Having explored numerous texts that discuss the role of the spine during prayer, let us further investigate the significance of the spine. The importance of the spine is explicated in medieval mystical literature. *Sefer Bahir*, one of the earliest kabbalistic works—from around 1200—offers an anatomy lesson that pertains to humans, as well as the Divine Anthropos (i.e., God imaged in human form). "The brain is the root of the spinal cord. The body constantly draws sustenance from there. If not for the spinal cord, the brain could not exist and without the brain, the body would not exist . . . therefore the spinal cord dispenses to the entire body from the brain" (*Bahir*, no. 37:9a).

The spine is critical for spiritual as well as physical health. According to an interesting midrashic statement, the soul is chained to the spine. "The soul is like a butterfly (lit. winged grasshopper), and a chain is attached to one of its legs and is connected to the spine. When a person sleeps, his soul leaves [his body] and roams the world" (*Midrash Tehillim*, ch. 11:102). Owing to the attachment of the soul to the spine, upon awakening the soul returns to the body.

There are numerous references in midrashic writings to the concept of an extraordinary spinal vertebra that we each possess, commonly identified as the tail bone and referred to in Hebrew as *luz*.[12] Whereas in general, the human body was formed from the earth and after death it decomposes and returns to the earth, the *luz*, however, is ascribed heavenly origins. According to the Rabbis, this bone is indestructible and can survive any eventuality. As it is the only vestige after death of an individual's corporeality, the *luz* is destined to be the start of resurrection (cf. *Bereshit Rabbah* 28:3).

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account in Genesis 3, wherein the snake seduced Eve into eating the prohibited fruit. This led to the expulsion from the Garden and mortality. Even in Genesis, however, the snake is introduced as being the shrewdest of all creatures of the field. Recall as well that when *Ha-Shem* commissioned Moses to act as his agent for the liberation of the Israelites, Moses wondered how he could convince the people that he was divinely selected. Thereupon *Ha-Shem* told Moses to throw his staff to the ground, and it became a snake. This was to be the Divine sign (cf. Exodus 4:1-5). During the subsequent competition between Moses and Aaron and Pharoah's magicians, Aaron's staff was transformed into a snake and devoured the Egyptian staves. One can also mention the copper snake that Moses was commanded by *Ha-Shem* to make, to ward off the plague of fiery snakes that had attacked the Israelites (cf. Numbers 21:4-9).

Owing to the snake motif that permeated stories about Moses, it is not surprising that according to the Sages, this imagery was incorporated into the *mishkan* (Tabernacle) that Moses erected. The middle beam of the *mishkan* was said to be wondrous (cf. *B. Shabbat* 98b). It levitated in place without being connected to anything. *Targum Yonatan* on Exodus 26:28 elaborated upon this, and in so doing refers to the snake simile.

> The middle beam, between the struts, extends from one end to the other and was derived from the tree that Abraham planted in Beer Sheva. When the Israelites crossed the sea, the angels chopped down the tree and threw it into the sea, where it floated on the surface of the water. Then the angels proclaimed: This is the tree that Abraham planted in Beer Sheva and he prayed there according to Divine decree. The Israelites took it and fashioned the middle beam [of the *mishkan*] from it—70 cubits in length. It was wondrous that when they set up the *mishkan*, it [i.e., the beam] would wrap itself like a snake around the struts of the *mishkan* and when they would disassemble it [the beam] would straighten out like a staff.

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The anonymous author of the anthology of mystical insights, *Shoshan Sodot*, initially discussed the function of the *luz* as the basis for resurrection in terms of the biblical verse, "Everything goes to one place—everything is from dust and returns to dust" (Ecclesiastes 3:20). He then associated the origins of the *luz* with the *Sefirah* of *Binah* (Understanding), which is commonly referred to as the Supernal Mother and is associated with the process of *teshuvah*, return to *Ha-Shem*. Next, a rather graphic description of resurrection is provided:

> Behold when the propitious time for resurrection of the dead arrives, dew will descend from *Keter Elyon* [the highest of the *Sefirot*] to *Binah*. This corresponds to the *luz* in the lower realm. It [i.e., the celestial dew] functions like leavening in dough and stretches out, extending to all of the limbs, sinews, skin and flesh. [All those who are resurrected] are transported [lit. somersault] to the land of Israel. There they receive their souls in the holy and pure land, for then *Binah* opens her gates and bestows bounty upon the supernal land. (*Shoshan Sodot*, 57a)

An interesting extension of the theory of the *luz* is the assertion that it only receives nourishment from the post-*Shabbat*, Saturday-night meal, referred to as either *melaveh malkah* (the accompaniment of the Queen), or King David's meal. In the well-known story in Genesis 2, Adam was commanded to refrain from eating from two of the trees in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve transgressed by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and were punished by expulsion and eventual death. As they committed their sin prior to the Sabbath, the *luz* was uneffected by their transgression and it is for this reason that it is incorruptable.[13]

