

Yichud of Rachel and Leah: Same-Sex Kabbalistic/Poetic Hermeneutics

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Abstract

The kabbalistic literature contains erotic descriptions of the unification between the masculine and the feminine aspects of God. This article introduces another significant unification -- same-sex relationship between the feminine aspects of God, *sefirat Shekhinah* and *sefirat Binah*. It focuses on the relationships between mother and daughter, sisters, and lovers in the *Zohar* and in Hebrew poems by Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934) and Zelda (Shneurson Mishkowsky, 1914-1984). According to the *Zohar*, the *Shekhinah*, as the divine archetype of eternal womanhood, is actually embodied in the particular personalities of the mortal woman. This intriguing notion from a feminist perspective reveals a more complex model for the relationship between a female mystic/poet and the *Shekhinah*.

There is no one in the world who can abide with Her unless he arouse this 'good' toward Her [...] And if you cannot arouse this 'good' to meet Her, keep far away from Her and do not go near Her; do not go into the raging fiery furnace. And if you do go near Her, do so in fear, like someone who is fearful of death, for the fire is raging and is burning the world with its flames.

Zohar 3:110b

...And the light of the rose / seems so near, / and its fragrance / so near, / and the silence of the leaves / so near, / that island / so near – / take a boat / and cross the sea of fire.

Zelda, "Each Rose"

Same-Sex Unification Within the Godhead

An intriguing erotic drama occurs within the kabbalistic tree of the *sefirot*, the ten aspects of God. The primary text of the Kabbalah, the *Zohar*, contains numerous descriptions of the erotic unifications (*yichudim*, יחודים) between the *sefirot*, usually in a heterosexual manner regarding the feminine and masculine aspects of God. Yet, a close reading of the *Zohar* reveals another kind of erotic unification, and perhaps the most fascinating one— same-sex *yichud* between the prominent feminine aspects of God, *sefirat Shekhina* (שכינה) and *sefirat Binah* (בינה). This essay explores implied same-sex *yichudim* within the heterosexual hegemony of the Kabbalah. Suggesting a complex gender identity of some of the *Sefirot* enables the development of new perspectives on existing kabbalistic narratives. In addition, this article focuses on same-sex *yichudim*, and their significance for a new understanding of both the superior world of the

Godhead, and this world.

The most known *yichud* occurs between the feminine *sefirah*, *Shekhinah* (in Hebrew, indwelling, the presence of God in the world), and her counterpart the masculine *sefirah*, *Tif'eret* (תפארת, glory). Their unification brings harmony and balance within the Godhead, as well as equilibrium in the lower world of humans. While *Shekhinah* and *Tif'eret* are depicted in this case as lovers, they are often described also as brother and sister, as well as son and daughter in relation to the “archetypal father” *sefirat Chokhmah* (חוכמה, wisdom) and the “archetypal mother” *sefirat Binah* (בינה, understanding). The rich Zoharic symbolism allows the simultaneous use of these images without breaking the taboo of incest.¹ Indeed the erotic relationship between the most famous *sefirotic* “couple,” *Shekhinah* and *Tif'eret*, is usually understood in heterosexual terms. And yet, the androgynous character of these *sefirot*, especially *Shekhinah*, raises some important implications for possible lesbian and homosexual unifications within the world of the *sefirot*. Moshe Idel refers to the theory of Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* as a source of influence on the kabbalists, and at the same time as an indication of their rejection of the same-sex approach:

There the theory of the two halves of bodies is intended to explain the attraction between men and women as well as homosexuality and lesbian relationship. This comprehensive love theory disappeared in the Hebrew sources, which restricted their discussion to the male-female attraction. Though homosexuality remained an option in medieval Muslim culture in Spain, with which Jews were well acquainted, and by which they were perhaps also influenced – as appears to be the case in medieval erotic poetry in Hebrew – the kabbalists seem to ignore this aspect of the Platonic text. It may well be that this selectivity reflects the intermediary sources to which the kabbalists were exposed. However, I assume that the halakhic propensity of many of the kabbalists also prevented them from engaging with the full implications of Aristophanes’ discourse.²

It appears that some of the kabbalistic texts do offer same-sex implications, and yet phallogocentric interpretations might fail to notice that. Although it is believed that the kabbalistic literature was almost exclusively written by males, a feminist reading of kabbalistic texts can reveal rarely discussed topics such as the erotic unification of the two divine mothers, the feminine *sefirot* of *Binah* and *Shekhinah*. The Zohar refers to the two divine mothers as “the hills of the world:”

‘This *ad* [עד] is a place embracing all sides, to this side and that side, sustaining and linking an

irremovable nexus. This *ad* is the focus of the desire of all, as is said: *Ad is desire of hills of the world* (Genesis 49:26). Who are *hills of the world*? These are two mothers, females, called *World*, as is said: *from world to world* (Psalms 106:48) – Jubilee and Sabbatical, each one called *World*. These are called *hills of the world*, and their desire is for this *ad*, sustenance of all sides. Why? Desire of Jubilee: to crown Him, streaming blessings upon Him, pouring over Him sweet fountains, as is written: *O daughters of Zion, come out and gaze upon King Solomon, upon the crown with which his mother crowned him* (Song of Songs 3:11). Desire of Sabbatical: to be blessed by Him, illumined by Him. Surely, this *ad* is desire of hills of the world.³

Both divine mothers are called “hills of the world,” the image of breasts, “*Shaddai*” (שׁדַּי), as one of the names of God. This image emphasizes the similarities between the two feminine *sefirot*. Nevertheless, they are also differentiated by the terms “Sabbatical,” symbolizing *Shekhinah*, and Jubilee, symbolizing *Binah*, both biblical terms that relate to the laws of the land.⁴ The kabbalists relate the Sabbatical, which occurs every seven years, to the *Shekhinah*, the seventh of the lower *sefirot*, and relate Jubilee, which happens every fifty years, to *Binah*, which is characterized by the number fifty, based on the Talmudic teaching of Rav and Shemu’el: “Fifty gates of understanding (בִּינָה, *Binah*) were created in the world...” (BT *Rosh ha-Shanah* 21b). Both divine mothers are viewed as the archetype of the nourishing breastfeeding mother. The difference between them stems from timing, maturity, and perhaps age. Both are filled with desire. The critical question is — do they have a passionate erotic desire to each other or do they share an object of desire? The Zoharic text refers to *ad* as a place of desire: “This *ad* is the focus of the desire of all.”⁵ In other words, this is the intimate state of mind or a psychological/emotional place that both divine females are longing for.

