

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Between the Waters: Umbilicus Mundi on Living Tethered to the Provisional

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Received: 28 February 2026 Accepted: 16 March 2026 Published: 18 March 2026

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## Abstract

This essay reads a deceptively simple folk parable — two unborn twins debating whether life exists beyond the womb — as a compressed theological treatise on the dialectic between divine immanence and transcendence. Drawing upon the Kabbalistic concept of tzimtzum, the Shekhinah traditions of Jewish mysticism, the hester panim theology of divine concealment, and the post-Holocaust theological frameworks that have informed my clinical and academic writing over five decades, I argue that the womb parable encodes an epistemology of sacred limitation: the closed system is not a prison but a preparation.

The essay's central and perhaps most theologically urgent claim is this: both twins are correct. The rational twin's empiricism is not merely excused as epistemologically limited — it is, within the chalal hapanui, the primordial void created by divine tzimtzum, theologically valid. The void is real. The hiddenness is genuine. Anti-theology, seriously and honestly practiced, is itself a mode of theological seriousness that the tradition cannot afford to dismiss. A God whose absence is merely theatrical has not truly contracted; tzimtzum without genuine void is a cosmological fiction.

The believing twin does not possess superior information. He inhabits a different relation — relational, auditory, oriented toward address rather than observation. The mother is not absent from the womb; she is the very amniotic medium of existence. But the chalal hapanui contains both twins with identical ontological generosity. She does not love the believer more. The dialectic requires both poles: a world of universal believing would have no genuine void, no authentic human freedom, no chalal in which the divine concealment could be real.

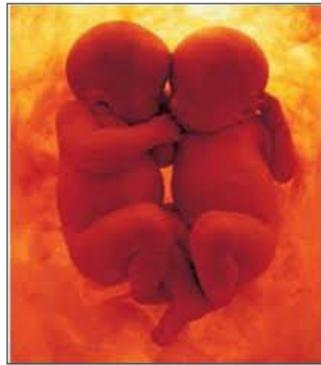
An addendum deepens the parable through two convergent traditions: the Talmudic teaching of Niddah 30b-which reveals that the womb is the original beit midrash, where an angel teaches the entire Torah by candlelight before sealing it in oblivion at birth — and the Jungian-Neumann understanding of the womb as the Great Mother archetype, the primordial containing feminine of the collective unconscious. Read together with my published Shekhinah theology, these traditions reveal the mother of the parable as simultaneously the biological mother, the Shekhinah as cosmic womb, and the Great Mother of depth psychology — three mothers whose convergence constitutes the parable's full theological depth.

**Keywords:** Clinically Integrated Tzimtzum, Chalal Hapanui, Shekhinah, Niddah 30b, Prenatal Torah, Great Mother Archetype, Therapeutic Tzimtzum, Hermeneutic Medicine, Sacred Listening, Relational Knowing, Post-Holocaust Theology.

*One of my favorite stories is in a mother's womb, with two babies, and one turns to the other and says, do you believe in life after delivery? And the other replies, why, of course, there has to be something after delivery. Maybe we're here to prepare ourselves for what will be later. Nonsense, says the first. There's no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?*

**Citation:** Julian Ungar-Sargon. Between the Waters: Umbilicus Mundi on Living Tethered to the Provisional. *Journal of Religion and Theology* 2026;8(1): 40-57.

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*I don't know, said the second, but there'll be more light than here.*

*Maybe we'll walk with our legs and eat with our mouths.*

*Maybe we'll have other senses we can't understand now.*

*The first goes, that's ridiculous. Walking is impossible and eating with our mouths.*

*That's absurd. The umbilical cord is what scientifically supplies nutrition and all that we need, but it's far too short.*

*Life after delivery is to be logically excluded.*

*And the second says, what if it's just different than it is here?*

*Maybe we don't need that physical cord anymore.*

*The first goes, okay, if there were life after delivery, then tell me, why has no one ever come back from there?*

*Delivery is the end of life and in the after delivery is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere.*

*And the second says, but certainly we'll meet mother and she'll take care of us.*

*The first goes, mother? You actually believe in mother? If mother exists, where is she now?*

*And the second goes, she's all around us. We are of her. It is in her that we live. Without her, this world would not and could not exist.*

*And the first says, I don't see her. It's only logical that she's not here.*

*To which the second replied, sometimes when you're in silence and you really listen, you can perceive her presence. You can hear her loving voice calling down from above.<sup>1</sup>*

## **1. The Parable and the Problem of Epistemological Closure**

There is a story — I do not know its precise provenance, though its theological sophistication suggests something deeper than internet folklore— of two twins in utero, debating the existence of

life after delivery. The first twin is the rationalist: umbilical cord as epistemological anchor, empirical observation as the only legitimate mode of access to reality. The second twin is the mystic: oriented toward presence rather than proof, toward relational encounter rather than verifiable data. What makes this parable remarkable — what has kept me returning to it throughout a career spent at the intersection of neurology, theology, and the philosophy of medicine — is its refusal to caricature either position. The skeptical twin is not a fool. He is doing exactly what good science demands: reasoning from available evidence within the only system he can observe. His conclusions are valid. His premises are simply, and catastrophically, insufficient. But insufficiency is not the same as error. Within the womb, there is no error. There is only the womb.<sup>2</sup>

The philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn argued that paradigm shifts occur not when the weight of evidence gradually tips the scales, but when the conceptual framework within which evidence is evaluated undergoes a revolutionary rupture.<sup>3</sup> The womb parable dramatizes precisely this Kuhnian crisis: the skeptical twin cannot be argued out of his position because the very terms of argument — the grammar of proof — are womb-dependent. What is needed is not more evidence but a different mode of knowing. This essay's purpose is not to adjudicate between the twins but to understand why the *chalal hapanui* — the primordial void created by divine *tzimtzum* — requires them both.

The entire tradition of Kabbalah rests upon the recognition that the *Ein Sof* — the Infinite — cannot be apprehended through the ordinary instruments of human cognition.<sup>4</sup> The *Zohar's* opening movement, the *Sifra Detzniuta*, begins precisely with the problem of how one describes what cannot be seen, how one speaks of what precedes language, how one knows what transcends the knower.<sup>5</sup> But the Kabbalistic tradition also insists on the genuine reality of the void

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<sup>1</sup>It is frequently (but inaccurately) attributed to: Henri Nouwen or Wayne Dyer and various anonymous "Hasidic" or "Jewish" sources. It appears to have circulated widely in Christian spiritual literature in the late 20th century and then entered broader interfaith motivational contexts.

it describes. The chalal is not an optical illusion. The darkness is not staged. This is the theological claim this essay seeks to honor in both twins equally.

## 2. Tzimtzum and the Womb: Divine Contraction as Creative Limitation

The great cosmological teaching of Rabbi Isaac Luria the Ari of Safed — begins not with creation but with withdrawal.<sup>6</sup> Before God could create, the Infinite had to make room. The Ein Sof contracted, pulled back, and in that withdrawal created the primordial space — the chalal — within which finite existence became possible. This is tzimtzum: divine self-limitation as the precondition for the existence of the other.<sup>7</sup> The womb is tzimtzum made biological. The mother contracts, makes interior space, withdraws even as she sustains. She cannot enter the space she has created without destroying it. Her concealment is the condition of the twin's existence. This is not absence — it is the highest form of presence, the presence that enables rather than overwhelms.<sup>8</sup>

But here the Lurianic theology introduces its most theologically vertiginous claim: after tzimtzum, the void is genuine. The Ari does not say that God merely pretends to withdraw while secretly remaining everywhere equally present. He says the withdrawal is real — so real that a separate residual imprint, the *reshimu*, is the only trace of divine presence remaining in the chalal. The emptiness is not theatrical. The darkness is not merely darkness-as-metaphor. This is what makes the skeptical twin's perception not a failure but a genuine reading of the chalal's actual condition.<sup>9</sup>

The physician who truly heals learns to practice what I call therapeutic tzimtzum: a deliberate withdrawal of the self, a making-of-space within which the patient's own healing intelligence can emerge.<sup>10</sup> This is not passivity; it is the most demanding form of active presence. And crucially, it requires that the physician genuinely withdraw — that the therapeutic space be a real chalal, not merely a performance of absence concealing omnipresent clinical authority. The authenticity of therapeutic tzimtzum is validated precisely by the patient's ability to inhabit the space as genuinely open.

