Tree of Souls:
The Mythology of Judaism

HOWARD SCHWARTZ

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TREE OF SOULS

BY HOWARD SCHWARTZ

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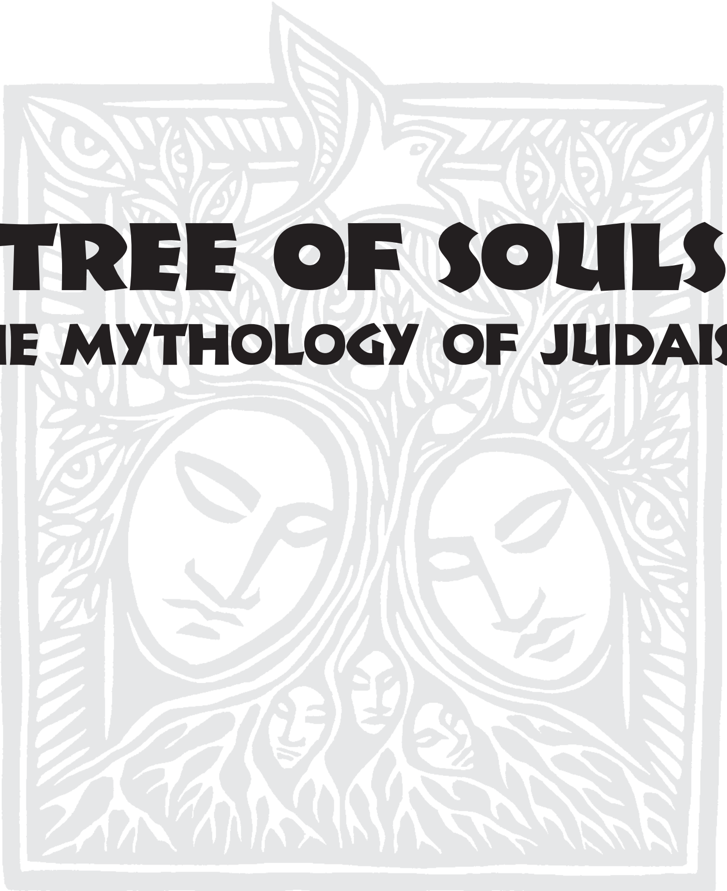

TREE OF SOULS

THE MYTHOLOGY OF JUDAISM

HOWARD SCHWARTZ

Illustrated by
Caren Loebel-Fried

Foreword by
Elliot K. Ginsburg

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For my son, Nati Zohar

Rabbi Yose taught: “God has a tree of flowering souls in Paradise. This tree is surrounded by the four winds of the world. From the branches of this tree sprout forth all souls, for they grow upon this tree, as is written: *‘I am a cypress tree in bloom; your fruit issues forth from Me.’* (Hos.14:9). And from the roots of this tree sprout the souls of all the righteous ones whose names are inscribed there. From this we learn that all souls are the fruit of the Holy One, blessed be He.”

Ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhamah
Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon

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ABBREVIATIONS

BOOKS OF THE BIBLE

Gen.	Genesis
Exod.	Exodus
Lev.	Leviticus
Num.	Numbers
Deut.	Deuteronomy
Josh.	Joshua
Judg.	Judges
1 Sam.	1 Samuel
2 Sam.	2 Samuel
1 Kings	1 Kings
2 Kings	2 Kings
Isa.	Isaiah
Jer.	Jeremiah
Ezek.	Ezekiel
Hos.	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad.	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Micah	Micah
Nah.	Nahum
Hab.	Habakkuk
Zeph.	Zephaniah
Hag.	Haggai
Zech.	Zechariah
Mal.	Malachi
Ps.	Psalms
Prov.	Proverbs
Job	Job
S. of S.	The Song of Songs
Ruth	Ruth
Lam.	Lamentations
Eccles.	Ecclesiastes
Esther	Esther
Dan.	Daniel
Ezra	Ezra
Neh.	Nehemiah
1 Chron.	1 Chronicles
2 Chron.	2 Chronicles

TRACTATES OF THE TALMUD

The Babylonian Talmud is identified as B. and the Palestinian Talmud (or Jerusalem Talmud) as Y. (for Yerushalmi*)*.

Ar.	Arakhin	MK	Mo'ed Katan
Avot	Avot	MS	Ma'aser Sheni
AZ	Avodah Zarah	Naz.	Nazir
BB	Bava Batra	Ned.	Nedarim
Bekh.	Bekhorot	Neg.	Nega'im
Ber.	Berakhot	Nid.	Niddah
Betz.	Betzah	Oh.	Oholot
Bik.	Bikkurim	Or.	Orlah
BK	Bava Kama	Par.	Parah
BM	Bava Metzia	Pe.	Pe'ah
De.	Demai	Per.	Perek ha-Shalom
Ed.	Eduyyot	Pes.	Pesahim
Er.	Eruvin	RH	Rosh ha-Shanah
Git.	Gittin	Sanh.	Sanhedrin
Hag.	Hagigah	Shab.	Shabbat
Hal.	Hallah	Shek.	Shekalim
Hor.	Horayot	Shev.	Shevi'it
Hul.	Hullin	Shavu.	Shavuot
Kel.	Kelim	Sot.	Sota
Ker.	Keritot	Suk.	Sukkah
Ket.	Ketubot	Tan.	Ta'anit
Kid.	Kiddushin	Tam.	Tamid
Kil.	Kilayim	Tem.	Temurah
Kin.	Kinnim	Ter.	Terumot
Maas.	Ma'aserot	Toh.	Tohorot
Mak.	Makkot	TY	Tevul Yom
Makh.	Makhshirin	Tz.	Tzitzit
Me.	Me'ilah	Uk.	Uktzin
Meg.	Megillah	Yad.	Yadayim
Men.	Menahot	Yev.	Yevamot
Mid.	Middot	Yoma	Yoma
Mik.	Mikva'ot	Zev.	Zevahim

RABBIS IDENTIFIED BY ACRONYMS

Ari = Isaac Luria.

Ba'al Shem Tov (also known as Besht) = Israel ben Eliezer.

Ben Ish Hai = Yosef Hayim of Baghdad.

Maharal = Judah Loew ben Bezalel.

Maharsha = Samuel Eliezer Edels.

Maimonides (also known as Rambam) = Moses ben Maimon.

Nachmanides (also known as Ramban) = Moses ben Nachman.

*Or ha-Hayim = Hayim ben Attar.

Ramak = Moshe Cordovero.

Rashbam = Samuel ben Meir.

Rashi = Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes.

Ribash = Isaac ben Sheshet Parfat.

*Or ha-Hayim ("The Light of Life") is the title of the famous biblical commentary written by Rabbi Hayim ben Attar. It is not an acronym; rather, he became identified by the title of his book.

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TRANSLITERATION KEY

alef = not transliterated
bet = b, v
gimmel = g
dalet = d
heh = h
vav = v
zayin = z
het = h
tet = t
yod = y – when vowel, at end of word – i
kaf = k, kh
lamed = l
mem = m
nun = n
samekh = s
ayin = ′, not always transliterated
peh = p, f, ph
tzaddi = tz
kuf = k
resh = r
shin = s, sh
tav = t

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PREFACE

A largely unrecognized but quite extensive mythology[1] is embedded throughout Jewish literature. The primary myths portrayed in the Bible, especially those in Genesis, became the focus of mythic elaboration. The biblical text packs a maximum amount of meaning into a minimum number of words, thereby compelling interpretation. An ancient rabbinic method of exegesis called midrash,[2] which sought out and inevitably found the solution to problems perceived in the biblical text, resulted in the creation of an abundant mythology that eventually took on a life of its own. Often the transformation that takes place between the early periods of Jewish myth and their later evolution is considerable, almost constituting a new set of myths based on the old ones. The sum of all of these generations of reimagining the Bible is a Jewish mythology as rich as that of other great ancient cultures. These myths may appear either in fully developed form or as widely scattered fragments. Often, when these fragments are collected from the extant sources and pieced back together, they reveal extensive elaborations of the original myths, often in unexpected directions.

It has been my intention to draw Jewish myths from the full range of Jewish literature. This tradition extends from biblical times until the present, and includes texts from inside and outside normative Jewish tradition. For details about the texts included, see "A Note on the Sources" on p. 525.

Because of the considerable differences between the myths deriving from various periods, it is difficult to speak of a single or definitive Jewish mythology. Yet it is also clear that the seeds of all the major myths are found in the earlier texts, where they are often the subject of a profound evolutionary process, a dialectic that alternates between the tendency to mythologize Judaism and the inclination to resist such impulses. An attentive reader should find the permutations of these myths fascinating. I have chosen to regard these as organic developments, possessing life of their own, and I have attempted to draw together the threads of these fragmentary myths into coherent ones, where possible. Where contradictory explanations are found, this has also been noted using the formula "Some say" and "Others say." This is intended to indicate the existence of multiple versions of the same myth. Some myths derive from a single text, but most have multiple sources, reflecting the continuing fascination with specific themes as well as the desire of subsequent generations to reinterpret them and make them relevant to their own lives.

This book has been structured around what I regard as the ten primary categories of Jewish mythology: *Myths of God, Myths of Creation, Myths of Heaven, Myths of Hell, Myths of the Holy Word, Myths of the Holy Time, Myths of the Holy People, Myths of the Holy Land, Myths of Exile*, and *Myths of the Messia*h. Each entry includes the myth, usually drawn from multiple sources, as well a commentary and its sources. The purpose of the commentary is to put the myth in the proper context, provide the biblical verses that inspired or explain it, note related myths, and to untangle, as much as possible, the mythic threads it consists of, as well as parallels to other mythic traditions.

Several key modern scholars have considered the question of whether there can be said to be a Jewish mythology, and, if so, what its characteristics would be. These include Gershom Scholem, Isaiah Tishby, Alexander Altmann, Raphael Patai, Joseph Dan, Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes, Arthur Green, Michael Fishbane, David J. Halperin, Michael Stone, Peter Schäfer, Elliot Wolfson, Rachel Elior, Pinchas Giller, Tikva Frymer-Kensky, and Elliot K. Ginsburg. I am grateful for their perspectives and insights. In addition, scores of articles have been written about various aspects of virtually all of the myths included here. I have noted especially important and relevant articles following the commentaries to the myths, under the category of "Studies."

I am grateful to the following people who supported and assisted me during this long project. Thanks, above all, to my editor, Cynthia Read, who has the patience of Penelope. Special thanks to my son, Nati, who lent a helping hand at a crucial time, and to my wife, Tsila, whose support has been essential. Many thanks to Caren Loebel-Fried for her beautiful prints, which have added immeasurably to this book. I am especially grateful to Elliot K. Ginsburg, David J. Halperin, Byron Sherwin, and Gershon Winkler for their valuable suggestions and comments. I am also grateful to Henry Shapiro for his astute suggestions, conveyed over many a lunch. Thanks are also due to Marc Bregman, Paula Cooper, Bonnie Fetterman, Rabbi Steve Gutow, Barbara Rush, Marc Saperstein, Peninnah Schram, Joseph Schultz, Cherie Karo Schwartz, Laya Firestone Seghi, and Diane Wolkstein, for their suggestions and insights. Thanks as well to Daniel Breslauer, Theo Calderara, Michael Castro, Joseph Dan, Amy Debrecht, Rabbi Bruce Diamond, Yael Even, Pinchas Giller, Rabbi James Stone Goodman, Stuart Gordon, Arthur Green, Edna Hechal of the Israel Folktale Archives, Ruth and Jim Hinds, Lynn Holden, Catherine Humphries, Glenn Irwin, Andrea Jackson, Eve Jones, Rodger Kamenetz, Edward Londe, the late Rabbi Abraham Ezra Millgram, Dov Noy, Marie S. Nuchols, Peter Brigaitis, Anne Holmes, Mary Ann Zissimos, Adelia Parker, Muriel and David Pascoe, Rebecca Pastor, the late Raphael Patai, Simcha Raphael, Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, the late Gershom Scholem, Maury Schwartz, Miriam Schwartz, Shira Schwartz, Alan Segal, Dan Sharon, Yaacov David Shulman, Rabbi Lane Steinger, Steve Stern, Rabbi Jeffrey Stiffman, Michael Swartz, Rabbi Susan Talve, Benyamim Tsedaka, Meg Weaver and Eli Yassif. I also want to thank the students of my class on Jewish mythology at Spertus College. I am also grateful to the University of Missouri-St. Louis for grants that made it possible to pursue the research for this book.

Readers who wish to register comments, suggestions, corrections, praise, or dissent may contact me at *jewishmyth@yahoo.com.*

Howard Schwartz
St. Louis

Notes

[1] See p. xliv of the Introduction for a definition of "myth" and "mythology" as it is used in this book. The conventional meaning of "myth" as something that is not true is *not* intended here.

[2] For a discussion of this method of rabbinic exegesis, see p. lxxii of the Introduction.

FOREWORD

The Resonances and Registers of Jewish Myth

by Elliot K. Ginsburg

To enter this book is to enter a world thick with meaning, *olam u-melo'o*, "a world and the fullness thereof."[1] In its pages, one can encounter the astonishing range of the Jewish mythic imagination: texts and countertexts, brief epigrams and extended chain midrashim, exclamations and sober disquisitions: they are all in there. For *Tree of Souls* is the product of a man, Howard Schwartz, who wears many hats: he is at once a literary artist and master editor, who is simultaneously immersed in (and sharpened by) the world of scholarship. The resulting work is a gift of the scholarly and literary imagination, and it is a joy to read.

Jewish mythology and its many voices. One of the most impressive features of this work is its capacious understanding of what is authentically *Jewish*. In consort with most contemporary scholars, Schwartz departs from those great Judaic scholars of the 19th century who sought to reduce Judaism—in its evolving, plural, oft messy vitality—to an idealized set of unchanging beliefs or practices, articulated by a central cast of characters. Schwartz listens rather more widely: he exhibits an inclusive, demotic willingness to combine different registers and a wide range of provenances. Obscure manuscripts and well-known texts reside cheek-by-jowl; so too, polished literary works and oral narratives. Texts written in Rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic sit alongside passages from Yiddish, German and Middle-Eastern vernacular. The multi-streamed Rabbinic tradition is represented not only by a stunning array of talmudic and midrashic texts, but also by later kabbalistic myths with gnostic and sometimes rapturous undertones, hasidic *mayses* (tales) and ethical tracts. The global meets the local as talmudic understandings of soul enter into dialogue with an Afghani Jewish tale from an oral archive—the Great Tradition imbricated with the so-called "Little Tradition." So too, the philosopher-legalist Maimonides resonates with early modern mystic Hayyim ben Attar, and the *Zohar* with the author of Yiddish vernacular prayers, Shifra bas Joseph, wife of Ephraim Epstein. Rabbinic Judaism[2], in these pages, speaks in many voices.

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If the Biblical-Rabbinic arc has a certain pride of place here, the book stretches to encompass non-Rabbanite currents as well. These include (1) Jewish streams that dried up in late antiquity or which subsequently flowed into other traditions; and (2) other mythic currents that left only the faintest residue in the Hebrew Bible, but which re-emerged with singular potency later. Of the former case, think of Philo or various Apocryphal works, preserved largely in Christianity; of the latter, those submerged texts, think of ancient Mesopotamian myths of cosmic battle, of the personified waters of chaos or the Great Sea-Dragon battling YHWH—accounts that are virtually effaced in the Hebrew Bible, but which surface fullblown in the Babylonian talmudic setting.[3] Schwartz also visits the contested borderlands of Rabbinic Judaism, on occasion citing Karaite teachings or the Sabbatean-tinged *Hemdat Yamim*, a work which enjoyed currency in Sephardic and Hasidic circles, despite its suspect provenance.

Finally, Schwartz expands the mythic canvas to include twentieth century figures, the Piasetzner Rebbe (d. 1943, Warsaw), Reb Zalman Shachter-Shalomi, the visionary of Jewish Renewal, and the Prague master Franz Kafka, to name three. All told, most of the dialects of Judaism, from major to minor, find a home here. Schwartz finds that elusive balance point between richness and focus. As one colleague put it: "Howard Schwartz is inclusive, but with good taste."

For readers who may wonder whether this democratizing impulse edges towards cacophony—too much of a good thing—know that Schwartz's keen gifts as an editor carry the day. He gives his work a strong thematic center, organizing texts around ten mythic categories that unfold across time and space. He is able to structure and sequence sources, to fashion mythic cycles. He deftly places texts in alignment with each other, or in apposition/opposition, creating a vibrant but coherent field of vision. What emerges therefore is an intriguing series of resonances and interrelations, a *transhistorical Jewish mythology*, if you will. If there are occasional bracing dissonances between myths, the whole approaches a symphony, a grand opus in ten chapters, ten movements.