Daniel Matt notes: “Literally *ad* means ‘eternity,’ but here it *apparently* alludes to *Tif’eret*, core of the *sefirot*, linking and sustaining the entire configuration of *sefirot*.”⁶ Therefore, both feminine *sefirot*, *Binah* and *Shekhinah*, display a mutual desire for the masculine *sefirah* *Tif’eret*. A feminist reading of the Zoharic text, however, does not accept the phallogocentric vantage point, in this case the allusion of *ad* to *Tif’eret*, and the aiming of both divine females’ desire to the same divine male. This psychological state of desire and passion does not need to be of a masculine nature. If the word “*ad*” alludes to *Tif’eret*, a rather complex sexual identity of this *sefirah* surfaces.

Although Idel claims that there is no kabbalistic engagement with the full implications of

Aristophanes' discourse, a significant influence of Platonist thought, especially with regard to the Zoharic conception of *Tif'eret*, can be demonstrated. Byron Sherwin adds:

“*Tiferet* is one of the *sefirot* birthed by *Binah*. But *Tiferet* emerged in a different form than the others. *Tiferet* has aspects both of *Hesed* and *Din*. Therefore, *Tiferet* can be both masculine and feminine. According to the *Zohar*, *Tiferet* originally emerged as a hermaphrodite, a bisexual entity having two sides or two faces, one male and one female, both attached back to back,⁷ like Siamese twins, though of different sexes. Eventually these sides were separated and each became a separate *sefirah*: the male side became *Tiferet* and the female side became the tenth sefirah, *Malkhut* (kingdom) [i.e., *Shekhinah*].”⁸

Even though the androgynous character of the Zoharic idea of *du partzufin* (facial androgyne) implies a dominant heterosexual relationship between *Tife'ret* and *Shekhinah*, it may refer to the androgynous character of these *sefirot*, like the Jungian Anima and Animus. In other words, gender identity can be changed within one *sefirah* according to its function. The following passage from the *Zohar* reinforces the notion of the interchangeable gender identity of the *Shekhinah*:

This angel is sometimes male and sometimes female. When providing blessings it is male and called Male – like a male providing blessings for a female, so He provides blessings for the world. And when it stands in judgment over the world, it is called Female – like a female who is pregnant, so She is filled with judgment and is then called Female. Thus sometimes it is called Male and sometimes Female, all one mystery.”⁹

When the *Shekhinah* is depicted as feminine, mostly as a recipient of the upper influx, She participates in influencing the world of creation, and subsequently her gender changes to male. The interchanging gender identity of *Tif'eret* and *Shekhinah* enables the possibility of lesbian unification between the two divine females. The desire of two “hills of the world” is focused on and embodied in the feminine side of *Tif'eret*. This is the desire for the similar and not the different.

A different interpretation of “the hills of the world” perceives *Binah* as a mother who has desire for her son *Tif'eret*, and *Shekhinah* as a bride who has desire for her groom.¹⁰ However, the usage of erotic language, in the form of the verb “desire” (תיאובתא), with regard to both mother and bride, is more difficult to accept than the interpretation of same-sex attraction. While “desire” can be construed as *Shekhinah's* sexual attraction towards her lover, it might not

describe the motherly feelings of *Binah* toward her son, unless there is an incest implication. It seems that the Zoharic text describes a similar passion of the two feminine aspects of God towards connectedness, possibly with each other.

Another Zoharic example offers an explanation to the marriage of Jacob to two sisters, Leah and Rachel:

Jacob, who was complete, infused love into two worlds, as we have established. Other humans who do so expose nakedness above and below, provoking enmity in two worlds, causing separation, as is written: *to become rivals* (Leviticus 18:18), for they become enemies of one another.¹¹

Daniel Matt comments: “Having attained the rung of *Tif’eret*, Jacob was able to marry two sisters (Leah and Rachel), who respectively symbolize *Binah* and *Shekhinah*. His marriage below stimulated the union of *Tif’eret* with both females above. However, anyone else who marries two sisters impairs the sefirotic process, **disrupting the union of the divine females** and turning them against one another.”¹² Matt’s interpretation touches upon the ambivalence of heterosexual unification versus the lesbian one. Does each of the divine females have a separate unification with the divine male? Or is the “union of the divine females” an erotic unification between them, facilitated by the divine male? The act of marrying two sisters is explicitly forbidden in Leviticus 18:18: “And a woman with her sister you shall not take to become rivals, to lay bare her nakedness while her sister is still alive.”¹³ And yet, the *Zohar* offers a justification for Jacob’s marriage to the two sisters by evoking their mystical/erotic unification. Jacob, who symbolizes *Tif’eret*, indeed exposes Rachel and Leah’s “nakedness” to each other, but prevents them from becoming rivals, and ultimately connects them in the sexual/sacred unification.