Gershom Scholem, in his foundational analysis of Lurianic cosmology, emphasizes that tzimtzum is not merely subtraction but the creation of positive potential through apparent negation.<sup>11</sup> The cord that sustains will be cut. The darkness will be flooded with light. The fluid will drain. Every element of womb-

existence that currently constitutes reality will be revealed, in the moment of delivery, as preparation. This is not consolation; it is cosmology. And the rational twin's rigorous inhabitation of the darkness is, paradoxically, the fullest possible engagement with the chalal's genuine reality.

## 3. The Rational Twin's Theological Validity: Correct in the Chalal

I want to make a claim that runs against the grain of most theological readings of this parable, and that I believe is essential to the integrity of my theology of immanence and transcendence: the rational twin is not merely excused for his skepticism. Within the chalal *hapanui*, he is theologically correct.

This requires unpacking with care, because it is not merely a gesture of intellectual generosity toward the non-believer. It is a claim about the structure of reality as Lurianic Kabbalah understands it. If the divine tzimtzum is genuine — if the withdrawal that creates the chalal is a real contraction and not a stage-set concealment — then the rational twin's perception of absence is an accurate perception of the chalal's actual condition. He is not hallucinating an empty womb. He is correctly reading an emptiness that is genuinely, cosmologically there.<sup>12</sup>

Consider the *reshimu* — the residual divine trace that remains in the chalal after tzimtzum. The Ari's teaching is precise on this point: the *reshimu* is genuinely ambiguous.<sup>13</sup> It is not a glowing signpost to divine presence. It is the faintest possible signature, available only to a particular mode of attentive relation, and interpretable — even by a person of intellectual seriousness — as nothing more than the diminishing echo of what has withdrawn. The rational twin who examines the *reshimu* and concludes that it is insufficient evidence of divine presence is applying appropriate epistemic standards to genuinely ambiguous data. He is not failing to see what is obvious. He is correctly identifying that what is present in the chalal is genuinely, intentionally, almost-invisible.

The post-Holocaust theologians have understood this with a clarity born of catastrophe. Eliezer Berkovits' theology of the hiding God insists that God's concealment must be real — not a pedagogical simulation, not a test with a foregone conclusion — or the moral seriousness of human response is undermined.<sup>14</sup> If God is secretly present and merely appears to hide, then the suffering of the innocent is not genuine abandonment but theatrical abandonment,

which is infinitely more obscene. The void must be a void. The hiding must be hiding. The rational twin who says “I do not see her” is, in this theological framework, giving the correct answer to a question that has been deliberately constructed to yield no other honest answer.

Emil Fackenheim’s insistence on the reality of divine absence at Auschwitz makes the same demand from a different angle.<sup>15</sup> The 614th commandment — to deny Hitler posthumous victories — is addressed to people who have every rational reason not to believe. It is not addressed to people whose faith has never been tested by genuine darkness. The commanding voice speaks precisely from within the darkness, not from a position of resolved theodicy. The rational twin is the addressee of this command: the one whose “no” is honest enough that a subsequent “yes” would mean something.

This leads me to a claim about the dialectical structure of my theology of immanence and transcendence that I have been developing across my published work but have not stated with sufficient directness: anti-theology, seriously and honestly practiced, is a mode of theological seriousness.<sup>16</sup> The atheist who cannot believe because the evidence is genuinely insufficient who has looked clearly at the darkness and refused to paper it over with premature consolation — is engaged in a form of theological honesty that the tradition cannot afford to dismiss. The Talmudic tradition preserves a remarkable phrase: *kofin oto ad sheyomar rotzeh ani* — we coerce a person until they say “I am willing.” The coercion presupposes genuine unwillingness. The tradition requires real resistance in order to produce real assent. The rational twin is not the tradition’s failed product; he is its necessary precondition.<sup>13</sup>

The mother, in the parable’s theology, contains both twins with identical ontological generosity. She does not withdraw her amniotic sustenance from the skeptic. The *chalal* holds him as surely as it holds his believing brother. Her reality is not contingent on his perception of it. And this is the final, most devastating validation of his position: even his non-perception occurs within her. Even his “no” is spoken in her voice’s register. Even his confident empiricism is an act performed inside the womb of a mother whose existence he denies. He is, without knowing it, the most intimate demonstration of the very immanence he disbelieves.

#### **4. Anti-Theology as Theology: The *Chalal Hapanui* as the Space That Holds Both**

The *chalal hapanui* — the primordial void of Lurianic

cosmology — is the theological concept that allows me to say what I want to say about the twins without collapsing the tension between them. The *chalal* is not neutral space. It is not simply absence. It is divine absence that is itself a form of divine act. The void is willed. The emptiness is purposive. The withdrawal that creates it is the condition of possibility for everything that exists within it — including the rational twin’s rigorous non-belief.<sup>14</sup>

I have been working toward what I can only call an anti-theology: not atheism, which is the confident assertion of God’s non-existence, and not agnosticism, which is the suspension of judgment, but something more dialectically demanding — the simultaneous holding of the theological and the anti-theological as co-necessary poles of a single truth that exceeds both.<sup>15</sup> The *chalal* is the spatial metaphor for this holding. It is the place where God is genuinely absent and genuinely present simultaneously — absent as the direct, verifiable, observable presence that the skeptical twin demands; present as the very medium that makes his questioning possible. Elliot Wolfson’s sophisticated analysis of Kabbalistic language has illuminated for me why this dialectical structure cannot be resolved by choosing one pole.<sup>16</sup> The Kabbalistic tradition does not offer the easy consolation of divine presence as the answer to divine absence. It offers instead the more demanding insight that absence and presence are modes of each other: the divine hiding is a form of divine speech, the void is a form of fullness, the *chalal* is itself an expression of the *Ein Sof*’s inexhaustible generativity. This is not word-play. It is the most rigorous possible response to the problem of concealment: not to deny it, not to explain it away, but to find within it the signature of what conceals itself.

The womb parable is a perfect illustration of this dialectical structure because it makes the spatial metaphor visceral. Both twins are right about what they can observe. The skeptic is right that there is no direct empirical evidence of the mother. The believer is right that there is a presence that can be perceived in silence. These are not contradictory observations — they are observations of the same reality from within the same space, made available by different modes of attention. The *chalal* contains both attentions equally. Neither invalidates the other. The void is genuinely dark. The mother’s voice is genuinely audible. Both are true simultaneously.

In my theology as developed across my published work, I have consistently argued against what I call the premature resolution of theological tension.<sup>15</sup> The

therapeutic encounter replicates this structure: the physician who rushes to reassure, who papers over the genuine darkness of prognosis with consolatory language, is committing a form of theological violence denying the patient the right to inhabit the chalal of their own situation with integrity. The patient deserves the rational twin's honesty as much as the believing twin's hope. Sacred medicine holds both without forcing a resolution that the clinical reality has not yet earned.

The dialectic requires both poles not as a philosophical nicety but as an ontological necessity. Consider what a world of universal believing would produce: no genuine chalal, no authentic human freedom, no space of real question within which real seeking becomes possible. The Talmudic tradition understands this through the concept of the yetzer hara — the evil inclination — which is not simply a moral obstacle but, paradoxically, a necessary engine of human striving.<sup>16</sup> Without the rational twin's "no," the believing twin's "yes" is cheap. Without the darkness, the voice from above is only noise. The chalal hapanui is not a problem awaiting the solution of universal faith. It is the structure within which faith can mean something.

