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The Sanctification of God in Love

Once again the kiss represents a resistance to tyranny, but in the story by Lamed Shapiro we have the consummate ironization of the motif. In "Der Kush," a tale of terror in *Die Yudishe Melukhe*, the kiss of death is a grotesque act that dramatizes in an almost surrealistic way the crass realism of evil in our times.⁵⁸ It tells of one Reb Shakhne, who first appears amid the plunder of a pogrom cowering under a bench, unable to act. It is there that the rabble, the *shekotzim*, find him and drag him out to perform to their drunken delight. And then it happens. One of the rioters, who had been well treated by Reb Shakhne, gets it into his head that the Jew should kiss his foot, and so he gets the holy man down on his knees and waits barefooted. Perhaps it was the degraded position itself, or that it evoked in him the ancient law that one should die a martyr before doing idolatrous service. But there it was, an ultimate moment: the holy Jew with his curled beard bent forward, his ancient face before the stinking red toe of his tormentor. Shapiro gives the encounter mythic dimensions – as also the response of Reb Shakhne. When he acts, he bites the putrid object with cannibalistic fury. The thugs pummel him to a bloody pulp, but the Jew holds on, dying in his resistance. No heavenly voice rescues this story from the curse of history; and no Akiba-like rapture restores this ritual from the fetid swamp of hate. The kiss of death here is an insane act: the Jew dies in the stink of Satan. Of him Scripture says, "For Your sake we are killed all day long."

3

"As if he sacrificed a soul" Forms of Ritual Simulation and Substitution

The longing for spiritual fulfillment, so characteristic of the quest for God among philosophers, mystics, and martyrs, is, as we have seen, a loving unto death – a commitment of "all" one's soul to God. This was the ideal to be maintained as much as possible and in whatever way possible. For this reason, ritual replacements were formulated whenever the most supreme commitment could not be made or properly performed. Two types have been mentioned. The first brings us back to the interpretation of Deuteronomy 6:5 found in the Midrash *Sifrei Deuteronomy* 32.¹ Responding to the martyrological application of the phrase "with all your soul" and its elaboration through the psalmist's remark "For Your sake are we killed all day long, and regarded as sheep for the slaughter" (Psalm 44:23), Rabbi Simeon ben Menasia rejected this as a concrete daily ideal ("Is it possible to be killed *all day long*?") and offered an alternative. He said that the passage should rather be taken to mean that God credits the righteous "as if" (*ke'ilu*) they are slain daily for His sake – that is, the deeds of the righteous, who "kill" their evil desires out of devotion to God, are deemed a



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more spiritualized realization of martyrological values. In this way the disciplined devotion to God through the commandments fulfills the obligation to love God "with all your soul," and makes it practicable. The life-enhancing rituals of the Law thus provide a functional substitute for the absolute practice of death.

The second type of ritual substitution was briefly noted in connection with the *Yosef 'Ometz* of Rabbi Yosef Yuzpe Hahn Nordlingen.² Because some commandments, like the duty to sanctify the divine Name, are not always feasible in one's lifetime, a functional equivalent was found ("considered" or "accounted," *neheshav*) in the act of studying the relevant laws and determining to fulfill them if the chance to do so arose. A precedent to this effect was adduced from Rabbi Simeon's interpretation of Psalm 44:23 in the *Sifrei*. Directly alluding to that passage (in which the speaker says that he and his people are "considered" or "accounted," *neheshavnu*, as sheep for the slaughter), Rabbi Yosef Hahn remarks that one who "determines daily to sanctify His great Name" by reciting Deuteronomy 6:5 with absolute devotion "is accounted [*neheshav*] as a sheep for the slaughter." Since the context deals with the very practical merit accrued by worshippers for the sake of their perfection and release from rebirth, the actuarial denotation of the verb *neheshav* must be emphasized; that is, it is not merely a matter of God taking note or consideration of these deeds but of actually accruing them to the account of good deeds of the worshipper. Accordingly, it is not only the ascetic discipline of the Jew that is accredited (Rabbi Simeon's view) but the inner determination to sanctify God with all one's soul in prayer and (if necessary) practice. The merit of martyrdom begins in meditation: intention is like the deed, in fact.

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The issue of ritual substitutions, and in particular the role of study and ascetic self-sacrifice, take us back to the early rabbinic period. A collection of interpretations at the end of the talmudic tractate *b. Menahot* (110a) is notable in this regard. Each one invokes the expression *ke'ilu* (as if) to note the functional equivalent of Torah study and Temple service. The first two are fairly general: "scholars who devote themselves to the study of Torah wherever they are," or "at night," are accounted "as if" they "burnt and presented offerings" to God or "were occupied with the Temple service." The third more closely specifies that "scholars who are occupied with the laws of the Temple service" are considered "as if the Temple were built in their days." But it is the fourth and fifth interpretations that connect the performative benefits of study with the transformative effects of sacrifices in a detailed way.

Resh Laqish said, "What is the significance of the verse 'This is the law for the burnt-offering, for the meal-offering, for the sin-offering, and for the guilt-offering' [Leviticus 7:37]? It teaches that whoever occupies himself with the study of the Torah is as if [*ke'ilu*] he were offering a burnt-offering, a meal-offering, a sin-offering, and a guilt-offering." Rabba asked, "Why then does the verse say 'for the burnt-offering, for the meal-offering'? It should rather have [simply] said, 'a burnt-offering, a meal-offering!'" "Rather," said Rabba, "[this formulation] means that whoever occupies himself with the study of Torah needs neither burnt-offering nor meal-offering nor sin-offering nor guilt-offering." Rabbi Isaac said, "What is the significance of the verses 'This is the law of the sin-offering' [Leviticus 6:18] and 'This is the law of the guilt-offering' [7:1]? They teach that whoever is occupied with the laws of the sin-offering is as if [*ke'ilu*] he were offering a sin-offering, and whoever is occupied with



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the laws of the guilt-offering is as if [ke'ilu] he were offering a guilt-offering."

The rhetorical cast of these interpretations should not gainsay their exhortatory force or, especially, the expiatory function of study proclaimed for Jews who lived after the destruction of the Temple and its service. Surely this reflects the ideals of the class of scholars who make these points; but just as surely does it betoken the changing notion of service (avodah) which was then at work in Judaism. No longer the sacrificial service of the Shrine but now the devoted service of the heart (in prayer) and mind (in study) is proclaimed as the means of reparation between the individual and God. A more lapidary formulation found in b. Megillah 31b makes this point at the conclusion of a "dialogue" between God and Abraham. The latter asks how Israel can be protected from punishments due to sin when the Temple service does not exist, and is told: "I [God] have already established for them 'an order of sacrifices,' [so that] whenever they read from them I accredit [Israel] as if [ke'ilu] they make a sacrifice before Me - and I forgive all their sins." Other acts of substitution could also be included. Here we shall simply mention the poignant petition of Rav Sheshet, who, after a penitential fast, prayed "that my fat and blood which have diminished [through fasting] be as if [ke'ilu] I sacrificed them on the altar before You, and You favored me [with forgiveness]."³ And then too there is the assertion that even if one brings only one's "self" (or "soul") before God in penitence, "it would be as if [ke'ilu] he sacrificed a soul."⁴ We miss the living spirituality of these teachings if they are reduced to mere hyperbole. Imitative displacements of the sacrificial service (through fasting and penance and study) are all spiritual means to

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the same end. In this sense it is "as if" the worshipper were occupied with the Temple service itself.

