

# God's Pharmacy: On the Use of Entheogens in Jewish Mystical Traditions

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## ABSTRACT:

Building on Derrida's essay *Plato's Pharmacy*, the current article examines sacred versus profane illuminations within the spiritual realm of Judaism. As exemplified by the marking nut (*balādhur*), I survey exoteric-curative and esoteric-altered states of consciousness inducing deployments of this medicinal plant fruit. Retracing the veiled pharmacopoeias that blur the lines between medicine and poison, I point to Walter Benjamin's later intoxication trials, which attempted to revive this recondite pharmacology.

## Introduction

"In the desert we find trees sprouting acorns, and we eat them. When much to our delight the teaching illuminates us, some of us slip away, cook them, and we eat." These words from *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* ("The Concealed Midrash") invite us to speculate about the effects triggered by the "acorns," their botanical classification, and whether this passage involves a meditation on a mysterious fruit or a profound meditation on the Scripture. This midrash belongs to *Sefer ha-Zohar* (the Book of Splendor), a thirteenth-century medley of Aramaic and Hebrew, the *chef d'oeuvre* of medieval kabbalah.<sup>1</sup> This series of mystical homilies that both solidified and invigorated Jewish spiritual imagery was delivered, under pseudepigraphic camouflage,<sup>2</sup> by members of an ancient spiritual society led by Simeon ben Yoḥai (c. second-century CE). In addition to adopting a pious lifestyle, which elevated their study of the Torah, the portrayed mystagogues also performed contemplative exercises aimed toward spiritual awakening. At first glance, their experience is at odds with Walter Benjamin's "profane illumination,"<sup>3</sup> a concept he deploys to describe the alteration of one's state of consciousness via hallucinogens, but Benjamin's writing provides an interpretive key to make sense of these passages and the ostensibly perception-expanding qualities of those "acorns." Embarking on

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<sup>1</sup> On the structure and gradual evolution of the Zohar, along with a comprehensive review of the state of the topical research, see Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Magnes Press/Cherub Press, 2010), esp. "Invention of the Zohar as a Book," 224–438.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudepigraph is a writing of false authorship (from Greek *pseudos* = "falsehood," "a lie," and *graphein* "to write").

<sup>3</sup> Grasped in its materialistic-anthropological contours, each "profane illumination" shall remain overshadowed by mystical-religious enlightenment. Cf. Walter Benjamin, *On Hashish*, trans. Howard Eiland et al. (Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2006), 132–133.

the marking nut's (*Semecarpus anacardium*) applications in medieval kabbalah, we gain insight into subsequent attempts to restore the sacred pharmacology as witnessed in Benjamin's drug experimentations. The drupe plant (fleshy fruit bearing a stone seed) is described as having restorative and poisonous attributes as well as a magical power that enhances users' intellectual capacities. Although lethal if overdosing or preparing an unauthorized concoction, it first triggers hallucinatory effects. Below, I deliberate over the nondualism of these contrasting properties and their metamorphoses reminiscent of Derrida's revered essay, *Plato's Pharmacy*.<sup>4</sup>

## Transformative Pharmacy

Polysemy of the Greek *pharmakon* ranges from adversative domains of healing therapy, incantations, and magical (frequently lethal) concoctions to color-wash applications. Such an etymological transition from hazard to cure, as well as psychedelic to dye, is detailed in Derrida's reflections on the Platonic *pharmakeus* (a physician-magician-legislator-writer) and informed kabbalistic notions that fused seemingly antithetical components into a new blend.<sup>5</sup> The ambiguity surrounding the ancient Greek noun *to pharmakon* also characterizes the Hebrew term *sam*. Derived from the Assyrian *šammu* and the Aramaic-Syriac *sama*, the word connotes medicine, poison, dye, and essence. Moreover, the past third-person singular masculine of *sam* is *sime*, which can be understood as "he blinded"—as in a blinding light—or "struck out [from a written text]." In both instances, an occultation occurs, obscuring conscious seeing-comprehension, and, consequently, the realization of potential danger. The noun *sam* (poison) was incorporated into the name of the archdemon Samael – "venom of God."<sup>6</sup> The sense of blinding is preserved in the demon's Latin equivalent, Lucifer, who metamorphosed from a bright morning star into a devil. Similarly, over the course of Benjamin's drug experiments, his signature idea of the aura enshrouding each body with its contradictory revealing-cum-concealing effect ripened into "a strange weave of space and time [*Gespinst von Raum und Zeit*]: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be."<sup>7</sup>

