

Spiritual Immunity: How a Person Can Serve as a Dwelling Place for the Holy Shekhinah

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Introduction

Shekhinah translates as “dwelling within” or “the Divine Presence”^{1,2} and is one of the names of G-d. *Tanakh*, Gemara, and Midrash contain a plethora of *Shekhinah* references that describe the *Shekhinah* associated with, or residing in, many locations including: on top of *Har Sinai* during *Matan Torah*,³ the *Mishkan*,⁴ the Holy Ark,⁵ the *Beit Ha-Mikdash*,⁶ Jerusalem,⁷ the

¹ In this article, we reference many (but not all) sources to support our views. There are, however, other sources that offer different opinions about the nature of *Shekhinah*. For a comprehensive discussion of the classical references pertaining to *Shekhinah*, see, e.g., S. A. Adler’s *Aspaklaria*, vol. 26, on *Shekhinah*.

² Exodus 24:16; Exodus 40:35; Rav Saadiah Gaon, in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* (c. 933) confirmed that *Shekhinah* was in fact *kavod*.

³ Exodus 24:16.

⁴ Numbers 9:17-18.

⁵ Exodus 25:22; Rashbam on Exodus 40:35. I Kings 8:10 states that the Kohen could not enter the holy of holies because it was filled with *Kavod Hashem* and that Hashem *Shokben ba-Araphel*.

⁶ Exodus 25:8, see *Rabbenu Bahya*, Deut. 12:5Ezek. 43:7; *Targ. Unk.* to Deut. 12:5; Ps. 49:15.

⁷ Zech. 8:3; Ps. 135: 21; I Chron. 23:25.

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Jewish nation,⁸ the synagogue,⁹ Jewish families,¹⁰ Jewish individuals,¹¹ married Jewish couples,¹² Jewish people while studying Torah,¹³ and the righteous.¹⁴

In this article, we examine a fundamental question posed by Or ha-Hayyim ha-Kadosh (Hayyim ben Moshe ibn Attar) in his commentary on Deuteronomy 4:24.¹⁵ If the *Shekhinah* is an all-consuming fire, **כִּי ה' אֵלֵהֶיךָ**, **אֵשׁ אֹכְלָהּ הוּא**, how can the *Shekhinah* dwell or reside within a Jew without destroying or damaging the body? Even according to the *meforshim* that the *Shekhinah* represents G-d's nearness to man, why does the *Shekhinah*'s close proximity to a person not destroy or damage his or her body?

⁸ The people of Israel are often affirmed to be G-d's special dwelling place (e.g., Ex. 29: 45-46; Deut. 23:15; Ez. 36:26-27); "G-d stands in the congregation of G-d; in the midst of the judges He judges" (Psalms 82:1); see Ramban on Deuteronomy 33:2: and *Or ha-Hayyim* on Exodus 25:9; *Hagigah* 14b. In halakhic *midrashim*, *Shekhinah* refers to G-d's manifestations, descents and goings forth in Israel's midst. It suggests not merely divine presence but divine nearness and even intimacy.

⁹ *Berakhot* 6a: "Ravin bar Rav Adda said in the name of Rabbi Yitzhak: From where is it derived that the Holy One, Blessed be He, is located in a synagogue? As it states, 'G-d stands in the congregation of G-d; in the midst of the judges He judges' (Psalms 82:1)."

¹⁰ *Kiddushin* 70b.

¹¹ *Sotah* 3b; *Or ha-Hayyim*, Leviticus 18:4.

¹² *Sotah* 17a; the *Koben Gadol* must be married to enter the Holy of Holies because the personal *Shekhinah* does not reside in an unmarried person (*Zohar*, *Naso* 144).

¹³ *Berakhot* 6a; *Pirkei Avot* 3:6, 3:3; *Tamid* 32b; *Bava Batra* 22a; the reading of the *Shema*: *Shabbat* 57a; *Shabbat* 127a; *Sanhedrin* 103b; *Genesis Rabbah* explains the verse (Gen 1:26): neither man without woman [. . .] nor both of them without the *Shekhinah*. According to Rabbi Hananyah ben Teradyon, if two men sit down together to study Torah, *Shekhinah* resides with them (*Mishnah*, *Pirkei Avot* 3:2); *Midrash Tanhuma* states that G-d "fills the realms above and the realms below" but his presence is particularly manifest in the sexual act. "In regard to the place where the adulterer comes to commit adultery, is not the Holy One there in his glory?" The adulterer's act of intercourse "causes the departure of the *Shekhinah*."

