



REVIEW ARTICLE

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My Own Inner Crisis II

Higher Power vs My Higher Power

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ ← ויאמר, נמי מאמר לוי

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Existential questions are the big questions about the human condition: love, death, freedom, evil, suffering, and suicide.

These questions were treated by existentialists as an end unto themselves. As Paul Tillich write: “only the philosophical question is perennial, not the answers” (The Dynamics of Faith) [1]. In a similar vein, Elie Wiesel wrote “every question possessed a power that did not lie in the answer.” (Night) [2].

In my first essay [3], I claimed that until I understood my own inner spiritual crisis I cannot begin to entertain a therapeutic space with my patients that allows for a spiritual healing beyond the physical symptoms and history as presented by the patient. To dig deeper into the subtext and real anguish presenting itself requires a self-understanding of those psychological and spiritual barriers I myself suffer from first.



Born 5 years after the Shoah to a survivor from Vienna, my childhood was spent obsessing about the subject and the impossibility to make sense of theodicy in a rational way [4]. In a recent documentary on my father’s wartime experience (“The cup half full”) I was asked to voice over the following narrative [5]:

“On June 14th, 1942, Regina, Julius, Alice, and 997 other Viennese Jews were forced to board a train at noon at the Aspang Railway Station in Vienna. Boarding took 7 hours, and the train departed at 7:08 pm. The train ride took three days and some 51 Jewish men between the ages of 15 and 50 were taken off the train at Lublin and sent to labor camps. The remaining 949 Jews arrived at Sobibor on the 17th of June at 8:15am. Every single one of these people, including the Ungars, were killed in the gas chambers and their bodies were destroyed in the crematoria a few hours after their arrival.

While Willi was unable to get letters to his family from November of 1941 and on, he did still receive some letters after that date. The last letter that we have from the Ungars in Vienna is dated January 4th, 1942. “

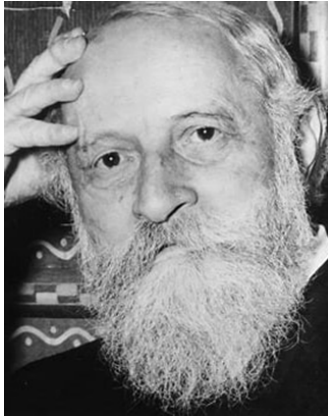
As I read these scripted lines over and over, the director commenting on my tone pitch prosody, and where to put the accent to coincide with the pictorial images, the full force of the words did not hit me until later. These were words, evoking memories of close beloved people I never knew because of events in history. Victims of man’s inhumanity to man, these were my grandparents and aunty I would never hug, or kiss embrace or speak with. I was filled with a newly uncovered grief, a deep wound which I had not confronted prior, in all the years of research and study into the Shoah and theodicy.

The tension between the precision of this verbal performance and the emotional response was hard to maintain but I think is emblematic of the tension between theology in objectively and rationally describing God or the god-image (Jung) versus the intimacy of the mystical encounter with an alteric Being (I might call “my” Higher power in the I-Thou sense of Martin Buber).

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In this second essay I want to add some biographical details of my journey and add a model from recent neurophysiology to my argument that as doctors and care-givers we must remain with this same tension between the objective analysis and precision in diagnostic analysis and treatment yet be open to the more intangible grief and wounding of our patients by dipping deep into our own woundedness.



Martin Buber 1878-1965

I have already outlined in previous essays [6] the work of neurologist Ian McGilchrist who argues that the division of the brain into two hemispheres is essential to human existence, making possible incompatible versions of the world, with quite different priorities and values.

The relationship between the two hemispheres of the brain is increasingly seen as central to our well-being and mental health, as a number of leading neuroscientists and psychotherapists have observed. Hemispheric imbalances and disconnections underlie many of our most prevalent forms of mental distress and disturbance, including schizophrenia, depression, autism, psychopathy, and alexithymia, as well as many relational and dissociative pathologies, including borderline, narcissistic, schizoid and paranoid personality disorders. A contemporary understanding of the nature of the divided brain is therefore of importance in engaging with and treating these conditions [7].

Not only mental health is affected but also spiritual health and trauma is controlled in different ways by these interhemispheric differences. Indeed, I claim that beyond the psychiatric, it is important to be able to understand what system our patients employ when presenting their symptoms and what deeper unacknowledged narrative can be unearthed by our awareness of two separate systems at work.

