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The Wizard Behind the Curtain: Divine Concealment, and Human Suffering in Frank Baum's American Midrash

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines L. Frank Baum's The Wizard of Oz as an inadvertent American midrash that parallels kabbalistic themes of divine concealment, exile, and the paradoxical nature of ultimate reality. Drawing upon the heretical kabbalistic traditions associated with Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschütz, Elliot Wolfson's scholarship on the apophatic dimensions of Jewish mysticism, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe's teachings on atzmut (divine essence), this analysis positions Dorothy's journey as a narrative of mystical descent and the confrontation with divine absence. The essay contrasts this darker theological reading with the more benevolent psychological interpretations found in works such as those by Yonason Gershom, arguing that Baum's text unconsciously echoes the most radical currents of Jewish mystical thought.

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From Populism to Psychology

Since its publication in 1900, L. Frank Baum's The Wonderful Wizard of Oz has generated an extraordinary range of interpretative approaches, each revealing as much about the interpreter's contemporary concerns as about the text itself. The earliest and most persistent reading has been Henry Littlefield's influential economic allegory, which positions Dorothy's journey as a veiled commentary on late 19th-century American populism, with the yellow brick road representing the gold standard, the silver slippers (ruby in the 1939 film) embodying free silver coinage, and the Emerald City standing for Washington's illusory promises of prosperity [1].

Psychological interpretations have proven equally enduring, with scholars like Madonna Kolbenschlag reading Dorothy's adventure as a classic individuation narrative in the Jungian tradition—the integration of shadow aspects (represented by her companions) leading to psychic wholeness [2]. Feminist critics such as Bonnie Friedman have emphasized Dorothy's role as an early example of female heroic agency, arguing that her quest subverts traditional gender roles by positioning a young girl as the active agent of her own salvation [3]. More recently, queer theorists like Alexander Doty have explored the text's coded representations of alternative identity and community formation, particularly in its celebration of chosen family over biological kinship [4].

Cultural historians have situated the narrative within broader patterns of American mythology, with scholars like David Parker arguing that The Wizard of Oz represents a distinctly American reimagining of the European märchen tradition, transforming Old World fatalism into New World optimism about individual agency and democratic possibility [5]. Religious studies scholars have offered various spiritual readings, from Joseph Campbell's monomyth interpretation to more recent explorations of the text's Buddhist themes of illusion and enlightenment [6].

Yet for all their insights, these interpretative approaches share a common limitation: they tend toward resolution and comfort, finding in Dorothy's journey either successful integration (psychological readings), political empowerment (populist interpretations), or spiritual awakening (religious approaches). Even the more critical readings ultimately affirm human agency and the possibility of meaningful transformation within existing structures of reality.

Introduction

This essay proposes a more troubling interpretation—one that positions *The Wizard of Oz* not as a tale of successful quest completion but as what we might call an American midrash of divine absence and cosmic breakdown. When Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschütz whispered his cryptic speculations about divine catastrophe and cosmic flaw in 18th-century Prague, he could hardly have imagined that his heretical possibilities would find expression in a Kansas farmhouse two centuries later. Yet Baum's narrative, beneath its surface optimism, unconsciously mirrors the deepest and most disturbing currents of Jewish mystical thought—particularly those traditions that confront the apparent indifference of ultimate reality to human suffering.

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The midrashic tradition has always been one of creative interpretation, finding in biblical narratives layers of meaning that speak to contemporary spiritual crises. But midrash serves a dual function: it both explains and protests. It seeks to make sense of divine action while simultaneously registering the shock of divine concealment. In this light, Dorothy's journey through Oz becomes not merely a tale of self-discovery, but a profound meditation on divine absence, the failure of authority, and the mystical paradox of *atzmut*—that ultimate divine essence where being and non-being collapse into indistinction.

This reading diverges sharply from more optimistic interpretations by emphasizing not Dorothy's empowerment but her disillusionment, not the restoration of cosmic order but its fundamental fragmentation. The Wizard's impotence becomes not a steppingstone to self-reliance but a revelation of the bankruptcy of all transcendent authority. Dorothy's return to Kansas represents not triumphant homecoming but mystical dissolution—the recognition that home itself may be as illusory as the Emerald City's green spectacles.

