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Applying Hermeneutics to the Therapeutic Interaction

Julian Ungar-Sargon MD, PhD*

Borra College of Health Science, Dominican University, USA.

***Correspondence:**
Julian Ungar-Sargon, Borra College of Health Science, Dominican University, USA.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the fundamental tension between two paradigms of textual engagement: the incarnational model, where language itself embodies and is saturated with divine presence, and the referential model, where text functions as signifier pointing toward transcendent truths beyond itself. Drawing on Kabbalistic, Hasidic, psychoanalytic, and postmodern frameworks, we explore how these competing understandings shape religious experience and textual interpretation.

In the incarnational paradigm, exemplified by Zoharic hermeneutics, the very substance of language its letters, spaces, and material form contains divine energy, making the reading experience itself a direct encounter with immanent divinity. In the referential paradigm, text serves as a vehicle pointing toward absent transcendent meaning, privileging rational contemplation over experiential engagement. The dialectical hermeneutics that emerges from this analysis brings together the insights of the Zohar, Lacan's Real/Symbolic/Imaginary triad, Žižek's concept of the traumatic Real, Zornberg's theory of textual absence/presence, Degel Machaneh Yehudah, and my work on embodied textuality and sacred listening to develop a nuanced theory of textual encounter with applications extending to therapeutic spaces and clinical phenomenology.

Keywords

Incarnational textuality, Transcendent signification, Dialectical hermeneutics, Sacred reading, Divine presence, Zoharic hermeneutics, Lacanian Real/Symbolic/Imaginary, Žižekian traumatic Real, Derridean différance, Sacred listening, Therapeutic textuality, Hermeneutical injustice, Interpretive authority, Hospice hermeneutics, Digital graphocentrism, Covenant medicine, Embodied textuality.

Introduction

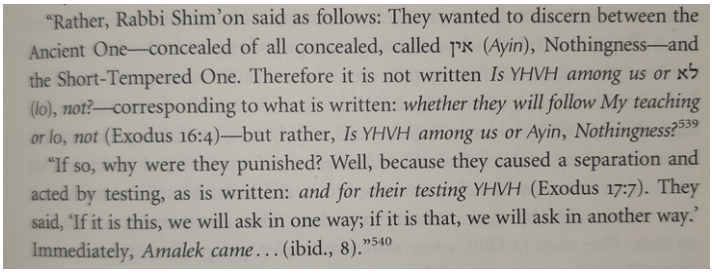
The question of how divine presence relates to language has profound implications for religious hermeneutics and practice. Two paradigmatic approaches have emerged throughout theological/textual hermeneutical history: one that locates divine presence within the materiality and structure of language itself an incarnational model of textuality and another that positions language as merely signifying transcendent truths that exist beyond words a referential model. This fundamental contrast invites us to consider whether religious reading is primarily an embodied, experiential encounter with divine presence immanent in the text, or a rational exercise in decoding symbolic references to transcendent truth. My thesis is that in our use of language in the sacred space of the therapeutic encounter these two paradigms are also present and need to be decoded.

As Handelman notes, "the issue at stake is not simply how to interpret texts, but how language itself is understood to function in relation to reality" [1]. The incarnational model, epitomized by Kabbalistic/Hassidic readings, understands letters and words as vessels of divine energy, with sacred reading becoming a direct encounter with divine presence. In contrast, the referential model, dominant in certain philosophical and rational theological traditions, views language as a system of signs pointing beyond themselves to transcendent truths, with reading becoming an act of understanding and fulfilling the divine will and at best a contemplative reference to an absent divinity. (absent as in or part of this mundane world). Drawing particularly on Exodus 17:7 as a prooftext, where the Israelites question "Is the Lord among us or not?", we explore how these competing textual paradigms represent fundamentally different theological orientations toward

divine presence and absence and how this awareness might affect the language used in the therapeutic encounter.

Kabbalistic Textuality

The Zoharic tradition represents perhaps the most developed articulation of the incarnational model of language, where text does not point to divinity but embodies it directly. For the Zohar, the Hebrew letters of sacred text are not merely conventional signifiers but vessels of divine energy and creative power [2]. The text states: "The Torah's words and letters are all part of one Name, one divine essence" [3]. This perspective understands textuality as theurgic capable of effecting metaphysical change through the divine power inherent in the text itself and exemplifies incarnational textuality in its purest form.