As I process this new science and be challenged by two possible ways of interpreting reality and therefore God, it rapidly becomes clear that I need to hold the paradox of the two-hemisphere model, subtending the rational vs non-rational mind, as a fertile tension, not to be resolved. I do not need to sacrifice my religious spiritual experience for a rational critique, rather respect the validity of both the rational and intuitive at the same time incompatible may they be.

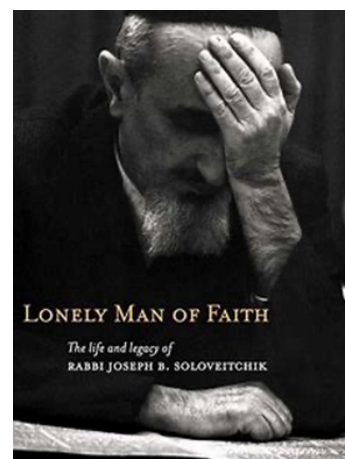
How does my existential crisis be better served by this model?

Niels Bohr said that the fact that spiritual traditions through the ages have spoken in images, parables and paradoxes means simply that there are no other ways of grasping the reality to which they refer; but that doesn't mean that it is not a genuine reality. Like beauty, goodness and truth and, it would seem, like atoms and their quantum fields, it rebuffs precision. And yet we know perfectly well when we encounter it, if we're not incapable of sensing it.

Images, parables and paradoxes refers to the function of the non-dominant hemisphere is validating a world full of contradiction.

The tension between intellect and heard has resonated thought religious doctrinal history as between the theologians who describe the sacred and those who experience it. From Apollo to Delphi, from Athens to Jerusalem, from the Jesuits to the Franciscans and the mystics proclaimed as heretics by their respective orthodoxies, man has suspected the intangible quality of the right hemisphere and its broad, holistic perspective, focusing on the interconnectedness of things. It is associated with empathy, social bonding, and intuitive understanding. The left hemisphere-with its narrow, focused view, excelling at analyzing details and manipulating isolated elements. It is linked to competition, logic, and language. It is analytic, discursive, precision, didactic, philosophic, authoritative, unable to tolerate ambiguity, nor paradox.

How ironic that I return to a seminal essay I read at age 18 that changed my understanding of what was prior a narrowminded orthodox view of the divine precisely because it outlined two types of religious man: Split between "Adam I and Adam II"



Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik's described the typology he called Adam I, created to master of the world out there, and his reading of Genesis chapter 1 with its "*pshuto shel mikra*" [8] the monotheistic view of the world as a thought in God's mind, and the Torah- a commentary on it, commanding mankind to control the world and develop technology in conquering it.

The second typology described as the servant in the Garden of Eden placed there to work it and tend to it he calls Adam II. Adam I is the "majestic man," focused on creativity, control, and mastery over the world. Adam II, on the other hand, is the "covenantal man," seeking a relationship with God and meaning beyond the material.

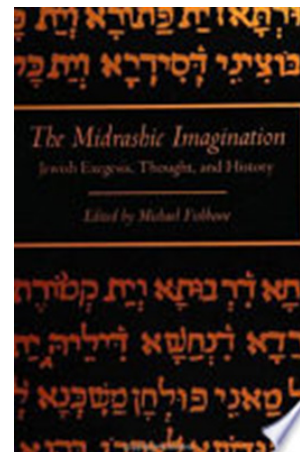
Soloveitchik's analysis delves into the tension between these two aspects of human nature. He argues that modern individuals often feel isolated because they struggle to balance these dual aspects of their identity. This duality is not just a personal struggle but reflects broader societal challenges in reconciling faith with modernity. Modern man is isolated and lonely and does not feel at home in the universe because he has forsaken the Adam II task. In a remarkable way his description fits with McGilchrist's diagnosis of modern enlightenment emphasis on the rational alone [9]:

What does a sense of the sacred entail? It requires being open to something other, something not already familiar, not part of the self-consistent system in which one operates. We must not ignore, or simply not see, whatever does not fit the prevailing paradigm. The sacred relies on indirect and metaphorical expression, metaphor meaning literally something that carries you across—not direct and literal expression; and on rituals, which are embodied metaphors. Of the two ancient paths to truth, we here need *mythos*, not *logos*. It requires acceptance of ambiguity, since both of what on the surface appear to be contradictory aspects might form a dipole and both be true.