The importance of the unification of the divine mother and daughter can be compared to another Greek text, the religious mystery of Eleusis. Adrienne Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* describes the sacred and lost rite of the reunification of mother and daughter: “Based on the mother-daughter myth of Demeter and Kore [or Persephone], this rite was the most forbidden and secret of classical civilization, never acted on the stage, open only to initiates who underwent long purification beforehand...The real meaning of the Mysteries was this reintegration of death and birth, at a time when patriarchal splitting may have seemed about to sever them entirely.”¹⁴

Moreover, as Adrienne Rich points out: “Jane Harrison considered the Mysteries to be founded on a much more ancient women’s rite, from which men were excluded, a possibility which tells us how endangered and complex the mother-daughter cathexis was, even before recorded history.”¹⁵ Interestingly, the unification of *Binah-Leah* and *Shekhinah-Rachel* carries an important similarity to the Eleusinian mysteries. Is the reunification of the divine females reminiscent of an ancient kabbalistic tradition? Did the exclusion of men from the female spiritual and erotic connectedness lead to its outcast altogether? Given the examples from the *Zohar*, it could be assumed that if there was a common ancient wisdom, or a cultural influence, in tune with Aristophanes’ same-sex approach, it was veiled within the patriarchal/heterosexual kabbalistic texts. To use Abraham Abulafia’s terminology, feminist readings of these texts should aim to untie the “male knot,” e.g. *Jacob-Tif’eret*, and to reconnect the two females threads, *Leah-Binah* and *Rachel-Shekhinah*. Only then will we be able to reestablish a diverse Jewish mysticism that is not only “the focus of the desire of all,” but also includes all.

The Heterosexual Unification Between the Mystic and the *Shekhinah*

A similar intriguing erotic drama occurs between the mystic and the *Shekhinah*. Traditionally, the mystic is perceived as male while the Divine Presence is perceived as Female. A good example of this relationship is expressed in C. N. Bialik’s poem “Take Me Under Your Wing” (“הכניסיני תחת כנפך”). This poem captures three entities of the divine females— mother, sister, and lover or bride.

הכניסיני תחת כנפך

הכניסיני תחת כנפך,
בקני לי אם ואחות,
ויהי חיקך מקלט ראשי,
קונ־תפלותי הנקחות.

ובעת רחמים, בין השמשות,
שחי ואגל לך סוד יסורי:
אומרים, יש בעולם געורים –
היכן געורי?

ועוד קו אחר לך אתונדה:

נִקְשִׁי נִשְׂרָפָה בְּלִהְבָּה;
אוֹמְרִים, אֵהְבָה יְשׁ בְּעוֹלָם –
מֵה־זֹאת אֵהְבָה?

הַפּוֹכְבִים רִמּוּ אוֹתִי,
הָיָה חֵלוֹם – אֵךְ גַּם הוּא עָבַר;
עָתָה אֵין לִי קְלוֹם בְּעוֹלָם –
אֵין לִי דָבָר.

הַכְּנִיּוֹנִי תַחַת כְּנָפֶיךָ,
וְהָיִי לִי אִם וְאִחֹת,
וְיֵהִי חֵיקֶךָ מִקְלַט רֵאשִׁי,
קוֹנֵת־פְּלוֹתִי הַגְּדוֹחֹת.¹⁶

Take me under your wing

Take me under your wing,
be my mother, my sister.
Take my head to your breast,
my banished prayers to your nest.

One merciful twilight hour,
hear my pain, bend your head.
They say there is youth in the world.
Where has my youth fled?

Listen! Another secret:
I have been seared by a flame.
They say there is love in the world.
How do we know love's name?

I was deceived by the stars.
There was a dream; it passed.
I have nothing at all in the world,
nothing but a vast waste.

Take me under your wing,
be my mother, my sister.

Take my head to your breast,
my banished prayers to your nest.¹⁷

Since its publication in 1905 (י"ב אדר, תרס"ה), the poem has prompted dozens of interpretations, and has even been set to several different melodies.¹⁸ Critics concentrated on a variety of aspects of the poem, but remained puzzled, unable to explain the poem's enigma wherein the speaker addresses his loved one as mother, sister, and lover.¹⁹ This complexity of multi-identities with relation to one "entity" is almost natural within kabbalistic context.

Let me enter under the "wing," the first kabbalistic concept in the poem. The word *Shekhinah* is not mentioned, but is implied in the title "Take me under your wing." The traditional understanding of "entering under the wings of the *Shekhinah*" is based on the Talmudic idea of drawing nearer to Jewish religion or returning to a pious way of life.²⁰ Many scholars accepted Bialik's erotic imagery but could not associate it with some kind of religious inclination.²¹ As is often the case, kabbalistic symbolism takes the common halakhic/midrashic notion and turns it into something completely different. Some remarkable Zoharic interpretations of this Talmudic expression are given the voice of a gifted child (in Aramaic ינוקא, *yanuka*):

The Child began by quoting: "I am black but comely, daughters of Jerusalem [as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon]. Do not look upon me that I am swarthy, [that the sun has tanned me]..."(Song of Songs 1: 5-6). These words have already been explained. When [the *Shekhinah*] experiences great love for her beloved, she makes herself extremely small, because of the thrust of love that she cannot bear, until nothing can be seen of her but the tiniest point, which is the letter *yod* [י]. She then envelops herself straightaway with all her hosts and her companies, and she says "I am black," because there is no white at all inside this letter, as there is with the other letters. This is the meaning of "I am black," namely **"I have no room to bring you in under my wings."**²²

The child discusses the relation of the *Shekhinah* to the tiniest letter of all – the Hebrew letter *Yod* (י). Not only does this unique interpretation draw the attention of the reader to the form of the letter and its meaning, it also attributes the Talmudic expression "bring you under my wings" to a specific manifestation of the feminine aspect of God in the Tetragrammaton [YHWA, יהוה]. Furthermore, the child attributes the feminine aspect of God to a "male letter," *sefirat Yesod*, which is associated with the phallus. Thereby, he proposes that the *Shekhinah* is

capable of having male traits at certain times. Interestingly, the *Shekhinah* has no room to bring anyone under her wings when she adopts the form of the “male letter” *yod* (י). This proposed inability assumes the more conventional feminine state of “bringing you under my wings,” indicating protection and nourishment. There are several symbols of wings attributed to the female form of the *Shekhinah* (when she has the form of the “female letter” *he* [ה]): “One alone is my **dove**, my perfect, my only one, love of her mother, light of her mother’s eyes.” (*Song of Songs* 6:9) In Bialik's poem, the speaker's plea for a female entity to “take me under your wing” has another connotation. In Hebrew, the word “wing” (*kanaf* [כנף]) also means the edges of a garment. Hence, the request of the poem’s speaker can carry an erotic implication, as if he were saying: “take me under your clothes.” Using kabbalistic characteristics of the *Shekhinah* allows for the multi-identity of the poem’s addressee. Thus, a kabbalistic interpretation of the poem exposes its multi-level nature: erotic/physical, emotional, spiritual and mystical.

