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A Place That Is Not: The Matkela, the Two Se'irim, and the Clinician Who Is Not the Fulcrum

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ABSTRACT

The opening sentence of the Zohar's Sifra de-Tzeni'uta names a balance (matkela) without which "face did not behold face" and "the primordial kings died." R. Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, in the Me'or Einayim on Aḥarei Mot, identifies that balance with Jacob, with Da'at, and with the two goats of Yom Kippur, one "for the LORD" and one "for Azazel". This essay traces the chain from the Zohar through its rabbinic substrate (Genesis 36:31, Bereshit Rabbah 65:15, Vayikra Rabbah 21:11), Sefer Yetzirah's "tongue of decree," and the Hasidic homily. It then asks what the chain offers the clinical encounter. My first instinct was to say that the physician stands on the fulcrum, like Jacob. I argue that the sources refuse this. The High Priest does not choose the goats' destinies; the lot does. The balance "hangs in a place that is not". And the tongue of a scale does not rule the pans; it is the part most moved by them. The clinician is therefore not the fulcrum but its host: one who wears Esau's hands without losing Jacob's voice, sends the unbearable to its boundary without making anyone a scapegoat, and whose authority is the authority of sensitivity. The essay closes with the claim that matkela completes the tzimtzum model: contraction makes otherness possible; measure makes relation among the differentiated possible.

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Introduction: The Kings Who Reign Before Jacob

The *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* opens with a scale. "The Book of Concealment is a book weighed in the balance. For until there was a balance, face did not behold face, and the primordial kings died, and their adornments were not found, and the earth was nullified" [1]. The kings are not anonymous. The Zohar is reading Genesis 36:31: "These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before any king reigned over the children of Israel" [2]. Edom is Esau. The kings who die for want of a balance are the kings of Esau's line, and they die because they reign *before Jacob*.

That single observation is the seed of this essay. R. Menaḥem Naḥum of Chernobyl, in his homily on *Aḥarei Mot*, names Jacob as "the mystery of *Da'at*, which is called in the Zohar the mystery of the *matkela*", and assigns to Jacob's merit the two goats of Yom Kippur [3,4]. He does not argue the identification at length; he assumes it. I want to show that the identification is not a homiletic leap. It is already implicit in the Zohar's own reading of Genesis, and before the Zohar in the rabbinic sources that made Esau the goat for Azazel and Jacob the "smooth" portion of the LORD.

I came to this material with a clinical thesis ready in hand. The physician, I wanted to say, stands on the fulcrum, on the knife edge between life and death, mercy and judgment, the patient's voice and the body's evidence, as Jacob stood between his father and his brother. There is something true in that picture. But the

longer I stayed with the texts the more they resisted it. The High Priest does not choose which goat lives in the sanctuary and which goes to the wilderness; the lot chooses. The *matkela* "hangs in a place that is not" and "is neither grasped nor seen". And on a real scale, the tongue does not govern the pans. It is the most responsive part of the instrument, moved entirely by what lies on either side. The sources, in other words, correct the grandiosity of my first formulation. The essay that follows is an attempt to let them.



The thesis I now defend is this. The clinician is not the fulcrum of the therapeutic encounter; the clinician is the one who hosts it. The *matkela* is the third that arises between clinician and

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patient when opposed demands are held in relation rather than resolved by the victory of one side. Jacob is its figure not because he is balanced but because he carries both identities on his own body, the voice of Jacob and the hands of Esau, and because he is the one to whom the balance is *given*. The two goats are its liturgy. And its clinical name is humility, understood not as a mood but as a structural position: the authority of the one most accurately moved.

This paper continues work I have published on the *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* and the healer-patient relationship [5] and on the *Me'or Einayim* as a source for clinical hermeneutics [6-8]. It must also be distinguished from my recent treatment of Jacob's disguise and Isaac's blind hands in "The Hands and the Face", where the same scene served an argument about assimilation and the double bind [9]. Here the scene is read as an examination room. Finally, the essay is written under the discipline I have elsewhere called the sacred epistemology of not-knowing [10]: the claim that uncertainty is not a failure of clinical knowledge but one of its conditions.

A note on sources. The Zoharic and rabbinic passages are cited by standard location. The Hebrew of the *Me'or Einayim* is quoted from working source sheets and should be checked line by line against the first edition and Arthur Green's complete translation [4] before publication; where I paraphrase, I say so.

coupling of the divine countenances that the Idrot will later describe. Before the balance, there are faces but no facing. Each power exists as an absolute. Chesed is only chesed; din is only din. Liebes has shown how thoroughly the Idrot build on this primal scene of failed relation [11] and Scholem traced its afterlife in the Lurianic doctrine of the breaking of the vessels [12]. I will not repeat that history. What I take from it is simpler: in this text, multiplicity without relation is lethal.

The second feature is that the balance is not itself one of the weights. The next line reads: "This balance hangs in a place that is not ... the balance stands in itself; it is neither grasped nor seen" [1]. The fulcrum is not located among the things it weighs. It is suspended from absence. I will return to this repeatedly, because it is the sentence that most directly corrects my first clinical intuition. If the balance hangs in a place that is not, then no one can stand on it as on a platform. It is not a position one occupies. It is a condition that occurs.

The third feature is the book's self-description. The *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* is "a book weighed in the balance." The text does not only describe the *matkela*; it claims to be measured by it. Concealment (*tzeni'uta*) and measure are joined from the first word. What is hidden is not hidden by being withheld but by being weighed: given in the proportion that can be received. I have argued elsewhere that this is also the grammar of the clinical encounter [5] and that the physician's disclosures, like the book's, are ethical only when they are measured to what the patient can bear.

