

# The Alchemical Scholar: Transforming Poison into Medicine Through Sacred Wisdom

Julian Ungar-Sargon\* MD PhD

Dominican University River Forest IL, USA

**Citation:** Ungar-Sargon J. The Alchemical Scholar: Transforming Poison into Medicine Through Sacred Wisdom. *Medi Clin Case Rep J* 2025;3(3):1053-1061. DOI: doi.org/10.51219/MCCRJ/Julian-Ungar-Sargon/277

**Received:** 08 July, 2025; **Accepted:** 11 July, 2025; **Published:** 14 July, 2025

**\*Corresponding author:** Julian Ungar-Sargon MD PhD, Dominican University River Forest IL, USA

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## ABSTRACT

This essay explores the profound parallels between the Talmudic concept of the talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter "like a snake," the dual nature of venom as both poison and medicine, and the Torah's characterization as either sam chayim (elixir of life) or sam mavet (deadly poison). Drawing from classical Jewish sources, particularly the Degel Machaneh Ephraim's mystical interpretation, we examine how ancient wisdom traditions understood the fundamental duality inherent in powerful substances—whether they be sacred knowledge, natural compounds, or modern pharmaceuticals. The study concludes with a critical analysis of contemporary pharmaceutical practices, exploring how the ancient principle of dosage determining poison versus medicine has been both vindicated and violated in modern medical practice.

**Keywords:** Talmid chacham; Torah as tavlin; Snake venom pharmaceutical duality; Jungian alchemy, nigredo transformation; archetypal psychology; Kabbalistic tzimtzum; Sacred pharmacology

## The Talmid Scholar as Nachash

The Talmudic statement in Yoma 23a presents us with a startling paradox:

“Any Torah scholar who is not nokem v’noter like a snake is not a true Torah scholar.”<sup>1</sup>

*“And Rabbi Yohanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Yehotzadak: Any Torah scholar who does not avenge himself and bear a grudge like a snake when insulted is not considered a Torah scholar at all, as it is important to uphold the honor of Torah and its students by reacting harshly to insults. The Gemara asks: But isn’t it written explicitly in the Torah: “You shall not take vengeance nor bear any grudge against the children of your people” (Leviticus 19:18)? The Gemara responds: That prohibition is written with regard to monetary matters and not personal insults only.”*

This teaching appears to praise the very qualities-revenge and grudge-bearing-that the Torah explicitly forbids in Leviticus 19:18. Yet this apparent contradiction opens a window into understanding the fundamental duality that characterizes not only spiritual wisdom but the very nature of healing and harm.

The comparison to a snake (nachash) is particularly significant in Jewish thought. The serpent represents the primordial symbol of knowledge that can either elevate or destroy<sup>2</sup>. In Genesis, the serpent brings knowledge of good and evil-a gift that simultaneously expands human consciousness and introduces death into the world. This archetypal duality establishes the pattern we see repeated throughout sacred literature: powerful forces possess inherent potential for both creation and destruction.

## Degel’s Alchemical Vision

### The prooftext<sup>1</sup>

והביט אל נחש הנחוש וחי זהו בחי' נטר ע"כ והנה האיר ה' את עיני בזה בדבריו הקדושים להבין הטעם לזה שצריך הת"ח שיהיה לו ב' בחי' הנ"ל ואמרתי שמוכרח הדבר אצל כל ת"ח שאי אפשר שלא יהי לו ב' בחי' הנ"ל אם הוא ת"ח כי ת"ח הוא הדבוק בתורת ה' תורת אמת והתורה יש לה ב' בחי' הנ"ל כמאמר ז"ל זכה נעשה לו סם חיים לא זכה וכו' היינו כשלומד התורה לשמה ומכבדה נעשה לו סם חיים ואם לאו ח"ו וכו' והת"ח שהוא דבוק לתורה

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Ephraim of Sudilkov’s interpretation transforms our understanding of the nokem v’noter quality from a behavioral trait to a fundamental epistemological stance<sup>3</sup>. In his mystical reading, the true talmid chacham functions as a spiritual alchemist, retaining painful experiences not for personal vengeance but for transformation into holiness. As we have noted in our analysis of Hasidic hermeneutics, this represents a “hidden radical message” that reframes conventional epistemological understanding of ethical response to injury with an ontological depth awareness of the dual nature of divine immanence<sup>4</sup>.

