Claiming the Title Kohenet

Examining Goddess Judaism and the Role of the Priestess
Through Conversations with Contemporary Spiritual Leaders

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Abstract

Among the most exciting areas in both feminist spirituality discourse and Jewish religious practice are the reemergence of Jewish priestesses, kohanot, and the formation of a small, growing movement called Goddess Judaism, a term coined by Jenny Kien, author of Reinstating the Divine Woman in Judaism (2000). I include this worship of the Sacred Feminine as a key part of this piece because I have found that the role of a Jewish priestess is only supported by groups when the Sacred Feminine is revered and held as part of our concept of deity. In what can only be a brief overview of a rich and broad subject, this paper addresses some of the new research into the presence of goddess worship, and its ritual functionaries, among Semitic peoples in the Ancient Near East, ranging from the Fertile Crescent to Canaan to Carthage. I also discuss contemporary goddess feminism and new practices combining Judaism with feminist spirituality, as forms of both worship and resistance to prescribed roles in a traditional religion. This resistance—and a creative insistence on egalitarian inclusion—manifests in debates around public worship by women’s prayer groups in Israel, and can be seen in the growing number of women rabbis and others taking spiritual leadership roles in the United States. I also look at women-centered midrashim—reinterpretations of canonical and apocryphal legends; empowerment of Jewish women’s personal and religious lives through creation of new rituals, and writing of new liturgy and sacred texts. Finally, I look at how women have incorporated the Sacred Feminine into their spiritual practices within existing Jewish frameworks, as well as the ways they handle opposition and derision of their ideas and practices. The paper will conclude with an assessment of shifts in consciousness in the Academy and the community brought about by this movement, and its impact on the liturgy and services of traditional religious institutions.

We are keepers of the flame, eshet lapidot...*1

- Prayer for Lighting the Fires of the New Moon, Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb

The re-emergence of the Jewish priestess, or kohenet and the evolution of a small, growing movement called Goddess Judaism are among the most exciting areas in both feminist spirituality discourse and Jewish religious practice today. I first became intrigued by the concept of “kohenet” when I read Bernadette Brooten’s Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue,2 an eye-opening piece of scholarship in which she provides evidence of women’s religious leadership in ancient Israel/Palestine. She notes a funerary inscription at the Beth Shearim catacombs in the Galilee which reads kohenet, translated by the archeologists who found it as priestess.3

This paper focuses on the explorations of modern Jewish priestesses who believe in a female deity, though not necessarily exclusively, and who incorporate Hebrew, Israelite, Canaanite, Phoenician and African goddesses into their research and spiritual practices. In it, I hope to offer a

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1 Eshet Lapidot, says Rachel Biale, refers to the prophetess Deborah from the Book of Judges, "one of the few women mentioned in the Bible as great leaders." While traditional commentators interpret her as the "wife of Lapidot," Biale said the feminist interpretation is that Deborah was "divinely inspired." (http://www.jewishsf.com/bk011214/bn32.shtml, Jewish Bulletin of Northern California, accessed June 5, 2005.)

2 Scholars Press, 1982.

3 Yet emphatically defined as the mother or daughter of a priest and not a priest in her own right, by the librarian at the archeological institute in Jerusalem who showed me the report.
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partial corrective to what the late, beloved Savina Teubal called “perhaps the most profound disservice perpetrated on humanity: the disassociation of woman from her own female religious experience.”

This article was born out of a paper delivered at the Institute for Feminist Theory and Research “Women and the Divine” Conference in Liverpool, England in June 2005. The conference conveners brought us together to explore the idea that reinterpretation of notions of ‘the divine’ are central to feminism’s emancipatory aspirations. In teaching—or practicing—goddess traditions, I believe we offer women strong models of self-empowerment, deeper historical and spiritual resources and references, tools through which they can access their own power and develop deeper relationships with the Divine. I daily witness the effects of “restoring women to ceremony,” to use Lynn Gottlieb’s phrase.