Not only are myths beautifully rendered here, but their meanings are variously elucidated, enriched and complexified through up-to-date scholarship. Schwartz appends a scholarly commentary to each myth. These mini-essays are models of concision and literary insight. He traces motifs and provides historical context: explicating perplexities, highlighting discrete traditionary strands and points of evolution. Nor are spiritual insights lacking in these essays. Multiple readers will thus be astounded and delighted; for through Schwartz's tentacular reach our understanding of the Jewish and mythic imaginations is challenged and stretched. "This is Jewish?" some of us might be moved to ask. But Jewish it is! The sheer variety of mythemes found here supports Gershom Scholem's contention that one cannot predict *a priori*—on the basis of earlier teachings—just what will be considered authentically Jewish in any given period.

The centrality of the mythic imagination. In recent decades scholars have called renewed attention to the mythic element in successive strata of Jewish tradition[4]: to the mythic fragments, echoes and organizing themes found in the compositions of the Hebrew Bible; to the rabbinic rereadings of the newly-canonical Scripture[5] in light of living myths of God's deeds and personality; and the complex integrations of mythic images and themes in medieval kabbalah, none more daring than the rendering of the divine totality in terms of ten potencies or *sefirot*, each with its own personality and gendered associations. (Divine oneness, for example, is expressed as the loving union of the masculine and feminine aspects of God.) In the ensuing paragraphs, I wish to suggest several things, knowing that their full articulation is beyond the scope of this essay: (1) that there is a Grand Myth (or meta-narrative) that was shared by most Jews in the Rabbinic, premodern setting; (2) that this grand myth is rooted in (if not identical with) the foundational text of the Hebrew Bible; (3) that in interpreting the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbis developed a "Myth of myths" of signal importance, that of the multi-faceted Torah, whose manifold meanings could be successively uncovered but never exhausted; (4) that these three elements combined to support a sort of mythic consciousness enabling devotees to read their lives in terms of the Sacred Text and the Sacred Text in terms of their lives; and (5) that this mythic consciousness was rendered vital through storytelling and interpretation, as well as through the drama of ritual.

Briefly then, (1) to be a Jew in the classical setting is to have a Story, a shared meta-narrative. It is to hold that this world is created as an act of divine will; that one is the heir of Abraham and Sarah; of those who endure(d) Egyptian slavery and the gifts of Redemption, who stand at the pivot of Sinaitic revelation and its Covenant, who know the joys of homecoming and the enduring dislocations of exile.[6] It is to hold that there will be a Messianic resolution to history, though the Messiah doth tarry. This broad myth binds its adherents in a web of faith and fate, memory and expectation, in a way that transcends the defining particulars of time and place. This grand story (whose bare bones I telegraph here) is rarely articulated *in toto* by its adherents: it is rather cited *en passant*, like one who hums a few bars of a well-known, deeply assimilated, song. The adherent carries this Story, or if you prefer, this Tune, but it also carries him or her. (2) The grid for this meta-Story is the foundational text, the Hebrew Bible, which reaches canonical status through its Rabbinic closure in the late first century. Yet (3) as one door is closed, another opens. As Gershom Scholem has eloquently shown, sacred Text was immediately reopened through the medium of interpretation: *midrash*, commentary, and sundry forms of storytelling. Or as Michael Fishbane would have it: Rabbinic mythmaking "begins where the Hebrew Bible closes, with the canon."[7] What emerges is a suite (sometimes a tangle) of images, arguments, readings and narratives, all rooted in the evolving Myth of the Multi-Tiered Torah. This master narrative assumes that the divine Word is pregnant with multiple meanings, whole families of mythemes. Thus we read "one God has spoken, two I have heard"; and the divine "word is fire," [its manifold meanings released] "like a hammer striking the Rock"; and in a particularly telling rabbinic litany, *ellu ve-ellu divrei elohim hayyim*: both this interpretation and that one (the one that contradicts it) are the word of the living God.[8] In its most lavish formulations—in mystical tradition—this becomes the Myth of Torah's infinite, inexhaustible meaning: "The Torah has seventy faces," nay "600,000 facets." Or as various hasidic masters have it, not only do the black letters of text have meaning, but so too, the white spaces.[9] We might grasp this multiplicity by way of a parable, which expresses its radical edge[10]: *The great hasidic master Nachman of Bratslav has a dream within a dream. He wakes up from that inner dream. Still in visionary mode, he tries to interpret the inner dream, but its meaning eludes him. He sees a sage standing nearby, and asks him the meaning of his dream. The sage tugs at his beard and says: "this is my beard and This! [tugging again at the beard] is the meaning of your dream."*[11] *Nachman responds: "but I don't understand. "In that case," the sage adds, "go to the next room." Nachman repairs to the next room and finds an endless library filled with endless books. "And everywhere I looked," he adds, "I found another comment on the meaning of this thing."* I ask, what is the deeper Truth: the transverbal immediacy of the tug, the Sage's "*This*!" or the infinite play of interpretation? Perhaps the Torah is never so clear as when it is being unpacked, mined for its manifold truths. And this concludes our Myth about the necessary multiplication of Myths. In a sense, Howard Schwartz's book is a more measured illustration of Nachman's creative play.

(4) Arthur Green has written: "The great happenings of Scripture should in the proper sense be seen as mythical, that is, as paradigms that help us encounter, explain and enrich by archaic association the deepest experiences of which we humans are capable...By retelling, grappling with, dramatizing, living in the light of these paradigms, devotees feel themselves touched by a transcendent presence that is made real in their lives through the retelling, the re-enactments." To use the formulation of Clifford Geertz, myth both

provides a model *of* reality, what is *really real*, and a model *for* reality, how one is to behave in its light.[12]

There is a profound dialectic for those who live under the penumbra of the Sacred Text and its mythos: as devotees tend to read their life in terms of the orienting Text/Myth, and read the Text in terms of their life. Thus, some Jews during the Crusades saw themselves as Father Abrahams called upon to sacrifice their children for the sake of their faith; even as the press of historical events and other (possibly Christian-influenced) narratives may have led them to hold that the Biblical Isaac was actually sacrificed and resurrected.[13] Over time, given myths expand and contract. New glosses to extant myths emerge as mythic fragments or images; sometimes these images coalesce into new stories, and sometimes into whole new mythic complexes or systems. Examples of System include the sefirotic theology in Zoharic Kabbalah with its Myth of the divine Androgyne, and the Lurianic mythos of Creation, Shattering, and Tikkun/Cosmic Restoration.

Classically speaking, to be a Jew is to have access to—to assimilate/debate/relate—varying degrees of these extant fragments, stories, mythic cycles and mythologies.

(5) As Howard Schwartz notes, myths are vitalized and absorbed not only through storytelling, but through the embodied mime of ritual performance (generally linked with the pattern of *mitzvot* and the cycles of sacred time). To grasp this, let me give one extended example—the myth of Sinaitic Revelation, wherein divine Presence and Will were simultaneously disclosed.[14] On one level, this was seen as a unique event that created a singular pivot in history. "God spoke these words *ve-lo yasaf*, and did not add any more." (Deut. 5:19) After this event, all has changed, and nothing can match its watershed import. To **recall** Sinai is to acknowledge that one-time transformation, and to live in light of its teachings.

On the second level of mythic enactment, Sinai is seen as an event that is **periodically reactualizable**. For example, to study Torah is (in the Rabbinic context) to *bask* in the light of Sacred Time and its heroes. To read and interpret, to retell, is to move from being a *dis*temporary of the Biblical figures to becoming their (near) *con*temporaries.[15] In a stronger sense, perhaps, to celebrate the holiday of Shavuot is to stand again at Sinai. In its kabbalistic formulation, especially, it is to enter the Covenant/Marriage with the Holy One, to feel the embrace of divine intimacy—not as memory of things past but as something wholly immediate. Here the sacred past flows into the present, or perhaps better: one re-enters that "past" which is not truly past so much as a transhistorical moment that is an eternal "present."

On the third level of signification, again found most strongly in kabbalistic tradition, Sinai is a paradigm for that which is, at bottom, always occuring. Here one comes to realize that the revelations of Shavuot are always present, if one could only maintain expanded awareness. Drawing on the Rabbinic pun "[At Sinai] God spoke these words, *ve-lo yasaf*: and did not add any more [i.e., Revelation is over] ff. Deut. 5:19, they read: *ve-lo yasaf*: and never ceased speaking.[16] The Torah that had been summarily closed is thus reopened, its wellsprings unsealed: *ma'ayan nove'a*. As Nachmanides had it, from the large miracles (such as Revelation at Sinai) one comes to the sense of the small epiphanies. For divinity is always present and the Voice never ceases to flow. At this level of expanded awareness [*mohin de-gadlut*] God is, as the benediction has it, *noten ha-torah*, the one who ever **gives** Torah, each moment anew.[17] At various points in his book Schwartz illumines the connection between myth and ritual, showing how story can become, in his words, "more than story."

To date, we have implied that it was through myth that Israel most commonly encountered, grappled with, assimilated and marked life's pivotal moments. For myth addresses some of our fundamental existential questions, concerns that may shift over time but which tend to pervade different cultural settings. These questions include: how did the world come into being, and to what end; what may I/we hope for; what is the meaning of suffering and of joy, the co-existence of good and evil; is there a deeper purpose to history? What does it mean to be a Jew, to embrace Jewish practice? Who (rarely what) is God and how may I serve the One? what does it mean to be both an image of the divine and "dust and ashes"; what does it mean that I can both shatter and fix vessels and worlds? What is the meaning of gender—in humanity, in divinity? Or: what is the relation of work and rest, of depression and renewal? What is the significance of embodiment and ensoulment? And: what might unfold in other dimensions of existence, both high and low; to wit, what is the meaning of death, its sorrows and its sweet release, and how does one here live in its presence? In this foreword I simply pose the questions. In *Tree of Souls* these and other root questions are vividly addressed. It has been said that survival (and the production of meaning) comes in cultural inflections. The myths in this book give voice to a full array of Jewish inflections and dialects, creating *olam u-melo'o*, "a world replete with meanings".

Still each path has its pitfalls. It is to Howard Schwartz's credit that his embrace of the mythic model does not blind him to the significant counter-impulses within Judaism: the various Rabbinic and philosophical critiques of certain myths, especially the graphic mythicizations of God found in aggadah and some strands of kabbalah. Second, even as Schwartz is aware of the profundities in his mythic sources, he is aware of their dangers too. For myths both articulate and absolutize (reify) our deepest visions. For an example see the Introduction, where Schwartz poignantly notes: "The intractable conflict in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians derives from this belief in the sanctity of the Holy Land, especially of Jerusalem, shared by both Jews and Muslims. This serves as a compelling reminder of the enduring and sometimes destructive power of these myths, which are not always benign." Or as James Young put it in a different context: a common site of memory is not necessarily a site of common memory.[18]

Ways of reading this book. As noted, *Tree of Souls* maintains a dynamic tension between textual diversity and thematic focus through the centripetal force of its editor. Schwartz's frequent weaving together of parallel sources into a unitary myth is an impressive achievement. Still, I confess that I often have trouble with this approach since it smooths out the edges, obscures specific voices and historical settings. But thanks to the commentaries, I was rarely perturbed by this. And the gain in narrative flow was measurable. The author has done a remarkable job in presenting the chain midrashim and the longer legends/myths (the *Tzohar*[19] to restrict myself to one example.) I like the way Schwartz presented the hard unvarnished accounts found in some sources: the Zoharic text wherein the Holy One (masculine aspect of God) is mated not with *Shekhinah* as one would expect but with Lilith (the demonic realm in its feminine guise). Or the aggadah wherein the son of arch-demon Sammael is cannibalized by Eve (and Adam). This source was stunning in all senses of the term. In these and other texts, mind surprises heart, as the text reads in ways that run counter to expectations and hidden wishes. In still other texts, narrative reaches the status of *mayse* as defined by Abraham Joshua Heschel: a story in which heart surprises mind.[20] Nachman's fragmentary tale of "A Garment for the Moon" and the oral tale "The Cottage of Candles" are two such texts for me. Each reader will undoubtedly find his or her favorites: be they tales that edify or perplex, astonish or delight, be they myths that stick in the craw, force one to reconsider, or make the heart melt. For there are as many gates in this book as there are stories (and some would say, as there are readers).

This book deserves a wide and varied audience. It will speak to storytellers of all stripes, spur the analogical and aesthetic imagination of artists. Students of myth and theology (Jewish and comparative) and spiritual seekers, those thirsty for the presence of the One, will have much to contemplate and absorb. Some readers may wish to focus on one tale at a time, to even memorize a passage or write it down and place it in pocket or purse for periodic examination and reflection. To learn *by heart*. Other readers may wish to explore a mythic cycle systematically, concordances in hand. Still others will want to make use of Schwartz's extensive notation of primary sources to engage in historical analysis. Through these notations and through the references to cutting-edge scholarship the reader is given tools to continue and deepen his or her readings. One need not agree with all of Schwartz's contentions in order to be edified and inspired by this book. He is a conversation partner of the highest order, a generous and deeply schooled *bar-p'lugta*. Still, not all is heavy in this book. As the midrash[21] has it *panim tzohakot la-aggadah*. "The Aggadah—the narrative imagination—has a laughing face." For reasons both playful and profound, this is a book to read and reread, to grow old with.

The anthological imagination and its resonances. *Tree of Souls* is a latter-day exemplar of the Jewish anthological imagination, that combinatory art. Indeed, anthology is one of the oldest forms of Jewish literary creativity, found in various Biblical books such as Psalms and, many would hold, the Pentateuch itself (if one accepts the documentary hypothesis). Many of the canonical and sacred works of the Rabbinic imagination were anthologies of texts, some even anthologies of anthologies.[22] In the modern period we have been blessed with encyclopedic anthologies of signal import, including Bialik and Ravnitzky's *Sefer ha-Aggadah* (in Hebrew) and Louis Ginzberg's magisterial *Legends of the Jews*. *Tree of Souls* builds on these works in many ways, recasting the thematic thrust of *Sefer ha-Aggadah* and revisioning the synthetic narrative of Ginzberg. Still, Schwartz extends our scope by drawing on heretofore marginalized texts as well as post-medieval and modern texts not included in the earlier works.[23] Indeed, **this book could only have been written at this historical moment**. For it draws on works that had been lost to earlier generations, such as the *piyyutim* of Yannai and the Dead Sea Scrolls; oral narratives collected in recent decades; women's prayers that have just now re-entered public (and scholarly) purview; as well as mystical manuscripts and "minor" midrashim that were previously known only to *yehidei segullah*, the precious few. In this book, our collective memory is dusted off, expanded and vitalized.

By way of conclusion or as entree into the book itself, a parable about this volume and the Anthological Imagination. The word *anthology* etymologically implies a collection of flowers, the artful forming of a bouquet. The hasidic rebbe Nachman of Bratslav, himself a great mythopoet and storyteller, likened the act of prayer to this anthological art—the assembling of bouquets for the Holy One. Each letter, he teaches, is like a flower of the field, and from these letters one forms words, themselves bouquets. From these words one forms prayers, and from individual prayers, whole services of worship—elaborate bouquets, garlands of blessing. Nachman then explains that each word—each flower—has a special resonance, an inner music. Its music hangs in the air, combining and harmonizing with the other words and prayers that follow, in a kind of Deep Song. Nachman concludes: "When you rise and speak the final words of the service, let the first letter of the first word still reverberate."[24] The book in your hands is a work of enormous resonance. The careful reader of *Tree of Souls* cannot but marvel at the consistent power, the occasional bracing oddness, and the enduring beauty of this anthology. It is a testament to its power that many of the early stories resonate with later ones, and that one continues to hear something of this book's "inner music"—its soul-stirring *niggun*—long after one has closed its pages.

Notes

[1] Ff. *Pesikta Rabbati*, chap. 28 et al.

[2] By this I mean the various streams of Judaism that are shaped by, and owe allegiance to, Rabbinic authority as it evolves.

[3] For other examples of this phenomenon, see Michael Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), esp. chapters 3 and 6.