I am aware that this is a demanding theological position — one that requires holding a genuine "no" alongside a genuine "yes" without resolving the tension by making the "no" secretly a "yes" in disguise. But I believe it is the only theologically honest position available in the post-Holocaust world. After Auschwitz, after the darkness of the twentieth century's most sustained divine silence, a theology that does not take the rational twin's position with complete seriousness is not theology. It is wishful thinking dressed in liturgical garments.<sup>17</sup>

## 5. Shekhinah as Amniotic Presence: Immanence Without Visibility

The second twin's most theologically dense utterance is this

"She is all around us. We are of her. It is in her that we live. Without her, this world would not and could not exist."

This is not merely poetic. It is a precise description of Shekhinah — the Divine Presence as understood in Kabbalistic and rabbinic tradition.<sup>18</sup> The Shekhinah is not a deity who occasionally visits the world. She is the very medium of existence: the divine immanence that permeates, sustains, and saturates reality at every point. She is what makes the world possible from the inside. And crucially, for the theological argument

I am making about the rational twin: she permeates the womb regardless of whether the twins perceive her. The Shekhinah's presence in the chalal does not depend on creaturely recognition. She is no less present in the skeptic's region of the womb than in the believer's.

In my recent work on Shekhinah consciousness, I have argued that the therapeutic encounter can be understood as a locus of divine indwelling — a contemporary site of the Shekhinah's presence, where the dynamics of tzimtzum, tikkun, and dirah betachtonim converge.<sup>19</sup> The womb parable makes this argument in narrative form. The mother is Shekhinah: utterly immanent, sustaining life from within, invisible to the instruments developed within that life, present in a way that exceeds all empirical detection. But — and this is now central to the essay's argument — her presence in the chalal is not a refutation of the rational twin's perception. It is the ground within which his rigorous non-perception takes place. The amniotic fluid that sustains him while he denies his mother is, itself, her. Feminist theologians have long emphasized the maternal dimensions of Shekhinah theology.<sup>20</sup> Rachel Adler's work on divine maternity, Judith Plaskow's recovery of immanent divinity in Jewish feminist thought, and Elliot Wolfson's analysis of the gendered economy of Kabbalistic symbolism all converge on the recognition that the Divine-as-Mother is not a metaphor but a theological category.<sup>21</sup> The womb parable enacts rather than merely illustrates this category. The twins swim in God without knowing it. They breathe divinity with every movement of their developing lungs. The Shekhinah is as close to them as the fluid that carries them — and as invisible as the air will be to us. The rational twin's denial takes place within an intimacy he cannot perceive. This is not ironic. It is the structure of chalal-existence itself.

## 6. Hester Panim and the Phenomenology of Divine Concealment

The skeptical twin's most pointed challenge: "Mother? You actually believe in mother? If mother exists, where is she now?"

This is the question of hester panim — the hiddenness of God's face — which has structured Jewish theology from Deuteronomy through the post-Holocaust theological reckoning.<sup>22</sup> The question "Is the Lord among us or not?" at Massah and Meribah (Exodus 17:7) is the womb-parable question asked by the Israelites in the wilderness: we are in distress, we cannot see evidence of presence, therefore presence is absent.<sup>23</sup>

What the womb parable adds to this ancient question is spatial precision. The Israelites ask their question in the wilderness — a space of genuine deprivation, genuine thirst, genuine vulnerability. The skeptical twin asks his question in the womb — a space of genuine sustenance, genuine warmth, genuine nourishment that he correctly attributes to the umbilical cord. He is not suffering. He is empirically accurate. And yet the question “where is she now?” is precisely the question of *hester panim*, asked from within the fullness of her provision. This is the theological scandal of immanence: the most intimate presence is most invisible precisely because it constitutes the very medium of perception. You cannot see what you are seeing with.

Richard Rubenstein concluded that the death camps made the God of history impossible.<sup>22</sup> Eliezer Berkovits argued for a theology of the hiding God — a God who withdraws in order to preserve human freedom.<sup>24</sup> Emil Fackenheim’s commanding voice from Auschwitz insisted on the imperative to survive and remember, the divine command given precisely in the darkness.<sup>25</sup> These three positions correspond, with remarkable precision, to three possible responses to the skeptical twin: Rubenstein’s position validates his conclusion (no mother); Berkovits’s validates his question while contesting his answer (the hiding is real but the hider is real too); Fackenheim’s addresses him directly within the darkness (the voice speaks from the concealment itself).

My own position is closest to Berkovits and Fackenheim, as developed in my analysis of the Rebbe Schneerson’s approach to post-Holocaust theology.<sup>26</sup> The divine hiddenness is not indifference; it is a different modality of presence — one that invites human partnership in the work of revelation. God hides so that we will seek. The seeking is itself the encounter. But the seeking must be real, which means the rational twin’s non-finding must be real. A seeker who already knows what they will find is not seeking. They are performing seeking. The *chalal hapanui* exists so that seeking can be genuine, which means the void must be a genuine void, which means the rational twin must be allowed, even required, to say: I look, and I do not find her.

When I sit with dying patients — and I have sat with many, over fifty years of clinical practice — I am struck by how often the experience of divine absence and the experience of divine presence become indistinguishable at the threshold. The hiddenness of God in extremis is not the same as God’s non-existence. It is God becoming amniotic: surrounding

without being seeable, sustaining without being demonstrable. The patient who says “I feel nothing, I find no comfort, I am alone” is as theologically serious as the patient who says “I feel held.” Both are giving accurate reports from within the *chalal*.

## 7. Delivery as Rupture: Birth, Death, and the Post-Holocaust Imagination

The skeptical twin’s most viscerally powerful argument: “If there were life after delivery, then why has no one ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life...”

The argument from silence has deep roots in philosophical skepticism about afterlife. Epicurus deployed it as his central argument: we have no experience of the dead returning; therefore death is annihilation. Lucretius extended it: we were non-existent before birth, and that non-existence caused us no distress; why should post-mortem non-existence be different?<sup>27</sup> Within the *chalal*, this argument is not merely plausible; it is, by the available evidence, correct. No one has returned from the post-delivery world. The testimonial record from that direction is, within the womb’s epistemic framework, exactly zero. But the womb-parable inverts this logic with devastating elegance: of course no one returns from the world after delivery. Once born, who would want to return to the womb? The question “has anyone come back from there?” assumes that the post-delivery world is worse than the womb — smaller, darker, less hospitable. From the perspective of the born, the question is almost comic. From the perspective of the unborn, it is existentially serious. This asymmetry between what the question looks like from inside and what it looks like from outside — is the parable’s sharpest theological instrument.

Jewish tradition has always been more cautious about afterlife speculation than Christianity, perhaps precisely because our primary encounter with death in the twentieth century came not as natural transition but as rupture — the Shoah as a delivery by violence, a forcible ejection from the womb of European civilization.<sup>28</sup> The post-Holocaust theological imagination must reckon with the fact that millions were delivered into death without consent, without preparation, without the gradual development of organs adequate to receive what came next. The parable’s developmental logic — organs grown in preparation for a world not yet visible — becomes, in the shadow of the Shoah, a theological provocation rather than a consolation.

And yet the absence of testimony from the other side is not proof of that side's non-existence. It is proof only that the mode of communication between the two orders of being is not the kind we recognize from within the womb. The near-death experience literature, which I approach with the same hermeneutic suspension I bring to any sacred text, does not prove survival.<sup>29</sup> But it is, theologically speaking, the closest thing we have to a muffled voice from above imperfectly received, ambiguously interpreted, but consistent enough across cultures and individuals to constitute at least a *reshimu*: a trace of something that does not fit the null hypothesis.

## 8. The Believing Twin's Epistemology: Relational Knowing and Sacred Listening

The believing twin does not argue. He perceives. And the mode of his perception is deeply specific:

"Sometimes when you're in silence and you really listen, you can perceive her presence. You can hear her loving voice calling down from above." This is not mysticism as woolly intuition. It is a rigorous epistemological claim about the conditions under which a different order of reality becomes accessible. The conditions are: silence, attention, receptivity, and the willingness to be addressed rather than to observe.<sup>30</sup> And the essay's revised argument about the rational twin does not undermine this claim — it deepens it. The believing twin's perception is more, not less, valuable precisely because it occurs against the backdrop of the *chahal*'s genuine emptiness. He is not hearing what is easy to hear. He is hearing what can only be heard in silence, through fluid, against the countervailing evidence of everything the rational twin correctly observes.