This process mirrors the ancient understanding of how venom becomes medicine. Just as the snake’s poison, when properly processed and administered, can become an antidote to that very poison, the scholar’s retention of injury serves not to perpetuate harm but to create healing. The Degel’s innovation lies in recognizing that the scholar must enter the space of toxicity-must

fully experience and retain the poison of human cruelty-in order to transform it into medicine for the world.

This theological framework establishes what we might call the “serpentine principle”: the recognition that the most powerful healing agents are often indistinguishable from the most dangerous poisons, differing only in dosage, timing, and intent.

## The Spice That Heals or Kills<sup>2</sup>

The Talmudic concept of Torah as tavlin-spice or seasoning -introduces another layer to our understanding of duality in sacred substances. In Tractate Kiddushin 30b, the Talmud states: “The Holy One said to Israel: ‘My children, I created the evil inclination, and I created the Torah as its spice (tavlin). If you occupy yourselves with Torah, you will not be delivered into its hand’.”

However, this protective quality of Torah operates according to the same principle we observe in pharmacology: dosage determines effect. The Talmud in Yoma 72b declares that Torah can be either sam chayim (elixir of life) for those who approach it properly, or sam mavet (deadly poison) for those who misuse it<sup>6</sup>. This duality reflects an ancient understanding that sacred knowledge, like any powerful substance, requires proper preparation, dosage, and intent. As Ungar-Sargon demonstrates in his work on language and meaning in sacred texts, the interpretive framework through which we approach divine revelation fundamentally shapes its effects-revealing the “dialectic between immanence and transcendence” that determines whether spiritual engagement becomes healing or harmful<sup>7</sup>.

The Torah scholar who becomes nokem v’noter has learned to work with the dangerous aspects of knowledge-its capacity to create pride, separation, and spiritual toxicity-while transforming these very dangers into sources of healing.

## The Tavlin Principle in Practice

The metaphor of tavlin is particularly apt because spices themselves demonstrate this dual nature. Medicinal spices like turmeric, ginger, or cinnamon can heal in proper amounts but cause harm in excess<sup>8</sup>. Even more significantly, many spices were historically understood as both flavoring agents and medicines-the line between food and pharmacy was fluid in traditional cultures.

This fluidity reflects a sophisticated understanding that healing occurs not through the elimination of potentially harmful substances, but through their proper integration and transformation. The talmid chacham who embodies this principle learns to work with the “toxic” aspects of human experience-pain, rejection, spiritual challenge-as raw materials for creating healing in the world.

## The Pharmacological Serpent

The use of snake venom in medicine represents one of humanity’s oldest therapeutic traditions. From the ancient Greek cult of Asclepius, where serpents were central to healing rituals, to traditional Chinese medicine’s use of snake-derived compounds, cultures worldwide have recognized the therapeutic potential hidden within the snake’s deadly bite<sup>9</sup>.

Modern pharmacology has validated these ancient insights. Snake venoms contain complex cocktails of proteins and peptides that, when properly isolated and modified, become powerful medicines. Captopril, derived from Brazilian pit viper venom, revolutionized treatment of hypertension<sup>11</sup>. Tirofiban, based on components from the saw-scaled viper, prevents blood

clots<sup>11</sup>. The very mechanisms that make venom deadly-its ability to affect blood pressure, clotting, and neural function-become therapeutic when harnessed correctly.

## Shamanic Epistemology

Traditional shamanic practices worldwide share a common understanding: the healer must be able to work with poison to create medicine. Whether through the controlled use of toxic plants like ayahuasca or datura, or through practices that deliberately induce altered states of consciousness, shamanic traditions recognize that healing often requires a journey through dangerous territory<sup>12</sup>.

