

CHAPTER TWENTY

THE SIXTH FACE

IMAGINATION

Sex models the erotic, but it does not exhaust the erotic. One of the core qualities of the erotic is imagination. The Zohar, the magnum opus of Hebrew mysticism, says explicitly in many places, “Shechinah is imagination.”

In common usage “imagination” is implicitly considered to mean “unreal.” Indeed, “unreal” and “imaginary” are virtual synonyms. To undermine the validity 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.”

IMAGINATION

The power of 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 that derive from our divine selves. Language and rational thinking are generally unable to access this higher truth. But the imagination is our prophet, bringing us the world of the Infinite, which speaks both through us and from beyond us. This is what the biblical mystic Hosea meant when he exclaimed that God said, "By the hands of my prophets, I am imagined."

But who are these prophets who so handily imagine God? Why don't we all have access to the experience of prophecy? "Because the Shechinah is in exile," respond the mystics. The erotics of imagination have been exiled into the sexual. The sexual is the one place where virtually everyone is able to access the full power of imagination. This means that the core erotic quality of imagination no longer plays in all the arenas of our lives, where it is so desperately needed. For it is imagination that allows us to access the wisdom and vision we need to re-chart our lives.

THE SEXUAL MODELS THE
EROTIC: IMAGINATION

One of the core qualities of the sexual is fantasy. To be sexual is to fantasize. Virtually every man and woman has sexual fantasies. To fantasize means simply to imagine. Fantasy is a quality of imagination. Sex models Eros because in the sexual we learn the power of fantasy. The sexual models Eros when it teaches us how to access the potency of imagination in every realm of our lives. What would it mean to fantasize about a world without hunger and sexual abuse? What would it mean to fantasize about a world in which every person's unique gift was received and honored? It is the power of fantasy and imagination that arouse us in the sexual. We require the power of fantasy and imagination to arouse us in the personal and the political as well. That is what it means for the sexual to model the

erotic. When we only access the full power of imagination and fantasy in the sexual, then the Shechinah, Eros, is in exile.*

But it is in the sexual that we practice the art of imagination. The modern erotic classic *Vox* by Nicholson Baker takes place in a series of conversations between Jim and Abby. They never actually touch each other. All of their contact takes place in the realm of imagination. In this drama, their imagination is aroused in a series of phone conversations on an erotic phone line. It is precisely in the sexual where we are able to access the power of imagination. Jim evokes Abby's imagination in the sacred text of his erotic description.

. . . I run my fingers just down the long place where the insides of your thighs touch, all the way to your knees, and then I'd let go of your legs, and they'd fall slightly apart, and as my hands started to move up inside them, with my fingers splayed wide, they'd move farther and farther apart, and then I'd lift your knees and hook them over the arms of the armchair, so that you were wide open for me, and in the darkness your bush would still be indistinct, and I'd look up at you, and I'd move on my knees so I'm closer, so I could slide my cock in you if I wanted, and I touch your shoulders with my hands, and pass my fingertips all the way down over your breasts and over your stomach and just lightly over your bush, just to feel the hair, and then I say, "I'm going to lick you now . . ." ³⁸

The Eros of imagination is exiled to the sexual. The liberation of Eros, which is the liberation of the Shechinah, will take place when the power of erotic imagination becomes available as a potent technology in personal, political, and social imagination. This liberation happens when the sexual becomes our guide—when the sexual models the erotic—and teaches us how to access the power of imagination in every dimension of our lives.

* There are different forms of fantasy, some which emerge from early childhood dynamics and others that emerge from the gorgeousness of our desire. We hope to publish a full volume focused entirely on the dynamics of sexual fantasy.

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

So why in modern usage does the word *fantasy* first and foremost conjure up images of the sexual? We very rarely talk about economic, political, or social fantasies. We don't even talk about food fantasies. But 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 only in sex where we use imagination to conjure up images of that which is hidden.

