

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Wellsprings of Embodied Wisdom Tracing Non-Cerebral Intelligence from Biblical Anthropology to Contemporary Embodied Theology

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Abstract

This essay traces the conception of wisdom (chochmah) as arising from bodily organs other than the brain—particularly the kidneys, heart, and viscera—across biblical, rabbinic, Kabbalistic, and contemporary theological frameworks. Beginning with the biblical anthropology that locates conscience and moral discernment in the kidneys (kelayot), we follow this embodied epistemology through its midrashic amplification in the figure of Abraham, whose kidneys “flowed with Torah,” into the Kabbalistic reframing that positions the kidneys within the sefirotic architecture of divine emanation. Drawing extensively on the scholarly apparatus assembled by Natan Slifkin in his monograph “The Question of the Kidneys’ Counsel,” this study examines how medieval authorities from Rashi to Ramban to the Italian Renaissance grappled with the apparent conflict between rabbinic physiology and emerging medical science. The analysis then connects this ancient wisdom tradition to the contemporary framework of embodied theology, demonstrating how the therapeutic encounter becomes a site where somatic wisdom emerges through the dynamics of tzimtzum, Shekhinah consciousness, and hermeneutic medicine. Against Cartesian dualism and biomedical reductionism, this essay argues for a return to the biblical intuition that the body itself is a knowing subject, capable of generating revelation from its hidden depths.

Keywords: Kidneys, Kelayot, Embodied Wisdom, Chochmah, Biblical Anthropology, Kabbalah, Embodied Theology, Tzimtzum, Therapeutic Space.

1. Introduction: Where Wisdom Hides

Rabbinic literature offers a startling image: Abraham’s kidneys flowing with Torah. According to Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 61:1 and Midrash Tanchuma (parashat Vayigash), our patriarch received Torah from his own kidneys—as if revelation erupts from the hidden recesses of the body itself. This image, at once anatomical and mystical, suggests that wisdom—chochmah—can flow upward from within. But this striking tradition rests upon a broader rabbinic anthropology that poses genuine hermeneutical challenges, challenges that medieval and modern

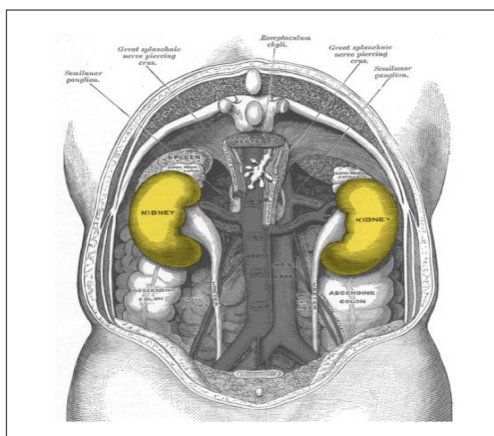
authorities have grappled with in fascinatingly divergent ways.¹

This essay undertakes a comprehensive examination of the tradition of embodied wisdom as it manifests in the figure of the kidneys across Jewish textual history. The investigation proceeds through four major phases: first, an analysis of the biblical foundations that establish the kidneys as organs of conscience and divine scrutiny; second, a survey of the Talmudic and midrashic elaboration of this theme, culminating in the paradigmatic case of Abraham; third, an examination of the medieval controversy over the

¹Garabed Eknoyan, “The Kidneys in the Bible: What Happened?” *Journal of the American Society of Nephrology* 16:12 (2005): 3464-3471; Giovanni Maio, “The Metaphorical and Mythical Use of the Kidney in Antiquity,” *American Journal of Nephrology* 19:2 (1999): 101-106.

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kidneys' cognitive function, drawing extensively on Natan Slifkin's invaluable scholarly synthesis; and fourth, a connection of this tradition to contemporary embodied theology as developed in the framework

at jyungar.com. Throughout, the guiding question remains: What does it mean to take seriously the claim that wisdom can arise from organs other than the brain?



2. Part I: Biblical Foundations—The Kidneys as Inner Tribunal

2.1 The Dual Function of the Kidneys in Scripture

The kidneys (*kelayot*) appear in Scripture in two distinct contexts. In the sacrificial laws, they are listed among the organs offered upon the altar (Exodus 29:13, 22; Leviticus 3:4, 10, 15; 4:9; 7:4; 8:16, 25; 9:10, 19). But on over a dozen other occasions, they are described as organs with cognitive and moral functions—as the seat of conscience, counsel, and moral discernment. The King James Bible, when translating *kelayot* in its non-sacrificial context, uses the word “reins” rather than kidneys. While the two terms are essentially synonymous, the differentiation was probably done out of a desire to indicate an allegorical use of the term. The JPS translation uses “mind” or “conscience.”²

The cognitive function of the kidneys appears most dramatically in Jeremiah's prophetic corpus. In Jeremiah 17:10, God declares: “I the Lord search the heart and examine the kidneys, to give to each person according to their ways, according to what their deeds deserve.” The parallelism here is not merely rhetorical; it establishes the kidneys as a distinct site

of moral evaluation, a hidden chamber where divine judgment penetrates. The verb *bochen* (examine, test) suggests the kidneys as a place of assaying, where the true nature of a person's character is tested like precious metal.

The prophetic texts present a consistent picture:

“You are present in their mouths, but far from their kidneys” (Jeremiah 12:2).

“God of Hosts, just Judge, Who examines the kidneys and heart” (Jeremiah 11:20).

“I, God, probe the heart, and examine the kidneys, and repay each man according to his ways” (Jeremiah 17:10).

“God of Hosts, Who tests the righteous, looking at the heart and kidneys” (Jeremiah 20:12).

The Psalmist extends this anthropology in Psalm 16:7: “I will bless the Lord who has counseled me; indeed, my kidneys instruct me in the night.” Here the kidneys (*kilyotai*) actively instruct (*yisruni*)—the same verb used for Torah instruction. The nocturnal setting is significant: in the darkness of sleep, when rational consciousness recedes, a deeper wisdom emerges from the hidden recesses of the body. The

²Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaya to Leviticus 1:9

kidneys become prophets within the flesh, speaking truth that daylight consciousness cannot hear.

