Thinking Spirituality Anew: Shekhina, *or the Ethics of Presence*

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This inquiry focuses on the concept of *shekhina* as a potential basis for a feminist theology. I will delve into the role it might play in a Jewish spirituality and explore the paradoxical representation of a suffering God that it entails. In approaching this topic, I considered introductory questions such as, "What form might a Jewish spirituality take?" "How should we live our Jewish spiritual lives?" and, and perhaps more importantly, "How are we to embody and enact a Jewish spirituality in our daily lives?" Then I realized I should start from the very beginning and ask, "Is there such thing as a Jewish spirituality?" For it is this question that has led me to define my personal journey through Jewish spirituality in relation to what I will define as an ethics of interdependence, care, and vulnerability.

My research began with the observation that, in many circles, the notion of spirituality, and specifically what is misrepresented as the recent invention of a Jewish spirituality, still arouses a certain suspicion. While it is based on flawed premises, we need to understand where this suspicion comes from. I must confess that, as a child, I associated spirituality with pictures of meek hippies, reveries of distant ashrams, or, at worst, ruthless gurus trafficking in dreams and taking advantage of the yearning of good souls for a more meaningful world. On a more conceptual level, spirituality was associated in my mind with a hermetic life of voluntary seclusion, turned towards the contemplation of the essence of Being. In keeping with dictionary definitions that describe the realm of the spiritual as immaterial and even antagonistic to the body and the physical world, I equated spirituality with a disembodied life, or at least with the aspiration for an otherworldliness that I both admired and dreaded — perhaps

because it seemed unattainable, but probably because I resist a spirituality that seeks to annihilate or overcome the material and the embodied.

This brings me back to the subject that I would like to address here, namely, that of the translation of a representation of Hashem (a spirituality of God) action. Therefore, I am trying to define a new form of spirituality that can be described as the humble quest for what exceeds us, for an Otherness that is never fully knowable and therefore cannot be encompassed by the human subject. I define Otherness in keeping with the philosophical tradition of French Jewish thinker Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), according to whom the encounter with Otherness, either in the form of God or of a specific human being, implies that the Other should not be reduced to or absorbed by the self. The Other must remain irrevocably different, separated, for self and Other to maintain their discrete identities. Self and Other, according to this philosophical tradition, only exist in relationship. They emerge through the tension and longing for one another that they maintain through the balancing of separateness and relatedness. In this theoretical framework, I define spirituality as a yearning for the infinite Otherness of God.

It is important to note that spirituality, so defined, should not lead to contemplation and stasis alone. It must involve the passionate commitment of both body and soul as we encounter the face of God through individual Others, the human beings who surround us and in whose faces our tradition encourages us to identify a *tselem elokim*. It is also my assumption that a disembodied spirituality would not only be a futile endeavor but would prove dangerous for the self, at risk of being negated in its embodied, material presence. It would also be dangerous for the *Other*, who would face the risk of being ignored in the subject's process of approaching God by aspiring to an ethereal reality and moving further from the world. Indeed, such a movement would disregard creation and its creatures. In other words, spirituality defines what we aspire to become through this quest for Hashem, the Other. Spirituality expresses our endeavor to be ourselves *b'tselem elokim*, not descriptively but *prescriptively*, as a project and endless dynamic.

In order to enquire into this active, mimetic, and embodied spirituality, we should delve deeper into the sparks of wisdom that hint at the myriad facets of Hashem, notably through the countless names and attributes of God; these sparks of divine presence may shape our vision of the created world and help shape our relation to Otherness — both that of God and that of Others. How can our representation of Hashem influence our actions? How does this

conception, both intimate and rooted in a shared tradition, define our responsibility towards Others as we emulate some of its defining traits?

In order to translate our spirituality to an ethics nourished and constructed by text study, allowing us to develop an intimate relationship with Hashem, we must overcome a number of objections. Since I posit that *shekhina* may serve as the foundation for a feminist theology, I should note one of the obstacles that could hinder such relationship: the Torah, in the broadest possible sense, often speaks the "language of men." In this context, I allude not only to anthropomorphism, in the tradition of the Rambam and his *Moreh Nevukhim*, but to what might be termed "andromorphism," literally "male form." The effort to conceptualize the divine has often taken the form of an implicit or explicit masculinization of the figure of Hashem — as Lord, Father, King or Lord of Hosts (*Hashem tsevaot*). This may have corresponded to the spiritual needs of the people who addressed God — for many people this imagery is still relevant today. But I, for one, have always struggled with the military connotations of *Hashem tsevaot* or *ish milchamah*. Yet it is mostly through these male metaphorical figures that Hashem has been traditionally described.

