

שכינה

the divine feminine

Erin "Arowyn" Johansen, Webmaster

People of
Israel

Bride of
Tif'eret

Raising
her up

Ecstatic
Kabbalah

Strong
Voices

An Introduction...

שכינה: the divine feminine

This project has sure gone a long way from where it started.

When I began working on this research project for my Judaism class at UC Davis, I intended to create a comprehensive guide to the Kabbalah. However, upon searching the net for potential links, I found that there was so much out there already. It was nearly impossible not to duplicate what had already been done.

So, I decided to unite several elements of Judaism that are close to my heart, mix it with a healthy dose of feminism, and synthesize it all into what you have here, a view of several aspects of the *Shekhinah*.

This piece takes a variety of angles. The first is the traditional view of the people of Israel as the embodiment of the Shekhinah, as well as the Shekhinah as the presence, or eminence, of God. The second view is slightly more esoteric, and deals with the feminization of Shekhinah and her role as the divine bride of Tif'eret, in the sefirot. The third perspective is on the idea of the Kabbalist's goal of "Raising the Shekhinah," uniting her with God and thereby healing the rift within God itself. The fourth view is an overview of the Shekhinah's role in ecstatic Kabbalah, and the final perspective deals with Jewish women, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, and their involvement in their contemporary mystical communities, as well as the ironic rift between men and women, symbolized in the divine rift between the masculine and feminine aspects of Kabbalistic deity. This final section also gives links to various resources on the Web that I have found, to give a fuller understanding of the Kabbalah itself, the perspective from which this project has been created.

So, take a look around and enjoy. [Email me](#) with comments and suggestions.



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People of Israel

שכינה: the divine feminine

In the Sefirot, also known as the Tree of Life, Shekhinah is the lowest sefirah. This sefirah is associated with kingdom, hence its other name, *Malkuth*.

This sefirah is also representative of the people of Israel, and the People of Israel are thereby representative of Shekhinah. The community of Israel can never fully become one with God, unless the Shekhinah is successfully lifted and united with her King.

The Shekhinah is the material, tangible things of this world. Her spirit dwells as the material emanence of God, the shelter that never leaves the people of Israel. As the community of Israel has been exiled and redeemed, so it is with the Shekhinah. The idea that a part of God is present within the community itself at all times, a part of God that has been "exiled," gives comfort to the community as a whole. There is a sense of peace in knowing that even God can be riven, as people often are.

Shekhinah is not merely an idea to the Kabbalist; this divine essence of God is real, tangible. The femininity of Shekhinah enables the Kabbalist to make interesting allegories between female anatomy and the progress toward unification with the divine:

"The feminine principle... is... identified with the Divine Presence (Shekhinah), the essence of God that pervades all creation. It is this Essence that is the true beauty of all things. Thus, whenever one contemplates any beauty, he must realize that this is the Divine Essence, and can thus make use of it to begin the ascent on the Ladder.

"Although the word *Nevekah* alludes to the orifices of a woman in the physical sense, it also refers to the spiritual orifices of Malkhut-Kingship. It is through these orifices that one can ascend into the spiritual realm. This is represented by the opening on the bottom of the letter *heh*.

- *Nehunia ben Hakanah*

Sabbath rituals have also been heavily interwoven with Kabbalistic meaning, alluding to the Shekhinah. The duality of the earth below and heaven above is a major teaching of Kabbalah. Each action taken in the material world can have a direct affect on heavenly matters. For instance, the *Tkhine imrei Shifre*, written by Shifrah bas Joseph (largely ignored by mainstream Kabbalists, as the author was female), redefined many daily roles of women, particularly on Sabbath. For instance, the Sabbath evening candle-lighting ritual, for which women had previously been assigned the role of candle-lighting because Eve reputedly snuffed out the light of God by sinning:

"But this is the reason for it: Because the Shelter of Peace (=the

Shekhinah) rests on us (=women) during the Sabbath, on the (Sabbath-)souls, it is therefore proper for us to do below, in this form, as it is done above (within the Godhead), to kindle the lights. Therefore, because the two souls shine on the Sabbath, they (women) must light two candles... Therefore, by kindling the lamps for the holy Sabbath, we awaken great arousal in the upper world..."

