

# A Baby Nursing From Its Mother's Breast: Imagines of the Divine Feminine in Hassidic Texts

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# Nursing Breasts: Va'era (Noam Elimelekh)

## "Elimelekh's Pleasantness"

Elimelekh Weissblum of Lizhensk (1717-1787, Poland)

Student of Dov Ber (the Maggid of Mezeritch), along with his brother Meshulam Zusya of Hanipol. Together, the brothers wandered in symbolic exile and poverty in their early years, to mystically share in the suffering of the *Shekhinah* [the feminine, indwelling presence of the divine]. Elimelekh gathered a group of disciples around him modeled after Dov Ber's group of students, who helped spread Hasidism throughout Poland, including Ya'akov Yitzhak HaLevi Horowitz (the Seer of Lublin, *Divrei Emet*) and Avraham Yehoshua Heschel (*Ohev Yisrael*). *Noam Elimelekh*, compiled by his students and published after his death, focuses on the spiritual life of the *Tzaddik*, and their functioning as a conduit for connecting their disciples to God. His work was the first to codify a "doctrine" of the *Tzaddik* ["Righteous One"] as a unique spiritual leader, and the first to use the term as a sort of title for a Hasidic rebbe or leader. Though a *Tzaddik* could remain entirely devoted to the spiritual realm, they instead must dwell in the lower world, working on behalf of their disciples and ordinary Jews everywhere.

## P'shat

In a tradition with so many masculine images for God, it's remarkable how this text draws on the similarity between the divine name *Shaddai* referenced in this Torah portion and the Hebrew word for breasts — *shadayim* — to explore the metaphor of God as the Divine Mother, whose sustaining energy flows into our world like a nursing mother feeding her infant. Drawing on a Talmudic passage about a husband and wife chatting during an early morning nursing session, the text asks: How do we attune ourselves to the sacred flow of nurturing energy from God? How do we avoid despair, distraction, cynicism, and all the other things that might take our mindful attention away from noticing the life-force that sustains our souls and our world?

**"I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai*, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name, the Eternal" (Exodus 6:3).<sup>1</sup>**

One might say: "***Shaddai***," is related to the word "breasts" [*shadayim*]. It was from this aspect of God that Israel nursed; from the divine flowing-abundance [*ShePha*].<sup>2</sup> A father also provides a flow-of-influence [*maSHPi'a*] to his son. This is the meaning of the verse: "**I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *El Shaddai***" — Rashi explains that "**I appeared**" applies specifically "*to these Ancestors*," hinting at the fact that

או יאמר שדי הוא  
לשון שדים, שמשם  
זה יונקים ישראל  
השפעות, ואב הוא  
ג"כ משפיע לבן, וזהו  
"וארא כו' באל שדי"  
ופרש"י ז"ל "וארא אל  
האבות" לרמז  
שמשום זה נראה  
להם באל שדי שהוא

<sup>1</sup> **Exodus 6:3** | Why the emphasis on God's name as "***El Shaddai***," as opposed to any of God's other, more common names?

<sup>2</sup> flowing-abundance [*ShePha*] | This word refers to the flow of blessing, energy, and vitality from its source in the divine, down to us here in the physical world. It is this flow of energy that sustains existence and that, in our better moments, we can "tap into" and experience on a human level. In our text, the *shepha* is compared to the flow of milk from a nursing mother. This passage also plays with multiple meanings of this same root. *ShePha* can mean abundance, plenty, or flow; *maSHPi'a*, from the same root, can mean to influence or to provide in abundance.