One of the attributes of the *Shekhinah* is to function as a vessel that contains and nourishes all, the image of the ultimate mother figure. Although the symbol of the supernal “mother” is usually attributed to a higher feminine aspect of God, namely *sefirat Binah*, it is also referred to as *sefirat Shekhinah*. Occasionally, the differentiation between the two “mothers” is done by attaching the adjectives “upper” and “lower.” *Binah* becomes the “upper mother” while *Shekhinah* is the “lower mother”.²³ This notion correlates with the pleadings of the speaker in the poem: “be my mother” and “take my head to your breast.” The speaker's request of the addressee – “be my mother” – led certain critics to assume that this metaphor stands either for Bialik's yearning for childhood (a time when no boundaries exist between the child and his mother), for nature, or longing for nourishing love. The second request from the addressee – “my sister” – can express longing for spiritual love, and even a yearning for childhood. Yet one cannot ignore the erotic atmosphere in which those pleadings are expressed. Can love of mother and sister be erotic? Interestingly, although taboo, the rabbinic establishment chose not to ignore such insinuations. Both the Talmud and the Midrash deal with this sensitive issue.²⁴ The question of the taboo is raised through a discussion of direct and indirect dreams and their interpretations. The direct dream involves a person dreaming about

having intercourse with his mother or his sister. The Talmud claims that the dreamer gains wisdom through the verses “If you call to understanding” (Proverbs 2: 3)²⁵ and “Say to Wisdom, ‘you are my sister’” (Proverbs 7:4). In this instance, an incestuous dream signifies wisdom and not the sexual act. The indirect type of dream contains certain elements which are expressions of the dreamer's forbidden desires towards his mother or sister. For example, when one dreams that olive oil waters an olive tree, it is interpreted as the dreamer's wish to have intercourse with his mother. Similarly, the Freudian method of dream interpretation is based on metaphoric relations between the dream's components and their interpretations.²⁶ Intriguingly, Bialik's poem contains both the plea to a feminine addressee “be my mother, my sister” as well as the declaration “There was a dream; it passed.” Whether or not this is an actual connotation of the rabbinic interpretation of dreams, it still embodies both a false dream and innocent or incestuous feelings towards a feminine addressee.

However, the kabbalistic idea that the same *sefirah*, *Shekhinah*, can change roles often in the same context is quite innovative. Hence, She can be “mother,” “sister,” and “lover” all at the same time. This notion re-appears in the Midrash:

This is compared to a king who had an only daughter, whom he loved very greatly and would call “my daughter.” And he did not leave his love for her until he called her “my sister.” And did not leave his love for her until he called her “my mother”.²⁷

This revolutionary point of view deals in a unique way with the strongest taboo of all, namely incest. In general, one of the Zoharic symbolic systems of the superior world of the *sefirot* is that of a family. In this frame of reference, the *Zohar* usually points to four main *sefirot*: *sefirat Chokhmah* – the father, *sefirat Binah* – the mother, *sefirat Tiferet* – the son or the brother and *sefirat Shekhinah* – the daughter or the sister.²⁸ The text expands on the kinship relations as a symbol of the interaction between the *sefirot*. However, the *Zohar* also departs from the traditional kinship system. It freely changes the roles of *sefirat Tiferet* and *Shekhinah* from brother and sister to simply lovers or even bride and groom.²⁹ One might suggest that the uninhibited character of the text results from its subject matter, meaning the heavenly realm. The rules of the upper world are different from those of the lower world, i.e., this world.

However, the lower world is modeled on the upper one, in Platonic fashion. Indeed, not only is this world similar to the upper world, but also humans can essentially change matters in the upper world through action. For example, when a husband and wife are having intercourse on the eve of *Shabbat*, they influence the upper-world intercourse between *sefirat Tiferet* and *sefirat Shekhinah*. Thus, the upper and lower worlds are not separable. This understanding clarifies the daring, revolutionary approach of the *Zohar* towards the incest taboo. Of course, the implications do not permit or promote incest but offer a unique way of dealing with the taboo. In Bialik's poem, the kabbalistic notion of diverse and at times morally contradictory traits, is associated with this one feminine entity, in which the nature of the desired love contains concurrently a sensual erotic love and a spiritual Platonic one. Furthermore, the yearning for spiritual existence, represented by the *Shekhinah*, is not contradictory to the expressed desire for different kinds of love – nurturing, romantic and erotic – since these kinds of love are also embodied in the *Shekhinah*.

“Listen! Another secret.” One of the main meanings of Bialik's poem seems hardly to have been mentioned in the existing interpretations, as if it were concealed in the format of a love poem. This is the indirect ars-poetic meaning of the poem. Between the pleas of the speaker in the beginning and in the end of the poem, there are three stanzas. The first two end in questions: “Where has my youth fled?” and “How do we know love's name?” Those questions are often understood literally as the loss of youth, and with it – the hope for happiness and great disappointment in love. This is certainly the *peshat* (literal) meaning of the text. Yet, the unanswered question, the empty space between the stanzas after the question mark, leads to the introduction of the kabbalistic concept of *Bli-mah* (בלי-מה, no-thing-ness), which means both "restrain" and "without a thing." It seems that the simpler the question, the harder its answer. The most crucial issues, such as different levels of love, remain without any clue as to their nature. The poet is powerless. There is no ability to write about love, but only the possibility of asking questions, as Bialik himself conveys in his essay “Revealment and Concealment in Language:” “‘There is no speech and there are no words,’ but only a perpetual search, an eternal ‘what?’ frozen on man's lips.”³⁰ In fact, even the question is pointless since

