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Metaphor and Metamorphosis:

Zoharic Imagery of Winged Beings as Midrash in Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*

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“Even Stella, who can remember, refuses. She calls me a parable-maker. She was always jealous of you. She has a strain of dementia, and resists you and all other reality” (41). In this passage from Cynthia Ozick's *The Shawl*, a grieving and delusional mother addresses the hallucinated vision of a long-deceased daughter murdered in front of her own eyes in a Nazi camp. This tragic episode, set against the backdrop of the nightmarish yet unconceivably real concentrationary world, belongs to a fictive personal history that plausibly locates itself along the long arc of Jewish history and reveals how memory may be altered within post-traumatic perception — here specifically as a lost daughter's fate that is constantly reimagined, reconfigured, and recast. Of similar and central concern to Ozick, according to Hana Wirth-Nesher, is “the relationship between Judaism and artistic representation ... [and] the means of representation and of communication within Jewish civilization” (323). Importantly, Ozick's convictions both compel and propel her “to seek forms that will require continuity, that will make literature liturgical, in that it evokes the texts of Jewish civilization . . . [thus] ‘liturgy’ becomes a dynamic concept” (313). A palpable connection here exists between the “parable-making” character of Rosa and the body of Jewish liturgical writings known as Midrash, which Ozick describes as “the literature of parable” (Ozick *Metaphor* 238). In his discussion of midrashic thought, Joseph Alkana explains that “although it primarily concerns itself with the exegesis of sacred texts, midrashic activity frequently takes the form of fiction, especially didactic fiction. These fictions focus on textual gaps ... [in order to] render comprehensible fissured or otherwise perplexing biblical passages” (Alkana 969) and to fill in the gaps and

silences within the stories of ancient liturgy that resist interpretation. A second purpose of midrashic writing, Alkana continues, is an attempt to interpret contemporary issues in ways that align with religious beliefs and the circumstances of the present moment to then “cast contemporary intellectual and ethical dilemmas as extensions of tradition” (969). Yet it is within the first category of the midrashic approach, that is, to fill in narrative gaps, that Joseph Lowin observes a midrashic connection between the stories of “Rosa” and “The Shawl,” where one narrative seeks to fill in the silences of the other. Yet Lowin cautions that while “Rosa” does continue the story of “The Shawl” it should not be strictly understood as its sequel: “Both stories are independent works of art and neither ‘needs’ the other to be considered complete. One might say, however, that once the reader has knowledge of both stories, neither story can be approached without reference to the other . . . [for] Ozick has entered, and drawn the reader into, the midrashic mode” (Lowin 112).

This study provides a midrashic reading of *The Shawl* by relating it to parable, here specifically to the legends of Talmudic and medieval Jewish mysticism known as the Kabbalah as set down its canonical text, the *Zohar (Book of Splendor)*. In the following essay, I will explore the imagery of winged beings throughout the novel and establish metaphorical connections to the mystical tradition of the Jewish Kabbalah and its legends of the antagonistic winged feminine forces, Lilith the Night-Monster and the *Shekhina*, the mystical “feminine emanation of the divine” on earth (Sivan *Belonging* 77), forever engaged in cosmic battle. Further, I will discuss how the transformative, metamorphic nature of winged beings provides a metaphor for radical shifts of perception as well as the collapse of time that, as Daniel Boyarin observes, relates one of the “strategies of the midrashic [mode] . . . enabling the hearers of the text to see and experience” events separated by even millennial distance (Boyarin 605n89).

These complementary roles recall the original purpose of Midrash, which was to create “a body of text that could guide the Diaspora after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.” (Rosenberg 2), and also to provide a sense of connection and healing for a nation cast, yet again, into physical and spiritual exile.

Much of the scholarship on Ozick’s writing in general, and on *The Shawl* in particular, focuses on issues of Holocaust representation and narration, and how her own spiritual and philosophical concerns with literary aesthetics impact the author’s narrative content and style. In my focus on midrashic readings I consider three midrashic studies of *The Shawl*: Miriam Sivan’s interpretation of Rosa’s letter-writing to Magda that in its role of creating connection and offering explanation provides a metaphor for the midrashic mode; Tod Linafelt’s intertextual reading between *The Shawl* and the liturgical *Book of Lamentations* mourning the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE; and Alkana’s analysis of “The Shawl” and its thematic connection to the biblical story of the binding of Isaac known in Hebrew as the *Akedah*. While these analyses articulate cogent thematic similarities, in general these readings only partially align with the actual plot of *The Shawl*, highlighting certain issues but remaining silent on other central concerns. What I propose is a reading that more closely aligns with the narrative of *The Shawl* and with the spiritual and psychological aspects of the novel that defy purely liturgical or psychological interpretations — a Kabbalistic interpretation suggested by the presence of winged beings that represent metaphorical energies of the winged divine feminine forces of the *Zohar* and the qualities of transformation that metamorphosis relates. At stake in a reading that considers the characters of Stella and Rosa to be the metaphorical embodiment of Lilith and the *Shekhina* of the Kabbalah — two embattled female divinities in winged form — is that it provides a metaphorical and thematically Jewish framework for

understanding the unspeakable tragedy of the Holocaust while resisting the assurances of a moralizing or fairy-tale ending as a possible conclusion that would ultimately “boil down to idle chatter” (Ozick Critics 177); for within this medieval system of Jewish mysticism, the physical world merely provides the theater for a metaphysical battle between good and evil, here depicted specifically as divine goddess energies representing two lunar forces at war.