The tradition read the two pans of the balance as the right and left columns of the sefirotic tree: chesed and gevurah, mercy and judgment. I have written about that polarity as it bears on healing [13] and about its darker form in post-Holocaust theology, where the tension between *middat ha-din* and *middat ha-raḥamim* does not resolve [14]. The *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* adds something neither pole contains. It says that the problem is not the existence of judgment. It is judgment standing alone. The cure is not the removal of the left pan. It is the arrival of the thing that lets the pans face one another.

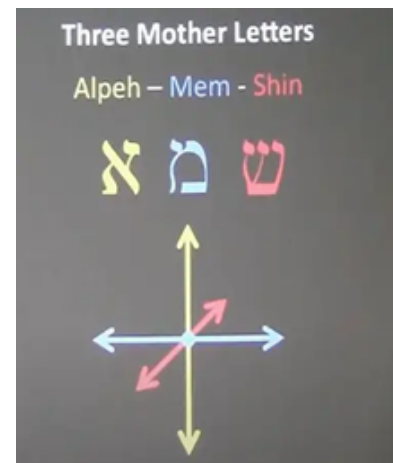
That thing has a name in the commentators, and a much older name in the tradition. To those I now turn.

The Matkela in the Sifra de-Tzeni'uta

The *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* is a few pages of compressed Aramaic, printed in the Zohar at the end of *Terumah* [1]. Its first lines set out the problem that the rest of the Idra literature will elaborate: **וזה אל, אלקתם הוה אל דעד. אלקתם ליקשד ארפס, אתועינד ארפס תלטבתא.**

"The Book of Concealment is a book weighed in the balance. Until there was a balance, they did not gaze face to face; the primordial kings died, their adornments were not found, and the earth was nullified."

Three features of the sentence matter for what follows. The first is that the failure is relational before it is ontological. The kings do not die because they are evil or weak. They die because they cannot look at one another. "Face to face" (*appin be-appin*) is the Zohar's recurring figure for union, for the



The Tongue of Decree: Sefer Yetzirah and the Gra

When the *Me'or Einayim* says that “the tongue that decides establishes them in the middle,” it is not coining an image. It is quoting the oldest text of Jewish cosmology. Sefer Yetzirah describes the three “mothers,” *alef*, *mem*, and *shin*, in the language of a court and a scale: “a pan of merit, a pan of guilt, and the tongue of decree deciding between them” (*kaf zekhut ve-khaf hovah ve-lashon hok makhria beineihem*) [15]. *Mem* is silent, *shin* hisses, and *alef*, the breath, stands between them. The tongue of the scale is air.

This matters for three reasons.

First, it shows that the *lashon ha-makhria* is a juridical image before it is a cosmological one. The two pans are merit and guilt. The setting is a trial. The Yom Kippur liturgy the *Me'or Einayim* is expounding is also a trial, and the goat for Azazel carries away the evidence for the prosecution. The clinician should notice this. The consulting room is continually turned into a court, by the patient who asks whether the illness is punishment, by the family who wants someone to blame, and by the institution that measures the physician's worth by outcome. Sefer Yetzirah does not abolish the court. It places breath at its center.

Second, the tongue is *alef*, the letter without sound of its own. It is the least substantial of the three. That is precisely its qualification. It can mediate between the silence of *mem* and the fire of *shin* because it adds no weight of its own to either pan.

Third, the tongue speaks. In Hebrew the word for the pointer of a scale and the organ of speech are the same. Whatever the mediating principle is, it is related to utterance. I will return to this in Section VII, where the voice of Jacob becomes the clinician's instrument.

The Vilna Gaon's commentary on the *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* makes the next step explicit. As quoted in my working sheets, the Gra says that “*Da'at* is the deciding principle, and within it are included *chesed* and *gevurah*,” that “the essence of the matter of the *matkela* is *Da'at*,” and that the two sides are sweetened together only when “the third comes, which contains *chesed* and *gevurah* and decides between them” [16]. *Da'at* is not a tenth sefirah in the ordinary count. It is the hidden conjunction of *hokhmah* and *binah*, and below them the inner point of the middle column. It is, in the Gra's reading, the *matkela* itself.

We should be careful here, because the word “middle” tempts us toward the wrong model. The Aristotelian mean is a point on a line between two vices, found by calculation and habituation [17]. The *matkela* is not a point on the line between *chesed* and *gevurah*. It is what allows them to be on the same line at all. Aristotle's mean avoids the extremes. The *matkela* holds them. Courage is the mean between cowardice and rashness, and the courageous man is neither. But Jacob is not the mean between Abraham and Isaac. He contains both.

That is why *Da'at* is also, for the Hasidic masters, the place of choice. “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; choose life” [18]. Choice presupposes that both possibilities are present and real. A mind that has abolished one of them has

not chosen; it has simply stopped seeing. *Da'at* is the capacity to keep both in view long enough to weigh them.



The Kings of Edom: Why the Balance Is Jacob's

Genesis 36 lists eight kings of Edom. Each reigns and dies. None founds a dynasty; none is succeeded by a son. The list is introduced with a chronological remark that the Zohar treats as a metaphysical one: these kings reigned “before any king reigned over the children of Israel” [2]. In the Idra reading, these are the primordial kings who died for want of the *matkela* [1]. They are Esau's kings. They rule Seir.

The philology is already doing theological work. Esau is born “red, all of him like a hairy mantle” [19]. He is *ish sa'ir*, a hairy man (Gen 27:11). He settles in *Se'ir* (Gen 33:16). And *sa'ir* is the word for the goat that Leviticus 16 sends to Azazel. The triple pun, hairy, Seir, goat, is not a Zoharic invention. It is rabbinic, and early.