It is the role of the contemporary priestess or kohenet to bring women these tools, and most of those doing so practice contemporary Jewish feminism, goddess feminism, combinations of goddess spirituality and Judaism -- all forms of both worship and resistance to constricted roles in traditional religion. This resistance—and an insistence on egalitarian inclusion in speech, text, decision-making and ceremony—has manifested in the creation of independent organizations such as the Reclaiming Collective, an Asherah online discussion group, Shekhinah Sanctuary, Suppressed Histories Archives, Red Moon Rites of Passage, Tel Shemesh, Shuv Tamid and my own Kol Ha-Ruach and Mishkan Shekhinah. Within the organized Jewish community, we see resistance to a male-centered spiritual life in debates on public worship by women’s prayer groups in Israel, and in the growing number of women rabbis and others taking leadership roles in North American Judaism.

In trying to define Goddess Judaism, I quote from a letter polling members of the “Jewitchery” online listserv.

It asked: Do you think of yourself as...
- A pagan who incorporates aspects of Judaism in their rituals
- A Jew who incorporates pagan elements
- A reconstructionist/revivalist of pre-Israelite (such as Canaanite) worship
- A pagan who just happens to be culturally Jewish
- All or none of the above

Clearly the frameworks are varied, and include everyone from Jews who practice with one group on a regular basis, to solitary practitioners. Ever-present is what Melissa Raphael calls “the blurring that can take place at the edges of spiritual feminist identities.” Which of these avenues is empowering, and for whom? For many Jewish women identifying as feminists, Goddess is not part of the equation. For most of the priestesses I know, She is.

Does feminism, to be successful as a liberatory movement, need to incorporate a new vision or reinterpretation of the Divine? And can this new vision simply come out of reconfiguring one’s relationship with God, or reinterpreting sacred text without re imaging God’s gender?

For some women, like Blu Greenberg and other Jewish orthodox feminists, secular Jew Lucie Brandon, or Adva Saldinger, a conservative, goddess worship is not a requisite; empowerment lives in making the rituals inclusive, or in a feminist re-reading of sacred texts.

For other women, reinterpreting and including the female aspect of deity in both scholarship and worship is crucial. One of these women is Anya Silverman, a ritualist who received her Masters in

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5 A feminist witchcraft collective, from 1978-1997; the group then re-formed and adopted a Wheel/Cells/Advisory Council structure (see www.reclaiming.org for the full history of the group.)
6 In Thealogy, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, p. 41.
Humanities: Women’s Spirituality at New College of California. Anya combines Jewish and pagan earth-based traditions. “I pray to the Goddess but it’s not like prayers that one says in synagogue. I do invoke the Goddess; I do ritual about or with the Goddess.”

When I asked her how she reconciles those beliefs with her Judaism, she said: “I don’t. It’s part of my cellular memory and who I am. Holding the contradiction is something I learn to do as I get older… I can live as one drawn to Goddess spirituality and simultaneously be culturally Jewish.” It is interesting to also note Starhawk’s comment[^8] that as she grows older both her Jewish and Pagan identities grow stronger. She too is comfortable celebrating both Chanukah and the Winter Solstice and she has modeled this ability to hold both—without guilt!—for many of us.

So What Is the Role of The Kohenet?

The word comes from the word ‘kohen’ meaning one of the priestly class headed by Moses’ brother Aaron, from whom a lineage is traced, in which the sons and daughters of a kohen inherited the role of priest. A woman’s status could be lost, however, if she committed certain acts considered to make her impure, for instance if she had sex, even through rape.

What was the role of the ancient Israelite or Canaanite priestess? How did it compare with the function of women today who are carving out roles of spiritual leadership? Did women define the role for themselves or was there a clear set of functions that came with the position? Was every priestess a bat kohen, the daughter of a Temple priest, or could anyone step forward or be appointed to serve the needs of a community? How did priestesses emerge before the Temple existed? It seems reasonable to assume, based on the practices and findings of the women written about here, that female priestesses existed not only at the same time that the male kohanim were present, but probably long before. As we find more archaeological and literary evidence, more material culture in the area that was once Mesopotamia—in Iraq, Iran and other parts of the Ancient Near East—I believe we can also make a number of reasonable assumptions about the practices of the ancients.

