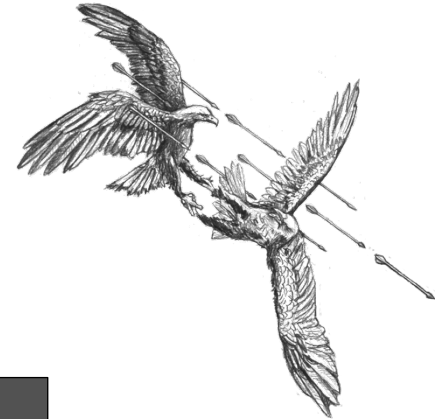




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Towards a Progressive neo-Hasidism



A Lesson from God in Trans Visibility

Lexi Kohanski February 26, 2024

VOLUME
III

“On the day the Mishkan (Tabernacle) was erected, the Cloud covered the Mishkan upon the Tent of Witness, and at night it would become like a vision of fire upon the Mishkan until dawn.” (Numbers 9:15)

The trans community has two *yuntifs* (holidays): Trans Day of Remembrance and Trans Day of Visibility. That’s what we get: a day to remember our murdered siblings, and a day to be seen—and given that pairing, you’d be right to assume that the way we are seen becomes a matter of life or death.

In the words of one scholar, visibility “can be an important aspect of queer and trans life, [but] visibility ought not be considered the only political horizon through which trans people imagine life. In fact, there may be ways that visibility hastens death.” **[1]** In a transphobic world, trans visibility

hastens trans death, as we remember every November 20. [2] In other words, the easier it is to see us, the easier it is to harm us.

What do people see in us that makes our vision dangerous— “vision” here referring both to literally being seen and to the dreams we carry for our genders and our selves? The apparent appeal of the “trans panic defense” (see footnote for an explanation of this upsetting legal strategy) shows that when others cannot make sense of the sight of our bodies, they may feel justified in responding to that illegibility with violence. [3] If the illegibility of trans bodies inspires violence, how can we stay safe without sacrificing our unreadable truths? Invoking Joy Ladin, maybe the way Hashem reveals Zirsself to us can shed light on what it means for trans people to be seen. [4]

THE WORLD IS A SERIES OF TENTS

Hashem is everywhere, in everything, always. But one of the few times we were all absolutely certain that the Presence was present was in **the wilderness**, when the **Mishkan** — “the Tabernacle” — was built. We read that a cloud covered the Mishkan once it was up. Not only that, but the second it was finished being constructed this cloud concealed it, as it says in Exodus, “And Moshe finished the work [of setting up the Mishkan] and the cloud covered the **Tent of Meeting**, and the Glory of Hashem filled the Mishkan, and Moshe couldn’t enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud was dwelling on it” (Ex 40:34-35). [5]

Now you might think that this would have been pretty disappointing. We did all this work, put in all this effort to make a beautiful structure with stunning designs and resplendent features, and we’re all standing there holding our breath to see the final product come together, and the second

it's done, some fog rolls in and covers it up! What's more, it's so thick we can't even get inside! So we don't get to enjoy its beauty, and we don't even get to use it. What's the point?

Obviously I've left out the crucial piece—it's not just some fog, it's literally the Presence of God. The Mishkan isn't there for us to stare at; it's there for Hashem to dwell in. The point is not the product. In fact, the moment when a thing becomes illegible may be the first time we see it for what it truly is.

For the Chassidish Masters, the idea that Hashem dwells within is not limited to the Mishkan. They called it *hislabshus*, a Hebrew word meaning literally something like “enclottedness.” The entire world consists solely of holy clothing, things that cover over and conceal the divine behind them. In the framing of the Meor Eynayim (Menahum Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl, d. 1797), *hislabshus* means “that in everything there is the force of the Maker, and with everything one must make themselves close to the blessed Creator, even when it seems to be an earthly, bodily [*gashmi*] matter.” [6] Every single thing that exists is a small Mishkan; all things are vessels that contain hidden divine Presence. To paraphrase Rabbi Dr Erin Leib Smokler, even when things seem like they're just clothing, don't be fooled— there is always something holy happening there. [7] The **tzadikim** of the world know how to see the holiness in things that seem to be only physical and material, “earthly and bodily.” When we see the clothing for what it is, a wick for sacred sparks, then the world begins to shine in our eyes.

