

Shekhinah

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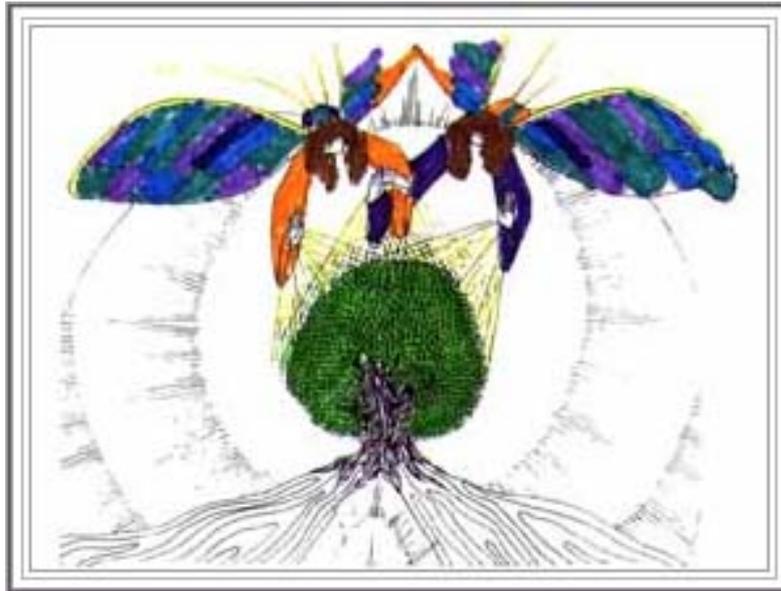
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Introduction

Like God, Shekhinah is a manifestation cosmic feminine that pervades all religions and extends from Yin as a fundamental cosmic principle of Taoism, through the female dakinis of Buddhism, to Sophia of Christianity, and the Hebrew Shekhinah. Sakina is a manifestation of the Shekhinah quoted by Muhammad from his experience of Jewish folklore in Medina, however the Muslim world has yet to accept its feminine sacred side except in the meditations of some Sufi masters, so here we present three accounts of the Shekhinah form the first hand accounts of women coming to terms of renewal in the face of the patriachal dominance of Judaism and Christianity.

Feminine Face of God

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Excerpts from *The Feminine Face of God: Unfolding the Sacred in Women* Bantam Books New York 1991 Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins

Shekhinah. Shekhinah. The word simply popped into my mind like an uninvited guest and wouldn't go away. At times it seemed to disappear, but then it would come again, quietly, this strange word Shekhinah. It seemed to be waiting patiently for me to pay attention to it. After hearing it in my mind for three days I tried saying it out loud. "Shekhinah." It had an interesting sound. And when I said it, I felt a soft tug somewhere deep inside. I began to ask my friends if they knew what it meant. It sounded as if it could be Hebrew, but although I knew some Hebrew, it was not familiar to me. When my husband and friends were unable to help, I tried the library in our small town but found no answer there either.

Shekhinah. Shekhinah. It was becoming more insistent now, demanding my attention. Still puzzling over what it could mean, I was sitting in my bedroom one morning when my friend Joan hurried through the door. She strode across the room and thrust a book into my hands.

"Let's try this," she said. I glanced down at the blue cover on which the word Kabbalah was written, and turned to the index. Running my finger quickly down the S column, I read, "Shekhinah: the feminine face of God." The words sent shock waves rippling down my spine and goose flesh bristling on my bare arms because I realized at once that the Shekhinah was not an uninvited guest at

all. She had been announced to me with great ceremony in a powerful dream a full month earlier. In the dream, I happily soar high above the clouds on a great golden dragon until I wonder, "Is this all there is?" The dragon immediately descends to earth, alighting at the side of a jewellike temple on a large body of water. I want to enter the temple, but I'm afraid to go in alone. I turn back to the dragon, hoping it will come and protect me. But this temple is human-sized and the dragon will not fit through the door. I begin to climb the stairs to the entrance anyway, and now I see a ferocious temple guardian with bulging eyes looming menacingly in the doorway. Black dogs snarl on either side of him. With uncharacteristic bravery I continue walking, and as I stride through the door the guardian and his dogs evaporate as if made of fog. Once I'm inside the doorway, an old man with long robes and a white beard emerges from an inner hallway to greet me. Without actually speaking, he lets me know that his name is Melchizedek. He is wearing a handsome dagger with a handle of turquoise and jade, and as soon as I notice this he presents me with a matching dagger, indicating that I am to wear it on my right side. Then he motions me ahead of him. It is clear that he expects me to lead the way.