However, with few easily discernible precedents or writings to guide us, today’s priestesses often feel as if we are making it up as we go along. In trying to piece together what might have been done in ancient times while serving the needs of our communities, women of Jewish and many other traditions draw on the past that is available to us, excavating what has been buried to create new

[^8]: As quoted in Melissa Raphael’s *Thealogy*, 2000, 41.
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ceremonies, incorporating our own beliefs and the inspirational words of our ancestors into our practice. We assemble the praises and lamentations written by High Priestess Enheduanna in 2350 BCE, liturgies such as the Gnostic “Thunder, Perfect Mind” found in the Nag Hammadi texts, ancient chants and earth-based rituals. When we hear the female voice of deity speaking to us through these texts with such strength and power, when we recite the litany of the me at rituals, or in a class, She is beyond time, definition or the confines of any religious construct.

Some rich female oral traditions have been handed down within Judaism, such as the body of Yiddish devotional prayers called ikhnit from Early Modern Eastern European Ashkenazic women. Yet when it comes to the oral transmission of information on what it meant to be a priestess in ancient times we have little material to work with. Given the suppression, omission and misinterpretation of written records, we remain ignorant of much of our heritage. So we try to remember and to imagine what might have been. Failing that we invent, as Monique Wittig urged us to do. Many customs and rituals went underground or perhaps disappeared for a time, but are returning. We are reconstructing and reclaiming kohenet through the leadership of women like Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb and Rabbi Elyse Goldstein, through the spiritual-political explorations of Starhawk, and through liturgies and rituals created by Marcia Falk, Rabbis Leah Novick, Geela Rayzl-Raphael and others. Fictional but well-researched reconstructions of the past such as The Red Tent allow us to imagine, combined with archeological evidence and our own practices, what might have been. In our search to know more about women’s priestly functions, we can also look to Leviticus, Kings, Chronicles, Isaiah and elsewhere in the literature for clues in the form of taboos. We know if there were such strict admonitions against witchcraft, sorcery, charms, magic, incantations, divination, prophesying or any other activity deemed dangerous to those who had taken power and wanted to keep it, there must have been a lot happening!

The roles we do imagine being performed by the ancient priestess, outside the Temple space where they were not allowed to perform cultic functions, would likely have included:

- Preparing sacrifices/making animal, meal and incense offerings
- Chanting (repetitive, trance-inducing) litanies/songs of power
- Serving as oracles and guides
- Writing and delivering prophylactic incantations,
- Creating amulets, altars and other ritual objects; ritual jewelry and garments
- Speaking to the ancestors on behalf of the community
- Lighting the lamps – drumming - making ceremonial beer
- Being present at births and deaths
- Serving as scribes; writing as well as performing the reading of sacred texts amulets, incantation bowls.

9 Voices of the Matriarchs: Listening to the Prayers of Early Modern Jewish Women (Beacon, 1999.)

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Max Dashu, independent scholar and founder of Suppressed Histories Archives, has spent the last thirty-five years researching women’s religious roles around the world. She believes the priestess would have been responsible for the singing of chants—often used as conduits for incantations—prophesy, divination, communion with the spirits of the dead, divine litanies, attendance at birth and death, going into trance states for oracular purposes.

Bernadette Brooten, in Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue (Brown Judaic Studies, 1982), wrote that “cultic or priestly functions could have included singing psalms, providing musical accompaniment, performing priestly blessings, examining the priestly offerings and performing sacrifices.”

Our roles today include many of these things, as well as creating blessings for one another in groups, rewriting male-dominated liturgy, building altars in new contexts and for a variety of purposes, recreating rituals for lifecycle events—including menarche rites, and the use of the mikvah, ritual bath, in abortion, rape, miscarriage and menopause rituals.10

Restoring the Sacred Feminine

While many Jewish women I know have inherited a legacy of strong, proud, positive female role models, and while, especially in mystical Judaism our intrinsic divinity is acknowledged, the sacrality of our bodies usually was not, nor a female Divine celebrated. Yet she existed. We see Her throughout the bible, where there are forty references to Asherah, goddess of the sea and the sacred groves. We also find Her in this reference in Jeremiah:

“But ever since we have stopped burning incense to the Melechet Ha Shamayim – Queen of Heaven - and pouring out drink-offerings to her, we have had nothing and have been consumed by sword and famine…Did we make her cakes in her image, and pour out drink-offerings unto her, without our husbands?” (Jeremiah 44:16-19).

Though most of us raised in Judaic-Christian traditions were not told about a female deity, She is there, in the texts, and has been for 3000 years – in positive biblical and Talmudic references which for the most part were hidden from our view until the feminist writings of the 1970s.