Bereshit Rabbah 65:15 reads Jacob's protest to Rebecca, “Esau my brother is a hairy man and I am a smooth man,” as a statement about Yom Kippur [20]. R. Levi offers a parable of two men near a threshing floor, one with thick hair and one bald. The chaff catches in the hair of the first and cannot be removed; the second passes his hand over his head and is clean. So Esau is soiled by sin all year and has no means of atonement, while Jacob is soiled all year and has the Day of Atonement. R. Isaac is more direct: “And the goat shall bear upon it all their iniquities” (Lev 16:22), that is Esau, “a hairy man.” David Halperin has argued that R. Isaac's reading, if the attributions hold, reaches back to third-century Palestine, and that it implicitly makes Jacob the goat for the LORD [21]. Andrei Orlov has gathered this material into a full study of the “atoning dyad” [22]. The midrash also contains a detail the *Me'or Einayim* will exploit: *avonotam*, “their iniquities,” can be heard as *avonot tam*, the

iniquities of the *ish tam*, Jacob.

Vayikra Rabbah 21:11 supplies the other half of the chain. Expounding “With this shall Aaron come into the holy place” (Lev 16:3), it assigns the bull to Abraham, the ram to Isaac, and the goat to Jacob, citing Rebecca’s command: “Go to the flock and bring me two good kids of the goats” (Gen 27:9) [23]. The kids are “good”, R. Levi says, good for Jacob, who receives the blessing by them, and good for his children, who receive atonement by them. The *Me’or Einayim* begins exactly here.

The Zohar develops the association in several places. In one passage Jacob brings his father two goats, “one to subdue Esau, who was hairy, and the other to subdue the grade to which Esau was beholden.” In another, R. Judah says that Rebecca’s two dishes foreshadow the two Yom Kippur goats, “one for the supernal grade and the other with the object of subduing the grade of Esau” [24]. And in *Aḥarei Mot* itself, the Zohar reads “I am a smooth man” (*ish ḥalak*) as “a man of the portion (*helek*),” drawing it from the division of the two goats: “the priest divides them, one to that one’s portion and one to the Holy One, blessed be He” [25].

Mary Douglas, working entirely outside the Jewish mystical tradition, saw the same structure. She read the Leviticus rite of the two goats as the ritual form of the Pentateuch’s great narrative theme: of two brothers, one is chosen and one is sent away [26].

Now put the pieces together. The *Sifra de-Tzeni’uta* says the kings died because there was no balance. The kings are Esau’s. The balance arrives with the “king over the children of Israel,” that is, with Jacob. The midrash makes Esau the goat for Azazel and Jacob the goat for the LORD. When the *Me’or Einayim* says that Jacob is the *matkela* and that the two goats come by Jacob’s merit, it is not joining two unrelated texts. It is reading the same story twice, once as cosmology and once as liturgy.



But notice what this means. Jacob is not only one of the two goats. He is also the one who brings both to his father. He carries the goat that stands for himself and the goat that stands for his brother, and he wears the skin of the second on his own hands. That is the image I will spend the rest of this essay trying to understand.

The Me’or Einayim on Aḥarei Mot: Jacob, Da’at, and the Two Se’irim

The Chernobyler’s homily takes up the verse “With this shall Aaron come into the holy place” [27] and the midrash that assigns the offerings to the patriarchs [23]. He maps the patriarchs onto the upper structure of the sefirot: Abraham toward *hokhmah* and expansion, Isaac toward *binah* and judgment, Jacob toward *Da’at*. Then comes the sentence on which everything turns:

אלקתם דוסב רהוזב ארקנה אוהו תעדה דוס בקעי תוכזב מיריעשו
“And the goats are in the merit of Jacob, the mystery of Da’at, which is called in the Zohar the mystery of the matkela” (3).

He explains at once why *Da’at* requires two goats:

ימי מיכרד ינש משו מייחב תרחבו ערו בוט תעדל הריחבה מוקמ מש יכ
 לאמשו.

“For there is the place of choice, to know good and evil, ‘and you shall choose life,’ and there are two paths there, right and left.”

And then the image of the scale:

אנימיב אלאמש רשקמו לילכמו עוצמה לע מדימעמו עירכמה נושלה רא
 אנימיב לכה השענו.

“But the deciding tongue establishes them in the middle, and includes and binds the left into the right, and all becomes right.”

“Therefore, there were two goats, one for the LORD and one [for Azazel], right and left. And the goat of the left bore all their iniquities to a land cut off, because everything had been sweetened” [3,4].

I have written three papers on the *Me’or Einayim*: on its vision of reading past the veil of the text [6], on Pharaoh’s hardened heart as a failure of awareness rather than of will [7] and on the Sinai homilies as a theology of conquering the demonic [8]. In each case what struck me was the Chernobyler’s relocation of cosmic events into consciousness. He does the same here. The *matkela* of the *Sifra de-Tzeni’uta* was the architecture of the divine world. In the *Me’or Einayim* it is also the architecture of the human act of choosing. “Know the God of your father and serve Him,” he quotes, “for the essence of service is through *Da’at*, where choice resides” [3].

Three verbs in the scale passage deserve slow reading.

The tongue *establishes them in the middle* (*ma’amidam al ha-mitzu’a*). It does not move to the middle itself. It brings the two sides into a relation where neither dominates.

It *includes* (*makhilil*). The left is not cast out; it is gathered into a larger whole. In the classical language, this is *hamtakat ha-dinim*, the sweetening of judgments. Judgment continues to exist. What ends is its autonomy.

It *binds* (*mekasher*). Binding is the vocabulary of *yihud*. The left is not dissolved into the right; it is tied to it.

Then comes the phrase that at first seems to undo the whole structure: “and all becomes right.” If everything is right, is the left abolished after all? I do not think so, and the ritual shows why. The goat for Azazel is not destroyed at the altar. It is sent. It carries its burden to its own place. The left becomes “right” in the sense that it now serves the purpose of the whole. It is no longer a rival sovereign. Hence the Chernobyler’s other phrase: after the sweetening, the accuser “has no authority to prosecute”. The prosecution is not refuted. It is deprived of standing.