[4] A short list of recent scholarship on Jewish myth might include the works of Michael Fishbane, Yehuda Liebes' two volumes for SUNY Press, Arthur Green's *Keter* (Princeton, 1997), and the two issues of the *Journal of Jewish Philosophy and Thought* devoted to myth and ritual, vol. 6:1-2 (1997). The Hebrew reader might also consider *Ha-Mitos be-Yahadut* [Myths in Judaism], edited by Moshe Idel and Ithamar Gruenwald (Jerusalem: Z. Shazar, 2004). Broadly speaking, most Judaic scholars through the 1970's tended to define myth narrowly and negatively, linking it with so-called "pagan" religions. They therefore tended to see Judaism as a demythologizing tradition, broken only by the "mythic resurgence" of kabbalah. Most recent scholars understand myth more broadly, as a fundamental human impulse (found in virtually all cultures) to structure life around orienting Stories. These scholars find rich myths in all strata of Judaism: not only in kabbalistic ritual but in Biblical imagery and Rabbinic *aggadah*. They extend the mythic arc to contemporary Judaism, to the Zionist marking of "wilderness as mythic space" to give one potent example. My fundamental sympathies, and those of Howard Schwartz, clearly lie with these "myth-friendly" scholars. For a spirited debate over the place of myth in Judaism, see Yehuda Liebes' and Shalom Rosenberg's pieces in *Mada'ei ha-Yahadut* 39 (1998). For two now-classic studies of the Jewish mythic imagination (especially in mystical tradition) see Gershom Scholem's *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (NY: Schocken, 1965) and *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (ibid., 1991). Finally, for the ways in which diverse cultures make use of their central stories, see Wendy Doniger's splendid *Other People's Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (NY: Macmillan, 1988).

[5] Canonization led to the possibility of grasping Scripture all at once, as a totality, in an almost holographic fashion. In rabbinic midrash, for example, one could read a given verse intertextually: in light of a *pasuk rahok,* a verse taken from a wholly different literary context with which, however, ingenious associations could be made.

[6] The slippage from past tense to present tense here is intentional, exemplifying the mythic tendency to collapse orders of time, i.e., to blur the distinctions between *then* and *now.*

[7] For Scholem, see his "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories" in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (NY: Schocken, 1971; for the Fishbane, see *The Exegetical Imagination,* p. 94.

[8] This is not to say that everyone is equally empowered to interpret; rather, it is the religious virtuosi, the Rabbis, who assume that central role. Clearly, Howard Schwartz goes beyond the traditional Rabbinic models of authority in this book. On the three quotations cited here, see Ps. 62:12, quoted in sundry rabbinic sources; the rendering of Jer. 23:29 in TB Sanhedrin 34a; and TB Eruvin 13b et al.

[9] On seventy faces, a shorthand for the inexhaustible fount of meaning, see Nachmanides to Gen. 8:4; Bachya ben Asher to Ex. 24:12, et al. On 600,000 faces, one for every soul at Sinai, see Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanot* 53b; Moshe Cordovero, *Derishah be-inyanei Mal'akhim;* and the discussion in Scholem's "The Meaning of Torah in Jewish Mysticism" in his *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism* (NY: Schocken, 1965). On the white spaces, see Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev in *Imrei Tzaddikim* (cited in Scholem, "Meaning of Torah," 81ff.) and the *Noam Elimelekh* cited in the Slonimer Rebbe's *Netivot Shalom: Mo'adim* "Shavuot" s.v. *"hag ha-'atzeret".*

[10] My rendering is drawn from *Hayyei Moharan* pp. 3:3 ff. *Likutei Moharan 1:20.* See also the translation and discussion in Arthur Green, *Tormented Master*, esp. pp. 198-200.

[11] In the *Idrot* section of the *Zohar*, the source for Nachman's riff, this gesture itself is replete with meaning. But that matter lies beyond the scope of this essay!

[12] Of course, there are exceptions to this model. Gods and heroes can act in ways in which ordinary folks cannot. Thus, King David's sexual behavior is not simply valorized; and Moses is variously seen as exemplary (a model that can be asymptotically approached by the spiritual virtuoso) and exceptional, the figure who is *sui generis* and cannot be emulated. The Arthur Green quotation is taken from his "Jewish Studies, Jewish Faith," *Tikkun* 1:1, p. 87; the Geertz citation comes from his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (NY: Basic Books, 1973).

[13] The genius of our last reading, from a midrashic standpoint, is that it was able to be justified scripturally. The ram, Gen. 22:13 relates, was offered *tahat b'no,* in place of Isaac. But by choosing a secondary meaning of *tahat,* the interpreter astonishingly reads: **after** Isaac! The classical discussion of the Binding, as well as its midrashic, textual anchorings, can be found in Shalom Spiegel's *The Last Trial* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights reprint, 1993).

[14] This formulation was inspired by a long-ago conversation with my teacher, Arthur Green.

[15] These notions have been developed by James Kugel in his “Two Introductions to Midrash” in Hartman and Budick, eds. *Midrash and Literature* (New Haven: Yale, 1986) and by Michael Fishbane in his various writings on Jewish hermeneutics.

[16] The Hebrew YSF can be read either as “to add” or via a homonym “to end” or cease.

[17] See Scholem’s magisterial essay, “Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism” in his *The Messianic Idea in Judaism.* This particular chain of readings is drawn from the 16th century kabbalist Meir ibn Gabbai’s *Avodat ha-Kodesh* 3:23.

[18] From his *The Texture of Memory* (New Haven, Yale: 1994)

[19] Myth 109 on the Primordial Light.

[20] Oral communication from Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, from whom I first heard this saying. And cf. Heschel’s *The Earth is the Lord’s* (NY: Schuman, 1950), p. 15, where we find the variant: “story where soul surprises the mind.”

[21] See *Pesikta Rabbati,* chap. 21.

[22] For a recent discussion of the anthological imagination in Judaism, and its various sub-genres, see the three issues of the journal *Prooftexts,* vol. 17:1-2 and 19:1 (1997/99). Of special use is David Stern’s prefatory comments in 17:1.

[23] Bialik and Ravnitzky focused on relatively well-known Rabbinic works; while Ginzberg’s *terminus ad quem* was prior to the Safed Revival in the 16th century.

[24] *Likutei Moharan* 1:65. For a translation of this text, see Lawrence Kushner, *The Way into Jewish Mysticism* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 2001) 147-149.

INTRODUCTION

I. The Mythical Strata of Judaism

Is there a Jewish mythology? At first glance, it might not seem to exist. After all, the central principle of Judaism is monotheism—belief in one God, excluding the very possibility of other gods. How can there be a mythology where there is only one God, without any interaction between gods, one of the hallmarks of mythology? Mythology seems to imply a multiplicity of supernatural forces, which gives the story of divinity a tension and an excitement it does not have when there is only an all-powerful single Deity. And since, in the monotheistic view, God created the world out of nothing, *ex nihilo*, doesn't this imply that God is the only inhabitant of heaven? Otherwise it could be said that other deities or divine beings participated in the Creation or have a share in ruling the world.

With only one God, heaven would be a barren place, at least in mythic terms. Yet the actual Jewish view of heaven is quite different. There are seven heavens, filled with angels and other divine beings, such as the Messiah, who is said to have a palace of his own in the highest heaven. The celestial Temple can be found there—the mirror image of the Temple in the earthly Jerusalem—as well as an abundance of heavenly palaces, one for each of the patriarchs and matriarchs and sages, where he or she teaches Torah to the attentive souls of the righteous and the angels. (Yes—in Jewish mythology women teach Torah in the world to come, although they were not traditionally permitted to do so in this world.[1]) Above all, heaven is the home of the souls of the righteous, who ascend to Paradise after they take leave of this world.

This vision of heaven ruled by God but populated by lesser divine beings and righteous souls may not seem to infringe on the core concept of monotheism. But among the inhabitants of heaven is an unexpected figure: God's Bride. This divine figure is known as the *Shekhinah*. At first this term referred to God's presence in this world, what is known as the Divine Presence. But by the thirteenth century, the term "*Shekhinah*," which is feminine in gender, had come to mean "Bride of God" and the *Shekhinah* was openly identified as God's spouse in the *Zohar*, the central text of Jewish mysticism.[2] This is a major development in terms of Jewish mythology, as the very notion of such a divine Bride is the essence of myth, echoing such pairs as Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology, and El and Asherah in the Canaanite. But the existence of such a figure, strongly resembling a Hebrew goddess, echoing the role attributed by some to Asherah in ancient Israel, raises the most elementary questions about her role in a monotheistic system.[3]

There are other unexpected echoes of polytheistic mythology to be found in Judaism. *Genesis Rabbah*, an important rabbinic text dating from the fourth or fifth century, speaks of a Council of Souls, apparently a council of heavenly deities, whom God consults with about the creation of the world and the creation of man. Here there is not one other divine figure, but multiple ones such as those found in pagan religions. Indeed, the Council of Souls is exactly like the divine council, led by the god El, who rules the world in Canaanite mythology. Such divine counsels rule in Mesopotamian and Babylonian mythologies as well.[4]

How could such a myth about multiple divinities be found in a mainstream rabbinic text such as *Genesis Rabbah*? Why was it not rejected as blasphemous? The answer is that Judaism is not, and never has been, a single stream of thought, but a river formed of many, often contradictory, streams, and rabbinic texts are composites of different kinds of thinking. There has been a perennial struggle in Judaism between the antimythic, monotheistic forces, and the kind of mythic forces that are prevalent in many kabbalistic texts. Therefore, in many mainstream rabbinic texts, including the Talmud and the Midrash, it is quite possible to find dualistic or even polytheistic configurations, such as this one about a Council of Souls, side by side with monotheistic texts.

Just as there are a variety of mythologies—every people of the world has one—there are many definitions of mythology. At this point it might be appropriate to provide a definition for the approach to mythology used in this book: *Myth refers to a people's sacred stories about origins, deities, ancestors, and heroes. Within a culture, myths serve as the divine charter, and myth and ritual are inextricably bound.*[5]

Let us consider this definition in terms of Jewish tradition: myth refers to a people's sacred stories about origins, deities, ancestors, and heroes. This is precisely what the Torah recounts for the Jewish people—stories about origins, as found in Genesis; about God, the ruling deity; about ancestors such as Abraham and Moses, and heroes such as King David.

As for having a divine charter, this is the precise nature of the Torah, dictated by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, which serves both as a chronicle and covenant. At the same time, myth and ritual reinforce each other in Judaism. The Sabbath alludes to the day of rest that God declared after six days of Creation. The ritual of the Sabbath is a constant reminder of the mythical origins of this sacred day.

All of these primary aspects of mythology find expression in Jewish tradition, and individual myths have exercised great power over Jewish life. Even to this day Jews relive the Exodus at Passover, which recalls the escape from Egyptian bondage, and receive the Torah anew on Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah. Nor, in some Orthodox Jewish circles, has the longing for the Messiah subsided.

For those who prefer not to use the term "mythology" in relationship to Judaism, there are two primary objections. The first is that the term suggests a constellation of gods rather than a single, omnipotent God. How could there be a Jewish mythology without contradicting this basic tenet of Jewish theology, without undermining monotheism? The simple fact is that despite being a monotheistic religion, like Christianity and Islam, Judaism does have real myth. Just as supernatural practices, such as using divination or consulting a soothsayer, were commonly performed despite the biblical injunction against them,[6] an extensive Jewish mythology did evolve, especially in mystical circles, where it was believed possible to preserve a monotheistic perspective while simultaneously employing a mythological one. Here it was understood that most mythological figures, especially the *Shekhinah*, were ultimately aspects of the Godhead, despite their apparent mythological independence. Indeed, it sometimes seems as if all of Jewish myth (and perhaps all of existence) were the epic fantasy of one Divine Being, or, as Lurianic kabbalah suggests, a kind of divine illusion, similar to the Hindu concept of maya. For what sometimes appears to have mythic independence can also be understood as an emanation of the Godhead. Divine emanations take the form of the ten sefirot, as symbolized by the kabbalistic Tree of Life.[7] It is possible to identify a sefirotic process underlying virtually every myth. But in translating mythic imaginings into stages of emanation, the sefirot also serve as an antidote to mythology, as they are entirely conveyed through allegory and symbolism, which are clearly not intended to be taken literally, and may have been created to restrain the unbridled mythic impulse released in Jewish mysticism, as well as to define its underlying archetypal structure. Certainly, this system of divine emanations is as complex and comprehensive as that of the Jungian theory of archetypes. And while the essence of myth is archetype, it is much harder, if not impossible, to mythologize a system as abstract as the sefirot. Yet underlying these abstractions are the living forces of myth.

The second objection to the use of "mythology" in terms of Jewish tradition is that it suggests that the beliefs under consideration are not true. Even the mere identification of a culture's beliefs as mythological indicates that it is being viewed from the outside rather than from the perspective of a believer. That is why, with a few exceptions, there has been such great reluctance to identify any of the biblical narratives as myths or to bring the tools of mythological inquiry to bear on Judaism or Christianity. While it is true that the study of these religions from a mythological perspective does imply the distance of critical inquiry, it does not mean that the traditions being examined are therefore false. Mythological studies are now commonly linked with psychological ones, and scholars such as C. G. Jung, Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Erich Neumann, Marie Louise Von Franz, and Sigmund Hurwitz have demonstrated how it is possible to recognize a dimension of psychological truths underlying mythic traditions, where myth can be seen as the collective projection of a people. And not only psychological truths, but the deepest existential truths. Indeed, this is the reason that myths persist, because the questions they raise are perennial. In the case of Judaism, many generations of rabbis, as well as other Jews, received and transmitted the sacred myths, rituals, and traditions, sometimes radically transforming them in the process, as well as imparting their own human imprint.

Over time, as the number of supernatural figures in this pantheon increased and interacted, an abundance of mythological narratives emerged. These stories describe events such as the transformation of Enoch into the angel Metatron, the Giving of the Torah, the separation of God's Bride from Her Spouse, the chain of events that has so far prevented the coming of the Messiah, and the attempts of Satan to gain inroads into the world of human beings. They also map out the realms of heaven and hell in great detail. By a process of accretion, these mythic realms were embellished and further defined, giving birth to additional narratives. In this way Jewish mythology has evolved into an extensive, interconnected—and often contradictory—mythic tradition.

II. The Categories of Jewish Mythology

Drawing on the full range of Jewish sources, sacred and nonsacred, ten major categories of Jewish mythology can be identified: *Myths of God, Myths of Creation, Myths of Heaven, Myths of Hell, Myths of the Holy Word, Myths of the Holy Time, Myths of the Holy People, Myths of the Holy Land, Myths of Exile*, and *Myths of the Messiah.* Each of these categories explores a mythic realm, and, in the process, reimagines it. This is the secret to the transformations that characterize Jewish mythology. Building on a strong foundation of biblical myth, each generation has embellished the earlier myths, while, at the same time, reinterpreting them for its own time.

Each of these ten major myths is represented here with several dozen submyths. These often form themselves into cycles, such as that of Enoch's heavenly ascent, or of Lilith's rebellion, or of Jacob's elevation to the status of a divine figure. A passage in a late medieval midrashic text seems to confirm this organizational approach, attributing this tenfold structure to God:[8] "Ten things were paramount in the thought of God at the time of the Creation: Jerusalem, the souls of the patriarchs, the ways of the righteous, Gehenna, the Flood, the stone tablets, the Sabbath, the Temple, the Ark, and the light of the World to Come."[9]

This midrash suggests its own definition of mythology: that which is foremost in the mind of God. By keeping these things in mind, God permits them to exist, for whatever God visualizes comes to pass. Indeed, all of existence depends on God's willingness to let the world continue to exist. There are many variations on this theme. There also are myths to be found about prior worlds that God created and then destroyed, and some myths of an angry or dejected God who calls the continued existence of this world into question.[10]

The fact that there are ten things in God's mind is significant. Why the number ten? Primarily because of the Ten Commandments. Just as men must keep the Ten Commandments in mind at all times, so too does God keep these ten things foremost in His mind. These are, in effect, God's Ten Commandments. Later the number ten also became attached to the Ten Lost Tribes, as well as the ten sefirot. An overview of each of these ten categories follows.

1. Myths of God

Judaism is primarily a religion based on the covenant between God and the people of Israel. According to the Torah, God established this covenant beginning with Abraham, and renewed it with Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses. In the Jewish view, this covenant was formalized in the handing down of the Torah at Mount Sinai, and, ever since, the Jewish people have turned to the Torah to guide their lives.

Naturally, there has been a powerful impulse in Judaism to better understand the nature of the God who created the world and established a covenant with the Jewish people. Among early Jewish mystics, this led to a series of visionary accounts, known as the *Hekhalot* texts,[11] that describe journeys of some famous rabbis into Paradise for the explicit purpose of attaining greater knowledge of God. These journeys are very dangerous, as there are said to be guards at every one of the seven levels of heaven, and the guard at the sixth gate will not hesitate to cut off the head of one who does not know the secret name that serves as a password to these celestial realms.