The Structure of Midrash

To understand how *The Wizard of Oz* functions as midrash, we must first grasp what Michael Fishbane terms the "hermeneutical spiral" that characterizes midrashic interpretation [1]. For Fishbane, midrash represents not merely commentary but a form of "inner-biblical exegesis" that reveals the text's capacity for infinite reinterpretation across historical contexts [2]. The midrashic method, as Fishbane demonstrates, operates through what he calls "traditio-historical transformations"—the creative redeployment of ancient motifs in response to contemporary spiritual crises [3].

Baum's narrative unconsciously follows this midrashic pattern, taking the archetypal journey motif and transforming it into a distinctly American meditation on exile and return. Yet unlike traditional midrash, which operates within an explicitly Jewish framework, *The Wizard of Oz* represents what we might call "secular midrash"—a creative retelling that echoes traditional patterns while emerging from entirely different cultural soil.

Emil Fackenheim's analysis of modern Jewish thought provides a crucial framework for understanding this phenomenon. In *God's Presence in History*, Fackenheim argues that authentic Jewish response to modernity requires what he terms "root experiences" that echo biblical and rabbinic paradigms while addressing contemporary spiritual dilemmas [4]. Dorothy's displacement from Kansas to Oz mirrors the fundamental Jewish experience of exile (*galut*), while her search for the Wizard parallels the quest for divine presence in an age of concealment [5].

David Stern's groundbreaking work *Midrash and Theory* further illuminates this dynamic by demonstrating how midrashic interpretation operates through what he calls "analogical thinking"—the recognition of structural parallels between seemingly disparate narratives [6]. Stern argues that midrash functions not through logical argumentation but through the cultivation of what he terms "mythic consciousness," whereby ancient patterns reveal themselves within contemporary experience [7].

Applied to Baum's text, Stern's analysis suggests that *The Wizard of Oz* achieves its enduring power precisely through its unconscious replication of foundational Jewish mythic structures [8]. Dorothy's journey follows what Stern identifies as the classical midrashic pattern of departure, trial, revelation, and return—yet each element is transformed to address specifically modern anxieties about authority, meaning, and authentic selfhood.

Dorothy as the Lost Princess

The most striking parallel between *The Wizard of Oz* and traditional Jewish mystical narrative emerges in the comparison between Dorothy and the Lost Princess (*HaMalka HaAvudah*) of Rebbe Nachman's famous tale. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov (1772-1810), great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, developed a distinctive form of mystical storytelling that Arthur Green has characterized as "psychological kabbalah"—narratives that externalize inner spiritual states through archetypal characters and situations [9].

In Rebbe Nachman's "Tale of the Lost Princess," a king's daughter is exiled to a palace of *kelipah* (impurity) where she awaits redemption by a devoted servant. The Lost Princess represents the *Shekhinah*—divine presence in exile—while her would-be rescuer embodies the soul's quest for reunification with its divine source. Yet the tale's most radical insight emerges in its conclusion: The Princess can only be redeemed through the recognition that exile itself serves a redemptive function, forcing both Princess and rescuer into deeper levels of spiritual realization [10].

Dorothy's situation mirrors this paradigm with startling precision. Like the Lost Princess, she finds herself displaced from her rightful home (Kansas/the King's palace) and transported to a realm of apparent enchantment that conceals spiritual danger (Oz/the palace of *kelipah*). Her companions—Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion—parallel the various helpers that appear in Rebbe Nachman's tale, each representing aspects of divine potential that must be gathered and integrated.

Most significantly, both Dorothy and the Lost Princess discover that their exile serves an ultimately redemptive function. Dorothy's journey through Oz transforms her understanding not only of herself but of the nature of home itself. When she returns to Kansas, it is not to the same gray landscape she left but to a world transfigured by the recognition of its own hidden depth. Similarly, the Lost Princess's exile catalyzes a process of cosmic repair that could not have occurred without the apparent catastrophe of displacement.

Rebbe Nachman's understanding of storytelling as "mystical therapy"—narrative that heals through the externalization of inner conflicts—provides a crucial interpretive key for understanding *The Wizard of Oz* [11]. Both tales operate through what Nachman called "hitbodedut through story"—meditative engagement with archetypal narratives that dissolve the boundaries between inner and outer experience [12].

The ruby slippers in Baum's tale function similarly to the mystical objects in Rebbe Nachman's stories—external symbols of inner spiritual capacities that can only be activated through profound shifts in consciousness. Dorothy's discovery that "I had the power all along" echoes the central insight of Breslov Hasidism: that divine connection is always already present, concealed only by the soul's failure to recognize its own essential nature.