This shamanic epistemology aligns remarkably with the Degel Machaneh Ephraim's understanding of the talmid chacham. Both traditions recognize that the healer must develop the capacity to hold toxicity without being destroyed by it, to enter dangerous psychic or spiritual territory in service of transformation. As Ungar-Sargon observes in his therapeutic work, conventional clinical discourse often fails when confronting experiences that "resist categorization or exceed the boundaries of diagnostic language"-pointing to the need for frameworks that can work skillfully with the "toxic" dimensions of human experience<sup>13</sup>.

The shaman who works with plant medicines understands that the same substance can heal or kill depending on dosage, preparation, setting, and the practitioner's level of training and spiritual development. Similarly, the Torah scholar who is nokem v'noter has developed the spiritual equivalent of this shamanic skill-the ability to work with the "venomous" aspects of human experience in service of healing.

## Like Cures Like: The Law of Similars

Samuel Hahnemann's principle of similia similibus curentur-like cures like-offers another lens through which to understand the paradox of the nokem v'noter scholar<sup>14</sup>. Homeopathy's fundamental insight is that substances which produce symptoms in healthy individuals can cure those same symptoms when administered in highly diluted forms.

This principle resonates deeply with the spiritual dynamics described in the Degel Machaneh Ephraim. The scholar who retains the "poison" of insult and injury-who becomes noter-does so not to perpetuate the toxic dynamic but to create its cure. By holding the energy of the original wound in transformed form, the scholar becomes capable of healing similar wounds in others.

Homeopathy's process of serial dilution and succussion (vigorous shaking) supposedly increases the healing power of a substance while decreasing its toxic effects<sup>15</sup>. Whether or not one accepts homeopathy's specific claims about material dilution, the underlying principal points to a profound truth about transformation: healing often requires taking the essence of what harms and subjecting it to processes that preserve its information while neutralizing its destructive power.

The talmid chacham engages in a similar process of spiritual dilution and potentization. The raw experience of injury is retained in consciousness but subjected to intensive spiritual "succussion"-meditation, study, prayer, and mystical practice-until its harmful charge is neutralized while its healing information remains available.

## Pharmaceutical Revolution: Promise and Peril

The past two centuries have witnessed an unprecedented expansion of pharmaceutical power, representing both the fulfillment and the corruption of ancient healing wisdom. Modern drug discovery often follows the same pattern established in traditional medicine: natural substances with complex, sometimes dangerous properties are isolated, purified, and standardized to create powerful therapeutic tools.

Aspirin derives from willow bark, a traditional pain remedy<sup>16</sup>. Digitalis, crucial for treating heart conditions, comes from the toxic foxglove plant<sup>17</sup>. Morphine and its derivatives emerge from the opium poppy, simultaneously offering profound pain relief and devastating addiction potential<sup>18</sup>. These examples illustrate how modern pharmacy continues the ancient tradition of transforming natural "poisons" into medicines.

## The Paracelsian Principle

Paracelsus, the 16th-century physician and alchemist, articulated what would become pharmacology's fundamental principle: "All things are poison, and nothing is without poison; the dosage alone makes it so that a thing is not a poison<sup>19</sup>." This insight bridges ancient wisdom and modern science, acknowledging that therapeutic and toxic effects often represent different points on the same continuum.

However, the industrialization of medicine has sometimes obscured this nuanced understanding. The drive for standardization and mass production has led to a tendency to view drugs as having fixed, inherent properties rather than understanding their effects as emerging from complex interactions between substance, individual, dosage, timing, and context.

## The Cost of Forgotten Wisdom

The opioid crisis represents perhaps the clearest modern example of how the ancient wisdom about dosage and intention has been forgotten with catastrophic consequences<sup>20</sup>. Opioids demonstrate the serpent principle in its most dramatic form: substances capable of profound healing when used appropriately become instruments of destruction when their power is misunderstood or misapplied.

The crisis emerged not from the inherent evil of opioid compounds-which remain essential tools for managing severe pain-but from a systematic failure to respect their dual nature. Marketing practices that downplayed addiction risks, prescribing protocols that ignored traditional wisdom about tolerance and dependence, and a medical culture that lost touch with the holistic context of healing all contributed to transforming medicine into poison on a massive scale.<sup>21</sup>

The development of antibiotic resistance illustrates another way modern medicine has forgotten ancient principles about balance and relationship<sup>22</sup>. Traditional healing systems understood that therapeutic interventions must work with, rather than against, the body's natural ecology. The concept of tavlin-spice that enhances rather than dominates-reflects this understanding.