The furtive transmission of the traditional applications of this wondrous-cum-fatal amalgam is mirrored and concomitantly with the advent of printing kabbalistic literature, replaced by its written surrogate, which was unveiled and disseminated through esoteric compendia. Nonetheless, the process of sacred pharmacology's disclosure, predicated upon mystical hermeneutics of secrecy, remained an exercise in futility. Jewish mystics can distinguish between an entheogen that has been extracted from a raw product and its noxious counterparts. This shift from detrimental to curative is based upon a precise admixture of

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<sup>4</sup> My study of hallucinogens in the Jewish esoteric tradition draws on Jacques Derrida, namely "Plato's Pharmacy," in idem, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Athlone Press, 1981), 61–171; Derrida, "La pharmacie de Platon" in idem, *La Dissémination* (Éditions du Seuil, 1972), 256–403.

<sup>5</sup> According to Maimonides, even a drop of marking nut oil ("honey" in the medieval idiom of medical practitioners) considerably alters the brew's taste. See the bilingual English-Arabic edition of Maimonides, *On Poisons and the Protection against Lethal Drugs*, ed. Gerrit Bos (Brigham Young University Press, 2009), 57–58. This oil served as a marking ink and dye for cotton clothes throughout India and Bengal, respectively. See Berthold Laufer, *The Diamond: A Study in Chinese and Hellenistic Folk-Lore* (Field Museum of Natural History, 1915), 482–483.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Babylonian Aramaic of the Talmudic and Geonic Periods* (Bar-Ilan University Press/The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 817–818; Ernst Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (Carta, 1987), 448; *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (The Oriental Institute, 2004), vol. 17, 315–321.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography" in *Selected Writings. Volume 2, 1931-1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 518; Benjamin, "Kleine Geschichte der Photographie," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Suhrkamp, 1991), vol. 2,1, 378.

ingredients, their dosage, and specific qualities. The concocter's proper intention (*kavvanah*) and spiritual preparation are also key factors.

The disclosure of God's pharmacy was a plodding endeavor that rested on dynamics that are symptomatic of the passage from orality to writing and heightened by the diffusion of arcane lore through copying and printing texts. These broadcasting endeavors were viewed by many mystics as a controversial dissemination of esoteric lore to the uninitiated. Distribution of secret knowledge was often justified as an attempt to convey the teachings of past masters adumbrated through a cloud of wordplay, gematric calculations, and obscure hints.<sup>8</sup>

Cloaked in botanic and medical terms, God's pharmacy and its mysterious concoctions remain hidden from uninitiated 'intruders.' Due to the secretiveness of these formulae, a deep chasm separates between that which demands to be named and how to articulate the former without violating the *nomos* (law-regulating human behavior) and *logos* (the word of divine revelation). Psychoactive properties of aromatic-cum-odoriferous substances, especially plants, are mentioned in *Song of Songs*: myrrh, balsam, cinnamon, perfume, and anointing oil.<sup>9</sup> The Bible refers to the holy incense (*qetoret*) burnt in the Temple. Stacte, onycha, and frankincense were among the ingredients for this *qetoret* offered in fumigation, all of which are sweet and cleansing, except the fetid galbanum (Exodus 30:34-38).<sup>10</sup> Jewish mystical discussions on that pungent component allude to demonic *qelippot* (shells or husks) operating within the kabbalistic universe. Eleazar of Worms (died 1238), a prolific writer and gatekeeper of esoteric theosophy within the leadership ranks of *Hasidei Ashkenaz* (the German-Jewish Medieval Pietists), was tagged with the sobriquet *ba-Roqeah*, meaning the Pharmacist, because he habitually concocted potions aimed at warding off demonic assaults against his community. Eleazar of Worms was akin to the legions of *ba'alei shem* (masters of the Name) who availed themselves of practical kabbalah (*qabbalah ma'asit*) in their capacity to function as folk healers and miracle workers.<sup>11</sup>

Bearing in mind the fine line between remedy and poison, let us consider the trance-inducing marking nut as a prime example of this sacred pharmacology, a common ingredient used to produce marking ink deployed in aggressive tantric magic rituals. Deriving from the Sanskrit *bhallātaka*, "resembling an arrow-head,"<sup>12</sup> this term alludes to the fruit's heart-like