The Talmudic concept of *bat kol* — the "daughter of a voice," the divine echo remaining in the world after direct prophetic revelation has ceased — illuminates this mode of perception.<sup>31</sup> The *bat kol* is not the thunderous divine voice of Sinai. It is precisely a whisper — available only to those who have cultivated the silence necessary to hear something quieter than their own internal noise. The second twin is a practitioner of the listening required to receive the *bat kol*. And the *bat kol* speaks precisely because direct divine speech is no longer available — because the *chahal* is real, because the *hester panim* is genuine, because the void in which the whisper sounds is an actual void.

The distinction I want to maintain is this: the believing twin does not possess superior information. He has not

accessed data unavailable to his brother. He inhabits a different relation to the same ambiguous amniotic field. Martin Buber's distinction between I-Thou and I-It is the most precise philosophical instrument for understanding this difference.<sup>32</sup> The skeptical twin is locked in I-It discourse: he speaks about the mother, analyzes her putative existence, demands evidence of her presence. The believing twin has slipped into I-Thou: he is in relation with the mother rather than reasoning about her. He has been addressed. And being-addressed changes everything, because it means there is an Addresser. But note carefully: neither twin can give the other what they have. The I-Thou cannot be argued into existence. The I-It cannot be argued out of its legitimate domain. The *chahal* holds both modalities as genuinely real.

## 9. Organ Development as Spiritual Preparation: Growing Capacity for Reception

The womb's deeper logic is developmental. The twins are not merely waiting for delivery; they are becoming capable of it. Every week of prenatal existence is the growth of capacities for a world the fetus cannot yet inhabit or imagine.

The lungs develop to breathe air they have never breathed. The eyes form to see light they have never seen. The ears tune to a frequency spectrum that the amniotic fluid filters and distorts but does not entirely exclude. The body is being built for a world it has only heard about — muffled, distant, calling from above. And the rational twin participates in this developmental process fully. His skepticism does not impair his lung development. His denial of the mother does not prevent the formation of eyes adequate to receive light. The *chahal* grows the organs of transcendence in both twins simultaneously, regardless of their theological positions.

The mystical traditions of Judaism — particularly the Hasidic understanding of *avodah*, spiritual service — insist that the cultivation of divine awareness is not the acquisition of information but the development of organs of reception.<sup>33</sup> You cannot perceive the *Or Ein Sof*, the infinite divine light, without first developing the interior vessels — *kelim* — capable of receiving it without being shattered.<sup>34</sup> The doctrine of *shevirat ha-kelim* — the breaking of the vessels — in Lurianic cosmology speaks to exactly this.<sup>35</sup> The primordial vessels were shattered because they were insufficient to contain the divine overflow. *Tikkun olam* involves the painstaking work of recovering the scattered sparks and building vessels adequate to hold what could not previously be held.

What I find theologically generative in the womb parable is the implication that both twins are, without knowing it, developing the same organs. The rational twin's rigorous intellectual honesty — his refusal of premature consolation, his insistence on genuine evidence — is itself a form of vessel-building. The Mussar tradition would recognize in him a practitioner of *emet*, truth, as a spiritual discipline: the cultivation of intellectual integrity so thoroughgoing that it prepares the soul for a truth it cannot yet receive.<sup>36</sup> He is growing his capacity for the post-natal world through the very discipline that prevents him from affirming it prematurely.

When I think about what fifty years of clinical practice has built in me — what the accumulated encounter with suffering, death, healing, and mystery has developed — I find myself thinking in these terms. Not: I have acquired more information about God. But: I have grown more capable of being present to what is actually happening. The organ of witnessing has developed. The vessels have become, fractionally, more adequate to what they are asked to contain. And this development has occurred precisely through inhabiting both twins' positions — through the clinical discipline of the rational twin's rigorous observation and the contemplative discipline of the believing twin's sacred listening — without resolving the tension between them.

## 10. The Clinical Threshold: Physicians at the Moment of Delivery

I have stood at the threshold many times. Not my own threshold — not yet — but the thresholds of patients whose delivery from this world was imminent. And the womb parable is never far from my mind in those moments.

The neurologist at the bedside of the dying patient is in a peculiar position: trained entirely in womb-epistemology (the empirical, the measurable, the verifiable), called to accompany someone who is leaving the womb entirely. We have no instruments for what happens at delivery. We have electroencephalograms that flatline. We have the cessation of clinical signs. We have the physiological signature of the womb becoming empty.<sup>37</sup>

The essay's revised understanding of both twins as theologically valid changes what I think the physician's role at the threshold requires. It is not sufficient to accompany the dying with the believing twin's hope alone — to offer only the reassurance of presence and the comfort of tradition. It is equally insufficient to

accompany them with only the rational twin's clinical precision — to manage the biochemistry of dying without attending to the person who is dying.<sup>38</sup> The physician at the threshold must inhabit both positions simultaneously: the rigorous honesty of the *chalal*'s genuine darkness and the receptive openness of the believing twin's sacred listening. Neither alone is an adequate response to the enormity of delivery.

The testimony of those who have come close to delivery and returned — the near-death experience literature — suggests something more complex than simple biological termination.<sup>39</sup> The consistency of the phenomenology across cultures and individuals does not prove anything in womb-epistemological terms. But it constitutes, in the framework I have been developing, a kind of clinical *reshimu*: a trace in the empirical data of something that does not reduce without remainder to its physiological substrate. The physician who is only the rational twin will file this testimony under “hypoxic confabulation.” The physician who is only the believing twin will over-interpret it as proof. The physician who holds both positions will sit with the testimony in the way the *chalal* holds its inhabitants: with genuine openness to both its darkness and its whisper.

What does the physician do at this threshold? The patient at the moment of delivery is the two twins simultaneously: the familiar world dissolving, the instruments of womb-comprehension becoming inadequate, the terrifying and perhaps exhilarating possibility that the entire framework within which life has been organized is itself provisional — a womb from which something is about to be born. The physician's role is to provide therapeutic *tzimtzum*: to make the space within which the patient's own transition can occur with dignity, with attention, with the possibility of encounter. To neither rush delivery nor prevent it. To accompany without colonizing. To be present to both the darkness and the voice.

## 11. Grief as Gestation: Mourning as an Intermediate State

The womb parable illuminates grief in a way I have found clinically and theologically generative. Grief is, structurally, the experience of being in one world while someone you love has been delivered into another.

The bereaved person experiences exactly what the skeptical twin predicts about delivery: darkness, silence, the severing of the cord of connection that sustained the relationship. The loved one is gone

into a post-delivery world that yields no evidence of its existence. Communication is cut. The umbilical connection — the daily phone call, the familiar touch, the shared meal — is severed.<sup>40</sup> And the bereaved person, like the rational twin, may correctly perceive that the evidence for continued relationship is exactly zero. To tell the grieving person that their dead are “with them” when they experience the *chalal* of bereavement as genuinely empty is to deny them the theological validity of their perception. Grief is the rational twin’s position made existential.

And yet grief is also, in the mystical traditions, understood as a form of gestation. The mourner is in an intermediate state: no longer the person they were before loss, not yet the person they will become through it. The formal Jewish mourning practices the *shiva*, the *shloshim*, the year of *kaddish* — provide a developmental structure for this gestation.<sup>41</sup> They are, in effect, the equivalent of the womb’s regulated environment: a bounded space within which transformation can occur without the mourner being overwhelmed by the chaos of unstructured grief. The mourning practices do not resolve the *chalal* of bereavement. They hold the mourner within it while their organs of a new relationship to the absent develop.