The industrial approach to antibiotics, which emphasized eradication rather than balance, has created new forms of pathology. By failing to consider the complex ecological relationships between beneficial and harmful microorganisms,

modern medicine created the conditions for “superbugs” that resist treatment. This represents a fundamental misunderstanding of the principle that healing requires working with natural systems rather than attempting to dominate them.

## Polypharmacy

The phenomenon of polypharmacy-the concurrent use of multiple medications-illustrates how the ancient understanding of dosage and interaction has been lost in contemporary practice<sup>23</sup>. Traditional systems understood that combining therapeutic substances creates new properties that cannot be predicted from the individual components alone.

When elderly patients take ten or fifteen different medications simultaneously, we witness a kind of pharmaceutical chaos that ancient healers would have recognized as extremely dangerous. Each drug may be appropriately dosed in isolation, but their interactions create unpredictable new compounds within the body. This represents a systematic violation of the principle that healing requires careful attention to dosage, timing, and relationship between substances.

## Profit and the Corruption of Healing Intent

One of the most significant differences between traditional and modern approaches to medicine lies in the economic structures that support them. Traditional healers, whether Torah scholars, shamans, or herbalists, operated within gift economies or community-based systems where the healer's welfare was directly tied to the community's health.

The commodification of medicine has fundamentally altered the relationship between healer and patient, creating incentive structures that can transform healing into harm<sup>24</sup>. When pharmaceutical companies profit more from chronic conditions than from cures, the ancient understanding of medicine as service becomes corrupted. The serpent's wisdom-the knowledge of how to transform poison into medicine-becomes inverted into the knowledge of how to transform medicine into profit through the creation of dependence.

The modern patent system represents a fundamental departure from traditional understanding of healing knowledge as collective wisdom<sup>25</sup>. When pharmaceutical companies claim exclusive rights to modified versions of traditional medicines-a practice sometimes called “biopiracy”-they violate the ancient understanding that healing wisdom belongs to the community.

This privatization of knowledge creates artificial scarcities and inflated prices for substances that should be widely available. The result is a system where the same compound that could heal becomes inaccessible to those who need it most, effectively transforming medicine back into poison through economic mechanism.

## Learning from Traditional Systems

The crisis in modern medicine points toward the need for integration between ancient wisdom and contemporary knowledge. Traditional systems like Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine, and Indigenous healing practices maintain sophisticated understandings of how to work with the dual nature of therapeutic substances<sup>26</sup>.

These systems emphasize constitutional types, seasonal timing, dietary integration, and spiritual context in ways that honor the complexity of healing. They recognize that the same herb might be medicine for one person and poison for another, depending on constitutional factors, current health status, and life circumstances.

The figure of the talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter offers a template for ethical practice in any healing profession. As Ungar-Sargon demonstrates in his integrative framework for understanding sacred dimensions of medical practice, authentic healing emerges from recognizing the “sacred-profane dialectic inherent in therapeutic encounters<sup>27</sup>.” This figure demonstrates several crucial qualities:

**Retention without vengeance:** The ability to hold information about harm without being consumed by desire for retaliation. In medical practice, this translates to learning from adverse events without becoming defensive or vindictive.

**Transformation of pain:** The capacity to convert personal and professional wounds into sources of wisdom and compassion. Healthcare providers who have experienced illness often become more effective healers, embodying this principle.

**Sacred responsibility:** Understanding that knowledge of how to heal or harm carries profound ethical obligations. The talmid chacham recognizes that power over life and death requires constant spiritual vigilance.

**Community orientation:** The scholar's retention of injury serves not personal interest but the welfare of the community. Similarly, ethical medical practice prioritizes public health over individual or corporate profit.

