

Divine Qualities and Real Women



The Feminine Image in Kabbalah

Long before women gained entry into the halls of Jewish learning, Jewish mystics explored and extolled feminine aspects of the Divine



Within the Jewish religious tradition, the literature of Kabbalah is second to none in its engagement with the feminine. The mystical authors of medieval Spain and southern France, the men who produced the Zohar and related texts, were averse to simplistic conceptions of gender.

{ By **BITI ROI**

Their sensitive attunement to sexual, mental, physiological and social aspects of female existence is strikingly manifest in their imaginative contemplation of God and speculations about the interplay of the divine and earthly realms. Indeed, the contemporary discourse on women in Judaism – which is still bound up with Talmudic categories and the strictures of halacha – can benefit greatly from the riches of kabbalistic imagery and perceptions of women and femininity.

Sefer Ha-Zohar – “The Book of Splendor” – is a sprawling masterpiece that presents a complex conception of divinity based upon an intricate exploration of the hidden meanings of the Hebrew Bible. Its mystical quest is structured in the form of teachings of the 2nd-century Mishnaic sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai (“Rashbi”) and a handful of his contemporaries, written in an Aramaic dialect that is unlike any other in Jewish writings. The authorship of the Zohar is traditionally attributed to Rashbi himself, but modern scholars have demonstrated that it was composed by a group of Castilian kabbalists of the 13th and 14th centuries, a circle that included Moses de Leon, Joseph Gikatilla, and Bahya ben Asher. Having acquired a canonical status, the Zohar continues to inspire traditional students and scholars of Jewish mysticism, as well as adherents of the popular spirituality of the 21st century.

No Secret is Concealed From Her

The cornerstone of the kabbalistic perception of the feminine is the study of the dynamic interrelationships within the Godhead, the mystical representation of the divinity. In the face of a tradition overshadowed by the masculine God of the Bible, the kabbalists developed a conception which consists of key feminine elements within the Godhead, the foremost of which is the figure of the *Shekhinah*.

Before the emergence of Kabbalah in the middle ages, the term *Shekhinah* was used

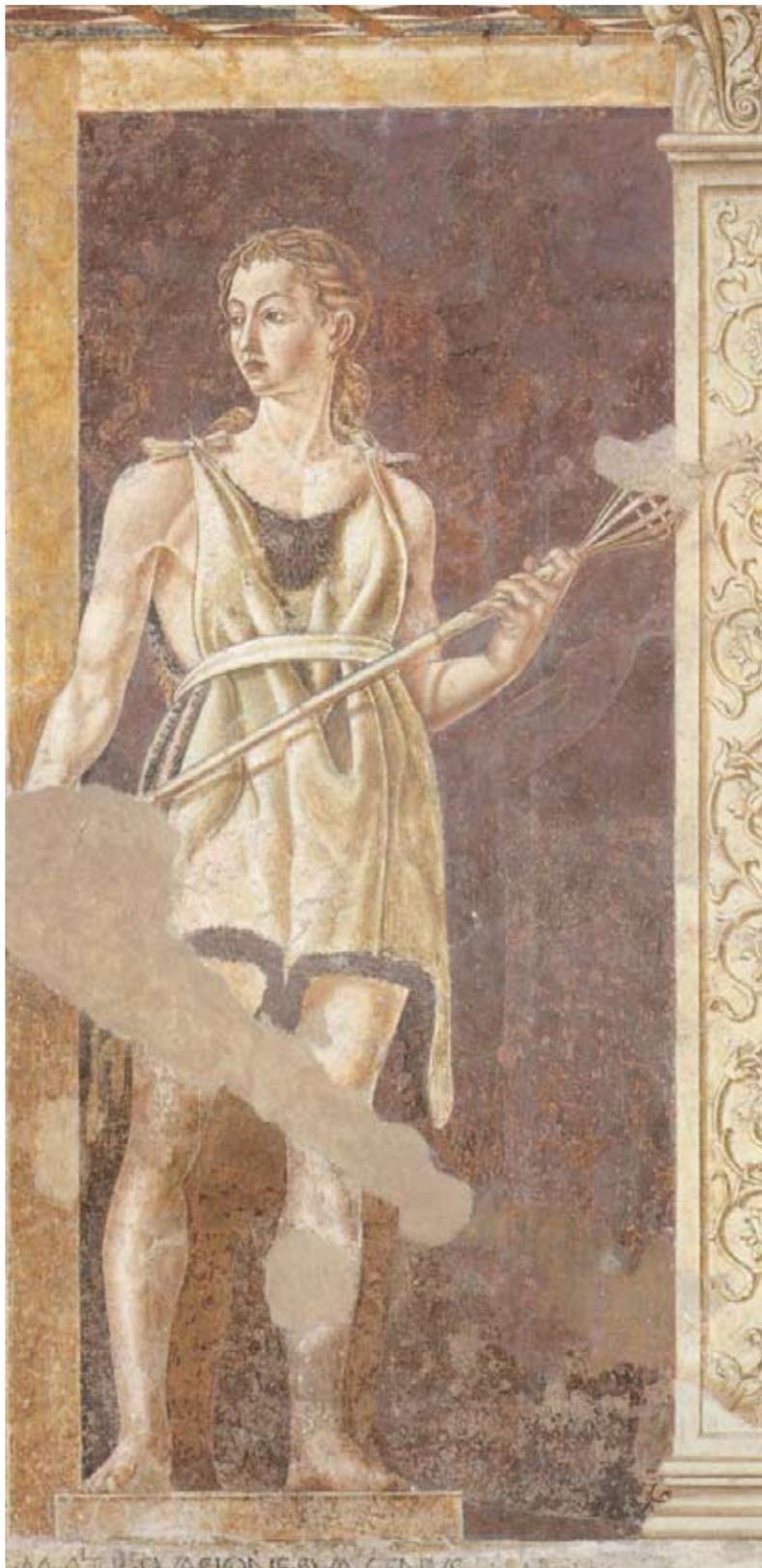
as a synonym for God. Grammatically, it is a feminine Hebrew noun, but the *Shekhinah* initially lacked any female attributes or even a distinctive identity of its own. In the works of early kabbalists, however, it was transformed into a queenly personification of the Godhead, the *Matronita*:

How many thousands, how many myriads of holy camps does the blessed Holy One have! ... Above them He has appointed *Matronita* to minister before Him in the palace ... Every mission that the King wishes issues from the house of *Matronita*; every mission from below to the King enters the house of *Matronita* first, and from there to the King. Consequently, *Matronita* is agent of all, from above to below and from below to above ... and no secret is concealed from Her. (II Zohar 51a)

The *Shekhinah* is far from being passive. In times of need, her charms save the People of Israel from being abandoned by the male God:

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 scents in the world could be found. (III Zohar 115b)

The kabbalistic study of the *Shekhinah* seeks to reveal its many different faces: she is the connecting point between the heavenly realm and earthly reality. For the kabbalists, the Godhead is not detached from real life: the divine reality is reflected in every concrete object on earth. Within this worldview, each and every woman represents, in a sense, the figure of the *Shekhinah*. Contrary to the medieval philosophical system that conceives of the world as comprised of static essences, in the Zohar the *Shekhinah* holds a dynamic relationship with the Godhead as its queen



(*Matronita*) and lover. This relationship extends to life on earth, or as the Zohar puts it in its unique Aramaic, she is *alma de-nukba* – the feminine world.

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The earthly presence of the *Shekhinah* in general, and in womankind in particular, is also extrapolated from the literal meaning of the word. The Hebrew root *shakhan*, from which the word derives, means “reside” or “inhere.” In his mystical work *Sha’arey Orah* (gates of light), composed in the same period as the Zohar, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla finds a biblical precedent for the notion of *alma de-nukba*: “The *Shekhinah*, in the time of Abraham our forefather, is called Sarah, and in the time of Yitzhak our forefather is called Rivkah, and in the time of Ya’akov our forefather is called Rachel...” Reflecting a similar view, the Zohar concludes that “all of the females in the world share in her knowledge of the divine secret” (II Zohar 105b).

Medieval Jewish philosophers, on the other hand, could not accommodate a conceptualization of a dynamic divinity, let alone the notion of a divinity with overt feminine attributes. For them, the inferiority of women was grounded in such proofs as Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib, and manifested in “essential” female qualities like deceit, inquisitiveness, garrulousness and pride.

The influential Provençal philosopher, scientist, and biblical exegete Gersonides (Ralbag) (1288-1344) placed women on an interim rank between beasts and men. In his commentary on Genesis 3:30, he observed: “And Adam named his wife Eve,’ in accord with his perception of her feebleness of mind, that is, that she did not

transcend other animals considerably... for most of her functions were indeed adapted to physical matters, to the feebleness of her mind and for her servitude of Man.” Even the sophisticated Maimonides, writing in Cairo in the 12th century, employed classical philosophical categories to draw a comparison between men (who are both “matter” and “form”) and women (who are “matter” alone):

Matter is in no way found without form and is consequently always like *a married woman* who is never separated from a *man* and is never *free*. (*Guide of the Perplexed*, III 8)

While the modern reader may find them odd, such observations preclude the possibility of understanding the feminine in a complex and interesting way.