Wolfson on the left, the Other Side, and Azazel

The Chernobyler’s phrase *u-makhilil u-mekasher smola bi-ymina*, “includes and binds the left into the right,” is very nearly the title of one of Elliot Wolfson’s earliest studies, “Left Contained in the Right” [29]. There Wolfson argued that the containment of the left within the right is a pivotal idea on which much of the Zohar’s theosophical hermeneutics turns, and he called it the ultimate task of *homo religiosus*. In the Zohar’s own language, the wicked blemish the upper worlds precisely by separating right from left. The *Me’or Einayim* is therefore not improvising when it makes the two goats a lesson in binding. It is inheriting the Zohar’s central ethical grammar and giving it a Yom Kippur setting.

Three features of Wolfson’s reading bear directly on the goats. The first is *monism*. Wolfson follows Tishby in showing that the kabbalists’ search for the source of the demonic within the divine was an effort to blunt the dualism latent in a doctrine of a “left emanation”. The demonic realm parallels the divine in structure but not in standing; in one Zoharic image, it is to the divine as an ape is to a human being [29]. Azazel, whatever else he is, is not a rival god. The goat sent to him goes to a secondary, derivative power that exists within, and not beside, divine sovereignty.

The second is that *the left is not to be abolished*. Wolfson draws attention to a passage in which the Zohar insists that evil should not be wholly eliminated, since it is as necessary to the world as the good. The Zoharic ideal, he writes, is one in which holiness is achieved through contact with the unholy, and by means of that contact the unholy itself is transformed or contained within the holy [29]. This is exactly the structure of *hamtakat ha-dinim* in the *Me’or Einayim*: not the destruction of the left, but its inclusion.

The third is *Job*. Wolfson notes that the Zohar reads Job’s sin as a failure to give the Other Side its due; by refusing it any portion, Job did not contain the left within the right [29]. The point is counterintuitive and, for the clinician, decisive. The righteous man who allows the left no portion does not become pure. He becomes split. The left he has refused does not vanish; it returns as an autonomous accuser. The whole book of Job is what happens next.

Wolfson’s entry on Azazel in the *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* completes the picture [30]. In the Zohar, he writes,

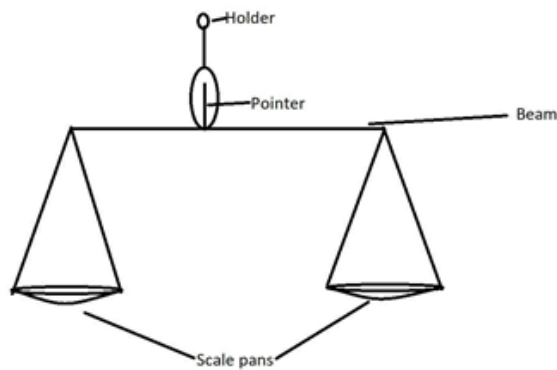
Azazel becomes the personification of the force of the Other Side, the demonic realm that parallels the divine, and, following an older midrashic tradition, is associated with Samael, the archon of Esau, a trope for Christianity. The goat for Azazel is thus the portion of Esau’s angel. The medieval tradition knew how dangerous that sounds. Nahmanides, commenting on Leviticus 16:8, cites the tradition that Israel gave Samael a “bribe” on Yom Kippur so that he would not annul their offering, and then insists that the goat is not a sacrifice to Samael at all [31]. It is sent at God’s command, as a host at a feast might be told by his master to give a portion to the master’s servant. The gift is an act of obedience to the King, not of worship toward the servant.

This is what Wolfson means by hypernomian [28]. In his recent formulation, it is the trespassing of the boundary that preserves the very boundary that is trespassed. The Azazel rite is its liturgical form. It is the one moment in the Temple year when an offering is sent *out* of the sacred precinct, toward the wilderness and the demonic, by divine command. The crossing is lawful because it is commanded, and the command is what keeps the crossing from becoming worship. The left is acknowledged in order to be bounded.

But Wolfson does not let this become a comfortable symbol. The same book that develops the hypernomian also examines, without apology, the kabbalistic denigration of the non-Jew as the ontic other [28]. The chain that runs from *sa’ir* to Esau to Samael to Azazel was also a way of locating the demonic in a people. The symbol that bounds the left can become the symbol that assigns evil to someone else. I take this seriously, and it is the reason Section VIII insists that the goat is not a person.

The clinical yield is threefold. From monism: the clinician’s own dark reactions are not an alien power invading the encounter but a secondary, bounded part of the clinician’s own structure, to be acknowledged rather than exorcised. From Job: the clinician who permits the left no portion, who admits no fatigue, no anger, no relief at a death, does not become pure but split, and the refused left returns as burnout, cynicism, or a boundary crossed. From Nahmanides: the portion given to the left must be given under the host’s command, that is, within the frame, in supervision, under the discipline of the work, and not as indulgence. Giving the Other Side its due is not the same as serving it.

Finally, the homily’s anthropology. If *Da’at* is the place of choice, and choice requires two real paths, then every human act of choosing reenacts the crisis of the *Sifra de-Tzeni’uta*. Before *Da’at*, each impulse presents itself absolutely: I must have this; I must destroy this; I am holy; I am worthless. Those are the kings who die, psychic states that cannot look at one another. *Da’at* is the capacity to hold two of them in view at once. I have argued elsewhere that clinical models of decision-making neglect precisely this dimension of fate and freedom [32] and that the question of whether patients have free will is less about metaphysics than about whether both paths remain visible to them [33]. The *Me’or Einayim* supplies a theology for that clinical observation.



The Lot and the Urn: Against the Sovereign Fulcrum

Here I must correct myself. The image of “the doctor on the fulcrum, like father Jacob” flatters the doctor. It places the physician at the point from which the destinies of the two pans are decided. The sources do not permit that reading, and it is worth being precise about why.