The ancient principle of tavlin-seasoning that enhances rather than dominates-points toward approaches to medicine that work with rather than against natural systems. This might involve:

- **Ecological prescribing:** Understanding medications as part of complex environmental and social systems, with attention to their effects on soil, water, and non-human life<sup>28</sup>.
- **Constitutional medicine:** Reviving attention to individual differences in response to therapeutic substances, moving beyond one-size-fits-all approaches.
- **Nutritional integration:** Recognizing food as medicine and medicine as requiring nutritional support, returning to the ancient understanding that healing involves the whole person in relationship to their environment.
- **Psychospiritual context:** Acknowledging that the effectiveness of any therapeutic intervention depends partly on the meaning and context the patient brings to the healing relationship. As Ungar-Sargon notes from his clinical experience, patients experiencing “spiritual crises, existential uncertainties, or trauma that defies articulation often struggle against the very linguistic frameworks intended to facilitate healing<sup>29</sup>.”

## Reclaiming Sacred Pharmacology

The convergence of ancient wisdom and modern crisis calls for what we might term “sacred pharmacology”-an approach to medicine that honors both the power and the responsibility inherent in substances that can heal or harm. This involves several key recognitions:



- **Dosage as spiritual practice:** Understanding that determining appropriate dosage requires not only scientific knowledge but also intuitive sensitivity to the unique needs of each individual and situation.
- **Timing as sacred rhythm:** Recognizing that when we intervene is often as important as how we intervene, requiring attunement to natural cycles and individual readiness for healing.
- **Intention as determinant:** Acknowledging that the healer's motivation and spiritual state influence the outcome of any therapeutic intervention.
- **Relationship as medicine:** Understanding that the quality of connection between healer and patient is itself a therapeutic factor that can determine whether a substance becomes medicine or poison.

## The Nachash as Guide

The serpent in Jewish mysticism represents not evil but the cosmic principle of discernment-the capacity to distinguish between beneficial and harmful applications of power<sup>30</sup>. The talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter "like a snake" embodies this discernment, having learned to work skillfully with dangerous forces.

For contemporary medicine, this means developing practitioners who can hold the full complexity of their power without being corrupted by it. It means creating systems that can acknowledge both the healing potential and the destructive capacity of pharmaceutical interventions without falling into either naive optimism or cynical despair.

The path forward requires integration rather than replacement. We need not abandon the genuine advances of modern pharmacology but rather integrate them with the wisdom traditions that understand healing as fundamentally relational and contextual.

This integration might manifest as:

Research methodologies that include traditional knowledge holders as equal partners rather than subjects of study.

Medical education that includes training in the spiritual and ethical dimensions of healing power, incorporating insights from contemplative traditions that understand the "dialectic between transcendence and immanence" that characterizes sacred encounters<sup>31</sup>.

Healthcare systems that prioritize relationship and community context alongside technological intervention.

Pharmaceutical development that considers ecological and social impacts alongside therapeutic efficacy.

Economic models that align profit with genuine healing rather than with the perpetuation of illness.

## Conclusion

The ancient teaching about the talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter like a snake reveals itself as startlingly contemporary. In our age of pharmaceutical power and crisis, we are called to embody the serpent's wisdom: the knowledge of how to transform poison into medicine through proper understanding, skillful means, and ethical intention.

The Degel Machaneh Ephraim's insight that true scholars retain injury in order to transform it offers a template for how healing professionals might work with the inevitable wounds that come from wielding power over life and death. Rather than suppressing awareness of the harm that medicine can cause, we are called to hold this knowledge consciously, allowing it to deepen our compassion and sharpen our discernment.

The parallel between Torah as tavlin and pharmaceuticals as therapeutic agents reminds us that the most powerful healing substances require the most sophisticated understanding. Just as Torah can be either sam chayim or sam mavet depending on how it is approached, our medicines reveal their true nature only in relationship to the wisdom, intention, and spiritual development of those who use them.

The serpent's teaching is ultimately about the unity of opposites-the recognition that creation and destruction, healing and harming, life and death are not separate forces but different aspects of a single cosmic principle. The healer who learns to work with this principle, who becomes nokem v'noter in the deepest sense, serves as a bridge between ancient wisdom and contemporary need.

