



Lesson **2**

When God Prayed A Study in the Art of Anthropomorphism

To whom does God pray and for what does He pray? If the notion of an omnipotent God praying isn't strange enough, the Talmud discusses an incident in which God instructed us to bring a sin offering to atone for His behavior! These and other anthropomorphic tales encode some of the deepest mysteries of Creation.

Introduction

Text 1

The first, longest, and most original of Alfonsi's twelve chapters indicts Jewish theology for its crude anthropomorphisms, primarily with explicit reference to talmudic homilies (*aggadot*) that violate both reason and any defensible interpretation of the Old Testament. Peter cites the rabbinic dicta that God wears tefillin (phylacteries), that he rages and grieves over the present dispersion of the Jews, that he is located in the West—all of these beliefs that no sane mind could entertain. . . .

The *aggadah's* ostensive attribution of human characteristics to God upset Alfonsi most; he condemned such homilies and their rabbinic authors for demeaning the divine majesty and perfection and for deviating from the teachings of reason and Scripture. Peter has no dearth of disparaging terms with which he characterizes such rabbinic error in the *Dialogi*: bad, evil, insane, indecent, ridiculous, worthy of derision, stupid, foolish, lewd—the list goes on. Beyond his intense dislike for this rabbinic lore, however, some recent investigators for Alfonsi and his writings have detected an indictment of the Jews for heresy. According to one recent monograph, "Alfonsi wishes to show that these texts contain

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doctrine heretical by the standards of classical Judaism, making Judaism as it was practiced by Alfonsi's contemporaries a heretical deviation from the Law."

Jeremy Cohen, *Living Letters of the Law* [Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1999], pp. 204-210

Rav Avahu and the Heretic

Bathing in a River of Fire

Text 2 ■

אמר ליה ההוא מינא לרבי אבהו, "אלקיכם כהן הוא, דכתיב, 'ויקחו לי תרומה' (שמות כה,ב). כי קבריה למשה, במאי טביל? וכי תימא במיא, והכתיב 'מי מדד בשעלו מים' (ישעיהו מ,יב)."

אמר ליה, "בנורא טביל. דכתיב, 'כי הנה ה' באש יבא' (שם, סו,טו)."
"ומי סלקא טבילותא בנורא?"

אמר ליה, "אדרבה, עיקר טבילותא בנורא הוא, דכתיב, 'וכל אשר לא יבא באש תעבירו במים' (במדבר לא,כג)."
תלמוד בבלי, סנהדרין לט,א

Babylonian Talmud.

A literary work of monumental proportions that draws upon the legal, spiritual, intellectual, ethical, and historical traditions of Judaism. The 37 tractates of the Babylonian Talmud contain the teachings of the Jewish sages from the period after the destruction of the 2nd Temple through the 5th century CE. It has served as the primary vehicle for the transmission of the Oral Law and the education of Jews over the centuries; it is the entry point for all subsequent legal, ethical, and theological Jewish scholarship.

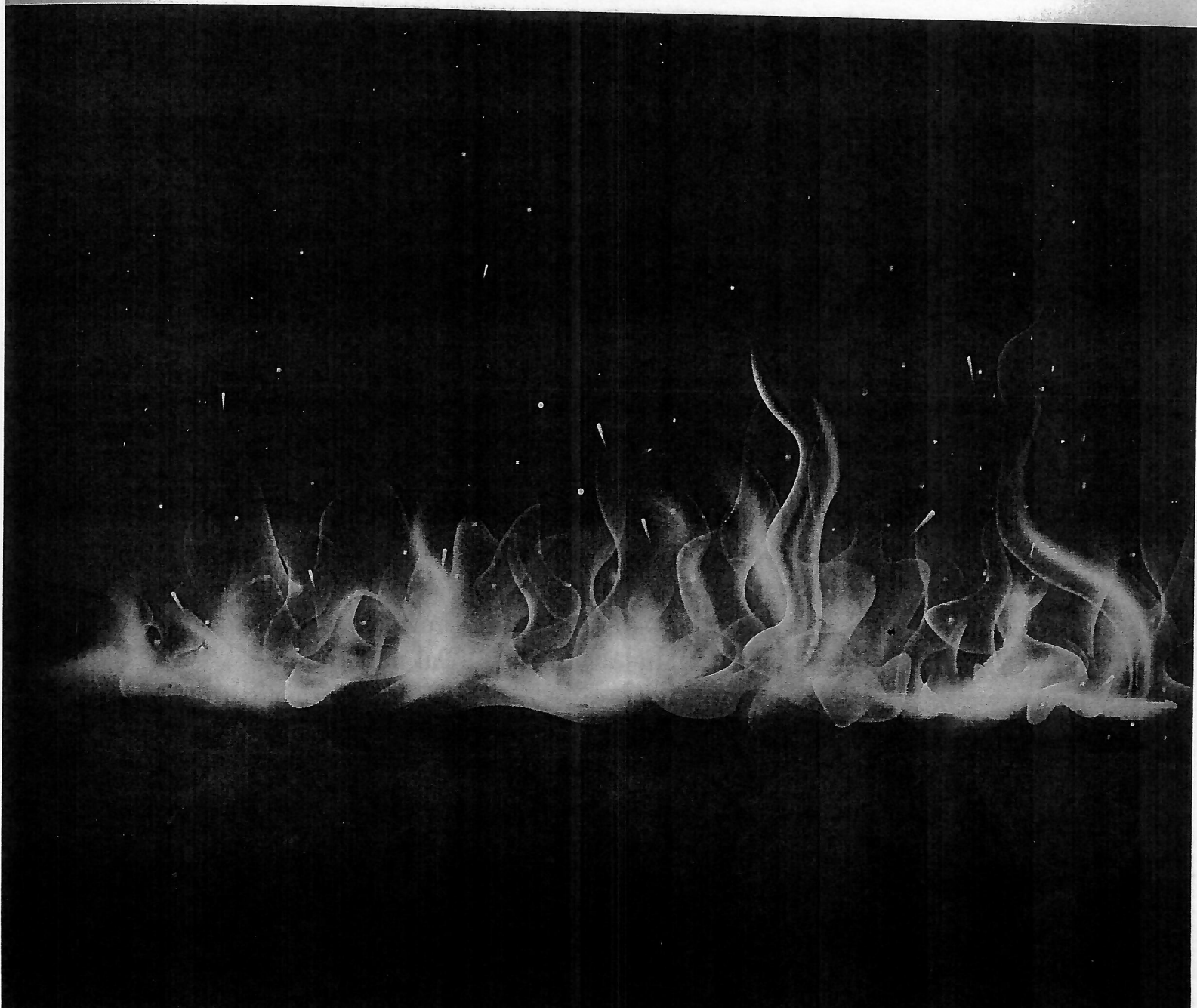
Amin (heretic) said to Rav Avahu: "Your God is a priest, inasmuch as it is written, 'Let the Israelites take for Me *terumah* [the priestly tithe]' (Exodus 25:2). Now, when He buried Moses, where did He immerse Himself [afterwards, to rid Himself of ritual impurity]? You cannot reply that He immersed in water, for it is written [regarding Him], 'He has measured the waters [of the oceans] in the palm of His hand' (Isaiah 40:12)."