Additionally, I will explore how the metamorphic nature of moths and butterflies, represented by the character of Butterfly-Magda, reveals a metaphorical connection to the midrashic compression of time and distance designed to provide consolation and regeneration to an exiled nation. At the more personal level, the image of a butterfly as a metaphorical emblem of healing and transformation signifies the possibility of metamorphic change that also requires the protective safety of a cocooned space; as illustrated in “Rosa,” a fragile yet powerful transformation begins with the steady encouragement of (the notably alliterative) persistent Persky who, in his steadfast support of the damaged Rosa, provides the cocooned protection she needs to heal without pressing for a testimony that she may not be able to accept as the truth. Finally, I will consider the character of Butterfly-Magda as the creation of Rosa’s traumatized psyche who, in a transformation of roles, functions in a way similar to the *Shekhina* as she proverbially guards her mother under sheltering wings. Here, Butterfly-Magda appears as an anthropomorphic hallucination whom Rosa depends upon to comfort her in life after atrocity, a specter whose summoned appearance magically creates a safe space where Rosa may attempt to face her fears as a grieving mother in the “obsessive returns to the past” that often describe the process of healing after trauma (Rothberg 19).

Metamorphosis itself signifies a mysterious, radically elemental transformation that, importantly, takes place at a much more accelerated pace than ordinary maturation; as such, the

metamorphic dimension may offer a model for the process of healing from trauma as well. The vertiginous nature of metamorphosis may provide a useful metaphor to describe the perceived rupture of linear time in the wake of atrocity, a phenomenon Adorno likens to the deconstruction and reordering of memory after Auschwitz: “Through constant reference to the site of murder,” Michael Rothberg observes, “Adorno faces a reevaluation of the time of the modern world — no longer conceived as a progressive passage from before to after but as threatened from within by potentially deadly repetition” (Rothberg 29). Adorno’s claim is narrativized by Rosa’s explanation of her dysphoric existence which she can best describe to the naïve Persky using metaphorical language: “Before is a dream. After is a joke. Only during stays. And to call it life is a lie” (58). By crystallizing language into metaphor, Rosa has taken down the barriers that unshared experience creates to attempt to explain the fragmentation of ordered time in her life after the camps. Midrash itself attempts to restore and repair fractured time as it fills disruptions and omissions within liturgical writings; in its role of maintaining spiritual connection across exilic distances and attempting to heal traumas suffered in diaspora, midrashic writing is therefore called upon to address “the silence that accompanies atrocity” (Sivan Crossing 50). Relatedly, Naomi Mendel believes that “the unspeakable is . . . what cannot be physically spoken or pronounced, like an infinite word or an infinite scream. Its dimensions are located in the challenge posed to the psyche by a traumatic experience and the subsequent repetition and deferral that constitute the work of mourning” (212). Here, grieving itself is presented as a necessary stage in the often non-linear process of healing — underscoring the difficulty inherent in transition itself from denial to a form of acceptance that must first take place before the transformative process of healing may truly begin. This process mirrors healing at the societal level, as Lawrence Langer explains: it has been “understood that

before one could speak of the renewal of the human image after Auschwitz, one had to crystallize its disfigured form and the horror that had defaced it” (Langer xxiii). Within the microcosm of “The Shawl,” Elaine Kauver implies that not only Rosa’s self-silencing but also the stylized gaps of its elliptical narration are transformed as speech is recovered: “The silence that pervades ‘The Shawl’ is broken in ‘Rosa’” (Kauvar Tradition 197). As it relates to writing in the midrashic mode, Alkana observes that “the speech of ‘Rosa’ fills many textual gaps left by ‘The Shawl’” (969), even if “Rosa’s ideal listener” cannot be found in Stella, Persky, or the community but rather in the character of Butterfly-Magda, “her dead daughter, who is not (unless we believe in ghosts) as separate entity but a part of Rosa herself, [which] provides clear evidence that Rosa’s addressee is herself, not us” (Budick 45). While her imaginary correspondence and visits with Butterfly-Magda appear to sustain Rosa’s tenuous grip on reality, such denial comes at great psychological and physical cost. The image of Rosa as first encountered in “The Shawl” is of a young mother ferociously determined to save her child; in “Rosa” she has transformed into a mere shadow of that woman, her reflection revealing metaphorical likeness to a bedraggled, skinny stork (23), the many decades of dreaming her Butterfly-daughter alive inflicting trauma that wastes Rosa’s body and spirit. For even in liberation, Rosa neglects her physical well-being, metaphorically eating like a bird as if she has willingly remained the camp of Magda’s murder, unable to leave the past, and Magda herself, behind.

The midrashic interpretation I propose locates itself within the Jewish rabbinic tradition but also outside of it as well, as it uses as its liturgical source the Zoharic legends of Lilith and the *Shekhina* of Jewish mysticism rather than the writings of traditional rabbinic liturgy. My contribution to the current scholarship of midrashic interpretations of *The Shawl* seeks to

expand its referential dimension by connecting the novel's imagery of winged beings to the mystical, disorientingly anthropomorphic legends of the Jewish Kabbalah. Descriptions of angels, moths, and butterflies interwoven throughout *The Shawl* may be considered metaphorical representations of the fractured divine feminine of the Kabbalah¹ and relate the mystery of metamorphosis closely associated to the natural world of winged creatures to the theme of death and transformation central to the novel's interconnected stories. Their presence in the narrative may be interpreted as a symbolic reference to the winged figures of Lilith and the *Shekhina* in this occult system of medieval Jewish mysticism. According to its central text, the *Zohar*, written in Aramaic in 13th-century Spain² and attributed to Moses de Leon, these two powerful energies — antagonistic manifestations of the divine feminine — exist in eternal conflict (Scholem 46). In the *Zohar*, the *Shekhina* is imagined as the pre-eminent feminine aspect of G-d — a winged divinity who symbolizes regeneration, motherhood, loving devotion, and death (Birnbaum 15). She is challenged by the dark force of Lilith, referred to in the Book of Isaiah (34:14) as a demon but later portrayed in the *Zohar* as the first female consort of Adam who, after fleeing Eden, haunts the world as a cannibalistic child-murderer, deadly succubus, and destroyer of pregnant women and babies who are “sinfully begotten” (Jacoby 80). Reading *The Shawl* as the metaphorical encounter between Lilith and the *Shekhina* provides a view to a medieval Kabbalistic narrative that seeks to explain the presence of evil on earth as well as the divine force of love and protection pledged to defeat it. Under such a reading, the magic shawl

¹ According to Matt, the word *kabbalah* is from the Hebrew, meaning “receiving” or “that which has been received.” Daniel C. Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism* (HarperOne, 2009) p 1.