In our time of pharmaceutical crisis and opportunity, we are called to become such healers: practitioners who can hold the full complexity of our power without being destroyed by it, who can transform the poisons of our age into medicines for future generations, who can embody the serpent's wisdom while serving the cause of life.

The path is neither the rejection of modern medicine nor the uncritical embrace of ancient tradition, but the synthesis that honors both the scientific understanding of how substances work and the wisdom traditions that understand why and when they should be used. This synthesis requires practitioners who are themselves integrated-spiritual scientists and scientific mystics who can navigate the dangerous territory where knowledge becomes either blessing or curse.

The talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter offers us a model for this integration: one who remembers injury not for personal vengeance but for collective healing, who retains the knowledge of harm in order to prevent its repetition, who transforms the poison of experience into the medicine of wisdom. In becoming such practitioners, we honor both the serpent's power and the divine intention that power should serve life.

The ancient teaching thus becomes a blueprint for our future: a vision of medicine that is both scientifically sophisticated and spiritually grounded, both individually effective and ecologically sustainable, both economically viable and ethically pure. This is the serpent's ultimate gift-the knowledge that seeming opposites can be reconciled, that poison and medicine are one substance approached with different levels of wisdom, that the path of healing leads not around danger but through it, transformed by consciousness into blessing.

## Appendix: The Alchemical Transformation

Carl Gustav Jung's profound contribution to understanding alchemy lies not merely in his interpretation of alchemical symbols, but in his recognition that the alchemical process requires the fundamental transformation of the practitioner himself<sup>32</sup>. In *Psychology and Alchemy* and *Mysterium*

Coniunctionis, Jung demonstrates that medieval alchemists were unknowingly engaged in a psychological opus that demanded their own participation in the very processes they sought to understand<sup>33</sup>.

This insight resonates powerfully with our analysis of the talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter. Just as the alchemist cannot remain external to the transformative process-cannot merely observe the nigredo without experiencing his own dissolution-the Torah scholar who retains injury for transformation must himself undergo the alchemical work of converting poison into medicine within his own psyche.

Jung's concept of the opus contra naturam (work against nature) reveals the artificial nature of the separation between observer and observed in transformative work<sup>34</sup>. The scholar who would heal others through the retention and transformation of injury must first submit to having his own emotional and spiritual lead transformed into gold. This process demands what Jung called "the participation mystique"-a dissolution of ego boundaries that allows the practitioner to become simultaneously subject and object of the work.

### **The Nigredo and the Dark Night of the Soul**

The alchemical stage of nigredo-the blackening or putrefaction-corresponds to what St. John of the Cross described as the "dark night of the soul"<sup>35</sup>. Both traditions recognize that transformation requires a descent into darkness, a willingness to experience dissolution before reconstitution can occur. In our context, this illuminates why the Degel Machaneh Ephraim's talmid chacham must be willing to retain the "venom" of insult and injury. Contemporary scholars have noted the radical nature of this teaching. As Moshe Halbertal observes in his analysis of canonical authority, the process of textual interpretation itself carries this dual potential-it can either illuminate or obscure, heal or harm, depending on the consciousness and preparation of the interpreter<sup>51</sup>. David Halivni's work on revelation and response similarly emphasizes how the same divine text can become either life-giving or destructive based on the hermeneutical stance adopted by its interpreters<sup>52</sup>.

The nigredo represents more than temporary difficulty; it constitutes an essential phase in which the practitioner's ordinary consciousness must be decomposed. Jung observed that this stage often manifests as depression, confusion, or spiritual crisis-states that modern psychology typically pathologizes rather than understanding as potentially transformative<sup>36</sup>. The scholar who is nokem v'noter has learned to work with these dark psychological states as raw material for spiritual alchemy.

This alchemical understanding reframes contemporary approaches to trauma and psychological healing. Rather than seeking to eliminate painful states, the Jungian approach recognizes that certain forms of suffering contain the seeds of their own transformation-but only when approached with the proper vessel (the prepared consciousness of the practitioner) and the right understanding of timing and process.