the poet is left with the eternal question mark – “?” (that has a feminine shape) – and with the space between the words, the void: “In truth, there is no place even for this ‘what?’, implying as it does the hope of reply. Rather there is – ‘nothingness’; man's lips are closed.”³¹ Interestingly enough, one of the names of *Shekhinah* is “מה” (*ma*, what), while *Binah* is “מי” (*mi*, who). After a failed attempt to express that which is inexpressible, the speaker declares: “I have nothing at all in the world, / nothing but a vast waste.” It is important to note that the English translation differs from the Hebrew original, where the stanza ends with the phrase (translated literally): “I do not have a thing” [אין לי דבר]. There is a strong linguistic connection between “thing” and “word” in Hebrew; both derive from the same root (DVR, דבר), which is also a term symbolizing *Shekhinah* both with relation to “a thing” (דבר מה) and to speech. The declaration here can be perceived not only as “a vast waste” but also as the loss of the *Shekhinah* as a muse, resulting in the loss of creative expression that is poetry. Therefore, the poet has no choice but to end the poem with the opening pleas. Still, the opening phrase “my banished prayers to your nest” seems different than the closing one. The opening prayers contain the hope for comfort and knowledge (in the biblical-erotic sense as well), unlike the closing prayers that express total despair. The repetition might represent the “perpetual search” for “the essence of things.” The “perpetual search” could be also understood as a mystical/poetical wish to be united with the *Shekhinah*, that is the *unio mystica*, or in this case, the *unio poetica*.³² Both view the mystic/poet as a male who strives to become one with the feminine aspect of God, or alternatively with the feminine muse.

The Embodiment of the *Shekhinah* in the Mortal Woman

For all females of the world abide in the mystery of *Shekhinah*. Whoever has a female, She dwells with him; whoever has no female, She does not.³³

If there is one place within kabbalistic literature that might fill a woman’s heart with joy it is the above quote from the *Zohar*. It is an exception to the phallogocentric theology of the *Zohar*. Isaiah Tishby explains: *Shekhinah* “is the divine archetype of eternal womanhood in general, which is actually embodied and realized in the particular personalities of mortal woman.”³⁴ This

is undoubtedly a rare case where a female is superior to the male within the patriarchal Jewish world, including its “avant-garde” kabbalistic perspectives. While a feminist reading of this kabbalistic text can embrace the statement “For all females of the world abide in the mystery of *Shekhinah*,” it still has to deal with the meaning of the rest of the text, “Whoever has a female, She dwells with him; whoever has no female, She does not.” The important role of a woman in enabling the presence of the *Shekhinah* is undoubtedly emphasized: “When a man is at home, the essence of the home is his wife, for on account of her, *Shekhinah* does not leave the house.”³⁵ However, a woman is depicted as a channeling tool for the male mystic in his aspiration to unite with the *Shekhinah*. The man is depicted as depending on his wife in order to be in *unio mystica* with the female divine. Apparently, he needs to delight his wife and give her pleasure, and only then can he gain unification with the *Shekhinah*:

Upon entering his house he should delight the lady of his house, for she engendered that supernal coupling. As soon as he reached her he should delight her anew, for two nuances. First, because the joy of this coupling is joy of *mitzvah*, and joy of *mitzvah* is joy of *Shekhinah*. Further, he increases peace below, as is written: *you will know that your tent is at peace, attend to your abode and not sin* (Job 5:24). Is it a sin if one does not attend to his wife? Certainly so, for he diminishes the splendor of supernal coupling coupled with him, engendered by the lady of his house.³⁶

If a man fails to please his wife, not only can he not unite with the *Shekhinah* because She unites with him only through his wife, but also by denying sexual pleasure for his wife he dishonors *Shekhinah* by hindering her union with *Tif'eret*. Once again, the actions of humans have a tremendous influence on the upper world. The emphasis here is on the spiritual needs of the male mystic. While his mortal wife seems to play a tremendously important part in his *unio mystica*, she can also be perceived only as a substitute to his “other” wife, the *Shekhinah*. From the wife's perspective, being a tool in the service of her husband, she can see herself as a rival to the *Shekhinah* instead of being in complementary relations with Her. Meirav Meidan in her article “The Kabbalist’s Wife” analyzes the poem “The Kabbalist’s Wife, Castile, End of the Thirteenth Century” by Assi Farber, which expresses the point of view of Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai’s wife on her life with the most famous kabbalistic figure.³⁷ The poetic description by the speaker of the poem, i.e., Rabbi Shim’on’s wife, on her relationship with the *Shekhinah* is

particularly interesting: “And that capricious female divinity, the *Shekhinah* with her breast of light / And her full-moon abdomen and that awful splendor / Through me, she was satiated and conceived, and was fruitful, and multi / plied — through me alone. / And whenever she wanted, she drew breath.”³⁸ Meidan explains:

The role of the *Shekhinah* in the poem may be understood in two different ways, which may well both be at work simultaneously. Seen one way, the *Shekhinah* is the lover, the kabbalist’s ‘other woman,’ stealing the attention, love and intimacy rightfully owed to his earthly wife. This interpretation directs an accusing finger at the traitorous husband. A different reading would have it that the *Shekhinah* takes over both the body and the husband of the earthly wife—but while both the kabbalist and the *Shekhinah* are recognized for their roles in the kabbalistic tradition, the wife remains insignificant.³⁹