² Matt provides attribution of the original writings that formed the basis of the medieval *Zohar*: “Moses claimed that he was merely the scribe, copying from an ancient book of wisdom. The original had supposedly been composed in the circle of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, a famous disciple of Rabbi Akiva who lived and taught in the second century in the land of Israel. . . . Moses de Leon wove his various sources into a masterpiece, a commentary on the Torah in the form of a mystical novel” (Ibid, p. 1).

that once-cocooned baby Magda can be understood as metaphorical wings of her mother, echoing the Kabbalistic blessing for divine protection *takhat kanfei ha-Shekhinah* — under the wings of the *Shekhina* — based upon the mystical formulations found in the *Zohar* (Weissler 54). Under such a reading of “The Shawl,” however, the *Shekhina* — the divinely protective presence on earth — tragically is no match for the cannibalistic Lilith, “queen of the demons, or of the demons in her retinue” (Scholem 154). In this metaphorical sense, Rosa with her cocooning shawl represents the figure of the *Shekhina* while Stella represents one of Lilith’s minions, motivated more by cruel circumstance than by an evil nature of her own. Here, however, an important distinction must be made: the murderous energy of Lilith is enacted not by Stella but by a monstrous regime and its emissaries — the collective resident evil in this nameless camp of incarceration and death.

“*The Shawl* issues a challenge to conventional aesthetics,” observes Alkana, “a challenge that also touches upon questions of history and of theology” (965). In the novel’s first story, “The Shawl,” Ozick’s economical, stylized prose alternatively shadows and sharpens images of human suffering as the author’s masterful control of tightly-wound literary forms creates an “elliptical, impressionist” lyricism (965). “The Shawl” describes in painterly, atmospheric language the terror of a death camp of women prisoners — a depiction of life in the barracks that “does not seek to beautify the truth” (Langer 140) but rather reveal it in a candid representation of squalor and degradation, of acrid, greasy air and an ashen, smoke-filled sky (8-9). Wirth-Nesher suggests that Ozick’s larger purpose for this harrowing yet revelatory writing is to “test her ideas within her own represented and invented worlds, [thus] Ozick sets up the most extreme case imaginable: she writes a novella about the Holocaust, one in which a mother is witness to the murder of her own child” (Wirth-Nesher 313) in prose committed to “rejecting

sentimentalism and universalism and moving toward the development of a more complex post-Holocaust literary aesthetic” (Alkana 965). Of central concern to Ozick is finding a respectful, sensitive voice for relating the story of the Holocaust that acknowledges the admonishment of Theodore Adorno — that “[t]o write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” (Adorno Prisms 34) — as well as her fears of writing for “aesthetic gratification” likely exacerbated by her belief that “Nazism was an *aesthetic* idea” (Alkana 980). It is with this sense of reverence that Ozick undertakes the challenge of “finding a form that makes it manageable to our imagination . . . as language veers between truth and myth in its efforts to extract from history a meaning that may not in fact be there” (Langer 139). Ozick creates the story about Rosa, a prisoner “whose surname reeks of the deathcamp Majdanek” (Langer 139) located near the Polish city of Lublin, and who embodies the strength to endure the tragic loss of her child and the struggle to emerge from its fierce grip of sadness — all in a world that offers little comfort, few answers, and where promises of salvation appear broken in shatters.

The mystifying and often dissonant aesthetic of *The Shawl*, therefore, may be understood as a parallel to the blurry incomprehensibility of human history (and here, a decidedly *Jewish* history) that the Kabbalah seeks to clarify and relate using legends and parables: “The Kabbalists had attempted to penetrate and even to describe the mystery of the world as a reflection of the mysteries of divine life. . . . For centuries the Kabbalah had been vital to the Jews’ understanding of themselves” (Scholem 1-2). Understanding *The Shawl* under a Kabbalistic reading provides an interpretive lens that relates imagery, setting, and characterization, for Ozick’s creation of the world of “The Shawl” itself suggests a strong thematic connection to divine goddess energy, as the prisoners of this women’s camp, in starvation and freezing cold, appear to subsist on little more than their feminine energy alone.

As Wirth-Nesher proposes, the author chooses to focus the two connected stories of *The Shawl* on a female character “so that the narrative circles around maternity and the woman’s relation to language and loss” (316). In addition to Wirth-Nesher’s exploration of “the role played by different languages . . . and the role of language itself in the representation of mother-child bonding,” her analysis considers the role of “fiction as a means of collective memory . . . in an invented account of a Holocaust survivor’s act of remembrance” (314). Here, the murder of a child and the destruction of motherhood itself, as presented through imagery and language that grounds the surreal into the dark reality of incomprehensible human tragedy, invites a reading of *The Shawl* that explores the novel as a work that seeks to establish “continuity, that will make literature liturgical, and that evokes the texts of Jewish civilization” (313).

The scholarly conversation I enter grounds its readings in the midrashic tradition, although the studies I consider represent different approaches and offer varying interpretations. Providing a biblical reading against the *Torah*, Alkana theorizes that *The Shawl* functions as literary midrash, a traditional form of storytelling that either “fills in the textual gaps” of liturgical writings or bridges current events and moral concerns to traditional sources as a way of unravelling meanings and maintaining a connection to the wisdom of Jewish tradition and texts (969). Alkana, however, reads the first story, “The Shawl,” as a metaphor for the biblical account of the *Akedah* — Abraham’s binding of Isaac in preparation for his sacrifice to G-d in Genesis 22 — supporting his claim through similarities shared by both narratives: “The *Akedah* features a series of basic plot elements and symbols that are refracted through Ozick’s reconfiguration in the ‘The Shawl’” (970). For example, Alkana continues, “[t]he binding of the two children, of Isaac in preparation for a sacrifice and of Magda with the shawl to keep her hidden and silent, furnishes each story with its name and serves as the single most prominent

symbolic point at which the two stories converge” (971). Certainly, a parallel can be drawn between the cocoon-like winding in the imagery of Isaac’s binding and Magda’s wrapping beneath the wings of the shawl. The obvious divergence, however, cannot be overlooked, as Ozick herself observes: “The binding of Isaac represents and introduces the supreme scriptural valuation of innocent life” (Ozick *Metaphor* 274). In her own writing, Magda’s life is shown to have value only to her mother, and is summarily sacrificed without any description in the text of hesitation or a sign of a murderer’s remorse.