On several occasions, the kidneys are mentioned together with the heart, establishing a partnership in moral cognition:

“...the Lord, the righteous, examines the hearts and kidneys” (Psalm 7:10).

“My son, if your heart is wise, my heart also rejoices. My kidneys rejoice, when your lips speak with uprightness” (Proverbs 23:15–16).

2.2 Sacrificial and Cognitive Functions: A Connection

These sacrificial and cognitive functions may be linked. The commentators Ramban and Rabbeinu Bechaya (on Leviticus 1:9), as well as Tashbetz (Magen Avot 3:4), suggest that the animal’s kidneys on the altar represent the parallel organ in human beings—reminding the offerer that it was with these organs of moral discernment that he sinned.³ The burning of the kidneys thus becomes an act of atonement for sins conceived in the hidden depths of moral deliberation, in those nocturnal counsels that precede conscious decision.

The question that emerges from this biblical evidence is whether the authors of Scripture meant the term metaphorically, or whether they indeed intended that the kidneys are the seat of part of the mind—a role that we would assign today to the brain. This question has been discussed extensively in several scholarly articles, with the general conclusion being that it does indeed reflect a belief that the kidneys actually possess such functions.⁴

3. Part II: The Classical Rabbinic Problem

3.1 Talmudic Physiology of Consciousness

The Sages of the Talmud understood the scriptural references to the kidneys literally. A remarkable passage in Berachot 61a (paralleled in Vayikra Rabbah 4:4) offers what can only be described as a physiology of consciousness:⁵

“The Rabbis taught: The kidneys advise (yo’atzot), the heart considers, the tongue articulates, the mouth finishes, the esophagus brings in all kinds of food, the windpipe gives sound, the lungs absorb all kinds of fluids, the

liver causes anger, the gallbladder secretes a drop into it and calms it, the spleen laughs, the gizzard grinds, the stomach [causes] sleep, the nose [causes] wakefulness.”

This is not an aggadic legend intended to be understood metaphorically. The descriptions of the functions of the tongue, mouth, esophagus, windpipe, lungs, stomach, and nose are all clearly scientific descriptions intended to be interpreted literally. The account of the liver causing anger is also consistent with standard belief in the ancient world. Thus, the account of the function of the kidneys and heart is equally intended as a literal description—consistent with ancient Akkadian and Babylonian understandings of physiology, which placed the mind in the heart and nearby organs rather than the brain.⁶

Mark J. Geller has demonstrated that the Sages of the Babylonian Talmud generally followed these ancient Near Eastern medical traditions. While Galen knew the brain to have a cognitive function, Aristotle believed that the brain only serves to cool the blood. Along with other ancient cultures, Aristotle believed the mind to be housed in the heart.⁷ It does appear that some of the Sages of the Talmud may have adopted aspects of Galen’s view, since we find R. Yehudah HaNasi disputing people with the statement, “It appears that he does not have a brain in his head.” However, the attribution of some cognitive function to the brain does not mean that the Sages ruled out the heart and kidneys serving to make moral decisions.⁸

3.2 Proof-text: Genesis Rabba 61:1

רבי שמעון אב לא למדו, ורב לא היה לו, ומהיכן למד את התורה, אלא זמן לו הקדוש ברוך הוא שמי כליותיו כמין שני רבנים, והיו נובעות ומלמדות אותו תורה וחקמה, הלא הוא דכתיב (תהלים טז, ז): אברך את ה' אשר יעצני אף לילות יסרוני כליותי. (תהלים א, ג): ויהיה

Rabbi Shimon said: He [Abraham] had no father to teach him, and he did not have a teacher. From where, then, did he learn Torah? The answer is that the Holy One blessed be He set his two kidneys [kilyotav] as two teachers of a sort, and they would flow forth and teach him Torah and wisdom. That is what is written: “I bless the Lord who counsels me, even on nights when my thoughts [khilyotai] are anguished” (Psalms 16:7).

תנו רבנן: שמי כליות יש בו באדם, אחת יועצתו לטובה ואחת יועצתו לרעה. ומסתברא דטובה לימינו ורעה לשמאלו, דכתיב: “לב חכם לימינו ולב כסיל לשמאלו”.

^{3,4}Tashbetz, Magen Avot 3:4.

⁵See also Midrash Vayikra Rabbah 4:4 for a parallel formulation.

⁶Mark J. Geller, “Akkadian Healing Therapies in the Babylonian Talmud” (Berlin: Max-Planck-Institut für Wissenschaftsgeschichte, 2004).

⁷For extensive discussion, see Julius Rocca, *Galen on the Brain: Anatomical Knowledge and Physiological Speculation in the Second Century AD* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 17–47.

⁸On Galen’s view of the brain’s cognitive function versus Aristotle’s cardiocentrism, see Rocca, *Galen on the Brain*, 17–47.

The Sages taught in a baraita: A person has two kidneys; one advises him to do good and one advises him to do evil. And it stands to reason that the one advising him to do good is to his right and the one that advises him to do evil is to his left, as it is written: “A wise man’s understanding is at his right hand, but a fool’s understanding is at his left” (Ecclesiastes 10:2).

3.3 Rashi

תנו רבנן [שנו חכמים] בברייתא: שתי כליות יש בו באדם, אחת יועצתו לטובה ואחת יועצתו לרעה. ומסתברא [ומסתבר] לומר כי זו שיועצתו לטובה נמצאת לימינו וזו שיועצתו לרעה נמצאת לשמאלו, דכתיב [שכן נאמר]: “לב חכם לימינו ולב כסיל לשמאלו” (קהלת י ב).