The Meor Eynayim goes on to explain that seeing through the *hislabshus* of things was the special trait of our father Yaakov. The Torah tells us that “Yaakov was a simple person, a dweller of tents” (Genesis 25:27). He is

“simple” because he has mastered how to dwell in a tent. Our Rebbe explains that “simple” here is “a term of wholeness, by means of his being ‘a dweller of tents,’ which are places of enclodedness and covering. He would see clearly that each thing is a covering enclothing God, and he would raise those things up and make them cleave to their Root.” [8] The tent is the symbol of *hislabshus*, a structure whose purpose is to cover what lies within. Yaakov knew what to do with tents: see “the force of the Maker” in them and use that clarity to bring himself and it closer to the Creator.

If the whole entire world is a series of tents that conceal the light of Hashem, then perhaps our lives are best spent playing a game of mystical hide-and-seek. “Ready or not, here I come,” we cry to the divine behind all things, as we rush to tag the hand of God hiding inside our curtains. I imagine Yaakov, even as an adult, retaining the childlike joyous simplicity of seeing everything as an invitation to play with the God who made the first rule: “Seek My Face.” [9]

Hislabshus is the normal state of play. Hashem is in omnipresent hiding, and we are Zir simple-shining seekers. But the Mishkan is not at all business as usual— everyone knows that Hashem dwells in the Tent of Meeting. The fog that rolls in to cover it up isn’t some bad weather; it is the Clouds of Glory, the literal Presence of God revealed for all to see. In this sense, the Tent makes obvious what is true about all tents: it is not there so that we can see it; it's there so that, in it, we can see Hashem. The point is not the product.

TRANSITION STORIES

If two stories can be told about the meaning of the Cloud—an obstacle obscuring the structure we’ve worked so hard to enjoy, or the manifestation of the very purpose of that work—let me tell you two stories about what gender transition is. You’ve probably heard the first one. It goes something like this:

Trans people’s problem is that we find ourselves in bodies that, in the words of the American Psychological Association, cause us to “experience ‘gender dysphoria,’ which refers to psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one’s sex assigned at birth and one’s gender identity.” [10] Our problem is that we’re in the wrong bodies and the wrong roles, and gender transition is about changing those roles and bodies until they’re right—socially with new pronouns and names, aesthetically with clothes and styles, and of course medically with hormones and surgeries. You transition enough of these things over to your “new” gender, and bada-bing bada-boom, problem solved.

That’s one story, where transition is a process of producing the true or desired gender. Among the things that are wrong with this story, I’ll mention that it makes being trans a mental illness, and that it traps us in a system of genders that wants trans people functionally not to exist. But this is more or less the story that’s gained the most political traction, because it is, as **Ramban** says, *tov lidchos es ha’shoel*—“good for shutting up the questioners.” [11]

The Meor Eynayim, in his interpretation of the verse “And Yaakov was a simple person dwelling in tents,” (Genesis 25:27) points towards the second transition story. *Hislabshus*

is the aspect of Yaakov’s level, whereas [his brother] Esav’s aspect is that of the extra. As it is written, ‘And I love *et* Yaakov, but I hate *et*

Esav' (Malachi 1:2-3)—*et* [a grammatical marker in Hebrew that does not exist in English] is a term of inclusion. For the inclusivity of Yaakov is beloved to Me, whereas the inclusivity that is extra, which is of the aspect of Esav, I hate. [12]

Again paraphrasing Rabbi Dr Smokler, Yaakov has a wide, inclusive vision of what can be an avenue for *dveykus*. He sees the Divine in all things. But what is inclusivity that is “extra,” such that Hashem should hate it? If Yaakov’s talent is to see the unnameable All in each individual thing, then perhaps Esav’s type of “inclusivity” is one that sees all things only in light of the individual self. To relate to the world through this consciousness is to see things as objects to be used, including them only insofar as they meet your own needs, replacing the hidden light with the drives and desires of the ego.

I’d like to submit to you that this objectifying inclusivity is the root cause of the thing that’s missing from the popular story about transition, and from my description of the Israelites being upset over the Cloud covering up the gorgeous Mishkan they’d worked so hard on—they are both missing the Presence of God.

THE ILLEGIBLE CLOUD OF GLORY

The point is not the product. Just as the adornments of the Mishkan aren’t for us to look at, so too the way a trans person styles and changes their body is not, at its best, about looking good, or legible, or “right.” Just as the point of the Mishkan is not the product but the Presence, so too transition should not be about arriving at the goal of gender; it should be about using gender to build our bodies and our selves into vessels that can reflect just a little bit more of the light of Hashem with which the world was created.

Of course, that's just my personal opinion—you've heard the saying two Jews, three opinions; well, two *trans* Jews? Forget about it.