The symbolism of the Kabbalah and Shekhinah is very sexual, perhaps one of the most intimately physical representations there is of the material world. A Kabbalist is required to give his wife great arousal, particularly on the Sabbath. This is a sort of sympathetic magic, in which the wife becomes the Shekhinah embodied, and her husband seeks to arouse her and create passion in heaven.

"When a person wishes to unify the Blessed Holy One and His Divine Presence (the male and female aspects of the Divine), he must banish all other thoughts... regarding which it is written, 'There are many thoughts in the heart of man' (Proverbs 19:21). One must then bring the Divine Presence into his mind, as the verse continues, 'But the counsel of God will abide.'

"When a man comes together with his wife, he must remove all clothing, to be together with her as one, as it is written, 'They shall be one flesh' (Genesis 2:21). In a similar manner, one must remove all other [thought, which serve as the soul's] garments, when he makes the Unification twice each day, declaring, 'Hear O Israel, God is our Lord, God is One.' (Deuteronomy 6:4)

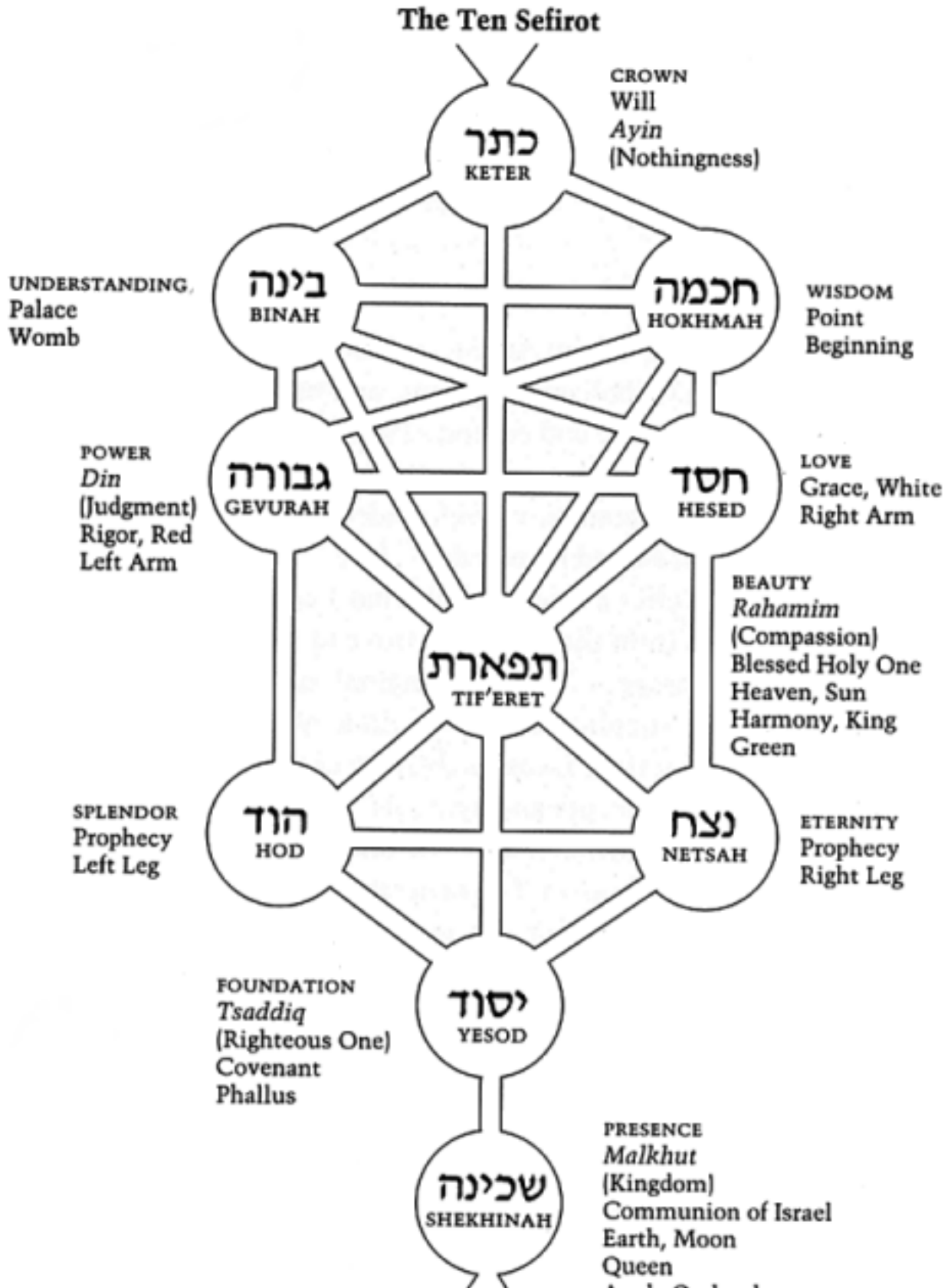
- *Tikuney Zohar*



The Ten Sefirot

שכינה: the divine feminine

Please be patient... this graphic is a bit large.





Apple Orchard
Rainbow



Ecstatic Kabbalah

שכינה: the divine feminine

The term Kabbalah literally translated means "tradition." In fact, the term was used to refer exclusively to the mystical tradition by Isaac the Blind and his followers around 1200 . Before this time, it was used to refer to a variety of different traditions. The term is used in the Talmud to refer to parts of the Bible outside of the Torah of Moses, and Oral Law is also referred to as "kabbalah" in post-talmudic literature. The development of Kabbalah in its early stages saw many terms used to refer to the tradition, such as *sitrei torah* and *razei torah* ("secrets of the Torah") in the Talmud.

