



The Hidden Light

האור הגנוז

ON THE FIRST DAY OF CREATION, according to the book of Genesis, God creates light. On the fourth day of creation, God creates the sun, moon, and stars. If this light of the first day of creation is not sunlight, moonlight, or starlight, what is it? Where is it? Does it have any meaning for us now?

Jewish mystics teach that the first light is connected to God's essence. Because the first light is so powerful, God hides it. The mystics call it *ba'or haganúz* (the hidden light). However, the hidden light can be found. It can be found everywhere. Most importantly, it can be found in you.

With the practice of yoga, you can look for, find, and reveal to the world the power and beauty of the mysterious hidden light within you.

Your Own Body of Wisdom

Take a moment to play hide and seek with yourself. You are the seeker. Find out some things about yourself: Can you recall a time when you felt powerful and radiant? Have you ever felt too small to receive someone's generosity or love? What is your most hidden mystery? Turn to your own wisdom sources for the answers to these questions. Consider your own body as a source of wisdom. How well do you know it? Your own breath is a mystery. How familiar are you with it?



Torah Yoga for the Hidden Light

According to the Ari, a sixteenth-century mystic in Sefad, Israel, God desires to shower the world with the abundant goodness of the hidden light. In order to give this light, God “needs” a vessel capable of receiving it.¹ In this world-view, your task is to build yourself into a vessel of receptivity.

Although babies and children are usually soft bundles of receptivity, it is not always easy or simple to receive loving-kindness and goodness as we grow older. Many things happen that tend to harden us and close us down. Great gifts, even small gifts, can be overwhelming. However, receptivity is something you can practice and relearn. Yoga is training in receptivity. As well as making you strong, yoga can transform you into a soft, open, receptive vessel for the hidden light.

Vessel Making

In Jewish High Holiday liturgy, God is described as a potter who fashions his creations. Pottery is a very old craft for vessel making. Yoga is also a craft for vessel making. With yoga, you become a pottery partner with God and participate in making the vessel of yourself.

In ordinary pottery, you work with clay. What do you work with in the pottery of yoga? Your body, of course, can be likened to clay that you stretch and mold. However, as you work with your body, you realize that your body is not separate from your mind, heart, and soul. Your breath helps to soften and release your body. Your thoughts and emotions contribute to the texture and pliability of your body. For example, if you say to yourself, “I am not flexible,” your body will probably believe you and not move so easily. If, on the other hand, you say to yourself, “I am open and yielding,” your body may very well open and yield. If you are afraid, your body tightens up. If you feel safe, your body relaxes. Yoga is a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual experience all at once. Your body-mind-heart-soul is the raw material on the yoga pottery wheel.

With yoga, you are involved in fashioning your own vessel: yourself. When you work often with the clay of your whole self, you become both a soft and a strong vessel—a vessel capable of receiving and revealing to the world the mysterious hidden light of the first day of creation.

Hidden Light Within You

Though you may not be aware of it, you are already a vessel containing hidden light. Jewish tradition teaches that each human being is an *olám katán* (little

world). The Malbim, a nineteenth-century Torah commentator in Poland, says: “the whole of reality is organized and arranged like the structure of a human being, because the human being is a *little world* that includes within itself all the powers that are found in all the worlds.”² In another teaching, the Malbim says: “Each person is a metaphor, image, and imitation of the whole big world.”³

Because you are a little world, within you are all the powers that are found in all the worlds—within you is the hidden light of the first day of creation. Yoga is a way to discover the hidden light within you.

Mystery of the Hidden Light

Jewish mystics have a lot to say about the hidden light. It is abundant love. It is divine consciousness. It is a mystery connected to God’s seemingly paradoxical presence and hiddenness in the world and in our lives. This mystery is within you. Yoga begins with a stretch of your spine and a deep breath and continues inward to the hidden and not completely knowable mystery of God within you. In the Torah, Job (19:26) speaks of the experience of seeing God with his body: “In my flesh I see God.” Rav Kook, first chief rabbi of Israel and the great mystic poet and sage of the last century, writes about his own intimate experience of the light: “My secret is for me—and my secret is my light—and my light is with me—the treasure of my life.”⁴ Let Torah and yoga guide you to the hidden treasure within you.