¹⁴ *Mo'ed Katan* 25a; Ramban on Genesis 35:13: *Berakhot* 5b; *Berakhot* 57a **קוֹרָא קְרִיאַת** **שְׁמַע רְאוּי שְׁתַּשְׁרָה עָלָיו שְׁכִינָה**, One who sees himself reciting *Shema* in a dream is worthy of having the Divine Presence rest upon him. *Shabbat* 30b states, "The *Shekhinah* rests on man neither through gloom, nor through sloth, nor through frivolity, nor through levity, nor through talk, nor through idle chatter, but only through joy in connection with a *mitzvah*."

¹⁵ "For the LORD your G-d is a devouring fire, a jealous G-d" (Deuteronomy 4:24).

Interestingly, the potential danger and fear of the *Shekhinah*'s presence within a person is reflected in a unique *minbag* among Ashkenazim during the recital of the *Kohen*'s blessing. The *Shekhinah* manifests itself on the hands of the *Kobanim* when they form the letter *shin* (for *shekhinah*) during their priestly blessings. Because the *Shekhinah* hovers over the hands of the *Kobanim*, it is harmful to gaze at their hands.¹⁶ The *Shulhan Arukh* also states that one should limit the viewing time when a Jew sees a rainbow [Moses de Leon, *Shushan 'Edut*, pp. 363-364],¹⁷ or when meeting a *nasi*,¹⁸ because of the presence of the *Shekhinah*.

The *Shekhinah* Dwelling Within a Person

The idea that the *Shekhinah* can dwell within a person has several sources. First, in his commentary in Leviticus 26:11, *Or ha-Hayyim* states that the *Shekhinah* dwells within the souls of *Bnei Yisrael*: "And I will place My Sanctuary among you." *Or ha-Hayyim* understands this verse in a sense

¹⁶ *Hagigah* 16a cautions that looking at three things can dim a person's eyesight: a rainbow, a *nasi* (lit. prince), and the *Kobanim* when they stand on the *dukhan*. In *Shir Ha-Shirim* (2:9) it states "Behold, He is standing behind our wall, looking from the windows, peering through the cracks." *Midrash Rabbah* there interprets "looking from the windows" to mean that the Divine Presence rests above the heads of the *Kobanim*, and "peering through the cracks" to mean that it is manifest between their fingers. Based on this *midrash*, Rabbi Asher ben Yekhiel (Rosh) taught that although a person's eyes will not become "dim" by looking at the *Kobanim*, it is still not proper to do so (*Tosafot HaRosh, Megillah* 24b). In contrast, Rambam (*Hilkebot Tefillah* 14:7) and commentaries state that one should not look at the *Kobanim* *משום היסח הדעת*, because of distractions.

¹⁷ Whenever a rainbow is seen in the cloud, the sign of the covenant is within it and judgment vanishes from the world. It is forbidden for a person to look at the rainbow so as not to cause shame to the *Shekhinah* and not look within her. See *Likutei Moharan* 42:1.

¹⁸ Rabbi Yehudah, son of Rabbi Nahmani, the disseminator of Reish Lakish, interpreted the verse "Whoever looks at the following three things, his eyes will grow dim. One who looks at a rainbow, at a *nasi*, and at priests" homiletically. He explained: "At a rainbow, 'As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud on the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness round about, this was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD' (Ezekiel 1:28). At a *nasi*, as it is written, 'And you shall put of your splendor upon him' (Numbers 27:20), which indicates that the splendor of the Divine Presence rested upon Moses, who was the *nasi* of Israel. The third item, looking at priests, is referring to one who looks at the priests when the Temple is standing, as they would stand on their platform and bless Israel with the ineffable name, at which point the Divine Presence would rest above the joints of their fingers" (*Hagigah* 16).

similar to Psalms 78:60¹⁹: “The tent He had set among men, אהל שכן באדם.” He claims that the meaning of these verses is that the primary dwelling place of Hashem, blessed be He, is within the souls of His Holy people.²⁰

Other commentaries offer similar themes to that of *Or ha-Hayyim*. The Alshikh (Exodus 15:1) writes that from the time of Creation, Hashem desired to establish a dwelling place in the lower world, **literally within man**. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk explains the verse in Exodus 25:8: וְעָשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם that every Jew is required to build the *Mishkan* in his or her heart so that G-d can reside within it. Interestingly, the *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh* (*siman* 10) targets the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* as a spark for the *Shekhinah* to dwell within a person. He proves this concept from the verse in Scripture: “All the peoples of the earth shall see that the Name of Hashem is called upon you, etc.” (Deuteronomy 28:10).²¹

In an attempt to help resolve how the body is not damaged by the *Shekhinah*, we introduce the term “spiritual immunity,” applying our knowledge of immunology as a *mashal* or paradigm to address this issue. Just as we can train our immune system to accept a foreign transplanted organ, so too we can train our bodies, via Torah study and *mitzvot*, to allow the *Shekhinah* to dwell within us without destroying or damaging our bodies.