The concept of the Sacred Feminine as embodied in deity was not part of my religious education. A female creator was never part of any Creation story American Jews heard growing up. She was hidden from us by the text and through the lack of it; the text of the Hebrew Bible is overwhelmingly patriarchal, with an emphasis on punishment, vengeance, strict obedience to male authority and law – or we were never told about places in which Shekhinah, She Who Dwells Within, resides. One of these places is on Mount Sinai, where it is written in the Talmud that Moses waited for communication from Her for six days. Rabbi Jill Hammer explains this by saying: On Shavuot, the festival of the giving of Torah, the Shekhinah descends on Mount Sinai to grant revelation to the people. This impressive passage in the Talmud reads:

*If two sit together and the words between them are of the Torah, then the Shekhinah is in their midst.* (Mishnah Avot 3.2)

And yet during a recent visit to the Museum of Cultural Heritage in Manhattan, I walked into an exhibit in which a slide show played revisioning the above quote to be male-centered, saying instead: “…God is in their midst.”

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10 See Geela Rayzel-Raphael’s comment on the mikvah having everything to do with transformation, and not impurity.
Shekhinah is defined as *ruach*, the spirit or breath of God, whose presence is often cited as *Wisdom, Hochma*, the basis and spirit of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew bible and the core writings on which the religion is based. *Clearly, She is there.* How much richer the tradition of my birth would have been had it included such explanations of sacred female imagery. How much fuller the picture could be if there was recognition and celebration, not denigration of our pagan roots—to have known, for instance, that the Eastern European custom of braiding the *challah* bread was done to resemble the hair of the Goddess of the Hearth, as Lynn Gottlieb and others have written, or that Jewish records “contain the literature of the fire-worship.”

I did not hear tales of the Shekhinah growing up, nor did I have access to images or stories about Inanna-Lilith-Ishtar, Anat, Astarte, Tanit or Asherah; it was only as a scholar at 40 that I really learned of Asherah, identified as a “fertility goddess”, never as Queen of Heaven. She was missing from both art and icon because, as in most protestant religions, an image of Goddess would certainly have been and is still considered idolatrous. How life-changing it would have been to have studied Raphael Patai’s *The Hebrew Goddess* as a teenager, at the same time I was confirmed—and to have learned that Asherah’s statue was present in the temple for no less than 236 years, two-thirds of the time the temple stood. So those seeking Asherah could find her in groves, on the hills, and in the Temple itself, noted the late British theologian Asphodel Long.

Had recognition of the Sacred Feminine been part of my upbringing, I doubt that at age six, seeing a man with a long white beard at our local drugstore, I would have said, “Look, Mommy, there’s God!”

I first heard the term Goddess Judaism suggested by Jenny Kien who, in the late 1990s, opened a forum for online discussions together with Judith Laura: the Asherah list, which addresses the heritage of “the Divine-Embodied-as-Female” in Judaism. Topics of discussion include the examination of new research on goddess worship in the Ancient Near East; women-centered *midrashim*, reinterpretations of biblical stories; how the divine female is portrayed in Jewish mysticism; ways women have found to incorporate Goddess within existing Jewish frameworks, as well as ways of dealing with opposition and exclusion.

It has been rewarding to see such conversations open, to notice how many of us have been exploring similar questions and see more focus on the Sacred Feminine, across both Jewish and Christian traditions. Only nine years ago, when I proposed teaching subjects related to “women’s spirituality” at a synagogue or community center, people were often not clear on what I meant; and met any reference to the word ‘goddess’ with scorn, suspicion, faint amusement and only occasionally open, nonjudgmental curiosity. Several years ago, when I brought a figure of Asherah to the family Seder table on Passover, she was relegated to a sideboard, lest anyone get the idea we were worshiping her. At that time, when I taught a class in a Jewish setting, I did not feel comfortable building an altar when I taught because it would not have been welcomed as a means of connecting with divinity; nor was it recognized as sacred or something Jews did! This discomfort was part of my upbringing, as we were taught, both as girls and as daughters of a survivor and refugee to ‘not make waves.’ Today, I not only build altars, I lead menarche rites in synagogue space and wherever else I am called upon to do them.

