שיצא ממנו ההתלבשות וזה נקרא מטי ולא מטי, בכדי שלא יהיה חס ושלו פירוד.

וזהו שאנו מיחדים שמע ישראל ה', הוא מה שלא בא עדיין להתלבש. ואלהינו, הוא שמצמצם עצמו להלביש עצמו על ידי תפלת

⁷ mother | The wordplay here is between "mother [em / אם]" and "cubit [amah / אמה]. See, for example, Sefer Etz Hayyim 29:4:

Through this you can discern why Transcendent Mother [ima / אמא, i.e. the Sefirah of Binah] is called "measure [midah]: Does she not measure and define the limits of Zeir Anpin [i.e. the six Sefirot that emerge from Binah]?

Sefer Ba'al Shem Tov, Noah (Amud HaTefilah) 15 also makes use of this same wordplay. The Sefirah of Binah, the Transcendent Mother, "births" the lower Sefirot that emerge from her. In doing so, she defines and sets limits to them, "measuring out" each of their qualities and characteristics, each of which serves as a "garb" for a broader divinity that none of them can fully capture or describe.

⁸ Zohar 1:16b | This phrase appears in a number of places, but here it describes the complex process of divine light beginning to emanate from the most transcendent elements of divinity. That divine light, as it begins to enter lower realms of the cosmos, "reaches" them, but perhaps loses something of God's infinite and indescribable nature in the process. Still, there is no actual "separation" between the uppermost realms and the light that reaches us in the lower world. In the Zohar, this process is described as the light entering into Binah [Discernment], the Transcendent Mother, who "births" the lower Sefirot – each of which represents a different quality or attribute within God, each perhaps one of God's many "garbs." These "garbs" are useful for us in striving to understand and relate to God, but ultimately we need to strive towards what lies beyond (or within) these "costumes" themselves, toward the infinite God that is beyond language or comprehension.

in this way, “one” means to unify everything. ⁹	ישראל ובאמת צריכין ישראל להדביק בשורש וזהו ה' השני, דהיינו לחזור אל השורש ובזה אחד ליחד הכל:
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BIO

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⁹ This is what happens when we proclaim God’s unity | The Shema is re-translated. Rather than reading it as a series of two-word phrases — *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad* — it is read as: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai-Eloheinu-Adonai, Ehad*. So, rather than reading it as “Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is one,” it is read as: Hear O Israel, the Eternal (who is beyond our comprehension) - (is the same as) Our God (who we imagine in many different costumes) - (and yet) the Eternal (still exists within and beyond the costumes), (and all of that is) One.