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Itzik Lodzer (Arthur Green), "Notes from the Jewish Underground: Psychedelics and Kabbalah," *Response* 2, no. 1 (1968): 9–21; Zalman M. Schachter, "The Conscious Ascent of the Soul" in *The Ecstatic Adventure*, ed. Ralph Metzner (Macmillan, 1968), 96–123.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Danny Nemu, "Getting High with the Most High: Entheogens in the Old Testament," *Journal of Psychedelic Studies* 3 (2019): 117–132.

<sup>10</sup> On *qetoret*, see Menahem Haran, "The Uses of Incense in the Ancient Israelite Ritual," *Vetus Testamentum* 10, fasc. 2 (1960): 113–129; Abraham Ofir Shemesh, *The Fragrance of Paradise: Scents, Perfumes and Incense in Jewish Tradition* (Bar-Ilan University Press, 2017), 259–260 [Hebrew]; for kabbalistic context, compare to the printed edition of *Sefer Kaf ha-Qetoret*: Joseph ben Solomon Ṭaiṭāzak, *Pan of Incense: Kabbalistic Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, ed. Arie Ne'eman Ben Zvi (Idra Publishing, 2018) [Hebrew].

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Immanuel Etkes, *The Besht: Magician, Mystic, and Leader*, trans. Saadya Shternberg (Brandeis University Press, 2005); Gedalyah Nigal, *Magic, Mysticism and Hasidism: The Supernatural in Jewish Thought*, trans. Edward Levin (Jason Aronson, 1994); Moshe Idel, *Hasidism: Between Ecstasy and Magic* (State University of New York Press, 1995), esp. 103–145.

<sup>12</sup> M. Monier-Williams, *A Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Clarendon Press, 1960), 748. *Balādhur* is Arabic derivation from the Sanskrit *bhallātaka* as attested by Schmucker and Bos: Werner Schmucker, "Die pflanzliche und mineralische Materia medica im Firdaus al-Ḥikma des 'Alī ibn Sahl Rabban aṭ-Ṭabarī" (PhD. diss., University of Bonn, 1969), 117–118 (no. 137); Gerrit Bos, "Balādhur (Marking-Nut): A Popular Medieval Drug for Strengthening Memory," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 59, no. 2 (1996): 229–236, here p. 229 (n. 2). Ingesting the fruit on a regular basis

shape. The Latin and Arabic equivalents *anacardium* (“upward-heart”) and *ḥabb al-qalb* (a piece-cum-seed of the heart) reference this same heart-like shape.<sup>13</sup> A heart-shaped arrow has a pointy tip; therefore, this denomination whimsically captures the marking nut. Ayurvedic medicine touts the fruit as a stimulant, a palliative for digestive ailments, and a nutritious food, also noting the nut’s escharotic punch, which explains its abortifacient functions.<sup>14</sup> In *Kāmasūtra* (Pithy Verses on Love), Vātsyāyana endorses *bhallātaka* as a lubricating aphrodisiac that bolsters male fertility.<sup>15</sup> Conversely, among the fruit’s side effects are skin irritation, spasms, nausea, vesication, and difficulties urinating.<sup>16</sup> To prevent hazardous reactions, contemporary Indian authorities recommend detoxification procedures (*śodhana*) that involve removing the *doṣās* (impurities or toxic content) from the marking nut.<sup>17</sup>

The tenth-century Qayrawān-based Arab physician Ibn al-Jazzār urged patients to moderate their intake of *balādhur* syrup, which served as a popular remedy for forgetfulness. He cautioned that the nut is liable to trigger madness or acute illness.<sup>18</sup> This warning of derangement was apparently a euphemism for psychosis.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, al-Jazzār’s words disguise mental and somatic effects that can be interpreted as an altered state of consciousness: a sudden mystical revelation, a meditative state, or an out-of-body experience.

In an early *zoharic* passage from *Midrash ha-Ne’elam*, essential for our comprehension of the *modus operandi* of this fruit, the marking nut is snugly hidden via translation:

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was deemed a cure for melancholy. Oliver Kahl, *The Sanskrit, Syriac and Persian Sources in the Comprehensive Book of Rhazes* (Brill, 2015), 211. Kahl’s monograph underscores various medical traditions involving this fruit: cf. *ibid*, 112, 125–127, 150, 172–173, 210–211, 365, 370, 374 (marking nut for tattoo removal).