Yet where Rebbe Nachman's tales operate within an explicitly theological framework, *The Wizard of Oz* presents what we might call "post-theological mysticism"—spiritual insight that emerges through the systematic dissolution of traditional religious categories. Dorothy's disillusionment with the Wizard parallels the modern confrontation with divine absence, yet this absence becomes itself a form of presence—the recognition that ultimate reality transcends all finite representations.

This parallel extends to the structural level of both narratives. Rebbe Nachman's tales characteristically end not with resolution but with deepened mystery—the Lost Princess is found, yet the tale concludes with new questions about the nature of redemption itself. Similarly, Dorothy's return to Kansas resolves the surface narrative while opening more fundamental questions about the relationship between dream and reality, exile and home, appearance and essence.

The comparison illuminates a crucial dimension of both stories: their function as initiatory narratives that guide readers through a process of mystical disillusionment. Both Dorothy and Rebbe Nachman's protagonists must surrender conventional concepts of power, authority, and security before discovering their own authentic spiritual capacity. In both cases, the journey's apparent goal (reaching the Wizard, finding the Lost Princess) proves less important than the transformation that occurs through the searching itself.

The Heretical Tradition

Rabbi Yonasan Eybeschütz (1690-1764) remains one of the most enigmatic figures in Jewish intellectual history, suspected by many of harboring Sabbatean sympathies and developing what Gershom Scholem would later identify as a "heretical kabbalah" [13]. Eybeschütz's most radical contribution to mystical theology was his suggestion that divine perfection itself might contain an element of flaw or concealment so profound as to constitute a kind of cosmic catastrophe within the Godhead.

This theological audacity finds unexpected resonance in Baum's portrayal of the Wizard. The figure behind the curtain—powerful in projection but impotent in reality—mirrors Eybeschütz's vision of a divine authority that maintains its sovereignty through concealment rather than revelation. The Wizard's confession of limitation ("I'm a very good man, but a very bad wizard") echoes the heretical possibility that divine authority itself might be fundamentally compromised.

In Eybeschütz's framework, this is not simple atheism but rather a mystical confrontation with what Elliot Wolfson terms the "alethic concealment" at the heart of divine being [14]. The Wizard's powerlessness becomes not a negation of the sacred but its most radical expression—a divinity that can only be encountered through the experience of its own absence.

The Apophatic Dimension

Elliot Wolfson's scholarly corpus has consistently highlighted the apophatic currents within Jewish mysticism—traditions that approach the divine through negation, concealment, and the systematic undoing of positive attribution [15]. For Wolfson, the deepest kabbalistic insights emerge not from cataphatic affirmation but from what he calls "theosophic atheism"—a mystical path that leads through the destruction of conventional God-concepts toward an encounter with the ineffable.

Dorothy's disillusionment with the Wizard represents precisely this apophatic moment. Her journey does not culminate in the discovery of a benevolent deity but in the recognition that ultimate authority is itself an illusion. Yet this recognition, rather than leading to despair, becomes the condition for authentic spiritual awakening. As Wolfson notes in his analysis of medieval Jewish mysticism, "the via negativa leads not to absence but to a presence so radical it can only be approached through the systematic negation of presence itself" [16].

The ruby slippers—always already on Dorothy's feet—represent this paradox of mystical realization. The power was never external, never located in the Wizard's supposed authority, but rather in the recognition of one's own groundlessness. This aligns with Wolfson's reading of advanced kabbalistic states as involving the dissolution of the subject-object distinction that normally structures religious experience.

The Paradox of Atzmut

The seventh Lubavitcher Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson (1902-1994), developed what is perhaps the most sophisticated modern articulation of the kabbalistic concept of *atzmut*—the divine essence that transcends all categorical distinction, including the distinction between existence and non-existence [17]. In the Rebbe's teaching, *atzmut* represents not simply divine transcendence but a mode of being so absolute that it encompasses and negates all finite determinations.

Dorothy's awakening in Kansas can be read as a literary representation of consciousness returning to *atzmut*. The entire adventure in Oz—with its vivid characters, moral quests, and apparent solidities—dissolves into the recognition that it was "only a dream." Yet this dissolution does not negate the reality of the experience but rather reveals its true ontological status. In the Rebbe's framework, the dream-nature of Oz mirrors the illusory character of all manifest reality when viewed from the perspective of absolute essence.

