

THE REDEMPTION OF THE SHEKHINAH

With the figure of the Shekhinah, the Jewish tradition confronts its own dark side. "Shekhinah" literally means the "Presence" of God in the world. It may be thought of as that aspect of the divine to be revealed "on earth, as it is in heaven". Emerging within the patriarchal tradition of Judaism, the Shekhinah identifies a specifically feminine aspect of God which is reflected in the receptivity of human beings. Jewish tradition speaks of the redemption of the Shekhinah as being brought about by the people of Israel fulfilling their covenant with God - keeping the Commandments handed down by Moses and interpreted by the Rabbis. Yet, with the idea of "the redemption of the Shekhinah" something remarkable occurs in the life of a religious tradition: Judaism addresses an underdeveloped aspect of its own nature and endeavors to redeem a neglected aspect of itself.

The Shekhinah brings with her a great deal of material related to the presentness, the feminineness, and even the sexiness of the divine. Material that would have been rejected by ancient Israel's religious leaders in their anti-pagan polemics many hundreds of years before, becomes integrated within the matrix of Jewish tradition and reconciled with the affirmation of the Oneness of God. The Shekhinah is not a contemporary innovation of feminist Jewish theologians; rather, it was introduced by the Talmudic rabbis in the early centuries of the Common Era, then given its fullest expression in the Zohar (the major work of Kabbalah, which first appeared in thirteenth century Spain), and has for many generations been reflected in the experience of Jewish poets and mystics.

The Inclusion of the Shekhinah

How then the Shekhinah come to be included within Judaism? Religious historians speak casually about one culture "influencing" another, without much consideration of how a tradition selects what it can assimilate, and what it must reject, in order to maintain its integrity.(1) Bible scholar Joel Rosenberg recently put forth the theory that from its beginning the Hebraic tradition formed itself by a kind of "traditional ecology". The Five Books of Moses, the larger Hebrew Bible, and the subsequent traditions of Jewish interpretation may be seen as stages of an organic process:

"At each stage, exclusion of a much wider body of oral and written material seems to have occurred; yet the excluded substratum was not, as it were, frozen out, but continued alongside the definitive formulation as a living force, able to exert its claim at subsequent stages of traditional development... All that we can say is that there is deep and resonant intertextual revelation among the parts that constitute the whole and a kind of traditional ecology... which postbiblical generations of interpreters among them the rabbinic and medieval Jewish exegetes, strove to make more explicit."(2)



The Hebrew Scriptures reflect a larger Hebrew tradition which, both before and after the formation of a Biblical canon, drew upon resources from within itself in order to interpret itself. As with any living tradition, we have an organic system in which "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts". This idea is generally taken for granted by members of any given tradition; unfortunately, it is something of a novelty in modern religious scholarship.

Traditions, like people, are strongly influenced not only by what they accept, but also by what they reject. Rosenberg points out that an "excluded substratum" may develop in parallel with the conscious contents of the tradition until it can be reconciled within it. Such an understanding of the psychology of traditions recalls Freud's and Jung's theories of the unconscious. That which a person rejects and represses becomes, subconsciously, a part them. How this material is then integrated is crucial to the individual's wholeness and growth. The same dynamic is operative in the psychic life of a people. Within the Jewish tradition this principle is acknowledged in the dictum "the stone which the builders rejected has become the foundation stone".

As much as the feminine aspect of the divine was like a stone rejected by the early "builders", it became a cornerstone of the house of Israel. Thus we find that Jews the world over usher in the Sabbath (the most important holy day in Judaism, though it comes every week) by welcoming the "Sabbath Queen" and "Sabbath Bride" - twin metaphors for the Shekhinah. Broadly speaking, the study of rabbinic law developed as an abstract and "masculine" discipline. And yet there grew up alongside it a rich tradition of midrash - imaginative recreations or "interpretation" of biblical narratives and characters - which appeal to an intuitive rather than a rational understanding. Jewish ritual observances appear masculine in their emphasis on meticulous points of detail (the complex body of laws relating to kosher food and even kosher dishes immediately comes to mind), and yet at the center of Jewish ritual observance is the sanctification if the home - which has a traditionally feminine character of "keeping house" for God.