<p>God was seen by them as “<i>El Shaddai</i>,” the One Who Gives in Flowing-Abundance [<i>ha-maSHPi’a</i>].<sup>3</sup></p> <p>One could say that this was hinted at by the Sages: “<i>In the first watch, the donkey brays; in the second, dogs bark; and in the third, a baby nurses from its mother’s breast and a wife converses with her husband</i>” (<i>Berakhot 3a</i>).<sup>4</sup> Meaning, this hints at how at that moment [of the third watch], Israel nurses from the breasts of its Mother, that being the aspect of God known as <i>Shaddai</i>, the One Who Gives in Flowing-Abundance, as mentioned above.</p> <p>How could it be that a person doesn’t feel fear, terror, and fright to speak at that moment with their wife — here symbolizing the evil inclination? Meaning, how could one engage in frivolous things, the fleeting things of the world, at that moment? So, the Talmudic text should instead be read as a question: “<i>And a wife converses with her husband?! Isn’t he cognizant of the fact that the baby is nursing from its mother’s breasts?</i>”<sup>5</sup></p> <p>The Talmud then refutes this with a question:</p> <p><i>If he enumerated the beginning of each watch, why do I need a sign for the beginning of the first watch, since that is when evening begins?!</i></p> <p><i>If he enumerated the end of each watch, why do I need a sign for the end of the last watch, since that is when it’s daytime!</i><sup>6</sup> (<i>Berakhot 3a</i>)</p>	<p>המשפיע.</p> <p>ו"ל שזה רמזו חז"ל משמר שלישי אשה מספרת עם בעלה ותינוק יונק משדי אמו" ר"ל כנ"ל לרמז שבעת הזאת יונקים ישראל משדי אמו היינו משם שדי המשפיע,</p> <p>ואיך לא יעלה מורא ופחד ואימה על בני אדם לספר אז עם אשתו רמז להיצה"ר, דהיינו לעסוק אז בדברים בטלים והבלי עולם, והוא לשון תימה אשה מספרת כו' ואינו משגיח שתינוק יונק משדי אמו?</p>
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<sup>3</sup> the One Who Gives in Flowing-Abundance [*ha-maSHPi’a*] The Ancestors — Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (and we may add Sarah, Rebecca, Leah, and Rachel) — accessed God through God’s aspect as a divine flow of energy and sustenance, like an infant nurses from a breast or a child receives a flow-of-influence from their parents.

<sup>4</sup> *Berakhot 3a* | In its Talmudic context, this passage discusses the division of each evening into three “watches” for timekeeping purposes, and for determining the proper hour for morning prayer (in an era without alarm clocks). The signs that are used to divide up the night into watches are quite evocative. Applying the symbolism of the “nursing” God, whose flowing-abundance [*shepha*] flows into and sustains our world, our text reimagines this late-night moment of nursing as a symbol of our “nursing” from God in times of darkness.

<sup>5</sup> Isn’t he cognizant | On the one hand, the “wife” (misogynistically) represents the evil inclination, the sexualized distraction that pulls a man away from their spiritual life. On the other hand, the nursing wife represents the flow of God’s abundance into the world. Despite this contradictory imagery, the text here asks: When we have an opportunity to sense the *shepha*, God’s sustaining divine flow of energy into our world, and to nurse from it like an infant, are we going to notice it? Or will we be distracted by frivolous, unimportant things?

<sup>6</sup> *Berakhot 3a* | In its original context, the Talmud is asking: When are all these signs happening? If they’re all at the beginning of each watch, the first sign (the donkey braying) would be superfluous since everyone can tell when night falls — it gets dark! There’s no need to determine when night begins by a donkey’s bray! And if they’re all indicating the end of each watch, then the last sign (the nursing mother and chatting couple) is superfluous, since the end of the last watch is obvious, too — it’s dawn! You don’t need to check to see if your wife is nursing to know that it’s getting light outside! Our text will take this technical passage and read it metaphorically.

<p>Meaning: Would a person like this exist, who would speak about frivolous things at that moment, and not direct their heart to the fact that <b>"it is time to be gracious to Her; the appointed time has come"</b> (Psalm 102:14)?</p> <p>Meaning: Would they not notice that it was the time to pray the morning prayers?<sup>7</sup></p> <p>The Talmud resolves this question:</p> <p><i>What is the practical ramification of this sign?</i></p> <p><i>It is relevant to one who recites the Shema while lying in a dark house, who does not know when the time for reciting Shema arrives. That person is provided with a sign that when a woman speaks with her husband and a baby nurses from its mother's breast, he must rise and recite Shema.</i><sup>8</sup> (Berakhot 3a)</p> <p>It is therefore clear that this is <b>"the fool, who walks in darkness,"</b> (cf. <b>Ecclesiastes 2:14</b>), who <i>"lies in a dark house"</i> and has not directed their heart to be in awe of the Blessed Creator.<sup>9</sup></p> <p>This is simple to understand.</p>	<p>ופריך הגמרא  "מאי קחשיב אי סוף  אשמורה כו' יממא  הוא",  ר"ל וכי נמצא איש  כזה שידבר אז  בדברים בטלים ולא  ישים אל לבו כי עת  לחננה ובא מועד  להתפלל תפילת  השחר?  ומתרץ  "לא צריכא אלא  למאן דגני בבית  אפל",  מובן ממילא הוא  הכסיל אשר בחושך  הולך וגני באפילות  באין משים אל לבו  יראת הבורא ב"ה.  וק"ל.</p>
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## Drash