"Rather, Rabbi Shim'on said as follows: They wanted to discern between the Ancient One—concealed of all concealed, called אין (*Ayin*), Nothingness—and the Short-Tempered One. Therefore it is not written *Is YHVH among us or* לא (*lo*), *not?*—corresponding to what is written: *whether they will follow My teaching or lo, not* (Exodus 16:4)—but rather, *Is YHVH among us or Ayin, Nothingness?*[539]

"If so, why were they punished? Well, because they caused a separation and acted by testing, as is written: *and for their testing YHVH* (Exodus 17:7). They said, 'If it is this, we will ask in one way; if it is that, we will ask in another way.' Immediately, *Amalek came*... (ibid., 8)."[540]

ZOHAR II 64b[1]

The Zohar's interpretation of Exodus 17:7 particularly illuminates this understanding of divine presence within and between textual elements. In Matt's authoritative translation, the Zohar offers a profound reading of the Israelites' question "Is the Lord among us or not?": "This verse does not ask whether the Blessed Holy One exists, for they had already witnessed the miracles and wonders He performed for them. Rather, they were distinguishing between the concealed, unknowable Ancient One and the revealed, manifest Holy King. They sought to know if the dimension of Judgment (is the Lord) operated through the revealed aspect, or the dimension of Compassion (among us) flowed from the concealed aspect or not" [42]. For the Zohar, the question at Massah and Meribah is not about divine absence but about discerning between different modes of divine presence the text becoming the site where these modes are distinguished and interrogated. The space between "is the Lord" and "among us" in the biblical question contains the entire mystery of divine manifestation, with the Zohar reading the very structure of the question as encoding kabbalistic truths about divine attributes.

Wolfson elaborates on this incarnational view: "In kabbalistic hermeneutics, the text is not a window through which one sees beyond, but rather a mirror in which one sees within" [4]. The divine is thus encountered not by looking through the text to what it represents, but by entering into the very materiality of the text itself the letters, vowels, crowns, and the spaces between them. This approach rejects the notion that language merely refers to some truth external to itself; instead, the truth is incarnated within the language itself, with divinity soaked into the very substance of the text.

Zornberg's analysis of the "void" or space that exists between letters further develops this incarnational understanding. She writes: "The white space of the text is not empty but pregnant with meaning... Reading becomes an act of traversing the abyss between letters, where the infinite reverberates" [5]. For Zornberg, the experience of reading is one of encountering divine presence in these spaces as much as in the ink that forms the letters a direct embodied engagement with immanent divinity rather than a rational reference to transcendent truth.

Textuality as Divine Encounter

The Hasidic tradition, particularly as articulated in works like Degel Machaneh Yehudah by Rabbi Ephraim of Sudylkow, extends the Zoharic understanding of incarnational language into the realm of experiential practice. The Degel teaches that "each letter contains worlds, souls, and divinity" and that the proper approach to text is one of "hitlahavut" (ecstatic fervor) rather than mere intellectual comprehension [6]. This perspective intensifies the incarnational model by emphasizing the direct, experiential encounter with divinity embodied in language itself.

This approach is exemplified in the Degel's interpretation of the verse "And these words that I command you today shall be upon your heart" (Deut. 6:6). The Degel interprets "today" to mean that one should approach the text as if receiving it anew in the present moment, creating a collapse of historical distance between the original revelation and contemporary reading [7]. This temporal collapse facilitates an immediate encounter with divine presence in the act of reading, treating language not as a system of referential signs pointing to absent truths but as the direct embodiment of divine reality in the present moment.

The Hasidic approach thus offers perhaps the most explicit contrast to referential models of language. As Rapoport-Albert observes, "For the Hasidic reader, the text becomes a site of divine-human communion rather than simply a repository of information or instruction" [8]. The text is not about something else; it is itself the divine presence. This view reaches its culmination in the Hasidic practice of contemplating individual letters without regard to their semantic meaning treating them purely as vessels of divine energy rather than as signifiers pointing to concepts beyond themselves.