Jastrow, 1 יָעַץ

כליות 61* (b. h.; v. עִזָּץ, [to press,] to encourage, plan; to advise. Ber. 61* אחת יועצתו לטובה וכ' 76* Snh. 76* והיעצדן וכ' 8* Ber. 8* וכשיעצצין אין יועצין וכ' 87* Snh. 87* ממך זה יעץ 'hidden from thee' (Deut. XVII, 8) that means (the need of) a counselor (Sifré Deut. 152 זו ממוקים שהכליות יועצות from where the deliberating kidneys are seated, v. supra.—Tem. 16* (play on יעבץ, I Chr. IV, 9) he advised and advanced the study of the Law &c. Snh. 106*, a. e. בלעם ש" Balaam who gave his advice (encouraging the oppression of the Israelites); a. fr.—[Ber. 3*; Snh. 16*, v. infra.]

3.4 The Two Kidneys: Good and Evil Counsel

The immediately preceding statement in the Talmud assigns the two kidneys distinct moral roles:

“The Rabbis taught: A person has two kidneys, one of which counsels him to do good, and the other counsels him to do evil. And it is reasonable that the good one is on his right and the evil one on his left, as it is written, ‘The heart of the wise man is to his right, and the heart of a fool is to his left’” (Ecclesiastes 10:2).

Due to its juxtaposition with the other passage, there is every reason to believe that this was likewise intended literally as an account of the two kidneys’ respective functions. This introduces a moral dialectic within the body itself: the kidneys become an internal theater of ethical struggle, a site where competing impulses contend before any decision reaches conscious awareness.

The Sages taught in a baraita: A person has two kidneys; one advises him to do good and one advises him to do evil. And it stands to reason that the one advising him to do good is to his right and the one that advises him to do evil is to his left, as it is written: “A wise man’s understanding is at his right hand, but a fool’s understanding is at his left” (Ecclesiastes 10:2).

Zohar, Pritzker Edition, Vol. 1, 274, Note 1285

3.5 Additional Talmudic and Midrashic Sources

Elsewhere, the Talmud (Rosh HaShanah 26a) states explicitly that God placed chochmah (wisdom) in the kidneys. Avot d’Rabbi Natan 31:3 describes a man as a microcosm of everything in the universe, with a description of how each of his bodily parts corresponds to something in the world; in this list, it describes his kidneys as corresponding to advisors.⁹

The Talmud (Chullin 11a) discusses how we know where to cut the spinal cord of a sheep that has been brought as a sacrifice. The Talmud answers that the Torah instructs it to be cut “opposite the atzeh” (Leviticus 3:9). The word atzeh does not appear anywhere else in Scripture and is usually translated as “spine.” But the Talmud expounds it to mean, “the place of the kidneys, which give counsel (etzah, vocalizing the word differently).” This halakhic derivation demonstrates how deeply the physiology of the kidneys was embedded in rabbinic consciousness.

Midrash Tehillim 14 elaborates upon the scriptural accounts of God examining the kidneys and heart, explaining that out of all the limbs and organs in the body, it is these that are directly responsible for determining a person’s actions.¹⁰ Note that this Midrash entirely excludes any role for the brain in this process. The Nishmat kol chai prayer, of uncertain authorship and origins, similarly affirms that it is the heart and kidneys—not the brain—that house a person’s consciousness: “All hearts fear You, and all innards and kidneys praise Your Name.”

3.6 Abraham’s Kidneys: The Paradigmatic Case

It is within this rabbinic framework that the stunning image of Abraham’s kidneys emerges. Bereishit Rabbah 61:1 teaches that Abraham was taught the entire Torah by his kidneys, while Midrash Tanchuma adds that these organs served as internal prophets guiding his moral clarity.¹¹ Here the physiology of conscience reaches its apex: the first patriarch, lacking Sinaitic revelation, received Torah from his own body.

The image is startling in its physicality. The verb novot (flowing) suggests Torah emerging from Abraham’s kidneys like water from a spring. The wisdom is not external revelation descending from above but internal revelation ascending from below. Abraham did not need Sinai because Sinai was already within

⁹Avot d’Rabbi Natan 31:3. This text probably dates to somewhat after the Talmudic period.

¹⁰See Midrash Tehillim 14, which entirely excludes any role for the brain in determining a person’s actions.

¹¹See Midrash Bereishit Rabbah 61:1; similarly in Midrash Tanchuma, parashat Vayigash.

him—written not on tablets of stone but inscribed in his very organs. His kidneys became the first *beit midrash*—an interior academy where divine wisdom welled up from somatic depths.

4. Part III: Medieval Responses—Between Literalism and Allegory

The question of how to understand these traditions generated diverse responses among medieval authorities—responses shaped largely by their varying exposure to Greek and Arabic medical science. As Slifkin has demonstrated in his comprehensive survey, the topic of the kidneys’ function well illustrates the differing education that Jews received in different times and places.¹²

4.1 Medieval France/Germany: No Difficulties

For Rashi (1040–1105), living in France and Germany where Jewish education was limited to traditional sources, there was no problem to solve. In all his commentaries on all the verses and Talmudic statements about the kidneys, Rashi does not make any comment about their being a metaphor. While it is true that in general Rashi does not do anything other than explain the simple meaning of the text, he does see fit to explain where a word is a metaphor—specifically in the context of anatomy. On the verse, “and you shall circumcise the foreskin of your hearts” (Deuteronomy 10:16), Rashi (along with other commentaries) stresses that the word “foreskin” is a metaphor—but not the word “hearts”!¹³

Furthermore, in his commentary to the Talmudic account of the kidneys giving counsel, Rashi elaborates that the kidneys advise the heart on what to do, bringing Scripture as a source for this. On the word *atzeh* (Leviticus 3:9), Rashi presents the Talmudic *atzeh/etzah* interpretation not as *derash* but as *peshat*—accentuating his literal acceptance. Living in France and Germany, Rashi’s education was limited to Jewish studies alone; he would not have been exposed to the scientific and medical texts that would lead one to question whether the kidneys really do have such a function.