The kabbalists too conjured up negative images of women, but these did not always represent them as inferior. The Jewish mystics were obsessed with the magical powers associated with women’s bodies – their hair, fingernails, womb, blood – and in some Zoharic depictions, women appear as demons:

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Two evil spirits are attached to one another. The male spirit is fine, the female spirit spreads out down several ways and paths, and is attached to the male spirit.

She dresses herself in finery like an abominable harlot and stands at the

corners of streets and highways in order to attract men ... This is the finery that she uses to seduce mankind: her hair is long, red like a lily; her face is white and pink; six pendants hang from her ears ... her tongue is sharp like a sword; her words smooth as oil; her lips beautiful, red as a lily, sweetened with all the sweetness in the world...

The fool turns aside after her ... and commits harlotry with her ... What does she do? She leaves him asleep on the bed ... The fool wakes up, thinking to sport with her as before, but she takes off her finery, and turns into a fierce warrior, facing him in a garment of flaming fire, a vision of dread, terrifying both body and soul, full of horrific eyes, a sharpened sword in his hand with drops of poison suspended from it. He kills the fool, and throws him into *Gehinnom*. (I Zohar 148a-148b, *Sitrey Torah*)

In an era dominated by rigid sexual identities, the early kabbalists appreciated the fluidity of gender. Here, in the Zohar, the female demon morphs, in a seamless transition, into a male warrior.

Mother, Lover and Creator

Perhaps the most important contribution of the Zohar to Jewish theology is the elaboration of a symbolic framework known as the sefirotic system. Literally meaning “sphere” or “region,” each *sefirah* – there are ten in all – represents an emanation of a different aspect of the Godhead, and is interconnected with the other *sefirot* in myriad ways that the mystics sought to untangle and elucidate.

The Zohar’s multifaceted presentation of the feminine is most conspicuous in the distinction between two *sefirot*: *Binah* (understanding), which stands for the Mother; and *Malkhut* (kingdom), which is the wife and lover, or in some cases the daughter. If the figure of the *Shekhinah* marks the



Eve as warrior, from a fresco in Villa Carducci (Soffiano, Italy), by Andrea del Castagno, c.1450.

kabbalistic acceptance of woman as part of the heavenly realm, then the contemplation of *Binah* and *Malkhut* is an attempt to explore aspects of the feminine in order to gain deeper understanding of the world.

In his *Sha'arey Orah*, Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla identifies *Binah* with abundance, pregnancy and nourishment. He calls it the "Mother," progenitor of the seven *sefirot* that are situated beneath it in the structure of the Godhead. Other designations of *Binah*, according to Gikatilla, include *olam ha-hayim* (world of life); *mekor ha-hayim* (source of life); *Elohim hayim* (the living God); and *sod ha-hayim* (the secret of life). All of these reflect feminine qualities that the kabbalists identified within the Godhead, and indicate that these men conceived of *Binah* as the ground of the whole of existence.

In this spirit, the authors of the Zohar identified this *sefirah* with the beautiful imagery of Genesis 2:10: "A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden." For them, this verse was expressive of the notion of divinity as the source of the all-encompassing flow of life, an emanation of the maternal *sefirah*. As an aspect of the Godhead, *Binah* is thus the power of creation. Indeed, certain kabbalistic traditions perceive the Creation as God's act of childbirth.

The notion of *Binah* as a womanly creator is supported by a linguistic analysis of the name. In the Talmud, *binah* is considered a specific type of wisdom, related to the "ability to surmise one thing from another" (BT Shabbat 31a). The kabbalists go a step farther, arguing that *binah* not only denotes a cognitive function (discernment), but also a maternal function (procreation). Gikatilla, in his *Sha'arey Orah*, observes that "another reason why she is called *Binah* is because she is the secret of conceiving sons and daughters." The author plays upon on the similarity between *binah* and the Hebrew word *ben*, meaning "son" or "offspring." Indeed, the maternal functions of conception, childbirth and breastfeeding appear in many of the

descriptions of the relations of *Binah* with its subordinate *sefirot*.

The kabbalistic link between childbirth and the creation of the world is derived from a creative reading of Proverbs 2:3, a verse conventionally rendered as follows: "If you cry out for insight" – *ki im labinah tikrah* – "and raise your voice for understanding." The kabbalistic reading revocalizes one key word – a common ploy in rabbinic interpretation of the Bible – turning *im*, "if," into *em*, "mother," producing a new meaning: "For you will call *binah*, Mother."

As men who considered themselves part of a long line of biblical interpreters, the members of the Zoharic circle often drew on Talmudic teachings. It is therefore unsurprising that the rabbinic reading of the creation of Eve, out of the rib of Adam, also associates *binah* with femininity, in a nice play on words: "And God built [*vayiven*, the biblical form of *banah*] the rib which he took from Adam into a woman" (Genesis 2:22), shows that the blessed Holy One endowed the woman with more understanding [*binah*] than the man" (BT Niddah 45b). This insight apparently eluded the philosopher Gersonides, though not his kabbalist contemporaries.