Another group of sources may be added here: those dealing with the issue of the atoning power of suffering and individual death. This notion has ancient roots and extends by way of rabbinic literature into the Middle Ages, where it joins with rituals and attitudes bearing on our theme. Explicitly or implicitly, the repairing role of death or pain is always part of the ideational background, if only because they formed part of the curriculum which the scholars inherited and thus contributed to the folk ethos of those who absorbed such ideas from the liturgy, from sermons, or from common parlance. For our purposes, several formulations may be culled from the whole. Of these, two dicta mentioned in the Mishnah are striking, both for the ideas conveyed and for their liturgical significance. In the first, found in a discussion of the coloration of skin diseases, Rabbi Ishmael is reported to have said, "Children of Israel - I am their atonement!" That is, he accepted these sufferings for the atonement of the people.⁵ In the second case, we learn that a person given a verdict of death by stoning is invited to confess just prior to reaching the place of execution; "but if he [the convict] does not know how to confess, they [the officials of the court] say to him: 'Say, "May my death atone for all my sins."'"⁶ Both formulations attest to accepted theological values concerning atonement and provide legal support for their ritual pronouncement.

Both suffering and death as instruments of atonement are conjoined in an early list (together with repentance and the Day of Atonement) that considers various sins and their ritual remedies.⁷ The capacity of the day of death to "cleanse" or "scrape away" sin is mentioned with respect to one who has "desecrated the Name of Heaven"⁸ -



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but only together with suffering (prior to death) and the appropriate acts of penitence. Among the biblical proof texts offered here is Isaiah 22:14, "Surely this sin shall not be atoned for [i.e., fully expiated] until you die." A dictum attributed to Rabbi Judah in the *Tosefta* gives a broader formulation: "Death and the Day of Atonement effect expiation together with repentance; repentance effects expiation along with death; and the day of death must be deemed like repentance."⁹

Classical Judaism thus struggled to assure the faithful that complete atonement for sins could be accomplished by the ritual and theological structures that remained after the loss of the sacrificial service. However apodictically formulated, one can easily sense the powerful impulses and anxieties that lie behind these teachings and the concern to base the outcome on biblically supported precedents. The notion that death is the ultimate sacrifice or expiatory act that can be offered for atonement provides great solace and influences Jewish attitudes both in the concrete act of sanctifying God in martyrdom and in the various ritual simulations (mental and physical) of death that developed in liturgical practice.

Before turning to the various forms of ritual simulation of death in Judaism (both mental and physical), it will be of interest to observe how the preceding traditions develop in the Middle Ages and combine to form the wider conceptual and theological framework of our specific theme. In this respect we may begin with Rav Sheshet's aforementioned prayer concerning the atoning power of one's "fat and blood" during penitential fasts. This theme recurs frequently in special synagogal prayers (*piyyuṭim*), particularly for Yom Kippur. Thus in a penitential prayer for that occasion, Levi ibn Altaban

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remarks how worshippers "offer their fat and blood / like sacrifices and burnt-offerings."¹⁰ Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra addresses God, "To You [O Lord] my heart and blood of my fat / I am like a lamb of burnt-offering."¹¹ Developing this theme, many medieval poets play on the alliteration of *dam* (blood) and *dem'a* (tear) and pray that God accept the gift of human tears as a sacrificial libation. In a particularly poignant stanza, Rabbi Shelomo ibn Gabirol intercedes for his people Israel (in a *rahit* for Yom Kippur):

Lord! she has no [Temple] offering to atone for her guilt;
But her fat and blood replace the fat of peace-offerings,
And the sprinkling of her tears is like the sprinkling of her blood.
Sprinkle, then, O God, with Your healing waters and purify her!¹²

We would seriously diminish the spiritual pathos of these prayers were we simply to relegate their sacrificial imagery to poetic tropes, to mere metaphors with no vital force. Rather, these petitions use ancient cultic terms to mediate and focus a concrete spiritual concern: divine atonement through vicarious sacrifice. Indeed, the penitents' desire for divine forgiveness is insistent throughout. For the sake of atonement, God is offered the flesh, blood, and tears of the penitent, even speech itself. In this last sense, the prayers have a confessional dimension and function like sacrificial offerings, in line with the dictum of the prophet Hosea, who urged his people to confess and say: "Instead of bulls we shall pay [the offering of] our lips" (14:3). Appreciating the force of this expression, an old talmudic tradition stresses the fact of substitution implied here and adds that one who confesses truly "is

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regarded by Scripture as if [ke'ilu] he offered bulls [parim]; as it is written, 'Instead of bulls we shall pay [the offering of] our lips'" (b. Yoma 86b). Annotating this teaching in the eleventh century, Rabbeinu Hananel underscores the point with the variant reading "as if he offered a sacrifice [qorban]." The synagogue poets who were Hananel's near and younger contemporaries wholeheartedly concurred when they said, "Their [the penitents'] song [was] instead of [temur] their offering [qorbanam]."¹³

The spiritual power of prayer complements the other (aforenoted) talmudic tradition regarding the study of the rules of sacrifice. Indeed, the two themes conjoin in one of the earliest works on halakhic practice: the *Sefer ha-Manhig* of Rabbi Avraham ben Natan Hayarhi of Lunel (ca. 1155–1215). Referring to the requirement to recite the rules of daily sacrifices (*parashat temidin*) every day, the author adds: "and these are accounted before God in place of an offering [*u-binqom qorban hen neheshavim lifnei ha-maqom*]; as it is stated: 'We shall pay the fruit [*peri!*] of our lips.'"¹⁴ Following this Sefardi tradition, Abudarham (fourteenth century) states that the rabbis ruled regarding the recitation of "the sacrifices more than other topics since whoever recites these with intention [*kavanat ha-lev*], it is as if [*ke'ilu*] he offered them [in sacrifice]."¹⁵ The concern was also well-established in the Ashkenazi rite. Thus by the thirteenth century, Rabbi Zedekiah ben Avraham Ha-Rofe (of Italy) refers to the daily recitation of the *tamid*-sacrifice in his *Shibbolei ha-Leqet* as something "required" (*ve-tzarikh . . . liqrot*);¹⁶ and the saintly Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Yehuda (of Worms) commented on the words "to sacrifice to Me" in the *tamid*-service, saying: "The *tamid* should always be performed; and if one should object and say that it is [now] annulled [because of the Temple's destruction], one may answer this [with the

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biblical verse] 'Instead of bulls we shall pay [the offering of] our lips' and [with the rabbinical dictum] 'Prayer has been established in lieu of sacrifices.'"¹⁷

Gradually, statements stressing the substitution of verbal recitation for sacrifices were incorporated into the prayer book and became an explicit petition interleaved with the paragraphs recounting the actual sacrifices. Thus by the sixteenth century, Rabbi Moshe ibn Makhir (of Safed) notes that after reciting the *tamid*-sacrifice the worshipper says, "May the words of our lips be deemed worthy and acceptable as if [*ke'ilu*] we offered the *tamid*-sacrifice at its appointed time." Similarly, Rabbi Yosef Karo ruled that after the sacrificial recitations (concluding with *parashat ha-'olah*), one should say: "May it be Your will that this be deemed worthy and acceptable as if [*ke'ilu*] I offered the *'olah*-sacrifice."¹⁸ These phrases recur in the Ashkenazi rite, along with a more explicit account of the atoning purpose of this prayer. Thus, just before reciting the rules of sacrifice, one is bidden to add:

May it be Your will, O Lord our God and God of our ancestors, that You have mercy upon us and forgive all our sins and grant us atonement for all our iniquities and wipe away all our transgressions; and that You build the Temple speedily in our day that we may offer to You the daily [*tamid*] sacrifice, that it provide atonement for us . . .

A third aspect of ritual simulation returns us to the theme of *kiddush ha-shem*, or martyrdom, discussed in the previous chapter. We there had occasion to observe that Rabbi Yosef Yuzpe Hahn (in the seventeenth century) invoked Rabbi Eliezer Azikri with respect to his teaching that if one did not have the opportunity to die a martyr in fact, then a sincere mental intention could suffice.