Unfortunately, Soloveitchik never resolved the tension or perhaps he reflected the irreconcilable nature of the two typologies.

The voluminous corpus of the rabbinic texts involves not just the legal aspects or *halakhah*, but also midrash and aggadah, a prolific repository of unrefined philosophical theology encompassing narrative, allegory, and a deeply intimate exegetical engagement with every word and sentence of the biblical text.

One example that tried many rabbis and philosophers of religion was biblical anthropomorphism, that needed to be interpreted metaphorically or allegorically but then drained them of any characteristic we would consider alive spiritually. A "higher power" that interacted with man needed more of what Franz Rosenzweig considered as an "assertion about meetings between God and man." (That was further evolved by Abraham Joshua Heschel who considered biblical reports of divine responses, as disclosures not of His Being but of relationship between God and humanity). My study of texts over decades and my own life crises have led me to such texts that favoured such a mythical dynamic approach, that engaged dramatically at times with the divine. The Midrashic tradition was free flowing, open to multiple indeterminate interpretations of texts and allowing one's own creative reading in the process.



Under the influence of scholar and my teacher Michael Fishbane who explored how mythic elements are deeply embedded in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition, Fishbane argued that rather than suppressing these myths, Jewish tradition has often deepened and expanded them, particularly in rabbinic literature and Kabbalah. In his "The Midrashic Imagination," [10] he examines the broad range of Jewish interpretation from antiquity through the medieval and renaissance periods.

He focused on midrashic creativity, exploring classical Midrash from various angles, including mythmaking and parables and highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of Jewish myth and midrash, showing how these elements contribute to the richness and depth of Jewish theological and cultural traditions. This allowed me to work on the use of rabbinic parables as a key element in encoding trauma beneath the surface of a text. Using the midrash to the book of Lamentations (5th century Rabbinic commentary), I attempted to show how the parable allowed for protest and a refusal of the surface rabbinic assumptions of God's righteousness and justification in the destruction of the Temple [11].

It was when I discovered the body of texts of Hassidism that such hermeneutic moves were subsequently developed (hundreds of years later) and juggled the delicate balance between reverence for the divine and mystical attachment (dveykut) yet free to question and struggle with faith.



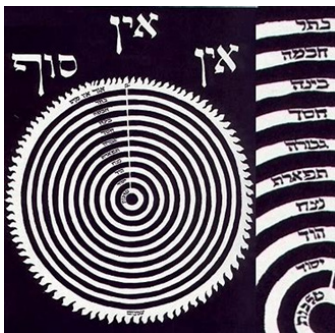
Thalita Hamaoui, Rosário Oeste

Through the teachings of Rebbe Shlomo Carlebach I came to study R. Zadok HaCohen and the school of 19th Century (third generation) Polish hasidism with its roots in the Prysucha counter-revolution of hasidism, who initiated the move to cognitive mysticism, in order to balance the academic (Lithuanian-style) of pure scholastic *emet*, truth, with *emunah*, faith.

For Alan Brill [12], R. Zadok is “*the hasid lamdan who, unlike R. Elijah (Gaon of Vilna), uses the mind, the instrument of Torah, and his individual will to come to know God as best a mortal can. R. Zadok’s introspection was “self-analytical nature,” which is a sensibility that does not present in pre-modern thought.*

Brill's reading of R. Zadok seems to bridge the gap between rationalism and mysticism. R. Zadok carefully adheres to the canons of (Lithuanian) rational thought, yet his Hassidic exposure providing the sense of Divine immediacy. However, none of the above was spiritually satisfying when confronting the Shoah. None of these attempts to reconcile the analytic with the experiential was sufficient a language to convey the horror of the tremendum and its effect on theology. Elie Wiesel had developed a new language, but the questions remained questions and any rationalizations by post holocaust theologians only made matters worse [13]. It was only through the writings of Rebbe Nachman of Bratzlav and the way his approach using the theology of the Lurianic mystical corpus did things begin to make sense.