<sup>13</sup> See, Bos, “Balādhur (Marking-Nut),” 229. The use of *bhallātaka* already turns up in the ancient Indian epic *The Mahābhārata* 3(33) 111.10–15; *The Mahābhārata: Book 2 The Book of the Assembly Hall. Book 3 The Book of the Forest*, trans. and ed. J.A.B. van Buitenen (The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 435.

<sup>14</sup> All parts of *bhallātaka* (seeds of the fruit, oil, and gum) were deployed for curative purposes. Arab physicians referred to the oil produced from marking nut seeds as “honey.” The extract often served as a dye or an ink. For comprehensive dosage instructions and therapeutic treatments, see K. M. Nadkarni, *Indian Materia Medica*, revised and expanded by A. K. Nadkarni, 2 vols. (Popular Prakashan, 1976), vol. 1, 1119–1125; Sebastian Pole, *Ayurvedic Medicine: The Principles of Traditional Practice*, (Singing Dragon, 2013), 139–140.

<sup>15</sup> Vatsyayana Mallanaga, *Kamasutra: A New, Complete English Translation of the Sanskrit Text*, eds. and trans. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 168. If a male proves incapable of satisfying his partner, doctors might recommend a surgical perforation of his penis. After the procedure, the member is cleansed with *bhallātaka* oil. Wendy Doniger, *Redeeming the Kamasutra* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 135.

<sup>16</sup> David Arnold, *Toxic Histories: Poison and Pollution in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), 34.

<sup>17</sup> These purification techniques are mentioned in *The Ayurvedic Formulary of India: Part II* (Government of India, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, 2000), 47, 370–371.

<sup>18</sup> MS Munich, The Bavarian State Library, Cod. Hebr. 253, fol. 263a-b; cf. Gerrit Bos, *Ibn Al-Jazzār on Forgetfulness and Its Treatment. Critical Edition of the Arabic Text and the Hebrew Translations with Commentary and Translation into English* (The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, 1995), 42; *Ibn al-Jazzār’s Zād al-musāfir wa-qūt al-ḥaḍīr: Provisions for the Traveller and Nourishment for the Sedentary: Books I and II: Diseases of the Head and the Face*, eds. and trans. Gerrit Bos and Fabian Käs (Brill, 2022), 139, 191, 201, 237, 599.

<sup>19</sup> *Balādhur*’s utilization as a lethal drug has been enhanced by legends surrounding the death of Aḥmad ibn Yahya al-Balāḍuri, an Arab historian active in ninth-century Baghdad. Cf. *Ṣarḥ asma’ al-’uqār: (l’explication des noms de drogues) un glossaire de matière médicale composé par Maïmonide. Texte publié pour la première fois d’après le manuscrit unique avec traduction, commentaires et index par Max Meyerhof* (Imprimerie de l’Institut Française d’Archeologie Orientale, 1940), 34–35.

Rabbi Hizkiyah said, I was in the regions of Arabs and saw men who used to conceal themselves among cliffs—in caves among the mountains—but every Sabbath eve they would return to their homes.

I inquired of them, “What is this that you do?”

They replied, “We are hermits, and we engage in Torah every single day. Sometimes we eat only wild herbs.”

I asked them, “With what are you nourished at other times?”

They replied, “In the desert we find trees sprouting acorns [*balud/balna*], and we eat them. When the teaching illuminates us, in great joy some of us slip away, cook them, and we eat. Such a day is reckoned by us as especially good. When the trees do not sprout, we eat whatever herbs we can find; we cook them and we eat.”<sup>20</sup>

Owing to the pseudo-epigraphic transformation of medieval Andalusia into second-century CE Palestine, the linguistic concealment of the sacred pharmacology, which was transmitted via mystical texts, was intensified by the fusion of Hebrew with an imitative Aramaic overlay. Thus, the conversation between the characters in the passage above has a nebulous feel.<sup>21</sup> Emulating the first and most accomplished group of ascetics described in Baḥya ibn Paquda’s *Ḥovot ha-Levavot* (Duties of the Hearts; second half of the eleventh century), a classical work of Jewish ethics,<sup>22</sup> the hermits consumed acorns from nearby trees. A closer look at the manuscripts housing this passage shows that in line with the reading by the prominent twentieth-century scholar of Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem, *balud*, or *balna* are acorns. Elsewhere, Scholem identifies *balud* as *balādbur*, that same plant described in the cure for memory lapse above.<sup>23</sup> Scholem’s decision to leave out this insight is in line with the preventive censorship that characterizes the first print edition of *Zohar Ḥadash* (Thessaloniki 1597; fol. 11b). The first edition of *Zohar Ḥadash* opts for the word *khulna* (“everything”) instead of *balna*.