The High Priest does not choose. The Mishnah describes the rite in detail [34]. The two goats are brought and stood side by side. They should be alike in appearance, height, and value, and purchased together. An urn (*kalpi*) holds two lots, one inscribed “for the LORD” and one “for Azazel”. The High Priest shakes the urn and draws with both hands at once, one lot in each, and places them on the heads of the goats. He does not know which hand holds which. The decisive act of the rite is performed by the one person in Israel whose holiness is highest, and it is performed blind.

The Talmud adds a detail that belongs in any reading of right and left. During the forty years that Shimon ha-Tzaddik served, the lot for the LORD always came up in his right hand; afterwards, sometimes in the right and sometimes in the left [34]. The tradition treats the right-hand lot as a sign of divine favour. But notice what it does *not* say. It does not say Shimon arranged it. Even the greatest High Priest could only receive what came up. His righteousness showed in the result, not in the choosing.

The balance hangs in a place that is not. The *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* describes the fulcrum as suspended from absence and as “neither grasped nor seen” [1]. A fulcrum that cannot be grasped cannot be occupied. It is not a seat of authority. It is an event of relation that happens when conditions allow.

The tongue of the scale is the most moved part. This is the correction that matters most. In a physical balance, the pointer (*lashon*) does not decide which way the pans fall. The weights decide. The pointer registers the decision. Its whole value lies in its sensitivity. A pointer that resisted the pans, or that leaned toward one of them, would be a broken instrument. The “deciding tongue” of Sefer Yetzirah and the *Me'or Einayim* decides only in the sense that it declares truthfully what the pans already say.

Translate this into the clinic. A physician who stands at the fulcrum as a sovereign, who “decides” what the patient’s life

shall mean, which symptoms count and which do not, when hope is warranted and when it is not, is a broken pointer. The physician who is a true tongue of the scale is the one most accurately moved by what lies in both pans: by the patient’s account and the body’s evidence, by the wish to heal and the fact of limits, by mercy and by the honest recognition of what cannot be done.

This is not passivity. A good pointer is a precision instrument. Its sensitivity is achieved, not given. I have written about the discipline of self-emptying that this requires, the clinician’s *kenosis* [35] and about the ways in which clinical judgment is shaped by language and power that the clinician does not see [36]. The humility the scale requires is not an attitude. It is a calibration.

It is also a safeguard. The clinician who believes himself the fulcrum is exactly the clinician most at risk of crossing boundaries. Gabbard and Lester showed that boundary violations tend to begin with the conviction that this case is exceptional, that the ordinary rules do not reach this depth [37]. The sovereign fulcrum is that conviction given a theology. By contrast, the pointer does not decide what weight belongs in the pan. It does not add itself to either side. Its authority depends on its not being one of the weights.

None of this abolishes judgment. I have argued that halakhic decision-making, like clinical decision-making, runs on two tracks, one rational and one intuitive, and that both are legitimate [38,39]. But judgment, in the sense I mean, is the faithful registration of what is in the pans, joined to the courage to say it. It is not the manufacture of an outcome. The High Priest must still stand before the goats. He must still draw. He must still confess Israel’s sins over the one and carry the blood of the other into the Holy of Holies. He acts; he does not choose. The distinction is everything, and I have tried to live by it under the heading of not-knowing [10].



The Voice and the Hands: Isaac as Diagnostician

The scene in which Jacob brings the two kids to his father is, among other things, a physical examination [19].

Isaac is blind; his eyes are “too dim to see” (Gen 27:1). He takes a history: “Who are you, my son?” (27:18). He is not satisfied with the answer and palpates: “Come near, that I may feel you, my son” (27:21). He auscultates: “The voice is the voice of Jacob.” He notes the discordance: “but the hands are the hands of Esau” (27:22). He asks again, directly: “Are you really my son Esau?” (27:24). He eats. He asks to be kissed, and smells: “See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field” (27:27). History, palpation, auscultation, olfaction, a repeated direct question. Every sense but sight.

And then the decisive clinical moment: “He did not recognize him, because his hands were hairy like his brother Esau’s hands; so he blessed him” (27:23). When the history and the examination disagree, Isaac trusts the hands.

Any clinician knows this scene. The patient tells one story; the body, the laboratory, the imaging tell another. “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau” is almost a textbook formulation of discordance between history and findings. And contemporary medicine, like Isaac, tends to trust the hands. The patient’s account is heard, noted, and set aside when the numbers speak. I have written about this at length: about the history as the place where the body in illness is first given meaning [40], about the measurable effect of listening on outcome [41], and about the history as a sacred text that must be read rather than merely screened [42]. The error Isaac makes is not stupidity. It is the ordinary prejudice of every examiner who has learned that voices can lie and hands cannot. Isaac is wrong because, on that day, the hands were the thing that lied.

I want to be careful not to repeat the argument of “The Hands and the Face”, where the same verses served a reading of the assimilationist’s double bind, and where Isaac’s blind hands were the figure of a world that could not tell one Jew from another [9]. Here the question is narrower and clinical. It concerns the physician’s own two instruments.

The physician, too, has a voice and hands. The voice is the instrument of the history, of explanation, of consolation, of the truth told at the right measure. The hands are the instrument of examination, procedure, and intervention, and by extension the whole apparatus of technical medicine: the scalpel, the catheter, the prescription pad, the order set. The hands are hairy. They belong, in the symbolism of these texts, to Esau: to the world of force, of hunting, of the field. They are necessary. There is no medicine without them.

Here the Jacob story says something uncomfortable. Jacob cannot receive the blessing in his own skin. He has to wear the goatskins. Rebecca puts Esau’s garments on him and the skins of the two kids on his hands and on the smooth of his neck. The blessing passes through the disguise.