Now let's kick it up to 11. What is the Presence of God, and what does it feel like to follow a cloud of it around a wilderness for 38 years? As it says in the Book of Numbers, "According to the rising of the Cloud from upon the Tent would the children of Israel follow after, and wherever the Cloud would rest, there the children of Israel would make camp" (Numbers 10:17). They're following this Cloud around the desert—and that already might be a little surprising. The minute the Cloud moves, when they can finally see clearly this amazing structure they'd worked so hard on, they don't take an hour to enjoy it—they immediately take it apart and go running to try to get the Cloud to cover it back up again! What is so special about this Cloud that it should make the beautiful Mishkan worthless without it?

When **Shlomo** finished building the **First Temple**, it says "the Cloud filled the Home of Hashem, and the priests couldn't stand to serve because of the Cloud" (I Kings 8:10-11). It seemed like this mysterious, impenetrable fog was preventing them from doing their work—what did they do wrong? Why won't Hashem let them in to perform their roles? Isn't that what they built this building for?! And Shlomo responds, "*Hashem amar lishkon ba'arafel.*" No, this is how Hashem shows up, Ze dwells in *arafel*, in the impenetrable mist (I Kings 8:12). **[13]** The fact that the Temple is cloaked in something we can't see or understand is the sign of the Temple's success. The appearance of the mysterious, the incomprehensible, on the face of something as graspable as a building—that is the Cloud that descends on the Mishkan; that is the way Hashem appears to us.

The **Zohar** contrasts two clouds: one, the Clouds of Glory; the other, the image of the onset of evil.

“A great cloud” (Ezekiel 1:4)—cloud of darkness, darkening the whole world. Come and see: What is the difference between one cloud and another? The cloud of which is written “For the cloud of YHVH was over them by day” (Numbers 10:34) and “Your cloud stands over them” (ibid. 14:14), is one that shines radiantly; all lights appear within that cloud. But this cloud is a dark cloud, not shining at all; rather impeding all lights, which cannot appear in its presence.

[14]

The difference between the Cloud of the Presence and this Cloud of Absence is that Hashem’s Cloud shines with every color; the other cloud consumes all color.

This Zoharic vision of the Cloud of the Presence illuminates the attribute of mysterious impenetrability we found in I Kings. When confronted with the incomprehensible, our understanding fails us either because the encounter is devoid of meaning, or because it overflows with meaning. All lights appear at once, or no light shines at all—either way, we cannot see through. The cloud of darkness represents the despair of mystery; the Cloud of Glory comes when the mystery is wonderful.

BECOMING VISIBLE

This is something I really struggle with, personally. To look at the places where my gender feels like it isn’t quite coming together, and to see in those spots not failure to achieve a transition goal but a mysterious misty opening. In those moments of what you could call dysphoria, I am faced

with a question that I don't know the answer to—what is there behind this foggy gender mess I've gotten myself into?

If I'm in the first transition story, where gender is a product to be attained, I'll tell myself it's not that bad, or I'll buy a whole new wardrobe, or make sure I really do have that appointment with a surgeon coming up. All of that is about trying to answer the question. But if I'm in the second story, where transition is a practice of inviting the sacred to shine from within me, then the unanswerability, the mystery of the question, leads not to anxiety but to awe, to wonder, to blessings.

The Zohar teaches that the more colors we bring into the world, the closer the Divine light in all things comes to shining again with the full radiance of Hashem's Presence. Maybe this is what the Meor Eynayim had in mind when he said that inclusivity which is "extra" is the type that Hashem hates—the kind of inclusivity that sees the illegibility of things as extraneous, their unreadability an excess that must be made to fit the eye of the beholder. Are you including a thing for what it is, or despite what it is? Hashem hates the one who sees a new color and groups it as red because it's close enough. Inclusivity in light of *hislabshus* expands itself with the acknowledgment of each sacred color just as it is. The simple sight, the vision that reveals and uplifts, is the one that does not already know. Or, rather, it knows only that within all things, the mysterious, unreadable Cloud waits to shine.

We spent 38 extra years in the wilderness *not* trying to arrive at our stated goal, because we were chasing after the mystery, traveling on paths that God only knew where they would lead. It may not have been perfect, we may not have been perfect, and we may have all perished without ever reaching our goal in the transition from slavery to freedom. We didn't

reach the goal then, but we have also never been as close to Hashem's Presence as we were when we were in love with that illegible, mysterious Cloud.

When trans people become visible, what do you see? Do we confront you with illegibility, the frustration of an unanswerable question—or with a mystery that reverberates with echoes of the Clouds of Glory? Listen: we don't construct our bodies so we can look at them—we do it so that the Presence of God can shine mistily from within us. To me, a successful gender transition is not that you should look at me and see a woman—it's that when you see me, you should see an opening to one small aspect of the light of the face of God.