"He immersed in fire," Rav Avahu answered, "as it is written, 'Behold, God will come in fire' (ibid., 66:15)."

"Is immersion in fire a valid method of purification?" the heretic asked.

“On the contrary,” Rav Avahu replied, “immersion in fire is the preferred method, as it is written, ‘all that cannot withstand fire, you shall make pass through water’ (Numbers 31:23).”

Talmud, Sanhedrin 39a



Borrowed Terminology

Question for Discussion

How are we supposed to understand the human qualities attributed to God throughout the Bible?

Text 3a ■

אם כן, מהו זה שכתוב בתורה, "ותחת רגליו" (שמות כד,י), "כתובים באצבע אלקים" (שם, לא,יח), "יד ה'" (שם, ט,ג), "עיני ה'" (בראשית לח,ז), "אזני ה'" (במדבר יא,א), וכיוצא בדברים האלו?

הכל לפי דעתן של בני אדם הוא, שאינן מכירין אלא הגופות, ו"דברה תורה כלשון בני אדם" (ברכות לא,ב), והכל כנויים הן. שנאמר, "אם שנותי ברק חרבי" (דברים לב,מב), וכי חרב יש לו ובחרב הוא הורג? אלא משל, והכל משל. משנה תורה, הלכות יסודי התורה א,ט

Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon
(Maimonides/Rambam, 1135–1204). Halachist, philosopher, author, and physician.

Maimonides was born in Cordoba, Spain. After the conquest of Cordoba by the Almohads, he fled Spain and eventually settled in Cairo, Egypt. There, he became the leader of the Jewish community and served as court physician to the vizier of Egypt. He is most noted for authoring the *Mishneh Torah*, an encyclopedic arrangement of Jewish law, and for his philosophical work, *Guide for the Perplexed*. His rulings on Jewish law are integral to the formation of halachic consensus.

If so, what is the meaning of expressions employed by the Torah: "below His feet" (Exodus 24:10); "[the tablets were] written with God's finger" (ibid., 31:18); "God's hand" (ibid., 9:3); "God's eyes" (Genesis 38:7); "God's ears" (Numbers 11:1), and the like? All these expressions were used to relate to human perception, which knows only corporeal imagery, for "the Torah speaks in the language of man" (Talmud, Berachot 31a). They are only borrowed descriptive terms. This [is apparent from] the verse: "When I sharpen the blade of My sword" (Deuteronomy 32:41). Does God have a sword? Does He need a sword to kill? Rather, this is

metaphoric imagery, and all such expressions are, similarly, metaphoric imagery.

Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah 1:9

Text 3b ■

הדחק הביאנו להגשים הבורא יתברך ולספר אותו במידות הברואים, כדי לשער עניין שיקיים מציאות הבורא יתברך בנפשות. והוציאו אותו ספרי הנביאים לבני אדם במילות גשמיות, שהם קרובות לשכלם ולהבנתם. ואלו היו מספרים אותו בעניין שראוי לו מן המילות הרוחניות והעניינים הרוחניים, לא היינו מבינים לא המילות ולא העניין, ולא היה אפשר שנעבוד דבר שלא נדע. כי לא יתכן עבודת דבר שאינו נודע. על כן היה צריך שתהיינה המילות והעניינים כפי כוח בינת השומע, כדי שיפול העניין על לבו על דרך הגשמות והמובן מן המילות הגשמיות בתחילה, ואחר כך נתחכם לו ונדקדק להבינו ולהודיעו שכל זה על דרך הקירבה ומליצת הספר, ושהעניין האמיתי הוא יותר דק ומעולה ומרומם ורחוק מאשר נוכל להבין אותו על תכונת דקות עניינו. והמשכיל הנלבב ישתדל להפשיט קליפות המילות וגשמותם מעל העניין ויעלהו במחשבתו ממדרגה אל מדרגה, עד שיגיע מאמיתת העניין הנדרש אל מה שיש בכוח יכולתו והשגתו.

חובות הלבבות, שער היחוד, י

We are compelled to portray the Creator in material terms and to use the familiar attributes of created beings in order to approximate an idea that will establish the reality of the Creator's being to the human mind. The books of the prophets presented God in the physical terms that are accessible to human intellect and understanding. Were we to speak of Him in a manner strictly appropriate, using only spiritual terms and ideas, we would have

Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda (11th century). Moral philosopher and author. Ibn Pakuda lived in Muslim Spain, but little else is known about his life. *Chovot Halevavot* (*Duties of the Heart*), his major work, was intended to be a guide for attaining spiritual perfection. Originally written in Judeo-Arabic and published in 1080, it was later translated into Hebrew and published in 1161 by Judah ibn Tibbon, a scion of the famous family of translators. Ibn Pakuda had a strong influence on Jewish pietistic literature.

understood neither the words nor the ideas, and it is impossible to serve what one does not know.

Therefore, there was a need for words and concepts that matched the listeners' power of comprehension, in order that the matter should affect their hearts. This was done through using, at first, physicality, the medium of physical terms. Afterwards, as the students grow in wisdom and can be more precise, they are informed and brought to understand that all this was metaphorical, a use of literary trope. The true nature of the subject is more refined, exalted, and transcendent than we are able to understand. The devoted mind will strive to remove the outer husks of the words and their materiality from the subject, and elevate it from one level to the next, until one arrives at the true nature of the subject being investigated, to the extent that the human mind is capable.

Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakuda, *Chovot Halevavot*, *Sba'ar Hayichud* 10

The devoted mind will strive to remove the outer husks of the words and their materiality from the subject . . .

Evade and Run

Text 4 ■

המין הזה המאמין בגשמות, כי דבר הרוחני לא יקבל טומאה. ולפי טעותו השיב לו ר' אבהו בדרך דחייה. חידושי אגדות (מהרש"א), סנהדרין לט, א

The [question of the] heretic [indicated that he] believed God to be a corporeal entity, for a spiritual entity is not susceptible to ritual impurity. Rav Avahu's response was tailored to the heretic's crude understanding of God and was only intended to dismiss his question.

Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Halevi Eidel's, *Chidushei Agadot*, Sanhedrin 39a

Rabbi Shmuel Eliezer Halevi Eidel's (Maharsha, 1555–1632). Rabbi, author, and Talmudist. Rabbi Eidel's established a yeshivah in Posen, Poland, which was supported by his mother-in-law, Eidel (hence his surname is "Eidel's"). He is primarily known for his *Chidushei Halachot*, a commentary on the Talmud in which he resolves difficulties in the texts of the Talmud, Rashi, and *Tosafot*, and which is a basic work for those who seek an in-depth understanding of the Talmud; and for his *Chidushei Agadot*, his innovative commentary on the homiletic passages of the Talmud.

An Atonement for God Honey, He Shrunk the Moon

Learning Exercise 1

With a partner, try to decode the following biblical anthropomorphisms:

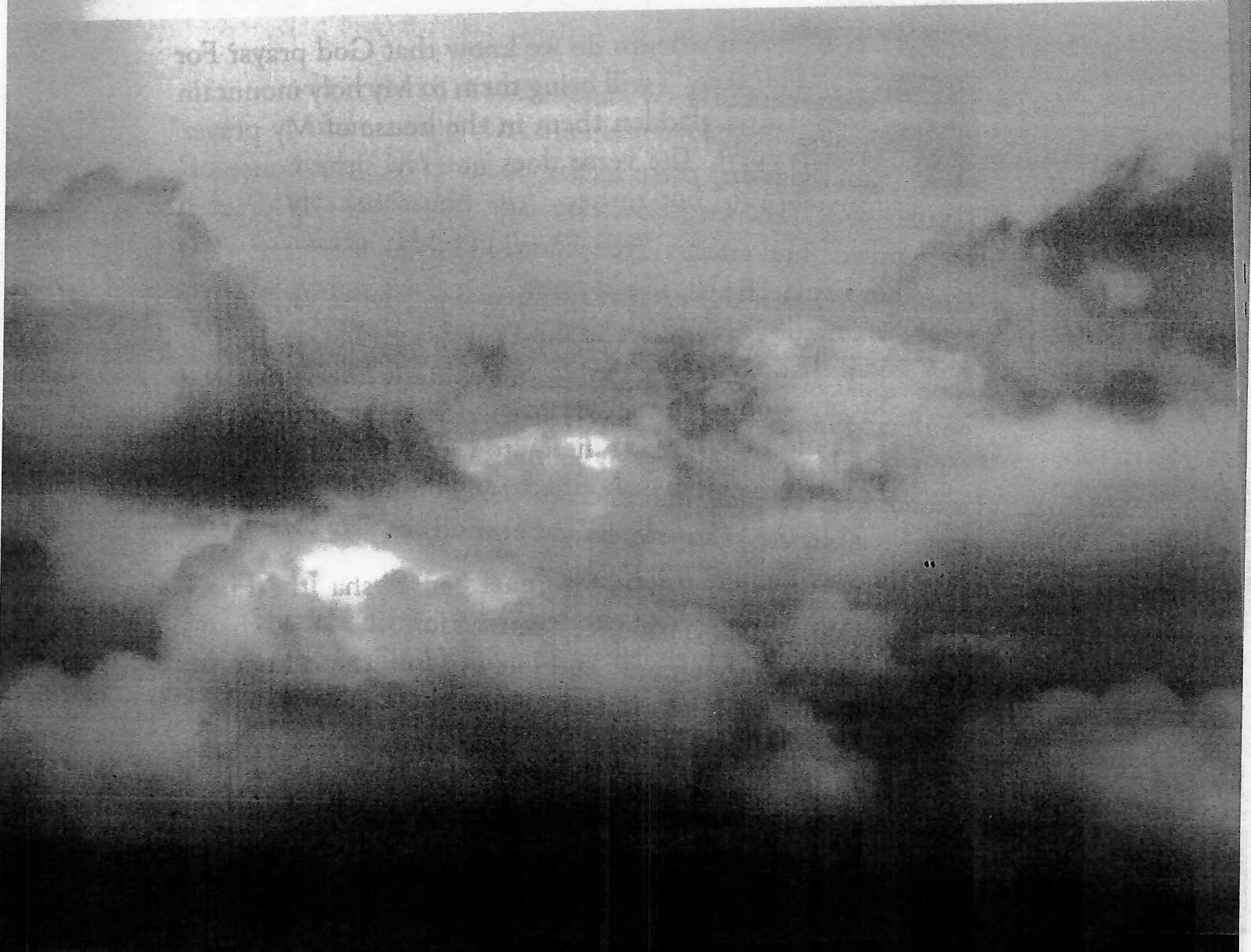
"God created man in **His image**." (Genesis 1:27)

"God **spoke** to Abram." (Genesis 11:1)

"You will see **My back**, but **My face** shall not be seen." (Exodus 33:23)

"When I sharpen the blade of **My sword**." (Deuteronomy 32:41)

"The heavens are **My seat**." (Isaiah 66:1)



Text 5 ■

מנין שהקדוש ברוך הוא מתפלל? שנאמר, "והביאותים אל הר קדשי ושמתים בבית תפלתי" (ישעיהו נו,ז). "תפלתם" לא נאמר, אלא "תפלתי", מכאן שהקדוש ברוך הוא מתפלל. מאי מצלי? אמר רב זוטרא בר טוביה אמר רב: "יהי רצון מלפני, שיכבשו רחמי את כעסי, ויגולו רחמי על מדותי, ואתנהג עם בני במדת רחמים, ואכנס להם לפני משורת הדין". תניא, אמר רבי ישמעאל בן אלישע: "פעם אחת נכנסתי להקטיר קטורת לפני ולפנים. וראיתי אכתריא-ל-י-ה ה' צבאות שהוא יושב על כסא רם ונשא. ואמר לי, 'ישמעאל בנך, ברכני!'