Although davenin (traditional Hebrew prayer; literally, "of the fathers") involves rapidly repeating page after page of written text, there is something distinctly feminine about the rocking, swaying motion which accompanies it, and the improvised sing-song by which the chant ebbs and flows. Until modern times, both the study hall and the prayer hall were virtually the exclusive province of men. And yet, the feeling of Jewish devotion was sufficiently feminine that many Hasidic Jews had their shirts and jackets made to button on the left - because, they maintained, the soul of man is feminine in relationship to God.

In Judaism, perhaps more than in any other major religion, there is a concern with feminine. And yet there appears to have been no detailed study in English on the role of the Shekhinah within the tradition. Probably the most detailed and influential current study of the Shekhinah within the Jewish tradition. Probably the most detailed and influential current study of the Shekhinah is The Hebrew Goddess (3), a book by the Israeli anthropologist Raphael Patai. The author, who expresses his prejudice in the book's title, brings together rabbinic lore concerning the Shekhinah. Jewish folk superstition regarding the she-demon Lilith, and archaeological findings on ancient Canaanite goddesses. Patai assumes that because the worship of pagan goddesses such as Asherah and Astarte occurred among the ancients Israelites (and we know that it did because it was roundly condemned by generations of Hebrew prophets), they should therefore be considered as Hebrew goddesses. Patai proceeds to consider all later Jewish references to an exalted feminine figure such as the Shekhinah as developments of this "Hebrew goddess" idea.



Rediscovery of the feminine within Judaism is significant. But by creating his own "Hebrew goddess" tradition, Patai shows utter disregard for how Judaism has conceived of itself as a monotheistic tradition - an appalling substitution of sociology for the study of religion. Extending Patai's analysis to its logical conclusion, would be forced to declare that because many North American Jews like to eat (non-Kosher) Chinese food, that Chinese food is therefore Jewish?

Patai's attempt to ferret out pagan goddess-sounding references from within the major works of rabbinic Judaism is reminiscent of a schoolboy skimming great works of literature for the sexy parts. He does, indeed, manage to extract a number of "good parts" on the Shekhinah, without bothering very much about what they meant in their original contexts. Though his interpretation of the "evidence" is quite prejudiced, Patai has done us the favor of assembling a great deal of interesting material. A thorough reevaluation of the Shekhinah's development within the Jewish tradition would take at least a full-length book or doctoral dissertation. Within the limits of this article, however, an attempt will be made to at least convey a feeling for the Jewish tradition of the Shekhinah, while also considering its possible origins and some of its striking expressions.

The Shekhinah in relation to God

Patai suggests that the first reference to the Shekhinah in the Targum Onkelos, an Aramaic paraphrase and translation of the Hebrew Bible which probably goes back to the first century C.E. (4). The Targum renders the verse, "Let me make Me a Sanctuary, that I might dwell (shakhanti) among them", from Exodus 25:8, as "Let them make Me a Sanctuary, that I might have my Dwelling (Shekhinah) among them". Thus, "the Biblical notion that the Tabernacle was built as a dwelling place for Yahweh is transformed in Talmudic literature into the idea that both the desert sanctuary and the Solomonic Temple were the earthly abode of the Shekhina". (5) With the notion of God becoming more abstract, there was a desire to identify an intermediate principle – the Shekhinah - which would distance Absolute Being from concrete manifestation.

This is typical of what happened to the verb-oriented Hebrew language, with its dynamic world view, when it was relocated within the abstract and idealized culture of the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, to understand the development of the Jewish conception of the Shekhinah, we must first understand the Jewish conception of God. Hellenized Jews would have wanted to avoid anthropomorphism, preferring to conceive of something more "objective" than the image of man. But the original Biblical conception of God may not have been so much of a person, as it was of a process. Every Hebrew word refers back to a meaningful three-letter root. The divine name, which in English has been translated as "Jehovah" or else designated as "the Lord", is in Hebrew more a verb than a noun. It is difficult to render in English, precisely because English is based on a Latin sense of "thing-ness". The Hebrew letters of the divine name, Y.H.V.H., combine the future participle y with the verb hvh, which means "present" or "is". Thus, the name Y-vh (6) suggests something like "Unfolding-being", or more precisely, "Becoming-is".