4.2 Medieval Spain: Grappling with the Challenge

In sharp contrast to Rashi, Spanish Jewry, educated

in “the best tradition of Arabic-Andalusian science,”¹⁴ grappled more directly with the challenge. R. Judah HaLevi (c. 1075–1141), trained as a physician, expresses awareness of the scientific objections and offers a quasi-defense:¹⁵

“Now, with that which is said about the function of the following organs—the kidneys give counsel, the spleen laughs, the liver causes anger and the stomach causes sleep—there is room for doubt. However, it is not surprising that the kidneys would have an effect upon the nature of thoughts. Surely we see something similar in the function of the testicles; for eunuchs are weak of intellect, even more than women.”

While HaLevi ends up with the same position as Rashi—that the Talmud is to be accepted literally—his approach could not be more different. For Rashi, there was no reason to question the Talmudic account. But for HaLevi, who was educated in Arabic literature, science, and philosophy, the Talmud was not studied in a vacuum. His training as a physician is doubtless responsible for his sensitivity to the problem. Still, given the limited development of the medical sciences in his era, his decision to nevertheless maintain belief in the Talmud’s statement is not unreasonable, although it was probably fueled by his general goal of defending traditional Jewish teachings against external threats.

Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–c.1164) takes a different path entirely. In his commentaries to Psalms 7:10, 16:7, and 139:13, he explains the scriptural references to kidneys as metaphor: the kidneys are hidden deep within the body and thereby represent man’s innermost self.¹⁶ Elsewhere, Ibn Ezra explains the function of kidneys as relating to the generation of sperm. He thus did not believe them to be the source of counsel and therefore explained the verses allegorically. On Leviticus 3:9, Ibn Ezra states that *atzeh* “is not related to any other in Scripture”—explicitly rejecting the Talmudic exegesis linking it to *etzah*.

Ibn Ezra’s approach is consistent with the standard approach to *Aggadata* amongst the Geonim and Sephardic Rishonim.¹⁷ While he had no difficulties simply rejecting the Talmudic statement—he could

¹²Natan Slifkin, “The Question of the Kidneys’ Counsel” (2010), monograph available at www.rationalistjudaism.com.

¹³See Rashi’s commentary to Berachot 61a and Leviticus 3:9.

¹⁴Shlomo Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 8.

¹⁵Kuzari 4:25.

¹⁶See Ibn Ezra’s commentary to Psalms 7:10, 16:7, and 139:13.

¹⁷Chaim Eisen, “Maharal’s Be’er ha-Golah and His Revolution in Aggadic Scholarship,” *Hakirah* 4 (Winter 2007): 137-194.

not do that with the Scriptural verses and therefore chose to interpret them allegorically instead.

4.3 Ramban and Rabbeinu Bachya: Synthesis Attempts

Ramban (Gerona, 1194–Land of Israel, 1270) accepts that the kidneys truly are the sources of counsel. He explains that the reason why with sacrifices, the animal's kidneys are burned, is that they are the instruments of thought and desire and thereby remind man that it was these with which he sinned.¹⁸ Yet Ramban, having medical training in thirteenth-century Spain, was aware that the brain is the seat of the mind.¹⁹ The term “desire” in his formulation perhaps accommodates the scientific view linking kidneys to reproductive organs.

Rabbeinu Bachya b. Asher (mid-thirteenth century–1340), a disciple of Rashba, also notes that the kidneys of an offering correlate with the organs in man which give counsel to the heart and lead him to sin. Yet he too was aware that the brain has a cognitive function. In order to reconcile this with the Scriptural and Talmudic accounts, he proposed that thoughts are conceived in the head but need to descend to the heart and kidneys in order to be actualized and transmitted as directions to the body.²⁰ This ingenious synthesis preserves both traditions while assigning them different roles in the cognitive process.

4.4 R. Yaakov b. Chananel Skili: Defending the Tradition

R. Yehoshua Ibn Shu'ib (Spain, early fourteenth century), another disciple of Rashba, cites and endorses the view of R. Yehudah HaLevi that the Talmud's statement is correct and scientifically defensible. He also claims further evidence in support of the Talmud's statement, noting that there was a case of a person who had his kidneys injured and as a result had his mental faculties harmed.²¹

Yet another disciple of Rashba, R. Yaakov b. Chananel Skili (Spain–Israel–Iraq, fourteenth century), records the controversy directly in *Torat HaMincha*:²²

“It was necessary for me to bring all these [sources] because I heard that there are some of my people, small of faith, who challenge our

Sages for saying that the kidneys give counsel, and they say that the kidneys have no power to understand and to give counsel but rather are just like the lower intestines. But behold, we have learned from the words of the prophets, and from the words of Solomon... who was wise in the natural sciences... and from God's response to Job... that the kidneys are an organ of wisdom, just like the heart.”

Note the difference between the approach of R. Yaakov b. Chananel and that of R. Yehudah HaLevi and R. Yehoshua ibn Shu'ib. They both saw it as necessary to include some sort of scientific justification for their position, whereas for R. Yaakov b. Chananel, the authority of the prophets and King Solomon alone is enough.

4.4 Tashbetz and Rashbash: Scientific Defenses

R. Shimon b. Tzemach Duran (“Tashbetz,” Majorca–Algiers, 1361–1444) studied philosophy and science extensively, focusing in particular on medicine, which he practiced for many years at Majorca. In his work *Magen Avot*, he provides a scientific basis for the Talmud's description of the kidneys' function.²³ He argues that since the kidneys are located close to the sex organs and are related to sexual desire, and the sex organs differ with men and women, and counsel is only found with men (!), thus the kidneys are seen to be the source of counsel. As further evidence, he points out that eunuchs lack counsel and wisdom.

R. Duran states that R. Yehudah HaLevi is his basis for this. But in fact HaLevi's claim was milder, being only that since the testicles are observed to be linked to cognitive functions, it is not far-fetched to suppose that there is also some sort of link between the kidneys and cognitive functions. His son R. Shlomo (“Rashbash,” Algiers, 1400–1467) cites and further elaborates upon the explanation given by his father as well as that given by R. Yehoshua ibn Shu'ib.²⁴

4.5 Early Modern Italy: The Controversy Resurfaces

The discussion about the kidneys flared up again in sixteenth-century Italy, a place where many Jews received an extensive secular education, especially in medicine. The first person to weigh in on the issue was R. Moshe ben Avraham Provençal (Italy, 1503–1576),

¹⁸Commentary to Leviticus 1:9. See also his commentary to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 6:6.