In the mythology of creation according to R. Luria (henceforth the Ari) the infinite had to withdraw in order to make space for the finite world.

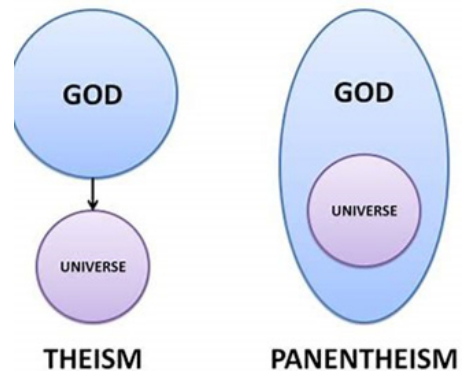


In the celebrated formulation of the Ari, before the creation of the world “the sublime and simple light filled all of reality.” There was no empty place or vacant space, but everything was filled by that simple light . . . then, the Ein-Sof [the Infinite] contracted itself at the very central point, and contracted that light to surround the central point, and left an empty place and a vacant space. *Tzimtzum*. in which all the worlds emanated, created, and formed.

The precise meaning of this striking description was the subject of learned and subtle controversy among early modern kabbalists. Some conceived it as a more or less literal description, affirming that the creation of space truly vacant from God, a kind of spiritual vacuum, was a necessary condition for the creation of the world.

In contrast to this school, virtually every Hasidic master adopted a nonliteral reading of the doctrine arguing that the divine contraction before creation was only apparent and that truly God never withdrew from any part of reality. This seemingly academic difference had critical meaning for me for the presence or absence of God in history and especially God’s absence in Auschwitz.

In the writings of Rebbe Nachman the paradoxical nature of the “*tzimtzum*” [14] as God being present at the same time as being absent, a non-rational claim that can only be resolved “in the future”. The paradox of God’s presence and simultaneous absence allows for the holding of two seemingly contradictory claims at once, a right hemisphere ability.

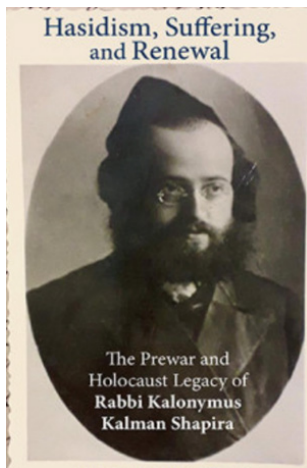


Baruch Spinoza claimed that "Whatsoever is, is in God, and without God nothing can be, or be conceived." And that "Individual things are nothing but modifications of the attributes of God, or modes by which the attributes of God are expressed in a fixed and definite manner."

In a letter to Henry Oldenburg Spinoza states that: "as to the view of certain people that identify god with nature (taken as a kind of mass or corporeal matter), they are quite mistaken" [15]. For Spinoza, our universe (cosmos) is a mode under two attributes of Thought and Extension. God has infinitely many other attributes which are not present in our world.

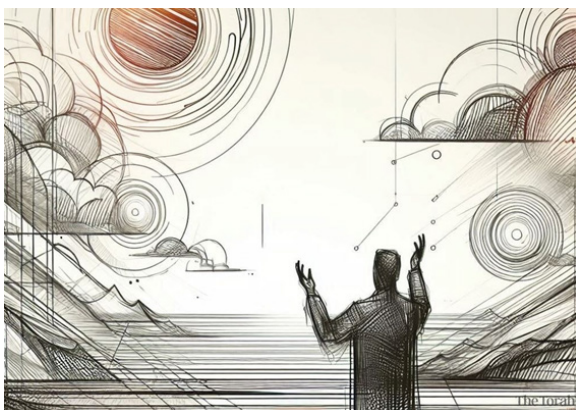
In 1828, the German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832) seeking to reconcile monotheism and pantheism, coined the term *panentheism* (from the Ancient Greek expression $\pi\acute{\alpha}\nu \acute{\epsilon}\nu \theta\epsilon\acute{\omega}$, *pān en theō*, literally "all in god").