Early Jewish mysticism was divided into two main branches, the *ma'aseh merkavah* (the work of the chariot) and the *ma'aseh bereshit* (the work of creation) . Merkavah mysticism was based on the visions of the prophet Ezekiel, related in the book of Ezekiel in the Tanakh. "Standing by a river in Babylon, the prophet sees a throne whirling through heaven, accompanied by four winged creatures darting to and fro. On the throne is 'a figure with the appearance of a human being,' surrounded by radiance like a rainbow." Merkavah mystics sought, through contemplation and meditation on various things, such as Torah, or the name of God, to achieve the vision of Ezekiel, and to see the figure on the throne.

Bereshit mysticism is the second important branch of early Jewish mysticism. The most important text of this movement is *Sefer Yetsirah* (The Book of Creation). This book introduced the ten sefirot, the divine emanations of God. The sefirot evolved later into a central theme within Jewish mysticism, and literally became "the central symbol system of Kabbalah." Gematria was also born in bereshit mysticism. The *Sefer Yetsirah* gives an account of creation that involves the divine letters of the Hebrew alphabet in order to effect creation. Gematria is the system of recombining letters into mystical combinations, in order to effect that same creative process, and thereby achieve co-creatorship and healing of the universe.

The Kabbalah known today is based on the *Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendor), published circa 1280 c.e. The work was probably the original work of Moses de Leon, but was attributed to the "ancient teachings of Shim'on bar Yohai and the *havrayya*, his mystical companions." The Zohar is a commentary on the Torah, revealing the mystical secrets supposedly related to Moses on Mount Sinai, when he received the ten commandments. The Kabbalist seeks to know God through analyzing the Torah, seeing its words as symbols of a greater floor plan of humanity that relates God's existence to the existence of humankind. Jewish mystics seek to bridge the abyss between man and God by healing the rift within God, that is uniting the feminine and masculine elements of God through the symbolism of the sefirot, and religious observances.