The first part of the article focuses on a few of the properties of the *Shekhinah*. The second part focuses on how understanding immunology can, *kinyakhoh*, expand on the fundamental concept and characteristic of the *Shekhinah* dwelling within a Jew as discussed by *Or ha-Hayyim*.

¹⁹ This is what the sages in *Bemidbar Rabbah* meant in their comments on Psalms 78:60, “He forsook the Tabernacle of Shiloh, the Tent He had set up amongst men.” The *midrash* observes that we must understand the wording as, “G-d had set up a Tent by means of man.” If people prepare themselves spiritually to study Torah and to observe it, not only are the commandments engraved on the Tablets and the Written Torah, but אשר פקד על פי משה, the Oral Torah Moses taught to the people, then we are assured of G-d setting His Tent amongst men (*Or ha-Hayyim*, Exodus 38:21).

²⁰ See also a similar theme in *Or ha-Hayyim* on Leviticus 19:33.

²¹ Rabbenu Bahya comments on the statement in the Talmud (*Menahot* 35) that this verse refers to *tefillin* and “that the letter שׁין (on the *tefillin*) is an allusion to the *Shekhinah*.” In addition, Eleazar of Worms (*Perushe Siddur ha-Tefillah la-Roqeah*, 287) states that the *tefillin* are placed on every person head to symbolize that the *Shekhinah* was resting upon his head.

Part I: The *Shekhinah's* Presence in Human Beings

Tzelem Elokim: It is important to differentiate between *Tzelem Elokim* and *Shekhinah*.²² All human beings are created with *Tzelem Elokim*, the image of G-d.²³ *Tzelem* is a reflection of anything that is made to resemble something else,²⁴ and is called the *tzelem*, of the Divine Form within the human body. This *tzelem Elokim* can be described as the spiritual imprint within the human physical form, linking body and soul. *Or ha-Hayyim* states,

[Genesis 1:27] ...wants to tell [us] that He created man with two images: the first is the image that is recognizable in all men, and even in men that are empty of holiness, “that they are not from the Children of Israel”—about them it states, “in his image,” the explanation [of which] is [the image] of the creature. And the second is the level of the happy ones, the people of Israel, the inheritance of My field... it comes to teach us that there are two images among the creations: the image that is recognizable [that he is human] and the image of G-d, [which is] spiritual (imprinted in Jews) and hidden. Understand [this].

Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv) commented that in the creation of man the image of G-d in each human being reflects the image of Creation.²⁵ In addition, Netziv describes at least four aspects of *Tzelem Elokim*: language and communication, intellectual curiosity, consciousness, and morality.²⁶ Finally, Netziv states that an important characteristic of *Tzelem Elokim* is that it is present in all individuals at all times^{27,28} and it

²² For an in depth discussion of the Kabbalistic perspective of *Shekhinah*. See Lamm, N., “The Unity Theme and Its Implication for Moderns,” *Tradition*, vol. 4, pp. 44-65, 1961.

²³ *Dimut* is used to describe a Divine association with human beings. A discussion of *dimut* is beyond the scope of this article. Rav Sa’adiah Gaon writes that the *Shekhinah* is indeed part of the physical world, but that it is a *kavod nivra* (*Emunot ve-Dei’ot* 2:10). The term *Shekhinah* refers to any miraculous thing that reminds the viewer that Hashem is *shokhein be-kirbo*, dwelling within him. Thus, the pillars of fire and cloud were images of the *Shekhinah*, as were the vision of Mount Sinai and the *Merkavah*.

²⁴ Shadal on Genesis 1:26: The essential meaning of “the image” is the complete freedom we find in man, [which means] that man must have free will [*Perplexed of the Generation* 1:1].

²⁵ Netziv is referring to the numerical equivalency of the words *Elohim* and *ha-teva’*.

²⁶ Aviezer, N., “The Origin of Mankind—A Torah Perspective,” *Hakirah*, vol. 18, 171-180, 2014.

