

# Homo Imaginus and the Erotics of Imagination

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The Shechinah is the feminine Divine. Her name means Indwelling Presence, "the one who dwells in you." She is presence, poetry, passion. She is the sustaining God force which runs through and wombs the world. She is the underlying erotic, sensual, and loving force that knows our name and nurtures all being.

Shechinah captures an experience, a way of being in the world, for which we do not yet have an English word. For this is a way of being which we in the West are hard pressed to articulate. It is the experience of waking up in the morning full of utter joy for the arrival of the day. It is weeping over the splendor of the sunset or the scent of the ocean or the fragility of a newborn. It is a way of living in love.

Our best move in the English language is to turn towards the term Plato introduced in the *Symposium*: Eros. For Plato "eros" is "love plus." It is precisely the kind of fully charged life experience which is evoked by the Hebrew term Shechinah.

But over time the term "eros" has been so narrowed and limited that it has lost most of its original intention. Usually when we hear the word "erotic" it evokes only the sexual. And although the sexual is a part of eros, it is only a limited part. This narrowing of a term is an expression of a spiritual dynamic which the kabbalists called the exile of the Shechinah.

Now open your hearts and minds to hear the next sentence.

*The exile of the Shechinah means no less than the exile of the erotic.*

But where did it go? To where was eros exiled? The answer is *that the exile of the Shechinah is the exile of the erotic into the sexual*. That is to say, when the only place you access the core qualities of eros is in the sexual, then eros, or the Shechinah, is in exile. When intense desire is a feeling you touch only before exploding in orgasm, then your life is poor indeed. The Shechinah is exiled. Eros has fallen.

## **Eros Expanded**

The redemption of the Shechinah from exile will come when we learn how to re-expand eros from the narrow confines of the sexual back into the broad expanse of living. The goal of life is to live erotically in all facets of being.

One of the core qualities of the erotic is imagination. The Zohar, magnum opus of Hebrew mysticism, says it explicitly in many places "Shechinah is imagination."

In popular understanding, the imagination is implicitly considered to be "unreal." Indeed "unreal" and "imaginary" are virtually synonyms in common usage. To undermine the reality of an antagonist's claim we say it is "a figment of his imagination." In marked contrast, the Hebrew mystics held imagination to be very real. Indeed, it would not be unfair to say that they considered imagination to be "realer than real."

The power of the imagination is its ability to give form to the deep truths and visions of the inner

divine realm. Imagination gives expression to the higher visions of reality which derive from our divine selves. Language and rational thinking are generally unable to access this higher truth. The imagination is our prophet, bringing us the word of the divine that speaks both through us and from beyond us. We imagine God. That is what biblical mystic Hosea meant when he exclaimed the words of God, "By the hands of my prophets I [God] am imagined."

But why don't I feel like such a prophet, handily imagining God? Why don't we have access to this experience of prophecy? Because the Shechinah is in exile. The erotics of imagination has been exiled into the sexual.

The simplest evidence of this exile is that we all have no problem accessing the power of imagination in the sexual. But we have enormous difficulty accessing that same faculty of erotic imagination, not only in a non-sexual visualization, but in all of our non-sexual lives. What that means is that this core erotic quality of imagination no longer plays in all the arenas of our lives where she is so desperately needed. For it is imagination which allows us to access the wisdom and vision we need to re-chart our lives.

This exile of the erotic Shechinah power of imagination is reflected both in our language as well as our most intimate experience. Our English word "fantasy" derives from the Greek word *phantasi*, a verb that means "to make visible, to reveal." For the ancient Greeks, this fantasizing had nothing to do with sex. It meant "making visible—through imagining—the world of the gods," the realm of pure spirit and forms.