THE EXILE OF IMAGINATION

A year ago, at a workshop on arousal and Eros, I (Kristina) was attempting to teach an important idea about the erotics of imagination. I wanted to give the students a deep embodied experience of how we have exiled imagination to the sexual. I began with a classic visualization script and instruction "take a moment to relax your body, take a deep breath in, breathe out . . . and continue to breathe slowly, deeply. Imagine there is a protective white light shining, glowing around your body . . . Feel how relaxed and calm and safe you feel as this light surrounds you . . ." I continued on for another fifteen minutes or so, saying, "Imagine being protected head to toe by this light," and then I proceeded to go through every part of the body asking them to imagine the light filling each and every body part. I ended with "feel a shield of protective light" and then asked people to share, asking, "How many of you had a clear experience?" Almost every single hand went up. I then, somewhat cheekily, challenged their claim and accused my surprised audience of being perhaps a bit

dishonest. After a funny and impassioned dialogue, most of the crowd confessed to having much less of a clear visionary experience than they had initially claimed. We realized together that the New Age, with all of its good qualities, also fosters spiritual inferiority complexes: “What do you mean you can’t see the colors of my aura? No high sense perception at all? You can’t see my guides or angels? I’m sorry, but this just isn’t going to work.”

I decided to try again, but this time I was going to go all the way. I began again with another trajectory for an exercise in imagination. Without being totally raw and explicit, I invited them to imagine a sexual scene. “Imagine that your perfect lover, passionate, burning hot, and wildly sexy, has you pressed up against a wall, holding your hands firmly above your head. They whisper hungrily into your open lips, ‘Your mouth tastes like a rare Cabernet . . . and I know other parts of you that taste even better.’ They begin to trace the outline of your mouth with their tongue; quivering, you swallow your hesitation and respond, ‘Are you going to find out?’ They answer back, ‘You bet your ass I am, in more ways than you can count. The very first moment I saw you, I wanted to rip your clothes off and both tenderly make love to you and ravish you deep and hard, watching as you scream the name of God!’” I continued on in graphic detail, aroused and flushed myself by my own internal thoughts! At the end of this process, I asserted with complete certainty that virtually every single person in the crowd was able to feel and sense in graphic detail the complete sexual visualization for most, if not all, of the time. We all laughed out loud. Slowly everyone realized that we had just grasped the point we were struggling with in the previous visualization. Imagination, that gorgeous erotic quality, has been exiled into the sexual.

The simplest evidence of this is that we all have no problem accessing the power of imagination when it comes to sex. As we just saw in the erotic novel *Vox*, Jim and Abby, two ordinary people, are masters of imagination in the realm of the sexual. But we have enormous difficulty accessing that same faculty of erotic imagination not only in a nonsexual visualization but also in all aspects of our nonsexual lives. The Shechinah—Eros, incarnate in imagination—has been exiled into the sexual.

THE EROS OF IMAGINATION

Mirrors of Desire

Eros and imagination hold the keys to many gates, not the least of which is the gateway to our freedom. We saw in the mirrors story of an earlier chapter how the erotic imagination of the Hebrew women in Egypt set into motion the process of the Jews' liberation from slavery. Pharaoh had insisted that the male slaves sleep in the fields separated from their wives. In defiance of the decree, women visited their men in the fields, teasing them with mirrors. Their men, wilting under the oppression of slavery, had lost their potency, but the women, in response, found tools to evoke their men's desire. With these mirrors, they engaged the men's imagination, even when their bodies would not respond. The mirrors are a symbol of the women's erotic play, which resulted in the men of Israel reclaiming their potency.

Throughout the ages, sex play has often involved using strategically placed mirrors. The mirror can amplify the quality of imagination. The mirror offers us an image, allowing us to see in a way that was previously hidden. If you hold a mirror in front of you, you can suddenly see behind you. A rearview 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 would otherwise 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. It was, however, not primarily the women's bodies that were made visible by the mirrors: it was the men's. The women taunted 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. To see oneself making love reveals a whole other image of the erotic self.

According to one biblical tradition, this erotic play was itself the beginning of the liberation. In erotic play, the imagination is engaged.

Once the men were able to re-access their imaginations, the images of freedom were not long in following. The Exodus from slavery became just a matter of time. Sexually erotic imagination was then the model and catalyst for 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 typical “righteous” women, we rarely imagine troops of women with sex toys going to seduce their men in the fields. But that is the precise righteous act to which the tradition is referring. The fact that our idea of righteousness is at odds with the sexual is yet another sad example of the Shechinah in exile.