The sefirot are important to understanding the Kabbalistic concept of God. Above the sefirot is *Ein Sof* (Infinite One), the infinite God, neither male nor female,

radiating and filling every corner of the universe. *Ein Sof* reveals itself to humanity through its divine emanations, the sefirot. Keter is the sefirah closest to God, and the filter through which Ein Sof emanates toward humanity. Gradually, through a process of reflection and contraction, *Ein Sof* limits itself, and its presence is emanated and filtered down into a presence that is represented by the people of Israel themselves: the Shekhinah. This sefirah is closest to humanity, and is seen as the outcast queen of God. It is the most tangible part of God, and the place through which the mystic can access not only higher sefirot, but through ecstasy, God itself. The sefirot become "the transition between God's infinity, and the finite world."

The kabbalist, through contemplating the mysteries of God, seeks divine union with God, and the overpowering emotional bliss, or ecstasy, that goes with that union. The intellect is an important aspect of ecstatic kabbalah, as meditation leads to intellectual and thereby spiritual union with God, the ultimate goal. Abraham Abulafia, popularized the ideas of divine intellectual union through mysticism in the thirteenth century. The mystic, according to Abulafia, "prophesies, according to the entity which causes him to pass from potentiality into the final and perfect actuality and he and he become one entity, inseparable during this act." In other words, through the mystical process, the mystic is able to become perfectly one with God, the divine intellect, inseparable. This moment of ecstasy can only be achieved through contemplation and religious observance.

The idea of one-ness with God is inseparable from ecstatic Kabbalah. This is evident in the writings of several Kabbalists. Azriel of Gerona wrote in the thirteenth century: "Say to Wisdom, "You are my sister." Join thought to divine wisdom, so she and he become one." Likewise, by the fourteenth century, Isaac of Akko wrote in *Otsar Hayyim*:

"'Taste and see that God is good.' The soul will cleave to the divine mind, and the divine mind will cleave to her... She and the divine mind become one, like pouring a jug of water into a gushing spring: all becomes one."

The mystic cleaves to the divine mind through contemplation of God, the essence of the divine mind, and often through contemplation of YHVH, the sacred name of God.

Abulafia refers to man as a "composite entity," composed of the ten sefirot. When one achieves one-ness with God, the finite composite becomes the infinite composite, and man is able to achieve the status of the ultimate spiritual composite, like God - a radical concept in Judaism, and most likely the reason that Abulafia's

"The light that is revealed is called the Garment of the King. The light within, within is a concealed light. In that light dwells the Ineffable One, the Unrevealed. ...all those lights sparkle from the Holy Ancient One."
- *Sefer ha-Zohar*

ideas were actively suppressed by mainstream kabbalists.

The process of seeking divine, ecstatic union and revelation is characterized by experiences of dialectical forces: fear and joy, terror and triumph. Abulafia wrote of this experience:

"Your life blood is in your heart... This blood within you will begin to vibrate because of the living permutations [of YHVH] that loosen it. Your entire body will then begin to tremble, and all your limbs will be siezed with shuddering. You will experience the terror of God, and will be enveloped with fear of Him... You will then feel as if an additional spirit is within you, arousing you and strengthening you, passing through your entire body and giving you pleasure... You will rejoice and have great pleasure. You will experience ecstasy and trembling - ecstasy for the soul, and trembling for the body... The Divine Presence will then rest on you... You will then recognize the true way."

The ecstatic experience of the mystic is the culmination of an effort to unite himself with God. I say "himself" because the extant texts, as well as tradition, refer to men as the exclusive practitioners of ecstatic Kabbalah. Yet this unification symbolizes the reunification of God itself, as below, so above. Ecstatic Kabbalah is not only a means of personal spiritual fulfillment, but is also seen by the mystic as a grander, somewhat altruistic method of healing the universe through practical means, namely through intellectual one-ness with God.

In other words, by identifying with the divine essence of God (Shekhinah), and acheiving unity with the divine itself (*Ein Sof*), the Kabbalist seeks to lift the Shekhinah, and restore unity within the Divine. God needs humanity, as humanity needs God.



Raising her up

שכינה: the divine feminine

The Shekhinah is a clear and striking representation of the rift within God perceived by the Kabbalah. She has been exiled, fallen to earth and become separated from her Beloved.