James Hillman's archetypal psychology offers crucial insights into the dual nature that characterizes both alchemical work and the dynamics we have explored throughout this essay<sup>37</sup>. Hillman's concept of "pathologizing" as a sacred activity reveals how psychological symptoms often represent the psyche's attempt to deepen and differentiate itself through suffering<sup>38</sup>.

In Re-Visioning Psychology, Hillman argues that the therapeutic goal should not be the elimination of pathology but rather its transformation through imaginative understanding<sup>39</sup>. This perspective aligns remarkably with the alchemical understanding that base metals (psychological lead) must be honored and worked with rather than simply discarded in the process of creating gold.

Hillman's emphasis on "seeing through" rather than "overcoming" psychological difficulties provides a framework for understanding how the talmid chacham works with retained injury. The scholar does not seek to forget or transcend the original wound but rather to see through it to its archetypal significance, discovering within the personal injury universal patterns of suffering and healing.

### **The Poison Path in Archetypal Psychology**

Hillman's work on the "poison path" in psychological development illuminates the necessity of working with rather than against toxic psychological material<sup>40</sup>. He argues that many psychological symptoms represent the psyche's attempt to introduce necessary poisons-experiences of limitation, mortality, and shadow-that ego consciousness would prefer to avoid.

This insight transforms our understanding of why the Torah scholar must be nokem v'noter "like a snake." The serpent wisdom involves not the avoidance of venom but the skillful incorporation of toxic material into the service of healing. Hillman's psychology suggests that attempts to maintain purely "positive" psychological states often result in what he calls "spiritual inflation"-a dangerous disconnection from the earthy, bodily, and shadow aspects of existence that ground authentic wisdom.

Sanford Drob's groundbreaking work in integrating Kabbalistic theology with depth psychology provides another essential perspective on the alchemical transformation we have been exploring<sup>41</sup>. In Symbols of the Kabbalah and Kabbalistic Metaphors, Drob demonstrates how the fundamental Kabbalistic concepts of tzimtzum (divine contraction), shevirat ha-kelim (breaking of the vessels), and tikkun (repair) parallel the psychological processes that Jung identified in alchemy<sup>42</sup>.

### **Tzimtzum as Psychological Nigredo**

Drob's analysis of tzimtzum reveals it as more than a cosmological doctrine; it represents a fundamental psychological principle in which consciousness must contract and limit itself in order to create space for transformation<sup>43</sup>. This contraction parallels the alchemical nigredo and the scholar's willingness to retain injury rather than immediately seeking resolution or revenge.

The tzimtzum process suggests that healing wisdom often emerges not from expansion or inflation but from a willingness to undergo voluntary limitation. The talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter has learned to practice a form of psychological tzimtzum-creating internal space for the transformation of toxic material by limiting his immediate reactive responses.

The Kabbalistic doctrine of shevirat ha-kelim-the cosmic catastrophe in which the divine vessels could not contain the influx of divine light-provides a theological framework for understanding why breakdown often precedes breakthrough in both individual and collective healing<sup>44</sup>. Drob demonstrates

how this concept illuminates psychological processes in which existing ego structures must be shattered before more integrated forms of consciousness can emerge.

This perspective reframes both personal trauma and collective crises (such as the pharmaceutical catastrophes discussed in our main essay) as potentially necessary stages in larger transformative processes. The vessels of modern medicine—its reductionist paradigms, economic structures, and technological frameworks—may need to experience their own shevirat ha-kelim before more integrated approaches to healing can emerge.

Drob's interpretation of tikkun (repair or restoration) reveals it not as a one-time event but as an ongoing process in which consciousness learns to work skillfully with broken and fragmented material<sup>45</sup>. This understanding parallels both Jung's concept of individuation and the alchemical opus as lifetime practices rather than achievable goals.

The scholar who embodies the principle of being nokem v'noter engages in ongoing tikkun—not by forgetting or transcending injury, but by continuously working to transform retained painful material into sources of wisdom and healing for others. This process requires what Drob calls “dialectical consciousness”—the ability to hold contradictions and paradoxes without premature resolution<sup>46</sup>.