CRISIS OF IMAGINATION

The greatest crisis of our lives is not economic, intellectual, or even what we usually call religious. It is a crisis of imagination. We get stuck on our path because we are unable to reimagine our lives differently from what 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 Bratslav, is to be willing to give up who you are for who you might become. He calls this process the giving up of *pnimi* to reach for *makkif*. *Pnimi*, for Master Nachman, means the old familiar things that you hold on to even when they no longer serve you on your journey. *Makkif* is that which is beyond you, which you can reach only if you are willing to take a leap into the abyss.

Find your risk, and you will find yourself. Sometimes that means leaving your home, your father’s house, and your birthplace, and traveling to strange lands. Both the biblical Abraham and the Buddha did this. 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 from God is *lech lecha*—“Go forth from your land, your birthplace,

and your father's house." Interpreted by the Zohar, it 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 is inward, and the vehicle is imagination. Imagination is the tool that allows us to visualize 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 the yesterdays and todays and to leap into an unknown tomorrow.

It is only in the fantasy of reimagining 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 indicates a failure rather than a fulfillment of imagination. True wisdom is to change your life from where you are, through the power of imagination.

THINK "COOKIES!"

Virtually every crisis, at its core, is a failure of imagination. Some years back, I (Marc) took off three years from "spiritual teaching" to get a sense of what the world tasted like as a householder. I took a job at a high-tech company, and from that relatively undemanding perch began to rethink my life and beliefs.

During this period, I did a bit of consulting with Israeli high-tech start-up firms. Truth is, I had little good advice to offer, but some of the high-tech entrepreneurs who had been my students would call me anyway. At one point, I received a call from a small start-up firm in Ramat Gan, Israel. The problem: They were almost out of venture capital, their market window seemed to be rapidly closing, and their research and development team was simply not keeping pace with their need for solutions.

Apparently, the problem lay with the elevator. The company was on the top floor of an old warehouse. The elevator was small, hot, and inordinately pungent. By the time the R&D teams would get through the daily morning gauntlet of the elevator, they had lost some of their creative sparkle. The president was convinced that this experience dulled

their edge just enough to slow down the speed and elegance of their solutions. What to do? I have to confess that I hadn't the slightest idea. Our meeting was on a Friday. As was my custom, I went home for the Sabbath and met with my own private consultant, my then-eight-year-old son, Eitan. When I asked him what I should tell the company, he laughed and said somewhat mockingly, "It's simple, Dad—cookies." I did not find this particularly funny. I raised this subject with him several times, but he would only respond, with maddening gravitas, "Cookies."

Finally, I gave up on him. Several days later I went to tell the president I had found no solution. I was going up the same malodorous elevator when in a blinding flash I realized what Eitan meant. Cookies! Of course! We had all been focused on elaborate ways to fix the elevator or to move locations. Eitan—with the simple brilliance of a child—reminded me of the true issue at stake. The crux of the matter was not the elevator; it was how the R&D team felt when they left the elevator. So what to do? Cookies. We set up a table with juices, fruit, and healthy cookies right outside the elevator. So even though the ride up the elevator was terrible, people would spend the whole ride eagerly anticipating the goodies that awaited them. No one else could envision Eitan's simple yet elegant solution because their imagination was "stuck in the elevator." A simple paradigm shift was inspired by reimagining.

Just as we fear so many of Eros' expressions, we fear imagination, for imagination holds out the image of a different life. It challenges our accommodation to the status quo. It suggests that all of the compromises upon which we have based our lives might not have been necessary. Our fear of imagination is our fear of our own greatness. So we work hard to kill it. We tell children to grow out of it. "It's only your imagination," we tell them, as if this were somehow an indication that "it" was therefore less real.

It was Albert Einstein's gift of imagination that allowed him to formulate the concept of relativity. Einstein imagined what it would be like to travel on a beam of light. What would things look like? What would another traveler, on another beam of light going in the opposite direction, look like to him? Without leaps of imagination, no growth is possible, and the spirit petrifies in its old frozen masks.