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DeAnna L’Am, an international peacemaker, mediator and ceremonialist, is a Rumanian Jew who does not practice contemporary Judaism, but rather feels very connected to the pre-Judaic

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12 See Patai, 1990: 38.
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goddesses from the Middle East, before recorded Jewish traditions. Raised as a secular Jew in Israel, she does not see it as an essential part of her identity. “My spiritual practice is rooted in paganism, earth-based traditions.” DeAnna’s family was atheistic. Still, she celebrated Jewish holidays both in school and at home, but found they had nothing to do with spirituality. “It was more a cultural thing.”

Although my own family was quite religious—we belonged first to a conservative and then a reform temple and I was sent to religious school through age fifteen, her feelings echo my own as an adult. I find little spiritual connection in traditional services I have attended, because they rarely if ever recognize deity as both female and male—when anthropomorphic references are made. While many are quick to say that God is an incorporeal spirit, God as represented in our prayer books, our hymns, our chants, our blessings, is still overwhelmingly portrayed as Avinu Malkenu, Our Father, our Lord, our King.

When I first spoke with Max Dashu of priestly roles and ancient ancestor reverence practices, she noted that dislocation of ancestor reverence occurs early on in the bible with references to the Witch of Endor. Stipulations in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to not practice witchcraft, or passages threatening wizards or mediums with death send a clear message: divination, talking to ancestors, prophesy was not to be practiced by the general populace for acquiring knowledge, healing or anything else, since to do so would dilute the power of the male clergy.

Whenever I have mentioned my own ancestor altar, asking advice of or preparing food for the ancestors, the idea is met within my own community with skepticism and a denial that we ever ‘worshiped’ our ancestors. Yet Jews observe yahrzeit, the yearly anniversary of a loved one’s death and more congregations now honor female as well as male ancestors by naming them. It is true these are not direct conversations, and perhaps that is why they are not viewed as ancestor reverence. But if we were to look at the practices of African Jews, including the Lemba of South Africa, we would certainly see ancestral communication in the form of direct conversations, women doing call and response to the ancestors in a beer and snuff ritual, for instance, and in the offering of special foods. So when we say Jews don’t practice ancestor reverence, which Jews are we talking about? (See the chapter in my work For She Is a Tree of Life on “Who Is a Jew?”)

Max also talked about the kadeshim, the holy women linked in 2Kings 23:7 to the worship of Asherah, whom she thinks may have woven houses for the Asherah before her vessels and images were thrown out of the Temple and burned. The HarperCollins Bible speculates that these women were weaving clothes for a statue of the goddess.

Another Jewish woman who honors the Sacred Feminine and performs a number of priestly functions is Janna Waldinger, who put together Chavurat Napa, a study/prayer group which meets for occasional ceremonies in her home. She too has experimented with different forms of shared spiritual leadership. She believes, as I do, that even trying to define a Jewish Goddess spirituality is at times pointless, almost always limiting – and the range of ancient priestly functions beyond our full knowing in 2008. Still, when we meet to drum, in ritual space or just to talk, we try to remember, to act from our faith and deepest intuition as we structure groups that offer women and men connection—to each other, to the Divine, to ourselves.

I have also sought to do this by creating The Lilith Institute and Kol Ha-Ruach, Voice of the Spirit, a women’s spirituality/study group and lecture series. Through these bodies, I have led public and private classes and rituals in the San Francisco Bay Area since 1997, including New Moon circles and what one participant named Goddess Shabbats; today a number of women are leading Sabbath and other Jewish holidays with a Goddess consciousness.

By finding ancient Israelite, pagan and African traditions which share elements, I have come to connect more fully in some ways with a Judaism from which I was once alienated. Without broadening
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my own definition of Judaism beyond the one I was raised in, I might not have come to such a deep appreciation of earth-based traditions, although Judaism is certainly one, nor, had my lens not widened to include Jews of color, I might never have met the Lemba women of South Africa and this rich aspect of my heritage. At one time, it felt sacrilegious to invoke my ancestors; now I realize my ancestors probably did so, as did their mothers before them.

Jamie Isman is another practicing Jewish priestess who is in constant conversation with this topic, trying to reclaim, uncover and recreate the spiritual and shamanic functions of the kohenet. She does so by working to have a personal connection with her ancestral Hebrew and Middle Eastern goddesses and the natural world. As a singer-songwriter, Jamie performs music as devotion and prayer. She founded the (mobile) Temple of the Hebrew Goddess, which she calls a work in progress.