So why is it that in modern usage the word "fantasy" first and foremost conjures up images of the sexual? We very rarely talk about economic, political, or social fantasies. We don't even talk about food fantasies. We do talk about sexual fantasy ... all the time. Just like the adjective "erotic," the verb "fantasize" has found itself relegated to the narrow confines of the merely sexual. The reason is clear. In modernity we have lost much of our ability to make visible, to imagine, the deeper visions of the spirit. It is mainly in the sexual where we use imagination to conjure up images of that which is hidden or not revealed. The limiting of erotic imagination to the sexual is the exile of the Shechinah.

### **Tragic Mirrors of Desire**

Fantasy and imagination hold the keys to many gates, not least of which is the gateway to our freedom.

A story of the wisdom masters suggests that it was the erotic imagination of the Hebrew women in Egypt that set into motion the process of their liberation from slavery.

Pharaoh had insisted that the male slaves sleep in the fields separated from their wives. The women, in defiance of the Pharaonic decree, visited their men in the fields. Their men, though, wilting under the oppression of slavery, had lost their potency. In response, the women found tools to evoke their men's desire—mirrors. With these they engaged the men's imagination, even when their bodies would not respond. The women, holding the mirrors in ways that reflected their physical beauty, would tease the men saying, "Look, I am more beautiful than you."

The mirror enhances sexual play because it amplifies the quality of imagination. As with the imagination, the mirror offers us an image, allowing us to see in a way that was previously hidden. Hold a mirror in front of you and you can suddenly see behind you. A rear view mirror is

so helpful precisely because it shows you something your normal eyes cannot see. Or position a mirror at a sharp curve in a road and you can suddenly see around the bend, catching a glimpse of something to come that otherwise would have been hidden.

In the women's mirrors of imagination the men were able to reclaim vision, to see the lost images of their women's sexual beauty which the oppressive burden of slavery had rendered invisible. Surprisingly, however, it was not primarily their own bodies that the women showed the men; instead, they reflected the men's bodies back at themselves, taunting them to see their own beauty. "Look I am more beautiful than you." Mirrors are a tool of imagination because they allow us to see images of ourselves that would otherwise be inaccessible.

According to one biblical tradition, this erotic play of the mirrors was itself the beginning of the liberation. In erotic play the imagination is engaged. Once the women taught the men how to re-access their imagination, images of freedom were not long in following. The Exodus from slavery became just a matter of time.

A sexually erotic imagination was thus the model and catalyst for a politically erotic imagination. About this the Talmud writes, "In the merit of the righteous women of the generation, the Hebrews were redeemed from Egypt!" When we think of a typical group of "righteous" women, rarely do we imagine troops of women with sexual paraphernalia going to seduce their men in the fields. But that is what Talmud tells us. The fact that our idea of righteousness is at odds with the sexual is yet another sad example of the Shechinah's exile.

### **Crisis of Imagination**

The greatest crisis of our lives is neither economic, intellectual, nor even what we usually call religious. It is a crisis of imagination. We get stuck on our paths because we are unable to re-imagine our lives differently than they are right now. We hold on desperately to the status quo, afraid that if we let go, we will be swept away by the torrential undercurrents of our emptiness.

The most important thing in the world, implies wisdom master Nachman of Bratzlav, is to be willing to give up who you are for who you might become. He calls this process the giving up of *pnimi*. *Pnimi* literally means "what is within," but for Nachman it means the old, familiar thing that comforts even when it no longer serves. Nachman calls on us to give this up to reach for *makkif*, that which is beyond you which you can only reach if you are willing to take a leap into the abyss. Find your risk and you will find your self. Sometimes that means leaving your home and traveling to strange lands. Both the biblical Abraham and the Buddha do this quite literally. But for the kabbalist the true journey does not require dramatic breaks with past and home. It is rather a journey of the imagination.