While Sivan does not engage in conversation with Alkana’s reading, she does, however, explore the connection between *The Shawl* and the episode of the *Akedah*. Sivan observes that Rosa’s letter-writing to Magda “is a kind of midrash for it fills in the lacunae, the painful gaps in the narrative of her life, and cobbles together some kind of loose life raft on which she can float in the long decades of despair” in her battle to overcome the traumatic loss of her child (Sivan *Crossing* 50). Sivan then challenges a possible connection to a midrashic reading aligned with the story of the *Akedah*, privileging the potential for healing in Rosa’s process of letter-writing over the false assurances of the happy ending noted by the rescue of Isaac within the liturgy; for the *Akedah*’s story of salvation remains unconnected to the fate of Magda and the vast number of murdered children her character and narrative represents. As Sivan observes, “[t]he letters then fit the kind of modern midrash . . . that have ‘insufficiently explained suffering, sacrifice, and death, especially when parents are in a position to witness or be agents in their child’s death, as Abraham was in the sacrifice of Isaac” (Sivan *Belonging* 150). Sivan emphasizes the notable difference between the *Akedah* narrative and Magda’s story in “The Shawl”: “in the Shoah there was no divine intervention, there was no handy ram instead of the child. There was only the horror of unmitigated cruelty and the limitations, and the necessity

of language to both present, express, lament, and commemorate the experience” (Belonging 150). Sivan denies Alkana’s midrashic reading, aligning with Susanne Klingenstein’s observation that of all of Ozick’s characters, “none has shared with the reader the vision of hell which Rosa has in this anti-akedah midrash” (Klingenstein qtd. in Sivan Crossing 55). Sivan mentions no parallel between the binding of Isaac and the winding of Magda in the magical shawl or any other similarities put forward by Alkana in his study — rejecting his claim based more upon the scope of the inequality rather than the number of points of narrative contact between “The Shawl” and the story of the *Akedah*.

In an analysis more closely aligned with Sivan’s reading, Linafelt views *The Shawl* as an example of survivor literature that shares a strong midrashic connection to the *Book of Lamentations*, here bridging a story of the Holocaust to the Babylonian siege of Jerusalem circa 587 B.C.E. Linafelt’s intertextual analysis provides compelling close readings that align specific sentences/verses and their position within the text to create thematic parallels: “[T]he opening chapters of *Lamentations* and ‘The Shawl’ are both concerned with constructing in the mind of the reader a world in which all hope of pity and comfort are extinguished” (Linafelt 139). The author observes that at “the thematic level, with its emphasis on the mother-child relationship, the threat of an enemy, and the hints of cannibalism, ‘The Shawl’ bears a marked resemblance to the *Book of Lamentations*” (138). A most compelling observation concerns melancholia, in which he posits “[i]f it is true that ‘The Shawl’ takes up the concerns of Zion for the survival of her children and makes those concerns its own, it is no less true that the survival represented by ‘The Shawl’ has been radically transformed. Long gone are the buoyancy of Second Isaiah . . . and promises of midrash” (141). Here, the author argues that midrashic connections must

accurately relate the devastation of loss and grieving, thereby resisting the aesthetic idolatry of minimization for the sake of art that Adorno so greatly feared.

Returning to a discussion of Kabbalah, the legends and parables describing supernatural beings as demons and divinities are canonized in both the *Zohar* and throughout the *Zoharic* literature, “an array of homiletical, mythological, and mystical texts” (Berman 2). While variations exist among the collected legends of these two divine entities, the Kabbalistic mystics generally depict Lilith as the cannibalistic Night-Monster and the *Shekhina* as the supernal mother — two winged beings cosmically engaged in eternal conflict (Patai 184; Smith 45). It must be emphasized, however, that these visual representations created through precise reference to wings in their physical form are normally construed within Jewish belief as idolatry. Precisely for this reason, Kabbalah is minimized, if not entirely rejected, by followers of more mainstream and legalistic Jewish observance for its inclusion of anthropomorphic imagery within its textual canon. Yet the authors of the *Zoharic* literature believed that figures such as Lilith and the *Shekhina* “served merely as a convenient means of solving the problem presented by Biblical anthropomorphisms in the eyes of a later, more sensitive theology” (Patai and Dever 110). In other words, Kabbalistic legends and parables described a supplemental cosmology to explain those aspects of God, described in the *Tanakh* (*Torah, Book of Prophets, and Writings*) that too strongly bear resemblance to human form and behavior. “For the great masses of the Kabbalists,” Alkana observes, “and the later Hasidim, to whom the mystical doctrines were known only from the brief but frequent references to them contained in prayer books, the anthropomorphization of the Godhead . . . and the attribution of a quasi-human character . . . was inevitable” (Patai and Dever 165). Patai and Dever further claim that “[t]his, from a theological point of view, was the great weakness of Jewish mysticism, and this, from a

psychological point of view, was its greatest strength” (Goddess 165). Therefore, it is under a mystical, nearly heretical reading that images of wings may function as symbolic, subliminal references to the Divine Feminine — here as the antagonistic representations of Lilith and the *Shekhina* — within *The Shawl*. Such an interpretation, however, reveals the potential for both the apocalyptically destructive but also redemptive, transformative power and protection that wings represent within a text that is politically pan-European yet thematically Jewish. The notable absence of magical rescue or release from suffering may suggest that which so many survivors believe — that G-d either exists and did nothing to save the Jewish people, or that He does not exist at all, which is reasonable under a Kabbalistic understanding where the world serves merely as a battleground for a war between good and evil. And yet, the biological connection between moths and butterflies relates a strong metaphorical connection to the transformative possibilities of healing and hope. In *The Shawl*, Ozick overwrites mythology to create a legend of butterflies that specifically reflects the atrocity and trauma of life in and beyond the camp, a subject to which I will return.