In my framework for caregiver grief work, I have proposed that grief is not the absence of the relationship but its transformation.<sup>34</sup> The cord is cut, but the connection — having been real — cannot be made unreal. What was, was. The metabolizing of that reality, through the alchemical process of mourning, produces not merely the absence of the dead but a transformed presence: the internalization of the loved one into the structure of the self. This is *tikkun*: repair through transformation rather than restoration through reversal. But the *tikkun* must pass through the *chalal*. There is no *tikkun* that bypasses the genuine void of loss. The rational twin must be allowed to grieve without consolation before the believing twin’s hope becomes available without dishonesty.

## 12. The Umbilical Cord as Provisional Sustainer: On Transcending Dependencies

The umbilical cord is the parable’s most theologically loaded symbol. It is simultaneously the means of life, the instrument of limitation, and the thing that must be severed for life to continue.

The skeptical twin is right that the cord sustains him. He is wrong that the cord sustains him permanently or completely. The cord is provisional: it is adequate for the womb but inadequate for the world. Its very

adequacy in the current environment conceals its insufficiency for the next. This is, I want to argue, a generalized principle of developmental theology: the structures that sustain us in one stage of existence are precisely the structures that, if clung to past their developmental moment, become the mechanisms of our imprisonment in that stage.

I have found this symbol unexpectedly generative in my work on addiction and recovery.<sup>36</sup> The addictive substance — or behavior, or relationship pattern — is a provisional sustainer that becomes an obstacle to transition. The addict’s cord sustains them through a developmental stage and then becomes the very mechanism of their confinement to it. The work of recovery is not simply severing the cord — that violent severance produces shock and danger — but the gradual development of the internal resources that make the cord’s continuation unnecessary.

Theological dependency operates similarly. The forms of religious practice — the liturgy, the law, the communal structures — are cords: they sustain and nourish. But if they are treated as ends in themselves rather than as means of developmental preparation, they become what I have called post-orthodox problems: the form outlasting the function, the cord continuing past the moment of potential birth.<sup>37</sup> The rational twin, interestingly, is not vulnerable to this particular spiritual pathology. His cord — the empirical method, the demand for evidence — is less seductive as an end in itself. He may be wrong about whether there is life after delivery, but he is not mistaken about the cord’s provisionality. He knows it is a cord. He simply does not believe there is anything beyond it. This is a more honest theological position than believing there is something beyond it while refusing to let go of the cord.

## 13. The Voice from Above: Prophecy, Intuition, and the Direction of Transcendence

The mother’s voice comes “from above.” This directional detail carries more theological weight than it initially appears.

From within the womb, the direction of transcendence is upward — toward the surface, toward the light, toward the world that lies beyond the fluid ceiling. But from outside the womb, the direction of immanence is inward — downward, into the darkness, into the hidden chamber of developing life. What is “above” for the twin is “within” for the mother. The direction of transcendence depends entirely on where you are

standing. This is not a paradox to be resolved; it is the spatial signature of the Ein Sof's simultaneous transcendence and immanence — what the Kabbalistic tradition calls *sovev kol almin* (surrounding all worlds) and *memale kol almin* (filling all worlds): the God who is above everything and within everything simultaneously.<sup>3</sup>

Jewish mysticism has always been alert to this paradox of divine direction. The Hasidic tradition collapses the distance between transcendence and immanence: they are not two realities but two perspectives on one reality.<sup>38</sup> The mother's voice calling "from above" is simultaneously the voice of the most utterly other and the voice of the most intimately present. It is both the *kol demamah daqah* — the still small voice of Elijah's cave (1 Kings 19:12) — and the creative utterance of the first day. Both, at once. The twin hears it as a whisper because a roar would shatter the womb. This is *tzimtzum* within *tzimtzum*: the mother contracts her voice as she has contracted her body, to make it receivable within the chamber of her own making.<sup>39</sup> The rational twin does not hear this voice. But let us be precise about what that means in the framework I have been developing: he does not lack the biological apparatus of hearing. The voice reaches him. What he lacks — or more precisely, what he has not yet developed — is the interpretive framework within which the incoming signal is recognized as address rather than noise. The *bat kol* reaches both twins. One hears music; one hears static. Neither is hallucinating. They are processing the same signal through different organs of reception — organs whose differential development is itself the developmental project of the womb.<sup>28</sup>

#### 14. Hermeneutic Medicine: The Patient as Sacred Text in an Intermediate State

I have proposed the framework of hermeneutic medicine: reading the patient as a sacred text.<sup>40</sup> The patient who presents in the clinical encounter is not a collection of symptoms to be decoded but a living document of accumulated experience, trauma, meaning-making, and suffering — a text that requires interpretation rather than merely diagnosis.

The womb parable extends this framework in a direction the essay's revised argument makes newly urgent. If the patient is a sacred text, they are specifically an intermediate text — a text in the process of being written, a text whose final chapter has not yet been composed, a text that is simultaneously the rational twin's clinical data and the believing twin's sacred address. The physician-as-reader must hold

both readings simultaneously: the empirical reading (symptoms, history, laboratory values) and the relational reading (the person who is being addressed by their illness, who is themselves being asked a question by their condition).

This requires what I call sacred listening — an orientation of attention that is simultaneously clinical and contemplative, evidence-responsive and transcendence-open.<sup>40</sup> The physician who practices only womb-epistemology — who reads the patient text through biomedical instruments alone — will miss the second twin's communication. They will hear no mother. They will see no light. They will diagnose only the cord and miss the world the cord is preparing the patient to enter. But equally: the physician who practices only sacred listening — who hears only the divine address and neglects the clinical data — has abandoned the rational twin's indispensable rigour. Both readings are required. Neither is optional. The *chahal hapanui* of the clinical encounter holds both.

The Talmudic tradition speaks of the text having four levels of interpretation: *pshat* (the plain sense), *remez* (the allegorical), *derash* (the homiletical), *sod* (the mystical secret).<sup>41</sup> The biomedical reading of the patient is *pshat* — necessary, foundational, and non-negotiable. A physician who cannot read *pshat* has no business practicing medicine. Sacred medicine requires all four levels: the literal clinical data, the patterns and analogies that connect this patient's story to the human story, the homiletical meaning that situates this particular suffering within the larger narrative of meaning, and the *sod* — the hidden dimension available only in silence, in relational presence, in the cultivated receptivity of the physician who has developed inner ears for what the patient cannot quite say. But *sod* without *pshat* is mysticism without medicine. The rational twin's reading is the foundation on which the believing twin's hearing becomes trustworthy.

#### 15. Conclusion: Dwelling in the Chalal — A Post-Modern, Post-Orthodox Theology of both/and

I have described my theological position as post-modern, post-orthodox, and post-Hasidic. The womb parable has allowed me, in this essay, to say more precisely what I mean — and to identify the *chahal hapanui* as the spatial and cosmological metaphor for the theological position I am trying to inhabit.

Post-modern, in this context, does not mean relativistic. It means: I do not believe the womb-categories of any

single religious tradition are adequate to describe what lies beyond delivery. The Orthodox framework, the Hasidic framework, the rationalist framework, the scientific framework — all of these are womb-languages. They are real, they are nourishing, they are the means by which I have developed whatever organs of reception I currently possess. But none of them is the post-natal world itself. The map is not the territory. The cord is not the world. And the tradition that mistakes itself for the transcendence to which it points has confused the reshimu for the Ein Sof.

Post-orthodox means I have passed through — not bypassed — the rational twin's position. I have inhabited the chahal's genuine darkness long enough to know that the believing twin's voice is not easy consolation. The orthodox believer who has never felt the force of the rational twin's argument, who has never genuinely perceived the void as void, who has never experienced the hester panim as genuine concealment — this believer has not yet earned the theological right to say "I hear the mother." They are asserting what they have not tested.<sup>37</sup> Post-orthodoxy, properly understood, is the position on the other side of the rational twin's rigor: not despite it, but through it and out the other side. Post-Hasidic means I carry the Hasidic insistence on divine immanence — on the

**ADDENDUM**

Shekhinah in every thing, the spark in every person, the sacred suffusion of the ordinary — without the nostalgic or authoritarian structures within which that insistence was historically embedded. The mother is real. The voice is real. But the womb is not the mother. And the tradition is not the transcendence to which it points. The chahal hapenui is not the Ein Sof. It is the space the Ein Sof made in order for a genuine other to exist.