To what degree, then, would the God of the Bible ("Becoming - Is") have been considered a male figure? God is indeed characterized as being masculine, but this happens for grammatical as much as for cultural reasons. As there is no neuter pronoun "it" in Hebrew, whatever is not identified specifically as "her" becomes identified as "him". At least in the crucial area of masculine sexual



behavior, God in the Bible is not a male "god". In contrast with the Fertile Crescent's various nature religions, Deuteronomy 11:13-17 (which Jews recite twice daily as part of the Shma prayer) specifies that agricultural bounty and the balance of nature depend not on human representatives of the divine performing sexual magic, but on a covenant of love and fidelity between Israel and God. What then is the Biblical notion of God?

God is best seen as an archetype in Philo's original sense of the term, i.e., a single element or overarching Type in which a multiplicity of elements or types are reconciled and made one.(7) This archetype of the divine presents itself as single and unique, but lends itself to description by a variety of adjectives and activities, feminine as well as masculine. Thus, we find that in Exodus 34:6 God is identified to Moses first of all as "Y-vh,Y-vh, a Compassionate God (El Rahum)...The word compassion is based on the Hebrew root rhm, which means "womb". Back in Genesis 17:1, God is identified to Abraham as El Shaddai, which is usually translated "God Almighty", but which suggest a feminine sense of "Provider" since the plural, shaddaim, means "breasts". (In modern Hebrew parlance, the expression "shaddai" would convey "that's plenty" or "it's enough").

It is certainly true that from the ancient Song of the Red Sea in Exodus 15:3 ("Y-vh is a man of war, Y-vh is His name"), to the familiar High Holiday liturgy ("Our father, our King, favor and answer us for we are without merit"), masculine characterizations of God abound in the Jewish tradition. Although it is understood that God is not a person, the religious imagination of the Jews tends to conceive of the divine in human terms. This lively sense of metaphor, which informs the development of midrash - so different from the doctrinal literalism of Christian theology - could not leave the designation 'Shekhinah' as an impersonal abstraction for long. Thus the rabbis reinterpreted the Shekhinah not as an impersonal "Presence" of God, but as a symbolic figure who is distinctly feminine. She was not conceived of as a goddess, exactly, but as a specific potential of God. The figure of the Shekhinah comes alive in relation to a specific idea - her exile from her rightful dwelling place in the Temple, at the heart of her people, because of their sins.

The Shekhinah in Relation to Israel

While Patai mentions this idea, he attaches no special significance to it. He does, however, provide a general portrait of the Shekhinah as she emerges within the Midrashic literature of the first through fourth centuries C.E. The Shekhinah is that aspect of God which touches the world of human beings, particularly in the area of sexual intimacy. Thus, according to a certain Rav Dimi in the fourth century, it is because the Shekhinah spoke to Adam, the serpent, and fish, that these creatures make love a face-to-face position. A number of Talmudic sources relate that it was because of his ongoing intimacy with the Shekhinah that Moses separated himself completely from his wife. Elsewhere it is said that for the husband and wife who merit it, the Shekhinah comes to rest between them. The Shekhinah comforts the sick, helps the needy, and walks with the humble. When the prophets of the god Baal practiced hospitality, the Shekhinah came to rest even upon them. (8)

The chief occupation of the Shekhinah in rabbinic literature, however, is her yearning for the Community of Israel, a community which became separated from her because of the Jewish people's sins. Interestingly, the rabbis also gave the identify of the two began to overlap. In medieval Kabalah this reached the point where the term "Shekhinah" itself becomes ambiguous, sometimes



meaning the Presence of God, and sometimes meaning the soul of his people, Israel. Earlier, in the Midrash, the Community of Israel is given much the same voice as the Shekhinah. In the following quotation from Reb Aha in the fourth century, the Shekhinah speaks as an aspect of God:

"When the Shekhinah left the Sanctuary, she returned to caress and kiss its walls and columns, and cried and said: "Be in peace, O my sanctuary, be in peace, O my royal palace, be in peace, O my precious house, be in peace from now on, be in peace!"(9)

In a related passage, the Community of Israel speaks of the Sanctuary with much the same feeling: "The community of Israel said before the Holy One, blessed be He, "Master of the World! I remember the safety, the security and the peace which I used to enjoy, and now it is all departed from me. And I cry and lament and say: O, if I could return to former years when the Sanctuary stood, and when you used to come down into it from the heavens, and let your Shekhinah rest on me, and the nations of the world would praise me! And when I would seek forgiveness from my sins, you would answer me. But now I am covered with shame and disgrace".(10)