Thus every aspect of God was open to mythic speculation: God's size and appearance; what God does during the day and at night; what God's voice was like to those who heard it at Mount Sinai; what God's relationship is like with His Bride; how God prays; how God grieved over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem—despite the fact that He permitted that destruction to take place. Nor is God's relationship with Israel as onesided as one might expect: there is even a talmudic myth about the rabbis rejecting God's interpretation of the Law in favor of their own, after which God is said to have laughed and exclaimed, "My children have overruled Me!"[12] This kind of interaction between God and His people, Israel, makes it clear that, as Yehuda Liebes puts it, "the God of Israel is a mythic god, and as such maintains relationships of love and hate with His creatures."[13]

In some of these myths God not only suffers like his people, but sometimes shows remarkable tenderness. One myth describes God as sitting in a circle with many baby spirits that are about to be born.[14] Another says that in the messianic era God will seat each person between His knees, and embrace him and kiss him and bring him to life in the World to Come.[15] Still another describes a nurturing God who raises the male children of the Israelites after they were abandoned because of Pharaoh's decree against newborn boys. After they were grown, they returned to their families. When they were asked who took care of them, they said, "A handsome young man took care of all our needs." And when the Israelites came to the Red Sea, those children were there, and when they saw God at the sea, they said to their parents, "That is the one who took care of us when we were in Egypt."[16]

Even though the second commandment clearly states that *You shall not make for yourself … any likeness of what is in the heavens above* (Exod. 20:4), rabbinic literature is full of anthropomorphic imagery of God, of God's hands, God's eyes and ears, God walking, sitting, and speaking. These images are often accompanied by a disclaimer, *kivyakhol*, "as if it were possible."[17] However, this disclaimer does not eliminate the distinct impression that God can be described in human terms. As Henry Slonimsky puts it: "Nowhere indeed has a God been rendered so utterly human, been taken so closely to man's bosom and, in the embrace, so thoroughly changed into an elder brother, a slightly older father, as here in the Midrash. The anthropomorphic tendency here achieves its climax. God has not merely become a man, he has become a Jew, an elderly, bearded Jew."[18] Or, as *Midrash Tehillim* on Psalm 118:5 states: "He is your father, your brother, your kinsman."

The rabbinic commentators had to contend with the often contradictory descriptions of God's appearance. For example, God is said to have appeared as an old man at Mount Sinai, while He is described as a mighty warrior at the Red Sea. In commenting on the second commandment, *I am Yahweh, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage* (Exod. 20:2),[19] Rashi engages this issue by quoting God as saying, "Since I change in My appearance to the people, do not say that there are two divine beings, for it is I alone who brought you out of Egypt and it is I who was at the Red Sea."

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the kabbalistic portrayal of God as *Ein Sof*, the Infinite One, from whom emanated the ten stages of divine manifestation known as the ten sefirot. Each of these sefirot bears one of God's primary attributes, and together they form the realm of God's manifestation in this world. Here, in contrast to a highly personified view of God, is one that is entirely impersonal, although the sefirot do represent attributes that are identified with human qualities, such as understanding, wisdom, judgment, and lovingkindness.[20] While one kabbalistic school identifies the true God as *Ein Sof*, which is beyond the realm of the sefirot, another school asserts that the divine essence of God can be found in the ten sefirot, for they are identical with the Godhead, and should be viewed as stages in the hidden life of God.[21] The theory of the sefirot was not without its enemies. One of these, Rabbi Isaac ben Sheshet Parfat, known as Ribash, writing in the fourteenth century, quotes one critic as saying contemptuously about the kabbalists, "The idolaters believe in the Trinity and the kabbalists believe in a tenfold God!"[22]

In the myths discussed so far, God has been portrayed as a masculine divinity. This is how most people view God. Yet no discussion of Jewish myths about God would be complete without a discussion of the myths about the Bride of God. This divine figure is known as the *Shekhinah*. Perhaps no Jewish myth undergoes as radical a transformation as does that of the *Shekhinah*. There is a complete cycle of *Shekhinah* myths to be found, which begins with God's creation of the *Shekhinah*, and portrays the sacred couplings of the divine pair as well as their confrontations and separations. In this view, the *Shekhinah* chose to go into exile with Her children, the children of Israel, at the time of the destruction of the Temple. When will Her exile come to an end? When the Temple, the *Shekhinah's* home in this world, is rebuilt at the time of the coming of the Messiah. There is even a rather staggering myth in the *Zohar* that suggests that the evil Lilith has supplanted God's true Bride in the divine realm.[23] These myths also reveal the existence of two *Shekhinahs*, one who makes Her home in heaven and one who has descended to earth. This cycle makes it clear that the kinds of interactions expected of a divine couple, like those found in Greek and Canaanite mythology—and to some extent in the Gnostic mythology of the early centuries of the Christian era—are found as well in the kabbalistic myths of God and His Bride.[24] However, unique to Jewish myths—to kabbalistic myths in particular—is the implication that the two mythic beings, God and His Bride, are really two aspects of the same divine being, of a God who contains everything, including male and female qualities. Indeed, this is stated directly by the Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl: "Only the *Shekhinah* and God together form a unity, for one without the other cannot be called a whole."[25]

In its earliest usage in the Talmud, "*Shekhinah*" refers to God's Divine Presence, thus the immanence or indwelling of God in this world. This personification was linked, in particular, to the sense of holiness experienced on the Sabbath. At this time no attempt was made to suggest that the *Shekhinah* was in any way independent of God, or to imply that the term referred to a feminine aspect of the Deity. Instead, the term implied the nearness of God, as in this homily of Rabbi Akiba: "When a man and wife are worthy, the *Shekhinah* dwells in their midst; if they are unworthy, fire consumes them."[26]

Yet some rabbinic myths set the stage for the ultimate transformation of the *Shekhinah* into an independent being. At first this usage of the term *Shekhinah* was intended to affirm that God remained true to the children of Israel and accompanied them wherever they went. In time, however, the term *Shekhinah* came to be identified with the feminine aspect of God and came to acquire mythic independence. Myths that emerge in kabbalistic and hasidic literature portray the *Shekhinah* as the Bride of God and the Sabbath Queen, personifying Her as an independent mythic figure. Indeed, there are several other identities linked to the *Shekhinah*, who is sometimes also portrayed as a princess, a bride, an old woman in mourning, a dove, a lily, a rose, a hind, a jewel, a well, the earth, and the moon.[27] These multiple facets of the *Shekhinah* suggest that as a mythic figure, the *Shekhinah* has absorbed a wide range of feminine roles. There is a series of myths about the *Shekhinah* found in the *Zohar*, forming a cycle.[28] Some of these myths are undeniably erotic in describing the lovemaking of God and the *Shekhinah.* Part of this cycle also includes the greatest conflict between God and His Bride, over God's permitting the Temple in Jerusalem, the home of the *Shekhinah*, to be destroyed. This results in the *Shekhinah* separating from God and going into exile with Her children, the children of Israel. It is here that the *Shekhinah* achieves mythic independence, for it is evident that the confrontation takes place between two mythic figures. After this, the presence of the *Shekhinah* is fully injected into the tradition. It prepares the way for a series of visions and encounters with the *Shekhinah* that are associated, in particular, with the *Kotel ha-Ma'aravi*, the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, also known as the Wailing Wall.

In these kabbalistic and post-kabbalistic texts, it is apparent that, at least from a mythological point of view, the *Shekhinah* has become an independent entity. Nevertheless, the *Shekhinah* was regarded at the same time as an extension or aspect of the Divinity, which was, of course, necessary in order to uphold the essential concept of monotheism. True initiates of the kabbalah were not disturbed by these apparent contradictions, but, for others, the danger of viewing the *Shekhinah* as a separate deity was recognized. That explains why the study of the kabbalistic texts was not permitted until a man had reached his fortieth year.[29] Only such a person was felt to be grounded enough not to be overwhelmed by kabbalistic mysteries, while younger, more vulnerable men might well be led astray.

Nor does the evolution of the myth of the *Shekhinah* end with the role portrayed in the *Zohar* in the thirteenth century. The implications of the exile of the *Shekhinah* were expanded in the sixteenth century by Rabbi Isaac Luria in his myth of the Shattering of the Vessels and the Gathering of the Sparks. And in the nineteenth century Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav told the allegorical tale of "The Lost Princess," which hints at an identification of the *Shekhinah* with an internal feminine figure, much like Jung's concept of the anima.[30]

One other subtle identity of the *Shekhinah* is suggested in the talmudic tradition of every Jew receiving a *neshamah yeterah*, a second soul, on the Sabbath: "Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: 'On the eve of the Sabbath the Holy One, blessed be He, gives man an extra soul, and at the close of the Sabbath He withdraws it from him.'"[31] This second soul is the internal experience of the *Shekhinah*. It remains throughout the Sabbath, and is believed to depart after *Havdalah*, the ritual of separation performed at the end of the Sabbath. This second soul functions as a kind of *ibbur*, literally "an impregnation," in which the spirit of a holy figure fuses with the soul of a living person, bringing greater faith and wisdom.[32] But in this case it is a divine soul that fuses with the souls of Jews on the Sabbath. It is not difficult to identify this second soul with the presence of the *Shekhinah*, who is also the Sabbath Queen. Certainly, the arrival and departure of the Sabbath Queen and the arrival and departure of this mysterious second soul are simultaneous. Identifying the second soul with the *Shekhinah* is a way of acknowledging the sacredness of the Sabbath from both within and without. For Rabbi Yitzhak Eizik Safrin of Komarno, a man could best discover the *Shekhinah* through his wife. He states in *Notzer Hesed* that the *Shekhinah* rests on a man mainly because of his wife, for a man receives spiritual illumination because he has a wife. He describes a man as being positioned between two wives. One, his earthly wife, receives from him, while the *Shekhinah* bestows blessings on him.

Out of all of these meanings attributed to the *Shekhinah* emerge a cycle of myths linked to the *Shekhinah*. Some of these portray the unity of God and His Bride, while others are about their separation. The key myth, as noted, is that of the exile of the *Shekhinah*, for at the time the Bride goes into exile, the figure of the *Shekhinah* becomes largely independent of the Divinity and takes on a separate identity. Still, the question remains: can the *Shekhinah* be considered a goddess? Does Her independent status award Her equality? The answer is more difficult than it might seem. On the one hand, the nature of the evolution of the *Shekhinah* from the concept of God's presence in this world to the Bride of God seems to maintain the *Shekhinah*'s identity with God strongly enough to raise doubts about Her goddesslike role. But, on the other hand, the role of the *Shekhinah* that emerges in the kabbalistic era can be viewed as a resurrection of the role of the suppressed goddess Asherah in ancient Jewish tradition.[33] Finally, the integral role of the *Shekhinah* in the system of the ten sefirot, where the *Shekhinah* is identified with the final *sefirah* of *Malkhut*, complicates the matter further. In the end, while the *Shekhinah* appears to have some of the earmarks of a goddess figure, this role is not as clear-cut as those of goddesses in other mythic traditions. Yes, the *Shekhinah* is the Bride of God, but, at the same time, the *Shekhinah* is a feminine aspect of the one God, and these roles exist simultaneously. How can this contradiction be resolved? Perhaps by viewing the mythological tradition within Judaism as a unique development, a kind of monotheistic mythology.[34]

Note that the myth of the exile of the S*hekhinah* is a two-part myth. In the first stage, the Bride of God goes into exile at the time of the destruction of the Temple, while in the second stage, a reunion of God and the *Shekhinah* takes place.[35] This reunion is brought about through the activities of Israel in fulfilling requirements of the *mitzvot*, the ritual requirements of the Law, and through the conscious application, or *kavvanah*, of prayers. When this reunification becomes permanent, the exile of the *Shekhinah* will come to an end, and "the *Shekhinah* will return to Her husband and have intercourse with Him."[36] This development is linked to the coming of the Messiah, in that one of the consequences of the messianic era is that the Temple in Jerusalem, which was the *Shekhinah's* home in this world, will be rebuilt. Since the *Shekhinah* went into exile because of its destruction, the rebuilding of the Temple will represent the end of Her exile. In this way the myths of the *Shekhinah* and the Messiah become linked.

Contributing to the long life of Jewish myths such as that of the *Shekhinah* are several associated rituals. The most important ritual linked to the myth of the *Shekhinah* is that known as *Kabbalat Shabbat*, re-created by Rabbi Isaac Luria in the sixteenth century. Here the worshipers go out into the fields just before sunset on the eve of the Sabbath and welcome the Sabbath Queen. Luria found the basis for this ritual in the Talmud, in Rabbi Haninah's going out to greet the Sabbath Queen.[37] Of course, by the time Luria formalized this ritual, the concept of the Sabbath Queen had evolved into an independent mythic figure, and the ritual itself becomes a kind of goddess worship, but within Judaism.

Most readers will also be surprised to learn that other divine beings are portrayed in the Jewish pantheon who assist God in ruling the heavens and the earth. The angel Metatron, for example, is not only described as the heavenly scribe, but is also said to rule over the angels and to see to it that God's decrees are carried out in heaven and on earth. These figures function in a way that is reminiscent of the Gnostic Creator-God (demiurge), who was said to have fashioned the physical universe. But the demiurgic figures in Jewish tradition are chosen by God and remain subservient to Him, as in the case of Metatron, who is identified as the lesser Yahweh. Further, they lack the malignant overtones of the Gnostic demiurge Ialdabaoth, the demonic figure described in the *Apocryphon of John*. Nevertheless, Metatron and other Jewish demiurgic figures do function as divinities and share the duties of ruling the worlds above and below with God.[38]

While the primary myths about Metatron are found in the books of Enoch, reference to Metatron is even found in the Talmud,[39] where a commentary on the verse where God says to Moses, *"Come up to the Lord"* (Exod. 24:1), is interpreted to mean that Metatron, not God, called upon Moses: "A heretic said to Rabbi Idith: 'It is written, *Then God said to Moses, "Come up to the Lord."*' But surely it should have stated, 'Come up unto Me!' Rabbi Idith replied, 'It was Metatron who spoke to Moses, whose name is similar to that of his Master, for it is written, *For my Name is in him* (Exod. 23:21).' 'In that case,' the heretic retorted, 'we should worship him!'"

This is a shocking discussion to be found in the Talmud, the most sacred Jewish text after the Bible, as it demonstrates that a near-divine role was attributed to Metatron even among some of the ancient rabbis. Thus even as Judaism was transformed from its biblical model to the rabbinic model and later to kabbalistic and hasidic models, there were multiple versions of Judaism being practiced, those of the educated elite and those of the people. And even among the elite there were many sects, some emphasizing mystical teachings, such as the Mysteries of Creation and the meaning of Ezekiel's vision of God's Chariot,[40] others describing heavenly journeys; and still others focused on demiurgic figures like Enoch. In addition, there are also surprising enthronement myths about Adam, Jacob, Moses, King David, and the Messiah, in which each takes on a demiurge-like role.[41] That is to say, they are chosen by God to assist in the ruling of the world. Some of these myths, such as those about Jacob, were likely inspired by biblical verses such as Jeremiah 10:16: *Not like these is the portion of Jacob; for it is He who formed all things, and Israel is His very own tribe: Lord of Hosts is His name.* Although most of these enthronement myths are found in the Pseudepigrapha—the noncanonical teachings of Judaism—some of them, such as those about Metatron and Jacob, can be found in standard rabbinic sources. In any case, the existence of these enthronement myths demonstrates the existence of some Jewish sects whose views show evidence of being dualistic.

Read together, these myths reveal a much more complex portrait of God than might be expected, especially of God's role in Creation and in ruling the world, and of God's special relationship with the people of Israel. They also reveal how generations of rabbis and mystics strove to define God's plan in creating the world, and what those intentions revealed of God's true nature. At the same time, these myths show God in His appearance, in His daily activities, in His joys and sufferings, to be very much like His people. Indeed, the portrait of God that emerges is of a highly sympathetic figure, portrayed with the full range of emotions, dark as well as light, that characterize His human creations.

2. Myths of Creation

Many people believe there is one account of Creation in Judaism: the Genesis story of the seven days of Creation. Those familiar with biblical scholarship may recognize two creation myths. The first is Genesis 1:1-2:3. The second begins at Genesis 2:4 with the words: *Such is the story of heaven and earth when they were created*. This creation myth includes the creation of the first man and woman, the myth of the Garden of Eden and the Fall, and ends at Genesis 3:24 with the expulsion of Adam and Eve: *He drove the man out, and stationed east of the garden of Eden the cherubim and the fiery ever-turning sword, to guard the way to the Tree of Life.*

Those intimate with the Hebrew Bible will also have recognized allusions to other creation myths, such as the one summarized in Psalm 104:2—*You spread the heavens like a tent cloth. . . . He established the earth on its foundations, so that it shall never totter*. Some readers may read these passages as a summary restatement of the Genesis account, while others will recognize an alternate creation myth, in which God first creates the heavens and then the earth.