In the simple and literal meaning of the biblical text, Abraham's command is *Lech lecha* ... "Go forth from your land, your birth place and your father's house." Interpreted by the Zohar, "*lech lecha*," a reflexive formulation that can be translated literally (though not in a way that is idiomatically correct) as "walk your walk," or alternatively as "Go to your self" is taken to mean not "Go forth," but "Go to yourself." For the kabbalist this means more than the mere quieting of the mind. The journey Abraham—and we—must take is inwards, and the vehicle is the imagination. For imagination is the tool that allows us to image a future radically different from the past or even the present. That is exactly what Abraham was called to do—to leave behind all of his yesterdays and todays to leap into an unknown tomorrow.

It is only in the fantasy of re-imagining that we can change our reality. It is only from this inside place that we can truly change our outside. The path of true wisdom is not necessarily to quit your job, leave your home, and travel across the country. Often such a radical break is a failure rather than a fulfillment of imagination. True wisdom is to change your life from where you are, through the power of imagination.

For virtually every crisis at its core is a failure of imagination. Without leaps of imagination, no growth is possible and the spirit petrifies in its old frozen masks.

### **Free to Dream, Dream to Free**

Erotic imagination is about the ability to see beyond the status quo. This is the deep intent of a second group of wisdom masters who also credit the liberation from Egypt to the power of imagination.

The great Exodus began with a man who had a dream. He was a man by the name of Nun, a Hebrew slave under Egyptian rule. One morning he awoke, stunned by his night imaginings. He had dreamed what seemed to be the unimaginable: He saw a time when the Hebrews were free! More than free, they were courageous warriors responsible for the dignity of their own destiny. News of the dream spread. It is said that the hope enflamed by this vision unleashed the dynamics of revolution which ultimately led to freedom.

Although it would take many years for it to become real in the world of realpolitik, this dream was the true beginning of the Exodus. Slavery ends when we can re-imagine ourselves as free people. Nun was none other than the father of Joshua, successor to Moses, who led the people into the Promised Land. All freedom begins with our willingness to stand and say, "I have a dream!" And even if we don't get to the Promised Land, we may well set into motion currents of redemption that will eventually heal our world. If we don't get there, our children will. Nun's entire generation died before reaching Canaan. Yet all of his grandchildren grew up in the Promised Land.

### **The Possibility of Possibility**

Prophet of imagination Nikos Kazantzakis writes, "You have your brush and your colors, paint paradise and in you go." This is a near perfect description of the spirit that animates the biblical myth ritual that yearly celebrates the Exodus from Egypt. Every year on the anniversary of the Hebrew Exodus, people gather for a uniquely dramatic biblical myth ritual, Passover. Unlike the Fourth of July or other freedom anniversaries, it revolves not around commemoration but imagination.

The guiding principle of the holiday is, "Every person is obligated to see him/her self as if they left Egypt." This Talmudic epigram, the guiding mantra of the ritual, is explained by the kabbalists as an invitation to personal re-imagining of the most fantastic kind. You are in Egypt—your own personal Egypt. Egypt, *mitzrayim* in Hebrew, literally means "the narrow places," the constricted passageway of our life's flow. Egypt—kabbalistically said to incarnate the throat—symbolizes all the words that remain stuck in our throats; the words we never speak. The stories of our lives that remain un-lived, unsung, unimagined.

We are slaves. Slavery for the kabbalist is primarily a crisis of imagination. Consequently, the healing of slavery is a ritual of imagination. For an entire evening, we become dramatists,

choreographers, and inspired actors. We re-imagine our lives as the first step on our path to freedom. As George Bernard Shaw reminds us, "Imagination is the beginning of creation. You imagine what you desire; you will what you imagine; and at last you create what you will."

God is the possibility of possibility—limitless imagination. Michael Lerner was correct in his work *Jewish Renewal* when he identified this notion as essential to the Hebrew understanding of the divine. The first of the Ten Commandments is "I am God." When this God is asked to identify himself, He responds, "I will be what I will be." That is, "You cannot capture me in the frozen image of any time or place. To do so would be idolatry and would destroy me." We are commanded against idolatry precisely because idolatry is the freezing of God in a static image, a violation of the imagination, a limiting of possibility.