Underlying this confusion of identity may be an understanding that these two, the Shekhinah and the Community of Israel, are much the same - or would be, if only God's people were not alienated from him. While the Targum's feminine designation of the Shekhinah may have been, more or less, an accident of grammar, in the Midrash the Shekhinah's voice is clearly a feminine voice. Specifically, it is a feminine voice yearning for the restoration of a kind of lost wholeness. When the rabbis put certain well-known declarations of the Hebrew prophets - which had first been related as the word of God - into the mouth of the Shekhinah, this gave them a distinctly feminine cast. Thus, according to one rabbinic source, after sins of Israel had caused her to flee the Temple Mount, the Shekhinah recited the words of Jeremiah 3:23, "Return you backsliding children, I will heal your backsliding ..." She recited this from the Mount of Olives three and a half years. Then, before retreating to heaven, she flew about saying (Hosea 5:15) "I will go return to My place until they admit their guilt and seek

My face."(11)

Patai records these quotations, but finds no special significance in them. But why would these two quotations in particular, among the declarations of God, have been reinterpreted as expressions of the Shekhinah? What did the rabbis have in mind? It is only when we examine the settings from which these quotations are taken that a picture comes into focus: both reflect an intense concern about Israel's worship of other god constituting infidelity to her God. As to the first quotation, God had declared only a few verse's earlier, in Jeremiah 3:20, that "just as a wife betrays her companion, so has the House of Israel betrayed Me." Both Jeremiah and Hosea drew upon this image of the adulterous woman to represent the alienation of Israel from God. Although they both wrote in the eighth century B.C.E., about a thousand years before the term "Shekhinah" gained currency, their contributions would later be retroactively incorporated within the emerging Shekhinah tradition. In the case of Hosea, the context of the above quotation is especially personal and intense. Hosea is the prophet who tells us (1:2-3) that God commanded him to marry a "woman of harlotry". Although Hosea rejects her because of her behavior, God commands him (3:1-2) to return to love her. In his



penetrating analysis of The Prophets, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel explores the religious motivation behind the actions of such a man:

"Only by living through own life what the divine Consort of Israel experienced, was the prophet able to attain sympathy for the divine situation. The marriage was a lesson, an illustration, rather than a symbol or sacrament. Its purpose was not to demonstrate divine attitudes to the people, but to educated Hosea himself in the understanding of divine sensibility."(12)

Hosea's marriage was not a magical attempt to influence the divine, but a personal experience of sympathy with the predicament of God. Although Hosea does not explicitly state that he found God's passionate concern for Israel reflected in his feelings for his wife (he gives only a minimum of information about himself), this implicit in the text. Thus, in 2:16-17 Hosea speaks of Israel no longer calling God "my Lord" but rather "my man". This is a pun on the name of the pagan deity Baal ("Lord"), yet it suggests that in Hosea's own relationship with his wife he went from regarding himself as her "Master" to regarding himself as "her man", just as she was "his woman". Continuing from there, Hosea speaks (2:18-20) of a covenant including "the beasts of the field ... the fowls the heavens and the creeping things of the earth ..." leading to a cessation of warfare. God tenderly proposes marriage to Israel, concluding that (2:22) "... I will engage you to me in faith, and you will know Y-vh". And this word "know" is the same word that we find in Genesis 4:1 describing the sexual union of Adam and Eve!

Behind the identification of Israel with the adulterous woman, and the anger thus aroused, it occurs to the mind of God - reflected in the mind of the prophet - that "he" must reach out to "her" in some new way. There is a heartfelt sense of the relationship between God and his people as a relationship of love which must overcome tremendous obstacles but which yearns to be fulfilled. The tradition of the Shekhinah is less a resurrection of the Goddess than a foreshadowing of the idea of romantic love which blossomed in thirteenth century Europe. In the quest of a man for the woman he loves, and in her response to him, a reflection of God's yearning is revealed in the human soul. The masculine aspect of God seeks to redeem, and be fulfilled by, the feminine. This kind of outlook is reflected by Rabbi Akiva in the second century C.E. when he insists that the erotic love poetry of the Song of Songs is worthy of inclusion in the biblical canon, for "if the Torah is holy, the Song of Songs is the holy of holies".