Endnotes:

[1] Z Nicolazzo, Alden C. Jones, and Sy Simms, *Digital Me: Trans Students Exploring Future Possible Selves Online* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023), 127.

[2] See, for example, this Trans Day of Remembrance article by Erin Reed: <https://www.erininthemorning.com/p/the-people-i-remember-on-trans-day>. Julia Serrano's classic work, *Whipping Girl*, lays out why and how trans women are particularly subject to death, coining the term transmisogyny.

[3] The so-called trans panic defense is a legal strategy whereby the defendant claims that their violent action against a trans person was justified by the revelation of the victim's trans identity; sometimes the defendant even argues that what they did was in fact a form of self-defense. This defense is not legally recognized in the United States *per se*, but it has been used effectively as a tactic. https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/panic_defense_bans

[4] Joy Ladin, *The Soul of the Stranger: Reading God and Torah from a Transgender Perspective* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2019), 13.

[5] The parentheticals are Ibn Ezra's clarification on the verses.

[6] Menahum Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl, *Meor Eynayim*, Parashat Toldot, s.v. *VeYa'akov ish tam yoshev ohalim*. Translation by author.

[7] Rabbi Dr Smokler taught this Meor Eynayim text in a class given at Yeshivat Maharat in Riverdale, NY on Nov 20 2023.

[8] *Meor Eynayim*, Parashat Toldot, s.v. *VeYa'akov ish tam yoshev ohalim*.

[9] Psalm 27:8.

[10] <https://www.psychiatry.org/patients-families/gender-dysphoria/what-is-gender-dysphoria>

[11] This is one of Ramban's explanations as to why Moshe and Aharon were punished for hitting the rock in Numbers 20:10.

[12] *Meor Eynayim*, Parashat Toldot, s.v. *VeYa'akov ish tam yoshev ohalim*.

[13] See Malbim there: "Since Hashem dwelled there in *arafel*, meaning when that place was still chaos and void, darkness and *arafel*," and Metzudas Tziyon, "*ba'arafel*—the dark mass of the Cloud."

[14] Daniel Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 203a-b. This Zohar is apparently not in conversation with Malbim or the Metzudos on *arafel* as a dark place where Hashem does dwell.

Glossary

Term	Definition
The Wilderness	This is referring to the 40 years the Israelites spent wandering in the desert after leaving Egypt and before getting to Eretz Yisrael.
Mishkan/Tent of Meeting	The tabernacle/Tent of Meeting/mishkan was the portable sanctuary that the Israelites carried with them in the wilderness. Mishkan comes from the Hebrew root meaning "to dwell"; the tabernacle was considered to be the earthly dwelling place of God. (https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-tabernacle/)
<i>Hislabshus</i>	Lit. "Enclothedness." The Hebrew root denotes getting dressed, but comes to describe the layers of materiality and worldliness that overlay True Reality, which is pure Godliness.
Tzadikim	Lit. "Righteous ones." In Kabbalah and Hasidism it comes to refer to saint figures who acted as intercessors between the Divine and their constituents.
Ramban	Rabbi Moses ben Nachman, also known as Nachmanides. He lived in the 12-13th c in Spain and he was the first mainstream commentator to use Kabbalistic ideas to explain the meaning of the Torah.
<i>Et</i>	The definite direct object marker in Hebrew grammar. Does not exist in English and is impossible to translate.
<i>Dveykus</i>	a state of cleaving to, or uniting with, the Divine
Shlomo	The biblical King Solomon was the son of King David and Batsheba. He was known for his wisdom, his wealth and his writings. He became ruler in approximately 967 B.C.E. and his kingdom extended from the Euphrates River in the north to Egypt in the south. His crowning achievement was the building of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Almost all knowledge of him is derived from the biblical books of Kings I and Chronicles II. (https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/king-solomon#google_vignette)

First Temple	<p>The crowning achievement of King Solomon's reign was the erection of the magnificent Temple (Hebrew- <i>Beit haMikdash</i>) in the capital city of ancient Israel - Jerusalem. His father, King David, had wanted to build the great Temple a generation earlier, as a permanent resting place for the Ark of the Covenant which contained the Ten Commandments.</p> <p>Sacrifice was the predominant mode of divine service in the Temple until it was destroyed by the Babylonians some four hundred years later, in 586 BCE.</p> <p>https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/the-first-temple-solomon-s-temple</p>
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