This conception of God influenced New England transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson. It was also appropriated by Gershom Scholem as Panentheism, meaning “all-in-God,” to describe Hasidism [16]. Panentheists and Hassidim believe three things: that the world is within God, that God is in all things, and that God is also supernaturally transcendent. Thus God is ontologically at one with the universe and yet remains greater than the universe. The universe does not exhaust what it means to be God. These writings allowed my reading of Rebbe Nachman along with his other radical ideas on messianism and history to support a divine in whom evil and demonic forces are within yet integral to the redemption through history.



Finally the writing of the Piacenza Rebbe writing before his deportation from the Warsaw ghetto and murder in Treblinka in 1942-3, allows for a new notion of theodicy that included prior mystical understanding with a new urgent personal suffering never before articulated. God's pain would destroy the world were it not mediated by sacred textuality. For example, a woman who "allows" herself to be broken by suffering sends a protest message to God about the nature of human frailty. The Rebbe imagines God weeping in His inner chambers, and we may be invited in to weep with Him [17]. Such themes emerge in *Sacred Fire*, (*Esh Kodesh*) a collection of homiletic and interpretive essays possibly the last work of traditional Jewish scholarship ever composed on Polish soil [18].

The notion of God's pain (comfortable to Christian theology through the incarnation of and experience through His son) was of great solace to my aching heart as articulated in real time and in anguish through the sermons that miraculously survived the Warsaw Ghetto, of this hassidic Rebbe.



The Eclipse of God

In the Bible, God takes responsibility for hiding. *Then My anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and hide My face from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, "Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us."* 31:18 **Yet I will surely hide My face on that day, because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods... Deut 31:17**

In contrast, Martin Buber's *The Eclipse of God* (1952) apportions the responsibility not with humanity or with God, but in between:

Eclipse of the light of heaven, eclipse of God—such indeed is the character of the historic hour through which the world is passing. But it is not a process which can be adequately accounted for by instancing the changes that have taken place in man's spirit. An eclipse of the sun is something that occurs between the sun and our eyes, not in the sun itself [19].

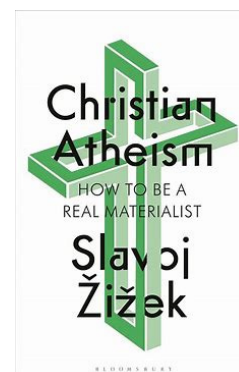
Here the responsibility is shared but in a different way. The vagaries of history, the insensitivity of human beings, perhaps the evil of other people, create a block that causes the Divine face to be hidden. Buber's imagery captures the complexity of how many of us experience the absence of God in our world.

Tzimtzum —The Withdrawal of God

Perhaps we can invoke the kabbalistic doctrine of *tzimtzum*, "withdrawal," the idea that God created the world by shrinking the divine presence to make room for the physical manifestation of the universe. In this age, our age, we might imagine ourselves as living through multiple withdrawals. *Tzimtzum*, of course, is primarily associated with creation, but we can extend the concept and see *tzimtzum* as a manifestation of God's hiding. And yet, the hiding expresses God's desire that people come find him, an image captured nicely in the title of Abraham Joshua Heschel's central work of theology *God in Search of Man* [20].

David Weiss Halivni, a survivor of Auschwitz writes in his "Breaking the Tablets" claims that the history of the Jews is "bookmarked" by two diametrically opposing "revelations": Sinai and Auschwitz. The revelation on Mount Sinai was the apex of God's nearness to the Jews, while the revelation at Auschwitz was the nadir of God's absence from them. Halivni's conviction is that Auschwitz represents not merely God's "hiding his face" from Israel, as a consequence of the Jews' sins a familiar trope in rabbinic theology but also his actual, *tzimtzum*, an ontological withdrawal from human history [21].

The hidden face of God as punishment plays a role in Christian theology, using the Latin term *deus absconditus* ("Hidden God"), and among Jews in discussion about God's place in persecution, most recently the *shoah* (Holocaust). Recently, however I found an ironic concordance between the theodicy of David Weiss Halivni and Zizec's heretical interpretation of Hegel's Christianity.