Inasmuch as the religion of Israel sets out as a "patriarchal" religion - asserting masculine values and masculine characterizations of God in preference to feminine ones - it tempers itself with the idea of the Shekhinah. What develops is a sense of interdependence between God and Israel. Though God first appeared as the creator of heaven and earth, and then as the One who commands the community which has accepted his commandments, that community has a will of its own. A sense of mutual relationship develops. As the relationship grows, there is room for tender feelings, for wistfulness, and for passionate yearning, both on the part of God for his people and on the part of Israel for her God. The Psalms of David first express this passionate yearning of Israel for God. In Hebrew prophets such as Hosea and Jeremiah we see the same kind of passionate yearning expressed by God for his people. From both sides of the equation the relationship of the community with God is proven in the crucible of the experience of the individual.



The Union of God and the Shekhinah

It is only much later, in medieval Kabbalah, that the Shekhinah is formally reconciled – mythically, and even magically - with the structure of Jewish tradition. We have already referred to the Friday evening Jewish service of Kabbalah Shabbat (the Receiving of the Sabbath) in which the "Sabbath

Bride" or "Queen" is invoked as a symbol of the Shekhinah. In even bolder language the Zohar interprets the Festival of Shavuot (which commemorates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai) as the marriage of God with Israel, and specifically with the Shekhinah. Thus it has been the custom among mystically inclined groups of Jews, at least since the sixteenth century, to observe an all-night vigil of Torah-study on the eve of this Festival: "For in this night the bride makes ready for marriage with the bridegroom, and it was thought fitting that all those 'belonging to the palace of the bride' (i.e., the mystics and students if the Torah) should keep her company and partake, through a festival ritual, in the preparations for her marriage".(13)

Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem generally limits himself to the historical interpretation of texts. Yet he admits that he himself witnessed such a ceremony first-hand (as has this author): "On the following morning, at the lifting up of the Torah in the synagogue and before the reading of the Ten Commandments, certain Kabbalists were in the habit of reading a formal contract, stating the terms of marriage between 'Bridegroom God' and the 'Virgin Israel'... Here we have a mixture of allegory and purest symbolism; for whereas the story of the marriage of Israel with God on the day of Revelation is after all only allegory, though a profoundly meaningful one, the conception of the Shekhinah's marriage with her Lord is a mystical symbol expressing something that transcends all images."(14) How are we to understand this "marriage" of God with the Shekhinah? Doesn't it suggest the polytheistic marriage of two separate gods, one male and one female?

How is this possible in a tradition which throughout its history has been conceived of by its proponents - including the mystics among them - as being strictly monotheistic? The answer is as follows: while in Judaism the oneness of the archetype of God is affirmed, the interpretation of the contents of this archetype is flexible. The Shekhinah is equated in the Zohar with the feminine sefirah of Malkhut, the last of the ten sefirot, or divine emanations. As the sefirah of Malkhut is the last, it reflects all the energies "above" as they come into manifestation on the material plane. Interestingly, whereas various patriarchal figures are associated with the other sefirot, Malkhut, which literally means "Kingdom", is associated with David who was both King and Psalmist, the representative of this people, the ardent lover of women, and the eloquent devotee of God.

While God is addressed in Hebrew by a variety of names and adjectives, the traditional Hebrew prayer book has no prayers addressed specifically to the Shekhinah. Probably, the Shekhinah became too distinct an identity in her own right to allow for this.(15) Thus it would seem that the Shekhinah may be considered one and the same as the Community of Israel, more readily than one the same as God.(16) It did, however, become part of orthodox Kabbalistic practice to make a kavannahor "intention" of unifying the Shekhinah with the rest of the Godhead.



The most widely used Kabbalistic invocation, recited before a great many prayers and rituals, opens "in the name of the union of the Holy, blessed be, and his Shekhinah..." "The Holy, blessed be" (which is conventionally rendered as "the Holy One, blessed be He") represents the sefirah Tiferet, at the heart of the Tree of Life. Tiferet is usually translated as "beauty", but etymologically means something more like "expression". Thus, the act which follows this invocation is intended to align the harmonious expression of the totality of the divine (Tiferet) with its concrete manifestation in us and in the world (Malkhut).