²⁷ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Laws of Repentance* 5:1.

²⁸ *Mishnah, Pirkei Avot* 3:18-19.

is the source of free will.²⁹ *Or ha-Hayyim* on Genesis 1:26 adds another dimension to *Tzelem Elokim* and states that its presence in every human being directs all humankind to mimic G-d's merciful nature.

***Shekhinah*:** As mentioned above, *Or ha-Hayyim* states that the *Shekhinah* can reside within (or is closely associated with) each Jew.³⁰ One of his earliest sources is in his commentary on Exodus 12:3 where he explains the significance of the first *mitzvah* (preparing the Korban Pesach). G-d informs us what a *mitzvah* can accomplish, namely, that when someone does a *mitzvah*, G-d allows His *Shekhinah* to dwell upon him.³¹ Ramban also presents this idea in his commentary to Deuteronomy 11:22 on the phrase “and to cling to Him,” and suggests that a person can cling to G-d even while engaged in the affairs of everyday life, and that such a person may become a “dwelling place for the *Shekhinah*.”

Or ha-Hayyim further states: “It [the presence of the *Shekhinah*] means that the performance of a *mitzvah* triggers the *Shekhinah* to reside within the body. This is the inner meaning of the verse (Leviticus 26:11-12) ‘I will walk among you,’ to walk within you.” In other words, the performance of *mitzvot* trains and prepares the body to accept the *Shekhinah* without damaging the body.

Or ha-Hayyim further states that the degree of righteousness of a Jew is reflected in the intensity of the *Shekhinah* that he or she possesses.³²

The considerations we have just mentioned may also explain why G-d referred to Himself twice as אֲנֹכִי when telling Jacob that He would descend with him to Egypt and would go up with him again when Jacob would be buried. G-d meant that the level of *Shekhinah* that would accompany him on his return would be at a higher level than that which accompanied him at the time he first journeyed to

²⁹ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah* 4:8 and *Sforno* on Genesis 1:26 state that the *Tzelem* is the source of “free will.” See *Meshekh Hochmah*, Genesis 1:16; Shadal on Genesis 1:26. The essential meaning of “the image” is the complete freedom we find in man, [which means] that man must have free will (*Perplexed of the Generation* 1:1).

³⁰ Ramban also presents this idea in his commentary to Deut. 11:22 “and to cling to Him,” and suggests that a person can cling to G-d even while engaged in the affairs of everyday life, and that such a person may become a “dwelling place for the *Shekhinah*.”

³¹ *Tikkunei Zohar* section 29 shows that the word מצוה contains half of the Ineffable Name at the end, and the other half at the beginning if one applies the method known as (אֵת טַב) *aleph tav, bet shin* when reading the alphabet. (The letter צ corresponds to the letter ה, and the letter נ correspond to the letter ך).

³² Genesis 46:4.

Egypt. It was the latter level of אֲנֹכִי which the Jewish people experienced at Mount Sinai...

When a Jew sins, however, it weakens the spiritual energy or force of the *Shekhinah*, as *Or ha-Hayyim* states,³³

Perhaps the word אֲנֹכִי which follows the word עֲנֹת here is an allusion to the *Shekhinah*; it is reminiscent of Deut. 32:18 צֹר יִלְדֶּה תֵּשֵׂי, that the commission of a sin such as idolatry “weakens” the שְׂכִינָה.

Elaborating a Role of the *Shekhinah* in Human Beings

In Genesis 46:4, *Or ha-Hayyim* describes various levels at which the *Shekhinah* can dwell within an object or within a person, depending on the situation. The highest level is when the *Shekhinah* rested upon *Har Sinai* at *Matan Torah*. The next level is when the *Shekhinah* rested in the *Beit Ha-Mikdash* that manifested itself in the revelation of constant miracles (*Avot* 5:5). The next lower level is when the *Shekhinah* rests on a prophet (see Rambam, *Hilkebot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 7:1:5). The next descending level is when the *Shekhinah* rests upon a synagogue or *beit midrash* (see *Berakhot* 5a and *Megillah* 29a). The lowest level is when the *Shekhinah* dwells within ten or fewer Jews who are learning Torah together.