Torah Study for the Hidden Light

What is the light of the first day of creation? In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer teaches: “In the light that the Holy One, Blessed be He, created on the first day of creation, a person can see from one end of the world to the other.”⁵ The original Hebrew text also means that one can see from the start of creation to its end. In other words, the first light illuminates all space and time. It enables absolute seeing, or God consciousness.

According to the primary text of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, the first light is *chésed* (loving-kindness).⁶ God desires to pour this loving-kindness into the world in great abundance. The mystics teach that the ability of the giver to give is in direct correlation to the ability of the receiver to receive. God wants people to learn to be receptive.⁷ God wants vessels that are prepared and open to hold divine love.

The vessel is a central image in Jewish mysticism. The world and human beings are seen as vessels that need to prepare themselves to receive love. The more the vessel can contain, the more love is poured in.

We can also understand the first light as God's clothing. The psalmist writes: "He wraps Himself in light as a garment" (Psalms 104:2). In the Midrash, the rabbis say: "... the Holy One, Blessed be He, wraps Himself in a white garment and shines the radiant light of His glory from one end of the world to the other."⁸

The first four letters of the Hebrew alphabet also hint at this story of God coming into the world clothed. The first letter, *áleph*, symbolizes oneness, unity, mystery, and, in fact, God. Following *áleph*, we have the letters *bet*, *gímel*, and *dálet*, which together spell *bégged* (clothing). So *áleph*, *bet*, *gímel*, and *dálet*, can be read as *áleph bégged* (God clothed).

The first light, then, can be seen as God's garment radiating the light of divine consciousness and love into the world.

Mystical Dilemma of God's Presence

Why does God need a garment of light in order to come into the world? Why doesn't God come in directly? This question touches on a central dilemma of Jewish mysticism. The mystics teach that God is *ein sof* (without end). The mystical dilemma is this: How can infinite God interact with finite creation without overwhelming it? If God were fully in the world, there would be no room for creation.⁹ One answer to this dilemma is the first light. It is God's way of interacting and communicating with finite creation.

The mystics understand that even the first light, if fully revealed, would be too powerful for the unprepared world.¹⁰ Our world is not strong enough to hold God's garment of light without preparation. If the first light poured in directly, it would break our unprepared world as if it were a lightbulb given too much power for its capacity. In the Talmud, the rabbis also teach that God saw potential misuse of this first great light.¹¹ Therefore, God hides the first light. The psalmist writes: "How great is the goodness that you have hidden for those who revere you" (Psalms 31:20). The *Zohar* says this hidden goodness is the first light.¹²

The concept of the hidden light is hinted at in the Hebrew word *olám* (world). This word is built from the three-letter root *áyin, lámed, mem*. The root itself means "hidden" or "concealed." Why does the Hebrew word for *world* allude to concealment? What is truly hidden in our world? The hidden light, of course—all the aspects of God that are contained in the powerful, illuminating, and potentially shattering first light.

Where Is the Hidden Light?

The great first light is in hiding. Where is it? How can we find it and let it shine forth from its hiding place? There are many answers to these questions.

The psalmist says, “And the light is sown for the righteous” (Psalms 97:11). Referring to the first light, the Talmud also teaches: “And God hid it for the righteous.”¹³ We learn from tradition that Moses is one righteous man who not only found the hidden light but also revealed it to others. Does all this mean that the hidden light is only for a select few? How many people can be righteous like Moses?

Maimonides, the great codifier and philosopher from twelfth-century Spain, teaches: “Every person is fit to be righteous like Moses.”¹⁴ The hidden light, therefore, is sown potentially for every person.

The Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century Eastern European founder of the Hasidic movement, says that the first light is hidden in the Torah. “Where did the Blessed Holy One hide it (the first light)? He hid it in the Torah.”¹⁵ The book of Proverbs teaches, “Torah is light” (6:23). To study Torah and to follow its teachings is a way to find and reveal the hidden light.