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For this spiritual substitution to be effective, however, the worshipper must be utterly resolved (*gamar be-libbo*) to die a martyr. As noted, the purpose of this ritual replacement was to enable the devotee to fulfill all the commandments of the Torah, and thus achieve absolute perfection (and with it release from the round of rebirth). The Kabbalistic theosophy underpinning this concern for ritual perfection was clearly articulated by Rabbi Yosef Hahn's contemporary Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz of Prague. In his masterwork, the *Shnei Lukhot ha-Berit*, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz noted the mystical tradition that each of the 613 commandments of Jewish observance is related to a different part of the Supernal Anthropos, a spiritual structure in the highest realm which is also the archetype for the human anthropoidal configuration on earth. Accordingly, one of the mysteries of the commandments performed by mortals is the simultaneous capacity of these acts to repair (and rebuild) the heavenly form while perfecting the earthly self.¹⁹ Individual and cosmic eschatology are thus interdependent, and absolutely dependent upon the human performance of every divine law – even those that are physically precluded by spatial setting (e.g., not living in the land of Israel), historical occasion (e.g., martyrdom), or social events (e.g., levirate marriage or writing a bill of divorce). So what can one do under such circumstances? Developing an older solution, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz offers a profound reinterpretation of the ancient ideal of study for its own sake and combines it with the notion of “spiritual preparation” (*hakhanah*).²⁰

The SHeLaH (as Horowitz was called, after the acronym from the title of his book) begins with the old problem of how the ancient Patriarchs achieved spiritual perfection, since they lived before Sinai and thus did not have the concrete commandments to perform. His answer is that

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they realized the commandments in a wholly interior way, through “the power of their preparation [*hakhanatam*]; that is, they were absolutely attached [*devuqim be-takhlit ha-devequt*] to the Creator, may He be blessed, and were joyfully prepared [*mukhanim*] to fulfill His will in whatever He might command them. . . . And this preparation [*hakhanah*] was like the actual deed [*ke-ma'aseh be-fo'al*].” What is more, through the strength of their “absolute preparation” (*takhlit ha-hakhanah*), these saints realized the entirety of 613 commandments through the commandments they did perform, for the totality was “included” [*kelulim*] in each and every *mitzvah*. After Sinai, however, when the 613 commandments were revealed, pious people practiced what they could do in fact (*be-fo'al*) and remained prepared to fulfill all of them joyously, so that “what one cannot fulfill [in fact] is [accounted] as if [*ke'ilu*] he [actually] fulfilled [it], since he is prepared [to do so]” through study of the Torah for its own sake. “Thus even though one may not fulfill [a commandment] because it is unavailable to him to do so, but he is [nevertheless] prepared [*mukhan*] to fulfill it, then [the commandment] is accounted to such a one as if [*ke'ilu*] he fulfilled it – because he brought the deed to actuality by the power of this preparation [*hakhanah*].”

For Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz, the public revelation of all the commandments is deemed a special theological moment, effected by God for “the generation which proved worthy” – though there is a noticeable shift from the exalted spiritual preparation of the Patriarchs, which was linked to their absolute *devequt* (attachment), to a preparation expressed through pure study. Although the latter “performance” of the commandments is deemed effective and demands great spiritual development, it is noteworthy that the language of *devequt* is not used



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in connection with it. Perhaps for this reason Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz's son, Rabbi Shabbetai Sheftel, sensed a diminution in spiritual capacity from the Patriarchs to the generation of Sinai and somewhat undermines his father's point when he comments that the Israelites at Sinai needed a multitude of commandments in order to achieve divine merit, because their preparation was not as strong as that of their ancestors. In a striking reversal, Rabbi Shabbetai Sheftel goes on to close the gap opened by his father's omission when he says that the people's "preparation" (*hakhanatam*) is "the attachment [*devequt*] to God, may He be praised, within them."²¹

The *SHeLaH* refers to the capacity of the individual to fulfill the commandments through mental preparation as "a very great mystery" (*rav hu sod ha-hakhanah*) and invokes the ancient rabbinic dictum that "whoever occupies himself with the portion of sacrifices is [accounted] as if [*ke'ilu*] he offered the sacrifices [themselves]" (*b. Menahot* 110a). The emphasis here remains on personal perfection. Elsewhere, the author returns to this teaching in the context of considering how the Temple service can be actualized in the present day (*ha'idana*), now that the Temple is in ruins. The perspective thus shifts to a broader, sacramental dimension as three levels of sacrificial simulation are recorded. In ancient days, when the Temple still stood, a person could worship God correctly through action, word, and thought: through (the act of) sacrifice, the (recitation of the) confession, and the (focused) articulation of the divine Name. But now:

A person must offer himself [sacrificially; *yaqriv 'et 'atzmo*] in action. [And] how [does he do] so? By means of [abject] mourning for Jerusalem, which he demonstrates through all his actions. . . .

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[And he must offer himself] in word. How so? [By means of the principle] "Instead of bulls we shall pay [the offering of] our lips"; as our sages of blessed memory have said: "Whoever occupies himself with the portion of the sacrifices is as if he offered the sacrifices [themselves]."

[And he must also offer himself] in thought. How so? [This he does through] the mystery [whereby] one determines in his mind [*gamar be-libbo*] to devote himself to the sanctification of the Name; for then he fulfills in himself [the verse] "A person who would offer from among you [a sacrifice to YHWH]" [Leviticus 1:2], since he offers himself [sacrificially] to God, may He be praised. [And as regards the continuity of the verse], "If his offering is from the sheep," [this may be understood] with regard to [the martyrologically understood passage] "we are regarded as sheep for the slaughter."²²

In this passage we have an interesting sequence of simulations from the physical to the verbal to the mental (i.e., intentional), all focused on Temple piety, with three eschatological effects: the *national* rebuilding of the Temple (through absolute mourning, as the passage itself says), the *personal* perfection of the self (through atonement for all sins), and the sanctification of the *divine* (through readiness for martyrdom). This last sanctification is more literally the sanctification of the divine Name, as we have seen earlier, and so it may be fitting to conclude this initial synopsis of ritual simulations with another passage from the *SHeLaH* which integrates action, speech, and thought on a spiritual level. This is a prayer for the reparation (*tikkun*) of the divine Name and is by any measure a remarkable expression of the attitude toward ritual reality we have been tracing. In it the speaker seeks to restore the defects caused through sin to each of the four letters of the divine Name, or to the other letters of the alphabet mystically



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connected to it.²³ Moving from the first to the fourth letter of the Tetragrammaton, the supplicant intends to repair each of the four hierarchical worlds (in descending series) dependent upon them through his acknowledgment that each one requires death by one of the four types of capital punishment (stoning, burning, decapitation, and strangulation) prescribed by the ancient rabbinical court. At each of the first three stages the speaker further invokes the intercessory merit of the Patriarchs, and at all four points he declares himself as (*ke'ilu*) one killed by the court in the proper way. Though simulated, such deaths effect nothing less than a *tikkun*, or atoning reparation, for the supernal divine reality. In the summarizing finale, intention and recitation are brought to a striking close when the worshipper beseeches God to give him the strength to undertake these sufferings with a pure mind and pure speech. With paradoxical poignancy, the divine is perfected through power bestowed upon the "dying" human sinner. Quite different features of simulated death will occupy us in subsequent pages.