In light of this fact, I would like to argue that the predominance of masculine images or representations of God may sometimes make it harder for female-identifying Jews to relate to Hashem through the mode of *imitatio dei*. Furthermore, given the evolution of the concept of masculinity over time, it may also be hard for some male Jews to relate to God as warrior and conqueror. And while one obvious objection to the argument of failed identification is that, at a philosophical and conceptual level, it is taken for granted that Hashem is altogether beyond the categories or gender and sex, we still need to account for the many masculine designations that exist. They more or less consciously shape our daily understanding of our shared Jewish tradition. Moreover, they emanated from a context where the spiritual needs of Jewish men were primarily addressed, even while Jewish women may also have reacted positively to and engaged with what they saw as the default representation of supreme. This may have become less relevant in our daily lives for both male and female Jews, even though these images undoubtedly retain some significance as vessels through which God can be conceived as a source of awe.

The promotion of the sexless and genderless "God of the philosophers" in the Maimonidean rationalistic tradition may not be a satisfactory solution to the problem either. Indeed, it seems to me that electing the *via negativa* in the tradition of the Rambam (as expounded notably in the *Moreh Nevukhim*);

enhancing the concept of an absent, transcendental God above all speculation; and resisting any attempt at knowing God implies a loss in terms of the relation between Hashem and the individual Jew. It simply does not give the pious Jew anything to think about or relate to since that God is infinitely Other. In other words, one cannot emulate what is infinitely Other: in such a case, there is nothing to grasp or even begin to describe. To emulate is to say that something could be imitated, but here nothing can be identified as potentially mine because nothing lends itself to conceptualization or categorization. I cannot begin to name attributes without perverting the Otherness of the Other.

Therefore, while this representation of God as beyond representation is philosophically cogent, it may leave one spiritually frustrated, at a loss to discover whom we should praise, thank and implore. In other words, the transcendent "God of the philosophers" leaves no room for *imitatio dei*, nor for the imagining or refashioning of the relationship between creator and creation that may become the foundation of an interpersonal ethics. It may elicit awe but never love.

This leaves us in a double bind. While I cannot identify with a purely transcendental God, I also struggle to consider what my relation to *Hashem tsevaot* or *ish milchamah* could be. I should note that this inquiry encompasses not only the problem of how Jewish women relate to specific facets of Hashem's anthropomorphic representation but that of more subjective forms of relation. For instance, I find it more uplifting to think of God as father, mother (*av harachaman* as "the maternal Father," drawing on *rechem*, "womb") or ruler than to imagine God as warrior. That is because I feel disconnected from warfare's violent implications. As some Jewish feminist thinkers argue, we may have to invent new representations rather than using any pre-existing ones. Tamar Ross's *Expanding the Palace of Torah* brilliantly retraces the history of twentieth-century Jewish feminism and refers to these endeavors, to which she has many a sound objection.[1] I agree with Ross' objections. We do not have to reinvent an entire theology. There is room in our texts for more relatable images of God that may lend themselves to *imitatio dei* for both women and men if we just look closely enough. I also think that there is more to our tradition than meets the eye, which is probably the phrase that sums up my choice

1. Ross, Tamar. 2004. *Expanding the Palace of Torah: Orthodoxy and Feminism* (Brandeis University Press).

to identify as Orthodox even when I struggle daily with so many aspects of traditional Judaism.

