



In Search of the Authentic: Contributions of Jewish Mysticism to a Conceptualization and Experience of the Self

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The search for an understanding of the Self spans centuries across disciplines. Historic models have been static describing an apparatus existing somewhere within the mind. This expanded through the development of psychological relational models, both through psychoanalytic and family systems theory. The research objective of this qualitative historical analysis is to trace the idea of the concept of the Self, particularly through psychodynamic models, and to build upon these paradigms through a similar analysis from Jewish mysticism. Like other spiritual pathways, Jewish mysticism can augment this understanding through intriguing maps of the Self, paradigms of relatedness, ideas of language, descriptions of subjective experience, and powerful, metaphoric imagery regarding the process of fracture and repair. This review is among the first to integrate these paradigms. Much common ground is discovered, and the model enriched, through Jewish mystical ideas of an unfolding Self interconnected with an experience of the Divine.



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← *Sefrot* by Robert Fludd (1574–1637), *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (1617–1621).

1 Introduction

You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, but the time you are real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.

– Williams 1922, 6

Margery Williams Bianco's famous work, *The Velveteen Rabbit*, shows us through a moving story how a stuffed rabbit discovers the experience of becoming real (Williams 1922, 6). Through moments of love, joy, pain, and loss, the Rabbit discovers its true, authentic Self. The story implies that the Self is not static but rather involves a dynamic unfolding and is shaped by our relationships and experiences. It emphasizes the importance of genuine connections in the formation of our identities. The rabbit's journey towards becoming real is facilitated by his relationship with the Boy, highlighting the transformative power of love and connection in the evolution of the Self, as well as a connection with the garden fairy whose kiss bestows upon the rabbit the experience of becoming real.

Joseph Campbell in his *Thou art That* underscores an important idea, which we can connect to the journey of the Velveteen Rabbit. Our entire life journey is not one of discovery of a particular structured entity that we would call the Self but rather a process of ongoing learning and unfolding of who we are. It is through the acceptance of this process of unfolding beyond one's discovery of an internal structure that Self-development occurs. This is a process described by Campbell that courses over the lifetime as it did for the Rabbit.

The fourth function of mythology is to carry the individual through the various life stages and crises of life, that is, to help persons grasp the unfolding of life with integrity. Remember the earlier statement that the experience of mystery comes not from expecting it but through yielding all your programs, because your programs are based on fear and desire. Drop them and the radiance comes (Campbell 2001, 5).

This manuscript will build upon Williams' and Campbell's ideas of a lifelong unfolding in the discovery of our

authentic selves and the experience of becoming "real". This process has been a quest for many – for thousands of years, long before the journey of the Velveteen Rabbit. Ideas describing the experience of Self-discovery come from psychoanalytic theorists, behavioral psychologists, novelists, poets, philosophers, spiritual doctrines, clergy leaders, physicists, mathematicians, and neuroradiologists, among others. One can spend a lifetime integrating ideas from multiple paradigms, reaching a murky idea of this entity of the Self. Individuals often successfully pursue depth meditation practices in this quest. Eastern philosophy and spirituality have become relatively mainstream, even within the mental health system, in the form of a more westernized language termed mindfulness meditation. Psychedelic drugs have become the latest curiosity in this pursuit, as individuals seek to discover the part of themselves that can be experienced as "real".

While evolving definitions of a unique structure within the mind visualized as a "Self" have a high degree of utility, perhaps a more experience-near paradigm would highlight a Self that is inextricably connected to the environment in the broadest sense, highlighting the degree to which we are all connected to nature, to one another, and to something greater. Ultimately, in considering the words of the psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, a conceptualization ought to facilitate an experience: "*the patient is looking for an experience, not an explanation*" (Ehrlich 1970, 182). An individual often seeks an experience, in an embodied manner, a pathway to reach what might be described as their deeper essence – a sense of themselves as "real". Kavar and colleagues describe through a research protocol the important contribution that a sense of spirituality brings to this experience. Their study identified themes in which spirituality is "*a key dimension to Self-understanding and is part of relationships, social engagement, an understanding of meaning and purpose in life, and an overall sense of happiness and joy*" (Kavar et al. 2015, 697).

The objective of this qualitative historical analysis is to trace the understanding of the idea of the Self, particularly through psychodynamic models, and to build upon these paradigms through ideas from a historical analysis of texts from Jewish mysticism. Original source documents both from the field of psychology and Jewish spirituality are analyzed and integrated with contemporary research regarding models of the Self. Like other spiritual pathways, Jewish mysticism can augment a model of the Self through intriguing internal maps, ideas of relatedness, consideration of the role of language, descriptions of subjective experience, and powerful, metaphoric imagery regarding the

process of fracture and repair. This review is among the first to integrate these paradigms, in which much common ground is discovered and the model enriched through Jewish mystical ideas of an unfolding Self interconnected with an experience of the Divine. These ideas have the potential to greatly enhance our ability to conceptualize a sense of an authentic Self beyond a concrete entity found somewhere within the mind, facilitating an idea of something that can be continually discovered, experienced, with an ongoing unfolding. This review parallels an ongoing exchange of ideas between one author involved primarily in psychodynamic thinking embracing ideas from Jewish spirituality while sharing knowledge with another author more immersed in concepts stemming from Jewish mysticism. This paradigm review with one another serves as a model for broadening ideas of the Self for individuals across disciplines similarly desiring to integrate these paradigms.

2 Background: The Self as a Static Individual Conceptualization

It is a particular passion in Western culture to see the Self as a unique, individual entity within the mind, capable of being trained to rise above adversity. This has characterized many of the suggestions stemming from the contemporary resilience movement embedded in most organizational human resource departments. Carlo Strenger (1989, 593) characterizes this idea through his notion of “Classical” man, with a Self ultimately capable of taming conscious and unconscious passions, linking this idea back to Sigmund Freud and to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. In describing this world view, Strenger (1989, 595) describes the goal of this classical view of the Self as follows:

The value of human life is to be found in the specifically human ability to transcend the drivenness of our animal nature. Kant's ethos is one of freedom. Our ability to be self-directed turns us from insignificant specks in a vast universe into those beings who are truly valuable.

One can call forth the words of William Ernest Henley (1888), referring to the battle of a mind against the pain from Tuberculosis in the bones: “*I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul.*” Implied in this process is a Self that is capable of guiding the individual through the various currents and waves that life presents. Alone, but ultimately capable of triumph. Such is the Self implied through many contemporary psychological paradigms: it is an internal structure somewhere within one’s brain that can transcend itself.

2.1 Behavioral Theory

Many helpful techniques within behavioral therapies teach an individual useful skills to tame a Self out of control. Cognitive behavioral theory implies a sort of Self in which perceptions and thoughts create emotional experiences leading the individual to feel overwhelmed. Like Henley’s idea, this Self can be tamed through an understanding of one’s thought patterns to calm the emotional responses. This process comes through a Self capable of realizing its own distorted perceptions to see a world more truthfully. Dialectic Behavioral Therapy attempts to provide skills and understanding to help access the “wise mind” rather than the overly “emotional” and “rational” minds. These skills fall in line with Carlo Strenger’s description of the classical Self, capable of recognizing disturbing internal feelings and perceptions, considering them, and reconceptualizing. This ultimately implies a unique, isolated Self that can become the “captain” of one’s soul.

Yet beyond the control of the Self, little can be found for the seeker in such behavioral paradigms regarding the embodied experience of this Self, beyond perhaps a restored sense of calm through the mitigation of anxiety. Though some internal sense of a Self in the state associated with “the wise mind” idea might include experiences of balance, presence, intuition, clarity, and peace.

2.2 Psychoanalytic Theory

Considering the nature of the Self through the lens of psychoanalytic ideas is a formidable task. Beginning with Sigmund Freud, one appreciates the idea of the Self through his structural and topographic models. He describes early in his work the idea of the Self generally as a mechanistic machine, the ego regulating energetic forces between an impulse driven id and a force for containment, the *super-ego* (Freud 1933, 75). It is difficult for an individual to find much of a subjective experience connected to these conceptualizations beyond perhaps the feeling of sexual and aggressive impulses and how these are regulated. The Self in Freud’s model is an intellectual abstraction of sorts and is distant and removed. Though theories of the Self expanded through the evolution of psychoanalytic theory, in many ways what has persisted is an idea of a concrete entity that is generally assumed to exist somewhere in the mind.

