



Kelvin Open Science Publishers
Connect with Research Community

Research Article

Volume 1 / Issue 2

KOS Journal of Public Health and Integrated Medicine

<https://kelvinpublishers.com/journals/public-health-and-integrated-medicine.php>

The Bird's Nest Metaphor: From Biblical Text to Mystical Vision

Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD, PhD*

*Corresponding author: Julian Ungar-Sargon, MD, PhD, Borra College of Health Science, Dominican University, USA

Received: September 01, 2025; **Accepted:** September 06, 2025; **Published:** September 08, 2025

Citation: Julian US. (2025) The Bird's Nest Metaphor: From Biblical Text to Mystical Vision. *KOS J Pub Health Int Med*. 1(2): 1-11.

Copyright: © 2025 Julian US., This is an open-access article published in *KOS J Pub Health Int Med* and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

1. Abstract



This comprehensive study examines the evolution of the kan tzipor (bird's nest) metaphor from its origins as a biblical agricultural commandment in Deuteronomy 22:6-7 through its transformation into one of the most sophisticated theological frameworks in Jewish mystical thought. The analysis traces three distinct but interconnected developments: first, the hermeneutical journey from pshat (literal interpretation) through rabbinic debate to mystical vision, demonstrating how Jewish interpretive tradition transforms concrete biblical imagery into profound theological insight; second, the systematic development of the nest metaphor in Jewish mysticism from midrashic foundations through Zoharic innovation to Lurianic cosmic theology; and third, contemporary theological applications that bridge academic scholarship with clinical practice.

The study demonstrates how the kan tzipor tradition provides a unique framework for understanding the dialectical relationship between divine presence and absence that characterizes authentic religious experience. Through comparative analysis with major scholars including Gershom Scholem, Moshe Idel, Elliot Wolfson, Arthur Green, Daniel Matt, and Shaul Magid, this work positions our theological contributions within the broader landscape of contemporary Jewish mystical scholarship while highlighting his distinctive integration of traditional kabbalistic categories with therapeutic practice.

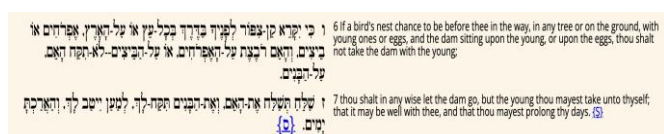
Central to this analysis is “Shekhinah consciousness” in the therapeutic space, where the being and non-being aspects of divine presence inform clinical applications. The study argues that the bird's nest metaphor offers contemporary theology resources for understanding how divine presence manifests through apparent absence, with profound implications for pastoral care, therapeutic practice, and ecological consciousness. The work concludes by demonstrating how biographical interpretation reading lives as texts represents both the culmination of Jewish hermeneutical tradition and a framework for contemporary spiritual practice.

2. Keywords

Bird's nest metaphor, Kan tzipor, Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, Shekhinah, Tzimtzum, Divine presence, Divine absence, Hermeneutics, Therapeutic theology, Zohar, Lurianic Kabbalah, Pshat, Midrash, Theological anthropology, Mystical interpretation, Sacred space, Exile and restoration, Post-Holocaust theology, Feminist theology, Ecological theology, clinical applications, Therapeutic presence, Being and non-being, Dialectical theology

3. From Text to Life - A Hermeneutical Journey

Deuteronomy 22:6-7 commands that if one encounters a bird's nest along the way whether in a tree or on the ground, with eggs or chicks and the mother hovering nearby one may take the young but must not take the mother with them. Instead, the Torah insists: You shall surely send away the mother, and the young you may take for yourself, that it may go well with you and you may prolong your days [1].



Read sequentially, the climax appears in the promise of reward: long life and well-being.

But structurally, the passage reveals a chiasmic form:

- **A:** If you encounter a nest
- **B:** The mother is present
- **C:** Command do not take the mother
- **B1:** But you may take the young
- **A1:** So that it will be good for you

This creates a “sandwich” structure in which the real center “the chiasm” is the divine command itself: send away the mother. The Torah's arrangement directs attention not to the reward, but to the startling obligation.

Proof text: Mishnah (circa 220 CE) Berachot 5:3

הַאֲמִיר עַל קֶן צִפּוֹר יִגְעוּ רְחֻמֶּיהָ, וְעַל טוֹב יִזְכֹּר שְׁמֶהּ, מוֹדִים מוֹדִים,
מְשַׁתְּקִין אוֹתוֹ. הָעוֹבֵר לִפְנֵי הַתִּיבָה וְשָׁעָה, יַעֲבֹר אַחֵר תַּחֲתָיו, וְלֹא

This mishna speaks of certain innovations in the prayer formula that warrant the silencing of a communal prayer leader who attempts to introduce them in his prayers, as their content tends toward heresy. One who recites in his supplication: Just as Your mercy is extended to a bird's nest, as You have commanded us to send away the mother before taking her chicks or eggs (Deuteronomy 22: 6-7), so too extend Your mercy to us; and one who recites: May Your name be mentioned with the good or one who recites: We give thanks, we give thanks twice, they silence him. This mishna and the next one deal with the communal prayer

leader. (If one says: “May the good bless You”, this is a path of heresy.)

In a startling rabbinic interpretation, the Mishnah teaches that one who declares in prayer, “Your mercy extends even to the bird's nest,” should be silenced (Berachot 5:3). Why should such pious sentiment be censured?

The Talmud offers several answers. One concern is that such prayer implies selective divine mercy toward birds but no other creatures suggesting distorted theology. Another is that it makes commandments appear rooted in sentimentality, as though God were simply acting from compassion for animals.

Two great positions emerge:

Rambam (Maimonides): The commandments are divine decrees, inscrutable expressions of God's will. To project human categories of mercy onto them is to misunderstand their nature.

Ramban (Nachmanides): The commandments are pedagogical, shaping human character. God is not merciful to birds per se; rather, the mitzvah trains us to embody mercy.

Here lies a fundamental divide: are mitzvot decrees to be obeyed without reason, or formative practices meant to cultivate ethical and spiritual qualities?