Moses and the Hidden Light

The Torah, which some say *is* the first light, also tells of the revealing of the first light in the story of Moses. Moses brings the children of Israel out of the darkness of Egyptian slavery so that they can receive the light of the Torah at Mount Sinai.

One of the first connections between Moses and the first light comes at his birth: “And the woman got pregnant, and she gave birth to a son, and she saw that he was good, and she hid him for three months” (Exodus 2:2). Rashi, the eleventh-century Torah commentator in France, says, “When he was born the whole house filled up with light.”¹⁶ Why does Rashi, known for explaining the plain meaning of the text, bring in the notion of light in connection with Moses’ birth? The text does not mention light directly. What is he basing his comment on?

Rashi hears an echo reverberating through the text from the first day of creation. When Moses is born, the text says, “and she saw that he was good” (Exodus 2:2). When God creates light, the text says: “And God saw that the light was good” (Genesis 1:4). From this linguistic echo, Rashi connects the word *good* with light—and not just any light—the first light, the light of God. Moses’ birth heralds the revealing of the first light into the world.

Just as the first light has to be concealed until there is a vessel to contain it, Moses has to be concealed after his birth: “and she hid him for three months” (Exodus 2:2). Again, the light was too powerful for the unprepared world to contain all at once. The light that Moses radiated when he was born was a foreshadowing of his life’s purpose. Moses grew to become a vessel not only strong enough to receive Torah, the first light, but also strong enough to reveal it to the world.



Receive and Reveal the Hidden Light

Torah *is* the first light and a guide to finding the first light. Sfat Emet, the nineteenth-century Hasidic Rebbe of Gur, Poland, teaches, “Human beings are created to give light in this world.”¹⁷ Everyone can fill the house with light as Moses did. With the teachings of Torah, one can learn how to become a vessel strong enough to receive and reveal the first light.

May we all discover our own path to the first light and together develop the strength to fill the whole world with it.

Yoga Practice for the Hidden Light

Move now to the practice of yoga, with the intention of making yourself a vessel for receiving and revealing more of the hidden light.

**Photo 1.1**

Centering Meditation

Sit on a firm folded blanket with your buttocks on the blanket and your feet on the floor. Cross your legs, and release the tops of your thighs toward the floor. Pull the flesh of your buttocks out to the sides and diagonally back. Press your sitz bones into the blanket. On an inhalation, extend your spine up through the crown of your head. Rest your hands on your knees (Photo 1.1).

Soften and close your eyelids. Soften your eyes. Close your mouth gently and relax your lips. For the next few moments, gather your attention to your breath. Feel the sensation of your breath coming in and out of your nostrils.



Gradually allow your breath to slow down and deepen. Draw your breath down into the lower outer corners of your ribs. Broaden your rib cage with each inhalation. Now soften your belly. Let yourself receive your own breath.

Make an intention that this time is entirely for you. Draw your gently focused attention to yourself, yourself in this moment.

With your attention beginning to turn inward, include your whole body in your field of awareness. Observe any sensations you are feeling right now. Do not judge what you find.

On an inhalation, press your shoulder blades into your back, and lift and expand your chest. Roll your shoulders and upper arms back. Inhale again, and feel your breath lengthening your spine upward even more.

With your attention drawn into yourself, visualize in every cell of your body a point of the first light—divine, radiant, and exquisite. Dwell for a moment on this light. Greet it in its hiding place deep within the cells of your body. For your next few breaths, be in this light within yourself. In your divine imagination, allow the light to intensify, to shine brighter, more fully. Feel your body growing stronger and more open to the light.

As you continue your yoga practice, you can deepen your connection to the light and strengthen yourself as a vessel for the light. For now, release your visualization. Let it go. Open your eyes. Breathe naturally.



Mountain Posture

Stand with the inner edges of your feet together. Broaden and lengthen the soles of your feet, and stretch and spread your toes. Lift the inner arches of your feet up. Distribute your weight evenly over the heels and balls of your feet. Press your heels into the floor, and stretch your legs up vertically. Pull the front of your thighs up, lifting your kneecaps.