Heinz Kohut developed this idea of the Self in his writing of what he came to call self-psychology (Baker 1987, 2). Kohut’s Self was again an entity implied to exist somewhere

within the individual's unique mind. He described it as containing both a system of values and a locus of action, with a streaming of energy along a tension arc from one to the other. Though this Self responded to environmental experiences through processes such as idealization and mirroring across development, it continued as an entity to be found somewhere within the mind. Kohut's Self, however, did rely upon contextual elements from the environment in its development, and patients often came to therapy with a "fragmented" or "shattered" Self – the purpose of psychotherapy was then to restore the Self through a sensitive, attuned therapist through the process of empathy, which Kohut defined.

Carl Gustav Jung built upon the idea of the Self, and in many ways, the processes of the Self were a centerpiece to his theory. He saw the Self as negotiating conscious and unconscious processes over one's life. It was the "midpoint" of personality, in which aspects of the personality were balanced. This led to unique personalities referred to as having more extraverted or introverted characteristics (Butz 1992, 1043). Once a person is individuated into a unique Self, he or she is capable of developing this further by connecting to more collective processes. Though implied in this idea remains the idea of an entity of the Self, located somewhere within the individual, however abstract.

The object relations school of psychoanalysis included a group in England who emphasized the impact of the first year of life and the influence of the environment on the developing psyche. This included, loosely and not necessarily affiliated: Winnicott, Fairbairn, Guntrip, Balint, and Bowlby. Each in their own way referred to the notion of a Self at birth, though descriptions of this Self were vague. What they focused on really was not the nature of the authentic Self per se, but the damage done to it in adapting to the world, particularly in the first year of life. Implied within their theory was the sustained idea of a concrete Self, perhaps within the brain somewhere, though with little description of the qualities of the Self one might anticipate experiencing. Yet the language referring to this Self at birth is of interest – the "True Self" of Winnicott, the "pristine" ego of Fairbairn – as they imply a sense of connection to something authentic at birth that then becomes contaminated requiring adjustment to live a life in our world through various environmental impingements.

John Bowlby looked at this through the observation of external behavior in the development of his notion of a secure base. He described it as innate in all mammals, our inheritance if you will, that we establish a secure base from early

in childhood – hopefully established in conjunction with the mother or father or a caring adult with whom we spend our time. It is a base from which we explore the world, and one to which we seek proximity in times of danger. This involves a natural signaling system and can be turned off if not responded to as an internal Self develops. This leads to discussions of secure versus insecure attachments, and how those are manifest in children, which ultimately can be traced in the dialogue and behaviors of developing adults. We see a difference in behaviors and different brain systems developed after the first year of life in these varied attachment patterns – though this is described ultimately from the observation of external behaviors without a real description of the landscape of the internal mind or experience of an individual. Those continuing his research paradigm through tools such as the Adult Attachment Interview studied the development of and qualities of individuals who developed different "internal working models of attachment". In a sense, one might consider this a seat of the Self, as these models dictate the way in which an individual responds to many situations in the world – from a response to a crying baby to the design of one's life choices. A secure individual, then, has some qualities that might be described as a secure "Self". These include a sense of a lively, fresh, sparky personality, an ability for self-reflection about one's actions and life, an ability to understand the motivations and situations of others, and an ability to remain connected to another individual while reflecting upon one's own experiences (Main 2000, 1079). Though there is no description within this paradigm about the actual experience of the Self for a person, subjectively.

Donald Wood Winnicott alludes to a more internal process in describing his idea of the Self. He describes our entering the world with a "True Self" at birth. This Self is full of vitality and spontaneity, but this entity cannot make it in the world. We are forced to develop a "False Self" – whose intent is to protect the True Self. To the extent that we are met with impingements or a lack of responsiveness in the earliest of years, the True Self is forced into greater hiding behind the adaptation and protective armoring of the False Self. This False Self is built from the necessary accommodations to whatever the world brings our way and helps in the survival of our True Self. Winnicott's True Self theoretically exists somewhere within the person – though he himself does not really describe much about it. Winnicott does provide some window into the nature of this true Self and the degree to which it is connected to the body (Winnicott 1984, 148):

At the earliest stage, the True Self is the theoretical position from which comes the spontaneous gesture and the personal idea. The spontaneous gesture is the True Self in action. Only the True Self can be creative and only the True Self can feel real. Whereas a True Self feels real, the existence of a False Self, results in a feeling unreal or a sense of futility... The True Self comes from the aliveness of the body tissues and the working of body functions including the heart's action and breathing. It is closely linked with the idea of the Primary Process, and is, at the beginning, not reactive to external stimuli, but primary.

While this gives us some window into the nature of a True Self, it leaves us with an ongoing question, how does one know when one has contacted it? Winnicott himself, unfortunately, goes on to describe the importance of understanding the False Self and its mechanisms in protecting the True Self but says: “*There is but little point in formulating a True Self idea except for the purpose of trying to understand the False Self, because it does no more than collect together the details of the experience of aliveness.*” (Winnicott 1984, 148).

This raises a problem for any human being when considering Winnicott's ideas: How is the True Self experienced? Is it merely the absence of a sense of futility and some vague sense of “aliveness”? Can the True Self develop and grow? Are there layers of depth to understand about this True Self? How might we build upon this idea to understand this notion of the True Self, absent the contaminants of the False Self accommodations? How do we know when we are “real”?

While an understanding of the Self historically has involved much discourse around the various functions of this entity, increasingly there is interest in experiencing this Self. John Riker (2024, 94) in elaborating Kohut describes the felt experience of “erotic striving” as the somatosensory experience of the Self. This may relate to the experience Winnicott describes as a capacity to be alone – an idea in which the individual comfortable with their own self experience may enter into the realm of the experience of an “ego climax” or “ego orgasm” – the experience of listening to a piece of music, the potential experience in nature, or post orgasm lying next to another. These are experiences of being alone, yet with the felt experience of being connected to something greater. One can imagine that this is the felt experience of one's authentic Self (Winnicott 1958, 34), and at times may border on the ecstatic.

2.3 Neuroradiology

Through the advancement of science, there is an allure to discovering the actual location of this Self somewhere within the workings of the brain. Perhaps it can be located in a particular structure visible through PET scans or fMRI technologies. To some extent, this is true. We can indeed discover pathways within the brain associated with some aspects of the experience of the Self. One example of a set of neural connections, the default state network, is visualized when an individual is involved in deep states of meditation. It is an area involving the medial prefrontal cortex, the posterior cingulate, the lateral prefrontal cortex and hippocampus. It is involved in daydreaming, self-reflection, meditation, and consideration of autobiographical information. In a sense, if the Self had a brain-based location, it might be considered to operate through this network. Studies of meditation have demonstrated various experiences involved with other brain networks, including activation and deactivation of hypothalamic structures (Mohandas 2008, 63). Of particular interest to the thesis of this paper is a study involving individuals reciting Psalm 23. Individuals reciting this showed particular brain area activations. Their religious experience was mediated by a circuit involving the dorsolateral prefrontal and dorsomedial frontal cortex and medial parietal cortex (Azari *et al.* 2001, 1649).

In a sense, then, neuroradiology may be on the way to discovering component parts of the brain involved in experiences of the Self. This may give actual credence to a component of the brain where a “Self” is housed, though rather than considering it a particular structure, science continues to point to a series of neural circuits involved in a variety of tasks that might be considered components of the Self.

While a neuroanatomic image is compelling in our quest to discover the nature of the Self, this ultimately is limited to a documentation of some specific aspects of the brain involved in Self-related activities. Of course, the entire body would be involved in some way with these experiences through firing of various neurochemicals throughout. And ultimately, this leaves the patient only with the experience of receiving an explanation of what the Self might be down to the anatomic level. It does nothing really to identify and help facilitate the actual subjective experience of the Self or to understand it beyond the specific reified individual structure found in the brain. How might this Self be connected to something greater?