### **Homo Imaginus**

Bachelard was right when he wrote of the imagination, "More than any other power it is what distinguishes the human psyche." Or listen to the twentieth century prophet of eros, Norman O. Brown: "Man makes himself, his own body, in the symbolic freedom of the imagination. The Eternal Body of Man is the Imagination." Hebrew mystical master Nachman of Bratzlav writes: "It is for this reason that man was called Adam: He is formed of *adama*, the dust of the physical, yet he can ascend above the material world through the use of his imagination and reach the level of prophecy." The Hebrew word "I will imagine" is *adameh*.

For Nachman, the core human movement which gives birth to our spirit is the evolution (within the same root structure) from *adama* to *adameh*. *Adamah* is ground, earth, Gaia. Yet it can also be read as *adameh*, "I will imagine." Man emerges from Nature to live what philosopher Joseph Soloveitchik called "a fantasy-aroused existence."

Imagination is not a detail of our lives, nor merely a methodological tool. It is the very essence of who we are. We generally regard ourselves as thinking animals, homo sapiens. Descartes' "I think, therefore I am" is hardwired into our cultural genes. Yet, biblical myth offers an alternative understanding of the concept of "humanness." The closest Hebrew word to the English "human" or the Latin "*homo*" is "*adam*." The word "*Adam*" derives from the Hebrew root meaning imagination (*d'mayon*). The stunning implication is that the human being is not primarily homo sapiens, but what I will call "homo imagninus."

At the very dawn of human existence, man is described as being created in the divine image. "Divine image" does not mean a fixed and idolatrous copy of divinity. God has no fixed form. God is, instead, the possibility of possibility. Consequently, the human being's creation in the divine image needs to be understood in two ways. First, humanity is not so much "made in God's image" as we are "made in God's imagination," a product of the "divine fantasy." Second, as human beings we ourselves participates in divine imagination—homo imagninus.

How different is this understanding from the bleak depression of modern existential thinking! Our longing for the good is dismissed by Sartre as a "useless passion." Human imagining, writes Camus, condemns us to misery, for it is absurd. We long for goodness, beauty, and kindness in a world perpetually marred by ugliness, evil, and injustice.

But for the biblical mystic, our erotic imaginings of a world of justice and peace marks the immanence of God in our lives. Our creative discontent, that which drives us to imagine an alternative reality, is the image/imagination of God beating in our breast. The cosmos is pregnant

with hints that guide our imaginings. We are called to heal the world in the image of our most beautiful imaginings. The eros of imagination is the elixir of God running through the universe.

### **Creating God**

Imagination is powerful. Very powerful. "Think good and it will be good," wrote Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the last master of Chabad mysticism. This is true not merely because of the psychological power of positive thinking, but also because every imagining gives birth to something real that eventually manifests itself in the universe.

Imagination is transformative not only on the human plane; it has a powerful effect on the divine scale as well. Kabbalists teach that each dimension of divinity, known as a *sefirah* in Kabbalah, has a color which incarnates it. By ecstatically imagining the colors of the sefirot and combining them according to the appropriate mystical instructions, one can actually have an impact on the inner workings of the divine force.

The Zohar goes further in audacious formulations which, upon first reading, describe man creating God in his image—that is to say, in his imagination. Unlike the philosopher Feuerbach, who called human imaginings of God a mere projection, for the Zohar such imagination simply reinforces the substantive reality of God. Or to put it slightly differently, while there is a limited truth in saying that God is a face of human imagination, we need to remember that imagination is a face of God.

Imagination is not childish fancy. It is the spiritual reality called forth by the sacred child within. The God we do not create doesn't exist. Yes, there is a divine force that exists beyond us. Yet there is also a powerfully manifest current of divinity that is nourished by our being. We are the erotic mirrors of God. The first string of letters in the bible, '*bereshit bara elokim*'... can be re-read as '*b'roshi tbara elokim*'—in my mind God is created.