Each person has a bit of the divine essence within, and must cleave to that divine essence, and thereby treat the Shekhinah with respect. One lifts the Shekhinah in various ways, depending on the practices and beliefs of the one attempting the task. Meditation, contemplation, righteous living, fulfilling the *mitzvot*... all of these are ways that various mystics and non-mystics have sought to effect this unification.

Abraham Abulafia, one of the original Ecstatic Kabbalists, spoke of knots within the soul, that had to be untied in order to liberate the divine light within.

"All the inner forces and the hidden souls in man are differentiated in the bodies. It is however in the nature of all of them that when their knots are untied, they return to their origin, which is one without any duality, and which comprises the multiplicity." (Abulafia)

By untying the knots in the human soul, one is able to liberate the divine essence (Shekhinah) within, and reunify it with *Ein Sof*. At creation, the cosmic, creative force of *Ein Sof* shattered the vessels of the universe. These shards are known as the *kelipot*, and hold the divine sparks of God, also known as the *tikkun*.

As the shards of the vessels that were broken during creation (*kelipot*) hold the divine sparks of the Shekhinah (*tikkun*), so also humanity holds the shards of the original soul of humanity. Through reunification of this soul, the Kabbalist also reunites the *tikkun* and is able to lift the sparks up to God, uniting the Shekhinah with her beloved. By liberating the human soul from the fetters of his humanness, the mystic is also able to liberate the *tikkun* from the *kelipot*.

This effects the healing of God, and bridges the abyss between God and his people, since the people of Israel are the embodiment of the Shekhinah. In this way, the mystic is able to actively participate in the healing of the universal rift between humanity and God, and hopes to lift humanity through his actions toward the divine.

"When we say that the Shekhinah is in the dust, we must realize that we can treat her with respect, or we can treat her with disrespect... By treating her with respect, we may hope to lift the Shekhinah out of the dust."

- *Sodmerer Rebbe*



Bride of Tif'eret

שכינה: the divine feminine

The Sefirot, also known as the Tree of Life, are the central symbolic structure of Kabbalah. It is through meditation on the Sefirot that one is able to ascend through the levels of God's emanations, which end in the Shekhinah, the divine essence pervading creation, and thereby, humankind.

Kabbalah is the name for the Jewish mystical tradition. Literally translated as "tradition," Kabbalah began to be exclusively used as a term for Jewish mysticism during the thirteenth century. The central symbolic structure of Kabbalah is the Tree of Life, composed of ten sefirot. The closest to God is Keter, which emanates down eventually into Tif'eret, the central sefirah and embodiment of the beauty and compassion of God. The final sefirah is Shekhinah, the closest to humanity and furthest from God, the communion of Israel and the exiled Queen of God. Tif'eret is seen as the God of the Bible, disconnected from His Bride, Shekhinah. The goal of the mystic is to raise the Shekhinah, the feminine aspect of God, and unite her with Tif'eret.

The Shekhinah is lifted through the sefirah Yesod, representative of the Zaddik, the righteous one who unites the Shekhinah with Tif'eret, in a divine union, the *heiros gamos* of Jewish mystical mythology, just as a Zaddik on earth would perform a marriage between a man and woman. The Shekhinah is seen as feminine, but only through the eyes of men. It is the man's job to arouse the Shekhinah, to arouse God himself and create a divine, intellectual love affair.

Below are excerpts from a translation of the *Lekhad Dodi* into its Kabbalistic symbolic meaning, taken from David Ariel's *The Mystic Quest*. This poem symbolizes the transformation of the Sabbath into a "cosmic wedding between the masculine Tiferet and feminine Shekhinah of God. The role of the congregation is to bring the lovers together, for this cannot be accomplished without their assistance." (Ariel, p. 75)

"Come, my beloved Tiferet,
To unite with the bride Shekhinah-Malkuth.
Let us welcome the Shekhinah into our midst.

...On the Sabbath, Tiferet and Malkhut are united.
In unity are Malkhut, God's name,
Tiferet and Binah.

Awake! End your exile from Tiferet!
Adorn yourself with the garments of Tiferet
With the aid of the messiah, from the house of David,
Who is nourished by Malkhut.
Shekhinah, come close to my soul,
Redeem it!