2.4 Jewish Mysticism and the Map of the Self

Ideas from Jewish mysticism present useful expansions on the idea of the Self. While ultimately connected to greater relational experiences, as described in later detail, there are particular capacities and functions of the Self that are worthy of exploration in this delineation of the internalized processes of a Self from the perspective of Jewish spirituality.

To put two thousand years of Jewish mysticism in a paragraph is itself a difficult task, as is summarizing some basic tenants. Put succinctly, mysticism involves an effort to have a direct experience with divine presence and/or deeper layers of reality. The encounter with the authentic Self in mysticism is something to be experienced more than understood cognitively. *Kabbalah*, a term often used to refer generally to Jewish mysticism, also refers specifically to a spiritual movement that surfaced in twelfth-century Europe, with origins in France and Spain. The kabbalistic tradition characterizes the “ultimate reality”, *Ein Sof* (He. *The Infinite*), as a source of radiant spiritual light that is itself truly unknowable, though in moments can be experienced through the connection to subtle divine emanations called *sephirot*. *Kabbalah* was greatly influential on subsequent forms of Jewish spirituality which, like most types of mysticism, derived their understandings of authentic reality through personal experience and the contemplation thereof – or traditions passed down through lineages of those who experienced and then spent time considering their encounters – rather than cognitive speculation as a primary route of discovery. These sets of insights, practices, and approaches evolved over many centuries with particularly notable schools emerging in Safed, Israel in the sixteenth-century and eighteenth-century Ukraine and its surrounds. Teachings from this latter school known as the *Hasidim* emphasized the ecstatic experience of true existence as a “bonding” or “attachment” (He. *dveikut*) to the ineffable and unknowable Infinite. In this paradigm of Jewish mysticism, Ultimate Reality is found both “beyond” the practitioner and also within. In this way, the true Self and the ever-unfolding and paradoxical Infinite source can be understood as one and the same. The Hasidic teacher known as the Apter Rav describes a stage of the mystical journey in which the seeker awakens the subtle inner awareness that enables him to view the world in the same way that Ultimate Reality did before the world was brought into existence (Ponak 2022, 46).

Through an interweaving of experience and lineage-based transmission with traditional symbols, imagery, and language, Jewish mystics create schemas for understanding

and charting various layers of reality and the Self. One such map is the various types or layers of the soul. These levels of soul include, according to Isaiah Horowitz (1698), a bodily, animating, sensory component (He. *néfesh*), an emotional, willful component (He. *ruah*), and a cognitive or thinking component (He. *neshamah*).

Each level of soul can be correlated with *sephirot*, a plural noun taken to mean emanations or qualities of the divine. All together there are ten *sephirot*, variously understood as a “ladder between the finite and the Infinite” (Green 2004, xlv), or as “pure virtues” (He. *midot*) found both in Ultimate Reality and in the core of the human Self (Cordovero 1584, 22:2). Each *sephira* has particular capacities, and we are capable of both reflecting upon and experiencing the energy of these (*Zohar* 1:103a–b). These concepts of the structures of the Self in and of themselves have a high degree of utility. Rather than a diffuse idea of the Self or disparate affects or developmental experiences, it is quite helpful to conceptualize a particular quality of the Self as something with an inspired connection to a “greater force”, *Ein Sof*. Much like Jung’s archetypes, these emanations carry particular qualities that are helpful to visualize in various ways and can appear in particular dreams.

A 51-year-old high functioning female client with lifelong access to the sense of *Hesed* or “lovingkindness”, discussed her difficulty with a different quality, that of *Gevurah* or “strength”, often understood as “boundaries”. After a review of various current and past difficulties embracing this energy, she had a dream in which a woman covered herself in blood by hacking at her arms and wrists while singing a repetitive song. She awakened with a strong sense of electrical vibrations coursing her body coming and going for nearly a minute. She was then able to use this image and associated tune and energy in calling up a component of the Self that had been more distant in the past. She associated this image with her mother and others she had felt compelled to care for or save psychologically over her life, and the embodied sense of electricity and associated hymn provided an increasing development of *Gevurah* with energy of the Divine. She saw this as a developing capacity in which she began to define herself beyond the capacity of saving another to have value or esteem, realizing that this was an impossible task, and began to experience a new sense of self regard.

While these contributions of the map of a Self helps one to build a relationship to one’s personal attributes and experience, this still implies a sense of a static, fixed Self. Equally important is the idea contained within most mystic tradi-

tions generally and Jewish mysticism specifically that the Self is in a dynamic process over a lifetime, with a continued unfolding through experiences with representations of *Ein Sof*. Like layers of an onion, one continues to reach new experiences – the discovery of the Self is just this – a process. Rather than discovering a distinct entity that will provide an answer to life's mystery, the Self is contained within the ongoing process of connection with a greater force. The Self is the process.

In classic rabbinic study, the Torah is seen mostly for its interpretive meaning. What it is on the surface is an invitation to delve deeper and discover. The idea of a *drash* involves just this very process – deeper understandings of Biblical texts to reach new unfolding understandings, paralleling an approach to the experience of an unfolding and constantly maturing Self (Ish-Shalom 2017, 16). Perhaps the Self, like the Torah, simply calls us to a journey of understanding where the deepening inquiry itself, not the final realization, is the point, where it is more about walking the path itself than arriving at any particular destination. And ultimately, psychotherapy might be considered the collaborative journey of this. The objective may not be to discover some ultimate truth or map of ourselves but to enter into the discovery process with another person. Perhaps this process itself has the capacity to lead to an experience of authenticity and something closer to what is real in any given moment.

3 An Expanding Understanding: The Self in Relation

Building upon our metaphor of the stuffed Rabbit, we understand that a sense of becoming alive comes through relationality. In a sense, a Self without relatedness can be seen as a stuffed plaything in a closet, waiting to join the world. The journey from the store to the external world involves a life of contact with others ultimately impacting the Self. This comes in the story through experiences with other toys as well as with the Boy – sometimes loving and sometimes difficult to bear – though always impacting the growth of the Rabbit toward becoming alive. It is the ultimate contact with the spiritual, the relationship with the energy of the Garden Fairy, that guides the Self in the story toward becoming real.

While the idea of a reified Self existing somewhere within the mind of the individual is useful, particularly to navigate through difficult feelings and perceptions, it may fall short in the quest to experience oneself as genuine, authentic, or real. Descriptions of the Self as a concrete, intrapsychic

unit can be understood as falling short of the reality of our ultimate connection to the community of subjectivities in which we all find ourselves. Is there even an individual Self that is separate from the connections that one experiences, in the past, present, or future imagination?

3.1 Psychoanalytic Relational Paradigm

The intersubjective paradigm within psychoanalysis led by Stolorow, Atwood, and Brandchaft, emphasized the idea that we inevitably live in a complex matrix of intersubjective connections. Our selves are a process both of our own experience and how we are impacted by those around us at any given moment. This creates a challenge for the idea of a solitary, isolated mind (Stolorow 2002, 52).

In this ever-evolving relational field of psychoanalysis, the unit of interest is not an individual Self, *per se*, but how that Self is impacted within the matrix or relationality. An individual brings a particular set of experiences and feelings to a particular moment, joined by those of another, and together they create a unique intersubjective field unlike any that has come before or can follow. We exist within these fields and may be changed by them.

Fields of psychotherapy that ignore the impact of the experience of the therapist miss this very point. Akin to the ideas of the uncertainty principle, the observed can only be understood through the lens of the observer: we impact everything we see. Both our understanding of another and the way they are interacting is impacted by who we are. To understand ourselves as solitary selves misses the truth of our ultimate connection, and to try to parse a self-understanding independent of the impact of the matrix of ongoing relationality is ultimately a limited exercise.

3.2 Family Systems

It is similarly worth considering the ideas of Murray Bowen in this context, it is critical to understand that the Self always exists within a matrix of relationships. The more we appreciate this, the more we differentiate ourselves. Ultimately, we live within a series of connections – a complex web of our relationships with family members, the history of these family members, our ongoing work experiences, and influences from community and society. So that if an individual begins to yell at his son, for example, this may actually represent anger projected upon him by his own mother, or a fellow employee, or an interaction in the mar-

ketplace. Our set of experiences at all times are influenced by a dynamic experience of relationality.