Metaphorical descriptions within “The Shawl” further create strong thematic connections to the divine. Rosa is described as an entranced angel “arrested in a fit” (4). Even in this fragile state, Rosa’s maternal instinct fixates on Stella, whom she associates with “The Angel of Death” (15, 23, 30, 35, 39), fearing how she “would gaze at Magda like a young cannibal” (5). For helpless Magda, her wings appear only in Rosa’s panicked perception of her child, one “no bigger than a moth” as she recedes into the distance on the shoulder of her murderer, and as “a butterfly touching a silver vine” (9) that is electrocuted upon its first flight. Decades after her death, Magda is reborn in her mother’s enduring post-traumatic hallucinations — a metamorphosis each time Rosa unfurls the magic shawl, “like a butterfly, in this corner and

then that corner, all at once” (64). The world of *The Shawl* is filled with the suffering of females; it is a barren landscape, reimagined as the magical realm of beings with wings that are prophetically potent but are of no worldly use, and whose cries for help are muted into silence and “devoid of any syllable” (7).

Although a cannibalistic plot is not the cause of Magda’s death, the cold, uncaring energy of winged Lilith, in a metaphorical sense, has condoned — if not inspired — Stella’s self-serving actions: “Then Stella took the shawl away and made Magda die” (6). In a Kabbalistic reading, the war between Lilith and the *Shekhina* can be understood as a metaphysical battle for the maternal love and protection that the shawl represents. Here, the battle over the shawl is a battle for Rosa’s maternal protection; for without the shawl (as the metaphorical wings of the *Shekhina*) to shelter her, Magda innocently delivers herself into arms of the cannibal, an officer who in cold blood throws the baby to her death and delivers to Lilith the victory.

The brutal imagery of demons, however violent, is counterbalanced by evocative writing that relates ideals of beauty and of motherhood deeply interwoven into the Kabbalistic imagination. From the “Kabbalah’s late twelfth-century beginnings, the *Zohar* contains some of divine femininity’s most daring articulations, which include breastfeeding imagery,” Haskell observes; in the *Zohar* the “*Shekhinah*’s role as a mother is clearly defined and linked to nursing imagery, establishing a mother-child relationship between divinity and humanity that the text reinforces with repeated references to humanity as children” (Haskell 66, 68). While imagery of the divided divine feminine godhead may parallel Stella and Rosa (connected to Magda) as characters concerned for their own survival, they are in fact bound to each other in their war against encroaching death. The mother-daughter relationship that Stella desperately needs to

share with Rosa is denied by Magda's existence; for the shawl itself represents to Stella all that she cannot have — not only the cocooning warmth and feelings of safety Magda experiences wrapped underneath the wings of the shawl, but also the miraculous nourishment that represents the food Rosa gives to Magda but not to her (5): for it was “a magic shawl, it could nourish an infant for three days and three nights” (5) while starving “Rosa and Stella were slowly turning into air” (6). Here, the *Shekhina's* power to protect and sustain her children is no defense against the destructive forces that have created this Dantesque circle of hell. Magda's murderer is described not human in terms, but rather as a montage of discrete images of a “shoulder . . . helmet . . . black body . . . [and] black boots” that perception may assemble into human form only to reveal a deadly functionary, soulless and inhumane (9). It is a camp of lice-infested barracks and “big rats that plundered the barracks at daybreak looking for carrion” (7), where grief not found in any human must be imagined as coursing through the wires of the electrified fence — a mechanized Angel of Death — in its metaphorical howl of “steel voices . . . mad in their growling” (10) that mourn Magda in a chorus of “grainy, sad . . . lamenting voices” (9). It is the authority ruling the camp, void of all compassion, that creates desperation, starvation, and abandonment of all traces of humanity. Under a Kabbalistic reading, Rosa reflects the maternal aspects of the *Shekhina* because her primary concerns are those of a desperate mother; yet her power is outmatched by the self-serving energy of Lilith that floods the entire camp that finally surges through Stella who “took the shawl away and made Magda die” (6) not as a predatory (and therefore cannibalistic) act, but one devoid of compassion for Magda and in obliviousness to the destruction yet to come. Is it the brutality of demons — or rather the chill of deadened indifference — that scripts Stella's bloodless explanation, “I was cold,” for the act that first exposes and then condemns the child to death (6)? Here is where the midrashic mode inspires

and invites the Kabbalistic imagination to create sense from silence, likening Stella's behavior to the legend of Lilith, murderer of children and creatrix of a sisterhood of bereft mothers broken by grieving and loss.

Another representation to the Kabbalistic order of multiple divine energies is the diminishment of a "supreme power," for as Alkana observes, "in the *Akedah* [story in the Torah, Genesis 22], the power over life and death ultimately resides in G-d" (973). Under a biblical interpretation, a just G-d would be expected to punish the wicked under an evolved system of morality and codification of law. This camp, however, is a world without a rescuing biblical G-d — a metaphorical "roll-call arena" (7) where innocence wanders naively into the ring of destruction and despair. Similarly, the writings of Kabbalah feature supernatural energies who battle among themselves without supervision or retaliation by a moralistic G-d in legends and parables that resemble both fantasy and nightmare: "In the *Zohar* the realm of evil is called *sitra ahra*, an Aramaic phrase meaning 'the other side.' 'Other' is the unmentionable left side, which is also the name of G-d's enemy, Samael" (Dan 53). Although the G-d of Abraham himself is a divine character in the *Zohar*, He exists merely as one among several divine energies. Here in the camp, the *Shekhina* and Lilith may be thought to find metaphorical representation in the Zoharic figures of Rosa and Stella, suggested by the motif of winged beings that carries throughout *The Shawl*. Figurative angels, moths, and butterflies are a presence in the arena; nearly forty years later in Rosa's apartment, squalid black flies reminiscent of Lilith's retinue of demonic minions (Scholem 154) appear as does the tragic revelation of Rosa's dysphoria in what appears to be one of many enduring post-traumatic hallucinations of Butterfly-Magda (54). The narrative of "The Shawl" relates in metaphorical language the sacrifice of the innocent child witnessed helplessly by her grieving mother, which is a story that shares elements of the

biblical *Akedah* story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. And yet, unlike in the retelling of the *Akedah*, salvation from omnipotent, ubiquitous G-d of the Torah — in a display of divine intervention — is nowhere to be found.