¹⁹In *Torat Hashem Temimah* (Kitvei HaRamban, vol. 1, p. 150), Ramban notes that the purpose of the Tefillin of the head is to be facing the brain, which is the “chariot of the soul.”

²⁰See Rabbeinu Bachya's commentary to Genesis 1:27 and Genesis 6:6. A similar view appears in the thirteenth-century work *Sefer Ma'arechet Eloket*, chapter 10.

²¹*Drashot Ibn Shu'ib* to parashat Emor, p. 284.

²²*Torat HaMincha* (Jerusalem: Ahavat Shalom Publications, 2000), Discourse 74 for parashat Ki Tavo, p. 665.

²³*Magen Avot* 3:4.

²⁴*Responsa Rashbash* 309–310 (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1998).

a halakhist and Chief Rabbi of Mantua. Amongst his responsa is a question that was posed about the Talmud's description of the kidneys giving counsel, since scientists and physicians had concluded that the brain is the seat of counsel. R. Moshe responds that the opinion of scientists and physicians is irrelevant vis-à-vis the tradition of the Sages.²⁵

His disciple and later successor R. Yehudah Moscato (Italy, c.1530–c.1593), on the other hand, while still defending the Talmudic position, sought to reconcile it with science. R. Moscato had also studied with R. Azariah de Rossi and, as a product of the Renaissance, he was well read and respected modern knowledge, which meant that he could not simply dismiss medical opinion.²⁶ In his collection of sermons, he has a lengthy explanation of his own to justify the Talmud's statement, based on the ancient ideas of the bodily humors, with the medieval modification of how these produce vapors which affect the brain.²⁷

R. Yitzchak Lampronti (Italy, 1679–1756) studied with the prominent rabbinic scholar and physician Yitzchak Cantarini and completed his medical studies at the University of Padua. He continued to practice medicine even while working as rabbi and Rosh Yeshivah.²⁸ In his Talmudic encyclopedia Pachad Yitzchak, he has an extensive entry on the topic of the kidneys giving counsel.²⁹ Due to his extensive medical background, he must have considered this an obviously and deeply problematic statement that required addressing at length.

After citing the relevant portions from the Talmud, R. Lampronti begins by noting that while the natural philosophers have discovered many wondrous things, they have not penetrated the true nature of things. Our sages, on the other hand, were privy to divine secrets regarding creation. However, R. Lampronti proceeds to note that when faced with a conflict between the Sages and science, he chooses between two approaches: one being that the Sages' received knowledge enabled them to reach truths that secular scientists cannot attain, and the other being that the Sages did not speak from tradition and were mistaken in their view. The latter is an approach that he applies in the case of the Talmudic statement that lice spontaneously generate, yet in the case of the kidneys, R. Lampronti adopts the approach that the Sages were correct. He explains why: because Scripture itself attributes such a role to the kidneys.

R. Chaim Yosef David Azulai ("Chida," 1724–1807), though essentially a product of Jerusalem dedicated to Talmud and Kabbalah, had broad interests which come to light in his defense of the Talmud's statement about the kidneys. Chida claims that the microscope reveals connections between the kidneys and the brain—apparently a reference to vascular microcirculation and macrocirculation which connects the heart, kidneys, and brain.³⁰ Chida thereby sees evidence that the kidneys are transmitting information to the brain, apparently relying on the ancient belief that blood is a vehicle of the mind.



The frontal lobe, highlighted in orange, is the most developed portion of the brain. It is involved in everything from logical decision making to emotional reaction, from judgment to movement.

²⁵She'elot u'Teshuvot Rabbeinu Moshe Provençal (Jerusalem, 1989); also cited in Pachad Yitzchak, erech Kilyaot Yoazot.

²⁶Moshe Idel, "Judah Moscato, a Late Renaissance Jewish Preacher," in Preachers of the Italian Ghetto (1992): 41-66.

²⁷Nefutzot Yehudah (Venice, 1588; Lemberg, 1859), derush 9.

²⁸David Ruderman, "Contemporary Science and Jewish Law in the Eyes of Isaac Lampronti of Ferrara," Jewish History 6:1-2 (1992): 211-224.

²⁹Pachad Yitzchak, erech Kilyaot Yoazot.

³⁰Pesach Einayim, Berachos 60a, and Midbar Kadmus, Kaf.

5. Part IV: The Modern Period—Literalists, Allegorists, and Rationalists

5.1 Contemporary Literalist Positions

In the modern era, many still insist on the literal truth of the kidneys providing counsel. Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg (1915–2006), who was the rabbi of the Shaarei Zedek Medical Center, uses the Talmud as reason for warning against kidney transplants, since one risks the donor's kidneys counseling the recipient in a harmful manner.³¹ The prominent Sephardic authority Rabbi Ovadiah Yosef (1920–2013) recommends that Jews receiving kidney transplants choose, wherever possible, to receive the organ from a Jewish donor, due to the Talmudic account of the kidneys providing counsel.³²

Rabbi Chaim Elazar Spira (the Munkacher Rebbe, 1871–1937) claims that medical science provides support for the Talmud's statement, albeit somewhat reinterpreted to be referring to nineteenth-century beliefs concerning the pathophysiology of kidney stones.³³ He explains that renal colic results from an inability to digest calcium properly, which in turn results from psychological stress and anxiety—which he describes as “the inability to provide counsel to the soul.” R. Spira thereby sees medical science as justifying the Sages' statement; although, as Slifkin notes, he seems not to have noticed that even with this very loose interpretation, it is the heart affecting the kidneys rather than the other way around.