Another very ancient Jewish creation myth is based upon the Babylonian myth of the god Marduk, the sky god, trampling Tiamat, the primeval ocean and divine mother. This myth is alluded to in Isaiah 51:9, *Was it not You who cut Rahab in pieces, and wounded the dragon?* And the story is told in the Talmud[42] in a version that makes the parallel to the Babylonian myth explicit: "When God desired to create the world, he said to Rahab, the Angel of the Sea: 'Open your mouth and swallow all the waters of the world.' Rahab replied: 'Master of the Universe, I already have enough.' God then kicked Rahab with His foot and killed him. And had not the waters covered him no creature could have stood his foul odor."

It is likely that these mythic fragments from Psalms and Isaiah were known by the priestly editors of Genesis, who chose the version of Creation found at the beginning of Genesis that portrays a creation out of spoken words rather than by the actions of God. This is the earliest expression of an impulse in Jewish mythology to present God's actions in verbal rather than physical terms.

Even informed readers may be surprised to learn that there are over 100 different creation myths in Judaism. Not only do these offer alternate scenarios about how God created the world, but some of them also raise the question of whether God created the world out of nothing (*ex nihilo*) or used existing elements. Some even question whether God was assisted in the Creation by others, and, if so, whether these were angels or other divine beings.

What role did these variant creation myths play in Judaism? They addressed primary theological issues about the nature of God and the Mysteries of Creation that had important implications. For example, if, as stated in Isaiah 45:7: "*I form light and create darkness*," does that mean that light pre-existed, and that God merely formed it, rather than created it out of nothing? If light did pre-exist, who created it, and does that imply that there are other divine beings? Is a God who shapes pre-existing elements as all-powerful as a God who creates them out of nothing? In *De Somniis* Philo identifies God as an artificer and a creator: "When God gave birth to all things, He not only brought them into sight, but also brought into being things that had not existed before. Thus He was not merely an artificer, but also a creator."[43]

It is readily seen that these are issues close to the heart of monotheism. But the proliferation of these myths strongly suggests that there were conflicting views among the various Jewish sects and even among the rabbis who were the authors of the talmudic and midrashic texts. The advent of kabbalah in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries gave a new direction and implication for creation myths. There is a creation myth near the beginning of the *Zohar* about how the world was created from a cosmic seed.[44] This is a far cry from the Genesis myth, suggesting that rather than creating the world through speech, God nourished a cosmic seed in a palace described in terms that strongly suggest a womb. Thus it emphasizes God's nurturing, feminine qualities. Indeed, one of the primary purposes of kabbalah seems to be a renewal of the feminine in Judaism.

What was the impact of these far-flung creation myths? In some cases it was profound. The myth created by Rabbi Isaac Luria, known as the Ari, about the Shattering of the

Vessels and the Gathering of the Sparks, transformed the way Jews viewed their lives in exile from the Holy Land. The Ari's myth gave their wanderings in exile a new meaning, in which God had put them in those far-flung places to gather holy sparks, in preparation for the advent of the messianic era.[45]

Myths about the creation of the world are, naturally, the primary type of creation myths found in Judaism. However, there is another important type of creation myth, concerning the creation of human beings. Once again, the Genesis accounts of the creation of Adam and Eve serve as the basis for a remarkable permutation of such creation myths. Even Genesis itself contains what the rabbis identified as an alternate scenario, based on the verse *Male and female He created them* (Gen. 1:27). Since this was understood to describe a simultaneous creation of man and woman, it seemed to conflict with the sequential creation of Adam and Eve. This led the rabbis to conclude that Adam had a first wife, before Eve. This, in turn, initiated a rich cycle of legends about Adam's first wife, who is sometimes called the First Eve and sometimes identified as Lilith.[46] But that very same verse also was used as the basis of a myth that Adam and Eve were created back to back, and that God had to divide them in two and then create backs for each of them.[47] The *Zohar* draws its own conclusions about the pairing of male and female: "God shaped all things in the form of male and female. In another form things cannot exist."[48]

Indeed, a closer reading of these myths about the creation of Adam reveals two separate traditions, one about a heavenly Adam and one about an earthly one. A wide variety of sources, for example, recount myths about a heavenly Adam. The Hellenistic philosopher Philo called this figure "The Heavenly Man."[49] In his view, the heavenly man, born in the pure image of God, is imperishable, and thus a divine figure. Some myths identify this figure as a heavenly Adam. There are also myths about Adam as a giant who reached the heavens, before he ate the forbidden fruit and shrank to human size.[50] Adam is also described as God's confidant, as the heavenly judge who separates the righteous from the sinners, and as a figure of such magnitude that the angels started to wonder if they should bow down before him.[51] Later this myth of a heavenly Adam evolved into the complex kabbalistic concept of Adam Kadmon, the primordial man, who is God's first creation, a kind of divine interface through whom all subsequent creation takes place.

There are more creation myths in Judaism than any other kind. The Mysteries of Creation served as a powerful attraction to the ancient Jews, and they were explored in depth at every phase of Jewish tradition.

3. Myths of Heaven

God makes His home in heaven. We learn of the existence of heaven in the very first verse of the Torah: *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth* (Gen. 1:1). The Hebrew term, *shamayim*, means both "skies" and "heavens," which suggests how the skies came to be identified as the heavens, and God as the first inhabitant of heaven. Yet even in the biblical account of heaven, God is described as sharing the heavenly realm with the angels. We learn this from the story of the Binding of Isaac: just when Abraham raised the knife above his son, Isaac, *an angel of the Lord called to him from heaven* (Gen. 22:11). The Bible also notes other angels, such as Michael, Gabriel, and the Angel of the Lord.

What is missing in the biblical view of heaven are the souls of the righteous. It is not until the rabbinic period, beginning around the first century, that the biblical concept of heaven was expanded to include them. For the past 2,000 years heaven has been mapped out in great detail in rabbinic, kabbalistic, and hasidic texts, as well as in the texts of the Pseudepigrapha and Jewish folklore. And in all of them heaven includes a multitude of angels and other divine beings, as well as the souls of the righteous.

There is an abundance of myths about heaven. These include myths that demarcate the map of the seven heavens and detail the celestial temple and the palaces and treasuries of heaven, as well as its fiery rivers and choirs. There are also myths about the interaction of heavenly beings who are similar to those found in Greek myth, except that angels play the roles Greek myth assigns to gods. The myths of heaven include several cycles, such as that about Enoch's ascent into Paradise and transformation into the angel Metatron. There are also a great many myths about the angels, not only about the well-known archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, and Raphael, but also about some lesser known but very important angels, such as Lailah, the Angel of Conception; the angel Gallizur, who utters all of God's evil decrees for Him; and B'ree, the Angel of Rain. When angels, such as Elijah, are sent to this world as messengers, they are clothed in bodies formed from air or fire. In many myths, the angels demonstrate minds of their own and serve as a sounding board for God's important decisions, such as whether to make human beings. Note that while God consults the angels, He often ignores their counsel.[52]

Heaven serves as a multipurpose concept in Judaism. It is not only the home of God and the other inhabitants of heaven, but it is also the *Olam ha-Ba*, the world to come, where the souls of the righteous are said to go after they take leave of this world. Thus, for the living, heaven serves as a place of longing, and as a strong motivation for people to remain righteous in order to attain their heavenly reward. Finally, heaven serves as the destination for mystics among the rabbis who sought to journey there while still living, using amulets and spells. Their stories are recounted in detail in the *Hekhalot* texts. For all these reasons, there is an abundance of myths about heaven and its inhabitants. Read together, these myths reveal a well-developed mythology about heaven as God's home, as well as the home of God's Bride, and home to the angels, the Messiah, and the souls of the righteous.

Note that the term for paradise is *Gan Eden*, literally, the Garden of Eden. This term has a double meaning, in that it is applied to both the earthly Garden of Eden and the heavenly one. The one on earth was the one that was inhabited by Adam and Eve. The other is the heavenly garden, which is a synonym of Paradise. As Nachmanides puts it, commenting on Genesis 3:23, "The physical things that exist on earth also exist in heaven. Likewise, the heavenly *Gan Eden* with its trees has a counterpart on earth." The earthly and the heavenly paradise are essentially separate but related mythic realms. Nevertheless, the imagery of one sometimes gets mixed with that of the other, as where streams of the kind that flow in the earthly garden are said to be found in heaven, flowing not with water, but with precious balsam oil.[53] Thus we are to understand that heaven also has streams, just like those found on earth. This also finds expression in the mirror image of the earthly city of Jerusalem and the heavenly Jerusalem, and grows out of the principle "as above, so below."

4. Myths of Hell

In the biblical view, all the souls of the dead congregate in a grim place called Sheol. There is neither reward nor punishment. It is not unlike the Greek realm of Hades, and it likely influenced the Christian concept of Limbo. In rabbinic lore, Sheol was replaced by Gehenna, a place of punishment for the souls of sinners, which combines elements of both purgatory and hell. It was the widespread rabbinic belief that only a few souls went directly to Paradise after death. The majority went to Gehenna where they burned in the fires of hell and were punished with fiery lashes by avenging angels for up to one year. In the *Zohar* these fires of hell are identified as a person's own burning passions and desires, which consume him.[54] These punishments are just as severe as those portrayed in Dante's *Inferno*, but—in contrast to the Christian concept of hell—the purified souls are released from Gehenna and permitted to make a slow ascent into Paradise. For this reason it could be argued that Jewish hell is more like the Christian concept of purgatory than hell, and some take the position that the inevitable release from Gehenna means there is no Jewish concept of hell at all, but, instead, a stage of punishment that purifies the soul before it ascends on high. However, the descriptions of the punishments of Gehenna are so extensive,[55] and the fear of these punishments among the living was so widespread, that it seems more accurate to simply describe Gehenna as "Jewish hell."

Many of the myths of Gehenna simply enumerate the punishments found there. Others attempt to map out the dimensions of Gehenna, and to point out where its entrances can be found. Over time, an elaborate mythology about Gehenna accrued, much as did the mythology about heaven. Many new details emerged, such as the role of Duma, the angel in charge of Gehenna, or the presence of a guard outside Gehenna who only admits those for whom punishment has been decreed. Reports are found about visits to Gehenna by several great rabbis, as well as accounts about how all punishments in Gehenna cease during the Sabbath.[56] One learns that there is a whole category of avenging angels who deliver punishments to the sinners in Gehenna. These fearsome angels chase after the souls of newly deceased sinners with fiery rods, and when these angels catch the sinners, they drag them to Gehenna to face their punishments.[57]

Thus the role of the punishment of hell in Judaism is a transitional one, part of a larger myth about sin and redemption, in which virtually everyone's soul is eventually purified enough to escape further punishment. In this it is in stark contrast to the Christian view that the punishments of hell are eternal.[58]

5. Myths of the Holy Word

Judaism is a strongly text-oriented religion. Not only is the primary text, the Torah, studied, but so too are the extensive rabbinic commentaries about it.[59] Much of the power attributed to the alphabet and to language grows out of their importance in the Genesis account of Creation, where God's words brought the world into being. Equally important is the account of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, where amidst lightning and thunder God's voice rang out for all the people to hear. So manifest was the voice that *All of the people saw the sounds* (Exod. 20:15). One myth describes the impact of God's voice as so great that the souls of the people leapt from their bodies and they all dropped dead, and God had to revive them with the dew of life.[60] So too does God's primary Name, YHVH, known as the Tetragrammaton, have limitless power for the one sage in each generation who knows its true pronunciation. Thus the power of the word, both spoken and written, is undisputed in Judaism.

Above all, the Torah itself takes on great mythological significance. It becomes far more than a text, even a text whose author is God. It comes to represent the full spectrum of Jewish teachings over the ages. The words of the Torah are believed to contain all truth, and in the rabbinic view it is even possible to interpret one word of the Torah as equivalent to another, as long as the numerical total of the two words is the same.[61] One myth describes the Torah as being written on the Arm of God.[62] Others personify the Torah as a bride, and Moses as her bridegroom. Still another myth describes the Torah as the wedding contract (*ketubah*) between God and Israel, binding the two together in a complex covenant.

There is even the idea that God is incarnated in the Torah. While most discussions about the Torah present it as God's creation and as the meeting place of human beings and God, the fourteenth century kabbalistic commentator Rabbi Menahem Recanati identified God and the Torah as one and the same thing: "God is incomplete without the Torah. The Torah is not something outside Him, and He is not outside the Torah. Consequently, God is the Torah."[63] This statement is explicitly contradicted by the eighteenth century kabbalist Moshe Hayim Luzzatto: "The Torah is God's, but He is not His Torah. The Torah is not in itself God, not His essence, but rather His wisdom and His will."[64]

Another view is that the words of the Torah are actually the names of God.[65] Therefore, God is called the Torah.[66] From these examples it is clear that the statement in the Mishnah that everything is in the Torah is meant seriously: "Turn it and turn it over again, for everything is in it, and contemplate it, and wax gray and grow old over it, and stir not from it, for you cannot have any better rule than this."[67]

Just as the Torah is personified, so too are there several myths in which the letters of the alphabet come forth, one by one, at God's command, to make their cases as to why they should head the other letters of the alphabet.[68] The honor goes to the letter *aleph*, while the letter *bet* is rewarded by being the first letter of the first word of the Torah, *Bereshit*, "in the beginning." There are also creation myths in which the world is created through the letters of the alphabet.

For readers unfamiliar with rabbinic tradition, one unfamiliar concept may be that of a dual Torah: the Written Torah (*Torah she-bikhtav)* that God dictated to Moses at Mount Sinai, and the Oral Torah (*Torah she-be-al-peh*), the explanations of the hidden meanings of the Written Torah, which God explained to Moses rather than put in writing. This Oral Torah is the basis for the imaginative retellings of biblical accounts so commonly found in the rabbinic texts. The radical changes brought to the original narrative are justified on the grounds that they were handed down as part of the Oral Torah.

Note that the tradition of the Oral Torah and the Written Torah is not the only example of dual Torahs to be found. There is also the concept of the Primordial Torah—the Torah as it exists in Heaven—which is contrasted with the Earthly Torah.[69] This myth makes it clear that these two Torahs are not the same. Also, there is an extensive tradition about the first tablets that Moses received at Mount Sinai, which he later smashed when he saw the people worshipping the golden calf. According to this tradition, the first tablets were much different than the second set that Moses received. While the first tablets were completely positive, the second tablets include negative commandments.[70]

Another way of viewing the concept of two Torahs is to view it as two ways of interpreting the text of the Torah. For the kabbalists, it was important to distinguish between the literal Torah, with its stories, laws, and commandments, and the eternal Torah through which the world was created. This led them to a search for the inner meaning of the Torah. Thus, the kabbalists were focused on discovering the mystical meaning. The *Zohar*, the primary text of kabbalah, is a compendium of these mystical interpretations. As the *Zohar* puts it about the teachings of one rabbi, "For every single word of Torah, he used to expound supernal mysteries."[71]

God's determination to give the gift of the Torah to Israel is described in blunt terms in one midrash: God picks up Mount Sinai and, while holding the mountain over the heads of the people of Israel, asks them whether they are willing to accept the Torah. Under the circumstances, they agree to accept it.[72]

Any discussion of the holy word must consider the importance of prayer. In the rabbinic view, God especially treasures the prayers of Israel and there is even an angel, Sandalphon, who gathers these prayers for God and weaves them into garlands that God wears as a crown of prayers while seated on His Throne of Glory. Faced with a history that resembled a litany of disasters, prayer was often the last recourse for the Jews, for it was believed to be their only hope of restoring God's faith in them.

Even today observant Jews spend a good deal of their day fulfilling the obligations set out in the Torah and subsequent texts, and they direct their minds and hearts several times a day through the medium of formal worship and private prayer. God, for His part, upholds the covenant established with Israel. And in all of these cases the means of communication between the human and the divine take the form of holy words, spoken as prayers or as texts inscribed on parchment[73], words that carry the reverberations of the eternal in every syllable.

6. Myths of the Holy Time

The major Jewish holy days are all closely linked to key Jewish myths. Rosh ha-Shanah is linked to the creation of the world; it is often referred to as "the birthday of the world." Yom Kippur is the day when God seals the Books of Life and Death. Sukkot remembers the Exodus, Passover, recounts the escape from Egyptian bondage, and Shavuot recalls the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. On Simhat Torah, the cycle of reading the Torah comes to an end and begins again, so that Satan cannot accuse the Jews of having finished with the Torah. Above all, the Sabbath, which recurs weekly, is closely associated with the day God rested after six days of Creation. Certainly, from the perspective of the ritual requirements of these holy days, myth and ritual are inextricably linked. By performing these rituals and reenacting these myths, it becomes possible to enter into a holy realm, where one can participate in an active covenant with God and seek out His mercy.