DREAM TO BE 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, like those we met earlier in the chapter, 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 inflamed by this vision unleashed the dynamics of revolution, which ultimately led to freedom.

Although it would take many years for it to become real, this dream was the true beginning of the Exodus. Slavery ends when we can reimagine ourselves as a 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, perhaps 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

Nikos Kazantzakis, a prophet of imagination, 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 ritual that yearly celebrates the Exodus from Egypt. Every year on the anniversary of the Hebrew Exodus, people gather for Passover. Unlike the Fourth of July or other freedom anniversaries, it revolves around not commemoration but imagination.

The guiding principle of the holiday is: every person is obligated to see himself as if he had left Egypt. This Talmudic epigram, the

guiding mantra of the ritual, is explained by the Kabbalists as an invitation to make a personal reimagining of the most fantastic kind. You are in Egypt—your own personal Egypt. The word *Egypt*, *Mitzrayim* in Hebrew, means “the narrow places,” the constricted passageway of our life’s flow. Egypt, which Kabbalistically is said to incarnate the throat, symbolizes all the words that remain stuck in our throats, the words we never speak, and 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, healing slavery is a ritual of imagination. For an entire evening, we become dramatists, choreographers, and inspired actors. Our first step on our path to freedom is to reimagine our lives. As playwright 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.”³⁹

God is the possibility of possibility—limitless imagination. The first of the Ten Commandments begins, “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 to destroy me.” It would violate the second commandment against idolatry. Idolatry is the freezing of God in a static image. To freeze God in an image is to violate the invitation of the imagination. It is to limit possibility.

HOMO IMAGINUS

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard was right when he wrote of imagination, “More than any other power it is what distinguishes the human psyche.”⁴⁰ Or listen to Norman O. Brown, the twentieth-century prophet of Eros: “Man makes himself, his own body, in the symbolic freedom of the imagination. The eternal body of man is the imagination.” We turn to the Hebrew mystical master Nachman of Bratslav: “It is for this reason that man was called Adam: He is formed of *adamah*, 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 for ‘I will imagine’ is *adameh*.”

For Nachman, the core human movement that gives birth to our spirit is the evolution (within the same root structure) from *adamah* 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 neither 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*. French philosopher René 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 “human,” or the Latin *homo*, is *adam*. The word *adam* derives from the Hebrew root meaning “imagination” (*de’mayon*). The stunning implication is that the human being is not primarily *Homo sapiens* but what we will call *Homo imaginus*.

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. Instead, God is the possibility of possibility. We saw how the biblical opposition to graven images was grounded in the refusal to limit God to the confines of an image. Consequently, the statement that human beings were created in the divine image should be understood in two ways. First, humankind is not so much “made in God’s image” as we are “made in God’s imagination”—we are a product of the divine fantasy. Second, human beings actually participate in the divine imagination—we are *Homo imaginus*.

How different this understanding is from the bleak depression of modern existential thinking! Our longing for the good is dismissed by existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre as a “useless passion.” Human imagining, writes Albert Camus, yet another existentialist philosopher, condemns us to misery, for it is absurd. To him, we long for goodness, beauty, and kindness in a world perpetually marred by evil, ugliness, and injustice.

But for the biblical mystic, our erotic imaginings of a world of justice and peace are the immanence of God in our lives. Our creative discontent,

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 flights of fancy. The Eros of imagination is the elixir of God running through the universe.

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 *sefira* in Kabbalah, has a color that 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 is even more audacious, portraying man creating God in *his* image—that is to say, in man’s imagination. Unlike for the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, who called human imaginings of God mere projection, for the Zohar such imagination simply reinforces the substantive reality of God. While there is a limited truth in saying that God is a figment of human imagination, we need to remember that imagination is a figment of God.

For the Kabbalist, imagination is not childish. 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. The act of nourishing, sustaining, and even creating divinity is called “theurgy” by scholars of mysticism. The term expresses the human ability to dramatically impact and even grow God. One of the great tools of theurgy is imagination. In fact, theurgic imagination is the medium and message of a Kabbalistic rereading of “In the beginning . . .” This first string of letters in the Bible, *bereshit bara Elohim*, can be reread as *b’roshit bara Elohim*—“in my mind God is created.”