5.2 Modern Allegorical Interpretations

Other traditionalists, who accept the modern scientific view regarding the kidneys, interpret the Scriptural and Talmudic accounts allegorically. The physician Dr. Yehudah Leib Katzenelson (1846–1917) insists that the Talmud's account of the kidneys providing counsel must be a metaphor, since the sages “surely knew” that the brain is the seat of the intellect and counsel.³⁴

In a lengthy discussion, Rabbi Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar (1871–1937) claims that the Talmud is allegorically referring to the spiritual counterpart of the kidneys, which are so named because just as the actual kidneys provide “good counsel” by

filtering urine, so too these spiritual organs provide good counsel.³⁵ Rabbi Chaim Friedlander of the Ponovezh Yeshivah (1923–1986) similarly insists that the Scriptural and Talmudic references must be to “metaphysical kidneys” which cleanse the soul of evil, paralleling the function of the physical kidneys which cleanse the body of waste.³⁶

None of these authorities explain how the Talmud's account of the kidneys also providing harmful counsel occurs with the spiritual counterparts to the kidneys; nor do they provide any justification for reading the various Talmudic statements in this light beyond the general claim of the Sages' supernatural wisdom.

5.3 The Rationalist Approach

For Orthodox Jews of a more rationalist persuasion, it is relatively easy to accept that the Talmud's views on the kidneys were simply mistaken. More challenging, however, are the descriptions of the kidneys found in Scripture. Some take the approach that the Scriptural verses to this effect are allegorical and were misunderstood by the Sages and Rishonim. But others are able to accept that they are literal and mistaken without this harming their faith, by adopting a variant of the principle of *dibra Torah k'lashon bnei adam*, “the Torah speaks like the language of men.”³⁷

This phrase appears in numerous places throughout the Talmud and Midrash, in the rabbinic works of the medieval period, and in the writings of recent scholars. However, the concept is utilized in very different ways. In the Talmud and Midrash, the phrase means that pleonasms (excesses in language) are used as a rhetorical flourish in the Torah, just as people speak, and are not intended to provide a basis for an additional exegesis. In the writings of the Geonim and Rishonim, on the other hand, we find them employing this principle to account for Scriptural anthropomorphisms.

Rabbi Dr. Isadore Twersky (1930–1997) explains Ibn Kaspi's approach to this principle at length:³⁸

“Kaspi frequently operates with the following exegetical premise: not every Scriptural statement is true in the absolute sense. A statement may be purposely erroneous, reflecting an erroneous

³¹ Responsa Tzitz Eliezer 13:91:4; see also 17:66:7.

³² Responsa Yabia Omer vol. 8 Choshen Mishpat 11.

³³ Divrei Torah 6, p. 880.

³⁴ Yehudah Leib Katzenelson, HaTalmud VeChachmat HaRefuah (Berlin, 1925), 106.

³⁵ Yekutiel Aryeh Kamelhar, HaTalmud U'Mada'ei HaTevil (Levov, 1928), 3:1, pp. 17–20.

³⁶ Sifsei Chaim, Emunah u'Bechirah II, p. 316.

³⁷ Avraham Korman, Ha-Adam Ve-Tiv'o (Tel Aviv, 1986, reprinted 2003), 289–290.

³⁸ Isadore Twersky, “Joseph ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual,” in Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature, vol. 1 (Harvard University Press, 1979), 239–242.

view of the masses... In its Kaspian adaptation, the rabbinic dictum may then be paraphrased as follows: 'The Torah expressed things as they were believed or perceived or practiced by the multitude and not as they were in actuality.'"

R. Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808–1888) writes about scientific inaccuracies in Scripture as follows:³⁹

"Jewish scholarship has never regarded the Bible as a textbook for physical or even abstract doctrines. In its view the main emphasis of the Bible is always on the ethical and social structure and development of life on earth... That is why Jewish scholarship regards the Bible as speaking consistently in 'human language'; the Bible does not describe things in terms of objective truths known only to God, but in terms of human understanding, which is, after all, the basis for human language and expression."

Rabbi Avraham Yitzchak Kook (1865–1935) also invokes the concept to explain why there is no reason to seek scientific accuracy in the Torah:⁴⁰

"Every intelligent person knows that there is no relevance to our faith... with regard to the state of astronomical or geological knowledge... It is already adequately known that prophecy takes its metaphors to guide mankind according to that which was then well-known in the language of men at that time... The intellectual truths of the depths of Torah are elevated and exalted far beyond these."

6. Part V: Kabbalistic Reframing—The Kidneys within the Sefirotic Architecture

6.1 The Body as Map of Divine Emanation

Kabbalah transforms the rabbinic intuition about embodied wisdom into a comprehensive metaphysical system. The ten sefirot—the divine attributes through which Ein Sof (the Infinite) manifests in creation—are mapped onto the human body. Chochmah (Wisdom) corresponds to the right hemisphere of the brain; Binah (Understanding) to the left; Chesed (Lovingkindness) to the right arm; Gevurah (Judgment) to the left; and so on.⁴¹

Within this system, the kidneys find their place among the lower sefirot, associated with Netzach (Eternity/

Victory) and Hod (Glory/Splendor). The Zohar, the central text of Kabbalah, develops the connection between kidneys and moral filtration.⁴² Just as the physical kidneys filter blood, removing impurities and maintaining homeostasis, so the spiritual function of the lower sefirot involves *birur*—the sifting and refinement of divine energy as it descends through the sefirotic tree. The kidneys become sites of *tikkun* (repair), separating the sparks of holiness from the *kelipot* (shells) that entrap them.

6.2 Chochmah as Flowing Water

The Kabbalistic association of Chochmah with water provides a crucial link to the midrashic image of Torah flowing from Abraham's kidneys. In the Zohar, Chochmah is described as the primordial point (*nekudah kadma'ah*) from which all existence emanates—but this point itself emerges from Keter (Crown), the undifferentiated divine will, like a spring emerging from a hidden source. The water imagery pervades: Chochmah is the *ma'ayan* (spring), the *nahar* (river) that flows downward through the sefirot to vivify creation.⁴³

This water must be filtered as it descends. The lower sefirot, including those associated with the kidneys, perform this filtration—ensuring that the divine light can be received by finite vessels without overwhelming them. Abraham's kidneys, then, represent a perfected filtration system: organs so refined that they could receive Chochmah in its purity and transmit it as Torah.