From this point of view, women can never win; either they are being betrayed by the husband, who “cheats” on his wife with “the other woman,” i.e., the *Shekhinah*, or the wife is being “possessed” by the *Shekhinah* against her will, having no control over the situation. This depiction of the negative relationship between the mortal woman and the *Shekhinah* is a direct result of the phallogocentric point of view. Judith Plaskow claims that “the *Shekhinah* is a usable image for feminists only if it is partly wrenched free from its original context, so that the tradition becomes a starting point for an imaginative process that moves beyond and transforms it.”⁴⁰ Adopting the Zoharic notion that the *Shekhinah* is embodied in a mortal woman is not sufficient without a further significant change: enabling a woman to become a full active mystic/kabbalist, not as a tool for the male mystic, but in her own right. This change leads me back to the same-sex kabbalistic discussion. If the male mystic’s unification with the feminine divine is depicted as a heterosexual relationship with the *Shekhinah*, mostly through his own wife, what is the nature of the relationship between the female mystic and *Shekhinah* if not a lesbian one? The stress here is on the similarities instead of the differences between the female mystic and the feminine divine. The ability of a woman to connect in an unmediated way with the *Shekhinah* is almost like folding into her own self through relations with another woman, or in this case “The Other Woman,” i.e., the feminine divine. The model of the erotic unification (*yihud*, ייחוד) between the two females, Leah-*Binah* and Rachel-*Shekhinah* mediated by the male figure Jacob-*Tiferet* appears once again in the story of Sarah and her daughter-in-law, Rebekah:

Rabbi Yose said, “this verse is difficult: האהלה (*ha-ohelah*), to the tent, Sarah his mother. It should read: לאהלה (*le-ohel*), to the tent of, Sarah his mother. Why האהלה (*ha-ohelah*)? Because *Shekhinah* returned there. As long as Sarah existed, *Shekhinah* never departed from her. A lamp would burn from one Sabbath eve to the next, illumining all the days of the week. After she died, that lamp died out; as soon as Rebekah appeared, *Shekhinah* reappeared and the lamp rekindled. *Sarah his mother—resembling Sarah in all she did.*”⁴¹

Here Isaac, who stands for *sefirat Gevurah* (or *Din*), serves as the force which brings together the two females, the mother Sarah-*Binah* and the daughter (in-law) Rebekah-*Shekhinah*. Another reading would see the *Shekhinah* as a feminine force, the link between the two women, the essence of similarity that connects them in an erotic/mystic unification. Interestingly, the *sefirah* of *Gevurah* is oftentimes depicted as a feminine *sefirah*, although at the same time it is symbolized by Isaac. Therefore, the unification between the two females is enabled by their unmediated connection with the *Shekhinah* on one level, and through a passionate female force, as *sefirat Gevurah*. It seems that the above Zoharic text supports Isaac’s phallogocentric action to ensure that the *Shekhinah* will dwell again within his house, mainly through the female erotic/mystic unification that occurs within the Godhead and at the same time in the human world. And so it says: “As long as Sarah existed, *Shekhinah* never departed from her.”⁴² Therefore, the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* is first and foremost within a woman’s own self, and as a result, in her space as well.

The *Yichud* of the Female Mystic with the *Shekhinah* as “a River of Colors and Scents”

And what if the mystic is a woman? Unlike female mystics in Christianity, the notion of being a woman and a mystic is almost non-existent in traditional Judaism.⁴³ Accordingly, one can rarely find written expressions of Jewish women, let alone mystical ones.⁴⁴ Bialik’s poem, “Take Me Under Your Wings,” expresses the desire of the male mystic/poet for the ultimate *unio mystica/poetica* with the *Shekhinah*. Similarly, a reading of two of Zelda’s poems reveals the intimate relationship with the *Shekhinah* from a female point of view.

האור הדק של שלומי

פרפר ימיו בגן-עדן
 דבק בפרח שזרעתי
 בסתו
 אותיות של מעלה בכנפיו הפתומות
 סימנים של זה.

בסימנים האלה
שנגד עיני טבעו בחלל
רפרף האור הדק
של שלומי.

The Fine Light of My Peace

The butterfly from the flower's
days in paradise—
the flower that I planted in the fall—
still clung, with heavenly letters
in its orange wings,
signs of God.

In these signs
that drowned in space before my eyes,
the fine light of my peace
fluttered.⁴⁵

הפרפר הכתום

כאשר הפרפר הפתם מפלס דרכו
בנהר של צבעים וריחות
אל פרח בן דמותו ודבק בו
כמו היה פרח זה
פוכב האני הסודי שלו
מתעוררת תקנה סאגנת וחסרת פשר
בכל הקבבות.

וכאשר נוטש אותו מרחף יפה
את עלי הכותרת שעופו
ונצלם בחלל
מקיץ בתבל הרגע הגלמוד,
נעלמת נשמה באי-סוף.

The Orange Butterfly

When the orange butterfly wends its way
through a river of colors and scents
toward its flower-mate, and clings
as though this flower were the star
of its secret self—
an inexplicable clamor of hope
rises in every heart.

And when that beautiful flutterer
abandons the weary petals
and vanishes in space,

the lonely moment wakens in the world,
a soul vanishes in infinity.⁴⁶

The presence of the *Shekhinah* in the poetic world of the two “butterfly” poems is evident. Unlike the constant plea of the speaker in Bialik’s poem, the speaker in Zelda’s poems experiences the connection with the feminine divine, in an unmediated way, through observation and identification with a butterfly and its “flower-mate.” A triangle is formed between the speaker of the poem, nature in the presence of a butterfly and a flower, and the presence of God in the world, the *Shekhinah*. The traits of each side of this triangle are interchangeable, and each of them is affecting the other. Thus, the “river of colors and scents” can be referred not only to the colors of the butterfly and the scents of the flower, but also to the symbolism of the rainbow and the river in relation to the *Shekhinah*. According to the Zohar, the *Shekhinah* is the great garden that is watered by the river of Eden:

*A river issues from Eden to water the garden (Genesis 2:10). The garden—this is woman, the river entering Her, watering Her, and all was one, while from there below is division, as is written: From there it divide (ibid).*⁴⁷