I never had the experience of breastfeeding my young children. But I did feel those beautiful moments of connection, late at night and in the early morning hours, holding the bottle for each infant, knowing that I alone was sustaining and calming them. There were times when the feeling was overwhelming ... and times when I just looked at my phone, listened to an audiobook, or watched a TV show – not unlike the husband in this text who speaks of frivolous things at the moment of sacred suckling. The confluence of, "Wow, this is the most amazing, sacred thing in the whole world" and "Wow, I'm bored and exhausted and I'd love some distraction" feels pretty similar here, and so I can understand the perspective of the "fool" who misses out on sacred moments because he is distracted.

<sup>7</sup> Would a person like this exist | Our text takes the Talmudic passage's technical question – why would people need a sign to know the obvious start and end of evening? – and instead frames it spiritually: Isn't it obvious, as plain as day, that when we experience the sense of God as the abundant flow of energy, no one would miss the opportunity to pray? Or to put it another way: How could someone arrive at the **"time to be gracious to Her,"** the Divine Mother, at **"the appointed time"** for prayer, and not direct their hearts to God?

<sup>8</sup> *Berakhot 3a* | Ultimately, the Talmud suggests that the sign of the chatting wife and nursing mother is not superfluous, since someone lying in a dark house might miss the beginning of dawn. When the mother is nursing and the couple begins chatting, the husband should know that it's time to recite the Shema, even if there's no window in sight to see the sun. This technical answer will also be read as a metaphor.

<sup>9</sup> **cf. Ecclesiastes 2:14** | In the end, it turns out that we the readers are the **"fools"** when we fail to be mindful of our constant "nursing" from the divine energy flow of God's *shepha*.

I've battled with that sense of distraction on and off over the course of my prayer life — I think most people with a committed, long-term spiritual practice have, too. There's something beautiful about the idea that the divine flow of energy continues unabated, nursing this world whether we are attentive to it or not.

Now my kids can run around and cause chaos! But in a safe and enclosed space I'll still find myself zoning out, playing on my phone, or just not taking it all in. I want to be kind to myself — parenting can have boring stretches, too, and that's OK! But also, I want to be really present for everything. I love these kids and want to make sure they know it, encouraging them to grow into kind, smart, connected human beings. When my husband and I notice ourselves missing out on a moment like this, we'll turn to one another and sing, "Cat's in the cradle and the silver spoon," the line from Harry Chapin's heartbreaking song about a father missing out on his child growing up.

It's interesting that *shepha* — the divine flowing of abundance — and *mashpi'a* — "to influence" — are connected with the same Hebrew root. *Mashpi'a ruhani*, for example, is the term for a spiritual advisor or guide. To be a *mashpi'a*, one who influences, is to allow your own energy and abundance to flow outward into someone else, to have them "nurse," so to speak, from your wisdom or knowledge or experience. But that requires both the *mashpi'a* and the receiver of that *shepha* to be attuned and aware. I hope to hone both my giving and my receiving capacities, as a parent and rabbi and husband and human.

## Sod

- When do you feel most attuned with the *shepha*, the sense that there is a divine flow of energy and care in the universe?
- When have you felt that you were the *mashpia*, the one providing care, and when have you been the one receiving care?
- How do you deal with distraction in moments in important, meaningful moments? Are you able to feel focused when those "appointed times" arrive?

# The Shameless Kiss: Vayeishev – 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 Ḥasidic movement, while still serving as a standard community rabbi rather than as a “rebbe” of a Ḥasidic 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!”