The *luz* is described as being nut-shaped. As there is also a tree from the almond family that is called *luz*, presumably this is the etymology of the name. There

13. R. Avraham Sperling, *Sefer Taamei ha-Minhagim* (Jerusalem, n.d.), 191, cites all of this in the name of *Eliahu Rabba*.

is a twofold connection between *luz* and the patriarch, Jacob. The only biblical reference to the *luz* tree is a narrative involving Jacob (Genesis 30:37). He also experienced a very significant event in a biblical town that was originally named Luz[14]—that is where Jacob had his famous night vision of the ladder to Heaven, with angels ascending and descending upon it. Upon awakening, he realized the spiritual significance of the locale and renamed the place Beit El (i.e., the house of God) (see Genesis 28:12–19).

Given the association of *luz* with the foundation of the spine and Jacob's vision of a ladder from earth to Heaven at a place called Luz, it is not farfetched to associate Jacob's ladder with the human body. This notion has been expanded upon by numerous renaissance and early modern luminaries. An early formulation is found in the influential Torah commentary of R. Moshe Alshech. Alshech was an important rabbinic authority in sixteenth-century Tzefat. He interpreted Jacob's vision as a message from *Ha-Shem*, confirming Jacob's spiritual superiority over other righteous individuals: "you are elevated over all of them for you are 'a ladder set on the ground'" (Genesis 28:12). Alshech continued by explaining the analogy with the ladder as follows. Owing to Jacob's physicality, he is grounded; nevertheless, his soul ascends to Heaven; (see *Torat Moshe*, 43b).

A fascinating and complex discussion on this topic was formulated by the seventeenth-century Moroccan kabbalist R. Avraham Azulai. He relates the human body to the topography of the land of Israel, as well as Jacob's ladder and the hordes of angels that accompanied the patriarch.

14. Interestingly, there was another city in the Near East that bore the name Luz. According to the Rabbis, *tachelet*, the special blue thread for the *tzitzit*, was manufactured there (see *B. Sotah* 46b, and *B. Sanhedrin* 12a).

Know that this ladder corresponds to the mystery of Adam. It encompasses all of the land of Israel. For the shape of the borders of the land of Israel is neither rectangular, nor circular, nor square but rather like a human lying on the ground on his back, with his head to the west and his two arms stretched out—one to the north and one south, and his legs opened—the big toe of one foot pointing to Mount Hor, which is the northwest corner and the big toe of the other foot pointing to the Egyptian river, which is the southwest corner. Between both legs the great sea [i.e., the Mediterranean] is interposed, for it is west of Israel.

Accordingly, you will discover that the land of Israel is divided into large and small strips and the above-mentioned ladder encompasses all of the strips. There are steps on both sides: facing inwards towards Israel and facing outwards, outside of Israel.

Know that anyone who lives outside of Israel is surrounded by 11,000 angels, as is written "One thousand will fall to your left side and 10,000 to your right" (Psalms 91:7). They ascend the steps of the ladder from the outer side, facing outside of Israel. Then they return to their place. As soon as an individual enters the air space of the ladder, immediately 22,000 pure angels descend the inner steps of the ladder. This corresponds to the 22 letters of the Torah [i.e., the Hebrew alphabet]. They accompany him—twenty thousand on one side and two thousand on the other. This is according to the statement "God's chariots are 20,000 and 2,000" Psalms 68:18. Thus, there are 22,000 pure angels, as noted previously.

If one has the misfortune of departing Israel, as he approaches the above-mentioned ladder the 22,000 [angels] leave him and ascend the steps of the ladder and disperse to their places. Thereupon, 11,000 angels descend to accompany him outside of Israel. (*Hesed Le-Avraham*, 19a)

There are also numerous texts from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century sources that discuss the ladder motif and are worth considering. For example, R. Yaakov Yosef of Polnoyye, the faithful disciple of the Besht, wrote:

> The point is that man stands upon the earth and his head reaches Heaven. God's angels ascend and descend within him, for man is referred to as ascending and descending. It

> is impossible to remain stationary on one level. One must concentrate to unify the Divine attributes, whether he ascends or descends. Everything is connected to the *Shechinah*. Thus it is written, "In all of your paths, know Him" (Proverbs 3:6). Understand this. (*Ben Porat Yosef*, 42a)

Like Azulai, R. Yaakov draws a connection between the human body and Jacob's ladder, though with different results. Herein, the angels of God are connected to Heaven from within the individual.