In particular, one facet of Hashem that our textual tradition expresses is that of care, vulnerability, and compassion (in the Latin sense of *cum-patior*, i.e. to *suffer with*). This is what the figure of the *shekhina* has come to encapsulate in later Kabbalistic and Hasidic traditions that draw on the rabbinic descriptions of *shekhina*. The *shekhina* can be described as the immanent presence of God within the world, and perhaps as the "feminine" face or side of Hashem[2] in a conceptual framework where "male" and "female" refer to abstract constructs rather than to fixed biological categories or essentialist behavioral prisms.[3] More particularly, the feminine in this context is regarded in relation to its Other, the masculine, often in a binary system of oppositions. For instance, the representation of a compassionate God is not limited to the feminized avatar of the *shekhina* even though it is one of the recurrent models or images through which this representation is channeled. That said, the feminine grammatical form of the noun *shekhina*, as well as its later Kabbalistic and neo-Kabbalistic direct personification as a female entity yearning to be reunited to her masculine divine half, has cemented *shekhina* in the minds of many as a feminine facet of God. This feminine assignment is less clear in the Gemara, however, which does not explore what it would mean to say that the *shekhina* is a feminine emanation of God.

In the texts below, what characterizes the *shekhina* and its worldly manifestation is the ability to suffer passively with human beings, to accompany the Jews in their earthly wanderings, and to affirm presence in ways that are spiritually meaningful. In fact, the *shekhina* is a spiritual model that can enable us to think of the relationship between God and God's people. It asserts that God and God's creations cannot exist or maintain their identities outside of this relationship but only in a state of connectedness and interdependence. This seems to challenge most of our rationalistic assumptions about the autonomy and self-sufficiency of God or of the sovereign subject. Questioning

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2. The form of the word itself is feminine, even though the verb that follows is sometimes in the masculine form, as is the case in Rav's teaching from BT *Shabbat* 12b; see Appendix.
3. This argument is made by French Kabbalah scholar Charles Mopsik in *The Sex of Souls* in his introduction to the book. Mopsik, Charles. *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah*, Cherub Press, 2005.

these self-evident axioms is very meaningful to me as I have found more truth in the ethical assumption that we are a society of vulnerable people, who need to care for one another and who constantly rely on one another, than in what can be described as the roots of modern atomized individualism. And the spirituality that will derive from such a conceptual framework is obviously one of interdependence and partnership between God and people.

In my analysis, I draw inspiration from Levinas, according to whom human subjects only exist by virtue of their willing subjection to the needs of the other, through the act of accepting responsibility for the vulnerable, and more broadly through the relationship to the non-self that makes us selves.

> *La relation intersubjective est une relation non-symétrique. En ce sens, je suis responsable d'autrui sans attendre la réciproque, dût-il m'en coûter la vie. (…) C'est précisément dans la mesure où entre autrui et moi la relation n'est pas réciproque, que je suis sujétion à autrui ; et je suis "sujet" essentiellement en ce sens. Vous connaissez cette phrase de Dostoïevski : "Nous sommes tous coupables de tout et de tous devant tous, et moi plus que les autres." (Les Frères Karamazov, La Pleïade, p. 310). (…) Le moi a toujours une responsabilité de plus que tous les autres.*
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> The intersubjective relation is a non-symmetrical relation. In this sense, I am responsible for others without expecting reciprocity, even if it costs me my life. (…) It is precisely insofar as the relation between others and myself is not reciprocal, that I am subject to others; and I am "subject" essentially in this sense. You know this sentence of Dostoyevsky: "We are all guilty of everything and everyone before everyone, and I more than the others." (The Brothers Karamazov, Pléiade, p. 310) (…) The self always has more responsibility than all the others. (Levinas 1982, p. 90, trans. mine).

That is a weighty limit to the credo of self-determination. "No man is an island, entire of itself," as the English poet John Donne elegantly phrased it. We are very much "other-determined" in our daily lives. We do realize that, but it is often perceived as a negative, unintended consequence of social life. However, the acknowledgment of interdependence, existential vulnerability, and interpersonal care is something I was delighted and proud to find in my own religious tradition.

Indeed, if one returns to the biblical source that serves as the blueprint for the formation of the *shekhina* concept, one becomes aware of a tradition

that constantly stresses the need to strive for the Other in the form of God, for something beyond the limits of the self. In Exodus 25:8, it is Hashem who commands the children of Israel to build a sanctuary "that I may dwell among them:"

וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם:

And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.

In other words, it is only when one creates room within the self that divine presence, *shekhina*, the dwelling, can be felt. Not unlike the *mishkan* journeying with the people in the desert, we have our own sanctuaries within ourselves if only we leave room for the Other.[4] In other words, the sacred exists where there is separation and connectedness, for there cannot be connectedness without a separation that ensures that two distinct entities are interacting.