A PILGRIMAGE BEYOND ROUTINE

If imagination can change God, then it is certainly a sacred path and vital tool in our everyday lives. Remember that the path of imagination is the path of the prophet. “By my prophets I am imagined.”⁴¹ The prophet symbolizes the divine energy of transformation that reminds us that the status quo is not holy. What is, is not necessarily what needs to be.

One wisdom text from the Hebrew Passover Seder reads: “Had God not taken us out from there, we, our children, and grandchildren would still be slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” Clearly this is not a reasonable claim to make for the descendant of a Hebrew slave. After all, the Pharaohs are long gone, leaving behind only their pyramids to be remembered by. Rather, it is a statement about the tyranny of inertia, the idolatry of the status quo: “This is the way things have always been, son . . . don’t rock the boat.” It is divine imagination that breaks the status quo, freeing us from our Egypts.

The prophetic imagination, with which we are all potentially gifted, insists that things can be different and better. Three times a year, taught the biblical myth masters, at least one member of every Hebrew family should make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The purpose of the pilgrimage was to access the temple energy of Eros, in which imagination played an essential part. In the ecstasy of the temple service, particularly during the autumn Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkot), nearly all of the participants flirted with their prophet selves. The Hebrew word for these triannual temple pilgrimages is *aliyah le’regel*. This means something close to “going up, ascending, by foot.” Walking—going by foot—is our most automatic activity. Hence the Hebrew word for “routine,” a virtual synonym for the status quo, is *hergel*—deriving from the Hebrew root *regel*, which also means “foot.” Just so, our English word *regular* is a direct and obvious descendant of *regel*. And so a better translation of the Hebrew term for temple pilgrimage—*aliyah le’regel*—might be “transcending routine, going beyond the regular, the status quo.” How? By accessing the prophet archetype within, and with that prophetic strength reimagining life beyond its ruts and routines.

In the areas surrounding the temple, there were imagination chambers designated for prayer, meditation, and visualization. There the temple mystics would chart their journeys into the depths of imagination and soul, where God is found. Yet we are beyond the days when the spirit of imagination was reserved for spiritual elites. In our divine core, we are all prophets, architects of our own temples. Remember that Bezalel, artisan of the mini-temple in the desert, was a master of imagination. The very word *bezal-el* is a play on an earlier biblical phrase, *b'tzelem Elohim*, meaning “in the image of God.”

In our interpretation, human beings participate in divine imagination and are thus invited to be the artisans of their lives. The raw materials, colors, and dimensions of your life's canvas are a given. How you mix the colors, weave the material, even choose the picture to draw on the canvas, is your artistic privilege and obligation. To be the artist of our own life—to be our own creator—is both the highest level of the sacred and the most profound expression of our glorious, our wondrous, humanity.

In a paradoxical set of mystical texts, Bezalel, the master craftsman of the book of Exodus, receives no clear blueprint from God or Moses on how to build the tabernacle. And yet he builds it in accordance with “God's will.” For the Kabbalists, this is a hidden allusion to the power of holy imagination to intuit cosmic truth. When the mystics suggest that Bezalel is “taught by God,” they speak in code. The artist is “wise of heart,” “filled with the spirit of wisdom, intuition, and intimate understanding.” All of these draw their inspiration from the breath of divine imagination.

TEMPLES OF IMAGINATION

In the mystical tradition, God shows Bezalel a vision of a tabernacle of flames. This apparition fires Bezalel's imagination and guides him in erecting the desert temple. The careful reader of the Exodus story cannot help but notice the other image of gold that emerges from the fire, namely the golden calf.

The golden calf emerges from the fire of uncertainty. The tradition tells us that Moses is to come down the mountain toward evening on an

appointed day. He has scheduled a rendezvous with the people. Moses is the parent figure. He is security and comfort for the newly freed slaves. But Moses is late. The biblical commentators tell us there has been a miscommunication. Moses thought they had set the time for one evening; the people thought it was for the previous evening. They enter a twenty-four-hour limbo. What happens in this crisis of uncertainty? Can the slaves reimagine themselves as free people without Moses?