In the previous chapter, the striking testimony of Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer Halevi was adduced with respect to a person who truly "determines" (*gomer be-libbo*) to sacrifice himself for the honor of God. Such a person, he remarked, does not feel the tortures brought upon him. He had this as "a tradition among the sages"; and we find one source in the thirteenth-century responsum of Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg, who notes this capacity to transcend pain when a person fully "determines" (*gomer be-da'ato*) to die a faithful martyr.²⁴ A similar expression to indicate spiritual intent is found in a contemporary (thirteenth-century) Spanish commentary on the commandments by Rabbi Moshe de Leon, the *Sefer ha-Rimmon*. The important

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difference for our purposes lies in the fact that the author is concerned to instruct his readers in the proper intentions to keep in mind while reciting the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) in the daily liturgy. Referring to the mishnaic and midrashic understanding of the phrase "with all your soul" as meaning "even if He takes your soul," de Leon cites the following (earlier) tradition:

Every person who loves his Creator, whenever he reaches the verse "and you shall love (etc.);" in the recitation of the Shema, should direct his mind and thoughts toward love for his Maker, as if [*ke'ilu*] he were giving up his soul for His sake in love, with absolute sincerity, and accepting death upon himself. And it is obligatory upon each person to resolve [lit., "determine"; *ligmor be-nafsho*] this matter daily. And this is like what [the sages meant when] they said, "For Your sake we are killed all day long, and regarded as sheep for the slaughter." And how splendid if he employs this intention daily in love for his Maker and devotes his soul for His sake, as we have said; and He, may He be blessed, wants intention [in worship].²⁵

Here we have a spiritual intention concerning martyrological devotion during prayer, long before the supposed shift from acts of concrete performance (during the Crusades) to their ritual enactment (during the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries).²⁶ What is more, this valuable document already employs the word *ke'ilu* to mark the meditative act involved. In contrast to contemporary and later uses of the "as if" formula to indicate projective visualizations of the divine Name (and other matters),²⁷ de Leon counsels a mental focusing of intent - a projection of will - performed daily. The goal is thus to enact the commitment to die as an expression of absolute loving devotion. And although nothing further is said here



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regarding actual martyrological practice, it is clear from de Leon's theosophical introduction that such a "death-act" has practical benefits. In the first place, he remarks that the commitment of human love is a pillar that sustains the universe, 28 even as it is a means of restoring one's divine nature to its transcendental source. 29 And finally, drawing on a discussion of the capacity of joyful service to draw forth heavenly blessing from the supernal gradations (of divine Being), de Leon speaks of the "holy martyrs," who "accepted death in love, through the mystery of joy." While cleaving to God in love, supernal Joy descended upon them; so that "they were joyful in their sufferings"! 30 Alluding to Rabbi Akiba's celebrated theology of "the sufferings of love" (b. Berakhot 5a), the text invokes the model of Akiba, who accepted his torturous death with a resolute spirit, and who, because of his great attachment to God while reciting the Shema at his death, "did not feel his torture!" Intense love may thus lead to the transcendence of pain, as Rabbi Meir of Rothenberg and Rabbi Abraham ben Eliezer attested, and as de Leon himself seems wont to counsel his compatriots. The proper practice of the daily Shema is then as much a preparation for saintly death as it is a credo of living love of God. The ritual recitation is thus an interiorization of death, such that the true devotee is already in life a spiritual martyr in deed.

This interpretation of the Shema recitation as a meditation on martyrological death recurs throughout the Middle Ages – and beyond. Particularly influential was the annotation of the celebrated sixteenth-century talmudist Rabbi Joel Sirkis to Rabbi Jacob ben Asher's monumental code, the Arba'ah Turim.

When one recites the Shema, one should have the intention to accept upon oneself the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven,

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to be slain for the sanctification of the Name. . . . This is what is meant by "with all your soul" – even if He takes your soul. . . . With this intention one will recite it with fear and trembling. 31

The issue comes up in other sixteenth-century documents and genres. Thus Rabbi Eliezer Azikri counsels in his spiritual compendium Sefer Haredim that one should resolutely intend to die a martyr while reciting the Shema, so that if the event should come to pass, he would devote himself to God "in joy." This prayerful resolution "would be accounted [neheshav] to him as if [ke'ilu] he devoted himself in fact." 32 Such a point, it will be recalled, was made by Rabbi Yosef Hahn (who also alludes to Azikri's manual) in the next century, and it achieved a summary formulation by the eighteenth-century Kabbalist and moralist Rabbi Moshe Hayyim Luzzatto, in his spiritual guidebook Derekh ha-Shem:

One of the conditions associated with this commandment [of reciting the Shema] is that each person mentally resolve [gomer be-da'ato] to devote his soul for the sake of God's Unity and willingly undergo all manner of sufferings and types of death for the sanctification of His Name – and [such a resolve] will be accounted [neheshav] as if [ke'ilu] he did the deed in fact and was slain for the sanctification of the Name. [Such a resolve,] moreover, has great consequences for the benefit of the Creation and the more general rectification. (IV.4.iv)

Several matters are intertwined here. Beginning with the traditional emphasis on the meritorious benefits accruing to the individual worshipper who determines to die a martyr while reciting the Shema, the passage ends with a reference to the greater boon befalling Creation and the



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overall redemption. Indeed, the meditative act not only produces a ritual exchange of thought for divine merit but has a theurgical effect on the fragments of fallen existence awaiting rectification. Put differently, but in the linguistic spirit of Luzzatto's formulation, the intense human resolve to sacrifice oneself for divine Unity actually influences the restorative unification of all Being. Self-sacrifice thus stands in the center of world-restorative actions, actually replacing the ancient Temple as the site of ritual at-one-ment. In this regard, the allusion to the old rabbinic list of effective expiations (mentioned earlier) cannot be overlooked. According to both the Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael and the Tosefta,³³ desecration of the divine Name requires (along with repentance and the Day of Atonement) suffering and death itself. Now, as if in response, Luzzatto says that the mental resolve to suffer and die for the sanctification of God's Name is not only like the real occurrence of such actions but even actualizes cosmic dimensions as well. Verbal proclamation and mental resolve thus combine as two sides of a performative utterance – with divine effect.

Integrating a martyrological "configuration" into one's imagination is one way that a simulation of death-in-love was enacted in Jewish ritual. A more physical procedure is the penitential practice of *nefilat 'appayim*, a simulated prostration performed in the morning and afternoon daily service, immediately after the public repetition of the Amidah prayer, the central standing prayer of the liturgy.³⁴ Depending upon customary procedure, the worshipper either first recites a confession and the thirteen attributes of divine mercy or immediately enacts the prostration rite and recites a psalm. In ancient rabbinic times, according to talmudic tradition (cf. *b. Megillah*

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22a), it was customary for one to actually lie prostrate and request divine mercy. This abject act of humility and self-nullification was commuted to the more symbolic gesture of leaning to one side while seated: to the right side in the morning (because the phylacteries are worn on the left arm) and to the left in the afternoon, according to Ashkenazi custom.³⁵ At this point, either Psalm 6 (in the Ashkenazi rite) or 25 (in the Sephardi and Kabbalistic rite) is recited.³⁶ On Mondays and Thursdays the *Ve-Hu Raḥum* penitential is added as well.

Various explanations for the *nefilat 'appayim* rite are found in the sources. They reflect different spiritual dimensions and concerns, as well as various modes of self-nullification and death enactment. To appreciate the spectrum of moral and mythic interpretations, and the psychological or theosophical poles of the rite, we shall begin with the fairly straightforward commentary of Rabbeinu Bahye ben Asher (thirteenth century) on Numbers 16:22 and conclude with examples a half-millennium later dealing with mystical death and the kiss of God. A window is thereby opened to the rich inner world of Jewish liturgical practice and, in particular, to one of its most intriguing gestures.