This idea of presence as the potential for meaningful relationships is probably why the *shekhina* often appears in contexts where people unite in holy encounters and direct their thoughts to the infinite Otherness of God — when a *minyan* prays to Hashem (BT *Sanhedrin* 39a) or when two people share words of Torah (Mishnah *Avot* 3: 2). While studying *daf yomi,* I found the list of instances where the *shekhina* manifests itself (BT *Berakhot* 6a): in the synagogue, when three sit in judgment, and when ten, three, or two people engage in Torah. Even a person alone who is engaging in matters of Torah benefits from *shekhina*. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is a very good way to start an enquiry into rabbinical elaborations of *shekhina*.

The quasi-performative manifestation of *shekhina* through human intentionality and the creation of a proper setting can be described as a revelation of God's presence as a witness of human interactions. *Shekhina* is where the people are when they direct their thoughts towards what exceeds them. In this sense, the *shekhina* testifies to a twofold presence through which the plural of dialogue or of shared prayer transcends the agonistic dualism of dialectical polemics to leave space for the mysterious encounter of self and Other. This is an encounter through a glass darkly, through a *parokhet* maybe, where one may glimpse but never gaze, caress but never possess. This tension and yearning

4. Here I am alluding to the *Kedushat Levi* on Exodus 25: 8 which insists that the verse cannot possibly mean that God's presence was constricted in the physical space of the temple but rather that *betocham* means "within the hearts and mind of the Israelites."

have an erotic dimension; it is thus not surprising that the *shekhina* is also said to be present between a worthy man and woman when they form a couple.

דריש ר"ע איש ואשה זכו, שכינה ביניהן, לא זכו, אש אוכלתן

> **Rabbi Akiva taught:** If **a man [*ish*] and woman [*isha*] merit** reward through a faithful marriage, **the Divine Presence** rests **between them.** The words *ish* and *isha* are almost identical; the difference between them is the middle letter *yod* in *ish*, and the final letter *heh* in *isha*. These two letters can be joined to form the name of God spelled *yod*, *heh*.
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> But if due to licentiousness **they do not merit** reward, the Divine Presence departs, leaving in each word only the letters *alef* and *shin*, which spell *esh*, fire. Therefore, **fire consumes them.**[5]

The *Likutei Moharan* (ii. 32: 4) interprets this *derashah* as a reference to the coupling of man and woman through the act of sex. In keeping with this erotic interpretation, it is noteworthy that the act of love does not result in a union or a fusion but rather in a new form of duality, that of the couple and the *shekhina*. So much for the commonly-held belief that people simply become one when they make love — here it is clear that some level of (indivi)duality must remain.

However, there is also a clear ethical and ritual dimension to Rabbi Akiva's insight. Indeed, the statement "every time two people have sex God is there" might sound appealing but also slightly too pantheistic. What Rabbi Akiva stresses here is that the *shekhina* is present when a couple have "merit." Rashi's comment on the saying clarifies that we are dealing with conjugal fidelity (ללכת בדרך ישרה שלא יהא הוא נואף ולא היא נואפת). One might observe that this is very much a *bein adam lechavero* ethical issue: What does God have to do with that, apart from the obvious relation with the prohibition of adultery that comes from God?

In my opinion, this maxim posits the presence of the *shekhina* not only in spiritually charged moments of encounter between the human and the divine (such as praying and studying), but also in meaningful encounters between people, and more specifically between two people. In this context, it is interpersonal commitment in the form of fidelity that makes the couple deserving of

5. BT *Sotah* 17a, Schottenstein translation.

welcoming the *shekhina* in their midst. If you leave room for the Other within you, you will realize what consequences infidelity could have on the person you love and on your relationship with them. It is only by making room within ourselves that we can welcome God, or pure Otherness, in the form of the *shekhina*. Therefore, I find it meaningful that the *shekhina* is present between man and woman in a relationship of committed love, which is even more coherent as the definition of committed love is not regulated exclusively by the two of them in a locked one-to-one exchange but by the Torah of Hashem, which, as we observed, commands fidelity. In other words, the manifestation of *shekhina* in a conjugal context points to a fragile convergence in the relationship with the human Other and the divine Other that exceeds the dialectics of the two without reaffirming a consensual, fusional oneness that negates the boundary between self and Other. That is why the *shekhina* appears "between them," not above them or beside them. The *shekhina* is like the *parokhet* that reenacts erotic separation, prevents the complete fusion of the couple, and maintains distinctiveness, tension, and yearning. Through the creation of a new duality, it ensures that the dual nature of the couple is preserved and not subsumed under the totality of the one.