The essay's central theological claim, then, is this: the womb parable does not resolve in favor of either twin. It holds both as necessary, both as valid, both as genuine inhabitants of the same chahal. The rational twin's empiricism is not a deficiency of faith but a fullness of honesty — an honesty that the chahal itself requires and enables. The believing twin's relational perception is not a deficiency of rigor but a fullness of receptivity — a receptivity that only silence, only attention, only the willingness to be addressed makes possible. Neither can give the other what they have. But neither is complete without the other's corrective.

In clinical terms, this means the physician of threshold must learn to move between the twins' positions with fluency — to be the rational twin when the patient needs honest assessment of the darkness and the



*The Womb as Sinai, the Womb as Cosmic Matrix: The Jungian Great Mother, and the Shekhinah as Amniotic Presence*

believing twin when the patient needs a companion in the silence where the voice might be heard. The chahal of the clinical encounter holds both. The sacred medicine I have spent my career developing is not the triumph of the believing twin over the rational one. It is the cultivation of the physician's capacity to inhabit the chahal with both twins simultaneously: rigorous and receptive, evidence-responsive and transcendence-open, honest about the void and attentive to the whisper.<sup>33</sup> As I write this, I am aware that my own delivery is not infinitely far away. The question of what I have been preparing for — what

organs I have been developing, what vessels have grown more adequate to hold what they are asked to contain — is not merely theoretical. It is the question the chahal hapenui asks of every creature it holds. And I notice, with gratitude and without resolution, that I am still both twins simultaneously: the one who looks carefully at the evidence and is not fully satisfied, and the one who sometimes, in silence, hears something calling from a direction that has no name in any of my womb-languages. The chahal holds us both. That may be enough.

The essay above argued that the womb parable encodes a theology of immanence and transcendence whose two poles are both valid within the *chalahapanui*, the primordial void of Lurianic cosmology. What that essay did not fully develop were two convergent lines of thought that deepen the parable considerably: the Talmudic teaching of Niddah 30b, which reveals that the womb is not merely a biological chamber but a site of complete divine revelation; and the Jungian-Neumann understanding of the womb as cosmic matrix — the primordial feminine archetype that underlies all subsequent human experience of containment, nourishment, and emergence. When these two traditions are read together through the lens of my published work on Shekhinah theology, the parable reveals dimensions that neither the Talmudic nor the Jungian framework makes fully visible alone. The mother of the parable is not merely a biological figure. She is, simultaneously, the Shekhinah of rabbinic-Kabbalistic theology and the Great Mother of the collective unconscious. The womb is not merely an intermediate space. It is the site where the Infinite teaches, the container of all wisdom, the maternal matrix of existence itself.

### 1. The Womb as the Original Beit Midrash

The single most important Talmudic passage for understanding the womb parable in its full theological depth is Niddah 30b, where Rabbi Simlai expounds one of the most astonishing teachings in the rabbinic corpus

*“A candle is lit above the head of the fetus, and with it the fetus sees from one end of the world to the other... And they teach the fetus the entire Torah while it is in the womb... As soon as it enters the world, an angel comes and strikes it on the mouth, causing it to forget the entire Torah completely.”*

This passage, read alongside the womb parable, transforms everything. The womb is not, in the rabbinic imagination, a place of ignorance awaiting the knowledge that birth will bring. It is the original site of complete revelation. The fetus in the womb has already received the totality of Torah. A candle burns above its head — not the dim light of biological existence, but the or of divine illumination — and the fetus can see *miksav ha-olam v’ad sofoh*, from one end of the world to the other.<sup>46</sup> The two twins of the parable are not debating whether they will one day receive knowledge. They are debating the nature of a knowledge they already possess but cannot access within the categories of womb-cognition.

The Talmud’s cosmology here is radical. The womb is not the absence of divine teaching; it is the fullness of it. What the rationalist twin dismisses as evidence-free assertion — the mother’s presence, the voice from above, the light beyond the fluid — the Talmud reveals as already accomplished fact: the fetus has been shown the entire breadth of creation and has heard the complete instruction of Sinai. The problem is not that the divine is absent from the womb. The problem is that the instruments of womb-cognition — the empirical, the measurable, the argumentative — are precisely the wrong tools for perceiving what is already, overwhelmingly, present.

The Maharal of Prague, in his commentary on this passage, insists that the teaching is not to be understood as referring to the physical fetus but to the soul of the child, which exists in a pre-natal state of *ibbur* (gestation) in which it has access to the divine fullness that embodied life will conceal.<sup>47</sup> This reading is developed in Hasidic thought — particularly in the *Likkutei Torah* of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi — where the prenatal Torah is understood as the soul’s native apprehension of divine reality, which the trauma of birth and embodiment progressively conceals.<sup>48</sup> What we call “Torah learning” in this lifetime is not the acquisition of new knowledge. It is the discovery of what we already know but have been caused to forget — a recovery of prenatal wisdom through the structured discipline of study.

The philtrum — the vertical groove above the upper lip that anatomists call the *filtrum philtri* — is the physical signature of this pedagogical violence. According to the popular elaboration of the Talmudic teaching, the angel’s touch at birth, which causes the forgetting, creates this indent: every human face bears, inscribed in its anatomy, the mark of a revelation received and an oblivion imposed.<sup>49</sup> I find this anatomical theology of extraordinary beauty and diagnostic relevance. Every patient who sits across from me in the clinical encounter carries on their face the signature of the womb’s Sinai — the mark of a knowledge they received and do not remember, the impression of an angel’s silencing touch. The physician who reads this as mere morphology has missed the text entirely.

#### 1.1 The Womb as Makom Torah: A Site of Revelation

The artist and teacher Jacqueline Nicholls has proposed, in a remarkable midrashic reading of Niddah 30b, that the mother’s body during pregnancy is a *makom Torah* — a place of Torah — a primal *beit*

midrash for the fetus, its own personal Sinai.<sup>49</sup> This formulation deserves theological amplification in the context of the womb parable. If the mother's body is a makom Torah, then the debate between the twins takes place not in a spiritually neutral chamber but in the midst of ongoing revelation. The rationalist twin's demand for evidence is issued from within an event of complete divine disclosure. He is arguing about the existence of the candle while sitting in its light.

This does not refute the rationalist twin's position — I have argued in the main essay that his position is theologically valid within the chahal — but it deepens the paradox considerably. The Niddah 30b teaching suggests that the womb's concealment of the divine is not the absence of revelation but its saturation. The fetus is overwhelmed by divine teaching — sees from one end of the world to the other, receives the entire Torah — and this very fullness is what makes individual cognitive access impossible. The Ein Sof, contracted into the chahal, is present so completely that the chahal's instruments cannot register it. The rationalist twin is not wrong that he cannot perceive the mother. He is perceiving the void that is the necessary consequence of her total presence. The candle is too bright to see by.

The Sefaria commentary tradition on this passage notes a fascinating parallel with Plato's doctrine of anamnesis: the soul, having seen all things, enters the body and forgets, and learning is therefore recollection.<sup>50</sup> But the Talmudic teaching diverges crucially from Plato: the prenatal Torah is not self-generated knowledge that the soul carries from a previous existence. It is taught — by the angel, through instruction, in relationship. Va-yoreihu va-yomer lo yitmach devarai libecha — “And He taught me, and said to me: Let your heart hold fast My words” (Proverbs 4:4).<sup>46</sup> The knowledge of the womb is relational from the beginning: it is the product of instruction, of address, of the I-Thou in its most primordial form. The believing twin who hears the mother's voice is not accessing private intuition; he is half-remembering a teaching he received before he had ears to hear it.