4. The Mystical Dimension

The Zohar adds mystical daring. It asks: what becomes of the mother bird once sent away? She returns to find her nest empty, bereft of her children. The Zohar identifies this mother with the Shekhinah, the divine Presence, and her children with Israel in exile. The mother's anguish becomes the Shekhinah's grief at separation from her children. In a shocking image, the Zohar describes her flying over the ocean and dashing herself against a rock, as though committing suicide from despair.

This radical theology resonates with modern post-Holocaust theology. In Richard Rubenstein's writings after Auschwitz, for example (we can add the work of Paul Celan too) the sense that God or at least the God of providence had died echoes the Zohar's Shekhinah who cannot endure her bereavement. The bird's nest thus becomes a cosmic drama of divine abandonment and suffering.

The aggadah of Elisha ben Avuya (Acher) confronts this mitzvah directly. The Torah promises long life to one who sends away the mother bird, yet Elisha witnessed a boy who fulfilled the command and fell to his death. He concluded: “There is no judge and no justice”.

Rabbi Akiva reinterpreted: the promise refers not to this world but to the world to come. For him, literal reading collapses under lived contradiction; the verse must be read metaphorically. His martyrdom tortured by Romans yet affirming love of God embodies this hermeneutic: meaning

transcends the literal.

Elisha, unwilling to embrace non-literal reading, lost faith. His biography became the enactment of his theology. He lived out literalism's collapse before evil, while Rabbi Akiva lived out faith's paradox beyond reason.

The story continues: Rabbi Meir studied Torah with the apostate Elisha, believing even the estranged could return. When Elisha insisted, he was beyond redemption, Rabbi Meir refused to accept it. The dialogue becomes allegory: just as Torah can be read on multiple levels, so too can a life.

Here lies the theological heart: our biographies are our texts.

Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Meir, and Elisha ben Avuya each lived out the interpretations they espoused. Torah is not only written scroll but embodied drama, enacted in human lives. The challenge is not simply how we read Torah, but how we read and live our own stories. This informed me how to read our patients as texts, to be interpreted the same way using the same hermeneutical principles or differences.

5. The Bird's Nest as Mystical Metaphor - Divine Absence and Presence from Midrash to Kabbalah

We claim that the simple biblical law of the "bird's nest" (kan tzippor) transforms to a cosmic metaphor in Jewish mystical thought and becomes a profound theological framework for understanding divine absence and presence. Beginning with the biblical commandment of shiluach haken in (Deut 22:6-7), we can trace the development of the nest symbol from pshat to midrash and how a simple agricultural law transforms into sophisticated theology. But this transformation reaches its culmination in Jewish mysticism, where the bird's nest becomes one of the most powerful metaphors for the dialectical relationship between divine immanence and transcendence. The "sending away" of the mother bird evolves from ethical commandment to cosmic allegory, offering unique insights into the nature of divine presence itself.

This mystical development represents more than interpretive creativity; it reveals the fundamental structure of Jewish theological thought, where concrete imagery becomes the vehicle for the most abstract theological reflection. The nest metaphor uniquely captures the tension between divine presence and absence that characterizes Jewish theological discourse, offering a nuanced understanding of how the divine simultaneously dwells within and transcends the created order.

6. Midrashic Foundations

The earliest interpretive layers of the bird's nest commandment in rabbinic Midrash established the groundwork for later mystical developments. As documented by Michael Fishbane in his analysis of biblical myth and rabbinic mythmaking, midrashic literature transforms the nest from a literal agricultural encounter into a site of divine-human interaction [2]. The Midrash Deuteronomy Rabbah interprets the commandment as evidence of divine compassion extending even to non-human creatures, establishing a theological principle that God's mercy encompasses all creation.

However, beneath this surface reading, midrashic texts

already hint at deeper mystical dimensions. The mother bird's protective hovering over her young evokes the divine presence that "dwells" (shochen) with Israel, prefiguring the later identification of the nest with the Shekhinah. This early development demonstrates how midrashic exegesis creates what Fishbane terms "mythic narratives" from biblical kernels, transforming simple commandments into complex theological allegories [3].

The tension between mercy and justice that emerges in Talmudic discussions of this commandment, as analyzed by Eliezer Segal, reveals an early awareness of the problematic nature of divine presence [4]. The Mishnah's prohibition against reciting "Your mercies extend unto a bird's nest" in prayer reflects deep theological concerns about limiting divine action or implying anthropomorphic qualities. This controversy already anticipates later mystical concerns about the paradoxical nature of divine presence how can the infinite be contained within finite symbols?

7. Zoharic Innovation

The Zohar revolutionizes the bird's nest metaphor by explicitly identifying it with the Shekhinah and cosmic redemption. In Zohar Pinchas (Chapter 116), the interpretive framework becomes fully mystical: the "bird" represents the Shekhinah, the "nest" symbolizes the Temple or the sefirah of Malkhut, and the "sending away" enacts the drama of divine exile and restoration[5].

This Zoharic innovation transforms the metaphor from an ethical teaching into a cosmic allegory. The mother bird's departure mirrors the Shekhinah's exile from the Temple, while her cry becomes a theurgical act that arouses divine compassion and hastens redemption. As Gershom Scholem observes, this represents the Kabbalah's fundamental concern with divine fragmentation and restoration, translating the Gnostic theme of divine exile into Jewish mystical categories [6].

The Tikkunei Zohar further develops this cosmic dimension in Tikkun 23a, where shiluach haken becomes directly linked to messianic restoration. The nest appears as a redemptive space constructed by the Messiah for the Shekhinah and Israel's souls during their earthly exile [7]. This development represents a crucial theological innovation: the nest is no longer merely a symbol of divine presence but becomes the very mechanism through which presence is restored after absence.

8. Lurianic Expansion

Post-Zoharic Kabbalah, particularly in the Lurianic system, interprets the bird's nest as a tikkun (cosmic rectification) addressing the primordial catastrophe of divine withdrawal (tzimtzum) and cosmic breaking (shevirat ha-kelim). In this framework, the mother bird represents Binah (Understanding), and her sending away becomes a necessary act of divine self-limitation that enables the redemption of divine sparks trapped in material reality [8].