## P’shat

After many years of struggle, Jacob settles down in the land of his ancestors, only to encounter challenges both physical and spiritual throughout the rest of the book of Genesis. Using this fraught moment as a jumping-off point, this text explores what it means to find spiritual meaning in both the day-to-day and in challenging times, using a number of different images. The “lifting up” of hands in ritual hand-washing before eating represents the “lifting up” of sacred sparks from food and physicality in general. The metaphor of a shameless, public kiss represents the ability to discover the hidden holiness of God’s love, even in the outward, physical realm. This same idea is expressed with the Biblical image of water flowing from a rock – the spiritual emerging from within the physical. Ultimately, Jacob manages to discover holiness not only in physicality, but even in life’s terrors and challenges. His ability to embrace equanimity – accepting both good and bad with equal tranquility – is what allows him to achieve spiritual greatness. He learns to greet each moment as an opportunity for holiness, uplifting its sparks of holiness, kissing it openly with a pure and unabashed love.

The general idea is that a person must discern how all their ways and all their deeds can be for a heavenly purpose, since “*all that God created in God’s world was created only for God’s own glory*” (*Pirkei Avot 6:10*). This includes even physical things, so that, for example, when one sits to eat or drink, one’s intent ought to be for the health of their body so that they can serve their Creator. And in regards to intercourse, a person should intend to fulfill the *mitzvah* of their sexual obligations to their spouse [*o’nah*].<sup>10</sup> This is the case for all physical things – that one should make the essence of things in

הכלל הוא שצריך אדם להתבונן בכל דרכיו ובכל מעשיו שיהא לשם שמים, כי כל מה שברא הקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו לא ברא אלא לכבודו אפילו בדברים הגשמיים, דהיינו כשיושב לאכול ולשתות יהיה כוונתו לשם בריאות גופו לעבודת בוראו ובענין הזיווג יכוין לקיים מצות עונה הוא הדין בכל ענינים הגשמיים שהוא עושה מעניני העולם הזה העיקר שיהיה לכבוד שמים ובזה מעלה את הנצוצות הקדושים אל שורשם, כי בכל דבר תמצא אהבה ויראה והתפארות גשמיים אך

<sup>10</sup> When one sits to eat or drink | Ḥasidic thought emphasizes *avodah be-gashmi’ut*, or serving God through physicality. Through proper mindfulness and rituals (such as blessings), one can take a physical act and uplift it to the spiritual realm. Eating, drinking, and even sexuality are common examples of this idea. When done with holiness and mindful intent, our fully embodied selves can be part of a meaningful and sacred life.

This World be for the honor of heaven, thereby lifting up the holy sparks to their Root.<sup>11</sup> This is because within everything you can find love, awe, and beauty [*ahavah, yir'ah, v'hit'pa'arut*]<sup>12</sup> in physical form; but when you crave to eat or drink, or you have any of the other types of cravings that come from This World, and you focus your intent on love of the Blessed One, you lift up that physical craving toward a spiritual craving. In this way, you sort out the holy spark within the food, or within whatever else. [...]

So we find that when a person walks upon the aforementioned path, it teaches them about the fiercely strong love they have within themselves for the Blessed One.<sup>13</sup> There is no greater path than this; wherever they go and whatever they do – even with the superficial things of This World – they serve their Blessed Creator.

This is the secret meaning of the verse: **"If only it could be as with a brother, as if you had nursed at my mother's breast: Then I could kiss you when I met you in the street, and no one would despise me."** (Song of Songs 8:1). There is love that is concealed and love that is revealed. Concealed love is like the love between a person and their spouse, which is private. Revealed love is the love of siblings, who sometimes out of their great love will kiss one another, even in public, and which is not shameful at all. This is the meaning of **"If only it could be as with a brother, as if you had nursed at my mother's breast"** – meaning, "If only your love for

כשאתה מתאוה לאכול ולשתות או שאר תאות עולם הזה ואתה מכוין לאהבתו יתברך אתה מעלה התאוה הגשמי אל התאוה הרוחני ובזה אתה מברר הניצוץ הקדוש שיש בזה האוכל או בשאר הענינים.