"אמרתי לו, 'יהי רצון מלפניך, שיכבשו רחמיך את כעסך, ויגולו רחמיך על מדותיך, ותתנהג עם בניך במדת הרחמים, ותכנס להם לפני משורת הדין. וונענע לי בראשו'."

תלמוד בבלי, ברכות ז, א

From whence do we know that God prays? For it says, "I will bring them to My holy mountain and gladden them in the house of My prayer" (Isaiah 56:7). The verse does not say, "[the house of] *their* prayer," but rather, "[the house of] *My* prayer"; from here we derive that God prays.

What is His prayer? Rav Zutra bar Tovi'ah said in the name of Rav, "[This is God's prayer]: 'May it be My will that My mercy should override My anger; that My mercy should prevail over My [harsher] attributes; that I should behave with mercy toward My children; and that [My kindness] should extend beyond the strict letter of the law.'"

It was taught: Rabbi Yishma'el ben Elisha [the High Priest] said: "I once entered the Holy of Holies chamber [on Yom Kippur] to offer incense. There I beheld

God, seated upon a high and exalted throne. God said to me, 'Yishma'el, My son, bless Me!'

"I replied: 'May it be Your will that Your mercy should override Your anger; that Your mercy should prevail over Your [harsher] attributes; that You should behave with mercy toward Your children; and that [Your kindness] should extend beyond the strict letter of the law.'

"And God nodded to me with His head."

Talmud, Berachot 7a

Text 6a

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹקִים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַמְּאֹרֹת הַגְּדֹלִים, אֶת הַמְּאֹר הַגְּדֹל לְמַשְׁלַת הַיּוֹם וְאֶת הַמְּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַשְׁלַת הַלַּיְלָה.
בראשית א, טז

God made the two great luminaries: the great luminary to rule the day and the small luminary to rule the night.

Genesis 1:16

Text 6b

אמרה ירח לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא, "רבוננו של עולם! אפשר לשני מלכים שישתמשו בכתר אחד?"

אמר לה, "לכי ומעטי את עצמך".

אמרה לפניו, "רבוננו של עולם! הואיל ואמרתי לפניך דבר הגון אמעיט את עצמי?... חזייה דלא קא מיתבא דעתה, אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, "הביאו כפרה עלי שמיעטתי את הירח".

והיינו דאמר ר' שמעון בן לקיש, "מה נשתנה שעיר של ראש חדש שנאמר בו 'לה' (במדבר כח, טו)?"

אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא, 'שעיר זה יהא כפרה על שמיעטתי את הירח'.
תלמוד בבלי, חולין ס, ב

The moon said to God, "Sovereign of the Universe! Is it possible for two kings to wear one crown?"

God answered, "[You have a valid point.] Go and make yourself smaller."

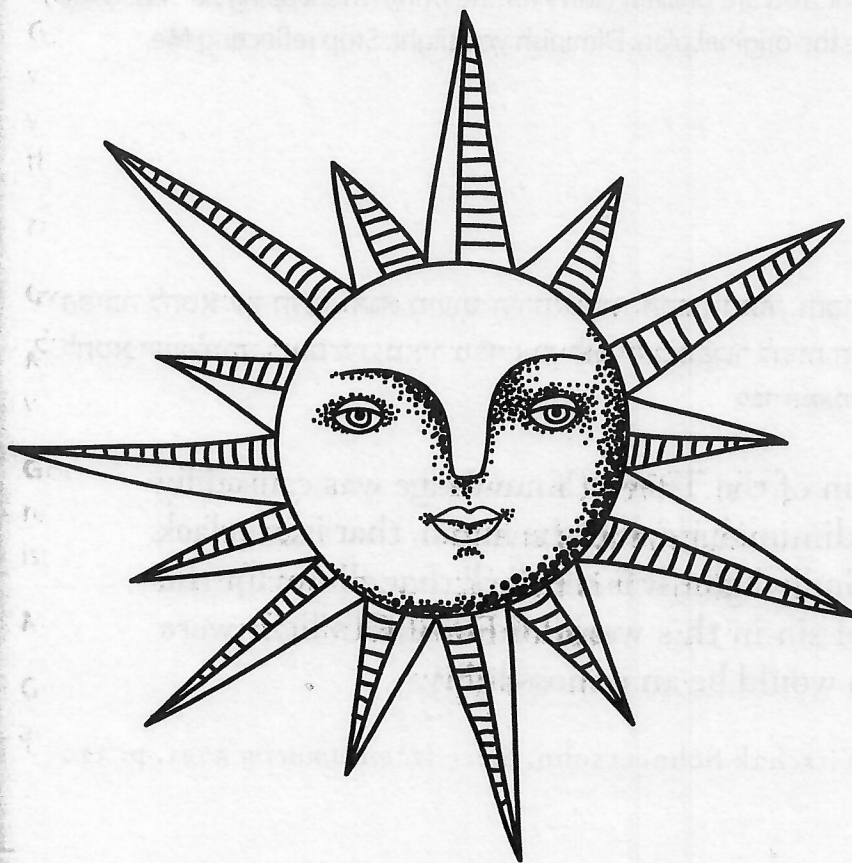
“Sovereign of the Universe!” cried the moon. “Because I raised a valid concern, must I now make myself smaller?” ...

Upon seeing that the moon would not be mollified, God said [to the Jews]: “Bring an atonement on My behalf for making the moon smaller.”

This is the meaning of what Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: “Why is the goat offered on Rosh Chodesh (the new moon) different [from all other periodic goat offerings]? Why is only this goat considered ‘[a sin offering] for God’ (Numbers 28:15)?

“Because God said, ‘This goat shall be an atonement for My having made the moon smaller.’”

Talmud, Chulin 60b



One Crown Short

God and Moon Conversation 1

Moon: Dear God, I just read the first chapter of Your Torah, the blueprint of Creation, and I noticed something interesting. You speak there of “two great luminaries”—that would be me and You, correct?

God: (nods His head.)

Moon: With all due respect, I don't get it. If all I do is reflect You, then I *am* You. There is only one crown, only one light—and why would two kings want to share one crown? What is really bothering me, I guess, is that if I am You, what am even I doing here? Why don't You just shine Your light directly? I bring nothing to the table.