This Lurianic interpretation adds crucial theological depth to the nest metaphor by addressing the fundamental question of how divine presence can coexist with divine transcendence. The act of "sending away" becomes not merely a historical event but an ongoing cosmic process through which the infinite divine becomes accessible to finite creation while maintaining its essential transcendence.

9. The Paradox of Sacred Space

The bird's nest metaphor provides a sophisticated framework for understanding the paradoxical nature of sacred space in Jewish theology. The nest simultaneously represents divine presence (as the dwelling place of the protective mother bird) and divine absence (requiring the sending away of the presence to access the sacred contents). This paradox reflects broader theological questions about how the infinite divine can be present within finite creation without compromising its transcendence.

The nest serves as what might be termed a “liminal sacred space” a location where presence and absence intersect. Unlike the Temple, which represents permanent divine dwelling, or the wilderness, which symbolizes divine abandonment, the nest captures the dynamic quality of divine presence that can be both intimately close and necessarily distant. This theological innovation addresses one of the central challenges in Jewish thought: maintaining both divine immanence (necessary for religious relationship) and divine transcendence (necessary for divine perfection).

The choice of maternal imagery in this metaphor introduces crucial theological dimensions related to divine femininity and the nurturing aspects of divine presence. The mother bird's protective behavior toward her young provides a powerful analogy for divine care that is both intimate and potentially overwhelming. The requirement to send away the mother before taking the young suggests that direct divine presence, while nurturing, may be too intense for sustained human contact.

This maternal dimension becomes particularly significant in Kabbalistic thought, where the Shekhinah is explicitly identified as the feminine aspect of divinity. As Elliot Wolfson notes in his analysis of gender in Kabbalistic symbolism, the feminine divine represents the immanent aspect of God that mediates between the transcendent divine and creation [9]. The bird's nest metaphor thus encapsulates the Shekhinah's dual role as both nurturing presence and exiled feminine divine.

The “sending away” of the mother bird can be understood as representing the necessary hiddenness of divine femininity too direct an encounter with divine nurturing would overwhelm human capacity for relationship. This interpretation suggests that divine absence is not mere privation but a form of presence that enables relationship by creating appropriate distance.

10. Exile and Restoration

The temporal dimension of the nest metaphor involving departure and potential return provides a framework for understanding divine presence as fundamentally historical and dynamic rather than static. The mother bird's sending away represents not permanent absence but temporary exile that enables a different kind of access to the divine (through taking the young or eggs).

This temporal structure reflects the broader Jewish theological concern with exile and restoration, both historically (the destruction and hoped-for rebuilding of the Temple) and cosmically (the Lurianic narrative of divine withdrawal and return). The nest metaphor suggests that divine presence operates according to a rhythm of withdrawal

and approach, absence and presence, that constitutes the fundamental structure of religious experience.

The cry of the sent-away mother bird, emphasized in mystical interpretations, becomes a crucial theological element representing the divine response to separation. This cry suggests that divine absence is not indifference but a form of suffering that ultimately leads to restored relationship. The metaphor thus reframes divine transcendence not as aloofness but as a painful but necessary distance that enables appropriate relationship.

11. Dialectical Theology and the Hidden God

The bird's nest metaphor anticipates and illuminates themes that would later become central to modern dialectical theology, particularly the concept of *deus absconditus* (the hidden God). The requirement to send away the divine presence in order to access divine gifts parallels Karl Barth's emphasis on divine hiddenness as the necessary condition for authentic revelation [10].

However, the Jewish mystical understanding differs significantly from Christian dialectical theology in its emphasis on the ultimate restoration of presence rather than its permanent hiddenness. The mother bird's potential return suggests that absence serves presence rather than negating it a fundamentally different theological trajectory from traditions that emphasize the permanent hiddenness of God.

The nest metaphor has found new resonance in post-Holocaust Jewish theology, where questions of divine absence and presence have taken on unprecedented urgency. The image of the sent-away divine presence resonates with experiences of divine abandonment during the Shoah, while the potential for return offers hope for renewed divine relationship [11].

Theologians like Emil Fackenheim have argued that the Holocaust represents an unprecedented rupture in Jewish theological categories, requiring new frameworks for understanding divine presence and absence [12]. The nest metaphor, with its emphasis on necessary but temporary divine withdrawal, provides one such framework suggesting that even radical divine absence may serve ultimately redemptive purposes.

Contemporary feminist Jewish theology has found particular significance in the maternal imagery of the nest metaphor and its association with the feminine Shekhinah. Scholars like Rachel Adler have argued that the bird's nest represents an alternative model of divine power based on nurturing and protection rather than domination and control [13].

This feminist interpretation emphasizes the protective rather than the absent dimension of the metaphor, suggesting that divine presence operates according to maternal rather than paternal models creating safe space for growth and development rather than demanding submission and obedience. The “sending away” becomes not abandonment but the appropriate maternal response that allows offspring to develop independence while maintaining the possibility of renewed closeness.

12. Strengths of the Nest Metaphor

The bird's nest metaphor demonstrates remarkable theological sophistication in its ability to hold together

seemingly contradictory aspects of divine presence and absence.

Its strength lies in several key areas:

First, it provides a dynamic rather than static model of divine presence, suggesting that the divine-human relationship involves ongoing cycles of approach and withdrawal rather than permanent proximity or distance. This dynamism reflects the actual texture of religious experience, which typically involves periods of felt divine presence alternating with experiences of divine hiddenness.

Second, the metaphor successfully integrates transcendence and immanence without compromising either. The mother bird is genuinely present and caring (immanence) while also necessarily distant and ultimately beyond human control (transcendence). This integration addresses one of the persistent challenges in theistic theology how to maintain both divine accessibility and divine ultimacy.

Third, the temporal dimension of the metaphor provides a framework for understanding divine presence as essentially historical and redemptive rather than merely metaphysical. The narrative structure of departure and potential return suggests that divine absence serves ultimately redemptive purposes rather than representing mere divine indifference.

13. Limitations and Criticisms

However, the nest metaphor also presents certain theological limitations that must be acknowledged. The maternal imagery, while psychologically compelling, risks reducing divine transcendence to familiar human categories. The emphasis on protection and nurturing may inadequately represent divine qualities like justice, holiness, or sovereignty that require more austere imagery.