Bowen, known for his breakthrough ideas in family systems theory, describes a process, which he terms the “differentiation of the Self”. Through drawing genograms of a family’s history, one can begin to uncover processes that persist within a system’s legacy. For example, one may begin to observe family cutoffs, scapegoats, and enmeshment as a way to cope with the anxiety of relatedness and the difficulty that comes from living within a system.

Bowen’s Self is also difficult to characterize. It has certain capacities, measured on a differentiation of Self scale. Fundamentally, this Self in its mature form can remain connected to one’s family of origin while pursuing one’s own passions and desires. This comes from seeing others empathically as connected to and influenced by their own families, with those limitations. People are connected to systems, and the more that we can see those influences on the individuals with whom we interact, without getting pulled into them ourselves, the more “differentiated” our sense of Self is (Titelman 2008, 3). This understanding underscores the idea of a dynamic Self at all times impacted by a system of interconnectedness.

3.3 Relationality in Jewish Philosophy and Mysticism

The ideas underlying the relational theorists can be discovered earlier through the ideas of Martin Buber, a prominent twentieth-century Jewish philosopher. Buber emphasized the growth of the Self in relation to the authentic experience of another, raising the question of the existence of a Self that is independent of relationality. Buber (1958, 2) explains that “[t]here is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I-You and the I of the basic word I-It. When a man says I, he means one or the other...”

Buber describes an idea that there is no I without a relationship, and that we may see others either as an “It” or as a “You”, or as he later says, “Thou”. When our experience with the other takes the form of I-It, we see ourselves as a Self among objects: experiences, purchases, and more superficial interactions with others. When we consider another an “it”, they become an object in our mind, and this has ramifications for our experience of our Self.

A “true Self” may involve seeing and connecting with others as subjects, as “true” and authentic themselves, through the

experience of I-Thou. He underscores the intersubjective nature of this experience – it comes through relatedness, specifically when experiencing this other as a subject. He emphasizes that this experience of the authentic Self may come through our relatedness with nature, with the subjectivity of other humans, or with a greater sense of life with a spiritual being.

Buber was highly influenced by the Hasidic *rebbe*s (He. “teachers”, “masters”) who provided experience-near descriptions of this relational Self. Many of them sought to bring the experience of mysticism belying exoteric Jewish thought and praxis to individuals beyond the limited intellectual elite (Greene 2013, 21).

Elie Wiesel, professor, writer, holocaust survivor, and author of 57 books shared in his work, *Souls on Fire*, the impact of this group of rabbinic scholars and leaders. He provides an image of their memory for all of us. He describes their “*fervent writing, the longing for redemption; the erratic wanderings over untraveled roads; the link between man and his Creator, between the individual act and its repercussions in the celestial spheres; the importance of ordinary words, the accent on fervor and on friendship too; the concept of miracles performed by man for man*” (Wiesel 1972, 5).

The Hasidic *rebbe*s considered the nature of the Self in relation to an eternal source – a truly relational view of the Self. One such Rebbe, Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1798), wrote in his work *Me’or Einayim* (He. “Light of the Eyes”; Nahum 2015, 1):

Through the beginning – through the Torah, which is called the ‘beginning of His way’ (Prov 8:22) – the Holy Blessed One created the world (Zohar 1:5a). We find that everything was created by means of the Torah and the power of the Creator is in that which is created, in which case the power of the Torah is in each thing and in all the worlds, and also in each person as is written. This is the Torah: A person (Num 19:14) as we will clarify. And the Torah and the Holy Blessed One are one (Zohar 1:24a), so we find in all things the life-force of the Holy Blessed One.

The *Me’or Einayim* provides here something beyond a mechanistic idea of the Self. This Self – “a person” – is indistinguishable from an Eternal source – “The Torah” and/or “The Holy Blessed One” – speaking to something more sacred, more blessed, more awe-inspired, than a mechanistic idea of forces regulating various drives. This Self inspires a greater degree of regard and reverence and may impact both the individual searching internally for this experience and the

respect offered to the companion on the journey. A few paragraphs following this passage, the *Me'or Eynayim* goes on to say that a wise person searches for the divine within others, not merely what is on the surface. This is a relational Self, connected to and one with the eternal through a life-force. The individual Self ultimately is not separated from the source of creation. There is no Self independent of other selves, nor of the creator, *Ein Sof*. We are all interconnected in this way.

When we make contact with this force, we feel expansive, inspired, ecstatic, and ultimately a different sense of realness and authenticity. The sense of ourselves as connected to this force of *Ein Sof* is again seen in our story of our Velveteen Rabbit, who ultimately becomes real through such contact. While finally in a garden with other rabbits, he is kissed by the Garden Fairy and has a moment of contemplation, unaware of how the experience of contact with the divine had led to a change – a change toward becoming real (Williams 2022, 25):

But the little Rabbit sat quite still for a moment and never moved. For when he saw all the wild rabbits dancing around him, he suddenly remembered about his hind legs, and he didn't want them to see that he was made all in one piece. He did not know that when the Fairy kissed him that last time, she had changed him altogether.

Jewish spirituality also underscores the relationship between individuals. A general idea is that the *Shekhinah* or “God’s presence on earth”, lives within the spaces between individuals. It is through intentionality and honoring one another that we may discover this experience. Disrespectful behavior toward one’s teacher, for example, “causes the Divine Presence to withdraw from Israel (*Talmud, Berachot* 27b). An experience of the Divine may transpire through a moment of realization that the force of God lives within all of us, and when this connection is made, one can begin to feel the presence of a higher force: “*If two sit together and there are words of Torah (spoken) between them, then the Shekhinah abides among them*” (*Pirkei Avot* 3:2).

Of interest, the Hasidic *rebbe*s also inform us of some critical components to facilitate this experience. Among them, humility, compassion, and viewing another as one’s equal become important contributions to facilitate the emergence of something greater between individuals. An important story comes from Rebbe Naḥman of Breslov, writing at the turn of the nineteenth-century. His work was infused with folktales to guide students toward experiences of the divine. He is known to have influenced important writers

such as Martin Buber discussed earlier, as well as Kafka (Feuer 2015). In one such story, he shares a discussion from a Rebbe Dovid of Lelov. This involved the writing of the name of the Creator as represented by the letter *yud* twice in succession so as not to write down the name (Buber 2013, 185):

When you see two yuds in the Ḥumash or the siddur, that is Hashem’s [note: God’s] name. When two yuds are next to each other, it’s Hashem’s name. But when one yud is higher than the other, it’s a separator between one pasuk [note: verse] and the next. Rebbe Dovid of Lelov said he learned from this the following lesson: When two Yidden (two yuds) feel equal, no one feels greater than the other; Hashem is there. But when one yud feels higher than the other, it’s a separator, and Hashem doesn’t reside there.

This idea reminds us that to have an inspired relational experience, there must be a recognition of a representation of the divine in the other. When this does not exist and one feels higher or lower in status than the other, there is no such experience. Rather, we experience cognitions such as “better than” or “less than” and all that follows from these ideas.

Another compelling idea from Rebbe Naḥman of Breslov is the practice of *hitbodedut* (He. “self-seclusion” or “meditation”) (Philmus 2024). Through this practice, an individual enters a spontaneous and heartfelt conversation with the Creator, becoming vulnerable with what is in one’s heart. In this way, a real, spontaneous, relatedness develops with personal meaning beyond what is found in prescribed liturgical statements, which may not allow some practitioners to communicate authentically. Through this direct relatedness at the right moment, when one is in the right place, and with the right words, an individual can find himself experiencing a deep sense of connectedness adding to that which we experience between one another.

4 Language and the Self

From the beginning of life, an individual’s developing Self grows through communication with the external world. This happens at first through a mutual gaze with the parent, in which the developing Self of the infant develops a sense of meaning through the response of the other. This is reflected through Winnicott’s idea of the mother as mirror to the child’s experience from the start, challenging prior notions of an autistic period of development following birth (Winnicott 1971, 111). The mother interacts with the infant

through “*holding, handling, and object presenting*” (Winnicott 1971, 111), and the infant comes to respond with a smile. By the third month of life, a collaborative dance can be seen between parent and child, shown clearly through the work of Ed Tronick. When mothers in the lab collaborate with their infant and are told to stop responding, distress is communicated by the infant through expressions of concern, cries, and ultimately bodily contortions (Melinder et al. 2010, 472).