וזוהו סוד נטילת ידיים, כי נטילה לשון העלאה כמו וינטלם וינשאם (ישעיה סג, ט) כלומר שהוא נוטל ונושא את שלשה הידים שהם יד הגדולה יד הרמה ויד החזקה המרומזים אל גימ"ל מדות האמורים למעלה כידוע הוא מעלה ומנשא אותם אל שורשם על ידי כוונתם.

וזוהו סוד המוציא לחם מן הארץ, כי לחם מרומז על הקדושה בסוד לחם ג' היות. וארץ, מרומז על הארציות וגשמיות והוא מוציא לחם, היינו הניצוצות הקדושים מן הארץ מן הארציות ומן החיצונים.

נמצא כשאדם הולך בדרך הנ"ל הוא מורה על אהבה עזה ועצומה שיש לו בו יתברך ואין לו דרך גדול מזה, כי כל מקום שהולך ובכל דבר שעושה אפילו בדברים חיצונים בעולם הזה הוא עובד את בוראו יתברך:

וזוהו סוד (שיר השירים ח, א) מי יתנך כאח לי יונק שדי אמי אמצאך בחוץ אשקך, כי יש אהבה מסותרת ואהבה מגולה. אהבה מסותרת, הוא אהבה בין איש לאשתו שהוא בהצנע. ואהבה מגולה היא, אהבת אח

<sup>11</sup> lifting up the holy sparks to their root | The metaphor of "sparks" is a common one, especially in *Kedushat Levi*. It draws on the Kabbalistic imagery of the great "shattering" – God sent God's light and energy into the cosmos in "vessels" to begin Creation, but the light overpowered the vessels and shattered them, showering the universe with "sparks." The sparks from this primal shattering remain scattered throughout creation, a sign of the brokenness inherent in the universe and also of the presence of holiness in everything, even in darkness and evil.

<sup>12</sup> [*ahavah, yir'ah, v'hit'pa'arut*] | These are synonyms for *Hesed* [Lovingkindness], its opposite *Gevurah* [Strength], and the balance between them known as *Tiferet* [Harmony]. These three qualities are a key Kabbalistic triad of *Sefirot*. Everything in our world has aspects of these within them; or perhaps, we can choose to relate to anything and everything in this world using these three spiritual modalities. When we do so in holiness and intentionality, we can find the holy sparks in any moment and uplift them.

<sup>13</sup> the fiercely strong blessed love they have within themselves. | This sentence might also be translated as "it teaches them about the fiercely strong love that the Blessed One has within God's self," due to the slipperiness of the generic male singular pronoun. The "fierce" love is a reference to **Song of Songs 8:6**, mentioned below.

me could be like the love of siblings; that is, even if I were to find you outside I would kiss you.” Meaning, “Even were I to find the sparks of holiness in outwardly physical things, I would still kiss you there.” Meaning, “I would lift them up to their Root – the secret meaning of the ‘kiss’ – without intending any physical craving.” This is the “fierce love” of the verse: **“For love is fierce as death” (Song of Songs 8:6).**<sup>14</sup> [...]

ואחות, כי לפעמים מרוב אהבתם מנשקים זה את זה ואפילו לעין כל ואין בזה שום בושה. וזהו מי יתנך כאח לי יונק, כלומר מי יתן אהבתך עלי כאהבת אח ואחות, דהיינו אפילו כשאמצאך בחוץ אשקך, כלומר אפילו כשאמצא את הנצוצות קדושתך בדברים חיצוניים וגשמיים גם שם אשקך, כלומר אעלה אותם אל שורשם שהוא סוד נשיקה ולא אתכוין לשום תאוה גשמי וזהו אהבה עזה וזהו כי עזה כמות אהבה (שם ח, ו) [...]

## Drash

Part of what got me interested in Jewish mysticism and Ḥasidut, when I first encountered it in my early twenties, was the idea that we could bring forth “sparks” of holiness from anything and everything, in each and every moment. And perhaps even more than that, I loved the idea that holiness was hidden in each and every one of us, no matter what. I discovered these ideas for the first time taking a class on this very same book, *Kedushat Levi*, with Rabbi Emma Kippley-Ogman at Congregation Kehilath Israel in Boston. I was going through a tough time: coming out of the closet, trying to find myself, and attempting to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. The image of the hidden sparks really resonated with me, as I was looking for a connection to divinity and a clearer purpose in myself at a time when I had a hard time finding them. It made me feel like Judaism had something profoundly, deeply, personally helpful during a confusing moment of my life.