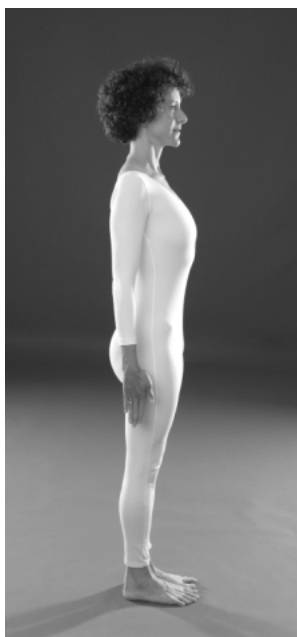
Move your tailbone down and in. Move your hips back over your heels. Bring equal weight to both feet. Take a few breaths to feel the connection you are making with the earth.

**Photo 2.1**

Roll your shoulders back, and actively stretch your arms down by your sides all the way through your fingertips, palms facing in. Move your shoulder blades in toward your chest, and lift your chest. On an inhalation, stretch your spine upward, lengthening the sides of your waist. Press your back ribs in, and breathe into your expanding chest. Soften your belly (Photo 2.1).

Relax your forehead, soften your eyes, and feel the energy within you. Breathe evenly into your whole body for three to five breaths as you root, lengthen, and expand. Imagine yourself as a vessel full of light. Be receptive to your own inner light (Photo 2.2).

Now release the actions of the posture and take a moment to notice and absorb the benefits. Be attentive to changes inside. Yoga is training in attentiveness. Whatever is happening, whether it be subtle or strong, notice it and receive it.

**Photo 2.2**



Triangle Posture

Bring your feet together and stand in Mountain Posture (see this chapter, Photos 2.1–2.2). Gather your attention inward.

Jump or step your feet four to four and a half feet apart. At the same time, extend your arms out sideways, parallel to the floor, palms facing down. Turn your toes in slightly, heels out, so that the outer edges of your feet are parallel to each other (Photo 3.1).

Turn your left foot twenty degrees to the right. Turn your right leg and foot ninety degrees to the right. Line up your right heel with the arch of your left foot.

Press your feet firmly into the floor, and straighten both legs. Pull the fronts of your thighs up, lifting your



Photo 3.1

**Photo 3.2****Photo 3.3**

kneecaps. Rotate the fronts of your thighs away from each other. The front of your right thigh and knee should face to the right. The front of your left thigh and knee should face forward.

Move your tailbone in and down. Check that the front of your torso and pelvis face forward and that your pelvis is level. On an inhalation, lift your waist up away from your pelvis and extend the sides of your torso up evenly.

Stretch your arms out from the middle of your chest to your fingertips. Broaden and lift your chest as your arms lengthen out to your sides (Photo 3.2).

Inhale and lengthen your spine even more. Exhale and extend your torso out over the line of your right leg (Photo 3.3).

Continuing to lengthen the right side of your torso, bring your right hand down to your calf or ankle or to a block or the floor behind your right ankle. Keep your left thigh back and tuck your right buttocks under. Stretch your left arm up directly over your left shoulder, palm facing forward. Face forward. Breathe evenly, and open up from the inside out.

Press the outer edge of your left foot into the floor, and straighten and firm your left leg. Press the inner edge of your right foot into the floor, and straighten and firm your right leg. Continually tuck your right buttocks under.

On an inhalation, stretch your spine from your tailbone to the crown of your head, lengthening your trunk out to the right. Turn the right side of your torso forward and the left side of your torso back. Then turn your head and gaze up at your left hand (Photo 3.4). Relax your face and your eyes.

Be involved in the posture for three to five breaths. Rather than letting the actions of the posture fade away over time, make them stronger the longer you



hold the posture. Straighten and firm your legs. Breathe softness into your lengthening, turning spine. Affirm to yourself: "I am strong and open."

To release, press your feet firmly into the floor, stretch your left arm up toward the ceiling, and on an inhalation come up to standing. Release your arms down to your sides. Turn your feet to face forward. Walk them in a little, and then either jump or walk them back together. Soften inside and notice how you feel. Be open to receive the gifts this posture offers you.