Isman defines Goddess Judaism as “another branch on the ever evolving… regenerating tree of Jewish culture and tradition. It is a path ultimately rooted in the Jewish wheel of the year that is Goddess and earth-centered, shamanic, revelatory and oracular, and empowering for women. Those who embrace Goddess Judaism use sacred imagery as a spiritual tool, create rituals and holy day celebrations, lifecycle initiations and the temple sanctuary.”

D’voraK’lihah of Shuv Tamid led services with me at Mishkan Shekhinah in San Francisco for several months, and now holds Rosh Chodesh ceremonies in her home. She has written and adapted many prayers which embrace both ancient and contemporary traditions, hopes, concerns. She was recently one of the first kohanot to be initiated through Jill Hammer and Holly Taya Shere’s Institute.

Women’s psyches and spirits experience something both positive and transformative if God is viewed as also embodying the essence of the Sacred Feminine. I concur with Rita Gross, who called for a more complete set of God images twenty two years ago after observing “the potential for meaning and identification experienced by saying ‘God-She’... Our mission statement in the New College Women’s Spirituality MA program has this vision at its core, when we focus on “The Sacred Feminine and the values of justice and sustainability associated with Her...” We have seen the effect on women of immersion in women-centered sacred texts, research, history, philosophy, arts and literature, and it is, without question, transformative. I have seen as well the freeing, mind-awakening effects on women of seeing themselves reflected in deity. After all, if we are made in God’s image, what are we to think if there is no “She” there? How are we to feel but invisible?

As we work to make this corrective, as we strive with each daily act towards balance, shifts in consciousness are occurring; it is exciting to witness women taking agency, making change in all areas of their religious and spiritual lives. After years of taking risks, feeling like outsiders, fighting for acceptance, those following a Jewish feminist spirituality where a female deity is key are getting “a place at the table,” adding an orange to the Seder plate as a matter of course. After enduring personal attacks or skepticism from our faith communities, losing friends and alienating family, or simply not being heard, it is good to see that at the same time we have been serving as catalysts for change. One of the clearest examples of this change is the self-authorization of a small number of women to declare themselves ‘kohenet’, to reframe the concept and to identify with and carry out the functions of a priestess where there is no clear or accepted precedent within the tradition today for doing so.

There is reason to be hopeful, as we work less in isolation and more in collaboration; it is gratifying, most of the time, to be on the cutting edge, as we expand the boundaries and practices of the tradition.

Ten years ago a compelling dream took me to Betty De Shong Meador, author of Inanna, Lady of Largest Heart. Dr. Meador is a Jungian analyst who has re-translated and worked with the

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Enheduanna poetry/liturgy for years and was familiar with my work with Lilith. She interpreted my dream to mean that my work was to heal a societal split—perhaps to bring Lilith back to the Garden from the wilderness.

Shekhinah, the female divine presence, like Lilith, is said to live in exile. Rita Gross writes of the Kabbalistic notion of exile, galut – the idea that the fundamental reality and pain of our existence is a result of alienation of the masculine from the feminine in God.13 We are seeing, more than ever, the personal and global consequences, the violence and disintegration that occur if these two principles are allowed to remain out of balance.

I agree with Jamie Isman that, “as a Kohenet in this time, our work is to help bring healing and balance, to reclaim our initiations and to restore that which has been lost …” It is gratifying to witness our reclamation in the 21st Century of the position and functions of the priestess.

That work is reflected in modern rituals drawing on rites done many thousands of years ago, rites led by women such as Anya Silverman and DeAnna L’Am, and by such groups as The Lilith Institute, Shuv Tamid, the Temple of the Hebrew Goddess, Sarah’s Tent, co-founded by Savina Teubal, in the work of Asphodel Long and in the recently-formed Kohenet Priestess Training Institute, founded by Rabbi Jill Hammer and Holly Taya Shere.

Let us continue to feed our multilayered tree of life, nurturing Her as She has sustained us, through ritual, ceremony and prayer. As we rediscover Her ancient teachings and our own divinity, it will be through our roots, our memories and our imaginations that we will shape our future.

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