In most cases, this sense of relationality comes to be expressed through verbal language – through words. Research has demonstrated the way the Self can be understood to some degree through these words. The Adult Attachment Interview has demonstrated that, through an understanding of linguistic patterns, one can understand with great accuracy the attachment behavioral system of an individual through the presence or lack of violations of collaborative discourse. Through the application of the linguistic philosophy of Paul Grice, unconscious internalized attachment behavioral systems can be identified. These can be perceived as early on as preschool, as secure versus insecure styles (Eskritt 2008, 435). These linguistic violations involve following or not the maxims of quality (be truthful), quantity (provide sufficient but not too much information), relation (be relevant), and manner (avoid ambiguity in communication) (Eskritt 2008, 436). Through coding of the Adult Attachment Interview, Mary Main and colleagues (Main 2000, 1081) tracked specific attachment patterns of an internalized Self in relation to others through violations of Grice’s rules of collaborative discourse:

From the perspective of Grice’s maxims, we can now state that speakers who are able to maintain coherent, cooperative discourse while describing and evaluating their early attachment-related experiences tend to have secure infants. Moreover, violation of ‘particular’ maxims predicts particular categories of insecure attachment. Speakers who violate the maxims of ‘manner’, ‘relevance’, and ‘quantity’ tend to have resistant/ambivalent infants, while those who violate truthfulness or consistency (the maxim of ‘quality’) tend to have avoidant infants.

A further consideration of the relationship between language development and the Self ultimately can be seen through the works of Jacques Lacan. In Lacanian theory, language comes to guide our perception of the world, and to potentially limit our experience. According to Lacan, language is used to distract us from the “real” (a materiality of existence beyond what can be expressed) in the development of the experience of a subjective, understandable,

stable reality. For Lacan, the self is not innate or stable but constructed through language which is an attempt to create coherence from the chaos of the unconscious. Language thus provides an ongoing adaptation away from the real toward our experience of what we deem to be reality. Experiences of what is real can disrupt what we have created through our social version of reality, created through language. “*Yet, the real is the rock against which all of our artificial linguistic and social structures necessarily fail. It is this tension between the real and our social laws, meanings, conventions, desires, etc., that determines our psychosexual lives. Not even our unconscious escapes the effects of language.*” (Felluga 2011).

The capacity for language can also be considered through the lens of Jewish spirituality, simultaneously contributing to creative capacities and potentially constraining the subjective experience. In the very first chapter of the Bible, *Elohim* (He. “God”) uses language to speak the world into being (Genesis 1). In the understanding of the medieval kabbalistic work *The Zohar*, creative speech was an expression of a longer, more subtle journey. It began when, “[t]wo thousand years before creating the world, the holy Blessed One [note: God] contemplated [note: the Hebrew letters] and played with them” (*Zohar* 1:2b). Before even the thought of creation begins, *Ein Sof* contains letters – symbols of the vibrational foundations of reality – as yet unmanifest, within itself. The journey from potential to actual existence then takes several stages, symbolized by thought, voice, and speech (*Zohar* 1:74a):

When it arose in the will of the blessed Holy One to fashion glory for Its glory [note: to create the spiritual and physical realms], from the midst of thought a desire arose to expand – expanding from the site of concealed thought, unknown, expanding and settling in the larynx, a site continuously gushing in the mystery of the spirit of life. When thought expanded and settled in this site... It sought to expand and reveal Itself further... Jacob emerged, Consummate Man [note: symbolizing wholeness and harmony in the spiritual realm], a single voice issuing audibly. Hence, thought, having been concealed in silence, was heard revealing itself. Thought expanded further revealing itself, and this voice struck against lips. Then speech issued, consummating all, revealing all. It is perceived that all is concealed thought, having been within, all is one.

In this vivid description of the Godhead, the most subtle manifestation known as *keter*, is associated with “divine thought or will”. The larynx is associated with *binah*, the

supernal “feminine spiritual archetype”, which produces an undifferentiated voice. The voice symbolizes the middle realm of the kabbalistic cosmology and is personified as Jacob. Finally, the voice reaches the lips and audible speech is heard. This chain of unfolding manifestation leads to the act of divine speech and the creation of the physical world.

The view that speech creates realities, even illusory ones, is understood by Jewish mystics as a path, which can be walked in the opposite direction as well: from surface level speech to ineffable consciousness. Hasidic masters of the 18th and 19th centuries taught to move beyond words to connect with silence. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov taught that this can allow a seeker to access the most subtle dimensions of existence. In other words, the journey back to the ineffable *Ein Sof* is facilitated by consciousness but not speech. In the following example, Rebbe Nachman describes what is needed to reach the *ḥalal hapanu’i*, an esoteric “realm of emptiness” (He. *empty void*) from which deeply existential dilemmas can arise (Nachman 1808, 64:3):

Speech is the boundary of all things since He [note: God] demarcated His wisdom in the [note: Hebrew] letters. Different letters denote different things. But there in the ‘ḥalal hapanu’i’, which surrounds all the worlds [note: is beyond all layers of material and spiritual existence], and which is, so to speak, vacated of everything – there is no speech at all, nor even thought without letters. Therefore, the conundrums that emerge from there are in the category of silence.

This teaching from Hasidism points to the experience that words are insufficient for reaching foundational elements of our world and our minds. Only in silence can these realities be understood. Similarly to how Lacan writes of language bridging the unconscious and the conscious, or “real” and “reality,” Jewish mysticism suggests dimensions which emerge from the depths using language. The truth of these matters, however, remains undifferentiated, indefinable, and beyond words.

5 Experience of the Self

5.1 Psychedelics and Subjectivity

The yearning for the subjective experience of the Self connected to something larger and for spiritual experiences beyond what is experienced in the transactional world of

our everyday lives can be seen vividly through the rise of interest in psychedelics. Within most psychiatry residency training programs, for example, Psychedelic Interest Groups have emerged, all reading the latest descriptions and evidence about these experiences. MDMA, LSD, DMT and psilocybin each in its own way facilitates a connection to something greater – something beyond the experience of a concretized, locked-in Self. The evidence of their impact is emerging as well.

Psilocybin has shown efficacy in the treatment of alcohol use disorder, major depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Lowe *et al.* 2021, 1; Khan 2022, 319; Gukasyan 2022, 151). This effect has been largely mediated by what would be termed a mystical experience by the subject. MDMA has shown promise in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (Latimer *et al.* 2021, 125). LSD has promise in the treatment of anxiety disorders, among other clinical entities (Inserra 2023, 733). The interest in these substances represents a desire to connect to something greater – in a sense, a different experience of the Self connected to what might be termed “spiritual”. The I–You or I–Thou of Buber.

The subjective experience of those participating in one study during a psilocybin session indicates a newfound experience of oneself. This involves an enhanced experience of belonging, and an improved ability to regulate difficult affective experiences. The authors conclude that psilocybin has an impact on the Self in which shame-based feelings and self-critical thinking are reduced, going hand in hand with a reduction in alcohol cravings (Agin-Liebes *et al.* 2024, 101).

While the focus of the study involves the impact of a psychedelic on symptom reduction, the mediating factor appears to be a shift in one’s experience of the Self. Through an experience of reduced self-attack and shame, the possibility for symptom reduction follows. In his recent work, Letheby goes beyond the psychological, turning to the effect that psychedelic molecules have through an impact on one’s spiritual experience. He describes the change due to psychedelic substances as having qualities of ego dissolution, including an experience of connectivity, new psychological insights, and existential reflections, and deeply felt emotions. Letheby emphasizes that, through a review of research, those individuals who report the greatest psychological benefits from psychedelic experiences are those who report the greatest degree of a spiritual experience, as measured by multiple psychometric assessments of spirituality (Letheby 2022, 2). Lawrence Fischman goes

beyond this formulation and, paralleling the development of psychodynamic models toward the relational and intersubjective, describes the critical impact of relationality in a spiritual experience to develop a sense of authentic experience and a sense of true knowing (Fischman 2022, 1). Fischman (2022, 12) further suggests that:

psychedelics alter the possible intentional states one may experience by activating the same dynamics, which arise in moments of meeting; that is, the drugs induce a sense of knowing and feeling known by another, which may be a therapist, a representation of a key figure in someone's life, an evoked companion, a vague imagined audience, or even a supernatural entity. What unites this range of real and imagined transactions is the experience of being known by an object. It is this experience, which confers the sense of authenticity to knowing.