Repeat this posture on the other side.



Photo 3.4



Warrior Two Posture

Bring your feet together and stand in Mountain Posture (see this chapter, Photos 2.1–2.2). Take a few breaths to turn your attention to your whole body.

Jump or step your feet four and a half to five feet apart. Turn your toes in, heels out, so that the outer edges of your feet run parallel to each other.

Place your hands on your hips. Turn your left foot twenty degrees to the right and your right leg and foot ninety degrees to the right. Press both feet firmly into the floor. Pull the front of your thighs up, and lift your kneecaps. Straighten both legs, and rotate the fronts of your thighs away from each other.

Extend your arms out to your sides with your palms facing the floor. Stretch from the center of your chest out to your fingertips, and keep your shoulders down and away from your ears (Photo 4.1). Check that your torso is facing forward and that your pelvis is level.



On an inhalation, lengthen your spine, creating a longer waist. On an exhalation, bend your right knee to a ninety-degree angle, moving your knee into a position directly above your right ankle. Tuck your right buttock under, and stretch your inner right thigh from your groin to your knee.

Press into the outer edge of your left foot, and stretch your left leg upward. Keep rotating the fronts of your thighs away from each other.

While maintaining the ninety-degree bend of your right knee, inhale and extend your spine up. Draw your shoulder blades into your back, and lift and expand your chest. Check that the front of your torso is facing forward and that your pelvis is level.

Stretch your left arm to the left as you turn your head to the right, and gaze out beyond your right fingertips (Photo 4.2). Relax your forehead, eyes, and jaw. Quiet your thinking mind. Become absorbed in the sensations of this posture.

Continually energize the actions of this posture for three to five breaths, breathing steadily and evenly. Feel your strength, your radiant energy. Be a warrior for light.

To release, press your left foot into the floor, inhale, and straighten your right leg to come up to standing. Turn your feet to face forward. Walk your feet in a bit, and then jump or walk your feet back together. Take a moment to absorb the benefits of the posture.

Repeat on the second side.



Photo 4.1



Photo 4.2



Standing Forward Bend

Stage One

Bring your feet together and stand in Mountain Posture (see this chapter, Photos 2.1–2.2). Take a few breaths to center your attention. Press your heels into the floor, and stretch your legs and spine upward.

Step your feet hip-width apart. Turn your toes in slightly, heels out, so that the outer edges of your feet run parallel to each other. Lengthen and broaden your feet, and spread and stretch your toes. Press your heels firmly into the floor, and pull the front of your thighs up, lifting your kneecaps. Rotate the fronts of your thighs in toward each other.

On an inhalation, raise your arms up over your head, palms facing each other, arms parallel. Inhale again, and lift the front and back sides of your spine upward. Take a few breaths here, coordinating your inhalations with lengthening your spine.



On an exhalation, lengthen the front of your spine, and lead with your chest as you bend forward at your hips, extending your trunk forward and down. Place the tips of your fingers on the floor or on blocks so that your hands are directly below your shoulders. Press the tips of your fingers down, and stretch your arms up away from the floor.

Bring your weight forward so that your hips are aligned directly above your heels. Then press your heels into the floor, and stretch your legs up again. Lift your head and chest.

Inhale and actively stretch your legs up, lifting your kneecaps. Rotate your upper thighs inward, and then press your thighs back as you stretch your spine and chest forward (Photo 5.1).

Breathe evenly, quiet your mind, feel your body getting more involved in the stretch. Breathe into places that feel tight or resistant. This is the concave part of the posture.



Photo 5.1

Stage Two

Hold the backs of your ankles or calves with your hands. Bend your elbows, and lift them out to the sides. On an inhalation, lengthen the front of your spine. On an exhalation, draw your trunk down and in toward your legs. Release your head down, top of your head facing the floor, and relax the back of your neck.

Bring your hips forward over the line of your heels. Actively stretch your legs upward as your spine passively elongates downward (Photo 5.2). Soften your belly. Relax your face, your eyes, and your jaw.