Following the rebellion of Korah and his cohorts in the wilderness (Numbers 16), God tells Moses and Aaron to separate themselves from the sinning congregation that He might destroy the rebels. The two men thereupon fall upon their faces (*va-yiplu 'al peneihem*) in order to supplicate divine mercy. On the phrase "they fell upon their faces" (v. 22), Bahye comments:

To pray. And from [this passage we derive the act of] *nefilat 'appayim* in prayer. And know that the matter of *nefilat 'appayim* in prayer has three purposes. The first is [to express]



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the fear of the divine Presence; the second is to demonstrate sadness and submission; and the third is to show the restraint of sensations and the nullification of feelings. [As regards] the first, [which deals with] the fear of the divine Presence, [the rite helps one] express shame and humility, since the covering of [one's] face [in the rite] is a form of humility and shamefacedness. . . . The second [purpose], to demonstrate sadness and submission, is that one who falls upon his face is sorrowful and submissive – and submission is of the essence of repentance, such that God senses the regret of the worshipper and fulfills his request. . . . [And] the third [purpose], to demonstrate the restraint of sensations and the nullification of feelings, is because one who falls upon his face, covers his face, and closes his mouth concurs that he does not know his [fate] . . . , and [acts] as if his feelings are nullified and restrained from his desires. And as regards his [closed] eyes and sealed mouth, [these symbolize] that he is unable to see or speak other than what expresses the will of God, be He blessed.³⁷

Most striking is the religious psychology conveyed here. Speaking as a pedagogue and pietist, Rabbeinu Bahye seeks to explain the custom of prostration in prayer in terms of a symbolic language that speaks to God of the worshipper's spiritual intentions: his abject humility before God's majesty, his total remorse before God's providence, and his ascetic control before earthly desire and God's will. The body, face, mouth, and eyes are all part of a syntax of piety that trains the worshipper in the values of humility, even as they simultaneously bespeak the incorporation of these values. Located just after the supplications which conclude the Amidah prayer, the ritual of *nefilat 'appayim* enacts the utter dependence of the individual upon God for all favors and the resolve to be a submissive servant to Him. The emotion of shame is

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therefore central. By means of the rite, pride is laid low and the self grounded in religious humility.

Perceived theologically, the issue of shame is part of the self's internal response to the divine Presence and evokes (in the ideal scenario) the repentant self-transformation of the worshipper. In this and related formulations, such a dynamic is often the way medieval Jewish thinkers construct the relationship between the renewal of religious sensibility in fear or awe of God and its eventual supplementation by covenantal love and faith. I mention this because it helps highlight the interesting difference between Bahye's discussion and the contemporary mythic theosophy portrayed in the *Zohar*. In one passage, the recitation of the Amidah brings about a conjunction of the masculine and feminine dimensions of God. "In shame" before this cosmic coupling, the worshipper falls forward and covers his face while focusing his mind on the birth of souls resulting from this Holy Union (II.128b–129a). The purpose of this physical and mental exercise is to undergo a cycle of death and rebirth, insofar as the worshipper "devotes his soul" to the feminine dimension. By thus cleaving to Her when She is "taking" souls, the worshipper is born anew (II.200b).³⁸ Accordingly, the expression of shame in this scenario induces a spiritual (rather than psychological) transformation of the worshipper; a change that results from cleaving to the divine during its process of regeneration.

In other cases, it is precisely the readiness or resolve to die during the rite of *nefilat 'appayim* that is decisive for the worshipper; that is, the penitent physically expresses the intention to die at the hands of the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of God, who is symbolized by the Tree of Death. The process is as follows. During the upright Amidah prayer the mystically minded person is supposed to be



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physically attached to the masculine principle known as *Tiferet*, the vertical column of the divine hierarchy that helps link the upper feminine grade with the lower one (*Malkhut*; i.e., the Shekhinah).³⁹ This masculine aspect is also symbolized by the Tree of Life. Accordingly, when the worshipper detaches his meditative attention from *Tiferet* at the conclusion of the Amidah, he must immediately acknowledge the feminine side of Death, that he not die altogether. "It is thus necessary for a person – immediately upon concluding the Amidah – to regard himself as if [*ke'ilu*] he departed from the world" (III. 120b). This is done through the mimetic act of *nifilat 'appayim*, whereby he falls face forward and (through reciting Psalm 25) redeposits his soul with the same feminine aspect of God with which he deposits it at night – but now not in a temporary way "but as one who actually [*vada'i*] departs from the world" (III. 121a).

Functioning at several levels, this ritual process is at once an integration (within the worshipper) of the opposites of life and death, a unification (for God's sake) of the Trees of Life and Death, and a human attachment to the divine Tree of Death for the sake of renewed life. The last point is vital, for as the *Zohar* states, "The secret [i.e., mystical] explanation [of this rite] is that there are sins which remain unatoned for until a person departs from the world, as is said, 'This sin will not be expiated until you die' [Isaiah 22:14]. Thus [the worshipper] should give himself truly over to death and devote his soul to that [other] 'place' – not as a [temporary] deposit [of the soul] as [done] at night but as if he actually [*vada'i*] departed from this world."⁴⁰ Absolute sincerity is thus essential for this atonement to "work"; no dissembling of death is allowed. The absence of the letter vav (numerically, 6) from the acrostic in Psalm 25 is said to hint at this as well, since the principle of

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"Life" and the gradations of *Tiferet* are symbolized by this letter (and number), and the worshipper must abandon these for "Death" after the Amidah prayer (III. 121b). Moreover, the letter quf is missing as well – to teach that the worshipper should not dissemble death like the (proverbial) monkey (*qof*) who pretended to be dead when a serpent (*hivta'*, which is a pun on "life" and is symbolic of the Shekhinah) came to kill it. Only loving sincerity ensures divine favor and the forgiveness of sins.⁴¹ In his Hebrew work *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, de Leon mentions these missing letters but demythologizes the explanation and neutralizes the zoharic notion of succumbing to the dark side of "Death."⁴²

In some of the previous texts, the *Zohar* employs a double locution to indicate the status of the ritual action performed. On the one hand, the death simulation is marked by the term *ke'ilu*. This serves notice that the ritual is merely "like" the death of the worshipper; it is only "as if" the performer died in the rite. On the other hand, the action is termed *vada'i*; that is, something "actual" – a veritable deed, "indeed." At the semantic level, such a combination of verisimilitude and actuality is an oxymoron. But as ritual denotations, this paradox finely expresses the double dimension of ritual performance: mimetic substitutes for actions "in the world" are believed to effect changes in this or otherworldly realms, "as if" those (conscious) imitations were the real thing. Accordingly, it is not necessary to die in fact in order to receive the benefits of death (like expiation); and to be reborn to life on a higher spiritual plane, one must merely (i.e., *actually* – in the ritual) be "as if" dead while the heavenly conjunctions are occurring. Action alone, however, does not suffice. Also required are the proper



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mental intention and the requisite verbal recitation. In the cases discussed, these include the decision to consider oneself dead and the recitation of Psalm 25 ("To You, O Lord, I deliver my soul!" v. 1). Action, speech, and thought thus form a triple cord of ritual efficacy. It is the well-tempered concordance of gesture, word, and intention that makes the rite work.

Subsequent Kabbalistic tradition developed one or another feature of the zoharic myths associated with nefilat 'appayim and gave the performer new powers and tasks. An interesting (and influential) conspectus is found in the commentary on the standard prayers by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522-70) - the preeminent Kabbalist in Safed before Rabbi Yitzhaq Luria, and his teacher. In his Tefillah le-Moshe, some old and new features are mentioned.43 Thus, in one context he quotes a long citation from the Zohar (III.120b-121a) dealing with the atonement that death brings and draws several conclusions.44 The first is a mere paraphrase of the point that one should consider oneself during the rite "as if" one had departed this world; but Cordovero also notes that this (death-offering) is "to appease" the Creator, even if one achieves only a brief ascension into "the exalted union" (be-yihud ha-'elyon). This consideration not only underscores the symbolic sacrifice of the rite but indicates that this deposit of the soul on high is a cleaving of the soul to the Godhead. This is probably not a mystical conjunction so much as an intense concentration upon supernal realities. The Zohar itself mentions as much when it says that this "reparation" for the soul requires kavvanah de-libba' (spiritual intention) and that one is required "to cause his soul and will to cleave to his Lord" without guile.