This invocation was popular in Hasidism, and is commonly used by Jews today, for example, at the Passover Seder before drinking each of the four cups of wine. It is, as well, the Hebrew inscription which appears on the upper left-hand corner of the title page of every issue of GNOSIS magazine. This formula is embellished in Kabbalistic literature with vivid descriptions of a kind of royal and exalted sexual union. Patai's rendering of one such account, taken from the Zohar Hadash, exemplifies this type of literature. Patai has already established that the Hebrew term matronit, adapted from the Latin word for "matron", was frequently used as an appellation for the Shekhinah:

"The Matronit, surrounded by her maidens, repaired to her couch set up in the Temple, there to await the coming of the groom. The curtains round about were decorated with myriads of precious stones and pearls. At midnight, the tinkling bells he wore around his ankles announced the coming of the King. As he approached, he was accompanied by a host of divine youths, and the maidens of the Matronit welcomed him and them by beating their wings with joy. After singing a song of praise to the King, the Matronit's maidens withdrew, and so did the youths who accompanied him. Alone, the King and the Matronit embraced and kissed, and then he led her to the couch. He placed his left arm under her head, his right arm embraced her, and he let her enjoy his strength. The pleasure of the King and the Matronit in each other was indescribable. They lay in tight embrace, she impressing her image into his body like a seal that leaves its imprint upon a page of writing, he playing between her breasts and vowed in his great love that he would never forsake her."(17)

As Patai suggests, this kind of account bears a striking resemblance to the ancient idea of hieros gamos, or sacred marriage, which is found as far back as ancient Sumer.(18) There, the Goddess Inanna (in the form of her Priestess) would offer herself annually, in a ritualized sexual union, to the King Dumuzi (and to all subsequent Kings). This sacred union was regarded in Sumer, as in the Kabbalah, as necessary for the welfare of the world. One can only wonder how the first Jewish Patriarch, Abraham, would have felt at seeing such material reappearing in the religion he engendered!

A closer reading of the above-quoted passage, however, shows just how much it is woven of Jewish thread. There is the previously mentioned tradition of the "mystics and students of the Torah" as wedding attendants. Several of the explicit references to love-making cited above - "his left hand under her head, his right arm embraced her.... impressing her image onto his body like a seal....playing between her breasts" - refer to quotations from the Song of Songs. Generations of Kabbalists have given such quotations various esoteric interpretations. As Patai indicates that the above-quoted passage was drawn from the "Midrash Haneelam to Ekhah"(the "Hidden Interpretation to the Book of Lamentations"), its general setting was probably one of lamentation for the destruction of Jerusalem.(19) The text likely addresses not just the celebration of a sacred marriage, "as above, so below", but a yearning for the restoration of conditions on earth in support of such a union. Perhaps



it was even accompanied by references to a harmonious union of man and wife effecting the restoration of the "Holy Temple".

The Revelation of the Shekhinah

For many Jewish Kabbalists the Shekhinah is not only an idea or a symbol, but is something which can be directly experienced. Consider the following story related by Moshe Idel in his discussion of Jewish mystical techniques in Kabbalah: New Perspectives. The great sixteenth century Kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, informed his disciple, Reb Abraham Berukhim, that unless he prayed before the Wailing Wall and saw the Shekhinah, he would die:

"When that pious man heard the words of Isaac Luria, he isolated himself for three days and nights in a fast and [clothed himself] in a sack, and nightly wept. Afterward he went before the wailing wall and prayed there and wept a mighty weeping. Suddenly, he raised his eyes and saw on the Wailing Wall the image of a woman, from behind, in clothes which it is better not to describe, that we have mercy on the divine glory. When he had seen her, he immediately fell on his face and cried and wept and said: 'Zion, Zion, woe to me that I have seen you in such a plight'. And he was bitterly complaining and weeping and beating his face and plucking his beard and her hair of his head, until he fainted and lay down and fell asleep on his face. Then he saw in a dream the image of a woman who came and put her hands on his face and wiped the tears of his eyes...and when Isaac Luria saw him, he said: 'I see that you have deserved to see the face of the Shekhinah'."(20)