Zizec and Theology

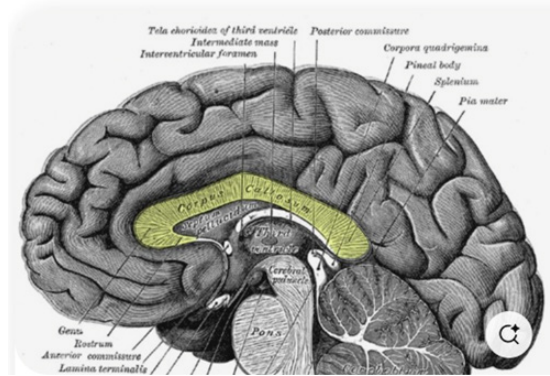
An atheist theology sounds like an oxymoron; however, far from a contradiction in terms, it is arguably the goal of a strain of theology that has fully embraced the limitations of human knowledge and the inadequacy of our conceptions of God. Accordingly, atheism has long been recognized as nascent within the theological tradition, in the various apophatic mystical varieties that have come and gone in the course of two thousand years of theology known also as the *via negativa*, the theological method that asserts the inaccessibility of God to human languages and concepts.

The effect of this is twofold: on the one hand, it maintains the sanctity of God and refuses to allow any one given conception of God to calcify as a possible source of idolatry. On the other hand, this type of theology, as exemplified by Nicholas of Cusa or Meister Eckhart, is a type of theology that disavows God, refuses God, a theology that functions without regard to God and thus regardless of God's existence or non-existence. Postmodern theologies, at a basic level, challenge traditional modernist forms of rationality by employing strategies of suspicion (including hermeneutics and genealogies), a suspicion demonstrated by focusing on the limits of human understanding, desiring to find paradox and undermining modernist assumptions of truth.

The atheistic quality in Žižek's theology is predicated on the concept of abandonment [22].

The Biblical text Žižek is most fond of citing is Christ's death on the cross, one Žižek formulates as "Father, why have you forsaken me?" In *The Monstrosity of Christ*, one can clearly see the connection between this notion of abandonment. Žižek writes that instead of: *the transcendent God guaranteeing the making of the universe, God as the hidden Master pulling the strings...we get a God who abandons this transcendent position and throws himself into his own creation, fully engaging himself in it up to dying, so that we, humans, are left with no higher Power watching over us, just with the terrible burden of freedom and responsibility for the fate of divine creation, and thus of God himself* [23].

In other words, Žižek interprets the human reaction to God's movement from the transcendent to the divine as one of anguish: we feel abandoned although we ourselves are empowered with Providential freedoms and responsibilities. It is at this point, however, that Žižek re-reads the notion of a creation *ex nihilo* to argue that the "nothingness" out of which creation sprang was a nothingness that also already had to be a part of God, rather than other than God: this coincidence of being and nothing that pre-existed creation- (*ayin* in Kabbalah). Although this compassion does not provide a meaning to suffering, the notion of a God that suffers, from Žižek's perspective, constitutes the decisive advance that Christianity makes over paganism. I find this notion similarly in Weiss Halivni's articulation divine withdrawal or *tzimtzum* occurring not at the time of creation but in the withdrawal of the divine as an ongoing act within history (culminating in Auschwitz).



In my last iteration however are the rituals of prayer and meditation following the loss of my father have forced me out of the left hemisphere in making rational sense of the suffering and anguish that is human history, and the refusal to rely on an outside *deus ex machina* because it is a *deus absconditus*... rather opened me to the intuitive experiential side almost against my will.

Since my father's death I am no longer the heretical son, challenging the orthodox simple faith that got him through the Holocaust as a refugee and enemy alien prisoner of war. His ghost informs me to follow the tradition of my father and his father and intuitively I find myself drawn back (in no small part through the prayer for the departed or Kaddish requiring twice daily attendance at synagogue for a year) and a deep desire to honor his life and his vision.



This right hemisphere of mine refuses to let go of the uncanny intuitive sense exemplified by the following senses:

Embracing eros, uncertainty, the greyness of things, loving the very space between opposites, like twilight [24], precisely because it defies the neat halachic categories of day or night. The love of Midrash and the deeper layers between the lines of the text betraying its unconscious desire, like listening to a patient's history for the cracks in the narrative that reveal the real story.

Thirsting for unio mystica, hymns to the drowning, the madness and insanity of love, the inter-inclusion of everything despite understanding nothing, the deeper wisdom in the belly, the sacre coeur, the humbled servant brought to his knees in pain and addiction, the I-Thou of the act of surrender [25].

Whether a winter sunset or the slow movement of the Eroica, life sends signals to a reality that cannot be understood only sensed.