After this Cordovero shifts planes and indicates the higher purpose of this personal sacrifice and its effect on

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the divine world. First, he says, this symbolic death is "for the sake" of the feminine gradation of Divinity (Malkhut), because the principle of Death adheres to Her (as we have noted); and then, too, one should "die" so as to purge Her of the "defect" caused by acts of desecration of the Name, because only death expiates such disruption of the divine harmony. By this atoning act, the female Malkhut is able "to unite with Her beloved [Tiferet]." An act of human conjunction (yihud) thus helps effect a supernal union (tityahhed) within the Godhead. Furthermore, the aspect of the "reparation" of the human body in the rite also enacts the conjunction (and thus reparation) on high; for Cordovero goes on to say that the worshipper should perform nefilat 'appayim by leaning to the left (the Sefardi and Kabbalistic custom) and "grasping it [lehabbeqah; i.e., the left arm] with the right [hand] to indicate that the intention [of the ritual] is that She [Malkhut] be joined and embraced [le-habbeqah] on high between the arms of the King [Tiferet]; . . . and that is [like what is written in Songs 2:6]: 'His left [arm] is beneath my head, and His right embraces me [tihabbeqeni].'"

At this point, the ancient rite of nefilat 'appayim is not only (as in the zoharic traditions) a penitential act of humility or inner transformation; and it is even more than an act effecting expiation for defects in the upper and lower spheres. By virtue of the enactment of Songs 2:6, interpreted as a conjunction of the masculine and feminine aspects of divinity, the worshipper physically imitates this supernal syzygy while intending it in his mind. The person thus becomes aligned with the masculine King, Tiferet, who is aroused to union with His beloved, who has been purged of desecrations brought about by human sin. However, this is not all. Immediately following this point, Cordovero says that in the process of binding



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Malkhut to Tiferet on high, "he [the worshipper] becomes the Female Waters [mayyin nuqvin]"; that is, the fertilizing fluids that prepare Malkhut to receive the downward thrust of heavenly blessings, which may, through her, inseminate the earthly realm.⁴⁵ We are thus faced with a true mystery rite of transformation whereby the worshipper is simultaneously both the heavenly Male and the heavenly Female. As Life and Death are integrated within him, so are they integrated on high. Indeed, through a symbolic death the penitent is now an agent of cosmic regeneration – even rebirth, for the reunited Bride and Bridegroom may now ascend to the supernal womb of the Mother ('Imma'; the gradation of Binah), in which they were formed.⁴⁶

The mythic aspects of Cordovero's interpretations of the nefilat 'appayim rite are bold and daring but relatively underdeveloped as compared with those of his disciple Rabbi Yitzḥaq Luria Ashkenazi ("the sainted ARI").⁴⁷ In his view, the worshipper (in an ideal sense, for the task requires consummate skill and is filled with spiritual danger) performs heroic exploits in the cosmic realms – releasing souls trapped in the husks of Gehenna and bearing them aloft through the four divine worlds, where they help accomplish a conjunction of masculine and feminine elements in the supernal spheres.⁴⁸ As a result of the holy prayers of Israel, these souls are purged and transformed into mayyin nuqvin, which the worshipper collects and raises to the (masculine) gradation of Ze'ir Anpin in the highest world (Atzilut; Emanation).⁴⁹ It is here that drops of mercy have secreted from higher aspects of this anthropomorphic configuration, as a result of the previous recitation of prayers in the liturgy. They now enter the generative principle of Ze'ir Anpin, which is "Jacob," who unites with "Rachel," his beloved.

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Remarkably, all this is achieved through a consummate act of spiritual intention, as the worshipper first imagines himself physically hurled from the exalted world of 'Atzilut (which he has attained through the Amidah prayer, just concluded) to the nethermost realm, 'Asiyah (the world of Making), and then concentrates upon his ascension with the transfigured souls. The act of nefilat 'appayim is thus conceived here as a real fall into the divine abyss, and as such is fraught with danger. Luria therefore cautions his reader not to attempt these feats unless he is truly righteous and can withstand contact with evil. There are those who barely escape with their own souls intact. Others never ascend; such souls are transfigured by their own acts of imagination and remain in this dimension or "world."⁵⁰ In these cases the shamanic descent is aborted, and an act of salvation ends in spiritual suicide.

In the course of other elaborations of the worshipper's journey, Luria speculates that the redemptive goal is for the adept to join the three aspects of his soul (life force, spirit, supersoul) to the corresponding aspects of lost souls in each of the three lower worlds, and thence to raise them to the gradation of Ze'ir Anpin in the fourth world through the mystery of the mayyin nuqvin. In a more complex alternative, the performer of the nefilat 'appayim rite is bidden to take only the soul aspect called life force from the fivefold configuration of souls in each of the three lower worlds – each ensemble of five being labeled with one of the three main terms for soul.⁵¹ Such arcana mark the perilous rescue of entrapped fragments of divinity which the worshipper intends to redeem for the sake of the Godhead itself. As an act of devotion of the self (mesirat nefesh), it borders on the spectacular; but it is not the spectacular itself. This exalted position is reserved for devotion unto death in the course of reciting the Shema



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in the (twice) daily liturgy or during the (unique) act of martyrological sanctification of the Name. Luria thus conceives a hierarchy of death devotions that dominate the intentions and imagination of the Jew at prayer.⁵²

Of the two main types of *mesirat nefesh* unto death, the ritual of *nefilat 'appayim* is the type performed by the righteous, who in their reparation of souls activate a syzygy in the lower reaches of the Godhead (*Tiferet* and *Malkhut*) in the highest world, setting in motion a well of saving waters that flow upward from the feminine (the womb of the righteous in heaven) and downward from the masculine gradation. This temporary conjunction is the result of the enacted death of the worshipper, who is "as if departed from the world." Its liturgical rubric is "To You [*'aleykha*], O Lord, I deliver my soul" (Psalm 25:1); that is, the adept only raises his soul to the hypostatic gradation of "Lord" (the masculine dimension of *Tiferet*) – no further.⁵³ By contrast, through the martyrological intention of the Shema recitation in the liturgy, the worshipper activates a higher syzygy (the supernal Father and Mother, *Hokhmah* and *Binah*); for he now intends to die in fact and, in accord with the key verse "For Your sake [*'aleykha*] we are killed all day long" (Psalm 44:23), actually goes "to the One who is above You" (*'aleykha*; i.e., to *Hokhmah*, who is above *Tiferet*).⁵⁴ This produces a more permanent union in the supernal realm – all the more so when the recitation of the Shema accompanies an actual martyrdom.

This was the effect of Rabbi Akiba's death, when, in an ecstatic moment, he passed beyond Moses (in *Tiferet*) and ascended (*'alah*) to the gradation of *Hokhmah*, also called *Ma'hashavah* (Thought). In this way, Luria transforms God's answer to Moses in the rabbinic legend of Akiba's death. As discussed earlier,⁵⁵ Moses complained

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that Akiba's torture made a mockery of piety; but he was caught short by the divine remark, "Thus have I determined" (lit., "[for] so has it arisen in [My] thought"). In one stroke this brusque theodicy is transformed, and Moses (the righteous prophet) who died by a divine kiss is superseded in the heavenly realms by Akiba (the sainted martyr), who ascended to the highest gradation of the Godhead (the pinnacle of Thought in the Mind of the Heavenly Anthropos that constitutes the highest world; thus, the divine comment was exegetically construed to mean "[for] so has he [Akiba] ascended into [the supernal sphere of] Thought"!). It may be that this transcendental ascension influenced the author of *'Arvei Nahal* centuries later, when he used just this rabbinic episode to say that saints may overcome the pains of martyrdom if they truly cleave to God in their last trial.⁵⁶

There thus transpires in Luria's scheme a hierarchy of kisses (*nishiqin*) in the divine realm brought about by different levels of loving devotion (*mesirat nefesh*) unto death. Moving upward, the following spectrum may be delineated. In the (relatively) lower reaches of the Godhead (for we are dealing with transformations in the divine structure in *'Atzilut*, the highest world), there is "the mystery of the lower kisses" – a syzygy effected between *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* by those individuals who either intend upon a martyr's death in the course of the liturgy or have this in mind at the moment of their (natural) death. The first is a symbolic exchange of human death for renewed life in the divine Being (the one activates the other); the second is "the mystery of the death of the righteous by a kiss," which now means that when the righteous die, there is a heavenly conjunction that releases Life and Blessing to the world. The blissful death of the righteous is thus an earthly figure of a transcendental state:



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grace below activates Grace above; the perfected soul of the righteous is a sacrificial sacrament, so to speak, that "inspires" divine Life.⁵⁷

The highest conjunction of divine qualities occurs between the supernal gradations of Hokhmah and Binah (Wisdom and Understanding) and is referred to as "the mystery of the supernal kisses." This syzygy is assisted by Moses through "the mystery of Knowledge" and by those (like Akiba) who devote themselves to death for the sanctification of the divine Name. The theosophical role of Moses is thus double: having reached the gradation of Tiferet he generates a unification in the lower Godhead; and in that very station he is in a position to serve as a "chariot" (or armature) for the higher and more interior unification of Hokhmah and Binah. But for our theme, the role of Akiba and the martyrs in the divine economy is more astonishing; for the blood and devotion of these saints not only repair disjunctions in the divine Being but activate a supernal bliss that overflows into all realms of existence. It is thus not just the mystery of death that stands at the heart of All-Being but the sacrificial death of humans that mysteriously redeems the Godhead. The hierarchy (and variety) of deathlike intentions in the liturgy thus reaches its apex in the loving death of martyrs for God's Name (whose various formulations – the Tetragrammaton YHWH in Tiferet and the revelatory 'eHYeH, "I shall Be," in the hidden heights – are therewith unified).⁵⁸ Mythic sacrifice does not then generate the diffusion and even fracturing of Being in the preternatural and primordial times of Beginning; but it does, in the form of mystical devotion of self, regenerate holy hierarchies and restore harmony to the divine Whole. Death is the paradoxical agent of Life: a salvific-messianic act with human love at the center.

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In the system of Rabbi Yitzḥaq Luria, the rituals of *Inefilat 'appayim* and Shema recitation are two types of devotion of the self focused on theosophical realities; and the explicit emphasis is on mystical intentions that effect changes in Divinity. Inwardness or even ecstatic states are not mentioned except to indicate the requisite meditative focus that may produce the desired ends. However, one of the well-known features of the revival of Hasidic piety in the eighteenth century is a concerted shift of emphasis away from the theosophy of divine attributes toward their psychologization in the "inner world" of the individual. At one level, this cultivation of a theological anthropology is merely (though significantly) the elaborated application of the old dogma that humans are created in the image of God. But on another level it opened new spaces in the spiritual life of the worshipper and provided maps for exploring mystical states and self-perfection. The remarkable tract on ecstasy, called *Qunteres ha-Hitpa'alat*, by Rabbi Dov Ber (son of Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi) reveals this development in highly calibrated formulations.⁵⁹ A column of (natural and divine) souls and soul states is the axis along which a devotee may ascend to exalted levels of mystical expiry. Not unexpectedly, Dov Ber emphasizes the ecstatic possibilities available through recital of the Shema.⁶⁰ Properly performed, this prayer can enable the adept to reach a level of ecstasy in which the contemplative mind is fired by emotional power.⁶¹ This level is the fourth of five stages during which an individual may develop his divine soul through contemplative awareness: from the initial acknowledgment of the spiritual truth of his contemplative theme to an "ecstasy of the whole essence [*atzmiyut*]," in which "the being" of the worshipper "is so absorbed that nothing of himself remains and he has no self-consciousness whatever."⁶² In special circumstances,



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such as martyrdom, the soul spark of this spiritual state radiates outward, an earthly hint of the soul's total withdrawal into God.⁶³

On the basis of the Lurianic model noted earlier, one might therefore conclude that Dov Ber has two types of Shema recital in mind here: the first being the liturgical proclamation of the unity of God with the sincere intention to die a martyr and the other being its performance in the course of actual martyrdom. This relationship between theoretical and actual death in contemplative ecstasy would seem to accord with the fourth and fifth levels of ecstatic trance in the *Qunteres*. The fact that Dov Ber refers to the consummate mystical state as "the love of [God] 'with all your might'" also suggests that this ecstasy was somehow related to a recitation of the Shema. But the master does not say so. What Dov Ber actually does is transform the Lurianic hierarchy found in *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanot* and place the performance of the *nefilat 'appayim* rite on a higher level than the recital of the Shema. This reconception of the ladder of ecstatic ascension is revealed in his meditations on the *nefilat 'appayim* rite in *Sha'ar ha-Teshuvah veba-Tefillah*,⁶⁴ which has linguistic and thematic links with the *Qunteres*. Starting from the verse "(You shall follow the Lord, your God . . .) and serve Him and cleave to Him" (Deuteronomy 13:5), Dov Ber develops a hierarchy of states that may be achieved in the course of the liturgy.⁶⁵ The contemplative level attained through the *nefilat 'appayim* rite (indicated here by the words "and cleave to Him") is superior to that available through the Amidah prayer (indicated by "serve Him"), since the latter only achieves a temporary annihilation of the self and no permanent "cessation of one's entire essence [*atzmuto*]." Unless the Amidah stage is the starting point for a deeper penetration into the divine Whole, the

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worshipper will gradually return to mundane reality and self-centeredness.⁶⁶ Only the *nefilat 'appayim* rite brings one to the state of supernormal consciousness that Dov Ber desires. Here the adept may be "absorbed [*nikhlal*] into the supernal Reality," becoming One with it (*ve-hayu le-'ahadim*), so that any trace of former separation is erased.⁶⁷ This deep *unio mystica* is deemed a permanent "bonding" (*hitqashsherut*) with God, an annihilation of the self into "the actual divine Reality" (*mahut 'eloqut mamash*).⁶⁸

The superiority of the *nefilat 'appayim* state to that induced by the Shema recital reveals another dimension of this exalted level of mystical death in the thought of Dov Ber. Although this master recognized the spiritual heights possible through contemplating martyrdom while reciting the Shema and lauded those who were able to prepare for such a death in the liturgy and withstand its terrors in actuality,⁶⁹ the advantage of the *nefilat 'appayim* practice lies precisely in its conjunction of the theoretical and actual. Recalling the old zoharic rubric that one should consider oneself "as if" dead when performing *nefilat 'appayim*, Dov Ber says that "this is no mere act of imagination [*shi'ur*] but an 'actual seeming' [*dami mamash*]; that is, when one truly gives oneself to death in the ritual, such that the merest "trace" of life is left, "this is no mere semblance [of death] produced by the imaginative faculty [*koah ha-medammeh*] but verity itself."⁷⁰ In such a state, that aspect of the worshipper's divine soul known as *yehidah* ascends on high, and he is virtually dead to this world, having entered a near-comatose state of "deep sleep" (*nirdam*). At this level of expiration, the ecstatic is insensate to himself and all pain – an intriguing link in the old chain that taught that persons truly cleaving to God do not feel the tortures of their martyrdom. But this is only one feature of the self-transformation induced by



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this state. The other is the movement outward from the divine depths to life itself, where the ecstatic is thoroughly attached to God in all his acts – come what will and come what may. In particular, the mystic is able to engage in workaday matters without falling from his high level.⁷¹ In terms of tradition, Dov Ber stands in a long line of masters who practiced this modality of spiritual consciousness.⁷² This capacity to be truly dead (to the world) while still alive (in it) seems to be the great merit of the *nefilat 'appayim* practice. Significantly, in his *Qunteres* Dov Ber also discusses the capacity of the individual whose soul-aspect of *yehidah* has been activated in the fifth level of ecstasy to work in the world and be (simultaneously) disengaged from it. This level of meditative trance is thus equivalent to the state available liturgically through the *nefilat 'appayim* practice. It is a complex consciousness that tries to conjoin the narrow ridge of contemplative inaction with the broad path of human interaction in this world. This tension between (mystical) solitariness and (social) solidarity was snapped by Rabbi Aaron of Staroselye, Dov Ber's contemporary and rival, who understood the *nefilat 'appayim* ritual to exact a higher price of disengagement from material pursuits, for fear that the bond with God be broken.⁷³ To "die" in the liturgy is thus an initiation into a divine acosmism – beyond time and space. For Dov Ber, on the other hand, such a death is rather the beginning of a messianic consciousness in the here and now.⁷⁴