Lacan and Žižek on Textuality

The psychoanalytic tradition, particularly as developed by Lacan and later Žižek, offers a radically different framework that emphasizes the referential nature of language. For Lacan, language including sacred text functions within his triad of Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary orders. The text exists in the Symbolic order, always pointing to but never fully capturing the Real, which remains fundamentally inaccessible [9]. This framework establishes a form of transcendent signification where the text gestures toward but cannot embody the ineffable, representing the referential model in its most sophisticated philosophical form.

[1] Trans Daniel Matt Vol IV Pritzker Edition Zohar Stanford University Press 2007 p350-351

Lacan's famous dictum that "there is no metalanguage" suggests that all textual systems, including sacred texts, are enclosed within language itself and cannot access an external position from which to grasp transcendent truth with certainty [10]. This presents a challenge to both incarnational and transcendent views of textuality, pushing us toward a dialectical hermeneutics that recognizes the interplay between presence and absence. Yet Lacan's framework ultimately privileges the referential function of language, with words forever separated from the Real they attempt to signify.

Žižek extends this Lacanian framework to religious textuality specifically. For Žižek, religious texts function as attempts to symbolize what he calls the "traumatic Real" of divine encounter [11]. The text does not contain divine presence (as in the incarnational view) nor does it successfully point to transcendent truth (as in the transcendent view); rather, it circles around an absence or gap that constitutes the Žižekian traumatic Real of religious experience.

As Žižek explains: "What the religious text 'really means' is not some transcendent content beyond the text, but precisely the gap or rupture within the symbolic order that the text attempts to paper over" [12]. This perspective destabilizes both the incarnational and transcendent approaches by suggesting that textuality primarily functions around an absence rather than a presence. Yet in positioning language as fundamentally separated from the Real it attempts to articulate, Žižek's approach ultimately aligns more closely with the referential model, where language points toward but never embodies the truth it seeks to express.

In the context of the Israelites' question at Massah and Meribah, Žižek would likely interpret "Is the Lord among us or not?" not as seeking information about divine location, but as articulating the fundamental gap in human experience that religious language attempts to address. The question itself becomes significant not for what it refers to, but for how it manifests the inherent rupture in the symbolic order a rupture that religious language simultaneously reveals and conceals.

Incarnation and Textuality

My work attempts to define a theoretical framework that acknowledges both the incarnational and referential dimensions of sacred text: "the gap between incarnational theology and Jewish textuality is less absolute than commonly assumed" [13]. I note the rabbinic concept of "Torah min ha-shamayim" (Torah from heaven) as implying a form of divine embodiment in text that parallels incarnational theology while still preserving the text's referential function. "When the Talmud declares 'words of Torah are not susceptible to ritual impurity,' it suggests a quality of divine imperishability inherent in the text itself a quality not unlike that attributed to the incarnate Logos in Christian thought" [14]. This connection opens possibilities for understanding how language can simultaneously embody divine presence and point to transcendent meaning. Furthermore, I have argued that the practice of "keriah" (ritual tearing of garments) performed upon witnessing a Torah scroll dropped to the ground parallels the mourning for a deceased person, suggesting an implicit understanding of the Torah as somehow "alive" or embodied with divine presence [15]. (once no longer of ritual value it is buried like a human being). This ritual practice reveals a theological understanding of sacred text as simultaneously material and divine, immanent and transcendent.

In the analysis of one of the most enigmatic verses of the bible, (Exodus 17:7), this dual understanding is particularly revealing. The very question "Is the Lord among us or not?" operates at both levels: as an existential questioning of divine presence (referential) and as a performative act that itself manifests divine engagement (incarnational).

The question both points to divine absence and, in its very articulation, creates a space for divine presence. "The question itself becomes the site of divine revelation, not despite but because of its articulation of doubt" [13]. This analysis reveals how language can simultaneously function as vessel of divine presence and as pointer to divine absence. This perspective directly addresses the contrast between language as divine incarnation and language as transcendent reference. Eybeschütz's theology of divine concealment is particularly illuminating in this context. He argues that divine concealment (hester panim) itself constitutes a mode of revelation rather than its opposite, writing: "The highest form of divine presence manifests precisely at the moment when God seems most absent, for in that moment of apparent abandonment, the soul searches most earnestly" [28]. This paradoxical formulation suggests that the very gap between incarnational and referential understandings of language between immediate presence and distant reference becomes the site of authentic religious experience.