The Rebbe taught that *atzmut* is simultaneously the most concealed and most revealed aspect of divinity—concealed because it transcends all finite categories, revealed because it is the innermost reality of every moment of experience [18]. Dorothy's clicking of the ruby slippers three times while repeating "There's no place like home" becomes a mantra of return to this essential ground, where the distinction between Kansas and Oz, between reality and dream, dissolves into a more fundamental recognition.

Comparative Perspectives

The interpretation advanced here stands in marked contrast to more psychologically oriented readings of Baum's text, such as those found in the works of Rabbi Yonason Gershom and other contemporary spiritual teachers who emphasize The Wizard of Oz as a story of personal empowerment and emotional healing [19]. In Gershom's reading, Dorothy's journey represents the archetypal path of individuation, her companions symbolizing aspects of the psyche that must be integrated for wholeness.

While such interpretations possess undeniable psychological validity, they arguably domesticate the more radical theological implications of Baum's narrative. The gentle reading transforms the Wizard into a benevolent if misguided father figure and Dorothy into an everyperson discovering her inner strength. The mystical crisis of divine absence—the confrontation with ultimate authority revealed as illusion—becomes merely a stage in personal development.

The heretical kabbalistic reading, by contrast, locates the text's power precisely in its refusal of such comfortable resolutions. Dorothy's return to Kansas is not triumphant self-realization but mystical dissolution. The gray landscape of her origin, contrasted with the Technicolor vividness of Oz, suggests not the superiority of ordinary reality but the colorless nature of *atzmut*—a divine essence so absolute that it appears as emptiness.

The Sitra Achra and the Wicked Witch

No analysis of The Wizard of Oz from a kabbalistic perspective can ignore the figure of the Wicked Witch of the West, who represents what the Zohar terms the *Sitra Achra*—the "Other Side" or realm of demonic force that feeds on holy energy severed from its source [20]. The Witch's dominion over the western territories of Oz parallels the Zoharic understanding of evil as a kind of cosmic parasitism, deriving its apparent power from the concealment of divine light.

Her dissolution in water becomes, in this reading, not simply the triumph of good over evil but the revelation of evil's ultimate insubstantiality. Like all *kelipot* (husks) in Lurianic kabbalah, the Witch's power depends entirely on the concealment of the divine sparks she has captured. When those sparks are liberated—symbolized by Dorothy's act of mercy toward the Witch's soldiers—the entire structure of apparent evil collapses.

This aligns with Eybeschütz's heretical insight that evil itself might serve an ultimately redemptive function, forcing consciousness into confrontation with divine concealment and thereby catalyzing deeper levels of mystical realization [21]. The Witch's pursuit of Dorothy drives the entire narrative toward its climactic recognition—that ultimate authority (the Wizard) is itself a projection of consciousness rather than an external reality.

Conclusion: Midrash as Protest Against Divine Indifference

Reading The Wizard of Oz as an American midrash reveals not only unexpected depths in what appears to be simple children's literature but also illuminates midrash's most radical function: its capacity to simultaneously explain and protest against divine absence in the face of human suffering. Through the lens of heretical kabbalah—particularly the traditions associated with Eybeschütz's speculations about divine flaw, Wolfson's analysis of apophatic mysticism, and the Lubavitcher Rebbe's teachings on *atzmut*—Baum's narrative emerges as something far more disturbing than a tale of self-empowerment: it becomes a sustained meditation on cosmic abandonment and the failure of transcendent consolation.

Dorothy's disillusionment with the Wizard represents not simply the overthrow of false authority but a confrontation with what Emil Fackenheim called the "rupture" in traditional theodicy—the recognition that conventional explanations for suffering have become impossible after the experience of radical evil [22]. The tornado that destroys Dorothy's Kansas home operates as what we might call a "natural Shoah," an arbitrary catastrophe that shatters the illusion of cosmic justice and moral order. Her transport to Oz becomes not escape but deeper exile—exile from any world where divine providence can be meaningfully affirmed.

This framework finds resonance in contemporary trauma theology, particularly our analysis of divine concealment (*hester panim*) as a theological response to radical evil and suffering [23]. Our exploration of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's "radical reconceptualization of divine presence within absence" provides a crucial interpretive framework for understanding how Dorothy's journey mirrors post-Holocaust theological consciousness [24]. The Wizard's concealment behind the curtain becomes, in this reading, not merely personal deception but a manifestation of "divine presence-in-concealment"—a mode of sacred hiddenness that emerges precisely through the experience of abandonment.