One key to the power of these holy days in the lives of the people is that of sacred time. During the Sabbath, for example, a distinct change takes place in the perception of time. There is a shift from the temporal to the eternal, as the focus changes to contemplation of the divine. In this sacred time a sense of holiness pervades the world, and the meaning of every action is magnified. At the same time, a holy presence can be sensed, which is identified as the Sabbath Queen. The kabbalistic principle of "as above, so below" defines all actions, and every ritual, from lighting the Sabbath candles to reciting the blessings over bread and wine, takes on a greater significance. In entering into sacred time, it can also be said that the people enter a mythic realm where the Sabbath Queen, invoked through prayer and song, can be perceived as an actual presence.

Sacred time is experienced not only during the holy days, but every day, during morning, afternoon, and evening prayers. For every time a *minyan* (traditionally, a quorum of ten men) gathers and the service begins, the congregation stands as petitioners before God, putting their fates in God's hands. The confidence that God is listening to their prayers derives from the unusual covenant between God and the people of Israel. This is not only a legal covenant, but a powerful bond between God and the chosen people. This covenant is the central myth at the heart of Judaism. It serves as a framework for all the other myths that grow out of that covenant, and, in particular, it encompasses all of the Myths of the Holy—the holy word, the holy time, the holy people, and the holy land.

One technique commonly used in the myths of the holy time is allegorical personification. In some of these myths the Torah is personified as a bride. In others the Sabbath is personified as a princess, a bride, or a queen. This grows out of the tradition of the Sabbath Queen, one of the identities of the *Shekhinah*. The first indications of the link between the *Shekhinah* and the Sabbath Queen are found in the Talmud, concerning the Sabbath customs of two rabbis: "Rabbi Haninah robed himself and stood at sunset on the eve of the Sabbath and exclaimed, 'Come and let us go forth to welcome the Sabbath Queen.' And on Sabbath Eve, Rabbi Yannai would don his robes and exclaim, 'Come, O Bride, come, O Bride!'"[74] Thus the myths of the Sabbath as a princess are simply alluding to the tradition of the Sabbath Queen, which, in turn, refers to the *Shekhinah*—God's presence in this world—as a participant of the Sabbath ritual. This holy presence is continually invoked throughout the Sabbath. The hymn *Lekhah Dodi,* composed by Shlomo Alkabetz in the sixteenth century, is recited in the synagogue to welcome the Sabbath Queen, thus initiating the Sabbath. In a more elaborate form of this ritual, *Kabbalat Shabbat*, the congregation goes outside to welcome the Sabbath Queen. This ritual might be seen as a kind of goddess worship, since it invokes a mythic feminine presence. Further, every aspect of the Sabbath fulfills a sacred requirement, even the lovemaking between man and wife on Friday night. Such lovemaking is said to take place under the shelter of the *Shekhinah*. It is required because, as the *Zohar* puts it, "in a place where male and female are not united, God will not take up His dwelling place, for blessing prevails only in a place where male and female are present."[75] And God's dwelling place in this world is, by definition, the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence.

In an interesting variation of this theme of allegorical personification, the Torah also is identified as a *ketubah*, a wedding contract, written for the wedding of God and Israel, where God represents the Groom and Israel, the bride:[76]

> On Friday, the sixth of Sivan, the day appointed by the Lord for the revelation of the Torah to His beloved people, God came forth from Mount Sinai. The Groom, the Lord, the King of Hosts, is betrothed to the bride, the community of Israel, arrayed in beauty. The Bridegroom said to the pious and virtuous maiden, Israel, who had won His favor above all others: "Can there be a bridal canopy without a bride? *As I live . . . you shall don them all like jewels, deck yourself with them like a bride* (Isa. 49:18). Many days will you be Mine and I will be your Redeemer. Be My mate according to the law of Moses and Israel, and I will honor, support, and maintain you, and be your shelter and refuge in everlasting mercy. And I will set aside the life-giving Torah for you, by which you and your children will live in health and tranquility. This Covenant shall be valid and binding forever and ever."
>
> Thus an eternal Covenant, binding forever, has been established between them, and the Bridegroom and the bride have given their oaths to carry it out. May the Bridegroom rejoice with the bride whom He has taken as His lot, and may the bride rejoice with the Husband of her youth.

It is the custom to read this allegorical text in Ladino on the holiday of Shavuot, which commemorates the giving of the Torah. It thus serves as a clear statement that the giving of the Torah was a covenant—here described as a wedding—between God and Israel, and underscores their mutual responsibilities, as in any marriage. God, the Groom, takes responsibility for protecting and supporting His bride, Israel, and Israel, in turn, reaffirms her loyalty and devotion to God. This kind of mutuality sums up the purpose of Jewish ritual, in which the people of Israel reach out to God for sustenance of every kind, spiritual as well as physical, and God responds by providing it for them, expecting, in return, their unceasing devotion. This is the essence of the covenant between God and Israel, which is reaffirmed daily, especially during sacred time.

7. Myths of the Holy People

The patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are known as the Fathers, and their wives, Sarah, Rebecca, Leah and Rachel, as the Mothers. Abraham is addressed as *Avraham Avinu*, "Our Father Abraham." Except for Rachel, all of the Fathers and Mothers are said to be buried in the Cave of Machpelah in the city of Hebron. They are held in the greatest reverence, not only as patriarchs and matriarchs, but as beloved members of one's own family, for since Abraham was deemed the first Jew, all other Jews must be his descendants. Thus the pattern of great patriarchal figures who were looming presences was established, and subsequent figures such as Joseph, Moses, and King David joined this pantheon.

One major way in which the traditions surrounding these holy people became embellished was through the application of the midrashic process, by which gaps in the biblical narrative were filled in through a unique, imaginative method that tried to read between the lines. Using this method, the childhood of Abraham was constructed out of thin air, using the template provided by the story of the childhood of Moses. So too were many details about the journey of Abraham and Isaac to Mount Moriah, where Isaac was to be sacrificed, added to the biblical account.[77] Indeed, the ultimate result of this midrashic method was to substantially enlarge the primary biblical narratives, creating a kind of Book of the Book.

Most remarkable are the kinds of transformations that came to be attributed to some biblical figures. Enoch, who is barely mentioned in the genealogy that goes from Adam to Noah,[78] ascends on high and is transformed into Metatron, chief among the angels. In these commentaries we learn that God, not Abraham, was Isaac's true father, while his mother was "the virgin Sarah."[79] And we also learn that Sarah was not barren, for although she did not give birth to any children before Isaac, she gave birth to souls.[80] Equally astonishing are some of the rabbinic traditions about Jacob. Not only are Jacob's highly questionable acts toward his brother Esau—buying his birthright and stealing the blessing of the firstborn—justified in rabbinic legend, but Jacob himself is raised to virtually divine heights.[81] In some versions Jacob is revealed to be an angel, while in others he is identified as an even higher being. The evidence for these traditions about Enoch and Jacob is substantial, with these figures taking on demiurgic proportions.

In particular, the lives of the patriarchs and their successors were carefully scrutinized, and served as role models for the people. When the people faced extermination from their enemies, they recalled Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah, and they were consoled. When they were sent into exile after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BCE, they identified with Joseph, who was forced into Egyptian exile, and, like him, they vowed to return to the Holy Land at the first opportunity. Certainly the creation of the State of Israel in our time is directly related to the belief that any Jew living outside the Land of Israel is living in *galut*, in exile.

So precious were these patriarchal figures that there was even a great reluctance to accept their deaths as final. Instead, there are myths and folktales to be found that clearly assert that Abraham, Jacob, Moses and King David never died. And, in the sense that each remains a powerful presence, this is true.[82]

8. Myths of the Holy Land

One way to view the sacred nature of the Land of Israel is to see it as a continuation of the Garden of Eden, the very archetype of a sacred place. The garden is described as a place of abundance, where every need of Adam and Eve could be met. Once Adam and Eve were exiled from the garden, its location was lost, and the Holy Land can be seen to assume many of its sacred qualities. In this view, *Eretz Yisrael*, the Land of Israel, is a holy land singled out by God for an abundance of blessings: *It is a land which Yahweh your God looks after, on which Yahweh your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end* (Deut. 11:12).

Some texts speak of a primordial light created on the first day of Creation that has its source in the Holy Land, at the very place where the Temple in Jerusalem was built. While the windows of most buildings are made to let light in, the windows of the Temple were built to let light out, and that light is said to have been the source of the holiness of the land.[83] The Lurianic myth of the Shattering of the Vessels describes how God sent forth vessels of primordial light, which shattered and scattered their sparks everywhere, but especially on the Holy Land.

For the great commentator Nachmanides, known as Ramban, the Holy Land is more of a spiritual place than a real one: "The Land is not like Egypt, which is irrigated by the Nile like a garden. The Land of Israel is a land of hills and valleys almost exclusively intended to absorb the dew of heaven."[84] For even though the physical Land of Israel exists, its essence is a spiritual matter, a life force coming from God. By entering the Land of Israel, a man becomes part of its sacred nature. And all those who walk as little as four cubits in the Land of Israel are assured of a share in the World to Come, while all who are buried in the Land of Israel—it is as if they were buried beneath the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem.[85] Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, one of the most influential hasidic rabbis, asserted that prayers originating in the Land of Israel can bring about miracles and true wonders for the entire world.[86] Indeed, the covenant between God and the people of Israel is manifest in the Land of Israel. As Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of modern Israel, put it, "Love for our Holy Land is the foundation of the Torah."[87]

The city of Jerusalem, a city holy to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, is also portrayed in mythic terms. Not only is there a Jerusalem on earth, but there is a mirror image of Jerusalem in heaven. They are identical, except that the Temple in the heavenly Jerusalem still exists, whereas the one in this world was destroyed. If anyone prays in Jerusalem, it is as though he were praying before the Throne of Glory. For the Gate of Heaven is there, and the door is open for prayer to be heard. It is said that all the trees of Jerusalem were made of cinnamon. When their wood was kindled, their perfume would spread through the Land of Israel. But when the Temple was destroyed, these trees were hidden away. It is also told that because of the fragrance of the incense, brides in Jerusalem did not have to perfume themselves. All of the people of Israel entered Jerusalem three times a year for the festival, yet Jerusalem was never filled. No one ever said, "There is no place for me to lodge in Jerusalem." Not only that, but it is said that no one was ever attacked by demons in Jerusalem. And while the Temple still stood, no one who remained in Jerusalem overnight remained guilty of sin. The presence of the Temple purified their sins.[88]

God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 13:14-17 is often referred to as a kind of deed bestowing the right to all of the Land of Israel on the people of Israel: *"Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west, for I give all the land that you see to you and your offspring forever."* In case there was any doubt about how far Abraham could see, God is said to have raised Abraham up over the Land of Israel and showed him all of the land.[89] The intractable conflict in the Middle East between Israel and the Palestinians derives from this belief in the sanctity of the Holy Land, especially of Jerusalem, shared by Jews and Muslims. This serves as a compelling reminder of the enduring and sometimes destructive power of these myths, which are not always benign.

Not only are the places of the Holy Land, such as Hebron, Beersheva and, of course, Jerusalem, linked with some of the primary episodes of the Bible, but there is a multitude of postbiblical myths and legends associated with them as well. Above all, Jerusalem is the jewel of the Holy Land, viewed as the navel of the world: *Thus said the Lord God: "I set this Jerusalem in the midst of nations, with countries round about her"* (Ezek. 5:5). This idea is restated in the Talmud: "The Holy Land was created first, and then the rest of the world."[90] The Temple that was twice built there and twice destroyed was not only regarded as the center of the Holy Land, but it was believed to have been built on the spot of the Foundation Stone that was regarded as the starting point and center of all Creation.[91] The Western Wall at the Temple Mount, also known as the Wailing Wall, has become the holiest Jewish site in the world. Those who visit there write a petition to God, known as *qvittel*, and put it in the cracks of the Wall. According to tradition, that is a certain method of contacting God. So powerful is this folk belief that many Jewish visitors to Israel leave messages to God in one of the cracks of the Wall.

9. Myths of Exile

The theme of exile makes its first, indelible appearance in Jewish tradition when God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. Ever after, Jewish myth and history are full of examples of those who are uprooted and forced to leave their homes and wander, sometimes for many generations. From the beginning of Genesis, the pattern is clear: after Cain kills his brother, Abel, God turns him into a wanderer and exile, a punishment Cain considers *too great to bear* (Gen. 4:13).[92] Noah and his family are exiled from all of humanity when God brings down a deluge that destroys all other life on earth. The inhabitants of the land of Shinar seek to avoid being scattered, and therefore set out to build a tower, the Tower of Babel, which, in the end, causes God to send them into exile after all. God tells Abraham to leave his home in Haran and set out for the land that God would reveal to him. After stealing his brother's blessing, Jacob goes into exile in the city of Haran in order to escape his brother's vengeance. As for Joseph, he was sold into Egyptian bondage, and taken far away from home. And Moses is separated from his family and his people and raised in exile. Later he is further exiled from the house of Pharaoh.

And, of course, there is the ultimate paradigm of liberation from exile, that of the Exodus. This myth presents in archetypal fashion all stages of the quest to liberate the people Israel from Egyptian bondage, to fashion them as a people through 40 years of wandering, to bestow on them the greatest treasure, God's own teachings, dictated by God to Moses at Mount Sinai, and to lead them back to the Holy Land. This monumental exile thoroughly reshaped the people of Israel and resulted in a sacred text, the Torah, that would sustain the Jewish people for the next 3,000 years.[93]

After the Exodus, the best-known Jewish myth of exile is probably that of the Ten Lost Tribes.[94] The Assyrian conquest of the northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE dispersed the ten tribes who lived there, leaving only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, who constituted the southern Kingdom of Judah. The mystery of the fate of those lost tribes gave birth to a multitude of legends about them, as well as accounts of visitors who claimed to have reached them, including Eldad ha-Dani, Benjamin of Tudela and David Re'uveni. In most of these legends these tribes are described as being exceedingly pious and observant. In some folktales, however, they are described as "little red Jews from the other side of the river Sambatyon." In order to explain why the lost tribes could not rejoin their brethren, they were said to be trapped on the other side of this pious river, which threw up rocks as high as a house six days a week and was therefore impassable, and only rested on the Sabbath. But the pious lost tribes could not cross then either, since no work is permitted on the Sabbath. This myth of the Ten Lost Tribes has given birth to farfetched efforts to identify where they went. Ethiopian Jews identify themselves as descendants of the tribe of Dan, and there are many far-flung, unlikely peoples, including the Japanese, the Celts, and Native Americans, who have been identified as among the lost tribes.

In general, then, exile serves as God's punishment, as clearly stated in *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* in *Zohar Hadash* 23c: "Every time the Jewish people were sent into exile, God set a limit to the exile, and they were always aroused to repentance. But this final exile has no set limit, and everything depends upon repentance." However, beginning in the sixteenth century, the belief arose that the dispersion of the Jewish people had a special purpose other than punishment, to enable them to serve as a guide to humanity.[95] Alternately, the Jewish people were viewed as serving a mystical function in raising up holy sparks that had been scattered around the world, as portrayed in the Lurianic kabbalah.[96] Thus, for the Ari, Rabbi Isaac Luria, the purpose of the many exiles of the Jews was to extricate the imprisoned sparks that were lodged in foreign lands. He believed that by living in Egypt the Israelites took all the holy sparks out of Egypt, defeating the forces of impurity that abounded in the desert. Rabbi Hayim Tirer of Chernovitz describes this process: "When the Jews left Egypt, all the holy sparks of Egypt flocked to them and departed with them." (*Be'er Mayim Hayim, Noah* 162). This mythic interpretation turned a punishment into a blessing, where God depended on His people, Israel, as much as they depended on Him. It clearly demonstrates that the theme of exile can be viewed from two perspectives. *B. Berakhot* 3a describes it as a painful exile: "Alas for the children who have been exiled from their Father's table." But, according to *Exodus Rabbah* 2:4, "It was in the wilderness that Israel received the manna, the quail, Miriam's well, the Torah, the Tabernacle, the *Shekhinah*, priesthood, kingship, and the Clouds of Glory."