## Cracking the Marking Nut

These inconsistent accounts of the marking nut, as well as the veiling of sacred-secret pharmacopoeia, reinforce the view that anchorites only sought its ecstatic effects when struggling to grasp the Torah. *Balud* consumption elicits spiritual illuminations that not only arouse *ta’avat’a* (an earthly desire) but also stirs a hankering for the supernal jouissance of the afterlife. In this context, the kabbalists emphasized their approval of such yearning for the

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<sup>20</sup> MS Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, Bodl. Or. 574, fol. 17b reads *balud*, whilst MS Vatican, Vatican City, ebr. 428, fol. 100b contains the variant *balna*. Alternatively, MS Biblioteca Casanatense, Rome, 2971 and MS Munich, the Bavarian State Library, Cod. Hebr. 217 refrain from specifying the hermits’ diet. I cite from the standard English translation: *The Zohar Pritzker Edition* (Stanford University Press, 2016), vol. 10, trans. Nathan Wolski, 47.

<sup>21</sup> For a disquisition of *zoharic* mytho-poetics, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>22</sup> Baḥya Ibn Paquda, *Ḥovot ha-Levavot*, trans. Judah ibn Tibbon (J. Junovitch, 1928), 247; *Al-Hidāyah ilā Farā’id al-Qulūb des Baḥya ibn Josef ibn Paquda aus Andalusien. Im arabischen Urtext zum ersten Male nach der Oxford- und Pariser Handschrift sowie den Petersburger Fragmenten*, ed. Avraham Shalom Yahuda (Brill, 1912), 360f.; Baḥya ben Joseph Ibn Paquda, *The Book of Direction to the Duties of the Heart*, trans. Menahem Mansoor, (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 408; Amos Goldreich, “Possible Arabic Sources of the Distinction between ‘Duties of the Heart’ and ‘Duties of the Limb,’” *Te’uda* 6 (1988): 179–208 [Hebrew]; Omer Michaelis, *Interiority and Law: Baḥya ibn Paquda and the Concept of Inner Commandments* (Stanford University Press, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> See Scholem’s copy of *Zohar Ḥadash* (edition Warsaw 1885), fol. 8b (preserved in the NLI in Jerusalem).

Godhead by using the same phrase that seals each day in the narrative of creation (Gen. 1:4-25): *khi tov* (“that it is good”). Numerologically speaking, the letters of the adjective *tov* (good) and the noun *’egoṣ* (nut) both equal seventeen. This common tally pertains to the hidden architecture of the eponymous “Secret of the Nut,” a series of medieval esoteric speculations about the configuration of the divine chariot (*merkavah*). Mainly associated with the German-Jewish Pietists, the authors of this corpus liken the appearance of this supernal vehicle to a walnut, used as a sanative means for deworming a child’s stomach.<sup>24</sup>

The opening of an ascetic’s mind deepens his comprehension of Scripture, elucidating hitherto unfathomable wonders of God. Within the mystery of the divine unity, even a deficient portion of the nut’s thickest shells or husks (*qelippot*) has an assigned abode. Symbolizing evil power, these husks are generally considered to amount to four, from the hardest outer layer to the softest stratum adhering to the kernel. Sages in medieval Provence enthusiastically recommended *balādhur qatan* (“small marking nut”)—a relatively uncomplicated potion to remedy forgetfulness—to those interested in *petiḥat lev* (opening the heart), a subconscious state conducive to vivid recall (hypermnnesia) and increased sensitivity, such a concoction would proffer attributes that bestow a mystical élan.<sup>25</sup>