### ***1.2 The Oath and the Imperative of Return***

Niddah 30b adds a further dimension that connects directly to the anti-theology argument of the main essay. Before the fetus leaves the womb, it is administered an oath: “Be a righteous person and not a wicked one; and even if the entire world says to you: You are righteous — be in your own eyes like a

wicked person.”<sup>46</sup> The child is sworn to righteousness before it knows what righteousness will cost. It is sworn to humility before it has anything to be proud of. And it forgets the oath immediately, along with the Torah, when the angel strikes.

The entire moral life is therefore conducted in a condition of amnesia about its own most fundamental commitment. We are oathbound and amnesiac simultaneously. The rationalist twin's skepticism is, in this framework, not merely an epistemological position but a symptom of the prenatal forgetting: he has forgotten the oath, the Torah, and the candle above his head. His rigorous non-belief is the form his oblivion takes. The believing twin's intuition of the mother's presence is the form his half-memory takes. Neither has full access to what the womb contained. They are both operating in the aftermath of the angel's touch.

This is the theological structure I call, in my published work, the dialectic of divine concealment and revelation: the divine hides most completely in the very act of most complete disclosure.<sup>14</sup> The womb's fullness — its overwhelming divine instruction, its candle-lit omniscience — becomes, precisely because of its totality, the most complete concealment. The angel does not introduce forgetfulness into a situation of prior clarity. The angel seals the forgetfulness that the totality of the womb's revelation has already, necessarily, produced. You cannot hold the entire Torah in womb-consciousness. The angel's slap is the consequence, not the cause, of the knowledge's fullness.

## **2. The Jungian Cosmic Womb: The Great Mother as Archetype of Containing Presence**

The second tradition that deepens the womb parable and that I want to place in explicit dialogue with both Niddah 30b and my Shekhinah theology — is the Jungian-Neumann understanding of the womb as cosmic archetype. Carl Jung's analysis of the Great Mother archetype, elaborated by his disciple Erich Neumann in *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (1955), identifies the womb as the primordial image of the containing feminine — the matrix from which all subsequent human experience of nourishment, transformation, and emergence is psychologically structured.<sup>51</sup>

Neumann's analysis is directly relevant to the womb parable because he identifies the Great Mother as simultaneously nurturing and devouring — the source of life and the agent of transformation through dissolution.<sup>51</sup> The womb that nourishes the twins is

also the womb from which they will be expelled. The containing presence that the believing twin correctly perceives as the mother's care is also, in Neumann's framework, the archetype of the force that will thrust them into existence. The Great Mother gives and takes; she is the amniotic environment and the labor that ends it. The rational twin's fear of delivery is, in Jungian terms, the fear of the devouring aspect of the Great Mother — the dissolution of the known container that is the precondition of individuation.

Jung himself, in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, identifies the mother archetype as the foundation from which the divine feminine in all religious traditions is derived: "The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason."<sup>52</sup> The mother of the womb parable, calling from above in silence and available only to the attentive ear, possesses precisely these qualities: magic authority without demonstrable presence, wisdom that transcends the reasoning of the rationalist twin, solicitude that continues regardless of whether her children can perceive it. Jung's formulation reads, in retrospect, like a commentary on the parable itself.

The Jungian analyst Wolfgang Giegerich has noted that the human being never genuinely leaves the womb in a psychological sense — that biological birth merely exchanges the somatic womb for what he calls the "metaphysical womb," the womb of meaning, of language, of culture, of the collective unconscious itself.<sup>53</sup> This insight is deeply compatible with the main essay's argument about the chalal hapnui as a structure that persists beyond any single instance of it. We are always inside some containing matrix — some horizon of meaning that we cannot see from outside because it constitutes the very medium of our seeing. The twin who cannot perceive the mother from within the womb will, once born, find himself inside a larger womb: the world of air and light and gravity, which will be, in turn, the containment he cannot see from the outside. Delivery delivers us into a series of nested wombs, each of which we mistake, in turn, for the whole of reality.

### ***2.1 Neumann, Shekhinah, and The Convergence of Two Traditions***

It is not accidental that Erich Neumann — the foremost Jungian theorist of the Great Mother archetype — was also a Jewish thinker deeply steeped in Kabbalistic sources, who engaged in sustained correspondence with Jung about precisely the

relationship between the Shekhinah and the archetype of the Great Mother.<sup>54</sup> In that correspondence, published posthumously in *Analytical Psychology in Exile*, both men converged on the recognition that the re-valorization of the feminine archetype of divinity identified in the Jungian corpus as Sophia and in the Kabbalistic tradition as the Shekhinah — represented one of the central spiritual tasks of the modern era.<sup>54</sup>

This convergence matters for the womb parable because it means that the two traditions I am bringing together — the Talmudic Niddah 30b and the Jungian Great Mother — are not independent frameworks that happen to share imagery. They are two articulations of what may be a single underlying reality: the primordial feminine as the containing ground of existence, simultaneously divine and maternal, simultaneously the source of nourishment and the agent of transformation, simultaneously utterly immanent (the amniotic fluid that sustains) and utterly transcendent (the one who calls from above and who cannot be perceived by the instruments developed within her).

The mother of the womb parable is therefore, in the integrated framework I am developing, a three-layered presence:

*Biologically:* she is the mother whose body contains, sustains, and will deliver the twins.

*Theologically:* she is the Shekhinah — the immanent divine presence that permeates the chalal, sustains it from within, and whose voice is audible only in silence, only to the receptive attention of the believing twin.

*Archetypally:* she is the Great Mother of the collective unconscious — the primordial containing feminine whose nourishing and transforming presence structures all subsequent human experience of immanence, belonging, and the terror of emergence into an unknown world.

These three layers are not competing descriptions. They are simultaneously true, at different registers of reality. The biological fact grounds the theological claim; the theological claim illuminates the archetypal structure; the archetypal structure reveals why the parable speaks to everyone, across every cultural context, with immediate cognitive force. The reason the parable resonates so immediately — why readers feel its truth before they can articulate it — is that it is activating the Great Mother archetype in the Jungian sense: it is awakening the collective memory of the

womb, the containing presence, the calling voice from the direction of the larger world.

### 3. The Shekhinah as Cosmic Womb: Convergence of My Published Theology

In my own published work, I have been developing the argument that the Shekhinah functions, in Kabbalistic theology, precisely as the cosmic matrix that the Jungian tradition identifies as the Great Mother.<sup>18</sup> The Shekhinah is not merely the divine presence that occasionally visits the world. She is, in the Kabbalistic formulation of *dirah betachtonim* — the divine desire to dwell in the lower worlds — the very medium of existence: the amniotic environment within which created reality is sustained, developed, and prepared for its ultimate emergence into the divine fullness.<sup>8</sup>

The Zoharic corpus identifies the Shekhinah with the *sefirah* of Malkhut — the Kingdom, the lowest of the ten divine emanations, the point where the divine overflow touches the world of matter.<sup>4</sup> Malkhut is the womb of creation: it receives the overflow from above and gestates the world within it. The Shekhinah's exile — her descent into the world of matter, her accompaniment of Israel into every diaspora — is, in this framework, the theological equivalent of the mother's descent into the womb: she goes where her children are, she makes herself co-extensive with their condition, she is present in the very medium of their existence without being visible to them within that medium.

In my essay "The Pain of the Shekhinah," I have argued that the Shekhinah's exile constitutes not merely a theological metaphor but the structural condition of embodied existence — that the primordial wound of *tsimtsum* inaugurates creation through divine self-limitation, and that the Shekhinah, as the feminine hypostasis of this wound, descends into material exile where her pain becomes the site of redemptive encounter.<sup>55</sup> Read alongside Niddah 30b, this argument gains a new dimension: the Shekhinah's descent into the exile of embodied existence is the womb's containing presence extended across the entire span of creaturely life. We emerge from the biological womb into the cosmic womb of the Shekhinah's exile. The angel's slap does not sever us from divine presence; it delivers us from one modality of divine containment (prenatal omniscience) into another (the Shekhinah's accompanying immanence in the world of forgetting).