Reb Abraham's vision was not an isolated incident. Two of his famous contemporaries, Rabbis Joseph Karo and Solomon Alkabetz, are also reported to have had revelations of the Shekhinah. After much fasting and weeping, the Kabbalistic author Reb Hayyim Vital was granted a similar vision. He cried out to a woman who appeared to him, "Mother, Mother, help me, so that I may see the Lord..."(21) In the nineteenth century, both Reb Isaac Yehudah Yehiek Safrin and the well-known Hasidic Rabbi, Levi Isaac of Berdichev, after a period of weeping, also experienced vision of a feminine figure identified with the Shekhinah. In both cases she told them "Be strong, my son ..." (22) These revelations to some degree recall the vision of the thirteenth century Muslim Sufi, Muhyiddin Ibn'Arabi. Ibn'Arabi saw the feminine figure of Sophia (Wisdom) while circumambulating the Ka'aba in Meca. She chastised him for indulging in being "perplexed" by love.(23) In the case of men such as these, it appears that an actual experience of the Shekhinah was granted in response to their yearning for God. Was she then the God for whom they were yearning? They would not have said so. It would be better instead to speak of the Shekhinah as a revelation of God which encouraged these seekers in their search. The Shekhinah did not present herself as a goal that had been reached, but as a profound reminder of the unfinished task of the revelation of God in this world.

The word "Shekhinah" comes to us from the heart of the Jewish tradition, where it is a vivid reminder of the gap between the divine reality and the religious community. That gap is the dark side of every religious tradition. Within Judaism, this feminine face of God came to balance the masculine, to bring the search back down to earth, back to the community, and back to the seeker.

Yet the Shekhinah is not necessarily a Hebrew name for the Goddess (depending, of course, on one's definition of "Goddess"). The Shekhinah points beyond male and female images of God – to realizing God as a Presence which yearns for us and awaits our receptivity.

NOTES

1. In Kabbalah: New Perspectives (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), Moshe Idel criticizes the well-known Kabbalah scholar Gershom Scholem for dwelling too much on possible non-Jewish sources of Kabbalah rather than looking towards the internal development of a Jewish mystical tradition. He points out the irony of Scholem's emphasis on Gnostic influences, especially since, increasingly, "contemporary scholars of Gnosticism refer to Jewish influence on the emerging Gnostic literature" (p. 30).
2. Joel Rosenberg, "Biblical Tradition: Literature and Spirit in Ancient Israel", in Jewish Spirituality: from the Bible through the Middle Ages, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1988), p. 82.
3. Thus, in "The Spiritual Dance" (GNOSIS # 4, Spring/Summer 1987, pp 24-25), Deena Metzeger speaks of Patai's Hebrew Goddess putting her in touch with "another kind of Judaism [in which]...the images won't leave me alone".
4. Raphael Patai, The Hebrew Goddess (New York: Ktav, 1967), p. 140. 5. Ibid., p. 142.
6. It is the Jewish practice to replace one letter of the divine name with a dash, to guard against taking that name in vain.
7. For a detailed critique of Jung's use of "archetype" and a reconstruction of the terms meaning, see my article on "The Limits of Jung", GNOSIS # 10, Winter 1989, pp. 52- 55.
8. Hebrew Goddess, pp. 145-6. 9. Ibid., p. 151.
10. Ibid., pp 151 - 52.
11. Ibid., p. 144. 12. Abraham Joshua Heschel, The Prophets (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1962), p. 56.
13. Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 138.
14. Ibid., p. 139.
15. In his recent book One God One Lord (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), Bible scholar Larry Hurtado demonstrates that what finally separated the early Church from the Jewish community was not the giving of an exalted status to Jesus - as was indeed accorded to Wisdom, and later also to the Shekhinah - but that this exalted status led to the worship of Jesus as an entity distinct from God.



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16. In recent years, certain feminist circles of Jews have nevertheless taken to addressing the Shekhinah in prayer, making "Blessed are you, Shekhinah" an alternative form to "Blessed are you, O Lord". Personally, I find this distressing. When I visited such groups and asked what was meant, I was told that "Shekhinah" was intended merely to be a feminine name for the Lord, or Yvh, and did not represent a different object of worship. This seems to me to deny the more specific connotations of the term.
17. Hebrew Goddess, pp. 194 - 95. 18. Ibid., p. 187.
19. Unfortunately, I have been unable to locate this text in its larger setting. I do not have at my disposal the undated Warsaw edition of the Zohar Hadash which Patai cites (Hebrew Goddess, p. 317, n. 16) and I have been unable to find this text in the edition of Zohar Hadash available to me.
20. Kabbalah: New Perspectives, p. 80.
21. Ibid., p. 81.
22. Ibid., pp.83 -84.
23. Henry Corbin, Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn'Arabi, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton University, 1969), pp 136 – 45.

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