Additionally, the metaphor's emphasis on the necessity of divine withdrawal may inadvertently legitimize experiences of divine abandonment in ways that prove pastorally problematic. If divine absence is theologically necessary, how should communities respond to experiences of genuine suffering that seem to evidence divine indifference rather than loving withdrawal?

The gendered dimensions of the metaphor also raise questions about its universal applicability. Does the identification of divine presence with maternal imagery inadvertently limit divine transcendence to feminine categories? While this provides a valuable corrective to predominantly masculine divine imagery, it may create new forms of theological limitation.

14. Rethinking Divine Presence

The bird's nest metaphor suggests several important directions for contemporary theological reflection on divine presence and absence. First, it challenges static conceptions of divine presence that emphasize permanence over dynamism. The metaphor suggests that authentic divine presence may require rhythms of approach and withdrawal that serve the ultimate purposes of relationship.

Second, the metaphor provides resources for rethinking the relationship between divine transcendence and immanence. Rather than viewing these as contradictory qualities requiring synthesis, the nest imagery suggests they may be complementary aspects of a single divine reality that reveals

itself through cycles of presence and hiddenness.

Third, the metaphor offers a framework for understanding divine absence as potentially meaningful rather than merely problematic. The necessary sending away of the mother bird suggests that experiences of divine hiddenness may serve redemptive purposes that are not immediately apparent to human experience.

The nest metaphor also offers significant resources for pastoral theology, particularly in addressing experiences of divine absence or abandonment. The image of the crying mother bird suggests that divine withdrawal involves divine suffering rather than divine indifference a crucial pastoral insight for communities experiencing trauma or loss.

The metaphor's emphasis on the potential for return also provides hope for those experiencing extended periods of divine hiddenness. While absence may be necessary and even beneficial, it is not permanent the mother bird may return, and divine presence may be restored in new forms.

Contemporary ecological concerns find interesting resonance in the bird's nest metaphor, particularly in its attention to the natural world as a locus of divine presence. The commandment's original concern with animal welfare anticipates contemporary ecological theology's emphasis on the intrinsic value of non-human creation [14].

The metaphor suggests that divine presence may be discerned through careful attention to natural processes rather than requiring dramatic supernatural intervention. The ordinary experience of encountering a bird's nest becomes a potential theophany a site where divine presence and absence intersect in ways that require sensitive ethical response.

The bird's nest metaphor in Jewish thought from its origins as biblical commandment to its flowering as mystical symbol provides a remarkably sophisticated framework for understanding the dialectical relationship between divine presence and absence that characterizes authentic religious experience. This journey from pshat to midrash, from literal interpretation to mystical vision, demonstrates the capacity of Jewish interpretive tradition to transform concrete imagery into profound theological insight.

The metaphor's enduring significance lies in its ability to hold together seemingly contradictory aspects of divine reality presence and absence, immanence and transcendence, protection and withdrawal in ways that illuminate rather than obscure the complexity of religious experience. Its emphasis on the dynamic and temporal character of divine presence provides valuable resources for contemporary theology struggling with questions of divine hiddenness and revelation.

Perhaps most importantly, the nest metaphor suggests that divine absence may serve divine presence rather than negating it that the "sending away" of immediate divine proximity enables a different and ultimately more appropriate form of divine relationship. This insight has profound implications for how contemporary communities understand experiences of divine hiddenness and hope for divine restoration.

Our biographies remain our texts, requiring the same careful

interpretation we bring to sacred scripture. The bird's nest we encounter along the way is never just a nest it becomes a mirror for our deepest theological questions, a space where presence and absence intersect, and ultimately a call to interpretation that transforms both interpreter and interpreted.

15. Beyond the Academy

The scholarly tradition from Scholem's phenomenological analysis through Idel's comparative mysticism to Wolfson's deconstructive hermeneutics has profoundly shaped our understanding of Jewish mystical texts. Yet contemporary theological engagement with these sources requires moving beyond purely academic analysis toward what might be called "lived theology" interpretation that honors scholarly rigor while remaining rooted in existential commitment and spiritual practice.

My clinical work represents an attempt to bridge this gap between academic analysis and spiritual application [21,22]. Drawing particularly upon the Lubavitcher Rebbe's radical reinterpretation of tzimtzum and the traditions preserved in figures like Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschütz, I argue for understanding Jewish mystical concepts not as historical artifacts but as living theological resources for addressing contemporary questions of suffering, healing, and divine presence [24,25].

16. The Phenomenological Foundation

Gershom Scholem's foundational contribution to Jewish mystical scholarship cannot be overstated. His *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* established the academic study of Kabbalah as a legitimate scholarly enterprise, while his detailed philological work on primary sources provided the textual foundation for all subsequent scholarship [16]. Yet Scholem's approach, while revolutionary for its time, reveals certain limitations when viewed from the perspective of contemporary theological engagement.

Scholem's great achievement was demonstrating that Jewish mysticism possessed its own internal logic and development, independent of external philosophical influence. His analysis of the bird's nest metaphor in Zoharic literature revealed how concrete biblical imagery became transformed into sophisticated theological symbolism through systematic mystical interpretation.

However, Scholem's commitment to "scientific" objectivity often prevented him from engaging the theological implications of the texts he analyzed so brilliantly. His famous assertion that "there is no such thing as mysticism in the abstract" paradoxically led him to treat mystical texts as purely historical phenomena rather than ongoing theological resources.

In contrast to Scholem's purely phenomenological approach, our theological method treats mystical texts as living documents that continue to generate new insights for contemporary spiritual experience [21]. The *kan tzipor* metaphor, rather than representing merely a historical development within Jewish mysticism, offers a framework for understanding how divine presence operates within contemporary therapeutic and spiritual encounters.