6.3 The Shattering of Vessels

Isaac Luria's revolutionary teaching of *shevirat ha-kelim* (the shattering of the vessels) adds another dimension. In the primordial catastrophe, the vessels designed to contain divine light proved too fragile; they shattered, scattering sparks of holiness throughout creation. The kidneys, as organs of filtration and testing, become instruments of *birur*—the gathering and elevation of these scattered sparks.

This framework suggests that the body's wisdom-generating capacity is itself part of the cosmic repair. Every moment of moral discernment that emerges from the kidneys, every intuition that arises from the viscera, participates in *tikkun olam* (repair of the world). The body becomes not merely a recipient of divine wisdom but an active agent in its restoration.

³⁹Samson Raphael Hirsch, *Collected Writings* vol. 7 (New York: Feldheim, 1996), 57.

⁴⁰R. Avraham Yitzchak Kook, *Adar HaYekar*, 37–38.

⁴¹Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1941), 244–286.

⁴²Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 112–145.

⁴³Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

7 Part VI: From Physiology to Phenomenology—Contemporary Bridges

7.1 Jung and Somatic Wisdom

Carl Jung's analytical psychology, while emerging from a different tradition, resonates remarkably with the Kabbalistic understanding of embodied wisdom. Jung repeatedly emphasized that the unconscious is not only psychic but also somatic—that the body carries knowledge inaccessible to ego-consciousness.⁴⁴ In his late work on synchronicity, Jung suggested that psyche and matter are two aspects of a single underlying reality, not separate substances as Descartes claimed.

Jung's concept of the archetypes—primordial patterns that structure both psychic and physical reality—provides a framework for understanding how organs like the kidneys could “know” in ways that transcend neurological computation. The kidneys, in this view, embody an archetype of moral discrimination and purification that operates beneath conscious awareness. Abraham's kidneys flowing with Torah represents the perfect alignment of archetypal pattern and physical organ.

7.2 Phenomenology and Embodied Cognition

Contemporary phenomenology, particularly the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides philosophical grounding for embodied epistemology. Merleau-Ponty's concept of the “flesh” (*la chair*) describes a pre-reflective, pre-personal layer of experience where body and world interpenetrate.⁴⁵ Before the subject-object distinction arises, there is a primordial unity in which knowing and being, perceiving and perceived, are not yet separate.

This phenomenological insight illuminates the biblical and Kabbalistic claim that wisdom can emerge from organs other than the brain. The kidneys' knowledge is not propositional knowledge (knowing that) but embodied know-how (knowing how)—a form of wisdom that operates through bodily participation in the world rather than through abstract representation. The kidneys “know” moral truth the way a dancer knows balance: through lived engagement, not cognitive computation.

7.3 The Return of the Body in Neuroscience

Contemporary neuroscience, ironically, is returning to something like the biblical anthropology. The discovery of the enteric nervous system—sometimes called the “second brain”—with its 500 million neurons lining the gastrointestinal tract, and research on interoception (the perception of internal bodily states) suggest that cognition is indeed distributed throughout the body.⁴⁶ The “gut feeling” that biblical authors knew through lived experience, modern science is rediscovering through empirical investigation.

We stand at a moment when the Cartesian paradigm is crumbling. Neuroscience has shown that consciousness is not localized in a single brain region but distributed across neural networks. Research on interoception demonstrates that we perceive and process information through our entire bodies. Studies of the gut microbiome suggest that our sense of self depends on trillions of organisms that are not even genetically “us.” The bounded, brain-centered self of Cartesian imagination is giving way to an embodied, extended, embedded understanding of human being.



⁴⁴Carl G. Jung, *Collected Works*, vol. 8, “The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche,” and vol. 9, “The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious.”

⁴⁵See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962).

⁴⁶On the enteric nervous system and “gut-brain axis,” see Michael D. Gershon, *The Second Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998).

8. Part VII: Embodied Theology and the Contemporary Therapeutic Space

I have attempted to describe an embodied theology of healing that draws directly on the tradition traced above.⁴⁷ Central to this framework is the concept of the therapeutic space as a contemporary locus of divine indwelling—a site where the dynamics of *tzimtzum*, *tikkun*, and Shekhinah consciousness converge in the physician-patient encounter.

In “Shekhinah Consciousness in the Therapeutic Space,” the argument emerges that the Shekhinah—God’s indwelling presence—manifests in authentic healing relationships. The therapeutic encounter becomes sacred when the physician practices *tzimtzum* (self-contraction), creating space for the patient’s experience to emerge. This divine self-limitation, which in Lurianic Kabbalah makes creation possible, here makes healing possible by allowing the patient’s embodied wisdom to surface.

8.1 The Patient as Sacred Text

A recurring theme is the concept of the patient as sacred text requiring hermeneutic interpretation. In “The Patient as Parable” and related works, the patient’s suffering is understood not merely as pathology to be corrected but as *midrash*—a sacred narrative awaiting interpretation. The body speaks a language that the physician must learn to read, and this reading is not reducible to diagnostic algorithms.

This hermeneutic approach to medicine reconnects directly with the tradition of embodied wisdom. If Abraham’s kidneys could generate Torah, then every patient’s body carries potential revelation. The physician’s task is not merely to treat disease but to attend to the wisdom that emerges from the patient’s embodied experience—to recognize, in the words of the Psalmist, that the kidneys offer nocturnal instruction that daylight consciousness fails to hear.

8.2 Tzimtzum as Clinical Method

“The Dialectical Divine: Tzimtzum and the Parabolic Theology of Human Suffering” develops the clinical implications of Lurianic contraction. The physician who practices *tzimtzum* withdraws the ego-centered need to fix, diagnose, and control, creating space for the patient’s own wisdom to emerge. This self-limitation is not passivity but the most demanding form of activity—the active restraint that makes genuine encounter possible.