God: Good point. You are brilliant (sorry for the pun), I'm *shepping nachas*. Okay then, let's revise the original plan. Diminish your light. Stop reflecting Me.

Rabbi Yosef Yitschak

Schneersohn (Rayats, 1880–1950). Chasidic rebbe, prolific author, and Jewish activist. Rabbi Yosef Yitschak, the 6th leader of the Chabad movement, actively promoted Jewish religious practice in Russia and was arrested for these activities. After his release from Soviet prison and exile, he settled in Warsaw, Poland, from where he fled Nazi occupation, and arrived in New York in 1940. Settling in Brooklyn, Rabbi Schneersohn worked to revitalize American Jewish life. His son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, succeeded him as the leader of the Chabad movement.

Text 7 ■

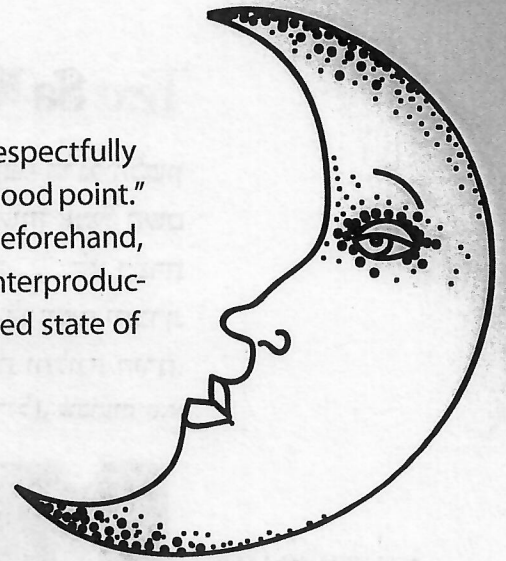
הסיבה לחטא עץ הדעת הוא מיעוט הירח שהוא חסרון האור, וחסרון זה הוא מקור לחטא ועון למטה, דאם היה מאיר גילוי אור, לא היה באפשר להיות החטא ועון למטה. ספר המאמרים תרצ"א, ע' שכ

The sin of the Tree of Knowledge was caused by the diminishment of the moon, that is, the lack of Godly light. It is this lack that allows for the possibility of sin in this world. For if God's light were revealed, sin would be an impossibility.

Rabbi Yosef Yitschak Schneersohn, *Sefer Hama'amarim* 5691, p. 320

God and Moon Conversation 2

Moon: Please, God, help me understand what's going on! I respectfully approached You with a grievance that was, in Your own words, "a good point." The solution that You suggested, however, is no solution at all! Beforehand, perhaps I wasn't serving any useful purpose, but I wasn't counterproductive either. I hate this darkness. What is the point in this diminished state of mine?



Sacrificing for a Relationship

God and Moon Conversation 3

God: Once again, you are absolutely right. This is a royal mess. (I knew this would happen as soon as you starting griping about crowns.) Let Me assure you that this situation pains Me no less than it pains You. This is certainly not the way I want things to be.

Moon: So You will fix everything?

God: Sorry, I can't do that.

Moon: You can't fix the situation? Why can't You just put things back to the way they were?

God: Because then we would be back to square one. Your complaint, as you recall I told you, had merit. What purpose is there in having an "other" that isn't really an "other"?

Moon: So what now? Are You saying that there is nothing to be done?

God: I did not say that. There is a way to remedy the situation, but My hands are tied. I need you to take charge now. Only you can clean up this mess.



Text 8a

רבים תמהים על המאמר הזה מה שאמר, "הביאו עלי כפרה". וכל זה מפני הרגל הלשון שהלשון הוא מורגל על מי שחטא ומביא כפרה על חטאו, ואין זה שייך אצל השם יתברך. אבל אין הדבר כמו שחשבו, כי כל הסרה וסילוק נקרא כפרה . . . לא כפרת חטא דוקא שיכפר לו השם יתברך.

[רק] מה שאמר הביאו קרבן כפרה עלי הוא סלוק תרעומות ותלונת הירח. חדושי אגדות (מהר"ל), שבועות ט,א

Rabbi Yehudah Loew
(Maharal of Prague, 1525–1609). Talmudist and philosopher. Maharal rose to prominence as leader of the famed Jewish community of Prague. He is the author of more than a dozen works of original philosophical thought, including *Tiferet Yisrael* and *Netsach Yisrael*. He also authored *Gur Aryeh*, a supercommentary to Rashi's biblical commentary, and a commentary on the non-legal passages of the Talmud. He is buried in the Old Jewish Cemetery of Prague.

Many are bewildered by God's statement "Bring an atonement (*kaparah*) on My behalf." They are puzzled because the Hebrew word *kaparah* is ordinarily used when speaking of one who sins and then offers [a sacrifice as] atonement for the sin. This cannot apply to God [Who cannot possibly sin]. They are mistaken, however, because *kaparah* is a generic term that means "removal," and can be used in any context . . . not only the removal of sin.

"Bring a *kaparah* on My behalf" is God's request of us that we "remove" the complaint that the moon lodged against Him.

Rabbi Yehudah Loew, *Chidushei Agadot*, Shevu'ot 9a

Text 8b ■

בני אדם אשר לא ידעו דברי תורה, חושבים כי כאשר האדם חוטא לפני ה' במעשיו וחייבה התורה להביא קרבן, אותו קרבן הוא כמו דורן שבשביל זה יכפר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא . . . אבל חס ושלום לומר כך . . . רק הקרבן הוא הקרבתם אל השם יתברך אשר הוא מביא אליו הקרבן, כמו שמורה לך שם קרבן. וכאשר יש קירוב והשבה אל השם יתברך אשר הוא בעל המעלה בלי חסרון, מסולק מאתו כל חסרון והעדר המצורף אליו שהוא החטא. וזהו סוד הקרבן . . . וזהו שכתוב "חטאת לה", כלומר, כי הקרבן הוא סלוק החסרון שנמצא בעולם הוא העדר האור מצד הקטנות אשר יש לירח. חדושי אגדות, שם

Those who lack a true understanding of Torah misunderstand the concept of a *korban* (sacrifice). They imagine that a sinner who brings a *korban* is offering a gift to God, Who then [is placated by the gift] and grants atonement. . . . Heaven forbid one should say this. . . .