I have argued that the white coat functions as a liturgical costume, a garment that confers authority before the physician

has said a word [43] and that the tension between healer and technician runs through the whole of modern practice [44]. The goatskins are that costume. Patients bless the hands: the procedure, the technology, the institutional competence. They often do so without ever recognizing the voice. And physicians learn that the blessing comes through the skins, and so we wear them more and more.

The danger is not the wearing. The danger is that the voice is lost under the hands. A physician can become all Esau-hands: skilled, fast, procedurally impeccable, and silent. Then there is no *matkela*, only the left pan. Conversely, a physician who refuses the skins, who speaks beautifully and cannot operate, cannot order the right test, cannot bear the violence that intervention sometimes requires, has only the right pan. Neither can hold the scale.

Jacob’s greatness in this scene, if the word is right, is that he carries both at once. The voice remains his own. Isaac hears it. Jacob does not disguise his voice; he could not. The hands are Esau’s, and he wears them knowingly. This is the *matkela* in a body.

But the text will not let this become a simple model. Jacob deceives his father. The blessing is obtained by a lie, and it costs him twenty years of exile, the loss of his mother, whom he never sees again, and a lifetime of being deceived in turn. The clinical application must carry that cost. When the physician’s hands are presented to the patient as though they were the whole of the physician, when technical competence is allowed to stand in for presence, the patient is deceived, even if no false word is spoken. I have written about the contextual errors that result when the human situation is left out of the clinical reckoning [45]. The goatskins are necessary. Wearing them without naming them is the beginning of a lie.



Azazel as Boundary, Not Scapegoat

The goat for Azazel is the most troubling figure in the rite, and the most clinically useful. Aaron lays both hands on its head and confesses over it “all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins”. A designated man leads it into the wilderness, “and the goat shall bear upon it all their iniquities to a land cut off” [27].

The *Me'or Einayim* reads this as the destiny of the left once it has been sweetened: it carries the sins “to a land cut off, because everything had been sweetened” [3]. The order matters. The sending comes *after* the sweetening, not instead of it. The left is first included and bound into the whole; only then is it sent to its place. What is sent is not repressed. It is named aloud, loaded by hand, and given somewhere to go.

This is, I think, the most precise image in the tradition for what psychoanalysis learned about the clinician’s own darkness. Winnicott argued in 1949 that the analyst will hate the patient, and that the work depends not on the absence of that hate but on the analyst’s capacity to know it, hold it, and not act on it [46]. Groves, writing for internists, named four kinds of “hateful patient” and insisted that the physician’s negative feelings are clinical data, not moral failures to be suppressed [47]. Both are describing the Azazel rite. The hatred, boredom, fear, and relief that arise in the encounter must be confessed, at least inwardly; laid on something with both hands; and sent to a place where they cannot prosecute the patient. I have written about the fluidity of evil in the therapeutic space and the moral ambiguity it produces [48]. The rite gives that ambiguity a form.

But the rite also carries a danger, and it would be dishonest to ignore it. The same structure that bounds the left can be used to expel a person. René Girard made the scapegoat mechanism the foundation of his account of social violence: a community in crisis restores its unity by transferring its guilt onto a victim and driving the victim out [49]. The “difficult patient” can become that victim. The team’s frustration, the system’s failures, the physician’s own helplessness are loaded onto the patient who does not get better, who complains, who does not fit the pathway, and that patient is sent away: discharged, referred on, labelled. And the physician can be the system’s goat too, carrying the institution’s sins into burnout and exile. I have described this as the Faustian bargain of modern practice [50] and the grief that follows a patient’s death as one of its unacknowledged costs [51].

How does one tell the difference between the Azazel of the *Me'or Einayim* and the scapegoat of Girard? The sources give three criteria.

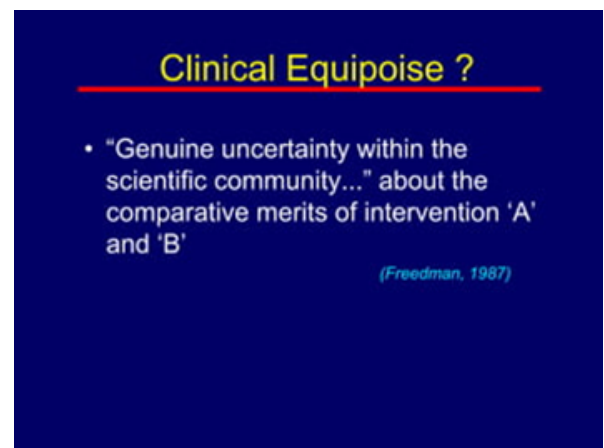
First, *sweetening precedes sending*. Only a left that has been included and bound may be sent. An impulse that has not been acknowledged, a hatred that has not been named, a failure that has not been owned, cannot be sent; it can only be projected. Projection is expulsion without inclusion. That is the scapegoat.

Second, *the goat is not the person*. In the rite, what is sent away is an animal that carries confessed sins. In the midrash, it is Esau, but Esau as a symbolic grade, not a human being to be driven from the camp. When the burden lands on an actual patient, or an actual colleague, the rite has been inverted.

Third, *the burden does not stay with the goat*. There is a remarkable late midrash in the additions to *Seder Eliyahu Zuta* [52]. Esau protests to God: “Master of the universe, is my strength such that I can bear all of Jacob’s iniquities that You load upon me?” And God takes all of Jacob’s sins and puts them

on His own garments, “so that their crimson became an intense scarlet,” and He will wash them until they are white as snow. Halperin called this a “stunning reversal” of R. Isaac’s midrash [21]. It is also, for the clinician, the decisive correction. The goat is not left to carry the burden forever. Someone above the rite takes it back.

In the clinic, the equivalent is simple and difficult. The clinician who has sent the unbearable to its place must not leave it with the patient. The clinician must take it back, in supervision, in reflection, in grief, in prayer, and carry it where it belongs. The Azazel rite, honestly performed, ends not in the wilderness but in the High Priest’s return to the sanctuary. I have argued elsewhere that the $\chi\lambda$, the particle that points without predicating, is the grammar of this kind of presence [53]. It indicates what is there without naming it wrongly.