Jewish religiosity cultivated dimensions of death for the sake of higher levels of spiritual awareness. In some circles there was an interest in integrating these elements into consciousness in order to prepare for the spiritual trials of a martyr's death and to prepare for one's own natural death. The latter involved imaginative anticipations of

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this event so that one might die in perfect faith. As a by-product, these exercises also evoked self-reflection such that more normative spiritual goals were achieved. The glosses of Rabbi Shabbetai Sheftel Horowitz to the *Shenei Lukhot ha-Berit* provide a case in point. In the context of his father's reformulation of the (deathbed) confessional of his own father (Rabbi Abraham Halevi, in *'Emeq Berakhah*), the son adds:

Let a person choose some time while he is still in good health to isolate himself and confess the following long confession; and [when doing so] he should consider himself [*yahashov be-da'ato*] as if [*ke'ilu*] he were dying. . . . [Indeed] it is worthwhile for every spiritually aware person to make use of the following confession and follow this practice at least before every New Moon, which is [considered] a minor Day of Atonement, and fast the whole day as on the Ninth of Ab, with all its restrictions. He should [then] thoroughly examine his ways and cleave to the Shekhinah for at least one hour; and [during this meditation] he should have his eyes closed [and directed] earthward while his heart is directed upward [to God]. And he should think of his death and dying day and devote himself to die in love whenever God, be He praised, may will it. And [during this procedure] let him be robed in a prayer shawl and wear phylacteries and induce great enthusiasm in himself.⁷⁵

Rabbi Shabbetai Sheftel then continues with the confessional itself and includes not only the readiness to die a martyr's death and the recitation of Psalm 25 but also the significant addition that if he die by torture or the fear of death overwhelms him and shakes his resolve, "let this confession which I hereby recite [while in sound mind and body] be as if I recited it at the hour of my death, word for word, with great concentration and much crying."

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With this formulation, the deathbed confessional has been adapted to spiritual growth and development. To be sure, there is much pathos in the fear that the terrors of death may confuse the mind and destroy a lifetime of religious piety. And indeed, subsequent writers dealing with preparations for death and dying have formulated a legal "announcement" whereby the faithful publicly proclaim that any impious statement made at death's door is "null and void like a broken sherd" (*batel u-mevuttal ke-heres ha-nishbar*).⁷⁶ Similarly, Rabbi Naftali Katz in the early eighteenth century gives a poignant statement of popular fears concerning the devouring power of the Devil, who may appear to the moribund through "apparitions . . . and weird guises to confuse and frighten" the worshipper, and who may thereby induce in him a "madness" ending in apostasy.⁷⁷ All this accounts for the great concern for expressing the confession properly and in perfect faith *before* the onset of death's anxieties. But it does not fully account for the ritualization of death through periodic meditations in isolation, together with private penances and self-dedication. All this is part of a process of internalizing the prospect of death, so that life becomes an ongoing practicing of death. The transfer here of Psalm 25 (which Shabbetai Sheftel takes over from his forebears) gives added emphasis to the type of religious devotion involved.⁷⁸ Spiritual perfection involves a dedication of the earthly self to God, a recentering of the person in the divine Self. As an aid toward this, the worshipper is told to close his eyes in meditation. This involves more than an act of humility in prayer.⁷⁹ What is rather involved is a type of sensory deprivation induced so that the worshipper may "remove his thoughts from all matters of this world *as if* his soul had departed from him."⁸⁰ The practice of closing the eyes in meditation is

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thus a form of dying to the world so that the soul may cleave to God alone – a first level of withdrawal, seconded by the concentration upon death itself. In this way the "as if" becomes "real," and the ritual induces a spiritual metamorphosis in the celebrant.

One final document brings these austere considerations into focus. It teaches a spiritual practice of uncompromising intensity – one that attempts to bring life and death into the most fateful fusion for the sake of inner perfection. The text is the so-called *Tzetl Qotn* of the great nineteenth-century Tzaddik Rabbi Elimelekh of Lizensk.⁸¹ Following common Hasidic custom, with roots in the medieval moral literature and earlier, Rabbi Elimelekh provides a list of spiritual practices (a kind of interior *regimen vitae*) that the adept is urged to study and internalize. The first two directives are of direct pertinence to our present discussion.

1. Whenever a person is not engaged in Torah study, and particularly when alone in his room or unable to sleep at night, let him think of the positive duty of "and I shall be sanctified among the people of Israel" [Leviticus 22:32]. And let him imagine in his soul and visualize in his mind *as if* [*ke'ilu*] a great and awesome fire burned before him up to the heart of heaven, and that he, for the sake of the sanctification of the Name, will overcome his nature and throw himself into the fire for the sanctification of the Name. And the Holy One, blessed be He, converts good thought into deeds [in his sight], so that the worshipper need not sit idly but may [even at such times] fulfill positive commands of the Torah.
2. A person should also think of the foregoing [meditation on death] during the first verse of the Shema and the first blessing of the Amidah. And he should also intend the following: [that] even if the gentile nations persecute him terribly and rake his flesh to force him to deny God's Unity – heaven



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forbid! – he will endure these torments and never cower to them. And he will visualize in his mind *as if* [*ke'ilu*] they were doing the foregoing to him, and in that way [he will] properly fulfill the recitation of the Shema and Amidah prayers.

The work continues with the stark advice to have similar thoughts and intentions while eating, engaged in sexual intercourse, or during any other act of physical pleasure.

With this regimen, the imagination of death has absorbed the totality of one's life – filling the spaces of solitude; ensuring the validity of prayer; and even neutralizing essential acts of human satisfaction. For Rabbi Elimelekh, the ruins of the heart must be sanctified through sacrificial discipline. In this way the old martyrological ideal is transformed: God is not simply or only "sanctified among [*be-tokh*] the children of Israel" but *within* their very being. A purified inwardness thus supplements public resistance as the way to sanctify the Name. On this path, everything seen and tasted in the sensible world must be the occasion to "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalm 34:9), that His exalted Being is the Source of all appearance. This insight occurs in the heart; its cultivation through meditation and ritual is the very means to redemption. It is just here that visualizations of death play a pivotal role. Situated between external perception and inner vision, these formalized projections are designed to purify the heart and devote it solely to God. For Rabbi Elimelekh, the natural play of appearance is a mirror of base desire, trapping the self in its myriad reflections. The spiritual task is thus to free the soul from misprision – and to unify its focus. Gradually, through the screen of simulated death, the divine reality may come into view before the inner eye. And then the soul will be saved.

Epilogue

The lines of these various chapters trace the spiritual face of Judaism, in one of its many appearances. Behind the visage is a passion for religious perfection, expressed as the love of God unto death itself. The masters of the tradition cultivated this ideal in all periods, in diverse genres, and in different modes. Rabbinic law and midrash, medieval philosophy and mysticism, and public and private ritual all have their due in this development. Rooted in the understanding that the spiritual life requires discipline, the sages set up different ladders of ascension. For some, the Law itself (philosophically or mystically understood) was this means of spiritual growth; for others, more private practices were built upon its firm foundation. But all agreed that the purification of desire and the perfection of the soul offered the hope of personal salvation. None denied the historical redemption of the nation.

Two wings guided the flight of the soul: Moses' call to love God with all one's heart and soul and might (Deuteronomy 6:5) and the lover's desire for the kisses of her Beloved (Songs 1:2). The first is a positive religious duty, subject to obligation and routine, whereas the second breathes the pathos of unfulfilled longing. Together they center Jewish worship in its objective and subjective dimensions; in its capacity for ritual continuity and the revisions of radical interpretation. Empowered by love commanded and aroused, the meanings of love and their modes of expression underwent numerous permutations. These are the tropes of love which entwine the sources and open new spaces for the religious imagination. Indeed,