The other side of the coin of exile is return, and the theme of return is also exceptionally powerful in Judaism. There is the constant longing to return to the Holy Land. The final words of the Passover Seder, recounting the Exodus, are "Next Year in Jerusalem!"[97] So too is the theme of return the underlying motif in the wide array of messianic myths in Judaism. The arrival of the Messiah, it is believed, will transform all existence, and all Jews will miraculously travel to the Holy Land. This, the initiation of the messianic era, will be the ultimate return.[98]

10. Myths of the Messiah

Myths of exile are naturally linked to myths of redemption, as exile leads a people to dream of redemption. While redemption takes many forms, its primary focus in Judaism is on the transforming role of the Messiah, a divine figure who, it is said, will descend to this world and initiate the End of Days. The longing for the Messiah is a direct result of the hardship and exile within Jewish history. Since the time of the prophet Isaiah, no one idea has obsessed the Jews more than this: When will the coming of the Messiah take place? Every Jew hoped it would be in his lifetime. Some Hasidim kept their staffs and white robes by the door, ready to answer the Messiah's call on the shortest notice. Even today many observant Jews still anxiously await the arrival of the Messiah, which is expected to initiate a heaven on earth, known as the End of Days. Of course, the requirements to be the Messiah are steep, and there are three: raising the dead, restoring the exiles to the Land of Israel, and rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.[99]

What follows the coming of the Messiah might be described as heaven on earth, a new incarnation of the Garden of Eden, making the cycle that started with the expulsion from Eden complete. The first era of history will be over, and a new era will begin. At the same time, the coming of the Messiah will bring about the repair of the rent in heaven that resulted from the separation of God from His Bride. For only the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem, the *Shekhinah's* home in this world, can restore God's Bride to Him, and the rebuilding will not take place until the Messiah comes.[100] Thus the fate of everything hangs on the Messiah, for the messianic era will bring about a cosmic healing both in heaven and on earth.

In this new era, the righteous among the sons and daughters of Israel will receive a heavenly reward that includes not only studying Torah with the Messiah, the patriarchs, and the sages, but even Torah classes taught by God. At the same time, the punishments of the souls of sinners in Gehenna will come to an end, and they too will be brought into Paradise. All this will follow the coming of the Messiah.

The cycle of messianic myths is quite complete. It starts with the creation of the Messiah, and includes the birth of the Messiah, the events that will initiate the End of Days, and accounts of the messianic era that will follow.

It quickly becomes evident that there are two basic concepts of the Messiah: one, a heavenly figure of supernatural origin who makes his home in a heavenly palace; the other, a human Messiah, an exceptionally righteous man who takes on the mantle of the Messiah and initiates the End of Days. In time, these two separate motifs were combined into a single myth in a clever manner: there were said to be two Messiahs, whose fates were linked.[101] One is identified as Messiah the son of Joseph (Messiah ben Joseph) and the other is the heavenly Messiah, Messiah the son of David (Messiah ben David).[102] According to this combined myth, Messiah ben Joseph, the human Messiah, will be a warrior who will go to war against the evil forces of Gog and Magog[103] and die in the process. He will be followed by Messiah ben David, the heavenly Messiah, who will defeat the evil empire and initiate the End of Days. In some versions of this myth, Messiah ben David will prove he is the real Messiah by resurrecting Messiah ben Joseph.[104]

In the myths of the heavenly Messiah, he is described as a supernatural figure living in his own heavenly palace, known as the Bird's Nest, waiting to be called upon to initiate the End of Days.[105] Some versions of this myth emphasize his suffering,[106] while others describe the Messiah as being held captive in heaven or in hell.[107]

All of these variants of the myth have in common the portrayal of a supernatural, heavenly figure who is forced to wait impatiently until the circumstances are such that it becomes possible for him to fulfill his messianic destiny. But the portrayal of the earthly Messiah is quite a bit different. In one famous talmudic version, he is described as a leprous beggar waiting outside the gates of Rome, who takes off and puts on his bandages one at a time, so that he will not be delayed if he is suddenly called.[108] But in general the human Messiah is described as the *Tzaddik ha-Dor*, the greatest sage of his generation, who will step into the role of Messiah if all the circumstances happen to be right. Naturally, there are many failures, due to one mistake or another. These are recounted in a series of myths about why the Messiah has not yet come. There are enough accounts of these failures to fill a book. There are even stories about some rabbis, such as Joseph della Reina, who sought to force the coming of the Messiah.[109]

All sorts of signs and warnings are expected to precede the coming of the Messiah, great upheavals known as the Pangs of the Messiah. Historical turmoil has often been identified with these mythic wars, and has inevitably precipitated messianic expectations. At the time that the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, three rabbis in Mea Sha'arim, the ultra-Orthodox section of Jerusalem, were reported to have dreamed, on the same night, that the coming of the Messiah was imminent. This rumor spread among the entire community, all of whom waited on pins and needles for the footsteps of the Messiah to be heard. This demonstrates that the longing and expectations for the coming of the Messiah are as intense as ever in these communities.

The Jewish mythology concerning the End of Days is just as elaborate as that found in the Book of Revelation, whose portrayal of the Apocalypse is surely drawn from contemporary Jewish eschatology. The messianic era will be heralded by great upheaval and an epic war known as the War of Gog and Magog. Finally, the new era will be announced by the prophet Elijah, blowing a horn from the ram that Abraham sacrificed on Mount Moriah (the other horn was blown at Mount Sinai). The righteous dead will be resurrected, and all the exiles will be gathered into the Holy Land, where the Temple will be supernaturally rebuilt. In heaven, God will be reunited with His Bride, from whom He was separated at the time the Temple was destroyed. At that time the Messiah will address all of Israel, and the blessed days of the Messiah will begin. The messianic hope, with its promise that *He will destroy death forever* (Isa. 25:8), has been fervently longed for since the days of Isaiah. Maimonides codified this hope in his *Thirteen Principles of Faith*, in which the twelfth principle is belief in the coming of the Messiah, which entered the popular domain as the statement, "I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah. No matter how long he may tarry, I will await his coming every day."

What about the belief in the Messiah in the modern era? Does it still have the power to compel widespread belief and expectation? For those who still firmly believe that God dictated the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai, the certainty of the coming of the Messiah is not viewed as myth but as truth, as codified by Maimonides. However, not all Orthodox Jews are equally impassioned about the coming of the Messiah. The Lubavitch Hasidim, in particular, await His coming. Many of them expect their deceased Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneersohn, to return to life and serve as the Messiah.[110]

As for non-Orthodox Jews, who make up the majority of modern Jews, most do not regard the Torah as the literal word of God. This view makes it possible to incorporate modern views into their practice of an ancient religion. Just as it seems unlikely to most of these Jews that the waters of the Red Sea really split apart, or that the sun stood still for Joshua, the coming of the Messiah is no longer expected. Even were the Messiah to arrive, it is highly unlikely that he would be recognized by those who were not expecting him. Instead, this tradition, like many others, has acquired the status of a myth, even if it has not been acknowledged as such.

III. Mythic Parallels

If there is a mythology in Judaism, what model does it follow—that of pagan mythology, where there is a pantheon of gods, usually ruled by a divine pair? Does it follow a dualistic model, where more than one god is involved in ruling the world? Or does it work within the monotheistic model, where there is but a single God who both created the world and rules it? While it might appear at first that only the monotheistic model was relevant, in fact, there is evidence of all three models in Jewish tradition.

That some kind of God or gods exist, most humans have had no doubt. How else could the world have come into being? Thus the primary purpose of Western religion is to answer two elementary questions: "Who created the world?" and "Who rules it?"[111] Among the religions of the ancient Near East, Judaism answered this question by insisting that there is but one God, whose name is YHVH, generally rendered in English as Yahweh. This principle is stated in the Shema, the central proclamation of Jewish belief: *Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One* (Deut. 6:4). That is the essence of Jewish monotheism. The great philosopher Maimonides always upheld monotheistic principles, writing, for example, that "There is one God who created everything and who guides the celestial spheres."[112] In this view, the same God who created the world rules it.

In contrast, some dualistic systems propose the existence of two gods. In Gnosticism, an evil god, known as the demiurge, created and rules this world, and the only hope of salvation comes from a higher, benevolent Deity. While the doctrine of a good god and an evil one is not found in Judaism, there are numerous instances where God shares his ruling powers with other divine figures, such as Metatron, or the one God is described as bearing contradictory qualities of judgment and mercy.[113]

Polytheism, in the form of the Greek, Canaanite, and Egyptian religions, offered multiple gods and a divine pantheon. Here, too, the original gods were usually not the ruling gods: Kronos is the father of the Greek gods, while Zeus is the ruling god; and it is the Canaanite god El, who wrested power from his father Samen (Heaven), who is supposed to be the ruling god, while actually it is Ba'al, El's son, who is the dominant ruler.

These three models—the monotheistic model of the Jews (and later Christians and Muslims), the dualistic model of the Gnostics, and the pagan model of the Greeks and Canaanites—would seem mutually exclusive. For example, we would not expect to find myths about a dualistic divinity in Judaism, since there is only one God. But we do. Despite the inviolable principle of monotheism, there are many Jewish texts that have strongly gnostic characteristics and portray a second divine figure who plays an active role in the ruling of the world. Gershom Scholem identified these texts as examples of Jewish Gnosticism.[114]

At first it may be difficult to see how monotheism can include a second divine figure. By definition, monotheism is an assertion that there is only one God. Yet there are two models of monotheism in Judaism: one in which there is one god and no other divine figures higher than the rank of angels, and a second model, in which other divine figures are acknowledged to exist, but they are subject to God, who is the king of the gods. This second type of monotheism is known as "monolatry," where worship of only one God/god is allowed, but the existence of other gods is acknowledged, at least tacitly.[115] In Judaism, it is defined as a stage in the religion of ancient Israel when the existence of gods other than Yahweh was admitted, but their worship was strictly forbidden.[116] That there was worship of some forbidden gods by the ancient Israelites has been demonstrated by archaeological discoveries, as well as by the tirades of the biblical prophets against such worship, such as the women weeping over Tammuz (Ezek. 8:14), or the people defending their worshipping the Queen of Heaven (Jer. 44:17-19). There is also evidence of the awareness of other gods in several biblical verses, such as *Who is like You among the gods* (*ba-elim*), *O Lord?* (Exod. 15:11).[117] Also, in Psalm 82, *God stands in the divine assembly; among the divine beings* (*Elohim*) *He pronounces judgment* (Ps. 82:1).

The concept of monolatry goes a long way toward explaining the parallel development of folk religion in Judaism beyond the official kind, especially in the popular culture. Although monolatry refers to the religion of ancient Israel, that does not mean that the kind of folk religion indicated by monolatry disappeared after the biblical period. Instead, it continued to evolve in its own way, far more open to mythological motifs than rabbinic Judaism.[118] By the time of the rabbinic period, the pagan religions against which the official religion was polemicizing no longer existed. Therefore the rabbis permitted these mythological motifs from the folk religion, which had elements of the ancient Near Eastern mythologies, to surface in a form that was then acceptable within the confines of rabbinic thought. This suggests that a great many rabbinic myths, as found in the midrashim, are not new creations of the rabbis, as might appear to be the case.[119] Rather, they are simply the writing down of an oral tradition that was kept alive by the people, when there was no need to suppress it any longer.

A close examination of the Jewish mythic tradition reveals that its origins are found in Near Eastern mythology. Umberto Cassuto says of these mythic parallels: "These Israelite myths of the Bible are derived from similar myths current among the neighboring peoples concerning the war waged by one of the great gods against the deity of the sea. The famous Babylonian story about the war of Marduk against Tiamat is but one example of an entire series of similar narratives. Among the Israelites ... the traditional material that was current in the lands of the East was given by Israel an aspect more in accord with their ethos, to wit, the aspect of the revolt by the sea against his Creator."[120]

This and other Near Eastern mythologies clearly fueled the continuing evolution of Jewish myth, which incorporated and integrated the earlier mythology. New myths arose to fill the void created by the loss of the older pagan ones. These new myths involve not only God, but also God's Bride, the *Shekhinah*,[121] and like the Greek myths of Zeus and Hera, they sometimes converge and sometimes diverge and often give birth to additional myths. So too are there other mythical figures, including that of the Messiah, along with angels, demons, spirits, and fabulous creatures of the air, earth, and sea, such as the Ziz, a giant mythical bird, Behemoth, a giant land animal, and Leviathan, a monstrous sea creature.

There are many often intriguing parallels to be found between Jewish myth and that of the Greeks and Canaanites. Many of these parallels concern the nature of God. Just as Zeus and El are warrior gods, so too is God a warrior, as in the verse *Yahweh is a man of war* (Exod. 15:3), although, of course, this is only one aspect of God. In some sources God is said to have smitten the Egyptians with His finger, while in others God is described as a mighty warrior, carrying a fiery bow, with a sword of lightning, traveling through the heavens in a chariot. Confirming the image of God as a great warrior, *Exodus Rabbah* 5:14 states that God's bow was fire, His arms flame, His spear a torch, the clouds His shield, and His sword lightning. The parallels to Zeus and the warrior gods of the Near East are clear:

> Yahweh is a mighty warrior, who defeated Pharaoh at the Red Sea. It is said that God smote them with His finger, as it is said, *And the magicians said to Pharaoh, "This is the finger of God"* (Exod. 8:15).
>
> Others say that God appeared to Pharaoh as a mighty warrior, carrying a fiery bow, with a sword of lightning, traveling through the heavens in a chariot. When Pharaoh shot arrows at Israel, God shot fiery arrows back. When Pharaoh's army cast rocks, God brought hail. And when Pharaoh shot fiery arrows from a catapult, God deluged them with burning coals. Finally Pharaoh exhausted his entire armory. Then God took a cherub from His Throne of Glory and rode upon it, waging war against

> Pharaoh and Egypt, as it is said, *He mounted a cherub and flew* (Ps. 18:11). Leaping from one wing to another, God taunted Pharaoh, "O evil one, do you have a cherub? Can you do this?"
>
> When the angels saw that God was waging war against the Egyptians on the sea, they came to His aid. Some came carrying swords and others carrying bows or lances. God said to them, "I do not need your aid, for when I go out to battle, I go alone." That is why it is said that *Yahweh is a man of war* (Exod. 15:3).[122]

One might wonder where this extravagant description of God the Warrior comes from, but most of the central images can be traced back to several biblical verses. The foremost is *Yahweh is a man of war*. And the intensely mythic description of God riding upon a cherub is found in the verse *He mounted a cherub and flew.* The portrayal of God traveling through heavens in a chariot, so similar to that of Apollo, may well be a remnant of sun worship in Judaism.[123] A parallel kind of sun worship can also be seen in the myths surrounding Enoch's transformation into Metatron, as Metatron is described in fiery imagery, and Metatron himself is identified as a ruling divinity. As for God's Chariot, known as the *Merkavah*, it is based on the vision of Ezekiel (Ezek. 1:1-28). God is said to have taken the cherub from between the wheels of this chariot.

Another important parallel concerns a conflict of cosmic importance between God and His Bride, as described in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic sources. It resembles the disputes between Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology, where, for example, Hera, angered by Zeus's infidelities, led a conspiracy in which Zeus was bound with leather thongs as he slept. In revenge, Zeus hung Hera from the sky with a golden bracelet on each of her wrists, and with an anvil fastened to each of her ankles.[124] While the conflict between God and His Bride never reached this kind of acrimony, God and the *Shekhinah* are still described in the *Zohar* as arguing over the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.[125] This confrontation results in God's Bride separating from Him, choosing to go into exile with Her children, Israel. It is this separation, more than anything else, that announces the arrival of the *Shekhinah*'s mythic independence, in which the *Shekhinah* functions more as an independent mythic being than as the feminine aspect of God. Here, however, God does not seek revenge as does Zeus. Instead, he mourns over His losses, in a surprising series of myths about God's suffering.[126]

In addition, there are remarkable parallels to the crucial myths of Creation, the Fall, and the Flood. There are Greek creation myths similar to the Genesis account of Creation found in Hesiod's *Theogony*,[127] in which there is a union between darkness and chaos. What is missing in these myths is God's role in combining these elements to create the world.

In two cases, there appear to be direct borrowing from Greek myth. One Jewish myth portrays Joshua, the successor of Moses, as Oedipus, while another describes a Jewish Icarus.[128]

Likewise, the biblical account of Eve eating the forbidden fruit and its myriad consequences has striking parallels to the story of Pandora, who set free the winged Evils, the misfortunes that plague mankind: Old Age, Labor, Sickness, Insanity, Vice, and Passion.[129] Both hearken back to a primordial sin, and both provide a myth of the origin of evil. Yet both myths include a forward-looking hope for redemption. In Pandora's case, Hope is the last to come out of the box.[130] And in the case of Eve there is hope for the Messiah.

An even closer parallel to the story of Pandora is found in *Genesis Rabbah* 19:10: "A woman came to the wife of a snake-charmer to borrow vinegar. 'How does your husband treat you?' she asked the wife. 'He treats me very well,' the woman answered, 'but he does not permit me to approach this cask, which is full of serpents.' The visiting woman said, 'Surely your husband is deceiving you and the cask is full of finery he plans to give to another woman.' Hearing this, the wife inserted her hand into the cask, and the serpents began biting her. When her husband came home, he heard her crying out in pain. 'Have you touched that cask?' he demanded to know. Thus, God said to Adam and Eve, *Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?*" (Gen. 3:11).