So far, I have mostly alluded to contexts where we encounter a healthy realization of the *shekhina*'s presence through fulfilling self-to-Other interactions. However, our texts teach us that the *shekhina* is not only present where there already exists a thriving relationship between creator and creation or between human beings. It may appear obvious that divine presence dwells where people are building outer or inner sanctuaries, praying, making love, and sharing words of Torah. But it seems to defy expectations that the *shekhina* is also to be found where there seems to be nothing but darkness and suffering, and where the connection between creation and creator has almost been severed. Indeed, *shekhina* (the "dwelling") can paradoxically signify, and testify to, Jewish uprootedness and a sense of irretrievable spiritual or physical loss. To give but a few examples, it is present when a sinner is put to death (BT *Sanhedrin* 46a-b, *Chagigah* 15b); when people are lying sick in bed (BT *Shabbat* 12b); on the face of a crying, vulnerable baby discovered by the daughter of Pharaoh (BT *Sotah*); and — perhaps the most commonly quoted and familiar manifestation of *shekhina* — it follows the Jewish people in exile and shares their anguish (BT *Megilah* 29a, see Appendix). This is all the more noteworthy as the exile is usually interpreted as a theological paradigm for distance

between the Jewish people and God, so the proximity of God should not be taken for granted in this context.

Moreover, in all these instances, we may observe that the epiphany of the *shekhina* is not as spectacular as we might have expected, especially within a tradition that frowns upon the depiction of direct divine intervention. While in BT *Shabbat* 12b, the *shekhinah* is said to feed and aid the sick, it seems quite clear that the phrase is not to be understood literally. Even more strikingly, in the parallel teaching of Rabbi Meir in BT *Sanhedrin* and *Chagigah*, when a person is condemned, the *shekhina* is reported to say, "I am burdened from my head, I am burdened by my arm" ("It is too heavy" Rashi explains, "it hurts"). It hurts to know that people, evil though they may be, are suffering. This is a baffling expression of utter helplessness on the part of God. Similarly, the *shekhina* does not heroically rescue the Jewish people from exile but rather follows them in anguish and sorrow. This elicits a sense of powerlessness that we may find incompatible with the traditional representation of an omnipotent God. However, what if passive suffering were a necessary aspect of omnipotence? What if omnipotence were not necessarily synonymous with redeeming action and direct intervention, as it is sometimes assumed to be?

Yet those texts suggest that we can mend broken relationships and soothe suffering souls merely by *being there*, silently but compassionately present. The *shekhina* suffers because the condemned person suffers and because of the sins that led to that person's execution. As an emanation of Hashem's *rachmanut* (mercy but also maternal love), the *shekhina* offers here what Levinas calls the "ethical caress," something that is perhaps even beyond the sensual and the erotic — a gentle and loving touch that barely brushes the skin. The caress of the *shekhina* does not proudly herald the end of grief and sorrow or miraculously heal the physically or spiritually wounded but merely whispers to the vulnerable Other that connectedness and love are still possible in the heart of darkness; that you are not, you are never, alone.

This is what an ethics of presence and care looks like: it implies that we may become as vulnerable as the one whom we wished to comfort while never denying what is deeply specific, intimate, and impenetrable in the grief of the Other. The ethics of presence is predicated upon the necessity of mourning alongside the mourner, of suffering with the weak and the sinful. It exalts tenderness and interdependence more than the dream of outright reparation. It advocates a paradoxically active passivity that realizes the importance of listening and caring rather than speaking to or fixing the vulnerable. More importantly,

it postulates that reparation and the healing of the Other's suffering are a continuous process, a constant effort and tension towards the improvement of the loved one's plight, rather than a teleological goal to be achieved.