Equipoise and the Third: The Matkela in Clinical Terms

Medicine already has a word for a balance. It is *equipoise*. In 1987 Benjamin Freedman defined clinical equipoise as a state of honest, professional disagreement among expert clinicians about which of two treatments is better [54]. Where such disagreement exists, it is ethical to randomize a patient between them; where it does not, it is not. Equipoise is thus the ethical condition of the controlled trial. It is literally a *matkela*: two pans held level, and a judgment that neither yet outweighs the other.

The comparison is instructive because of where it fails. Equipoise is a balance of *uncertainty*. It holds two options level because we do not yet know which is better, and it is designed to end: the trial tips the scale, and the balance is resolved. The *matkela* of the *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* is a balance of *relation*. It holds two powers in relation not because we are ignorant of their weights but because the world cannot survive their separation. It is not designed to end. When it ends, the kings die.

The clinical encounter requires both balances, and confusing them does harm. When a physician treats a relational tension as if it were an uncertainty waiting for data, for example the tension between a patient’s wish to go on and the body’s failure, the physician waits for the scale to tip and, when it does, declares one pan the winner. “The scans show progression; there is nothing more to do”. That is equipoise resolved. But the

patient's wish did not become false because the scan was bad. It needs to be held in relation to the scan, not overruled by it. That is *matkela*.

The psychoanalytic literature on the "third" comes closest to the Zohar's idea. Thomas Ogden described the analytic third as a subjectivity created jointly by analyst and patient, belonging to neither, and yet experienced by each [55]. Jessica Benjamin developed the idea into an ethic. She describes the typical impasse of a clinical relationship as "doer and done to", a complementarity in which each party experiences the other as acting upon them and neither can step outside. The way out is not for one party to win but for both to surrender, not to each other, but to a third: a shared principle, rhythm, or recognition that neither owns [56].

Benjamin's surrender to the third is close to what the *Me'or Einayim* means when it says the tongue "establishes them in the middle." The pans do not surrender to the tongue. Both are brought into relation by something that is not one of them. And that is the decisive point for the thesis of this essay. If the third is not the clinician's possession, the clinician cannot be the fulcrum. The clinician, too, surrenders to it.

I have argued elsewhere for a "third grammar" in the theology of the clinical encounter, one that refuses both the consolations of theodicy and the despair of pure absence [57]. The *matkela* is its structural correlate. It is a third that does not resolve the two into one, but lets them face each other.

What, then, does the clinician actually do? The answer the sources suggest is modest. The clinician keeps both pans loaded. That is, the clinician refuses to let either the patient's voice or the body's evidence be removed from the scale. The clinician registers truthfully which way the scale leans, and says so, in words measured to what can be borne. And the clinician waits, sometimes for a long time, in the relation, without forcing a resolution that the situation does not yet contain. These are small acts. They are the whole of the tongue's work.



After Tzimtum: Measure as Relation

Much of my work over the past several years has been an attempt to use the Lurianic doctrine of *tzimtum* as a model for the clinical encounter. I have argued that the physician's withdrawal makes room for the patient's own reality [58], that the horse-and-rider parable, in which God is to the world as the rider is to the horse, collapses once *makom* is read through

tzimtum [59] and that therapeutic contraction must be revised, because the fracture lies within mercy itself and not only between mercy and its absence [60]. I have also argued for an irreducible *ayin* and *yesh*, a nothingness and a somethingness that the heart cannot collapse into one another [61] and for a theology of sacred brokenness in the broken *vav* of *shalom* [62].

The *matkela* supplies something that model lacked. *Tzimtum* explains how otherness becomes possible. God withdraws, and a space appears in which something other than God can exist. The physician withdraws, and the patient's own story can appear. But *tzimtum* on its own says nothing about how the others that appear in the vacated space are to live together. It makes room. It does not order the room.

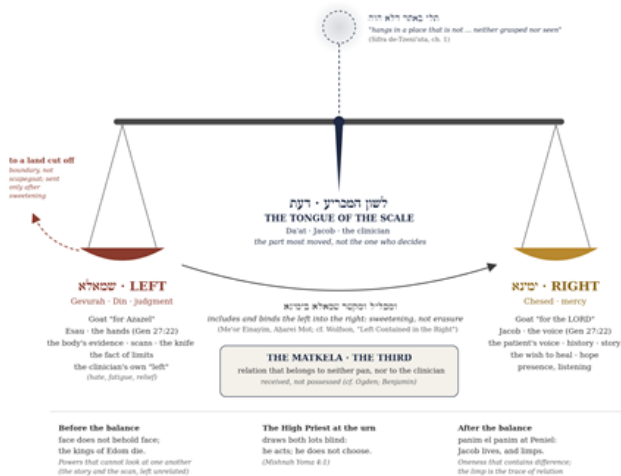
That is precisely the problem of the *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta*. Its kings exist. There is room for them. What they lack is relation. They cannot face one another, and so they die. The *matkela* is the principle that comes after the contraction and makes relation possible among the differentiated. If *tzimtum* is the first gift, space, then *matkela* is the second, measure. And measure here does not mean precision. It means proportion: the right relation of one thing to another.

This distinction clarifies the clinical application. The therapeutic *tzimtum* I have described is necessary but not sufficient. A physician can withdraw beautifully, make room for the patient's story, listen without interrupting, and still leave the patient with two unrelated realities: the story and the scan, the hope and the prognosis, the person and the disease. The withdrawal has made room for both, but nothing has brought them into relation. The patient, alone with them, experiences exactly what the primordial kings experienced: powers that cannot look at one another.