...By you, Shekhinah, the Jewish people will be restored
And the earthly Jerusalem will be rebuilt..."

"While outwardly the Song of Songs is simply a beautiful love song, it actually is the most profound song of unification of Z'er Anpin [the male face of God, also Tiferet] and his Bride. It thus contains a hidden holiness, just [as] this mundane world contains the hidden holiness of the Shekhinah..."

- *Nehunia ben Hakanah*



Strong Voices

שכינה: the divine feminine

Jewish women have always been strong leaders. In the Tanakh, we find stories of women such as Deborah and Esther, women who delivered their people from the hands of their enemies, who outsmarted the men on both sides. Yet, these same women were also declared "unclean" by the laws of the Torah, simply because they bled. While various scientific statements can be made about the probabilities of pregnancy if a man has intercourse with his wife during the allotted time while she was not in the flow time of her menstrual cycle, there is still a stigma that surrounds women today while they are bleeding. A natural time is considered "unclean," rather than empowering.

Jewish women, along with many other women of their time, were expected to be devoted wives, clever financial planners, careful mothers, and content with their assigned roles. In the eighteenth century this was the case for most Jewish women, yet the silent (and not-so-silent) struggle of a few women to become legitimate scholars, involved in the mystical traditions of their religion, rings out in the literature that has survived, both in its content and its language. The exile of the Jewish woman from Jewish scholastic and mystical life is uncannily symbolized in the Kabbalistic view of the rift within God itself, the separation of masculine and feminine that the mystic sought to heal.

The realm of scholarship and mysticism was considered by most to be the arena of men. Groups of mystics were considered brotherhoods. Only men could be rabbis, women were to look after the home and family, and were to help with the family business if necessary. Public offices and concerns were the domain of men. So, too, were the esoteric doctrines of the Kabbalah. To say that these two were related would be incorrect, insofar as in other religious mystical traditions, women who were barred from scholarship nonetheless contributed heavily to those mystical traditions.

Joseph Caro wrote of the Shekhinah speaking to him and other mystics:

"I am the Mother... I am the redeeming angel... I am the emissary of the Holy One, blessed be He... I watch over you steadily... The Shekhinah talks to you... Go to a pure place, thinking constantly of Torah without letting your thoughts wander for a second... Unify your heart constantly... thinking of nothing except me, as I appear in my Torah and ritual. This is the mystery of unity... For the soul that attaches itself... literally becomes a 'Camp of the Shekhinah.'"

So, we see that the Shekhinah is viewed as the lover, the embodiment of the divine Torah, the essence of God that pervades all creation. By becoming a lover of the Torah, a man may also become the lover of the Shekhinah, and thereby arouse her and lift her to God in the effort of reunification. If this is the only manner of "lifting the Shekhinah," then where do women fit in?

Maimonides (1135-1204) had a tremendous impact on Jewish thinking, and his Aristotelian concepts worked their way into many different areas. One place this is evident is the concept of woman as the stern, harsh, judgmental aspect of God. The goal of the mystic is to "soften" the Shekhinah, to balance the scales in favor of the gentle, masculine side. To our modern minds, this concept might seem absurd, but to the medieval mind, particularly the medieval mind heavily influenced by misogynistic Aristotelian thinking, this idea was quite ordinary, and even taken for granted. Among the Aristotelian ideas evident are the placement of feminine aspects on the Tree of Life itself. Each feminine aspect, except for the Shekhinah, is placed on the left, the side of darkness and evil. According to tradition, Gevurah (also known as Din) is the dark, demonic force with which Ein Sof limits itself from expanding out and filling the universe with its infinite goodness.

The climate in which the Kabbalah was ripened, while not necessarily anti-woman, was decidedly one-sided, heavily leaning in favor of male scholarship and reason. By the eighteenth century, in the staunchly conservative Jewish communities, it was usually only the Rabbis' daughters who even learned to read and write Hebrew, much less learn the intricacies of Talmud. Even fewer women learned Aramaic and the many texts that comprised the literary compendium of Kabbalistic concept and knowledge. There is a striking parallel between the cosmic rift in the male and female aspects of God, and the male and female aspects of society: the Shekhinah, like the women of the Jewish community, had been intellectually exiled. Yet, in the effort to reunite masculine and feminine in God, male practitioners often overlooked the full extent of their own separation from their female partners, content with their own cultural sanctions against these women.