Textual omission of the G-d of Israel by any name, however, cannot be the sole basis for perceiving such absence, for the divine forces Lilith and the *Shekhina* are neither directly referenced in the “The Shawl” nor suggested through the names of its human characters, as Strandberg observes: “The names of Rosa, Stella, and Magda are Latin cognates for the images associated with the Christ child's Advent: Rose (signifying the Incarnation); Star (over Bethlehem); and Magi (three Wise Men)” (Strandberg 204n39). If any reference to a specific divinity or liturgical teaching can be understood from the text, it is not from Jewish tradition but from Christianity, as Rosa explains in a letter to Magda: “To have the power to create another human being, to be the instrument of such a mystery. To pass on a whole genetic system. I don't believe in God, but I believe, *like the Catholics*, in mystery” (41, emphasis added). This comparison of motherhood to the generative power of the divine feminine, specifically the Christian gospels of the virgin birth, is the closest textual evidence for any belief in a biblical G-d in the camp. This belief, however, does not appear in the text as signifying a personal faith in salvation, but rather as an exalted image of motherhood in Rosa's memories of her own mother, who in her kitchen creates offerings of mystical poetry to the Madonna: “Mother of God, how you shiver / in these heat-ribbons!” (41). Christian imagery of the divine feminine maintains a connection to the Kabbalistic imagery of winged beings, here the maternal *Shekhina* in the poetic figure of the shivering Madonna who wraps around herself like a shawl energetic waves of heat to keep herself warm, recalling the paradoxical “coldness of hell” of *The Shawl's* opening line (3). Indeed, the image of “the statue of the Virgin and Child” (41) in her family's

kitchen offers inspiration for Rosa's value of chastity, as she declares that "they never put [her] ... in their brothel" and denies the only logical explanation that Stella "that pornographer" offers for Magda's conception (43). Rosa weaves a belief in the Catholic sense of mystery into her own expressions of deep maternal love and support; these feelings, channeled only to Magda, exacerbates Stella's desperation for nurturing and protection which directly connects to Magda's murder by another's hand. Stella, even at fourteen years of age, still "wanted to be wrapped in a shawl, hidden away, asleep, rocked by the march a baby, a round infant in arms" (4) while Rosa, in whom "all pity was annihilated . . . looked at Stella's bones without pity" (5). The starvation and the debilitating cold Stella always feels have delayed the development of her reproductive capacity, her emotional maturity and the maternal instinct to protect — and not endanger — Magda. In this sense, Stella yields from crushing external circumstances to the cold, self-serving drives of Lilith the same way that Rosa, although acknowledging that she was "forced by a German . . . more than once" (43), identifies with the sanctity and immutability of the protector/mother *Shekhina*, considering "herself pure: a madonna" (59) and further aligns Rosa's self-identification with the Kabbalistic conflation of motherhood, mystery, and divinity beyond the traditional rabbinic teachings of monotheistic cosmology.

Interestingly, Stella's character is perhaps even more closely aligned with Kabbalistic legend than Rosa's. Described in vivid metaphor that is even further emphasized by the immediacy of the narrator's description — "Stella, cold, cold, the coldness of hell" (3) — the very first words of *The Shawl* consign her character to the demonic sphere of Lilith's destructive energy. Herself an emaciated teenager, Stella stands as one accused of — rather than victimized by — the heartless cruelty of incarceration. Although its precise meaning cannot be discerned from the opening line of text alone, such forthright characterization of a cold-blooded

nature relates Stella to several facets of Lilith's incorporeal forms — "half-human and half-demon ... a jealous witch who destroys infants ... appearing sometimes as destroyer and sometimes as champion of independence" (Jacoby 79). As it is for Rosa and the Magda of her hallucination (whom Rosa beatifies as "purity" and a "snowqueen" (42)), innocence is also an important theme in Stella's story, beginning in "The Shawl" and continuing throughout "Rosa." Here, Rosa's perception of Stella as "The Angel of Death" has not faded but rather has taken on a more sinister dimension: she addresses Stella as one whom "a devil climbs into . . . and ties up your soul and you don't even know it" (15), one described as having "a black will" (15, 39). Yet Rosa's irrational misperceptions are based on instinctive maternal fears that trigger within her an excess of *Shekhina* energy; for although there is no textual evidence that Stella wishes or attempts to harm Magda, Rosa identifies Stella as an encroaching threat driven by over-exposure and emaciation, with knees "tumors on sticks, her elbows chicken bones" (3).

Assuming the protective stance of the *Shekhina*, Rosa finds in Stella a most likely enemy — a menacing force who "gazed at Magda like a young cannibal . . . [so] sure that Stella was waiting for Magda to die so she could put her teeth into the little thighs" (5). On her nightly watch, Rosa becomes "afraid to fall asleep" as if protecting Magda from the "Night Monster, and sleeps "with the weight of her thigh on Magda's body" (6) recalling the image of the *Shekhina* enfolding her children in sheltering wings. This perception creates a subconscious imprint that remains through the decades after their release, as Rosa sometimes still has vivid "cannibal dreams about Stella" (15) in which she boils her "tongue, ears, and "fat hand with plump fingers" (15). She remembers "the time that Stella said 'Aryan,' it sounded to Rosa as if Stella had really said 'Let us devour her'" (5), echoing the Kabbalah: "[h]uman infants were fair prey

for Lilith when they had been sinfully begotten,” perhaps accessing a cultural memory that recalls *Zoharic* legend (Jacoby 80).