Theologically, it implies that *tsimtsum*, the retraction of Hashem's infinity and the retention of traces of divine presence in the created world, is constantly renewed and re-actualized through the compassionate suffering of the *shekhina* that invests the ordeals that the Jewish people experience with meaning. It also invokes a sense of awe rather than pity when encountering vulnerable others, as is suggested in BT Shabbat 12b.

It is striking that the Gemara forcefully stresses that "God will support them on the day of illness." The scriptural prooftext is quoted three times, as though to underline that this is a unanimous reference. Therefore, when we visit the ill, we are "between the person and God," not unlike the *shekhina*, who manifests herself between two lovers. We are participating in, and enhancing the meaning of, a dual relationship through our presence at the bedside. This Talmudic passage also gives us a precious indication of the tremendous respect that we should feel when visiting the sick. In wrapping ourselves in our *tallit* and not daring to sit, are we showing deference only to the *shekhina* who tends the sick, or also to the people who suffer? I think that by echoing and experiencing human weakness and vulnerability, the *shekhina* indirectly suggests that we are, and should be, doing both.

That is why I argue that we need the *shekhina* as a model that can teach us ethics of presence and interdependence rather than only the ethics of relation with a transcendental Otherness. The vision of the *shekhina* following the *bnei Yisrael* in exile is not one of infinite, distant otherness, but one that every Jew, male and female, can relate to, one that feels closer in everyday life than the vengeful warrior-like God or the First Principle. I hope to have demonstrated that it leaves us room to emulate the divine attribute of care, and to exercise in turn, to the best of our ability, the ethics of presence.

Bibliography

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Appendix: Rabbinic Sources

BT *Shabbat* 12b

דאמר רב ענן אמר רב מנין ששכינה סועד את החולה שנאמר ה׳ יסעדנו על ערש דוי תניא נמי הכי הנכנס לבקר את החולה לא ישב לא על גבי מטה ולא על גבי כסא אלא מתעטף ויושב לפניו מפני ששכינה למעלה מראשותיו של חולה שנאמר ה׳ יסעדנו על ערש דוי ואמר רבא אמר רבין מנין שהקדוש ברוך הוא זן את החולה שנאמר ה׳ יסעדנו על ערש דוי:

As Rav Anan said that Rav said: From where is it derived that the Divine Presence cares for and aids the sick person? As it is stated: 'God will support him on the bed of illness' (Psalms 41: 4). The Gemara comments: That was also taught in a *baraita*: One who enters to visit the sick person should sit neither on the bed nor on a chair; rather, he should wrap himself in his prayer shawl with trepidation and awe, and sit before the sick person below him, as the Divine Presence is above the head of the sick person, as it is stated: 'God will support him on the bed of illness,' and he must treat the Divine Presence with deference. On a similar note, Rava said that Ravin said: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, feeds the sick person during his illness? As it is stated: 'God will support him on the bed of illness.'

BT *Megilah* 29a

תניא ר״ש בן יוחי אומר בוא וראה כמה חביבין ישראל לפני הקב״ה שבכל מקום שגלו שכינה עמהן גלו למצרים שכינה עמהן שנאמר (שמואל א ב, כז) הנגלה נגליתי לבית אביך בהיותם במצרים וגו׳ גלו לבבל שכינה עמהן שנאמר (ישעיהו מג, יד) למענכם שלחתי בבלה ואף כשהן עתידין ליגאל שכינה עמהן שנאמר (דברים ל, ג) ושב ה׳ אלהיך את שבותך והשיב לא נאמר אלא ושב מלמד שהקב״ה שב עמהן מבין הגליות

It is taught in a *baraita*: Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai says: Come and see how beloved the Jewish people are before the Holy One, Blessed be He. As every place they were exiled, the Divine Presence went with them. They were exiled to Egypt, and the Divine Presence went with them, as it is stated: 'Did I reveal myself to the house of your father when they were in Egypt?' (1 Samuel 2: 27). They were exiled to Babylonia, and the Divine Presence went with them, as it is stated: 'For your sake I have sent to Babylonia' (Isaiah 43: 14). So too, when, in the future, they will be redeemed, the Divine Presence will be with them, as it is stated: 'Then the Lord your God will return with your captivity' (Deuteronomy 30: 3).