The *matkela* names the further work. After making room, the clinician helps the pans face one another. Not by resolving them, not by declaring a winner, but by holding them in the same frame long enough for the patient to see both at once. The result is not the undifferentiated unity that preceded the contraction. It is the richer unity that follows it, a oneness that contains difference.

I have described elsewhere the Shekhinah's pain as a pain of exile, a divine presence that suffers with those it accompanies [63]. The *matkela* adds that the Shekhinah's exile is not only a separation from above. It is also the condition of powers that have not yet been brought face to face. The work of repair is not only to bring the Shekhinah home. It is to let the faces meet.

There is a biblical scene where this happens. Jacob, alone by the Jabbok, wrestles through the night with a figure who will not give his name. At dawn he receives a new name, Israel, and says: "I have seen God face to face (*panim el panim*), and my life was preserved" [19]. The phrase answers the *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* directly. Before the balance, face did not behold face, and the kings died. At Peniel, face beholds face, and Jacob lives. But he limps. The *matkela* does not make Jacob whole in the sense of unwounded. It makes him whole in the sense of related. The limp is the trace of the relation.



Objections and Replies

First objection: the essay still flatters the physician. It compares the clinician to a patriarch and a High Priest. Is that not the grandiosity it claims to renounce?

The comparison is to their structural position, not their stature, and the essay's whole argument is that the position is not sovereign. The High Priest draws blind. Jacob wins the blessing by a disguise that costs him twenty years. The tongue of the scale is the part most at the mercy of the weights. If anything in this essay flatters the physician, it is the claim that sensitivity is a form of authority. I believe that claim, but I hold it as a discipline to be practised, not a status to be enjoyed.

Second objection: Jacob is a deceiver. Why take as a model of integration a man who lied to his blind father?

Because the tradition does. The *Me'or Einayim* does not choose Jacob in spite of the goatskins but because of them: he is the one who can carry both identities. The essay does not endorse the deception. It argues that the clinician inevitably wears Esau's hands, that the blessing comes through them, and that the moral question is whether the clinician names what he is wearing. The deception in Genesis 27 is a warning about what happens when the hands are presented as the whole person.

Third objection: "all becomes right" sounds like denial. Clinically, a model in which the left is "sweetened" could license false positivity: the refusal to acknowledge bad news, the insistence that suffering is secretly good.

That is the most serious objection, and it is why I insist on the order of the rite. Sweetening is not relabelling. The left is first named, confessed over with both hands, and sent to its place. Only a judgment that has been fully acknowledged can be sweetened. The *Me'or Einayim*'s claim is that judgment loses its autonomy, not its reality. In clinical terms: the bad news is not softened into something else. It is brought into relation with the rest of the patient's life, so that it no longer rules alone.

Fourth objection: this is Aristotle's mean, or shared decision-making, in mystical dress.

Neither. The mean avoids extremes; the *matkela* holds them [17]. Shared decision-making distributes the choice between

physician and patient; the *matkela* places the balance in neither of them. The closest secular analogue is the psychoanalytic third [55,56] and even there the Zohar adds something the analysts do not: the claim that the balance "hangs in a place that is not." The third is not only co-created. It is received.

Fifth objection: the argument depends on a theology many clinicians and patients do not share.

In a recent essay I argued that some elements of a system can travel alone, detached from the theology in which they arose, and others cannot [64]. The practical core of this essay travels. A secular clinician can keep both pans loaded, register the scale truthfully, name the costume he wears, send what is unbearable to its boundary without making anyone the scapegoat, and take the burden back afterwards. What does not travel is the claim about where the balance hangs. For me, that claim is not decoration. It is the reason the clinician is not the fulcrum. But the practice can be learned without it.

Conclusion: The Humility of the Tongue

I began with a picture of the physician on the knife edge, like Jacob, deciding between the pans. I end with a different picture, which I think is truer to the texts and to forty-seven years of practice.

The kings of Edom died because they reigned before there was a balance. Each was absolute; none could look at another. The balance arrived with Jacob, not because Jacob was the strongest or the most righteous, but because he could carry both identities at once: the voice that was his and the hands that were his brother's. The tradition read this in the two goats of Yom Kippur. Both were brought by Jacob's merit. One went inward, to the Holy of Holies. One went outward, carrying what had been confessed. And between them stood the High Priest, who did not choose their destinies, but drew blind from the urn, and did what the lots required.

The *Me'or Einayim* called this balance *Da'at*, the place where choice resides, and said that its work was to include and bind the left into the right until the accuser lost its standing. Sefer Yetzirah had already named the balancing principle as a tongue made of breath. And the *Sifra de-Tzeni'uta* said, before any of them, that the balance hangs in a place that is not, and cannot be grasped.

The clinician who learns from these texts does not stand on the fulcrum. The clinician is the tongue of the scale: the part of the instrument most moved by what lies in the pans, whose only authority is the accuracy with which it registers and declares what it feels. That clinician keeps both pans loaded: the patient's voice and the body's evidence, the wish to heal and the fact of limits. He wears Esau's hands, because medicine cannot be practised without them, and he names them as hands. He sends what is unbearable in the encounter to its place, but only after he has confessed it, and he does not let the goat be a person. And when the rite is over he takes the burden back, as the late midrash says God took Jacob's sins onto His own garments, so that the goat does not carry them forever [52].

The book of Micah ends with a verse read on the afternoon of

Yom Kippur itself, after the book of Jonah: “You will give truth to Jacob” (*titen emet le-Ya'akov*) [65]. It is striking that truth is something *given* to Jacob, not something he possesses. The tradition knew that Jacob's relation to truth was complicated. Truth comes to him as a gift, late, after the ladder and the exile and the wrestling and the limp.

So too the *matkela*. It is not the physician's achievement. It is given, when the physician has made room, kept both pans loaded, and waited. The humility this requires is not self-deprecation. It is the recognition that the balance does not rest on us. It hangs in a place that is not. Our work is to be moved by it truthfully, and to say what we see.

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