Derrida and the Spaces Between

Postmodern approaches, particularly Derrida's deconstructive reading, complicate both incarnational and referential understandings of language. Derrida's concept of "différance" suggests that meaning is always deferred, never fully present either within the text or beyond it [16]. This perspective challenges both the idea that divine presence is incarnated in text (as the Zohar suggests) and that text successfully refers to transcendent truth (as rational theology maintains). For Derrida, the spaces between letters so central to Kabbalistic reading become metaphors for the gaps and deferrals inherent in all textual systems. As Derrida writes: "The white spacing that separates words and lines is not merely a passive ground but actively produces meaning through difference" [17]. This focus on spacing parallels Kabbalistic attention to the spaces between letters, but with a crucial difference: where Kabbalists see these spaces as filled with divine presence, Derrida sees them as markers of absence and deferral.

Caputo extends this Derridean insight specifically to religious texts: "Sacred texts do not so much contain or refer to the divine as they perform the endless deferral of divine presence that constitutes faith itself" [18]. This postmodern perspective thus offers a third alternative beyond incarnation or transcendence: textuality as the

endless play of presence and absence, neither fully embodying the divine nor successfully referring to it.

When applied to the question at Massah and Meribah, Derrida's approach would focus on how the question itself "Is the Lord among us or not?" simultaneously poses and undermines its own inquiry. The question performs the very absence it interrogates, with the space between "among us" and "or not" marking the undecidable nature of divine presence/absence. This undecidability is not a failure to be overcome but the very condition of textual meaning and religious experience.

More recent theological work on divine absence provides additional frameworks for interpreting the tension between incarnational and referential language. Drawing from analysis of pivotal biblical moments of questioning most notably the Israelites' question "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Exodus 17:7) these approaches view divine absence not primarily as divine withdrawal or human faithlessness but as a necessary condition for authentic religious subjectivity and textual encounter.

I have identified three modes of responding to divine absence in both biblical and contemporary contexts that illuminate this linguistic tension:

1. **Lament:** Articulating the experience of divine absence as a form of theological testimony. The question "Is the Lord among us or not?" represents not a rejection of divine presence but a demand for it based precisely on prior covenant commitments. "questioning becomes a form of testimony that preserves rather than abandons theological commitment" [23]. This lamentation mode reveals how language can simultaneously articulate absence and perform presence.
2. **Reinterpretation:** Developing new hermeneutical frameworks to understand apparent absence. The naming of Massah (testing) and Meribah (contention) represents a reinterpretive move that inscribes the questioning as part of an ongoing relationship rather than rejecting it. This process of "reinterpretation transforms the experience of divine absence from theological crisis to theological opportunity" [24]. This re-interpretive mode shows how language that appears purely referential can be transformed into language that performs divine presence.
3. **Ethical Response:** Translating theological questioning into communal action. The experience of divine absence creates space for human ethical agency that "extends rather than replaces theological commitment" [25]. This ethical dimension offers an embodied response to the gap between textual promise and experienced reality, transforming apparently referential language into incarnational practice.

This framework particularly illuminates the therapeutic dimensions of sacred reading. Just as therapeutic spaces provide containers for articulating experiences that conventional settings might suppress, sacred texts offer spaces where questions of divine absence can be safely expressed. The therapeutic container, like the sacred text, "becomes sacred precisely in its capacity to hold questions of divine absence with neither premature theological closure nor abandonment of theological meaning altogether" [26]. In this space, language functions as both vessel of divine presence and articulation of divine absence simultaneously incarnational and referential.

Toward a Dialectical Understanding

Rather than privileging either incarnational or referential approaches to language, this paper proposes a dialectical understanding that acknowledges the productive tension between these perspectives. The divine may be encountered precisely in the oscillation between presence within language and absence beyond it, a theological dynamic illuminated by the biblical questioning at Massah and Meribah (Exodus 17:7).