In contrast with the maternal *Binah*, the *sefirah* of *Malkhut* represents God's partner and lover – the erotic side of the feminine. *Malkhut* desires, seduces, pines, yearns, and also envies, suffers rejection, expulsion and banishment. Her relations with the "male" *sefirot* above her (she is the lowest *sefirah*) are amorous, and are manifested by waves of attraction and repulsion, union and separation. But *Binah* and *Malkhut* have their own relationship as well, that of mother and daughter. When *Malkhut* reveals herself during the pilgrimage to the Temple, *Binah*, her mother, lends *Malkhut* garments and jewelry, as we learn at the opening of the Zohar (I:1b):

[A]nd Mother lends Daughter her garments, though not adorning her with



The demon Lilith,
rendered by Dante
Gabriel Rossetti, 1868.





Rendering of medieval demonic figure Hulda (Holla), by Israeli artist Yael Ramot, 2006.

her adornments. When does she adorn her fittingly? When all males appear before her, as is written: “[All your males shall appear] before the Sovereign, God” (Exodus 23:17).

The maternal aspects of *Binah*, however, are only part of the essence of this *sefirah*. Just as importantly, it is identified as possessing elements of harshness and judgment that belong to the divine quality of *Din* (law). As defined in Talmudic writings, *Din* is the polar opposite of divine grace and mercy (*Hesed*).

The characterization of *Binah* as partaking of *Din* is pivotal to the kabbalists’ conception of femininity. *Din*, through *Binah*, is not only associated with justice and punishment, but also describes a refining and limiting quality, which discerns the infinity of details that constitute the world. Without *Din*, the world would be an undifferentiated influx of divine grace; *Binah* presides over its allocation to her subordinate *sefirot*. The maternal *Binah*, which represents divine abundance, also disburses it as appropriate and withholds it if necessary.

Talking a Good Game

For the kabbalists, *Binah* endows the world with form: the emanation that it receives from the higher *sefirah* of *Hokhmah* takes shape within her. This helps explain the kabbalistic association of the two feminine *sefirot* with the organs of language and speech - *Malkhut* with the mouth, and *Binah* with the tongue. In midrashic and medieval Jewish writings, women's verbal skills are often stereotyped as gossip and chatter. The Zohar, however, chooses to emphasize, regarding women's use of language, the ability to describe abstract entities and to differentiate one thing from another.

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Furthermore, in the Jewish tradition, the world was created through speech. In rabbinic *midrashim*, and in the ancient mystical text *Sefer Yetzira* ("Book of Creation"), the world is created by ten divine statements. For the medieval kabbalists, *Binah's* procreative and discerning attributes and *Malkhut's* association with the mouth converge in *olam hadibur*, "the realm of speech." In addition to its divine connotations, this "realm of speech" was also the mundane domain in which the kabbalists lived and worked, spending most of their time talking to one another as they studied Torah and endeavored to decipher the secrets of its language.

But since women were barred from joining in such lofty activities, it is rather ironic that abstract feminine entities were designated to define the essence of kabbalists' daily practice. After a hard day of contemplating the feminine aspect of the divinity with other

men, the kabbalists returned home to women of flesh and blood: their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters. The question of how these women informed the mystical works of the Zoharic circle is most fascinating, and unresolved. Quite plausibly, the women who breastfed and raised their children, cooked, cleaned and ran their households, also served as the muses for such mythical figures as the omniscient *Matronita*, the discerning and fecund *Binah*, or even the terrifying demonic seductress with the sharpened sword.

Historical evidence is too scanty to allow us to determine whether such fanciful imagery also reflected a more lenient approach to patriarchal norms within the family and community. Bold literary visions do not necessarily translate into practical changes in cultural or economic life, or psychological adjustments in the day-to-day world. Therefore, one must treat with caution any claims that the kabbalists were the precursors of contemporary feminism.

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During the next golden age of Kabbalah, in 16th century Safed, the Zoharic tradition was further elaborated and enriched. Shabbat hymns such as Rabbi Shlomo Elkabetz's *Lecha Dodi* depicted the holy day as queen and bride. The leader of the Safed kabbalists, Rabbi Isaac Luria (the "Ari"), established a custom whereby a man would kiss the hand of his mother at the hour that Shabbat began, as a symbolic greeting of the *Shekhinah*. Such a gesture, reflecting respect for real women and their mystical counterpart, provides one charming example of how kabbalists wove their abstract ideas into the fabric of daily life.



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