Above all, many parallels exist to the biblical account of the Flood. One Mesopotamian Flood myth is found in the Epic of Atrahasis, who, like Noah, is the survivor of the great Flood. The god Ea-Enki advises Atrahasis to build an ark. Ea-Enki says: "Place a roof over the barge, cover it as the heavens cover the earth. Do not let the sun see inside. Enclose it completely. Make the joints strong. Caulk the timbers with pitch."[131] This is very much like the directions God gives to Noah to build the ark.[132] So too does Atrahasis fill the ark with animals.

Another Flood myth, an even closer parallel, is found in the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh*, in which Utnapishtim is parallel to Noah. Ea, the divine patron of fresh water, warns Utnapishtim about the coming Flood and tells him to build an ark and take specimens of every living thing on board. In this way Utnapishtim and his wife are the lone human survivors of a Flood brought on by the divine assembly that was intended to destroy every other mortal.

Another great Flood myth, this one Greek, is recounted in the Latin poet Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It is remarkably similar to the biblical account of Noah, and even includes a dove. Here Zeus floods the earth, intending to wipe out the entire race of man. But Deucalion, King of Phthia, is warned by his father, Prometheus, and builds an ark. All the world is flooded, and all mortal creatures are lost except for Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha. Deucalion sends out a dove on an exploratory flight, and is reassured by it.[133]

These Flood narratives with their distinct parallels strongly suggest that all of them—including the biblical narrative of the Flood—are based on the same ancient Mesopotamian tradition from the third millennium BCE.

Parallels also exist between the Jewish heavenly pantheon and the Greek. The Jewish pantheon is just as extensive, but with a host of angels playing roles equivalent to those of the Greek gods. Thus, instead of Poseidon, there is the angel Rahab, who likewise rules the sea. Or just as Hermes is the divine messenger, so this role in Jewish mythology is played by the angel Raziel, who delivers a book of secrets to Adam. And the angel Metatron, who is described in terms of the sun, plays a role similar to that of Helios, the Greek God of the sun.

There are also striking parallels involving Prometheus. Just as Prometheus is said to have formed man out of clay and water, so the angel Michael (or, some say, Gabriel) is said, in some sources, to have formed the body of Adam. And while it is widely known that Prometheus brought fire from heaven and gave it to humankind,[134] it is far less known that in some Jewish myths Adam plays a very Promethean role, bringing down both light and fire from heaven for the sake of humankind.[135]

Some of the most interesting parallels are those between Jewish and Christian sources. In Christianity, God is said to have incarnated His son, Jesus, as a human; thus the essence of the Christian myth is that a divine figure became a human being. This follows the pattern of Jewish myth where it is angels who are incarnated as human. Genesis 6 describes how the Sons of God cohabited with the daughters of men, begetting giants. Rabbinic commentaries identify the Sons of God as two angels, Shemhazai and Azazel, who descended from on high, took on human form, and sought out human women for lovers.[136] These angels revealed all kinds of heavenly secrets, including magical spells, and taught women the arts of seduction. In addition, the prophet Elijah, who was taken into heaven in a fiery chariot, is an angel who often appears in human form on earth.[137]

Another variant of this divine-to-human pattern concerns how the talmudic sage Rabbi Ishmael was conceived. It is said that Rabbi Ishmael's mother was so pious that God sent the angel Gabriel to take the form of her husband and to meet her at the *mikveh*, the ritual bath, and to conceive a child with her. She, of course, had no idea that it was a disguised angel and not her husband who met her. She conceived that day, and when Rabbi Ishmael was born, he was said to have been as beautiful as an angel.[138] This is the same theme of human women having intercourse with an angel, but here it is with God's approval, while the angels Shemhazai and Azazel broke their promise to God that they would not fall into sinful ways.

So too are there myths in which the patriarch Jacob is identified as an angel who came down to earth in human form. We can now see that this myth, so strange at first, is part of an explicit pattern in Jewish mythology, that of a divine figure becoming human. Sometimes these echoes even become overt. The first century philosopher, Philo, proposed that it was God who begat Isaac, not Abraham, although God made sure that Isaac closely resembled Abraham. Philo even says that this child was born to the "virgin" Sarah. Here we find a direct parallel to later Christian lore.[139] Indeed, there are an extensive number of parallels with Hellenistic and Canaanite mythology. What this indicates is that Jewish mythology was not isolated from the other mythologies. It was resonant with the motifs that were the psychic currency of their neighboring cultures.

Christian tradition is built upon Jewish sources, especially on the myths of heaven and on the messianic tradition. In Christian theology, Jesus is said to have fulfilled the long-awaited messianic prophecies stated in Isaiah and elsewhere. Those who recognized Jesus as the Messiah became Christians. Those who did not remained Jews, still awaiting the Messiah.

While the Christian dependence on Jewish tradition is irrefutable, there are also Jewish myths that hark back to Christianity. In the Christian interpretation of the binding of Isaac, a direct link is made between Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac, and God's willingness to sacrifice His son, Jesus. Abraham replied to Isaac's question about what they would sacrifice by saying, *God Himself will provide the lamb, my son* (Gen. 22:8). The Christian reading of this verse is that God will be making the sacrifice of his son, Jesus, who is identified as the lamb. Thus the linkage between Isaac and Jesus was well-established in Christian texts when we find a midrashic tradition that Abraham *did* slay Isaac, and that Isaac's soul ascended on high. He studied in the heavenly academy of Shem and Eber, and after three years his soul descended and he was resurrected. The parallel to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus is clear—the major difference is that of the three days of Jesus and the three years of Isaac. This, then, is a likely example of a Christian-influenced Jewish myth.[140]

So too is the Islamic tradition based on the Jewish one. Abraham is the Muslim as well as the Jewish patriarch, and while the *Koran* does not specify which son of Abraham climbed Mount Moriah with him, later Muslim exegesis identified him as Ishmael.[141] There are also Islamic myths to be found about Adam as well as Abraham, and, of course, about Ishmael, Abraham's son by Hagar.

The most prominent mythological parallels between Jews and Muslims are those concerning Jerusalem. The Temple Mount, where the Dome of the Rock was built, is sacred to both religions. Both identify the Temple Mount as Beth El, the place where Jacob had his dream of angels ascending and descending. In the Muslim version, God identifies Himself to Jacob as "The God of your fathers, Abraham, Ishmael, and Isaac." Both believe that the terrestrial Temple was placed exactly below the celestial Temple, and that although the earthly Temple has been destroyed, the celestial Temple still remains. Both people believe that a ram's horn will be blown in Jerusalem on Judgment Day and both expect the resurrection of the dead to take place there.[142] From these examples it is clear that the Jewish and Muslim traditions about Jerusalem have a great many parallels, and in many cases are virtually identical.

These are just a few of the many parallels to Greek, Christian, and Near Eastern myths that are found in Jewish sources. These parallels demonstrate that Jewish tradition did not exist in a vacuum, but that the kinds of motifs found in other traditions are mirrored, sometimes transformed, in Jewish lore. Thus Jewish mythology was not separate from the other surrounding mythologies, but very much a part of the existing tradition.

IV. Myth and Ritual in Judaism

According to the mythologist Walter F. Otto, "Myth demands ritual."[143] This is the central premise of the Myth and Ritual school of mythological studies. The intimate relationship between myth and ritual in Judaism confirms this approach. Many of the rituals of Judaism, such as those of the Sabbath or the saying of the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, have their basis in some elemental myth, such as the creation of the world or the fate of the soul after death. Thus Judaism can be said to possess both of the primary elements of a mythic system: myth and ritual.

As in other traditions, Jewish myth and ritual reaffirm and validate each other, for as long as they remain linked, the ritual keeps the myth alive. But as soon as the ritual falls into disuse, the myth loses its primary purpose: linking the past and the present through the acting out of the ritual. Without the ritual, the myth is no more than a story, albeit a powerful and compelling one.

It is important to remind ourselves that what we call a myth was, or still is, someone else's truth. Among observant Jews, most of the texts identified as myths in this book still constitute divine truths from the Written Torah or the Oral Torah—that is, truths that originated with God. Likewise, for observant Jews, the stories that accompany Jewish rituals have retained the status of absolute truth. Indeed, the key test in our time[144] for whether one holds Orthodox views is whether one believes that God dictated the Torah to Moses at Mount Sinai. Without this belief, the seal of truth that binds the Torah and makes every word fraught with infinite meaning no longer exists. Thus, for believers, the ultimate truth of the Torah must be beyond any doubt. This is the essential condition for a mythic system to flourish.

However, even for those Jews in our time who regard the stories of the Torah more as myths than as truths, the stories retain much of their inherent power. Like all myths, they are not arbitrary creations, but projections from the deepest levels of the Self. From this perspective, these stories can be read as psychic maps, as archetypes of the collective Jewish unconscious. Further, they are an essential part of a rich heritage that derives from an ancient past, and even those Jews who do not believe in the divine origin of the Torah may well regard themselves as descendants of Abraham. They also are likely to observe some of the most prominent Jewish rituals, such as participating in a Seder on Passover, celebrating a Jewish wedding, or, above all, observing the Sabbath.

The Sabbath is openly intended to recall the seventh day of Creation, when God rested, as stated in Genesis 2:3: *And God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it; because that day He rested from all His work which God in creating had made.* It is interesting to note that the practice of observing a day of rest on the Sabbath appears to have existed prior to the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai. The account of the manna found in Exodus 16:25-30 includes an injunction against collecting manna on the Sabbath; nor did the manna fall on that day. This indicates that the Sabbath was already recognized as a holy day, as God states, *"See that Yahweh has given you the Sabbath"* (Exod. 16:29).[145] So too was it identified as a day of rest.

To emphasize the parallels between God's day of rest and the human day of rest, all forms of work are forbidden on the Sabbath, as stated in Exodus 20:10: *But the seventh day is a sabbath of the Lord your God: you shall not do any work*. The laws of the Sabbath include dozens of kinds of activities that are defined as work and therefore forbidden, such as lighting a fire, carrying of any kind, or writing, as well as any exchange of money.[146] The point of this blanket prohibition against work on the Sabbath is to remind the people at every turn that they, like their Creator, are observing a day of rest. Thus there is a remarkable mutuality in the way that the myth of God's day of rest recalls the ritual of the Sabbath and the Sabbath ritual recalls the creation myth.

Many of the Sabbath rituals have special meaning. It is traditional to have two challahs on the Sabbath. The two challahs (braided loaves of bread) represent the Israelites in the wilderness who collected manna on Friday for two days, for no gathering of the manna was permitted on the Sabbath. Another good example of the intimate link between myth and ritual is the reason given for the custom of eating fish on the Sabbath. This fish, it is said, is intended to remind us of the messianic banquet that awaits the righteous in the World to Come, when they will feast off of the great fish Leviathan and drink messianic wine saved since the six days of Creation. Once again the Sabbath and Creation are directly linked, and this reaffirms the purpose of the Sabbath ritual, which is to remind us of God's six days of Creation and His subsequent day of rest. The creation of the world is God's greatest miracle, and remembering this reinforces the fact that we would not even exist without God, nor can we continue to exist without Him. Ultimately, then, the purpose of this Sabbath ritual is to give honor to God and to God's creation.

Just as the Sabbath is welcomed on Friday night, so its departure is signaled at the end of the Sabbath with *Havdalah,* a closing ceremony that separates the Sabbath and the days of the week that follow. Here prayers are recited and songs sung, and certain ritual items are used: a braided candle, spices, and wine. These ceremonies are the ritual manifestation of the arrival and departure of the Sabbath. However, there is also a powerful mythical dimension to these rituals, for the arrival of the Sabbath brings with it two important spiritual presences, the Sabbath Queen and the *neshamah yeterah*, a second soul. The Sabbath Queen is one of the personas of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence, who is the Bride of God. The *neshamah yeterah* is a holy spirit that inhabits a person for the duration of the Sabbath. Both the Sabbath Queen and the second soul are said to take their leave when the *Havdalah* ceremony that concludes the Sabbath is performed. The ritual of smelling the spices that is part of *Havdalah* is supposed to revive a person who has just lost his or her extra soul. *Havdalah* is supposed to be performed when three stars appear in the night sky, but many Hasidim were reluctant to end the Sabbath, and they would delay the ceremony as long as possible, until well after midnight. There was even one Hasidic sect that put off saying *Havdalah* until the middle of the week, and then began at once to prepare for the next Sabbath.

Thus the Sabbath can be seen as a perfect melding of myth and ritual, which, since it recurs on a weekly basis, serves as a religious foundation for those who observe it. It is truly as the essayist Ahad Ha'am said, "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath, the Sabbath has kept Israel." The myth, which comes first, is the Genesis account of the six days of Creation, and how on the seventh day God rested. All of the elaborate traditions of the Sabbath, including the ritual meal using challah and wine, the Sabbath songs, and refraining from any kind of work, serve to remind us that the Sabbath is a special day, when the people of Israel recall God's great work of Creation, as well as the day God rested. The people act out the rituals that keep the myth alive, and the myth is remembered and reenacted, and the entire cycle reexperienced.

Another important ritual in the Jewish life cycle is the saying of Kaddish, the prayer for the dead. This prayer is recited daily for 11 months for a deceased mother or father (*B. RH* 17a). Mourners stand to recite the prayer at the end of each prayer service, while facing Jerusalem. The Kaddish is also recited at the burial service, and whenever family members visit a grave.

Although the Kaddish is mentioned as one of the synagogue prayers in the Talmud, the practice of mourners reciting the Kaddish seems to go back to the thirteenth century. Over time, the Kaddish has become inextricably linked to a constellation of myths about the fate of the soul after death. For the Kaddish is not only a remembrance of the dead, but also a theurgic invocation, calling upon God to protect the soul of the one who has died during the time that the soul spends in Gehenna. It was the widespread Jewish belief that only a few pure souls went directly to Paradise after death. Acknowledging that everyone has his or her share of sins, it was believed that the majority of those who died went to Gehenna, where they were punished by avenging angels for up to one year. These punishments are intended to serve as a purifying process, and they are generally identical to those associated with the Christian concept of hell. Sinners are struck with flaming lashes or hung by their offending organ. But then—in contrast to the Christian view of hell—they are released from Gehenna and permitted to make a slow ascent into Paradise. This belief is explicitly stated in the Midrash: "The son's reciting of the Kaddish raises the soul of the parent from purgatory to paradise."[147]

It is in this context that the Kaddish must be understood as a theurgic practice, an action that brings about divine intercession, here protecting the soul of the father or mother from the punishments of Gehenna. The prayer serves as a kind of amulet—holding back the forces of vengeance in the same way that an amulet protects against the Evil Eye. This spiritual protection is required for up to a year, the maximum time a soul spends in Gehenna. However, the Kaddish is recited only for eleven months, out of respect for the deceased, on the assumption that one's own parents were not so evil as to require the full twelve months of purification. Note that saying the Kaddish thus gives a compelling reason for mourners to be present for prayers. Indeed, the fate of a beloved parent's soul hangs in the balance, and the ritual of saying the Kaddish and the myth of the fate of the soul after death were inextricably linked.

Another outstanding example of a theurgic ritual is the ceremony known as *Tashlikh,* dating from the fourteenth century, which takes place during the afternoon of the first day of Rosh ha-Shanah. It is customary to go to the banks of a river, or any body of water, shaking the pockets of one's garments into the water as a symbolic way of getting rid of one's sins. Not only does *Tashlikh* serve as a symbolic purgation, but it implies that fulfilling the ritual will indeed serve to purify one's soul and free one of sin. As is the case with many Jewish rituals, however, there are multiple interpretations of what it means. Some interpret *Tashlikh* as a rite of transferring the sins to the fish, while others view it as a ritual of moral purification. Still others claim that the custom was created as a magical ceremony to placate the water demons.[148] While it is clear that *Tashlikh* presently plays a role of purification related to the larger observance of Rosh ha-Shanah, the implication that *Tashlikh* is also intended to placate demons shows that Jewish concerns during this time of judgment include the forces of evil.

Another example of a Rosh ha-Shanah ritual with a mythic purpose is the sounding of the shofar. The ram's horn is blown on Rosh ha-Shanah (when all Jews are required to be present to hear it), in a strictly prescribed series of short and long blasts. There are many reasons given for this custom. One of the most fascinating of these asserts that the sounding of the shofar causes God to move from His Throne of Justice (where His judgments are harsh) to His Throne of Mercy (where His judgments are merciful).[149] This interpretation makes the shofar blowing on Rosh ha-Shanah a prime example of theurgy, since it is the ritual act itself that is said to make God render favorable judgment rather than any prayer or petition. Another explanation of this ritual is that God made up a secret language, that of the ram's horn, which is only understood by Him, so that the Accuser should not know the pleas of His children.[150] Identifying these blasts as a secret language is an acknowledgment that their meaning is unknown, except to God.