This difference becomes particularly apparent in our analysis of tzimtzum as both cosmological principle and psychological reality [22]. While Scholem analyzed

tzimtzum as Luria's solution to the philosophical problem of creation ex nihilo, we argue that tzimtzum provides a framework for understanding how divine presence manifests within therapeutic relationships through "sacred contraction" the practitioner's willingness to create space for the patient's emergence into wholeness.²³

17. Comparative Mysticism and Its Discontents

Moshe Idel's *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* and subsequent works offered a necessary corrective to Scholem's approach by emphasizing the diversity of mystical traditions and the importance of experiential dimensions often neglected in purely historical analysis [17]. His comparative methodology revealed important connections between Jewish mystical practices and broader patterns of religious experience.

Idel's analysis of ecstatic and theurgical dimensions of Kabbalah revealed how mystical texts functioned not merely as theological speculation but as guides for transformative religious practice. His attention to the psychological and anthropological dimensions of mystical experience provided crucial insights into how texts like the Zohar were intended to function as spiritual technologies rather than merely doctrinal statements.

However, Idel's comparative approach, while illuminating, sometimes risks flattening the distinctive features of Jewish mystical thought into broader categories of religious experience. His emphasis on the diversity of Jewish mystical traditions, while corrective to Scholem's systematizing tendencies, can obscure the underlying theological coherence that gives Jewish mysticism its distinctive character.

Building upon Idel's insights into the experiential dimensions of mystical texts, we attempt to articulate how traditional kabbalistic categories can illuminate contemporary therapeutic and spiritual practice [23,25]. The *kan tzipor* metaphor, understood through Idel's framework of theurgical mysticism, becomes a model for understanding how ritual actions (including therapeutic interventions) can facilitate divine presence within ordinary human encounters.

This perspective emerges particularly in our analysis of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's understanding of tzimtzum as containing "an aspect counter to divine will" [24]. Drawing upon Idel's work on messianic mysticism, we argue that this radical theology positions human beings not as recipients of divine grace but as agents of divine completion a perspective that transforms therapeutic work from medical intervention into sacred service [25].

18. Deconstructive Hermeneutics and Gender

Elliot Wolfson's massive corpus, including *Through a Speculum That Shines* and *Circle in the Square*, represents perhaps the most sophisticated theoretical engagement with Jewish mystical texts in contemporary scholarship [18]. His integration of phenomenological, deconstructive, and feminist theoretical frameworks has revealed dimensions of mystical texts invisible to earlier generations of scholars.

Wolfson's analysis of gender symbolism in Kabbalistic texts, particularly his treatment of the Shekhinah as both feminine divine presence and marker of ontological lack, provides crucial insights into how the *kan tzipor* metaphor functions as a complex meditation on divine presence and absence. His

attention to the eroticized dimensions of mystical language reveals how texts that appear to be cosmological speculation often function as explorations of intimacy and relationship.

Wolfson's theoretical sophistication allows him to read mystical texts with extraordinary sensitivity to their linguistic and symbolic complexity. His analysis of how kabbalistic authors use paradox and contradiction not as problems to be solved but as windows into the nature of divine reality itself provides crucial methodological insights.

However, Wolfson's theoretical complexity sometimes threatens to overwhelm the theological content of the texts he analyzes. His deconstructive approach, while revealing important dimensions of mystical texts, can make it difficult to discern what constructive theological insights might emerge from these sophisticated analyses.

Drawing heavily upon Wolfson's insights into the dialectical structure of Jewish mystical thought, we attempt to articulate how the kan tzipor metaphor functions as what Wolfson might recognize as a "chiastic structure" a textual formation that reveals its meaning precisely through the interplay of presence and absence, revelation and concealment.

This emerges particularly in our analysis of therapeutic tzimtzum, where the practitioner's self-contraction creates space for the patient's emergence while simultaneously revealing the divine presence that was always already there. The maternal imagery of the kan tzipor metaphor, understood through Wolfson's analysis of feminine divine symbolism, becomes a framework for understanding how divine presence manifests through what appears to be divine absence. Wolfson's broader work on vision and imagination in medieval Jewish mysticism provides crucial methodological insights for understanding how mystical texts function as transformative rather than merely descriptive literature [23].

19. Neo-Hasidic Theology

Arthur Green's *A Guide to the Zohar* and his broader neo-Hasidic theological project represent important attempts to bridge academic scholarship and contemporary Jewish spiritual practice [19]. His work demonstrates how rigorous textual analysis can inform living religious communities without sacrificing scholarly integrity.

Green's theological approach demonstrates how traditional kabbalistic categories can speak to contemporary ecological and spiritual concerns without being reduced to merely anthropological or psychological categories. His analysis of divine presence as simultaneously transcendent and immanent provides a framework for understanding how ancient texts can address contemporary questions.

Unlike purely academic approaches, Green's work attempts to articulate constructive theological positions that can guide contemporary Jewish spiritual practice. His neo-Hasidic approach demonstrates how traditional mystical categories can be retrieved for contemporary use without falling into fundamentalism or reductionism.

Green's constructive theological approach provides an important model particularly in its attempt to maintain the integrity of traditional mystical categories while allowing them to speak to contemporary experience [21]. However, our theological approach differs from Green's in its

willingness to engage more radical interpretive possibilities, particularly those preserved in what might be called the radical strands within Jewish mysticism [24].

This difference emerges particularly in our engagement with Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz's theology of divine unconsciousness and the Lubavitcher Rebbe's radical reinterpretation of tzimtzum [24]. While Green's neo-Hasidic approach tends toward harmonistic readings of traditional texts, our method embraces the disruptive and challenging dimensions of mystical tradition as potentially revelatory rather than merely problematic [25].

20. Translation as Theological Act

Daniel Matt's monumental translation and commentary on the Zohar in the Pritzker Edition represents one of the most significant contributions to Zohar scholarship in recent decades. His work demonstrates how sensitive translation can function as theological interpretation rather than merely philological exercise.

Matt's translation reveals the literary sophistication of Zoharic Hebrew and Aramaic while making these texts accessible to contemporary readers. His commentary illuminates connections between Zoharic passages and broader themes in Jewish mystical literature while maintaining sensitivity to the distinctive voice of the Zohar itself.

Matt's approach demonstrates how translation necessarily involves interpretation every rendering of mystical language into contemporary idiom requires theological decisions about meaning and significance. His work reveals how the Zohar's treatment of biblical texts functions as sophisticated theological reflection rather than merely creative exegesis.