Rather, a *korban* entails an individual's drawing near to God—to Whom the *korban* is being offered—as indicated by the name *korban* [which means drawing near]. Because God is perfect and beyond blemish, one who draws near to God is also relieved of all imperfections and blemishes (that is, sins). This is the secret of the *korban*. . . .

This is why the verse states [that on Rosh Chodesh we should bring] "a sin offering for God." The *korban*, as explained, removes the world's imperfections. In this case, the imperfection we are removing is the absence of light that resulted from the diminishment of the moon.

Rabbi Yehudah Loew, *ibid.*

God's Prayer

Text 9 ■

למי כביכול הוא מתפלל? ואומר אני, אצלינו, עמו וצאן מרעיתו הוא מתפלל, ומבקש מאתנו שנשיב מעשינו ונשוב בתשובה לפניו, ובזה נגרום שיהיה רצון מלפניו שיכבשו רחמיו וכו'. כי תמיד זהו רצונו, אך שעונותינו מעכבים.

ואל תתמה שאני מפרש שאצלינו הוא מתפלל ומאתנו הוא מבקש דבר זה, כי מקרא מלא הוא, "מה ה' אלקיך שואל מעמך כי אם ליראה וגו'" (דברים י"ב), הרי שהוא שואל ומבקש דבר זה מאתנו כי בידינו הוא כי נתן לנו הבחירה בדבר זה . . . וזה גם כן כוונת הראיה שהביא בעל מימרא זו מקרא דבית המקדש נקרא בית תפלה ואין הכוונה להגביל בו מקום מיוחד שמתפלל שם, אבל הכוונה שהקדוש ברוך הוא אומר שאלו התפלות שאנו מתפללים בבית הזה, שישרה קודשא בריך הוא שכינתו שם בתוכינו, אלו בקשות בעצמם הם תפלתו ובקשתו כביכול, וזה הרצון לפניו. ציון לנפש חיה, ברכות ז, א

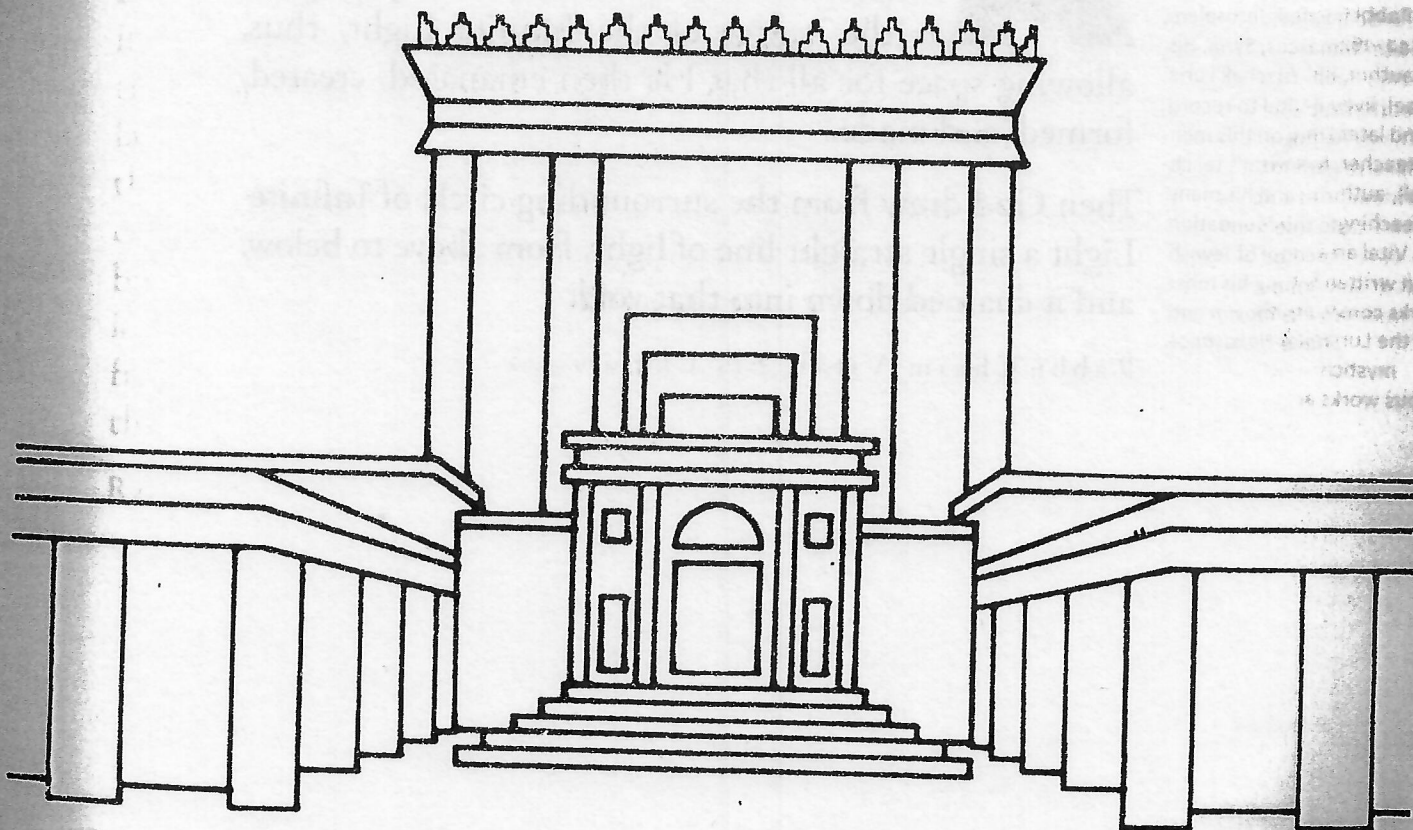
To whom does God pray (as it were)? I say that He prays to us, His nation, the sheep of His flock. He beseeches us to improve our ways and to return to Him, and thus arouse His will to be merciful toward us, etc. This is God's constant longing; our wrongdoings, however, impede [His ability to be merciful].

Do not be surprised that I say that God prays to us and makes requests of us. After all, the verse says so clearly: "[And now, O Israel,] what does your God ask of you? To fear Him, etc." (Deuteronomy 10:12). God requests this of us because this is entirely in our hands, for He has granted us free choice in the matter. . . .