This darker reading reveals midrash's most unsettling dimension: its function as a form of theological protest that masks itself as explanation. The classical midrashic tradition developed elaborate mythologies to account for divine hiddenness—stories of cosmic battles, primordial sins, and eventual restoration that served to preserve faith in ultimate meaning. Yet these same narratives, read against the grain, register profound theological shock. They record not divine presence but its radical absence, not cosmic order but its fundamental fragmentation.

Baum's narrative unconsciously replicates this midrashic pattern of disguised protest. The surface story affirms individual agency and the power of friendship; the deeper structure reveals a world where ultimate authority is fundamentally compromised, where home itself may be illusory, where the quest for meaning leads only to the recognition of its own impossibility. The ruby slippers—always already on Dorothy's feet—represent not hidden empowerment but the terrible recognition that we have always possessed the capacity to return to a reality we can no longer inhabit innocently.

In this heretical reading, the Wizard's concealment behind the curtain becomes a mirror for divine concealment in the face of historical catastrophe. His confession of limitation—"I'm a very good man, but a very bad wizard"—echoes what we might call the modern Jewish discovery of divine impotence. This is not the hidden God of traditional theology, temporarily concealed for pedagogical purposes, but something more terrible: a God whose hiddenness may reflect not transcendence but actual absence, not mystery but void.

Yet our analysis of *tzimtzum* (divine contraction) as therapeutic paradigm suggests a more complex reading [25]. In his examination of how "suffering emerges not from divine absence but from the very structure of divine presence-in-concealment," including Jonathan Eybeschütz's radical theology of divine unconsciousness, the Wizard's impotence becomes not abandonment but a form of therapeutic withdrawal. His refusal to provide magical solutions forces Dorothy and her companions into the recognition of their own authentic capacity—a process that mirrors "the recognition of God's hidden presence within darkness itself".

The gray landscape of Kansas, to which Dorothy returns with apparent relief, becomes in this reading not the triumph of reality over illusion but the revelation of reality's own emptiness. The famous line "There's no place like home" transforms from affirmation to lament—the recognition that home, like the divine presence it symbolizes, exists primarily as absence, as longing, as the memory of something that may never have been.

Yet even this darker interpretation preserves midrash's essential function: the refusal to abandon the search for meaning even in the face of meaninglessness, the insistence on continuing to tell stories even when stories themselves have become impossible. Dorothy's return to Kansas, like the Jewish people's continued existence after historical catastrophe, represents not the resolution of theological crisis but its creative perpetuation. She cannot remain in Oz because Oz is itself a product of displacement; she cannot rest in Kansas because Kansas has been forever altered by the recognition of its own contingency.

Perhaps this is Baum's deepest midrashic insight: that in a world where traditional authorities have revealed their impotence, the path forward leads not through restored certainties but through what we might call "mystical homelessness"—the cultivation of a spirituality grounded in groundlessness itself.

The wizard behind the curtain—exposed in his weakness yet somehow still beloved—represents not the failure of the divine but its most radical self-revelation: a God who can only be encountered through the systematic undoing of all God-concepts, a presence that manifests precisely through the experience of its own absence.

These reading positions *The Wizard of Oz* within the trajectory of what we might call "post-catastrophic theology"—spiritual thinking that emerges from the ruins of traditional theodicy and finds in those ruins do not despair but a different kind of hope. It is the hope not of restored meaning but of meaning's creative destruction, not of divine rescue but of divine accompaniment in abandonment, not of return to an original home but of the discovery that exile itself might be the only authentic spiritual condition.

In the end, Dorothy's clicking of the ruby slippers becomes not a magical incantation, but a form of prayer adapted to an age of divine silence—the repetitive affirmation of longing in the absence of any guarantee that such longing will be fulfilled. Her mantra "There's no place like home" transforms into a kind of kaddish for lost certainties, a morning ritual for the death of God that somehow keeps both mourning and God alive in the space of their own impossibility.

This is midrash at its most radical: not explanation but sustained question, not consolation but creative discomfort, not the restoration of meaning but its endless deferral in the service of something deeper than meaning—the irreducible mystery of existence itself, experienced simultaneously as gift and wound, presence and absence, home and exile.

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