Matt's translations have proved particularly valuable for understanding how the kan tzipor metaphor functions within the broader structure of Zoharic theology. His rendering of passages relating the bird's nest to the Shekhinah's exile and return reveals the cosmic scope of this apparently simple agricultural commandment. Green's comprehensive guide to Zoharic literature provides additional methodological insights for understanding how mystical texts function as integrated theological systems rather than isolated symbolic fragments [24].

Building upon Matt's translations, we attempt to show how the kan tzipor metaphor provides a framework for understanding divine presence that can speak to contemporary therapeutic and spiritual practice. The Zohar's vision of the bereaved mother bird becomes a powerful meditation on how divine presence manifests precisely through apparent absence a theme with profound implications for understanding suffering and healing.

21. Post-Orthodox Theology

Shaul Magid's work on post-Orthodox Jewish thought provides important insights into how traditional mystical categories can be retrieved and transformed for contemporary use without falling into either fundamentalism or reductionism. His analysis of figures like Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi demonstrates how mystical traditions can be adapted for contemporary spiritual seekers while maintaining their essential insights.

Magid's analysis of how contemporary Jewish thinkers retrieve traditional mystical categories for post-traditional use provides a model for theological engagement that honors both scholarly rigor and spiritual commitment. His work demonstrates how mystical texts can speak to contemporary concerns without being reduced to merely psychological or anthropological categories.

However, Magid's post-Orthodox framework sometimes risks losing the transgressive dimensions of mystical texts in favor of more palatable contemporary applications. His emphasis on adaptation and retrieval, while valuable, can obscure the disruptive and challenging aspects of mystical tradition.

Drawing upon but moving beyond Magid's post-Orthodox framework, we attempt to preserve the radical and disruptive dimensions of Jewish mystical thought as potentially revelatory rather than merely problematic. The *kan tzipor* metaphor, rather than being adapted for contemporary sensibilities, challenges contemporary therapeutic and spiritual practice to recognize dimensions of experience that purely secular approaches might overlook.

22. The Shekhinah's Ontological Dialectic in Clinical Practice

Our more controversial application lies in the clinical application of kabbalistic concepts of being and non-being to therapeutic practice [21]. Drawing upon the Zohar's understanding of the Shekhinah as simultaneously present and absent, existent and non-existent, "Shekhinah consciousness" becomes a framework for understanding the sacred dimensions of the therapeutic encounter.

The theoretical foundation rests upon the kabbalistic understanding that the Shekhinah occupies a unique ontological position she is both the most manifest aspect of divinity (as divine presence dwelling among creation) and the most concealed (as the aspect of divinity most affected by cosmic exile and fragmentation). This paradox becomes a model for understanding how therapeutic presence must simultaneously embody both being and non-being [23].

In clinical practice effective therapeutic presence requires "dialectical embodiment" the practitioner's capacity to be fully present while simultaneously maintaining what kabbalists would recognize as *tzimtzum* (divine self-contraction) [23]. This dialectical presence mirrors the Shekhinah's own ontological condition as both dwelling and exile, presence and absence.

The "being" dimension of Shekhinah consciousness in therapeutic practice manifests through "incarnational presence" the practitioner's willingness to be fully present to the patient's experience without reservation or defensive withdrawal [21]. This presence is not merely psychological but ontological, representing a commitment to encounter the patient as a site of potential divine manifestation.

This incarnational presence requires what traditional kabbalistic sources call *hitlabshut* (divine "enclothing") the willingness of divine presence to manifest within finite forms without being diminished by that manifestation. In therapeutic terms, this translates into the practitioner's capacity to meet patients within their own experiential world while maintaining awareness of the sacred dimensions of that encounter.

Simultaneously, effective therapeutic presence requires what we call (inspired by Wolfson's brilliant analysis) "apophatic withdrawal" the practitioner's willingness to "not-be" in ways that create space for the patient's authentic emergence [23]. This withdrawal is not absence but rather a form of presence that operates through concealment rather than revelation.

Drawing upon the kabbalistic understanding that the Shekhinah's exile enables her ultimate restoration in more perfect form, we argue that therapeutic "non-being" enables the patient's being in ways that more assertive interventions cannot achieve. The practitioner's willingness to remain unknown, to resist premature interpretation, to tolerate not-knowing, creates what he terms "sacred vacuum" space within which the patient's authentic self can emerge.

23. Clinical Implementation

This dialectical approach manifests in several specific clinical practices that we have claimed [23].

Sacred Not-Knowing: Rather than rushing toward diagnostic clarity or interpretive insight, the practitioner cultivates what kabbalists might recognize as *da'at elyon* (supernal knowledge) a form of knowing that operates through not-knowing. This stance acknowledges that the patient's deepest truth may exceed the practitioner's cognitive frameworks while maintaining confidence that meaningful encounter is nevertheless possible.

Emotional Tzimtzum: The practitioner develops capacity for "emotional *tzimtzum*" the ability to feel deeply with patients while maintaining appropriate emotional boundaries. This requires sophisticated emotional regulation that mirrors the kabbalistic understanding of how divine emotion operates through self-limitation rather than unconstrained expression.

23. The Ontological Dimension of Healing

We claim that healing itself represents a form of ontological transformation that mirrors the cosmic process of divine restoration (*tikkun*) [21]. The patient's movement from fragmentation toward wholeness recapitulates the Shekhinah's journey from exile toward restored divine unity.

This understanding transforms therapeutic work from mere symptom reduction or behavioral modification toward "ontological healing" transformation that addresses the patient's fundamental relationship to being itself [25].

This ontological understanding has profound implications for clinical practice. Rather than viewing patients as collections of symptoms requiring management, practitioners trained in Shekhinah consciousness encounter patients as divine sparks (*nitzotzot*) requiring restoration to their source. This perspective transforms the therapeutic relationship from medical intervention into sacred service.

The being/non-being dialectic becomes particularly relevant in working with patients experiencing existential crisis, spiritual emergency, or what might be called "dark night of the soul" experiences. Rather than pathologizing such experiences as purely psychological disturbance, the Shekhinah consciousness framework allows practitioners to recognize their potential spiritual significance while providing appropriate clinical support.