Rabbi Yechezkel Landau
(*Noda BiYehudah*, 1713–1793).
Rabbi and halachist. Rabbi Landau was born in Poland. In 1755, he assumed the rabbiniate of Prague and all of Bohemia. An influential authority on Halachah, he responded to queries from all over Europe, most of which have been collected and published in *Responsa Noda BiYehudah*. He also wrote explanatory commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch and a commentary on several Talmudic tractates.

This is also the meaning of the Scriptural corroboration [of the assertion that God prays], the verse that refers to the Holy Temple as “the house of My prayer.” This does not mean to delimit a specific location wherein God prays. Rather, God is saying that the prayer we offer in that holy site—our wish that God’s presence should dwell amongst us [and that His kindness should be upon us]—is also *His* prayer, request, and desire.

Rabbi Yechezkel Halevi Landau, *Tsiyun Lenefesh Chayah*,
Berachot 7a



Anthropomorphism Revisited

A Ladder of Light

Text 10 ■

והנה אחר הצמצום הנזכר לעיל, אשר אז נשאר מקום החלל ואויר פנוי וריקני באמצע אור האין סוף ממש כנזכר לעיל, הנה כבר היה מקום שיוכלו להיות שם הנאצלים והנבראים ויצורים והנעשים. ואז המשיך מן אור אין סוף קו אחד ישר מן האור העגול שלו מלמעלה למטה, ומשתלשל ויורד תוך החלל ההוא.
עץ חיים א,ב

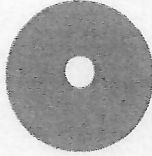
Rabbi Chaim ben Yosef Vital (ca. 1542–1620). Lurianic Kabbalist and author. Rabbi Vital was born in Israel, lived in Safed, Jerusalem, and later Damascus, Syria. His teacher, Rabbi Yitschak Luria (Arizal), authorized Vital to record his teachings. Acting on this mandate, Vital arranged Arizal's teachings in written form, and his many works constitute the foundation of the Lurianic school of Jewish mysticism. Among his most famous works are *Ets Chayim* and *Sha'ar Hakavanot*.

After the aforementioned contraction, there remained a void and a hollow empty space at the center of the Infinite Light, thus allowing space for all that He then emanated, created, formed, and made.

Then God drew from the surrounding circle of Infinite Light a single straight line of light, from above to below, and it chained down into that void.

Rabbi Chaim Vital, *Ets Chayim* 1:2

Text 11 ■

 ur reality is an offshoot of His, so that everything about it reflects the nature of its source as the grooves in a phonograph record mirror the structure of the sound waves that forged it. Thus the kabbalists speak of a *sefer histalshelut*, a “chain of evolution,” in which the ten divine attributes (*sefirot*) that God projected from Himself to define His relationship with us evolve into the essence of creation, into the spiritual “DNA” that determines the nature of every created thing. . . .

Ask an artist about the source of one of his paintings, and he’ll tell you about an experience he had, the emotions it roused in him, and how these feelings matured over time until his talent translated them into the particular creation before you. Obviously, he is not speaking of the source of the physical material of the painting—the canvas and paints he acquired in an art-supply store—but of the vision they embody. Similarly, while the physical substance of earth and light were brought into being from naught, their spiritual essence developed through the “chain of evolution” that God generated.

Rabbi Yanki Tauber, “A Pool of Fire,” www.meaningfullife.com

Rabbi Yanki Tauber (1965–). Chasidic scholar and author. A native of Brooklyn, NY, Rabbi Tauber is an internationally renowned author who specializes in adapting the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. He is the executive editor of Chabad.org, the largest website of Jewish content, and has written numerous articles and books, including *Once Upon a Chassid* and *Beyond the Letter of the Law*.

Moon Diminishment Aftereffects

Feeling Our Pain

Text 12 ■

Amin (heretic) said to Rav Avahu: “Your God is a priest, inasmuch as it is written, ‘Let the Israelites take for Me *terumah* [the priestly tithes]’ (Exodus 25:2). Now, when He buried Moses, where did He immerse Himself [afterwards, to rid Himself of ritual impurity]? You cannot reply that He immersed in water, for it is written [regarding Him], ‘He has measured the waters [of the oceans] in the palm of His hand’ (Isaiah 40:12).”

“He immersed in fire,” Rav Avahu answered, “as it is written, ‘Behold, God will come in fire’ (ibid., 66:15).”

“Is immersion in fire a valid method of purification?” the heretic asked.

“On the contrary,” Rav Avahu replied, “immersion in fire is the preferred method, as it is written, ‘all that cannot withstand fire, you shall make pass through water’ (Numbers 31:23).”

Talmud, Sanhedrin 39a

Text 13

בכל מקום שגלו שכינה עמהן. גלו למצרים, שכינה עמהן. . . גלו לבבל שכינה עמהן. . .
ואף כשהן עתידין ליגאל שכינה עמהן, שנאמר, "ושב ה' אלקיך את שבותך" (דברים
לג). "והשיב" לא נאמר אלא "ושב", מלמד שהקדוש ברוך הוא שב עמהן מבין הגלות.
תלמוד בבלי, מגילה כט, א

Wherever the Jews were exiled, the divine presence went with them. When they were exiled to Egypt, the divine presence was with them. . . . When they were exiled to Babylonia, the divine presence was with them. . . .

And also when the Jews will be redeemed, the divine presence will go with them. This is indicated by the verse, "You God will return with your returning exiles" (Deuteronomy 30:3). It does not say that He will "bring back [your returning exiles]," but that He "will return with [your returning exiles]." This teaches that God will return with the Jews from their lands of exile.