In my essay "Shekhinah Consciousness," I have proposed that the therapeutic encounter can be

understood as a contemporary locus of Shekhinah indwelling — that the physician who practices therapeutic *tsimtsum* creates a sacred space that replicates the womb's amniotic environment: bounded, sustaining, warm with the heat of genuine attention, and oriented toward a delivery — the patient's emergence into greater wholeness — that neither physician nor patient can fully anticipate or control.<sup>18</sup> The Niddah 30b teaching deepens this framework considerably: if the womb is the original *makom Torah*, then the therapeutic encounter that replicates the womb's structure is also a site of potential revelation — not the medical revelation of diagnosis and treatment, but the deeper revelation of the patient's own forgotten wisdom, their prenatal wholeness, the Torah of their own soul that the trauma of embodied life has caused them to forget.

#### 3.1 *The Philtrum and the Therapeutic Encounter*

Every patient who enters the clinical encounter carries on their face the mark of their prenatal revelation and its subsequent concealment. The groove above the upper lip is the visible trace of the *makom Torah* that was sealed at birth: the impression left by the angel's silencing touch, the anatomical memory of a knowledge that exceeds what the patient currently has access to.

The physician who practices hermeneutic medicine — who reads the patient as a sacred text — must learn to see the philtrum as a hermeneutic marker: an indication that the person before them is not only the patient they currently present as, but the bearer of a prenatal wholeness that their condition of suffering has obscured.<sup>40</sup> The task of healing, in this framework, is not merely the remediation of pathology but the creation of conditions under which the patient's own prenatal wisdom — their Niddah 30b Torah — can begin to become re-accessible to them. The physician's therapeutic *tsimtsum*, in making space for the patient's own intelligence to emerge, is participating in the reversal of the angel's slap: not restoring what was taken, but creating the conditions under which it can be partially, gradually, recovered.

The believing twin hears the mother's voice. He is, in the Niddah 30b framework, half-remembering the angel's teaching — the prenatal instruction that taught him the entire Torah, that showed him from one end of the world to the other. He cannot articulate what he knows. He cannot demonstrate it. But he can listen. And in listening, he is practicing the form of Torah *sheb'al peh* — oral Torah, received tradition — that is older than any text: the tradition of the womb itself,

where the teaching was not written but spoken, not recorded but received, not demonstrated but heard.

### 3.2 *The Rationalist Twin and the Philtrum*

What does the Niddah 30b teaching say about the rationalist twin's position? It says something devastating in its tenderness: he too was taught the entire Torah. He too had the candle burning above his head. He too could see from one end of the world to the other. The angel's touch fell on his mouth as surely as on his brother's.

His rationalism is not a deficiency of the soul. It is a deficiency of access — a more complete amnesia, a thicker forgetting, a more thorough effect of the angel's pedagogical violence. The rationalist twin is not someone who was taught less; he is someone who remembers less. His rigorous demand for evidence — his insistence that he will only affirm what he can observe — is the echo, in negative form, of the omniscient seeing that was his in the womb. He once saw from one end of the world to the other. Now he can see only the cord. The contrast must be agonizing, even if he cannot name what he has lost.

This is why I have consistently maintained that the anti-theology position must be honored rather than refuted. The rationalist twin's rigorous non-belief is the form his prenatal knowledge takes in the aftermath of forgetting: the negative imprint of a positive that was too complete to be retained. The void where the divine once shone is, paradoxically, shaped exactly like the divine. The absence that the rationalist twin correctly perceives is the absence of what the Niddah 30b text tells us was once overwhelmingly present. He is grieving, without knowing it, the loss of the womb's Sinai. His skepticism is a form of mourning — the mourning of a soul that once knew everything and now demands evidence.

I have argued in my essay "Navigating the Depths: A Framework for Caregiver's Grief Work" that grief is the *chalal* experienced as personal loss — the void that opens where connection previously was.<sup>34</sup> The rationalist twin's epistemological position is, in the Niddah 30b framework, a form of this grief. He is in the mourning of a pre-natal knowing he cannot name, practicing the *kaddish* of a Torah he has been made to forget. The physician who meets this form of skepticism in a dying patient — the one who insists there is nothing beyond delivery — is meeting not merely intellectual resistance but a deeper, unnamed grief: the grief of the soul for its own prenatal fullness.

### 4. An Integrated Reading: The Womb as the Space Where All Three Mothers Converge

The addendum's argument can now be stated in its integrated form. The mother of the womb parable is simultaneously three mothers, whose convergence constitutes the parable's full theological depth:

She is the biological mother of physiological fact whose body is the *chalal hapanui* of Lurianic cosmology rendered visceral: contracted to create space, withdrawing to enable development, sustaining through the cord whose very provisionality is its gift.

She is the Shekhinah of Jewish mystical theology — the feminine immanent divine who descends into exile alongside her creation, who is present in the medium of existence itself rather than above it, whose voice is available only in silence because she speaks in the register of pure immanence, and whose pain in exile is the structural condition of the created world she inhabits.<sup>18</sup>

She is the Great Mother of the Jungian collective unconscious — the primordial containing feminine whose archetypal presence structures all human experience of belonging, nourishment, transformation, and the terror of emergence. The reason the parable speaks across cultures and centuries without requiring Kabbalistic or Talmudic education is that it activates this archetype directly, bypassing the rational mind and addressing the deeper stratum of psychic organization where the womb-memory is stored.<sup>51</sup>

And she is the teacher of Niddah 30b — the presence that, through the medium of the angel, taught the entire Torah to the fetus with a candle burning above its head, showed it from one end of the world to the other, and then sealed that knowledge behind the angel's touch so that embodied life could become the project of its recovery. The womb is not a place of ignorance preparing for knowledge. It is the place of complete knowledge preparing for the project of remembering.<sup>46</sup>

The rationalist twin's demand — "where is she? I see no evidence of her existence" — is, in this integrated framework, both correct and poignant. He is correct that he cannot perceive her through the instruments of womb-cognition. He is poignant because those instruments were developed within her, are sustained by her, are themselves the consequence of the prenatal teaching she arranged, and are reading an absence whose shape is exactly her shape. He cannot see the Shekhinah. He cannot access the Great Mother archetype. He cannot remember the Torah of Niddah

30b. But the candle burned above his head as surely as above his brother's. The angel touched his mouth too. The groove above his lip is the same.

The believing twin hears her because he has, for reasons the parable does not explain and the tradition declines to systematize, retained slightly more of the prenatal attentiveness — a fractional more of the womb's omniscient seeing, a trace of the angel-taught Torah, a residual activation of the Great Mother archetype in the deep psyche, a whisper of the Shekhinah's accompanying presence. He cannot prove any of this to his brother. He can only report the perception. And in reporting it, he is practicing the most ancient form of eidut — testimony — that the tradition knows: the testimony of the partially-remembering soul to what it once knew completely.

Both twins are held, equally, in the womb. The Shekhinah sustains them both. The Great Mother archetype underlies both their psychic structures. The Niddah 30b candle burned above both their heads. The angel's touch fell on both their mouths. What differs between them is not what they received but what they remember. And memory, in the mystical traditions as in clinical practice, is not a passive retrieval of stored information. It is a form of avodah — spiritual practice — a discipline of the kind of attention that the believing twin has, somehow, managed to cultivate: the silence in which the mother's voice becomes audible, the receptivity in which the prenatal Torah begins, fractionally, to surface.

This is why learning is chazarah — return — in the rabbinic vocabulary. Not acquisition but recovery. Not progression but remembering. Not the movement toward something new but the spiraling return toward something primordially known. Every page of Talmud studied, every moment of contemplative silence, every instance of sacred listening in the therapeutic encounter, every act of genuine I-Thou attention — these are the means by which the angel's amnesiac touch is, infinitesimally, undone. We are all the twins, debating our own depths. We are all, simultaneously, the child whose mouth was sealed and the soul whose womb-knowledge persists, dimly, in the listening.

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