A hasidic expansion that explicitly refers to the Genesis narrative is the following:

> "And he [i.e., Jacob] dreamed" (Genesis 28:12)—the explanation is that in this world a human is like a dreamer, lying in darkness. Indeed no supernal light is revealed to a human in this world. When one awakens by means of serving *Ha-Shem*, namely when one's thoughts come to the supernal realm, then one sees "and behold there is a ladder" (Genesis 28:12) for he himself is the ladder. Even though he is lying on the ground, nevertheless his head reaches heaven. And behold the angels of God [ascend], by means of his study of Torah. (*Or ha-Ganuz*, 22)

This doctrine was also taught by R. Hayyim of Volozhin. R. Hayyim, the pioneer of the Lithuanian *yeshivah* movement, was the leading disciple of the Vilna Gaon and hence the leader of the opponents of Hasidim (i.e., *mitnagdim*). This indicates the universality of this teaching.

> Behold, as we have written, man is like a ladder that stands upon the earth and reaches heaven. The angels of God ascend and descend within him. That is to say, they receive ascent or descent from him, as we have written. This is what they said in the *Midrash* [i.e., *Bereshit Rabbah* 68:16]: ladder (*sulam*) corresponds to Sinai.[15] At Sinai the ladder from

15. Sinai and *sulam* (ladder) each have the numerical value of 130. Based on this *midrash*, the *Baal ha-Turim* noted: *sulam* has the numerical value of Sinai, for He showed him (i.e., Jacob) the Sinai event; see *Baal ha-Turim* on Genesis 28:12.

above to below was completed by means of Moses. (*Nefesh ha-Hayyim, Likkutei Maamarim*, 344)

Several other comments of R. Hayyim explore this issue of the celestial roots of the individual and are worth reflecting upon.

Accordingly, the perfect human is like a tree that is planted Above and his shade extends below, which is the body. He is very attached to his root, until he is close to prophecy, for he is very attached to Above and from there to even higher levels extending upwards to the Infinite, Blessed is He. Therefore he is like a pillar that is positioned below, yet he is entirely connected Above, as if by a rope. Thus it is written, "Jacob is a rope that is His allotment" (Deuteronomy 32:9). That is to say, [it is] just like a rope which has one end connected Above and the other below. (*Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, 343)

This image of Jacob as a rope attached to *Ha-Shem* forms the basis for another of R. Hayyim's penetrating discourses:

Each person who believes in the Torah, his soul is attached and grasps the Tree of Eternal Life—grasping onto one of the letters of the Torah that transcends all of the worlds. He is linked, as if by a rope, below to this lowly world. His head, however, is attached above to his root, as it is written "Jacob is a rope that is His allotment" (Deuteronomy 32:9), just like a rope that is connected Above and its end descends below.

If, God forbid, he destroys a spark from his soul, by transgressing a sin that entails cutting off (*karet*), immediately that spark is split from its root—from the rope that it was attached to until now. This is the significance of the following: "And this soul is cut off" (Leviticus 22:3), the explanation is that the small spark that transgressed [is cut off]. The entire soul, however, is not cut off from its root, God forbid. For the part that remains, still rooted and grasping the Holy Torah, redeems him from sin. (*Nefesh ha-Hayyim*, 316)

An extension of this theme is found in the writings of the late nineteenth-century Baghdadi Sage R. Yosef Hayyim. In a discussion of the soul he notes that not

everyone can actualize all five levels; nevertheless, there is no need to despair owing to our descent from Adam:

In any case, every person has a part in primal Adam who comprises all of the created souls. Accordingly, if a person properly participates in Divine service, he will merit connecting the soul to her supernal source. As a result he will be accredited with all [five] levels [of the soul], as previously mentioned.

I shall offer an analogy to this: there is a great rope that hangs in the heart of Heaven. It is many thousand metres wide. A person has a slender string. If he can attach his string to the end of the [celestial] rope that extends to the earth, behold it is considered as if he is holding on to the great rope, "whose head reaches the Heavens" (Genesis 28:12). (*Ben Ish Hai, Va-Yeshev*, 45)

These early modern discussions that employ the image of Jacob's ladder or rope are clearly interconnected. They were likely influenced by two related texts found in zoharic writings: "All knock on the *Shechinah*, which is a ladder with six rungs, and this is the heart. On it the angels of God ascend and descend" (*Tikkunei Zohar*, no. 25:70b).

Here is a more elaborate discussion from the *Raaya Mehemna*:

The windpipe has six rings, about which it is written "Ascribe to *Ha-Shem*, O Divine beings . . ." (Psalms 29:1). Upon it the voice ascends, dividing into the six voices of the *Shechinah*. The seventh ascends to the mouth, which is the throne. The six rings of the windpipe are like six stairs to the royal throne and the windpipe is a ladder, upon which the angels of God ascend and descend. These are the breaths that arise from the heart and descend to the heart. (*Zohar* 3:235a)

These early texts explicitly refer to the *Shechinah* as a conduit for prayers that are transformed into angels; nevertheless, the anthropomorphic imagery of the Kabbalah makes it easy to transfer this motif to humans.