I am sure that Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev, the author of this text, would not have thought of a queer reading for his image of the “shameless kiss.” And yet for me, a queer sensibility feels deeply present here: There is a hidden holiness that wants to shine forth in public but is disparaged because it is seen as physical rather than spiritual. The shameless public kiss is liberatory, revealing a powerful, pure love from an unexpected place. This text pushes us to recognize that we have a deeper spiritual dimension to everything we do, even within things that seem physical or superficial. It asks us to embrace the “shameless kiss” in public because we know it has deep significance, even if others do not. It’s on all of us, in our own ways, to discover those sparks in unexpected moments and places. Through living them fully and with meaning, we can lift them up to their Source.

## Sod

- How can you do *avodah be-gashmi’ut*? How can you engage in your everyday interactions with the physical world in a way that brings more intentionality and holiness to each moment?

<sup>14</sup> **If only it could be as with a brother, as if you had nursed** | Our text seems to be doing to this verse from Song of Songs exactly what it asks us to do in our lives – to uplift it from the physical into the spiritual. The graphic, erotic imagery is transformed, step by step, into a spiritual practice. The desire to openly display one’s hidden erotic love for a lover, as siblings may openly display their familial love for one another, becomes a metaphor for the way we try to take hidden sparks of holiness and reveal them. The sexual subtext isn’t entirely erased, though – our text mentions earlier that even sexuality has sacredness within it.



- What are the “sparks” hidden in you, or in others, that you can help bring out? What is the hidden love, **“fierce as death,”** that you would like to bring out into **“the street?”**
- How do you find holiness and meaning even in challenging moments? Do you find yourself able to say “this, too, is for the good?” Do you bristle against that message?

## Ladies-In-Waiting: Toldot (Degel Maḥaneh Ephraim)

**“Flag of Ephraim’s Camp” (Numbers 2:18)**

**Moshe Ḥayyim Ephraim of Sudlikov (1748-1800, Ukraine)**

Grandson of the Baal Shem Tov (founder of the Ḥasidic movement) and student of his students Dov Ber (the Maggid of Mezeritch) and Ya’akov Yosef of Pollonye (*Toldot Ya’akov Yosef*). His teachings often include sayings from his grandfather, who died when Moshe Ḥayyim Ephraim was twelve years old. He saw himself as continuing his grandfather’s legacy, but served as the rabbi of the community in Sudlikov, rather than as a “rebbe” with a circle of Ḥasidic disciples.

### P’shat

For the true *Tzaddik* [“Righteous One,” usually referring to a Ḥasidic leader], prayer is never strictly personal — it is also about searching for ruptures in the greater, overarching spiritual structure of the universe, and praying for their repair. Praying for greater cosmic healing and repair always rebounds back to oneself — one’s own suffering stems from, and is mirrored in, the suffering and brokenness within divinity itself. Instead of praying for myself, I pray for God — and when God’s suffering is relieved, the root cause of my own suffering is relieved, too. This type of prayer is like being a lady-in-waiting for God: We try to sense God’s own distress and then work to fix it. In this way — and using intricate Kabbalistic wordplay — Isaac’s plea on behalf of his barren wife Rebekah is transformed from a personal prayer for their physical needs into a mystical prayer for reunification of disparate elements within the divine. In the process of working to repair the rupture within God, Isaac repairs what is ruptured in his own life, too. It is this mystical spiritual practice that leads Rebekah to finally conceive.