Throughout his manuscript, Fischman explains that, paralleling the experience of the infant being known by an attuned parent from the beginning of life, or a patient known by a therapist and “mentalized” in their mind, a critical component of the experience of authentic knowing and feeling real is generated through the intersubjective experience with another – even when the experience occurs wearing a mask and headphones. MDMA and other psychedelics facilitate the rapid dissolution of defensive experiences, allowing for a drop in the expectancy of painful reactions to one’s internal experiences, and the emergence then of the “True Self” emerging with an experience of acceptance and being known by the other.

5.2 Subjective Experience through Mystical Judaism

Jewish mysticism, or *Kabbalah*, approaches the idea of the Self and the experience of authenticity as a “divine spark” – a piece of the Eternal living within each being. One can consider other metaphors from other spiritual traditions that capture this idea – perhaps kundalini from Kashmir Shaivism and MDMA or ecstasy from neurochemical perspectives. The light of *Ein Sof* is connected to this divine spark that dwells within each being. Through meditation and mystical practice, the individual can at moments experientially connect this sense of light within the Self to the sense of greatness beyond. In the paradigm of mystical Judaism or *Kabbalah*, this experience stems from a complex energetic connection of the *sefirot*, the divine emanations referenced above.

The Hasidic rebbes spoke and wrote of the ability to experience the connection to God through *dvekut* (Weisblum 1788). This involves an intense spiritual connection with the Divine, where the sense of Self becomes attached to or even subsumed within the greater reality of God’s presence (Heschel in Ponak 2022). This takes the sense of the concretized, “Invictus” of Self to something beyond. Hasidic teachings and stories often also point to the importance of humility and potentially Self-effacement in this process (Heller 2010), as well as the helpfulness of a “spiritual guide” (He. *tzaddik* or *rebbe*) with experience in this realm (Schachter-Shalomi 1983, 47–49).

Perhaps through our imagination at least at first, we might draw from these descriptions a more powerful sense of the idea behind Winnicott’s True Self and Fairbairn’s central pristine ego. What makes them pristine or true? It is as though there is something near sacred about the Self at the beginning of life. This pristine ego might be considered the inner Torah, the inner divine essence and preconceptual light. “We find in all things the life-force of the Holy Blessed One.” This certainly brings a greater immediacy to the idea of the Self. A Holy Torah, not in the sense of a book but of a deep reality, a knowing which precedes cognition, but which cognition and awareness can help seek. This begins to have a certain light, and a certain pull to discover and uncode.

The Self is experienced in a variety of manners through Jewish mystic teachings: from a sense of joy and ecstasy to an experience of deep sadness, and the balance of equanimity, all experienced through a union between an aspect of the Self and *Ein Sof*. Consider the following passages. The first involving an experience of joy through union with “God’s presence” on Earth (He. *Shekhinah*; *Zohar* 1558):

The Divine Presence does not dwell in a place of sorrow but it does dwell in a place of joy. If there is no delight there, the ‘Shekhinah’ does not rest there. As it says, ‘Now get me a musician.’ And as the musician played the hand of God came upon him (2 Kings 3:15). The spirit of God was on him. This is the ‘Shekhinah’, and of course it does not rest in a place of sadness.

Though the experience of the Self in connection with God is not limited to joy and subjective ecstasy and bliss. One can also find reference to the experience of deep sadness. This sadness, when experienced subjectively in conjunction with a higher power, leads to a restoration of capacities. The passage below is from the Piaseczner Rebbe (Kalonymus Kalman Shapira 1960, 178–179) who taught and sup-

ported many people in the Warsaw Ghetto before he was killed in a concentration camp:

God, blessed be he, is to be found in his inner chambers weeping, so that one who pushes in and comes close to him by means of studying Torah, weeps together with God, and studies Torah with him. Just this makes the difference: the weeping, the pain, which a person undergoes by himself, alone may have the effect of breaking him, of bringing him down, so that he is incapable of doing anything; But the weeping, which the person does together with God – that strengthens him. He weeps – and is strengthened: he is broken- but finds courage to study and teach. It is hard to raise one’s self up, time and again, from the tribulations, but when one is determined, stretching his mind to connect to the Torah and Divine service, then he enters the Inner Chambers, where the Blessed holy One is to be found; he weeps and wails together with him, as it were, and even finds the strength to study Torah and serve him.

And yet another experience of the Self through connection to God involves a sense of equanimity: *“The cause of equanimity is attaching the mind to God. The one who is connected and joined to the mind of God, even though people do things to him, he does not feel it. He does not pay attention to ‘soothsayers and diviners.’”* (Isaac ben Samuel 1981, 281–282).

These descriptions add to the more reified, structured, idea of the Self through an understanding that when this Self is ultimately experienced as connected to something greater, something that connects us all, experiences from ecstasy to sadness to balance are felt. And it is in these experiences that we find our own sense of becoming “real”.

6 Fracturing of the Self

6.1 Psychoanalytic Perspectives

Ultimately, as Winnicott described through the process of False Self development, the True Self cannot endure and relies on protection to survive. In a sense, it becomes buried beneath the protection of the False Self.

Fairbairn goes one step deeper in the discussion of what happens to us internally – a description of the processes of our mind. On some level, as a minister, he could speak a slightly different language than other psychoanalysts, also bringing a sense of spiritual background to his ideas.

Fairbairn outlined our birthright not as a “True Self” as Winnicott described so simply and eloquently, but rather referred to this same entity as the “central pristine ego”. Like Winnicott, he explains that it is not possible for us to continue as a central pristine ego or True Self. We ultimately must accommodate to some extent. Even if the external world isn’t so wonderful, we must adapt – and we must see those that care for us and on whom we are dependent as good. We need to eat, to have a place to live, and someone to generally look after us, even if the situation isn’t the best. We may idealize our own upbringing in the name of this survival. What of the badness, then, that we experience from those that oversee us from the earliest moments? Where does it go in our quest to see our caretakers as good?

Fairbairn explains that it is introjected. Energy is taken away from our central pristine ego in the development of what he termed “endopsychic structures”. The Self becomes structured – now impure. We develop internal subsidiary selves. He refers to them as “internal saboteurs” and a “band of fifth columnists.” This process takes energy away from our central pristine ego, which is in a sense dulled. Energy is taken from the central pristine ego along with the badness that could not be seen in the external world of our caregivers. It is internalized, and it is repressed. We are unaware of the process. These internalized subsidiary selves wreak havoc on the Self. If we try to feel good, these will keep us down. They represent the equivalent forces of our home in early life. Fairbairn (1952, 65) writes:

By this means he seeks to purge them of their badness; and, in proportion as he succeeds in doing so, he is rewarded by that sense of security, which an environment of good objects so characteristically confers. To say that the child takes upon himself the burden of badness, which appears to reside in his objects is, of course, the same thing as to say that he internalizes bad objects. The sense of outer security resulting from this process of internalization, is, however, liable to be seriously compromised by the resulting presence within him of internalized bad objects. Outer security is thus purchased at the price of inner insecurity, and his ego is henceforth left at the mercy of a band of internal fifth columnists or persecutors, against which defenses have to be, first hastily erected, and later laboriously consolidated.

The process of psychotherapy for Fairbairn is one in which the patient comes to trust the therapist sufficiently to face and experience the impact of the original source of badness. With enough trust in the therapeutic relationship,

a patient may come to see the therapist as strong enough to withstand the force of the bad object, which is then released. Fairbairn calls this the “release of bad objects”. It is a bit like an exorcism, and can happen bit by bit, or in a great force, leading to a disturbing regressed feeling for the patient. But it involves realizing where the badness began in the imperfection of the parent that was taken on by the child and internalized. This leaves the individual with an experience of a less safe world, taken care of by potentially dangerous caregivers, but the source of the badness is no longer in the patient. In a sense, it is where it belongs.