Their anxiety as they wait for Moses to come down the mountain is a test of their freedom. Will they be able to hold the center in the emptiness of their uncertainty? The answer is no. The people are not yet free. They are overwhelmed by the prospect of being free, yet responsible, actors in their own drama.

So they build an idol, the golden calf. An idol, you recall, is a “graven image.” An engraved fixed image is a false certainty, a failure of imagination. In the language of the mystic Tzadok—the priest who expresses a theme that runs throughout Hebrew mysticism—they fixate on the face of the ox. The ox is only one of four images that, according to the prophet Ezekiel, are engraved on the cosmic vehicle, God’s chariot. The others are the faces of an eagle, a lion, and a man. The chariot is the ultimate Hebrew mandala image. It is the locus of mystical meditation on the Divine.

Tradition has it that during the theophany of mystical encounter at Mount Sinai, the people were gifted with this precise vision of the Divine. They actually saw the four faces on the chariot. The only problem is that later they chose to focus on only one of the images—the face of the ox. The golden calf is a manifestation of the ox face. It is precisely such exclusive focus on only one image that short-circuits the imagination. “Getting stuck” is often caused not by imagination’s absence but by the overbearing presence of one image. The Zohar teaches that the sin of the golden calf was that the people became so transfixed by one image that all other possibilities were blocked. This narrowness of vision is the unifying theme in the story. Initially the Hebrews’ fixation was on Moses; they could not imagine life without him. When Moses disappeared, they were unable to wait for his return and transposed their Moses fixation onto the calf.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

There is much in our lives that evokes images of waiting. We are not fully realized—we await some future that we believe holds the secrets of our transformation and healing. But that future is fully available to us in the present. The secret is in how we wait.

One image of nonerotic waiting was given to us by playwright Samuel Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*. The play captures the all-pervading sense of ennui, despair, and hopelessness that comes when one loses all sense of present and presence, waiting instead for a fantasy messiah. This is the shadow of imagination: the inability to heal and repair the world because we are paralyzed by imaginary redeemers upon whom we wait, hoping they will finally make everything all right.

It is easy to get stuck in imagination. I am reminded of the story of a meditation teacher who gave an assignment to his students to sit in isolation and imagine themselves as something radically different from what they had ever imagined themselves to be. When the time came for the students to emerge from their meditation, one student didn't appear. Hours passed. The ashram was searched. Finally, finding the young initiate in a broom closet, they invited him to come out and join the group. He said he could not emerge, for he had imagined himself as a bull. His horns were simply too wide to fit through the door, and so he sat. Every facet of Eros has its own shadow. We must be careful not to get lost in imagination. On the contrary, imagination needs to be the place where we "get found."

An alternative image of waiting is supplied by the biblical mystics. This is not the passive and resigned waiting for Godot, but waiting for the Messiah, not as some future event that will make it all better, but as a reality, available in the full presence of the present. Messiah waiting is a process of active imagination that brings in its wake the social and spiritual activism of *tikkun*, the healing and transformation of the planet. In "waiting for the Messiah," we give birth to the first level of the existence of a better world. This is erotic waiting, as opposed to nonerotic waiting.

The act of imagination is transformative. For as the contemporary biblical mystic Abraham Isaac Kook wrote in the early twentieth century,

“Whatever you imagine exists.” Your imagination discloses the way things could be and, on an inner level, the way they already are.

IN-FANCY

Little Jane comes to us in tears. “I wished Tommy would get hurt, and he did. But I didn’t mean it.” We comfort little Jane, wanting her to know that she is not responsible for the accident that happened to Tommy. And we are partially right, but only partially. The essential intuition of the child needs to be validated and not explained away. Our kids need to know that they are powerful. They can reimagine the world—for good or for evil, to hurt or to heal. Imagination is an essential part of responsibility.

We intuitively look for our children to create a better tomorrow for all of us. Hebrew tradition interprets the word *banim* to mean both “children” and “builders.” Children are always building imaginary realms and constructing fortresses and castles with such exquisite aptitude. Children are always dashing around as superheroes, saving banks from robbers, and creating elaborate family scenarios with a few dolls. We need to nurture infancy, in-fancy, to encourage its power rather than undermine it with scoffing and ridicule.