**“Isaac pleaded with the Eternal on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Eternal responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived,” (Genesis 25:21).**

There are deep things in this, like what my master and grandfather, whose soul is in heaven (may his memory be a blessing for life in the World to Come) said: Since all things come from the *Shekhinah* [the feminine, indwelling presence of the divine] (so to speak), then whenever a person lacks something, they should understand that they are (so to speak) also lacking within the *Shekhinah* (blessed be God and God’s name). As our eyes come to be enlightened and our minds come to be expanded to understand this fact, so, too, do all our prayers need to be prayers for fulfilling what the *Shekhinah* lacks (so to speak), so that as a consequence whatever one lacks in oneself is repaired. This is the meaning of: “*The Tzaddikim are the emissaries of the Noblewoman*”

ויעתר יצחק לה' לנוכח אשתו וכו' ויעתר לו ה' ותהר רבקה אשתו

יש בזה דברים עמוקים ע"ד שאמר אב"ד נ"ע זללה"ה כי כל הדברים הם באים מהשכינה כביכול וכל החסרונות שיש לאדם יבין שהם חסרון השכינה כביכול ב"ה וב"ש כמו שהאיר עינינו בזה הענין בהרחבת הדעת לכן כל התפלות צריך להתפלל שתתמלא חסרון השכינה כביכול וממילא יתוקן חסרונו וזהו צדיקייא אינון שלוחי דמטרונתא כי הצדיקים ע"י חסרונם מבינים שיש חסרון בשכינה דוגמת חסרונם ומייחדים אותה ביחוד גמור

והוא גלוי כי כל הזווגים הם בדעת ולכן נקרא זווג בשם דעת כמו וידע אדם וכו': והדעת הוא א' זהו איה של מוסף קדושת שבת ע"ש בכוונת האר"י זללה"ה

וזהו גם בלא דעת נפש לא טוב כי טוב היינו הזיווג כידוע ע"ד אמרו צדיק כי טוב והוא שאמר בלא דעת נפש לא טוב היינו שא"א להיות שום זווג בלא דעת רק ע"י הדעת שהוא אחד מתייחדים ומתקשרים בזווגא

וידוע אדני הוא דין והא' של אדני ממתיק דינים ומעלה את המלכות עליה אחר עליה כי הא' הוא הדעת וע"י הדעת

<p>[Matronita]<sup>15</sup> – the Tzaddikim [“Righteous Ones,” usually referring to Hasidic leaders] discern, via what they themselves are lacking, what is lacking in the Shekhinah, who is Herself a model of what they themselves lack. They work to unite her in true union.<sup>16</sup> [...]</p> <p>This is the meaning of “<b>Isaac pleaded [va’Ye’eTaR] with the Eternal on behalf of his wife...</b>” His prayer went up and there effected unification, coupling, and birth [...]</p> <p>Then, immediately afterwards, “[...] <b>and his wife Rebekah conceived.</b>” Whatever happens in the upper worlds also happens in all the worlds. Understand this well, since this is what led to “<b>and his wife Rebekah conceived.</b>” [...]</p>	<p>הוא נעשה יחוד כנ"ל כי הוא ממתיק הדינים בשורשן והבן זה וכשנעשה יחוד נעשה הולדה והבן: ונקרא בשם אמה</p> <p>וידוע דשם אדני במילואיו הוא מספר תרע"א וכשחסר הא' היינו שמלכות שהוא אדני הוא בלא יחוד הוא תר"ע:</p> <p>וזהו שמרומז בפסוק ויעתר יצחק לה' לנוכח אשתו פי' הבין זה ע"י אשתו שאינו מולדת הדוגמא לזה שיש חסרון כביכול שם שא' חסר ונשאר עתר וזהו ויעתר לה': פירוש שהתפלל שיתחבר אלופו שלעולם לעתר ונעשה מזה תרע"א שהוא שער השמים כי השמים נכנסים שמה כי שם צוה ה' את הברכה ושם מולידים והבן:</p> <p>וזהו ויעתר לו ה' היינו שעלתה תפלתו ונעשה יחוד וזיווג והולדה שם ע"י שנתחבר ד' שהוא אלופו של עולם לעתר כנ"ל</p> <p>וממילא ותהר רבקה אשתו כי כמו שנעשה בעולם העליון כן נעשה בכל העולמות והבן זה מאוד כי עי"ז ותהר רבקה אשתו כי חיי ובני ומזוני במזלא תליא מילתא שהוא איה כדאיתא במוסף שבת בכוונת האר"י ז"ל</p>
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<sup>15</sup> *The Tzaddikim the emissaries of the Noblewoman* | I can't find this exact phrase anywhere, but it seems to stem from a few similar ideas in the Zohar. See for example, *Zohar 1:242a*, where the Tzaddikim [Righteous Ones] are called “**maidens of Jerusalem**,” serving as the Noblewoman's ladies-in-waiting and emissaries to the king:

*“I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem,” (Song of Songs 3:5). These are the souls of the righteous, who are always near the King, letting the King know the doings of the Noblewoman [Matronita] every day.*

See also *Zohar 3:53b*:

*Come and see: What is the difference between Moses and Aaron, and which of them is higher? Moses is the king's counselor [shushbina d'Malka], but Aaron is the Noblewoman's counselor [shushbina d'Matronita]. A parable: There once was a king with a very exalted noblewoman. What did he do? He gave her a counselor to help her, and to look over the affairs of the home. When the counselor would come before the king, he would only come along with the noblewoman.*

“Matronita,” a “matron” or “noblewoman,” is frequently used in the Zohar as a symbol for the Shekhinah, though her origins as a figure date back to the Talmud, where educated and intelligent Roman noblewomen serve as everything from curious interlocutors to benevolent saviors to threatening tormentors for various Sages. See, for example, *Berakhot 55a*, *Kiddushin 39b*, *Rosh Hashanah 19a*, and others.

<sup>16</sup> unite her in true union | The goal of the Kabbalists – and by extension, the Hasidim – is to help reunite two separated parts of divinity. The Shekhinah or Matronita – the immanent, feminine aspect of God – lives in exile in the lower worlds with us, much like the Jewish people live in exile. She is meant to reunite with the King, or Tiferet [Harmony] – the masculine, transcendent part of God – in a reunion mirroring the coming together of husband and wife. As we'll see below, this reunion is often described using a sexual metaphor.

## Drash

So much of my own prayer life is focused on myself. I reflect on my life and my choices, I look for peace or calm, I ask for wisdom or health or guidance. Sometimes of course my sphere of concern will widen to my family and friends – I think of their health and the struggles they’re facing, too!

Becoming a congregational rabbi, though, felt like a challenge to widen that sphere in an even larger way: Could I honestly and genuinely hold in my consciousness all these people in synagogue, to pray on their behalf and not just my own? Could I elevate my concern beyond myself and my closest people to the needs of the entire community? This is the sort of spiritual power that Hasidic masters – rebbes and *Tzaddikim* – were purported to have. They carried the spiritual weight of their followers on their shoulders in prayer. And though Jewish prayer services are admittedly already quite long, I feel like there’s not always the time in shul or space inside my own head and heart to do that consistently, especially when I’m filled up with my own concerns.

This text, though, imagines another model for prayer – it’s not about praying for myself or my family or even all the members of my community. It’s about serving as the servants, or ladies-in-waiting,<sup>17</sup> of the *Shekhinah*, the feminine element of the divine that dwells with us and suffers with us. She is both a part of God and is also the collective symbol of all her people. When we pray for her healing, for her redemption, for her peace, we are in fact praying for ourselves, too – but for ourselves as part of something larger than ourselves. Instead of thinking only about my own private sorrows, I can think of them as reflective of something with cosmic significance: the collective sorrow of the world, the brokenness inherent in creation, God’s own suffering at the fact of our suffering.

In my own experience I’ve found this a very powerful way to pray, expanding my mindful attention and consciousness to embrace something much bigger than myself. If my suffering is a part of the universal, divine suffering of existence, then it means that I am not alone – my suffering has meaning beyond myself, making it both more and less important than I thought.

## Sod

- How much do you focus on your own needs, wants, and desires in prayer and spiritual practice? How much do you focus on the broader needs of your family, your community, or the broader world?
- Does your own suffering ever feel like it’s part of something bigger? Does it cut you off from empathy with others, or join you to them?

<sup>17</sup> As a side note, I’ll admit that this particular text doesn’t specifically say that we are ladies-in-waiting, but simply “emissaries,” using the masculine plural that can refer to either a group of men or a group of people of mixed gender. However, this text is drawing on earlier expressions of this same idea, one of which comes from *Zohar* 1:242a, imagining the righteous in prayer as the “**maidens of Jerusalem**” (**Song of Songs 3:5**), who share their Noblewoman’s concerns and needs to the King.



- How does the image of a vulnerable God, suffering with us and in need of our help, resonate with your spiritual life?