Importantly, the battle to save Magda from Stella’s predatory designs has not been roused by Stella’s own words but rather is brought on by a triggered paranoia that increases as Rosa’s ability to nurse her child fades, the “dead volcanoes” (5) of her sore breasts now dried and “with not a sniff of milk” (4) left. The text’s repeated emphasis of Rosa’s inability to nurse Magda reveals here a metaphorical weakening of the *Shekhina*’s energy, heightening Rosa’s prophetic sense that Magda’s death is at hand: “Rosa knew Magda was going to die very soon; she should have been dead already, but had been buried away deep inside the magic shawl, mistaken there for the shivering mound of Rosa’s breasts” (6). The imagery of breasts and nursing, and also their depletion and very absence, represents another aspect of the psychological tension — the metaphorical war of the goddesses — between Stella and Rosa; for not only the shawl but Rosa’s breasts themselves are a source of protection, if not actual nourishment — breasts that Stella in her emaciation cannot develop (3), appearing herself as a child without a mother to feed her. Here, the love of the *Shekhina* does not extend to Stella, nor do her overflowing breasts nurse her. That Stella runs out of compassion for Magda seems justified as the text indicates that there is no compassion flowing to her from her aunt. Stella claims she takes the shawl out of necessity, not malice; however, she represents the energy of Lilith in Rosa’s mind, having set in motion the events leading to Magda’s murder. Stella will forever be the “Angel of Death” as Rosa renames her — a child-murderer, a potential cannibal, and a demon: in Rosa’s imagination, Stella is a “Lilith” without wings.

Under this Kabbalistic interpretation, the metaphorical wings of the text’s human characters appear as the intimation of Goddess energies engaged in divine battle, with Rosa as

that aspect of the *Shekhina* as supernal mother, and Stella as Lilith, the cannibalistic murderer of children asleep in their beds. Within this schema, however, Magda is the victim of allegorical inevitability; for although she may not embody a specific divinity, her character's transformation is the metamorphosis from a true Nazi infanticide into Rosa's imaginary butterfly-child. In this transformation, Butterfly-Magda flies not only beyond "the other side of the steel fence . . . [its] green meadows speckled with dandelions and deep-colored violets" (8), but also from the past into the future, carried from "The Shawl" into "Rosa" on metaphorical wings. In both stories the butterfly-image of Magda remains at the level of simile: in Magda's death scene the baby "looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine" (9) and upon unpacking and unfurling the shawl "she was like a butterfly, in the corner and in that" (65) in "Rosa." Ozick's resistance to moving from simile into metaphor relates a stability in Rosa's perception, for in both moments (the flight to electrocution and the release of her spirit from the box containing the shawl) figurative language suggests that Rosa knows the difference between her dead child and a butterfly — not that Magda *is* but rather *reminds of* a butterfly in some specific way. In "The Shawl" Magda is not herded along a crowded death-march but rather looks "like a butterfly . . . [whose] zigzag arms splashed against the fence" (9-10) in solitary death-flight, while in "Rosa" she resembles other girls of her imaginary age who are "always butterflies at sixteen" (64). The text reveals that Rosa has imagined for Magda the metamorphic power to materialize at different ages as well: "Rosa wanted to see what age Magda was going to be: how nice, a girl of sixteen" (64). Here Magda represents a divine energy of a different kind, a goddess of transformation, one who seems driven by her own desires to appear a certain way, yet is merely the creation of Rosa's intentions and particular emotional state. As such, Rosa and Magda remain connected, as if tethered together by the shawl itself, wrapping their wings

around each other, perhaps Magda now as the protectress — the *Shekhina* taking Rosa under her wings — remaining with her mother as she zigzags through her perceptual imbalances and struggles with post-traumatic grief.

The process of metamorphosis, in its thematic connection to midrashic writing, represents the radical shift in perception that allows two seemingly unrelated narratives and/or histories to align in meaningful ways. The transformation of a moth to a butterfly represents this drastic change in a compressed, metaphorically collapsed period of time. Rothberg's description of healing after atrocity appears to trace this same pattern of ruptured time: "There is no gradual, developmental progress in the 'working through' of the implications of genocide . . . post-Holocaust history has a traumatic structure — it is repetitive, discontinuous, and characterized by obsessive returns to the past and the troubling of simple chronology" (Rothberg 19). In striking parallel, Rosa's perception of Magda transforms from a moth to a butterfly over merely four lines of text: "She was no bigger than a moth. All at once Magda was swimming through the air. The whole of Magda traveled through loftiness. She looked like a butterfly touching a silver vine" (9). The return of Butterfly-Magda in "Rosa" can be related to Rosa's fragmented sense of time, in the way that she imagines Magda at different ages and assuming multiple identities, "a professor of Greek philosophy at Columbia University" (39) and also "a doctor married to a doctor" (35). In relation, trauma has been defined as "an event in the subject's life defined by its intensity, by the subject's incapacity to respond adequately to it, and by the upheaval and long-lasting effects that it brings about in the psychological organization" (Laplanche 465). In its own mysterious way, metamorphosis itself represents an upheaval — a collapse in the timeline of expected development. It is this sense of relating those moments separated through time or by specific narrative elements that defines the midrashic mode of

thought. Here, the process of metamorphosis itself can be related to the one of the important functions of midrash, that is, to fill silences — perhaps the silences that often accompany atrocity — which in turn may create a safe, cocoon-like space where healing may begin. By the ending of “Rosa,” the healing process appears to be slowly progressing, with Rosa testing her limits as a child whose mother offers a taste of independence without abandonment. For while she has temporary possession of the shawl, she allows Butterfly-Magda to fly away on her own: “Magda was not there. Shy, she ran from Persky. Magda was away” (70). Perhaps the metaphorical wings that Butterfly-Magda now wraps around her mother are still there, waiting for another moment of connection. But now is the time for Rosa to undergo a transformation of her own — a shedding of her cocoon, and a gradual metamorphosis from an isolated, angry soul into a hopeful, more social creature who is learning to use her own wings to fly.