In the *יוצר אור berakhab* of our morning prayers, we praise Hashem as אֲדוֹן עֲזוֹנוֹ, צוֹר מִשְׁגַּבְנוּ, מִגֵּן יִשְׁעוֹנוֹ, מִשְׁגַּב בְּעַדְנוֹ. *Arnei Eliyahu* explains that the prayer alludes to the *Shekhinah*'s protection of a Jew throughout his four stages of life.^{34,35} Furthermore, in a prayer that we say every Yom Tov after taking out the Torah, we beseech that the *Shekhinah* should dwell upon us “To make us worthy that Thy Presence (*Shekhinah*) may rest upon us to instill upon us a spirit of *hokhmah and binah*.”

³³ Exodus 32:17.

³⁴ “Master of our power” represents the first stage of childhood, when the body is defenseless and vulnerable, and Hashem is our master of strength. “Our rock-like stronghold” represents the adolescent stage, when the child is maturing and Hashem provides us with the strength to defend ourselves as we grow.... “Shield of our salvation” represents the adult stage until an older age. Hashem is our shield saving us from countless dangers that could affect our health and family, and provides us with daily sustenance. “A stronghold for us” is when we are elderly; Hashem is our strength when we are frail and weak.

³⁵ The *Shekhinah*, unlike *Tzelem Elokim*, is not necessarily present at all times in the Jew. This idea is reflected in *Pesahim* 56a that the *Shekhinah* left Yaakov before he blessed his sons.

One of the *Shekhinah's* critical roles is to serve as a shield.³⁶ For example, *Shekhinah* is the “strength of hand ... [that] brought us [Israel] forth out of Egypt.”³⁷ In the Talmud, *Shekhinah* represents G-d's ‘protection’ (*Shabbat* 88b). In the Zohar, *Shekhinah* “is found in the midst of Israel, and especially when His people are exiled, to continue to protect them.” Noam Elimelekh explains that the *tzaddik* cleaving to Hashem becomes the embodiment of the quintessence of Hashem, giving him the power to give life to one who is ill. In Genesis 28:15, *Ohr ha-Hayyim* states that when the *Shekhinah* dwells within a *tzaddik* it raises the level of prophetic dreams to a level of actual prophecy.

How does the *Shekhinah* protect the individual? There are several mechanisms. First, it can elicit memories that can alter our actions, as when Joseph visualizes the image of his father when *eishet Potiphar* tried to seduce him. According to one opinion in the Talmud,³⁸ Yosef ha-Tzaddik's intention, when he entered the house of Potiphar that day, was in fact to be intimate with her, but at that very moment, the image of his father appeared to him from the window and caused him to abstain from

³⁶ *Or ha-Hayyim* in Leviticus 18:2 states the role of the *Shekhinah* is to assist the person to fulfill the will of G-d. *Zohar* (*Tzav* 182) states that any Jew who learns Torah, the *Shekhinah* protectively covers him like angelic wings. Many Talmudic passages convey the idea that the presence of the *Shekhinah* serves as a safety shield. See *Pesahim* 68a, *Yoma* 3b, and *Shabbat* 31a. *Shabbat* 88b also describes the protective nature of the *Shekhinah* as it states, “The rightful place of G-d's majesty, the Torah, is in the heavens. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses, ‘Provide them with an answer as to why the Torah should be given to the people.’ Moses said before Him, ‘Master of the Universe, I am afraid lest they burn me with the breath of their mouths.’ G-d said to him, ‘Grasp My throne of glory for strength and protection, and provide them with an answer.’ And from where is this derived? As it is stated, ‘He causes him to grasp the front of the throne, and spreads His cloud over it’ (Job 26:9), and Rabbi Naḥum said, ‘This verse teaches that G-d spread the radiance of His presence and His cloud over Moses.’”

³⁷ See Exod. 13:16. In addition, many times in the Torah the *Shekhinah* descended onto the *Ohel* to protect Moshe and Aharon from being attacked by *Bnei Yisrael*. Also, in *Shelah*, after the spies were punished, *Bnei Yisrael* wanted to go to war against Amalek, and G-d told them not to because He was not with them to protect them. Every day in the early part of Shaḥarit, we ask G-d to protect us from evil people, evil intent, and sin: “And may it be Your will, Lord our G-d and G-d of our fathers, to enable me always to walk in the way of Your Torah and adhere to Your precepts. Lead us not into temptation, sin, transgression, or disgrace. Do not let the evil impulse control us. Keep us far from evil people, and reinforce our attachment to the good inclination and to good deeds. Guide our instincts to submit to you. ...”