⁴⁷See the extensive corpus at jyungar.com, particularly “Shekhinah Consciousness in the Therapeutic Space” and “The Dialectical Divine: Tzimtzum and the Parabolic Theology of Human Suffering.”

In this framework, the patient’s symptoms are not merely problems to be solved but communications to be heard. The body—including the kidneys and other internal organs—is constantly “speaking,” generating meaning that the biomedical model is deaf to. The essays propose training physicians in what might be called somatic hermeneutics: the art of reading the body’s text, attending to its symbolism, honoring its wisdom.

8.3 Critiquing Cartesian Medicine

In “The Cartesian Split Lives On” and “Beyond Chemical Reductionism”—I directly critique the mind-body dualism that has structured Western medicine since Descartes. This dualism, the argument runs, has severed the connection between the patient’s lived bodily experience and the objectified body-as-mechanism that medicine claims to treat. The result is a healthcare system that excels at technical intervention but fails to engage the patient’s embodied wisdom.

I have proposed an alternative: a medicine grounded in what they call sacred encounter. In “The Sacred Paradox of Healing,” this encounter is described as requiring the physician to hold both divine presence and absence—to recognize that healing involves the gathering of scattered sparks (*nitzotzot*) trapped in the patient’s suffering. The physician becomes not merely a technician but a participant in *tikkun*, collaborating with the patient’s body in the work of cosmic repair.

9. Part VIII: Synthesis—Toward an Embodied Epistemology of Healing

9.1 The Continuous Thread

The thread connecting these diverse sources—biblical, rabbinic, Kabbalistic, Jungian, phenomenological—is the consistent affirmation that wisdom can arise from bodily sources other than the brain. This is not primitive naïveté but a sophisticated alternative to the Cartesian paradigm that has impoverished both medicine and theology.

The biblical authors who placed conscience in the kidneys were not confused about anatomy; they were articulating an anthropology in which the whole body participates in knowing. The rabbis who described Abraham’s kidneys flowing with Torah were not speaking metaphorically; they were describing a condition in which the body becomes so refined that it can receive and transmit divine wisdom. The

Kabbalists who mapped the sefirot onto the body were not merely creating a mnemonic device; they were asserting an actual correspondence between divine structure and human form.

9.2 Beyond the Rationalist Resolution

The rationalist resolution offered by figures like R. Samson Raphael Hirsch and R. Abraham Isaac Kook—that Scripture speaks in “the language of men,” accommodating popular but mistaken beliefs—is intellectually satisfying but risks missing what the tradition may actually be pointing toward. The rabbinic physiology of the kidneys is not merely “primitive science” to be explained away; it may encode a

phenomenological insight of enduring significance: that moral wisdom emerges from somatic depths, that the body itself “knows” in ways that precede and exceed rational cognition.

Abraham’s kidneys, flowing with Torah, become not an embarrassing relic of pre-scientific thought but a profound image of embodied revelation—a paradigm for what this essay has called an “embodied theology.” The medieval authorities who struggled to reconcile this tradition with emerging medical science were not merely engaged in apologetics; they were working out the implications of a radically different anthropology than the one that would eventually triumph in the west.



9.3 Implications for Contemporary Practice

What would medicine look like if it took seriously the claim that wisdom emerges from organs other than the brain? First, it would attend to patients’ bodily sensations not merely as symptoms to be decoded but as communications to be heard. The patient who says “I feel it in my gut” or “something in my heart tells me” would not be dismissed as speaking metaphorically but honored as accessing a form of knowing that rational analysis cannot replicate.

Second, such medicine would train physicians in practices of embodied presence—not merely “active listening” as a communication technique but genuine *tzimtzum*, self-contraction that creates space for the patient’s embodied wisdom to emerge. The essays at jyungar.com repeatedly emphasize that this requires more than technique; it requires the physician’s own spiritual development, their capacity to hold uncertainty, to dwell in the space between knowing and not-knowing.

Third, this approach would recognize the therapeutic relationship itself as a site of wisdom-generation. When physician and patient enter authentic encounter, something emerges that neither brought to the

meeting. This emergent wisdom is not reducible to the physician’s expertise or the patient’s self-knowledge; it arises in the space between, in what Buber called the “between” (*das Zwischen*). The kidneys that flow with Torah may be the physician’s as much as the patient’s.

10 Conclusion: The River that Flows from the Body

Across Scripture, Midrash, Kabbalah, depth psychology, and the essays at jyungar.com, a single motif emerges: wisdom rises from the hidden chambers of the self. Chochmah is not only the divine attribute associated with the uppermost reaches of the sefirotic tree but also the living water that permeates every level of being, including the flesh. Abraham’s kidneys symbolize the first *beit midrash* of the body, the first therapeutic space, and a reminder that revelation continues to whisper within us.

The medieval controversy traced by Slifkin—between literalists who defended the Talmudic physiology and rationalists who reinterpreted it allegorically—is not merely a historical curiosity. It represents an ongoing tension in Jewish thought between accommodation to

external knowledge and fidelity to received tradition. Yet both sides of this controversy may have missed the deeper point: that the tradition of embodied wisdom points toward a phenomenology of moral knowing that neither ancient physiology nor modern neuroscience has fully captured.

The therapeutic implications are profound. If the body itself is a site of revelation, then healing cannot be reduced to technical intervention in a biological mechanism. The physician must become something like a prophet—not in the sense of predicting the future but in the original sense of navi: one who receives and transmits divine communication. The patient's body speaks; the physician's task is to listen.

This is, ultimately, a call to recover what modern medicine has lost: the sense of the clinical encounter as sacred space, the patient as bearing divine image, the body as temple. The kidneys that flowed with Torah in Abraham still flow in every patient who enters the consulting room. The question is whether the physician has ears to hear.

In the context of the ancient tradition traced throughout this essay, we may say: the body knows. The kidneys advise. The heart considers. And from the hidden chambers of the flesh, wisdom—chochmah—continues to well up like water from a spring, offering instruction to those who have learned to attend to its voice.

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