Echoing the spirit of finding one’s way, Ozick, in her 2016 *Critics, Monsters, and Fanatics and Other Literary Essays*, discusses her respect for Adorno’s admonitions as it relates to her own limitations for creating a literary aesthetic of her own: “And here it is necessary to look again at Adorno’s declaration — not the phrase that is his most renowned, but the one far less so, though perhaps more crucially telling; *Even the most extreme consciousness of doom threatens to degenerate into idle chatter*” Ozick asserts. “Barbaric cruelty is, for its victims, merciless yet finite — a shooting, a hanging, a hacking, a gassing, a rocketing, a bombing, a beheading. But idle chatter leaves an endless cultural trail, and worse, it crushes into trivia whatever it fingers. . . .When history is abused, it becomes no better than the gossip of the lie; it influences what we believe” (Critics 179). Here, Ozick makes a clear distinction between the overarching taboo against creating poetry (and by a manner of synecdochic extension, all artistic forms of aesthetic sensitivity) after Auschwitz and Adorno’s more pressing, moralistic

concern — that attempts at fictionalizing the Holocaust not devolve into mere prattle and literary dross.

Under a Kabbalistic reading there is a palpable collapse of reality into fantasy, of imprisonment into freedom, and of acceptance into delusion. As a metaphorical angel, the incorporeal Rosa can float through the air at will. The human Rosa, however, must negotiate a precarious dual existence — as a woman herself fading from starvation responsible for nourishing an even more fragile human life. The waning of Rosa's *Shekhina*-like energy is related in "Rosa," where decades after Magda's murder she has transformed from the driven, protective mother creating miracles with a magic shawl that "could nourish an infant for three days and three nights" (5) into a "ragged old bird with worn feathers" (23), a "sluggish bird on ragged toes" (30). This image of the *Shekhina* with wings tattered from the cosmic battle against the Lilith and her demons offers a metaphorical representation of Rosa's weariness in her post-traumatic struggle that drains her as she negotiates between a grounded existence and the deluded life as a mother to a butterfly-daughter. Since the invasion of her homeland, Rosa's world has been one of vulnerability, where the unassuming and the unprotected are the potential victims of those who have intentions that are sinister and "black as Stella's will" (15), those of Lilith, the Night Monster of the Kabbalah.

Imagery of winged creatures interwoven throughout *The Shawl* lends a magical, otherworldly atmosphere to the nightmarish world of the camp. The transformation of characters into metaphorical angels, moths, and butterflies imparts, at first, a lyrical, mysterious beauty. The presence of wings symbolizes both the extreme nature of sheltering love and the abject suffering of the losses certain to come, the gossamer shimmer fading into the darkness of eternal night. This nameless camp could represent all the camps of Nazi Europe, where life was

not merely “cold, cold, the coldness of hell” (3) but a metaphorically “human hell” itself. Specifically, in the camp of *The Shawl* the wings of angels, moths, and butterflies that might evoke natural and mysterious beauty in another setting here foreshadow a battle for survival that ends in tragedy. A Kabbalistic reading, in its resistance to an imposed morality, contextualizes victimization as collateral damage of a cosmic battle; for this mystical, yet heretical, interpretation defines the world as merely the setting of the never-ending battle between good and evil — a lawless arena of death that either resists a faith in a sheltering G-d, or casts Him as one who exists only to abandon to destiny the traumatized, the wounded and the grieving, and one which Adorno demands must not be misrepresented through aesthetic diminishment or distortion. In a 2006 review of *The Poetry of Yehudia Amichai*, *New Yorker* literary critic James Wood foregrounds Amichai’s “After Auschwitz” as a response to Adorno’s questioning of an appropriate post-Holocaust aesthetic: “The philosopher Emil Fackenheim once proposed, after Auschwitz, what he called a ‘614th commandment,’ in which the Jewish people are enjoined to survive as Jews, lest the people of Israel perish; commanded to remember the Holocaust, lest that memory perish; and ‘forbidden, thirdly, to deny or despair of God . . . lest Judaism perish” (Wood). The profound desolation of Amichai’s poetics challenges Adorno’s prophecy of a purely myopic post-Holocaust aesthetic that hesitates to question the existence of a responsive G-d:

After Auschwitz, no theology:
 the numbers on the forearms
 of the inmates of extermination
 are the telephone numbers of God
 numbers that do not answer,

and are now disconnected, one by one. (7-12)³

“After Auschwitz we have to speak of ‘moment faiths,’” Fackenheim offers, “moments when redeemer and when visions of redemption are present, interspersed with times when the flames and smoke of the burning children blot out faith — though it flickers again” (Shenker 197). In the death camp of *The Shawl*, the clouds of cremation that swirl the “ash-stippled wind” (7) are the metaphors for murder. Under a Kabbalistic reading, they are traces of Lilith — the winged Night Monster demon and murderer of children who, at the hands of others, claims as her victim Baby Magda. The winged *Shekhina*, the Kabbalistic supernal mother who protects her children, the House of Israel, under sheltering wings — *takhat kanfei ha-Shekhinah* — provides a metaphorical representation of the redemption of which Fackenheim speaks. “If one tries to hear a redeeming voice at Auschwitz,” he continues, “there is only silence. But a commanding voice speaks to those willing to listen: A Jew is forbidden to give Hitler posthumous victory, and to consent to despair is to give that victory. The moral-religious contradiction can be resolved only by affirmation that there can be no second Holocaust” (Shenker 197). A Kabbalistic reading of *The Shawl* illuminates the primacy of ethical self-regulation, that only moral responsibility for each other — and not divine intervention — can save humanity from its cyclical descents into human hell — here specifically the European Holocaust that incinerated millions of innocent lives, beyond the angelic rescue of the biblical *Akedah* and the metaphoric transformation of consciousness, their memories rising like smoke from the *olah*⁴ as a burnt offering to the G-d of

³Amichai, pp. 47-48.

⁴ Encyclopedia Britannica Online. The term “Holocaust” is a derivation “of the Greek *holokauston*, a translation of the Hebrew word *olah*, meaning a burnt sacrifice offered whole to God” as part of the ritual sacrifices commanded in the Old Testament.

Israel in unwilling sacrifice. May it not, however, have been in vain, but a prayer for all humanity: "Auschwitz should never happen again" (Adorno Education 203).

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