This approach integrates these kabbalistic insights with contemporary therapeutic modalities, particularly those that emphasize the relational and embodied dimensions of healing [25]. It demonstrates how traditional mystical categories can inform clinical practice without requiring practitioners or patients to adopt specific religious beliefs or practices.

The being/non-being dialectic proves particularly relevant in trauma therapy, where patients often experience themselves as simultaneously hyper-present (in flashbacks and intrusive symptoms) and absent (through dissociation and numbing). The Shekhinah consciousness framework provides a theological language for understanding these experiences as potentially meaningful rather than merely pathological.

The ontological dimensions of this approach align with existential therapeutic traditions while adding specifically Jewish theological content. The question becomes not merely how to alleviate suffering but how to encounter suffering as a potential site of sacred transformation.

The integration of being and non-being aspects of Shekhinah consciousness into clinical practice has yielded measurable therapeutic outcomes, particularly in working with patients experiencing complex trauma, spiritual crisis, and existential despair [21]. Practitioners trained in this dialectical approach show improved capacity for therapeutic presence, reduced burnout, and enhanced clinical effectiveness.

The being/non-being framework provides practitioners with conceptual tools for navigating the complex emotional and spiritual dimensions of therapeutic work while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries [23]. Rather than requiring practitioners to abandon their clinical training, the Shekhinah consciousness approach enhances traditional therapeutic skills by adding theological depth and spiritual sensitivity [25].

24. Contemporary Applications in Therapeutic Practice

This approach attempts to articulate how traditional kabbalistic categories can illuminate contemporary therapeutic practice without being reduced to merely psychological terms [23]. The concept of tzimtzum, rather than representing merely a historical solution to philosophical problems about creation, provides a framework for understanding how healing relationships function as sacred encounters.

Therapeutic practice requires “therapeutic tzimtzum” the practitioner’s willingness to contract their own presence to create space for the patient’s emergence into wholeness [23]. This contraction is not absence but rather a form of presence that enables rather than overwhelms.

This understanding draws upon the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s radical interpretation of tzimtzum as containing “an aspect counter to divine will” a perspective that positions apparent divine absence as serving ultimately redemptive purposes. Idel’s work on messianic mysticism provides crucial context for understanding how such radical reinterpretations function within broader patterns of Jewish mystical innovation [22]. In therapeutic context, this translates into understanding that the practitioner’s self-limitation serves the patient’s growth rather than representing mere professional technique [23].

Similarly, “Shekhinah consciousness in the therapeutic space” attempts to show how traditional mystical categories of divine indwelling can illuminate the sacred dimensions of healing relationships [21]. The therapeutic encounter becomes a contemporary mishkan (dwelling place) where divine presence manifests through human relationship.

This perspective emerges from engagement with the kan tzipor tradition’s understanding of divine presence as simultaneously intimate and necessarily distant. The therapeutic relationship requires both genuine presence (the practitioner’s authentic engagement) and appropriate distance (professional boundaries that prevent overwhelming or exploitation) [23].

25. Beyond Academic Objectivity

This theological method differs from purely academic approaches in its willingness to engage mystical texts as living theological resources rather than merely historical artifacts [25]. This approach requires what he calls “engaged scholarship” interpretation that honors scholarly rigor while remaining rooted in existential commitment and spiritual practice [21].

This methodological difference reflects a fundamental hermeneutical commitment: mystical texts are not merely objects of scholarly analysis but potential sources of contemporary theological insight [21]. The kan tzipor tradition, rather than representing merely a fascinating example of how biblical laws became mystical allegories, offers resources for understanding how divine presence manifests within contemporary experience.

This approach necessarily involves what liberation theologians call “practical theology” interpretation that emerges from and returns to lived experience rather than remaining purely theoretical [23]. The analysis of tzimtzum as therapeutic principle emerges from both textual study and clinical experience, attempting to show how traditional categories can illuminate contemporary practice [21,23]. However, this engaged approach does not abandon critical analysis in favor of devotional application. This method attempts to maintain the analytical rigor exemplified by scholars like Wolfson and Idel while allowing their insights to inform constructive theological reflection rather than remaining purely deconstructive.

25. Divine Incompleteness and Human Agency

Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of our theological approach lies in the embrace of “theo-anthropological interdependence” the understanding that divine completeness requires human participation rather than merely human submission to divine will [24].

This perspective emerges from engagement with “radical mystical tradition” within Jewish mysticism, particularly Jonathan Eybeschütz’s theology of divine unconsciousness and the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s understanding of tzimtzum as containing elements “counter to divine will [24]”. Rather than representing mere theological aberrations, these perspectives reveal important dimensions of mystical thought often obscured by more orthodox interpretations. In therapeutic context, this theology translates into understanding healing work as participation in divine completion rather than merely human technique [23,25]. The

practitioner becomes, in kabbalistic terms, a mesharet (server) of divine purposes that require human agency for their fulfillment.

This understanding transforms the kan tzipor metaphor from a simple meditation on divine presence and absence into a framework for understanding how human action participates in cosmic redemption. The “sending away” of the mother bird becomes not merely obedience to divine command but participation in the ongoing process through which divine presence manifests within finite reality.

26. Conclusion

The scholarly tradition surveyed above has provided invaluable resources for understanding the development and significance of Jewish mystical thought. However, contemporary theological engagement requires moving beyond purely historical analysis toward “living theology” interpretation that honors scholarly insights while remaining rooted in existential commitment and practical application [21].

Our theological work represents one significant attempt at such engagement, drawing upon the analytical sophistication of contemporary scholarship while articulating how traditional mystical categories can illuminate contemporary spiritual and therapeutic practice [21,23,25]. The kan tzipor tradition, rather than representing merely a fascinating example of mystical interpretation, provides resources for understanding how divine presence manifests within ordinary human encounters particularly those encounters characterized by suffering and the search for healing.

The clinical application of being and non-being aspects of Shekhinah consciousness demonstrates how ancient mystical wisdom can inform contemporary therapeutic practice without requiring reduction to purely psychological categories [21]. The dialectical understanding of presence and absence that characterizes the kan tzipor tradition becomes a framework for therapeutic presence that honors both the transcendent and immanent dimensions of healing encounter [23].