There is substantial evidence that women created for themselves a new form of women's spirituality within their daily lives. The emergence of *tkhines*, Yiddish supplicatory prayers, in the seventeenth century was a sign that things were changing for women. While most *tkhines* were written by men, a vast number of them were written by women. These voluntary prayers focused on important religious events in the lives of women, at least through the nineteenth century, and by looking at the structure of the *tkhines* there becomes evident a structure organized around the private events of the female domestic life.

The *Tkhine imrei Shifre* (The *tkhine* of Shifrah's Words), written by Shifrah bas Joseph, is one example of the redefinition by women of the woman's domestic duties, particularly in the duties that define her Jewishness. In *Imrei Shifre*, Shifrah redefines the symbolism behind the candle-lighting ritual required of women on the Sabbath. Rather than accepting the traditional meaning of this ritual, that it was woman's symbolic atonement for Eve's dispersal of light from the world, she calls upon Kabbalistic doctrine to redefine and edify woman's role in the sacred Sabbath ceremony.

By creating a place for women to kindle the divine lights, and awaken and arouse the upper world, Shifrah does what no man has been willing to do thus far: create a place for women in mystical tradition. Rather than trying to break into the upper

echalon of male-dominated scholastic and mystical communities, Shifrah brought the ideas of Kabbalah to a level where women could not only understand, but participate in ritual. This is not to say that women were not intelligent enough to understand Kabbalistic ideas. However, intricate knowledge of Talmud and Torah are required before fully understanding Kabbalistic concepts, something that most of Shifrah's contemporaries women didn't have. So, she brought the concepts into a woman's world, in women's terms, in Yiddish, a woman's language, converting a popular ritual into one that praised women, rather than denigrated them.

To say that women were excluded from Jewish mystical traditions completely would be an error. However, it was not the leaders of those traditions that sought to include women, or particularly agreed with the inclusion of women in their traditions. Rather, it was the women themselves who redefined ideas and carved for themselves a niche within their own culture. In keeping with their own tradition of creating a structure of religious observances around their own daily lives, they also brought into these structures the confidence that they, too, were responsible for repairing the rift between the Shekhinah and God. They were the Shekhinah in flesh, and their own separation from male-dominated society was symbolized by the very belief held by the mystics of their communities: the divine separation.

Modern Jewish feminism centers around the Shekhinah. The idea of the divine feminine has much appeal for many women. The Shekhinah should not be misinterpreted as a "Hebrew Goddess," however. The central idea is that the Shekhinah is the feminine face of God, one facet in a perfectly cut diamond: the facet that reflects the light to our own eyes. However, like a fine diamond, the Shekhinah may be difficult for those who are not rich in the gifts of esoteric understanding to fully grasp and understand. Yet, as in all aspects of Judaism over time, the concept of Shekhinah is forever changing and transforming. Many standing outside of Judaism would see Shekhinah as an unmistakable Goddess, fitting into the traditional mythological role of exile and return, the compassionate mother and fierce yet beautiful presence. However, one must step inside the tradition to realize the full extent of Shekhinah. To call the Shekhinah simply a Goddess figure would be limiting the vision of the Kabbalists. Rather, the Shekhinah is the infinite divine essence that pervades all of creation, and she is inseparable, yet seemingly forever separated from, the ultimate, genderless, divine and infinite God.

Other Voices

- [Judaism 101](#) ... this is an excellent site giving an overview of everything Jewish, including Kabbalah.
- [Kabbalah and Jewish Mysticism](#)
- [Bnei Baruch Kabbalah](#)
- [Jewish Kabbalah](#)
- [Jewish Mystical Traditions](#)

- Sakina, Kabbalah, Shekhinah
- Pirkei Avot