Hold this posture for three to five breaths as you move deeper into your body. Do not strain or force yourself. Patiently and gently, breathe into places that feel resistant or closed. Attend to the secrets of your breath and the characteristics of your body.

To release, first come back to the concave part of this posture. Bring your fingertips to the floor or blocks in front



Photo 5.2



of you. Press your feet into the floor and extend your chest and spine forward. Lift your head.

To come up all the way, press your feet into the floor. Place your hands on your hips. On an inhalation, extend your trunk forward, and lead with your chest to lift up to standing. Release your hands down by your sides. Relax, and take a moment to notice the impression this posture makes inside you.

**Photo 6.1**

Simple Sitting Twist

Sit on a firm blanket with your legs crossed. Have your blanket high enough so that your knees are lower than your hips. Pull the flesh of your buttocks out to the sides and diagonally back. Center yourself evenly on both of your sitz bones. Place your hands down on the floor on either side of your hips, fingers facing forward. Pressing your hands down, use your arms to help extend your spine up. Lift the crown of your head upward.

Roll your shoulders and upper arms back. Press your shoulder blades into your back, inhale, and lift your chest. Soften your belly, the back of your throat, and your eyes.



Place your left hand on top of your right knee. Place your right fingertips down on the floor a few inches behind your left buttock, fingers facing back.

On your inhalations, lengthen your spine upward, creating space between each vertebra. On your exhalations, move more deeply into the twist, turning your whole torso from left to right. Use your hands and arms to assist you in turning.

Keep your shoulders down away from your ears, and lift your elbows out to your sides to make more room for your chest to broaden and expand. Keep your face the same direction that your heart is facing (Photo 6.1). Soften your belly.

Continue to spiral your torso deeper into this posture for five to seven breaths. Inhale and lengthen; exhale and turn. Quiet your mind; relax your face and eyes. As your spine turns, draw your attention inward to the mystery that is you.

To release, return to center slowly with awareness.

Repeat the twist to the second side. Then switch the cross of your legs, and repeat the twist, first to your right and then to your left.



Bridge Posture

Place a firm folded blanket on the floor. Lie on your back on top of the blanket, bringing the tops of your shoulders to the edge of the blanket, the back of your head on the floor. Bend your knees, and use your hands to bring your heels in close to your buttocks, feet on the floor, hip-width apart. Turn your toes in slightly, heels out, so that the outer edges of your feet are parallel to each other.

With your arms tucked in close to your body, bend your elbows and lift your hands up, fingertips facing the ceiling, palms facing each other. Press the tips of your elbows down into the floor, and lift your chest. Press your shoulder blades in, and move them down toward your waist (Photo 7.1). Relax your face, eyes, and the back of your throat. Turn your attention inward.



Photo 7.1

**Photo 7.2**

Stretch your arms toward your feet, and hold your ankles. If you cannot reach them, place a strap around the front of your ankles (Photo 7.2). Hold the strap close to your ankles, and straighten your arms.

On an exhalation, press your shoulders and heels down into the floor, pull on your ankles or the straps, and lift your hips up toward the ceiling. Press your outer arms down. Lift your back ribs up to expand your chest.

**Photo 7.3**

Inhale into your expanding chest and roll your shoulders down. Firm your buttocks as you press your tailbone up toward the ceiling. Keep your thighs, knees, and outer edges of your feet parallel to one another, toes slightly turned in. Do not let your knees splay out to the sides.

Lengthen the back of your neck and turn your gaze toward your chest (Photos 7.3–7.4). Relax your throat and eyes. Look within.

**Photo 7.4**

Hold yourself up for three to five breaths, breathing evenly. Feel what is happening. Let sensations build. Strengthen your vessel. You are opening windows of awareness throughout your body-mind.

To release, lower your back to the floor; release your legs; relax. Repeat the posture a few times.

When you are finished, rest on your back. Extend your legs onto the floor, and let go of any effort. Soften your eyes, and feel the effects of the posture. Take several minutes to rest, bathing in the abundant light within you.