“The flow of emanation proceed from the highest *sefirot* proceeds from the *sefirot* to *Shekhinah*, *the garden*. Below Her, the unity of the divine yields multiplicity [the world of creation].”⁴⁸ In Zelda’s poem both the flower, representing the physical garden as well as the upper garden, and the butterfly that clings to it in a sensual way, are inseparable from the “river of colors and scents.” The same goes for the symbol of the rainbow. Although some kabbalists and scholars perceive the rainbow primarily as a symbol for the divine phallus, it is also often attributed to the *Shekhinah* when She unites with *sefirat Yesod*.⁴⁹

When are they visible? When the rainbow is revealed in the world. When the rainbow appears, they are revealed.⁵⁰

Matt notes: “The rainbow symbolizes both *Yesod* and *Shekhinah*, in whose union *Chesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Tif’eret* are revealed in their respective colors: white, red, and green.”⁵¹ *Shekhinah* shares the symbol of the rainbow with *Yesod*, displaying the colors of the *sefirot*.⁵² At other times, the rainbow symbolizes the manifestation of feminine judgment, assuming the androgynous nature of the *Shekhinah*:

I have set My bow in the cloud (Genesis 9:13)—since the day the world was created. On a cloudy day, when the קשת (*keshet*), rainbow, appears, *the appearance of the image of the presence of YHVH*, the left is aroused to be empowered. Rachel emerges, וַתִּקַּח (*va-taqash*), and *she had hard, labor* (ibid. 35:16).⁵³

The pun קשת-תקַח (*keshet-taqash*) connects between Rachel's hard labor and the *Shekhinah* as manifestation of harsh judgment.

In the poem, "The Orange Butterfly," we encounter once again the triangle of the female poetic voice, nature, and the feminine divine. The colorful appearance of the butterfly and the flower relates to diverse and "inexplicable" human emotions, and to the nature of the *Shekhinah*.

"The star / of its secret self" is the link between the poetic world, nature, and the feminine divine. The "star" alludes to the traditional reference to God in the sky with a direct connection to the inner "secret self" that can be understood as the unconscious, or as Jung's "collective unconscious," since "an inexplicable clamor of hope rises in every heart" and not only in the speaker's heart. The end of the poem introduces the kabbalist notion of *Ein Sof* (אין סוף, infinity). It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the significance of this loaded term. Suffice to say that *Ein Sof* is above the ten *sefirot*, and can neither be conceived nor articulated by humans. In a single moment, there is a total unification with the divine "as soul vanishes in infinity," and at the same time, a "lonely moment" of death appears, preceded by the separation of the butterfly from its "flower-mate," and from the vision of the poem's speaker: "And when that beautiful flutterer / abandons the weary petals / and vanishes in space." This is the elusive fluttery moment of the *unio poetica*, the unification of the female poet with the *Shekhinah* that dwells outside in nature, within "the secret self," and far above, and beyond it. All these aspects are folded within the creative expression of the poem itself.

Similarly, in the poem "The Fine Light of My Peace," the "heavenly letters" are at the same time the beautiful signs on the butterfly's orange wings, the presence of God in the world, and the letters of the poem itself. Furthermore, Hebrew has many names for God. In this poem, Zelda chooses to use the specific name of God as "יה" (*yah*). In the kabbalistic tradition, this is one of the names that symbolizes the *Shekhinah* in her androgynous nature. As a "ה" (the Hebrew letter *he*) She is in her passive nature as the watered garden and the great womb that

receives the influx from above, and as a “י” (the Hebrew letter *yod*) the *Shekhinah* takes on male traits, and turns into an active force that bestows blessings on the world.

Writing about the subtle connection between nature, the inner self, and the divine is the core of the *unio poetica/mystica*. “The flower that I planted in the fall,” and signs on the butterfly’s orange wings are compared to both the letters of the poem and to “the heavenly letters” of the *Shekhinah*. “The fine light of” the speaker’s peace is the ultimate unification between the female’s poetic voice and the feminine divine. The “fine light” within is one with the light of the *Shekhinah*. This is the mystery of the *Shekhinah* as a source of inspiration. And if “the same-sex *yichud*” awakens “the lonely moment,” it contains a deep insight of both life and death within “the river of colors and scents,” and is motivated by the strong nature of love “כִּי־עֵזָה כְּמָוֶת אֶהְבֶּה” (“for love is as fierce as death,” *Song of Songs* 8:6), like in the Zoharic parable:

It is like a man who was in love with a woman who lived in the street of the tanners. If she had not been there, he would never have set foot in the place; but because she was there it seemed to him like the street of the spice merchants, where all the finest perfumes in the world could be found.⁵⁴

It seems that the female poet/mystic experiences a natural affinity to the *Shekhinah*. In Zelda’s words: “...And the light of the rose / seems so near, / and its fragrance / so near, / and the silence of the leaves / so near, / that island / so near —.”⁵⁵ The similarities between the female poetic voice and the presence of the feminine divine in the world are as same-sex closeness, a mirroring, seeing yourself in the other. This can be also experienced as “the lonely moment,” i.e., being on “that island” filled with “the light of the rose” and “its fragrance,” but lacking someone with whom to share this experience. The female speaker of the poem knows that what comes naturally to her requires a tremendous amount of effort from the male addressee. In order to get to “that island” and to “that light,” he needs to “take a boat / and cross the sea of fire,”⁵⁶ while she has no hesitation to “go into the raging fiery furnace,” since she “arouse[s] this ‘good’ toward her.”⁵⁷ In fact, what seems to him as “the sea of fire” is perceived by her as “the light of the rose.” And thus, once again, the female serves as a vessel (perhaps through the feminine erotic symbol of the boat) for the male’s unification with the “light of the rose,” “rose” being one of the symbols of the *Shekhinah*. Her ability to be one with “The Other Female,” the *Shekhinah*,

both as the feminine divine and as the poetic muse, is evident:

“For all females of the world abide in the mystery of *Shekhinah*.”⁵⁸

Notes

1. The consequence of literal understanding of the relations between the *sefirot* led to transgressive sexuality in the messianic movements of Sabbatianism and Frankism. See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 232-233.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.
3. *Zohar* 2:22a. Translated by Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar Pritzker Edition*, volume IV, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 70-71.
4. Leviticus 25:1-24, and Deuteronomy 15:1-3 refers to the Sabbatical, and Leviticus 25:8-55 refers to Jubilee.
5. Matt (2007).
6. *Ibid.*
7. The source of this hermaphrodite person can be found in Talmud Bavli, Eruvin, Chapter 2, 18a.
8. Byron L. Sherwin, *Kabbalah: An Introduction to Jewish Mysticism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), p. 65.
9. *Zohar* 1:232a, Matt (2006), pp. 402-403.
10. See note 3, Daniel Matt, p. 71.
11. *Zohar* 2:126b, Matt (2006), pp. 185-186.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 186. My emphasis.
13. See also BT, Pesahim 119b.
14. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and institution*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), pp. 238-239.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
16. Chaim Nachman Bialik, *Kol Shirei C.N. Bialik* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv: The Dvir Co LTD, 1966), P. 178.
17. Ruth Nevo, *Chaim Nachman Bialik - Selected Poems* (Jerusalem: Dvir & The Jerusalem Post, 1981), p. 57.
18. Some of these interpretations are: Gershon Shaked ed., *Bialik: Yetsirato Lesugea Bi-ree Ha-bikoret* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1992), Abraham Bar-Yosef, *Meshoreray Ha-me'a Ha-20: Mi-Bialik Va-Eilakh* [Hebrew] (Tel-Aviv,

- 1997), Isaac Bakoon, *Tsofe Hayiti Be-'eyno Shel Ha-'Olam: Shirat Bialik* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2004).
19. See Adi Zemach, *The Hidden Lion* (Jerusalem: Kiryat-Sepher Ltd., 1976), pp. 263-276.
20. Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin, 96.
21. See Adi Zemach (1976).
22. *Zohar* 3:191a. Isaiah Translation by David Goldstein in Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, Three vols. (Oxford:Oxford University Press,1989), p. 219. My emphasis.
23. *Zohar* 1:247b.
24. *Talmud Bavli, Berachot, 57a* and *Midrash Lamentations Rabbah*, parashah *Aleph*, 26.
25. In Hebrew it is: "כי אם לבינה תקרא" and the reading of the Talmud is "'אם and not "אם".
26. I explore in detail this intriguing notion in my essay "' An Unsolved Dream is Like an Unread Letter' – On the dream stories in Midrash Lamentations Rabbah, and on the Hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur," Department of Near Eastern Studies, U.C. Berkeley, spring 1983 (won the Graduate Prize in the Benjamin Goor Contest in Jewish Studies 1983-84. Unpublished).
27. *Midrash Rabbah* to the Song of Songs 3:11. See also, Song of Songs 5:5 and Isaiah 62:5.
28. See *Zohar* 3, 290a; *Idra Zuta*.
29. See *Zohar* 3, 61b-62a.
30. Hayyim Nahman Bialik, *Revelment And Concealment: Five Essays* (Jerusalem: IBIS Editions, 2000), pp. 15-16.
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
32. Like the *unio mystica*, i.e., the union of the mystic with God, the poet attempts to unite with her/his own hidden self. For this act, I coin the term *unio poetica*. In that sense, the expression of the incommunicable experience of the *unio mystica* is remarkably similar to the incommunicable experience of the *Unio Poetica*.
33. *Zohar* 1: 228b. Matt, Volume III (2007), p. 377.
34. Tishby (1989), volume II, p. 464. Since women in traditional orthodox Judaism are considered as “second class” citizens who cannot be considered to be a valid witness in court, nor a valid participant in a *minyán* (quorum of ten adults required for certain religious obligations), it is astonishing to find out that they are actually the embodiment of the feminine aspect of God, the *Shekhinah*.
35. *Zohar* 1:50a. Matt Volume I (2004), p. 277.
36. *Zohar* 1:50a. Matt, Volume I (2004), p. 276.

37. Meirav Meidan, "The Kabbalist Wife," *Nashim* 19 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 249-286.
38. Ibid., pp. 254-255.
39. Ibid., pp. 258-259.
40. Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again At Sinai* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), p. 140.
41. *Zohar* 1:133a. Matt, Volume II (2004), p. 249.
42. Ibid.
43. Women like Richeldis de Faverches (founder of the Holy House at Walsingham, or "England's Nazareth"), the learned Hildegard of Bingen, Hadewijch of Brabant (exemplary voice of the Beguine tradition of love mysticism), charismatic traveller and pilgrim Margery Kempe and anchoress Julian of Norwich, if to name only a few. See Andrea Janelle Dickens, *The Female Mystic: Great Women Thinkers of the Middle Ages* (New York: I. B. Tauris Press, 2009).
44. For an extraordinary revival of Jewish women like Hannah Rachel of Ludmir, Dulcie of Worms and others see Rabbi Tirzah Firestone, *The Receiving: Reclaiming Jewish Women's Wisdom*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004).
45. Translated by Marcia Falk, *The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems, Zelda* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), pp. 188-189.
46. Ibid., pp. 190-191.
47. *Zohar* 1:36a. Matt Volume I (2004), pp. 223-224.
48. Ibid., note 945.
49. On the rainbow as a symbol for the divine phallus see Elliot Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), p. 87. See also Melila Hellner-Seshed, *A River Flows From Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), P. 335.
50. *Zohar* 1:1b. Matt, Volume I (2004), p. 4.
51. Ibid.
52. Matt, Volume I (2004), p. 139, note 246.
53. *Zohar* 1:18b, Ibid.
54. *Zohar* 3: 115b, in Tishby (1989), pp. 421-422.
55. Falk (2004), pp. 66-67.
56. Ibid.

57. *Zohar* 3:110b.

58. See note 32.

Further Readings

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Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary Journal Winter 2011 Volume 8 Number 2

ISSN 1209-9392

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