Fairbairn used religious metaphors in referring to this process. In his description of one particular psychological mechanism that he termed the moral defense, he explained further why an individual takes on the sense of badness themselves, rather than allowing it to be perceived in those taking care early on (Fairbairn 1952, 66–67):

It is better to be a sinner in a world ruled by God than to live in a world ruled by the Devil. A sinner in a world ruled by God may be bad; but there is always a certain sense of security to be derived from the fact that the world around is good ‘God’s in His heaven: All’s right with the world!’; and in any case there is always a hope of redemption. In a world ruled by the Devil the individual may escape the badness of being a sinner, but he is bad because the world around him is bad. Further, he can have no sense of security and no hope of redemption. The only prospect is one of death and destruction.

What is particularly notable about Fairbairn’s model is that in the development of these endopsychic structures of internal saboteurs, energy, or goodness, or might we say “light”, is taken from the natural, central pristine ego, and coupled with the badness experienced in the world, and internalized. This process speaks to an allure of the internal badness. It is not there necessarily in a merely static way, but we are drawn to it. To experience the saboteur in dreams, enactments, projections, sexual desires, addictions, etc. There is a pull into the darkness. Perhaps because it contains an energy of the original central pristine ego.

An example of this process can be seen through a patient dream from a renowned musical composer of Asian descent, having difficulty creating new music (Katzman 2024).

I was in a jail cell. My lawyer came to explain to me that there had been a change in the sentence. I would be released in two years, instead of a life sentence. I was happy about that, content. Though in actuality, I had come

to see the jail cell as comfortable and had befriended the warden. There were beautiful colorful rugs on the floor, beautiful paintings on the walls, and I had a nice adjustable bed. I was comfortable there and could easily be there for a couple of more years, though I was at peace to know that I would be released in two years. And confident that I would be.

From the Fairbairn perspective, we can consider how comfortable it may be to be in jail, with the jail guards formed by our internal saboteurs keeping us imprisoned. The patient saw the therapist immediately as his attorney, negotiating a release from jail, though there was more work to do. And he had developed a comfort in the prison that was home – it had developed since he was born. As he gained insight and recovered feelings related to his early life, while held in the mind of the therapist, his creativity and ability to write music resumed.

In Fairbairn considerations, one can imagine that to the extent that any of the “central pristine ego” has been sequestered by an endopsychic structure, the internal saboteur would be experienced with great strength and power. It owns a component of our original light. And perhaps taking on the bad object, in Fairbairn language, involves facing the darkness and the powers possessed by the introject to steal the piece of gold, the light, the Torah, back from the saboteur to be re-experienced. A similar description again can be found within the Hasidic text, *Me’or Einayim* (Isaac ben Samuel 1981):

and a portion of Divinity from above was placed within the darkness of materiality. For the whole essence of the intention was so that the lowest levels can rise above and that there will be an ‘abundance of light from [note: within] the darkness,’ (Ecclesiastes 2:13). And this is the meaning of the descent of Joseph [He. YoSeF] to Egypt [He. MiTZRaYiM], the lowest levels, i.e., a ‘strait’ [He. MeiTZaR YaM] – a narrow channel of water. For through this, pleasure is increased [He. YitvaSeF] as is written, ‘an abundance of light,’ that there is an increase in pleasure when it is lifted out from darkness, and therefore he is called Joseph [He. YoSeF], connoting addition [He. toSa-Fot].

The joy of Jewish mysticism involves its allusion and ultimate guidance to our lived human experience – and how we can bring to life a greater sense of authenticity, immediacy, and hopefully moments of pleasure and contentment. It becomes guidance from centuries ago as to how to experience what is real. The Hebrew name for Joseph is Yosef and

it is linked etymologically for the words that mean “abundance” and “addition.” The name for Egypt in Hebrew is *Mitzrayim* and is connected through interpretive etymology to the concept of a “narrow channel” or a “strait.” Through this allusion to the Israelite exile in Egypt, the meaning of servitude, and the exodus narrative, one can begin to wonder why it is that we in our lives continue to visit our internal pharaohs and sink into submission to their instructions. And how we can perhaps become free. The idea here identifies that within this dark place there is a great deal of light when it can be recovered. This is a difficult task; it involves traversing the narrow place of constrictions and likely is best done in conjunction with a skilled practitioner. These dark places are not necessarily to be just avoided, or overcome through skills management training, but to be approached with the understanding that there is some sense of divine spark contained within them, as Fairbairn had referenced, a component of our original “central pristine ego”.

It may be possible that we can experience a release of bad objects through a “good enough” therapy with a “good enough” therapist. One may face an inner saboteur – and release it – but not necessarily be in contact with the experience of the light held there simultaneously. Perhaps the internal saboteur can leave such an imprint, that even when we understand it, and release it in good part, we cannot experience the light without assistance in recognizing it.

We share here another relevant patient dream. This individual was a 50-year-old-attorney, now working with a rabbi, after many years himself of psychoanalysis, which had been quite helpful. He sought help connecting to an experience of something bigger outside of human relationality. He had had prior experiences that one might call spiritual or transcendent through Buddhist and Sufi paradigms, though had now begun a study of Jewish mysticism. He began a discussion of his dream life with the rabbi. And a dream was gifted to him, like none before (Ponak 2024).

I was in some sort of train station. My parents were going to pick me up, but they were far away and couldn't get to me. I was trapped in this room, and there were sinister people around – one was torturing someone next to me by teasing him about getting out, but he ultimately couldn't. I thought maybe I could call an Uber to escape this place. I looked down at my cell phone and it wasn't working. Though it then started to flash a code – 0-6-4-0. And I began to feel a vibration over my whole body. And as I did, I realized I was escaping the room through some sort of portal that I didn't quite comprehend,

though it felt warm, familiar, and in a strange way like home.

The client went on to experience this feeling in dreams on various nights for the days to follow before the experience subsided. Though he described it as “terrifying” at first passing, he later related that this was not quite the right word, and that it might be closer to God-fearing... to a sense of awe to be in contact with something beyond himself. He realized that he had connected to a new dimension of his experience of Self, and that it implied to him connection to something beyond himself, and he was relieved of a certain experience of loneliness with this knowledge.

The patient wondered about the code. He thought it represented his new zip code, where he and his wife had moved and where he felt quite content and free and had begun a new life chapter. Of some interest is the association to Hassidic literature provided by the rabbi to the code 64. The rabbi associated this to a famous passage from Rebbe Nachman of Breslov from his text *Likutei Moharan*. This passage describes the original contraction from the light of *Ein Sof*, so that the Eternal might show and experience compassion. This is the original creation story and describes the contraction involving the creation of a “Vacated Space”, perhaps symbolized in this dream by the room. Yet, like the light of the cell phone code, Nachman describes (in passage 64!) the possibility of finding light in this vacated space formed by contraction, a process similar to finding light within a journey to dark, endopsychic structures of the Self (Nachman 1808, 64:3):

For he will be able to find God in that place, if he seeks and searches for Him there. Since the [note: heresies] stem from the Shattering of the Vessels, there are some holy sparks and some letters that broke and fell there, as is known. Therefore, he can find divinity and consciousness there in order to answer the questions raised by this heresy that stems from external wisdom, which [note: in turn] stems from extraneous elements from the Shattering of the Vessels. For there is Godly life-force there, i.e., consciousness and letters that broke and fell into that place.

Spiritual metaphors may help us to understand this situation of the darker places within us and the draw to them in a more immediate way. Kabbalistic thinking describes this process of descent into the darkness, drawn in by a sense of the light. While it cannot be known whether the actual cell phone code in the patient's dream reflected this ancient Jewish text, the conversation led to an expansiveness for

the client and greater ideas about the notions of the “darker” components of himself. In a sense, providing this reading provided a new context to consider about his experience of feeling trapped in the dream, and mitigated a sense of shame he initially experienced about the dream.