The insights from Jung, Hillman, and Drob converge on a crucial recognition: transformation requires not just the right knowledge or techniques, but the proper preparation of the practitioner's consciousness. In alchemical terms, the vessel (vas hermeticum) must be properly sealed and prepared to withstand the pressures of the transformative process<sup>47</sup>.

### The Therapeutic Vessel

For contemporary healing practice, this means recognizing that the practitioner's psychological and spiritual development is not separate from but integral to therapeutic effectiveness. As Ungar-Sargon notes in his clinical work, conventional therapeutic frameworks often fail when confronting experiences that “resist categorization”—pointing to the need for practitioners who have themselves undergone the alchemical work of integrating shadow material<sup>48</sup>.

The talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter serves as a model for this kind of prepared vessel. Through the practice of retaining and transforming injury, the scholar develops what we might call “alchemical resilience”—the capacity to work with toxic material without being overwhelmed or corrupted by it.

On a larger scale, our analysis suggests that contemporary society lacks adequate vessels for the alchemical transformation that our current crises demand. The pharmaceutical industry's focus on profit over healing, the medical system's fragmentation of body and spirit, and the broader culture's avoidance of death and suffering all represent failures of the collective vessel.

Creating more adequate containers for transformation might involve:

- Educational institutions that integrate spiritual and psychological development with technical training.
- Healthcare systems that recognize the practitioner's inner work as essential to therapeutic effectiveness.
- Economic structures that align material incentives with the long-term work of individual and collective healing.

- Cultural practices that honor rather than pathologize the necessary descents that precede authentic transformation.

### The Serpent as Alchemical Symbol

The serpent imagery that runs throughout our analysis takes on additional depth when viewed through the lens of alchemical psychology. In alchemical iconography, the serpent often represents the prima materia—the initial chaotic matter that contains within itself the potential for transformation<sup>49</sup>. The serpent biting its own tail (ouroboros) symbolizes the circular nature of the alchemical process, in which the end product contains and transforms the original material.

The talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter “like a snake” embodies this ouroboric principle. By retaining and continuously working with the original injury, the scholar creates a closed system in which the poison of the wound becomes the medicine of wisdom. This process requires what Jung called “holding the tension of opposites”—neither acting out the vengeful impulse nor repressing it but allowing it to undergo transformation within the vessel of prepared consciousness<sup>50</sup>.

The convergence of Jungian psychology, Hillman's archetypal approach, and Drob's Kabbalistic insights points toward possibilities for what we might call “alchemical medicine”—approaches to healing that honor the dual nature of therapeutic substances and the necessity of practitioner transformation.

### The Eternal Alchemical Work

The insights of Jung, Hillman, and Drob reveal that the dual nature we have explored throughout this essay—the capacity of substances and practices to heal or harm depending on dosage, timing, and consciousness—reflects fundamental principles of psychological and spiritual transformation. The alchemical tradition, properly understood, offers not merely historical curiosity but practical wisdom for navigating the dangerous territory where knowledge becomes either blessing or curse.

The talmid chacham who is nokem v'noter emerges as an archetypal figure: the wounded healer who has learned to transform personal injury into universal medicine. This transformation requires not the elimination of the wound but its ongoing alchemical processing—a lifetime practice of converting lead into gold, poison into medicine, darkness into light.

For our contemporary crisis in healing, this alchemical perspective suggests that the path forward requires more than new techniques or better policies. It demands practitioners who have themselves undergone the transformative work, who have learned to hold the tension of opposites without being destroyed by it, who can serve as adequate vessels for the profound changes our time demands.

The serpent's wisdom thus reveals itself as ultimately alchemical: the recognition that the most powerful healers are those who have learned to work with their own venom, who have discovered within their deepest wounds the seeds of their greatest gifts, who understand that the goal is not the elimination of suffering but its transformation into wisdom.

In this light, every authentic healer becomes an alchemist, every genuine therapeutic encounter becomes a laboratory for transformation, and every moment of retained injury becomes an opportunity for the ancient work of converting poison into medicine, darkness into light, death into life.



In memory of all healers who have learned to hold poison without being poisoned, who have transformed their wounds into wisdom, who have served the ancient principle that knowledge exists not for power but for service, not for self but for the healing of the world.

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