Further evidence of the marking nut’s usage is encapsulated in the premodern Lurianic branch of Kabbalah and can be found in the man of Safed, Ḥayyim Vital (1542-1620), who served as a major exponent of Isaac Luria’s teachings. He was evidently familiar with this recipe when he penned his medico-theurgic compendium titled *Sefer ha-Pe’ulot* (Book of Actions).<sup>26</sup>

For forgetfulness: the castoreum<sup>27</sup> is to be cooked in a strong vinegar; afterwards, mix it with the honey of *anaqardi* [a marking nut],<sup>28</sup> and whatever is left outside is to be removed. Anoint the final part of the head from the backside. Prior to this, the hair that is there [on the backside] must be shaven well. The *anaqardi* is a *balādhur*—fruits that grow in the land of India—and they are hot and dry to the fourth degree.<sup>29</sup>

Vital’s recommendation lays bare some riveting parallels to Indian folk medicine, chief among them a treatment involving the patient’s shadow. For light headaches or spleen ailments, mantrikas are prescribed, smearing the head of a patient’s shadow with butter and marking

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Daniel Abrams, *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation in Medieval Germany: A Study of the Sod ha-Egoṣ Texts* (Mohr Siebeck, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Cf. MS Ben Zvi Institute, Jerusalem, 2675, fol. 115b (nr. 24). On *petiḥat ha-lev* as a wondrous technique for committing Mosaic texts to memory, see Yuval Harari, “Opening the Heart: Magical Practices for Knowledge, Understanding and Good Memory in Judaism in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages,” in *Shefa Tal. Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture Presented to Bracha Sack*, eds. Zeev Gries, Haim Kreisel, and Boaz Huss (Ben-Gurion University Press), 303–347, esp. pp. 319–325 [Hebrew]; Eliezer Brodt, “Segulot le-Zikharon u-Petiḥat ha-Lev,” *Yerushatanu* 5 (2011): 337–360 [Hebrew].

<sup>26</sup> The pharmacopoeia was also titled *Sefer ha-Refu’ot* (Book of [Medical] Recipes).

<sup>27</sup> Castoreum is a yellowish exudate from the castor sacs of mature beavers that the fragrance industry utilizes as a tincture.

<sup>28</sup> The Hebraized term *anaqardi* derives from the fruit’s Latin name *Semecarpus anacardium*.

<sup>29</sup> MS Jerusalem, The Ben Zvi Institute, 2675, fol. 110b (nr. 216). Concerning Vital’s manual, see Gerrit Bos, “Ḥayyim Vital’s ‘Practical Kabbalah and Alchemy’: A 17th Century Book of Secrets,” *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 4 (1994): 55–112, p. 78 in particular. Gershom Scholem, *Alchemy and Kabbalah*, trans. Klaus Ottman, (Spring Publications, 2006), 48–50.

nut juice. Furthermore, these magician-exorcists dotted the sick person's entire shadow with this blend...<sup>30</sup>

The cornucopia of magical practices and superstitions blurs the distance between the sacred (ritually authorized pharmacopoeias) and individual, often hazardous efforts, to ascend closer to the Godhead or *Ein Sof* (Unfathomable One) by acquiring preternatural skills. The dosage of marking nut *panaceum*, along with the spiritual aptitude of its consumer, determined if such a concoction was beneficial or treacherous. In the domain of the Law, there is a yawning gap between the holy *logos* and written *nomos*, which also affects the dynamics of *pharmakon*. The same holds true for the hermeneutical distance between God's pharmacy, where the ritual use of hallucinogens is sanctioned, and the inebriated trials of self-appointed "doctors," who are ostracized for being impious sorcerers. The distance between medicine and poison thus became a measure of the difference between, on one hand, the permitted and supervised implementation of magical remedies and sacred pharmacology's illegitimate mimicry on the other. Over the course of time, the sacralization of profane experimentation and the profanation of God's drugstore overlap analogically in the dissolution of Benjamin's aura. This same chasm or *fond sans fond* (bottomless ground), which is cluttered with half-sacred and half-profane illuminations, characterizes Benjamin's documented experiences with hashish and opium from 1927 to 1934.