On these rare occasions like

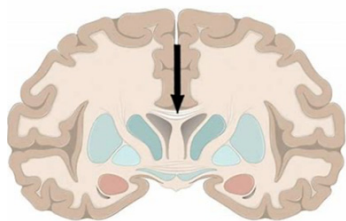
A Shabbat inspiration at 3am pouring over the Zohar,

A submerged insight bubbling up in the immersion in the Mikvah

Intuiting a diagnosis while immersively listening to a suffering patient, the left will reluctantly admit, acknowledge, concede:

"I was clueless!" my rational thinking got me nowhere, to the edge of ignorance, to the abyss of not knowing, and here you right sided map of neurons intuited the solution!

In such acts of surrender, the truth emerged from the depths.



The Corpus callosum [26]

These opposite irreconcilable hemispheric views of reality and the world and higher power are connected by a thin strand of neurons:

*This thick band of nerve fibers allows the communication between both hemispheres. This part is responsible for transmitting sensory, motor, and cognitive information between both halves of the brain. It is the most extensive connective pathway in the brain, with **200 million axonal projections** in the middle of two hemispheres. It occupies the center of the brain and almost 10 cm in length.*

Only a few fibres (2%) connect the two hemispheres, meaning there is only minimal communication between my hemispheres that reflects my fractured soul.

The left continues in blissful ignorance of the very existence of the right...

Adam I and Adam II communicate minimally.



Doubting Thomas by Caravaggio

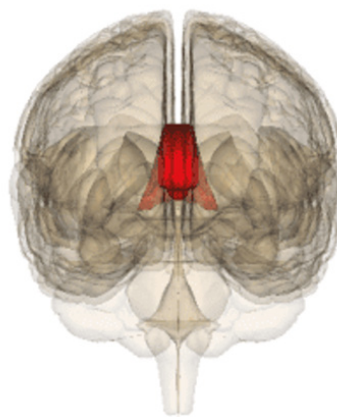
More often the right distrusts itself, knowing the *inner Kritik* that is the left side, the doubting Thomas poking his little finger into the wound of the Caravaggio portrayal of the passion.

This preordained split may have once had biological evolutionary survival value, but the over reliance on the left hemispheric power models has left me and the wreckage of the past and the planet bereft.

Now my daily work is to convert the Higher Power to *my* Higher Power and not see the time and effort as wasted. To inhibit the left hemisphere, to quiet the rational mind and open the deeper structures to allow the Other to participate in the healing of wounds inherited and earned.

Those few callosal strand connecting these disparate worlds are the lifeline of sanity and recovery.

Conclusion



Using the interhemispheric model as a tool to self-understanding we can make some inferences as follows:

My left hemisphere employs reason and logic to view the world. It might see the reasonableness of a prime mover an intelligent design(er) however because of issues with theodicy it cannot abide a loving deity for logical reasons of human biology cruelty evolution and history. The farthest it is willing to admit to is a Spinozian pantheism, a (Jungian) god-concept and a sense of curiosity at the starry sky (Heschel).

My right hemisphere, however, allows for the uncanny intuitive notion of a loving (I-Thou) God, and a sense of my being a humble servant unique yet a holographic incarnation of divinity. My right hemisphere sees a coherence and elegance to the world and how suffering pain and a broken soul is part of the ongoing unfolding of a spirituality where mankind is being asked to mature and connect with a Higher Power in a personal way.

The goal is to balance and contain the disparate pulls of each hemisphere in the healing of the soul that makes rational sense only sometimes and needs the intuitive experiential

understanding from the non-rational side of self to function wholly and in an integrative fashion. Until we physicians understand these pulls and conflicts within, we cannot begin to hear our patients' cries and anguish and see beneath the surface of their stories.

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24. Rabbi Rami Shapiro teaches an alternative understanding of surrender. He claims freedom that comes from letting go of cultural conditioning. A freedom that comes with a radical acceptance of and being surrendered to what is. See his Surrendered-The Sacred Art: Shattering the Illusion of Control and Falling into Grace with Twelve-Step Spirituality. The Art of Spiritual Living. SkyLight Paths. 2019.
25. Corpus Callosum comes from the Latin word corpus meaning body and callosum, meaning tough or hard.