In this way, Jewish mysticism lends an accessible metaphor to Fairbairn’s more intellectualized description of the process of the fracturing of the Self. We can begin to experience the light of “true Self” in a more sustained way, even through our darker internal spaces. If we experience components of the true Self as what they might be – points of Divine light – we can practice getting to the source that was necessarily hijacked in the process of getting along in the world, creating these internalized and hidden structures.

7 Integrating the Full Self: Running and Returning

In reality, however, one cannot easily live in the constant state of near-ecstasy and continue to manage in life. It may be helpful, then, to consider this last bit of wisdom from Jewish mystics. The Rebbes immersed themselves in states of bliss, but also had to carry on a life of everyday responsibilities. They did not generally withdraw from society into a monastic lifestyle – most of them also had ordinary lives to live, like most of us.

To complete a metaphor – the Velveteen Rabbit became real through contact with the mysticism of the Fairy and had a felt experience of this. But to be real also requires a means of obtaining nourishment and survival with the other rabbits in the forest. The creator of the Hasidic movement, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, known popularly as the Ba’al Shem Tov, provided the following idea of running and returning – from the ecstatic to the ordinary in life, potentially involving multiple capacities of our Self (Keter Shem Tov 1:24:2).

‘Sometimes the neglect of the study of Torah is its foundation...’ (b. Menahot 99 a–b). It is hard to understand how ignoring Torah can possibly support it. The Ba’al Shem Tov explains it with the verse, ‘The living creatures were running and returning, (Ezekiel 1:14).’ Everything burns to return to its root. Through eating, drinking, and business dealings a person neglects the study of Torah and the service of God. However, at that point the soul rests from its burning and is strengthened so it can return later to an even higher ‘devekut’. And about this the Ari

said, ‘Sometimes the neglect of Torah is its foundation’ is the mystery of ‘the living creatures were running and returning.’ And understand!

In everything from spiritual enlightenment to weightlifting, we must take a break and embrace the mundane, employing other functions of our Self, and tending to the ordinary. One patient describes connecting with feelings of ecstasy amidst meditation yet living in a disorganized and messy home that disturbed him. He complained of the ordinary tasks in his life – particularly cleaning the dishes stacked in the sink. I just don’t want to do it. Any of the chores: Making the bed, cleaning the dishes – I get so frustrated when I need to scrub the pots that I just don’t want to do any of it.

An authentic, real life involves the balance of everyday existence with potential contact with something beyond. The process of “running” can feel ecstatic, though can also lead to deeper psychological shifts. It is wise to take time both for experiences beyond one’s everyday experience as well as for the integration of these potential shifts to one’s inner landscape. This “return” can lead to a new understanding of oneself and is critical in the integration of Divine experiences. Though ultimately, once that fairy has come down and touched our soul introducing us to the experience of what is real, there may be no easy turning away from the path.

8 Conclusion

Through our tracking of the famous Velveteen Rabbit through the experience with the Boy and other toys, we can relate to the experience of becoming “shabby” through the impacts of these relationships over our lifetime. Yet it is these very relationships, and ultimately one with something greater, that have the potential to lead to our feeling more authentic and ultimately “real”. This sense does not come to us exclusively through intellectual understandings, but rather, the felt experience that these relationships have imprinted. Through considerations of how we are all connected, and ultimately to something greater, Jewish mysticism provides one pathway toward a deepening experience supporting both psychological and spiritual development. Even those experiences that contain difficult and hidden memories have the potential to bring light into our lives once understood and our feelings about them potentially re-experienced in the presence of an attuned and skilled practitioner.

At some point in life, most of us are faced with a challenge, a point of adversity that may open a particular channel of self-reflection and a quest to discover this authentic Self and a striving to become more “real”. This generally involves questions somewhere along the lines of “Who am I?” often leading to reflections about one’s beliefs and values, how they may be similar or different to those who raised us, and who we are becoming and desire to be in this lifetime. There is often a yearning to encounter deeper, hidden feelings and unfelt experiences. And there is a need for guidance through this process.

Unfortunately, many such opportunities are dressed in the experience of crisis – we don’t recognize them as opportunities for growth. Additionally, the current mental health system is often directed toward crisis management and a reliance on medications, crisis stabilization, and coping skills. While these are all critical components of managing such situations, an individual is often guided away from the possible growth signaled by the anxiety they are experiencing – the opportunity to discover a bit more about one’s “Self”. And while the above-described management components have a critical place within a mental health system, it is unfortunate that due to financial circumstances and access, this has become the norm – the extent of the mental health system for many – leaving an individual without the help that might facilitate a discovery of a deeper authentic experience. This is characterized well by Wilkin (2006, 12):

Once a person accepts any form of mainstream mental health care, she is faced with the paradox of disabling caring. Every time an emotionally distressed individual is professionally rescued, she forfeits a golden opportunity to discover and utilize her own healing potential. Yet within a mental health service that is heavily medicalized and investing more and more in time-limited therapies, can it ever be otherwise?

While management of our distress is a necessity, a realization that there is potential for growth embedded in reflecting upon these experiences is paramount in the course of self-discovery. The process of knowing ourselves as real continually unfolds for all of us, through times of potential joy and ecstasy to inevitable challenge and adversity. This notion of the limitation of contemporary psychiatric treatment models and the consideration of spirituality as an addition to the mainstay of psychiatric diagnosis is underscored in Stanislav Grof’s *The Stormy Search for the Self*. In this seminal work, Stanislav Grof describes the progressively limited views of traditional psychiatric understandings to

presentations of distress and the potential role of a compassionate human being, well versed in spiritual models, working with an individual through a period of crisis. Decades ago, Stanislav and Christina Grof (1990, 3) wrote:

The spiritual elements inherent in personal transformation seem alien and threatening to those who are unfamiliar with them. In the last couple of decades, however, this situation has been changing rapidly. Spirituality has been reintroduced into the mainstream culture through renewed interest in sacred systems such as those found in Eastern religions, Western mystical literature, and Native American traditions.

As spiritual traditions have augmented the mainstream mental health conversation about how we might develop through these experiences, it is our hope that the voices of the rebbes of the eighteenth-century Ukraine, the concepts of *Kabbalah* percolating from thirteenth-century Spain, and concepts of spirituality embedded within Judaism dating back 2000 years can further augment this understanding. The notion of the Self is one of ancient curiosity and study, and to the degree to which ideas from spiritual paradigms can help in our quest to feel real and authentic, we believe there is greater healing available for all of us.

This research brings together voices from distinct paradigms to deepen our picture of the Self. For those immersed in the literature of spirituality and mysticism, the delineation of the nature of the Self from psychological and biologic paradigms, including information from the field of psychedelics, augments ancient concepts. In particular, the developing concepts of the Self within psychodynamic thought, from mechanistic structures to a relational experience, connected through language, deepens the understanding of the Self for practitioners from all spiritual backgrounds. Similarly, expanding the notion of the Self for clinicians of psychological practice to include a relationship beyond the individual and connection to something potentially experienced as sacred and awe inspiring has the potential to deepen a client’s experience of grace and self-compassion. Finally, while it has become commonplace to consider ideas from Eastern spiritual practices into the vernacular of mental health practice, this manuscript provides an additional spiritual model of the Self from the world of Jewish mysticism. These ideas dates back centuries and have the potential to deepen the ideas of our very nature and purpose. While this is only a brief introduction to the ideas of Jewish mysticism, it is our belief that bringing these concepts into more mainstream thinking can deepen the wisdom of practitioners, both of other path-

ways of spirituality and more traditional psychology. The process of considering these ideas also affords practitioners the opportunity to integrate contemporary psychological ideas with ancient wisdom to deepen ideas about the human experience and potential pathways toward personal growth.

Finally, as implied by the story of the Velveteen Rabbit, the experience of authenticity and feeling “real” requires a number of influences. This development generally transpires through the wisdom of aging and the influence of multiple relationships. It is deepened through contact with something beyond our ordinary experience – the touch of the Garden Fairy – which may come through the experience of psychedelics, the process of being truly and deeply understood by another, or moments of meaning coming to us through stories told again and again over the centuries often brought to us through sacred texts.

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