## Profane Illuminations

In transcending his sensorium—what Benjamin dubbed a "toe dance of reason"<sup>31</sup>—this twentieth-century pharmacological explorer endeavored to overcome the critical detachment of a person's mind from its surrounding body by resurrecting a materialistic magic in which unanimated objects wink at their beholder, and by winking divulge the sameness of everything. Typically perceived as a barrier, an object's thingness can be surmounted by a spectator's piercing gaze infiltrating its very essence, transcending the subject and object (or human and thing) shatters the barrier in an enigmatic spectacle of gestures. Reminiscent of Derrida's cat,<sup>32</sup> Benjamin opined that material things stare at us. Along these same lines, he ultimately concludes that all temporal entities are aura-wreathed. Furthermore, every creature or object is only perceptible via the shroud of its aura. It bears noting that Benjamin received his introduction to profane enchantment through hashish, mescaline, and opium.<sup>33</sup>

The Greek term *ekstasis* signifies mental and physical displacement from one's proper locus or assigned dwelling. Such a departure alludes to all the above-mentioned

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<sup>30</sup> John Abbott, *The Keys of Power: A Study of Indian Ritual and Belief* (University Books, 1974), 28. Moreover, *bhallataka* figured into remedies or talismans meant to ward off the evil eye. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 124–131.

<sup>31</sup> Benjamin, *On Hashish*, 20.

<sup>32</sup> On an animal's gaze, see Derrida's approach to the animal philosophy. Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Luise Mallet, trans. David Wills (Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Benjamin pinpointed the use of entheogens as a preliminary mode of surmounting an otherwise rigid path towards religious enlightenment. The deployment of hallucinogens was, however, only a preparatory step in the process of unveiling a form of sensual-mundane magic embodied in an artistic creation. In the essay "Surrealism" (1929), he proffered: "But the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination [*die wahre, schöpferische Überwindung religiöser Erleuchtung*] certainly does not lie in narcotics [*bei den Rauschgiften*]. It resides in a profane illumination [*in einer profanen Erleuchtung*], a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson [*die Vorschule abgeben können*]. (But a dangerous one; and the religious lesson is stricter [*und die der Religionen ist strenger*])." Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism," in *Selected Writings. Volume 2, 1927–1930*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 207–221, quotation on p. 209; Benjamin, "Der Sürrealismus," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 2,1, 295–310, citation on p. 297.

experimentation with drugs. After engaging in introspection (*enstasis*), the spiritual seeker aims for transcendence.<sup>34</sup> Each foray into transcendence reveals a subtle core of *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanniness), the Heideggerian defamiliarization of the human being via disclosure. This revelatory progression ends with the individual withdrawing back into themselves,<sup>35</sup> as mystical experiences conclude with either the person's symbolic or actual death or a humbling return to the monadic self.

Shifts in perception through intoxicants can occur within the framework of a marvelous yet horrifying (*to deimon*) quest for an impersonal or hyper-personal consciousness (of God), along with an intensive somato-sensation of the external. Under the burden of a *logos* that is, without exception, less than fully comprehensible, the language of mystical illuminations, which adheres to the rules of the written word, comes apart at the seams. Putatively, disclosive mystical writing comes to a halt somewhere in the middle: after the triumphal declaration of a secret's exposure but prior to actually fulfilling this promise. The obscurity of theosophic works aside, the magic, yet nevertheless practical, formulas-conjurations and pharmacoceias that safeguard ancient remedial lore are theoretically accessible to the public. Alas, this sort of knowledge is only approachable through the tortuous path of recovering the hidden uses of drugs-*samim* in the all-but-forgotten pharmacy of God.

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<sup>34</sup> According to Mircea Eliade, the dynamics of ecstasis and enstasis are associated, respectively, with the enterprise of a shaman and yogi. Stuart Ray Sarbacker, "Enstasis and Ecstasis: A Critical Appraisal of Eliade on Yoga and Shamanism," *Journal for the Study of Religion* 15, no. 1 (2002): 21–37. For kabbalistic accounts on trance interpreted through the prism of shamanism, see Jonathan Garb, *Shamanic Trance in Modern Kabbalah* (University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>35</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Yale University Press, 2000); Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1983); on Heidegger's *Unheimlichkeit*, see Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (Harvard University Press, 2015). Wolfson discusses this topic within the transformative context of the *Schwarze Hefte* (Black Notebooks). Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Duplicity of Philosophy's Shadow: Heidegger, Nazism, and the Jewish Other* (Columbia University Press, 2018), in particular his chapter "Nomadism, Homelessness, and the Obfuscation of Being", 33–86.