³⁸ *Sotah* 36b.

carrying out his intentions. The *Shekhinah*, for example, can evoke an action by causing one's *tzitzit* to slap him during an attempted seduction by an evil woman.³⁹

A final function of the *Shekhinah* is that it serves as a source of Divine communication. We see throughout the Torah that the cloud of the *Shekhinah* would hover over the *Ohel* to signal to Moshe to hear the Words of G-d. It is stated by the Noda Bi-Yehudah⁴⁰ that the *Shekhinah* serves as Divine Providence—Heavenly guidance—for all earthly affairs.

How can the Shekhinah reside within human beings without damaging the person? Having established that the *Shekhinah* can dwell within a person, we return to the question of *Or ha-Hayyim*, “How can the Creator of the world Who is infinite, purely spiritual, and Who is described as a devouring fire,⁴¹ reside within or associate with a finite physical entity (i.e., a human body)?”⁴²

One classical answer as to why the presence of the *Shekhinah* does not destroy or damage the body is that the *Shekhinah* can undergo a *tzimtzum* (contraction) process.⁴³ However, *Or ha-Hayyim* presents an innovative idea in his commentary on Leviticus 26:11-12.

נַתַּתִּי מִשְׁפָּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא־תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם.

Therefore, after stating that I (G-d) will place my dwelling within you... the nature of the soul is such that Hashem will dwell with

³⁹ See *Menahot* 44a about a story where the *tzitzit* slapped a Jewish man to prevent him from engaging with a renowned prostitute.

⁴⁰ *Noda Bi-Yehudah Al Ha-Torah* see <https://www.torahmusings.com/2017/11/what-is-the-shekhinah/>

⁴¹ *Or ha Hayyim, Leviticus* 26:11.

⁴² Before the Israelites sinned, the *Shekhinah* rested on everyone; but when they did evil it disappeared (*Sotah* 3b). “And My soul will not abhor you.” The idea that G-d will make His home inside people’s souls exceeded the people’s fondest hopes; for they could not imagine how a creature of flesh and blood could become “home” to G-d’s presence.

⁴³ Just as the boundless *Shekhinah* can contract to reside within the Temple, it can contract within a person without causing harm. *Tzimtzum* means that G-d has the capacity to delimit his presence to a constricted physical space, whether the Tabernacle, the Temple, or the synagogue. Similarly, *tzimtzum ha-Shekhinah* contracts or limits the destructive force when it resides within a person. The concept of *tzimtzum* is that it was necessary for the infinite Hashem to contract Himself to create a finite world. Just as a glass would crack when boiling water is poured into it, so too the world could not sustain such an intense concentration of the *Shekhinah* and would shatter.

them in complete harmony... meaning a Jew can be trained by doing *mitzvyot* and learning Torah not to reject the *Shekhinah*.

Part II: Spiritual Immunity

From an immunological perspective, each person is born with a unique biological signature, barcode, or fingerprint that is localized on the plasma membrane (these proteins comprise the major histocompatibility complex proteins) of every cell of one's body. If a person is exposed to a cell, an organ, or a pathogen that lacks this unique biological signature, the immune system is automatically programmed to destroy and eradicate that foreign cell, organ, or pathogen.

When a foreign organ is transplanted into a person, the body will trigger its immune system to reject the transplanted organ. However, doctors can adapt the body with the help of medications (i.e., anti-rejection drugs), not to reject the transplanted organ. Moreover, science is making great strides to allow patients to receive and accept foreign transplanted organs without the need for anti-rejection drugs. Without going into specific details, new research⁴⁴ has demonstrated that it is possible to "train" the human immune system not to reject a transplanted organ. This is referred to as immune tolerance.⁴⁵

Immune tolerance is one reason why a pregnant woman does not reject the foreign embryo that she is carrying. Traditional mechanisms of immune tolerance in pregnancy include the placental barrier between her and the fetus and her hormonal immune-suppressive state.⁴⁶ However,

⁴⁴ For example, the Stanford Medical Center Program in Multi-Organ Transplantation and the Division of Bone Marrow Transplantation are currently enrolling patients in a research study to determine if blood stem cells injected after kidney transplantation, in combination with lymphoid irradiation, will change the immune system such that immunosuppressive drugs can be completely withdrawn. In addition, the goal of another clinical study conducted at the University of Chicago and Stanford University is to allow the patient to develop "tolerance" to the transplanted kidney while maintaining a competent immune system. Tolerance enables the transplant recipient's body to recognize the transplanted organ as self rather than foreign tissue. To accomplish this, patients in this study will receive specially treated bone marrow taken from their donor.