We have long since forgotten our true nature as agents of transformation. We have forgotten that we are superheroes. At the backs of our closets and eaten away by moths, our magical capes are long neglected. Birds don’t fly because they have wings; they have wings because they fly. We are what we imagine ourselves to be. The wings always come in good time. We need to reclaim our capes of holy imagination and heal our fear of flying.

THE CAPACITY TO BE

One favorite—if occasionally frightening—television show of kids in the 1960s was *The Twilight Zone*. Once there was an episode about a boxer who loses a fight as his young son watches the contest at home on

television. The son believes what the father does not, namely, that Dad really can win. So with his passion, his conviction, and the great love of a son for his father, he summons up all his inner concentration and tries to reimagine the fight. Lo and behold, we see the fight being replayed on the TV screen, and this time Dad wins.

When Dad comes home a few hours later, the son tells him what happened. Dad, of course, thinks this is sweet but childish nonsense. “No!” his son says desperately. “You’ve got to believe. You’ve got to believe.” The father ultimately cannot bring himself to believe—in himself, in his son, or in the power of imagination. For the third time we see the fight replayed on the screen before the father and son. The father loses as his son cries.

When raising a child, the parent often has to teach the distinction between the real and the illusory. And yet the child also must raise the parent, reminding him that imagination is real and possibility is infinite. Such is the deep wisdom of the following wonderful story told by the mystical master Nachman of Bratslav:

The king’s young son seemed to have gone mad. He sat, stark naked, underneath the king’s table, claiming he was a turkey. There he sat making soft gobbles, taking his meals, and sleeping. He sat stark naked because, as he explained, nobody ever saw a turkey in human clothes. All the king’s analysts and all the king’s therapists couldn’t put his son back together again.

Finally, a wise old man, who was very young in spirit, came and offered to heal the prince. No one had heard of this old man, but the king, being rather desperate, consented to his offer. The old man promptly went and, much to everyone’s consternation, sat under the table, stark naked, with the boy.

“What are you doing here?” asked the very confused and surprised prince.

“Why, I am a turkey,” responded the old man.

“Well . . . I guess that’s okay.”

And the two became friends, as only turkeys can. Some days went by and the old man put on a shirt.

“What are you doing?” cried out the boy. “I thought you were a turkey.”

“Why, I am,” said the man, “but is there any reason a turkey cannot wear a shirt?”

The boy thought, and truthfully, although it did seem a bit improper, he could think of no substantive reason why a turkey could not wear a shirt. And if a turkey could wear a shirt, well, it was a bit chilly, so he put on a shirt as well. And so the process continued to pants, shoes, and eventually to sitting at a table, until the prince was fully healed.

Often a child seeks to compensate for the pathologies of society. The kingdom suffers from a lack of imagination. A lack of imagination is a lack of soul. So the child rebels and seeks healing through an increase of imagination. Yet it does not always hold that an increase of imagination is an increase of soul. Sometimes we overdose and lose ourselves in the very imaginings that were to be our healing. Often such overdosing is the key to the psychological reality maps of children. The child can be made whole only if we enter with her into the world of imagination. Our healing can flow only from that inner place. The underlying therapeutic principle can be summed up in two words: empathetic imagination, which is essential not only to psychological healing but also to all authentic relationships.

Next time you are in an argument with someone you love, step out of the circle of conflict and imagine yourself as that person. Try to experience the argument through his or her psyche. The Kabbalists say God is radically empathetic to the suffering of every individual. To be a lover is to be like God—to enter into the space of your beloved so you can receive the full depth of her story, including her loves and triumphs, but especially her hurts, fears, and vulnerabilities. For the mystic, this is the essence of our relationship to the Divine, both within and beyond. To feel the pain of the Shechinah in exile is to exercise imagination; it is to enter divine space and feel what God feels.

Whenever they see their beloved children arguing, parents are greatly pained. Imagine through your parenting experience how God must feel

when his children kill each other. In doing so, we participate in the pain of the Shechinah in exile.

Just so in joy. When our children love each other, we are delighted beyond words. Imagine how God must feel when we are good to one another. In kindness, we touch ecstasy. We participate in the rapture of the Shechinah redeemed.