Handelman suggests such a synthesis when she writes: "The rabbis understood that God's presence in the text was also God's absence, that revelation was simultaneously concealment" [19]. This paradoxical formulation captures the dialectical nature of language's relationship to the divine. Sacred text functions neither purely as vessel of divine presence (as in extreme incarnational views) nor merely as reference to absent truth (as in purely referential models), but as the dynamic interplay between presence and absence, incarnation and reference. Similarly, Wolfson's concept of "unsealing the sealed" points to the way textual interpretation both reveals and conceals divine presence: "The mystical exegete does not simply uncover pre-existing meaning but participates in the creation of meaning through the very act of interpretation" [20]. This participatory hermeneutics suggests that divine presence emerges not simply from the text itself (incarnational model) nor from the truth beyond the text (referential model), but from the interpretive engagement that navigates between them.

This dialectical approach is further supported by Zornberg's reading of midrashic literature, where she identifies a pattern of "rupture and repair" that characterizes the relationship between text and divine presence [21]. The ruptures in the text its gaps, contradictions, and silences become precisely the spaces where divine encounter becomes possible. These ruptures challenge both incarnational views (by revealing the text's incompleteness as vessel of divine presence) and referential views (by disrupting smooth reference to transcendent truth) yet simultaneously enable a deeper encounter with the divine precisely through this disruption.

Sarna's analysis of the question "Is the Lord among us or not?" reveals how this dialectical understanding operates in biblical narrative. He notes that the question "represents not necessarily a denial of God's existence but a questioning of divine presence and providence in their immediate circumstance" [27]. This formulation acknowledges both the referential dimension of language (questioning divine reality) and its incarnational dimension (the question itself becoming part of the covenant relationship). The naming of the place as both Massah and Meribah further reinforces this dialectical tension, enshrining the questioning itself as part of Israel's sacred history [28].

Recently I have suggested "that the articulation of doubt itself becomes a form of faith when it emerges from and returns to covenant relationship" [29]. In this framework, language that appears purely referential (questioning divine presence) simultaneously functions incarnationally (embodying covenant faithfulness through the very act of questioning). The question in Exodus 17:7 thus operates at both levels simultaneously: as referential inquiry about divine presence/absence nevertheless as incarnational performance of covenant relationship.

Implications

This exploration of the two fundamental approaches to divine language incarnational and referential has significant implications for clinical encounters. If divine presence oscillates between incarnation within the text and transcendence beyond it, then both sacred reading and therapeutic listening must balance between experiential encounter and rational interpretation.

The experiential dimension of reading attending to the materiality of the text, its rhythms, sounds, and spaces honors the incarnational textuality tradition. As Fishbane notes, "The sensuous engagement with text has been central to Jewish practice, from the bodily swaying during study to the kissing of the Torah scroll" [32]. This embodied textuality finds its clinical parallel in approaches that honor the patient's embodied expression of suffering as meaningful in itself rather than merely as a sign pointing to pathology. Simultaneously, the interpretive dimension of reading seeking meaning, making connections, drawing inferences honors the referential aspect of textuality. As Levinas suggests, "The text always points beyond itself to ethical responsibility for the other, which constitutes its ultimate significance" [40]. This transcendent dimension corresponds to the physician's responsibility to interpret symptoms within broader medical epistemology, recognizing that language points beyond itself to biological and psychological realities.

The challenge for clinicians is to maintain the creative tension between these approaches through dialectical hermeneutics to engage with both body and mind, experience and intellect, embracing both presence within the text and truth beyond it. As Zornberg concludes in her analysis of textual absence/presence: "The sacred reader dwells in the borderland between presence and absence, where the infinite momentarily touches the finite through the medium of text" [33].

The question posed "Is the Lord among us or not?" thus emerges as the paradigmatic question for all who engage with sacred texts. This question operates simultaneously as an expression of doubt about divine presence (referential) and as a performative act of covenant relationship (incarnational). It is both about divine absence and itself a manifestation of divine presence. This paradoxical duality suggests that the deepest encounters with the divine occur precisely at the intersection of these two understandings of language where words simultaneously embody divine presence and point beyond themselves to transcendent meaning.

The implications extend beyond religious practice to therapeutic contexts, where language similarly functions in this dual capacity simultaneously embodying suffering and referring to underlying conditions. Just as sacred reading navigates between incarnational and referential approaches to language, healing encounters happen in that space between presence and absence, between incarnational immediacy and transcendent meaning, between narrative medicine and medical science a space where covenant medicine can flourish. "When we approach language as both vessel and pointer, containing the divine while simultaneously reaching beyond itself, we create the potential for genuine transformation in both religious and therapeutic contexts" [34].

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