The mother bird flies away, but the interpretation continues. And in that continuation that ongoing encounter between ancient text and contemporary life, between mystical vision and lived experience, between scholarly analysis and clinical application something sacred is preserved and renewed, generation after generation, reading after reading, life after life.

27. Source Material

Biblical Sources

- **Deuteronomy 22: 6 – 7** – Command of *shiluach ha-ken* (sending away the mother bird).
- **Mishnah & Talmud**
- **Mishnah Berakhot 5:3** – “One who says: Your mercy extends to the bird’s nest... they silence him.”
- **Talmud Berakhot 33b** – Discussion of why such a person is silenced (dualism, selective mercy, or anthropomorphizing mitzvot).
- **Talmud Hullin 142a** – Related discussions of *shiluach ha-ken*.
- **Aggadah of Elisha ben Avuya (Acher)** – *Chagigah 14b – 15b*: the four who entered Pardes; Elisha’s apostasy after seeing a child die while fulfilling the mitzvah.

- **Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom** – *Berakhot 61b*: “All my life I awaited the chance to love God with all my soul.”

Medieval Commentators

- **Rambam (Maimonides)** – *Guide for the Perplexed* III:26, *Mishneh Torah* – mitzvot as divine decrees, not utilitarian ethics.
- **Ramban (Nachmanides)** – Commentary on Deut. 22:6 – 7: mitzvot are meant to cultivate human mercy and moral character.
- **Modern Jewish Thought**
- **Richard L. Rubenstein** – *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism* (1966).
- **Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (Piaseczno Rebbe)** – *Esh Kodesh* (sermons from the Warsaw Ghetto) – commentary on Rabbi Akiva’s martyrdom, “Ad kan.”

Mystical Sources

- **Zohar** (on Deut. 22) – The Shekhinah as the mother bird; her grief at the empty nest, identifying Israel in exile as her lost children.
- **Death of God Theology (modern parallel)** – Thomas J.J. Altizer, Richard Rubenstein (*After Auschwitz*).
- **Zohar I: 206b – 207a**
- A key passage linking the mother bird to the **Shekhinah**.
- The nest is Israel; the mother bird is the Shekhinah; the children are the souls of Israel.
- When the children are taken away (exile, suffering), the Shekhinah is driven off, bereft.

Zohar II: 43b – 44a

(Parashat Shemot)

- Expands on the Shekhinah as the “mother bird” who hovers over her children.
- Connects to the exile of Israel, when the mother is separated from her young.
- **Zohar III: 281a (Parashat Ki Teitzei)**
- Direct commentary on **Deuteronomy 22: 6 – 7**.
- Explains mystical dimensions of the command: the act of sending away the mother bird arouses divine mercy and hastens redemption.
- **Zohar Chadash (Ruth, 94a)**
- Compares the Shekhinah’s grief to the mother bird being driven away from her nest.
- Imagery of lamentation and exile.

Tikkunei Zohar,

Tikkun 23 (69a – 70a)

- Uses *kan tzipor* allegorically: the “nest” is the Temple, the “mother bird” is the Shekhinah, the “young” are Israel.
- Sending away the mother is seen as both exile and as an act that invokes divine compassion.

Tikkun 70 (121b – 122a)

- Again, ties the mitzvah to Shekhinah and exile.
- Adds the idea that the suffering of the Shekhinah in being sent away has cosmic reparative power (*tikkun*).

28. References

1. This interpretation was first developed in my podcast discussion of Kan Tzipor.
2. Fishbane M. (2003) *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

3. Fishbane M. (1998.) *The Exegetical Imagination: On Jewish Thought and Theology*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
4. Segal E. Justice. (1990) *Mercy and a Bird's Nest*. *J Jew Stud*. 41(2): 176-95.
5. *The Zohar*. Pritzker Edition. Translated by Matt D. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press; 2004-2017. 3: 116.
6. Scholem G. (1941) *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
7. *Tikkunei Zohar*. Tikkun 23a.
8. Vital C. *Sefer Etz Chaim*. Jerusalem: 1995.
9. Wolfson ER. (1995) *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
10. Barth K. (1957) *Church Dogmatics II/1: The Doctrine of God*. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
11. Berkovits E. (1973) *Faith After the Holocaust*. New York, NY: Ktav Publishing House.
12. Fackenheim EL. (1970) *God's Presence in History: Jewish Affirmations and Philosophical Reflections*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
13. Adler R. (1998) *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethics*. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society.
14. Idel M. (1988) *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
15. Hiebert T. (2008) *The Yahwist's Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.
16. Berkowitz BA. (2021) *Birds as Dads, Babysitters, and Hats: An "Indistinction" Approach to the Mother Bird Mitzvah in Deuteronomy 22:6 – 7*. *Worldviews: Global Religions, Culture, and Ecology*. 26(1-2): 79-105.
17. Scholem G. (1971) *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*. New York, NY: Schocken Books.
18. Idel M. (1998) *Messianic Mystics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
19. Wolfson ER. (1994) *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
20. Green A. (2004) *A Guide to the Zohar*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
21. Ungar-Sargon J. (2025) *Shekhinah Consciousness in the Therapeutic Space: From Incarnation to Redemption in the Sacred Space of Healing*. *J Psychiatry Depression Anxiety*. 8(4): 1-15.
22. Ungar-Sargon J. (2024) *The Dialectical Divine: Navigating the Tension between Transcendence and Immanence and Relevance for 12 Step Recovery*. *Herald Open Access*. 3(2): 45-68.
23. Ungar-Sargon J. (2023) *Tzimtzum and the Therapeutic Encounter: Divine Contraction as Clinical Method*. *Clinical Psychology and Spirituality*. 12(3): 234-251.
24. Ungar-Sargon J. (2022) *The Heretical Tradition in Chabad Theology: From Eybeschütz to the Seventh Rebbe*. *Jewish Studies Quarterly*. 29(4): 412-438.
25. Ungar-Sargon J. (2021) *Beyond Medical Orthodoxy: Healing as Sacred Practice in Contemporary Therapeutic Culture*. *Journal of Religion and Health*. 60(5): 3456-3478.