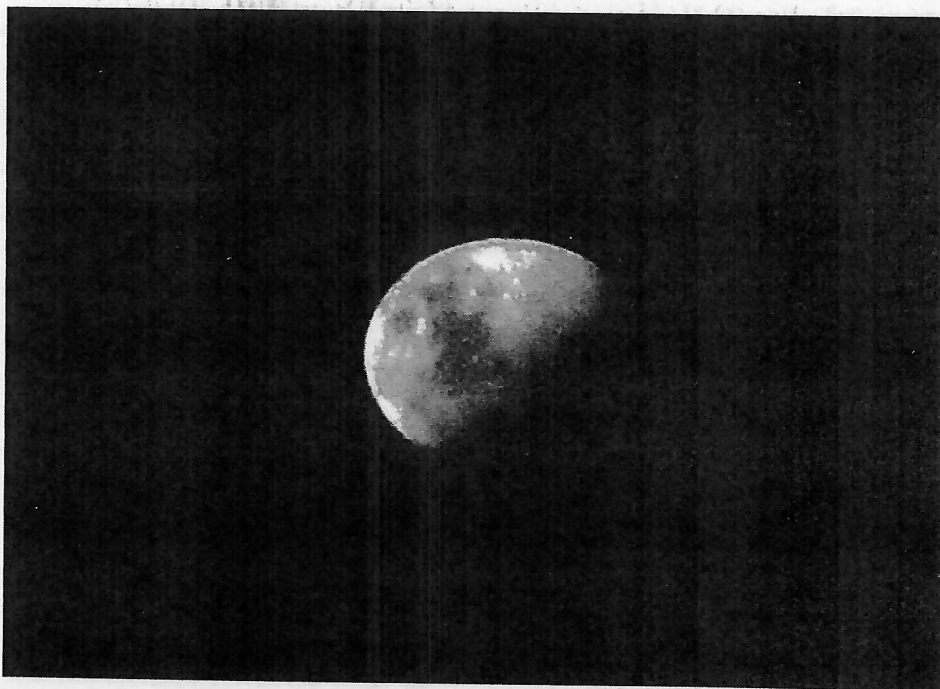
Talmud, Megilah 29a

Text 14 ■

ויהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקי ואלקי אבותי, למלאות פגימת הלבנה ולא יהיה בה שום מעוט, ויהיה אור הלבנה כאור החמה כאור שבעת ימי בראשית, כמו שהיתה קדם מעוטה. שנאמר, "ויעש אלקים את שני המארת הגדלים".
סידור תהלת ה', קידוש לבנה

May it be Your will, my God and the God of my fathers, to fill the defect of the moon, so that there be no diminution in it. May the light of the moon be as the light of the sun, as the light of the Seven Days of Creation, as it was before it was diminished. As it is said, "And God made the two great luminaries."

Siddur Tehilat Hashem, Blessing of the Moon



Key Points

1. Our frame of reference as physical beings does not allow us to speak coherently about lofty spiritual ideas.
2. Therefore, the Torah and the Talmud often describe God in anthropomorphic terms. Physical terms and human qualities are employed to describe infinitely greater spiritual concepts, though the parallels are inexact.
3. All weaknesses and limitations implied by these metaphoric terms do not apply to God.
4. In the mystical understanding, the Torah's anthropomorphic metaphors are actually devolved and diminished forms of the divine properties they are describing.
5. God created the world because of His desire for a relationship with us. A relationship must involve two parties who *choose* to enter it. Thus, at the beginning of time, God diminished His light to allow for the existence of an entity that feels itself to be distinct from Him, and therefore has the ability to choose to accept (reflect) God.
6. God chose to create a condition in which the fulfillment of His deepest wish, as it were, is in our hands. God prays to us, imploring us to choose to experience a relationship with Him.
7. God chose to enter a relationship with us and therefore is affected (and becomes "impure") by our sorry plight. We bring an end to impurity (and the diminishment of the moon) through immersion in fire: a fiery, passionate relationship with God.

Appendix A

Text 1 ■

והיסוד השלישי: שלילת הגשמות ממנו. והוא שנאמין שזה האחד אינו גוף ולא כח בגוף, ולא יארעוהו מאורעות הגופים כגון התנועה והמנוחה, לא בעצם ולא במקרה. . . ואמר הנביא, "ואל מי תדמיון א-ל וכו'?" (ישעיהו מ,יח), "ואל מי תדמיוני ואשוה וכו'?" (שם, כה) . . .

וזה היסוד השלישי הוא אשר מורה עליו מה שנאמר, "כי לא ראיתם כל תמונה" (דברים ה,טו). כלומר, לא השגתם אותו בעל תמונה, לפי שהוא, כמו שאמרנו, לא גוף ולא כח בגוף.

פירוש המשניות להרמב"ם, סנהדרין, הקדמה לפרק חלק

The third principle is that God is incorporeal. We must believe that this One [Creator] is neither a body nor any bodily attribute. He is not subject to bodily phenomena—for example, motion or rest—neither essentially nor incidentally. . . . The prophet therefore says, "To whom can you compare God? [What image can resemble Him?]" (Isaiah 40:18), and "To whom will you compare Me?" [says the Holy One?]" (ibid., 40:25). . . .

This third principle is inferred from the verse: "You have seen no image" (Deuteronomy 4:15), meaning that you did not perceive Him [at Mount Sinai] as possessing any image, since, as we have said, is neither a body nor any bodily attribute.

Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin*, Introduction to *Chelek*

Appendix B

Text 1 ■

בכל אחד ישנו השם הוי' . . .
וזהו "שויתי הוי' לנגדי תמיד" (תהילים טז,ח), דכאשר מסתכלים על יהודי (על עצמו
(במראה) או על השני) באיזה מצב שיהי, גם כשעושה רחמנא ליצלן ההיפך, הרי
רואים עליו . . . שם הוי': "שויתי הוי' לנגדי תמיד".
מאמר ד"ה שובה ישראל, תורת מנחם תשמ"ט, א, לז

The Godly light represented by the Tetragrammaton is present within each individual. . . .

This is [a deeper meaning of the verse], "I have set God before me at all times" (Psalms 16:8). When we look at a person—whether at ourselves in a mirror or at another individual—we ought to detect the divine, regardless of the person's state, even if the person is behaving, God forbid, in a manner that is the antithesis of holiness. In this way, we literally "set God before ourselves at all times."

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson,
Torat Menachem 5749, 1:37

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902–1994). The towering Jewish leader of the 20th century, known as "the Lubavitcher Rebbe," or simply as "the Rebbe." Born in southern Ukraine, the Rebbe escaped Nazi-occupied Europe, arriving in the U.S. in June 1941. The Rebbe inspired and guided the revival of traditional Judaism after the European devastation, impacting virtually every Jewish community the world over. The Rebbe often emphasized that the performance of just one additional good deed could usher in the era of Mashiach. The Rebbe's scholarly talks and writings have been printed in more than 200 volumes.