⁴⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/health/organ-transplants-immune-system.html>; Ochando J, Fayad ZA, Madsen JC, Netea MG, Mulder WJ, "Trained immunity in organ transplantation," *American Journal of Transplantation*, 2020 Jan. 20(1):10-8.

⁴⁶ Bai K, Li X, Zhong J, Ng EH, Yeung WS, Lee CL, Chiu PC, "Placenta-derived exosomes as a modulator in maternal immune tolerance during pregnancy," *Frontiers in Immunology*, 2021 May 11;12:1716.

we now know that during early embryological development, millions of stem cells from the embryo can cross the placenta to embed into the pregnant woman.⁴⁷ These stem cells initially lack the signature proteins (major histocompatibility proteins) of the embryo⁴⁸ but over time, these proteins re-appear slowly on the plasma membrane of the foreign fetal cells embedded in the mother. The slow appearance of these proteins on these cells allows the mother's immune system to tolerate the fetal stem cells thereby preventing her immune system from rejecting the developing embryo/fetus.⁴⁹

On a simplistic level, just as the immune system allows a body to adapt to physical and environmental challenges (such as pathogens), one's spiritual immunity is how a person's religiosity allows them to adapt to spiritual and environmental challenges. Thus, one can better understand the presence of the *Shekhinah* in a Jew as a type of spiritual transplant (*ki-yyakhol*). Spiritual immunity expands our understanding of *Or ha-Hayyim*. When a person engages in Torah study or in *mitzvot*, the body can be "trained" to accept the *Shekhinah* without harming the person. The idea of linking physical traits (the immune system) to spiritual phenomena is also alluded to by *Or ha-Hayyim* who states at Exodus 11:5 that G-d made physical things in this world to parallel spiritual phenomena so that humankind will believe in the spiritual power of a Sage's Torah.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Slaviv S, "Maternal-fetal relationship, natural chimerism and bilateral transplantation tolerance as the basis for non-myeloablative stem cell transplantation, *International Journal of Hematology*, 2002 Jan;76(1):172-5; Mikhail MA, M'Hamdi H, Welsh J, Levičar N, Marley SB, Nicholls JP, Habib NA, Louis LS, Fisk NM, Gordon MY, "High frequency of fetal cells within a primitive stem cell population in maternal blood," *Human Reproduction*, 2008 Apr 1, 23 (4):928-33.

⁴⁸ Zavazava N, "Immunity of embryonic stem cell-derived hematopoietic progenitor cells," *Seminars in Immunopathology*, 2011 Nov (Vol. 33, No. 6, pp. 613-617), Springer-Verlag.

⁴⁹ Fändrich F, Dresske B, Bader M, Schulze M, "Embryonic stem cells share immune-privileged features relevant for tolerance induction," *Journal of Molecular Medicine*, 2002 Jun. 80(6):343-50; Macholdová K, Macháčková E, Prošková V, Hromadníková I, Klubal R, "Latest findings on the placenta from the point of view of immunology, tolerance and mesenchymal stem cells," *Ceska Gynecologie*, 2019 Jan 1, 84(2):154-60; Durgam SS, Alegre ML, Chong AS, "Toward an understanding of allogeneic conflict in pregnancy and transplantation," *Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 2022 Apr 13, 219(5):e20211493.

⁵⁰ *Shabbat* 133b states another example of "spiritual beauty" ascribing a spiritual component to a physical phenomenon. "This is my G-d and I will glorify Him [*anveihu*], the LORD of my father and I will raise Him up." The Sages interpreted *anveihu* homiletically as linguistically related to *noi*, beauty, and interpreted the

Our rabbis have taught us that each person can create a proper environment for the *Shekhinah* to reside within us. Similarly, prophecy requires training and preparation, as detailed in Rambam:⁵¹ “All the prophets do not prophesy whenever they desire. Instead, they must concentrate their attention [upon spiritual concepts] and seclude themselves, [waiting] in a happy, joyous mood, because prophecy cannot rest upon a person when he is sad or languid, but only when he is happy.”

We conclude with a final perspective from *Or ha-Hayyim* on the protective nature of the *Shekhinah*.⁵² On Exodus 15:26, he states,

וַיֹּאמֶר אִם שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמַע לְקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְהִישָׁר בְּעֵינֶיךָ תַעֲשֶׂה וְהִאֲזַנְתָּ לְמִצְוֹתַי וְשָׁמַרְתָּ כָּל חֻקָּיו כָּל הַמְצַוָּה אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם לֹא אֶשֶׁם עָלֶיךָ כִּי אֲנִי ה' רֹפֵאֲךָ.
He said, “If you listen faithfully to the voice of the LORD your G-d, doing what is right in His eyes, heeding His commands and keeping His decrees, I will not bring on you any of the sickness I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the LORD—your Healer.”

Implicit in this verse is a Divine promise that G-d will not inflict us with any disease. *Or ha-Hayyim* asks, why do we need G-d to serve as our physician to heal us if we will not be inflicted with disease? He answers this with a profound medical/spiritual insight: G-d promises that if we follow His *mitzvot*, G-d will teach us how to protect us to prevent disease from affecting our health. G-d will not have to eliminate COVID viruses or cancer-causing viruses. Rather, He will protect us from these diseases

verse: Beautify yourself before Him in *mitzvot*. Beautifying *mitzvot* like *shofar*, *lulav*, and *sukkah* enhances the *mitzvah* even though one can still fulfill the *mitzvah* in another non-beautifying manner. Similarly, Rabbeinu Bahya states in Exodus 3:1 that G-d gently oriented Moshe to prophecy little by little and lifted him up from one (spiritual) level to the next until his mind would be strong enough. This can be compared to a person who requires a gentle adaptation when exiting a dark house into sunlight. If he exits suddenly and looks at the sun, his vision will be darkened. He must therefore look at the light slowly until he becomes accustomed to it. The same way it works with physical light is how it works with the enlightenment of the mind; all mind-related things work similarly to physical things; the traits of the soul are related to the traits of the body. In Kabbalah, everything that exists—whether it be an object, a living organism, an event, or even a memory of the past—is an artifact of a divine spark (Freeman, T, *Sparks of Things to Come*)
https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/2863166/jewish/Scattered-Sparks.htm).

⁵¹ *Mishneh Torah, Fundamentals of Torah* 7:1.

⁵² *Or ha-Hayyim* discusses at great length the idea that the one who engages in a *mitzvah* is protected from both physical harm and sin.

by instructing us how to train our bodies so that these diseases will not affect us. G-d will serve as a proactive/preventative physician guiding our lives to be healthy.

The key health element in this Divine guidance in preventative medicine is learning how to train a healthy immune system. We have all learned the value of vaccinations and diet in curtailing COVID infections and the importance of diet and exercise in dramatically reducing the risks for cancer, atherosclerosis, and even Alzheimer's disease. The Divine promise stated above goes further; it states that by doing *hesed*, learning Torah, and observing *mitzvot*,⁵³ we can maintain a proper spiritual immune system as well. Both the medical and spiritual immune systems will protect us from disease and help us maintain a healthy life.

In summary, ascribing a spiritual aspect to human immunity is based on a Jewish philosophical precedent. *Or ha-Hayyim* on Numbers 15:30-31 states that every soul is composed of 248 (spiritual) organs and 365 (spiritual) sinews. Corresponding to these Hashem gave the Jewish people 248 obligations and 365 prohibitions. *Or ha-Hayyim* refers to these as "spiritual limbs and sinews."⁵⁴

Nonetheless, how the *Shekhinah* dwells within our bodies remains a profound and complex question. This article is meant only to embellish the insights of *Or ha-Hayyim*. We conclude with *Or ha-Hayyim's* profound understanding of "I am the LORD your G-d," that the Jewish people as a chosen people means that G-d is the LORD of *Bnei Yisrael* and not a personal "LORD G-d" of any other nation.⁵⁵ The *Shekhinah* dwells within our bodies and within our nation, fulfilling the promise of G-d at *Har Sinai* that *Bnei Yisrael* is His *am segulah*, a Chosen People. ❧

⁵³ *Berakhot* 30b and *Zohar* state that the *Shekhinah* only resides when one is in a state of happiness and not sadness (*Zohar, Va-Yeshuv* 29). Some *meforshim* state that Miriam sang at the *Yam Suf* to instill a state of happiness and receive the *Shekhinah*. *Pesahim* 117a notes that the *Shekhinah* would reside in King David after he sang his *shiroi*.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ On Leviticus 11:44 he states, "For I am the LORD your G-d." The major difference between Israel and any other nation is that G-d has not described Himself as the "LORD G-d" of any other nation. This obligates us to keep our distance from anything which contaminates us (*Or ha-Hayyim, Leviticus* 19:3). It is appropriate therefore for the Torah to write that as a result of your observing these negative commandments, G-d will establish you as a holy nation for Him, and hints that the Israelites will replace the angels when they qualify for the description a "holy nation."