I step into a long hallway with a high ceiling and red tiles on the floor. Walking slowly, we eventually come to a pair of polished wooden doors at the end of the corridor. I open them silently and lead the way into a large, empty room. A plain wooden stage is set against the far wall. At the back of the stage is a built-in cabinet. I approach the cabinet and pull open the doors.

I am dumbfounded by what I see. Rolled onto finely carved wooden poles is the most sacred object in Judaism, the Torah. I learned as a child that the Torah contains the five books of Moses written on parchment by an Orthodox scribe, and that if even one letter has been written incorrectly, the Torah cannot be used. I have never actually seen a Torah close up or held one, since these privileges were permitted only to men when I was growing up. But now I lift this Torah carefully out of its cabinet and cradle it to me tenderly as if it were a baby.

Then I notice something unusual. Instead of a mantle of velvet covering the scrolls, or a simple ribbon holding them closed, the Torah has been sealed shut by a dark round blot of red wax. I look at Melchizedek. "This is a very special Torah," he says. Pulling out his dagger, he breaks the seal and rolls open the scrolls. They are absolutely blank. "The Torah is empty," he says, "because what you need to know now is not written in any book. You already contain that knowledge. It is to be unfolded from within you."

"What is this Torah for?" I ask.

My question seems to set in motion the next sequence of events. Without speaking Melchizedek lifts the Torah and lightly places it inside my body, from my shoulders to my knees. I accept this gratefully, feeling my body as a sacred vessel.

At once, a great commotion breaks out behind us. Spinning around, I see that the room is now filled with long-bearded patriarchs wearing black coats and trousers. They're holding hands, laughing, singing and dancing jubilantly around the room. They pull me into their celebration. As I dance I seem to see Moses, King David and King Solomon, and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They, too, are dressed in black coats and trousers, dancing with such heartfelt abandonment that I catch their joy and am filled with it. Ecstatically we whirl round and round the room, laughing.

Finally the dancing stops and I ask, "What is this all about?" Melchizedek answers, "We are celebrating because you, a woman, have consented to accept full spiritual responsibility in your life. This is your initiation as one who will serve the planet."

As I wonder what this means, he continues, "And you are not the only one. Many, many women are coming forward now to lead the way. "

"But who will be our teachers?" I protest.

"You will be teachers for each other. You will come together in circles and speak your truth to each other. The time has come for women to accept their spiritual responsibility for our planet."

"Will you help us?" I ask the assembled patriarchs.

"We are your brothers," they answer, and with that the entire room is flooded with an energy of indescribable kindness. I am absolutely confident in this moment that they are our brothers. I feel their love without any question. They say then, "We have initiated you and we give you our wholehearted blessings. But we no longer know the way. Our ways do not work anymore. You women must find a new way."

Encountering Shechinah



Excerpts from: Encountering the Shechinah, The Jewish Goddess Rabbi Leah Novick, from Nicholson, Shirley ed. 1983 The Goddess Re-Awakening 204-14.

She so pervades this lower world... that if you search in deed, thought and speculation, you will find Shechinah, for there is no beginning or end to her. Rabbi Joseph 13th-cent mystic

Introduction

Traditional Jewish scholars have always insisted that the Shechinah is not a separate presence from the one God whom Jews worship. At the same time, they have given us a Shechinah literature replete with images, descriptions, and qualities of the most detailed and often anthropomorphic nature. This body of commentary, poetry, and prayer provides, in my view, a filtered but consistent memory of "God the Mother," and is the basis for the "Jewish Goddess." I say "Jewish Goddess" pointedly to distinguish her from the "Hebrew Goddess" that Professor Raphael Patai has documented so well

namely the Canaanite Mother Goddess Asherah. The Bible itself tells us that the ancient Hebrews honored her until about 800 B.C.E. when King Josiah removed the Asherah from the Jerusalem temple and destroyed the outlying shrines. While her worship had been denounced repeatedly by the Prophets, they themselves chronicled consistent Jewish homage to Asherah or Astarte, Queen of Heaven.

The Shechinah is defined, in traditional Jewish writings, as the "female aspect of God" or the "presence" of the infinite God in the world. She is introduced in the early rabbinical commentaries as the "immanence" or "indwelling" of the living God, whose role as the animating life force of the earth is to balance the transcendent deity.

While she does not appear by name in the five books of Moses, the explicators of the Old Testament refer to her in interpreting the text. For example, when Moses encounters the burning bush, he is told to remove his shoes and prepare himself to receive the Shechinah. According to the rabbis, the choice of the simple thorn bush as the vehicle for the revelation was to emphasize the Shechinah's presence, since nothing in nature can exist without her. In Proverbs, we are introduced to the Divine Mother as Chochmah (Wisdom), who was present from the time of creation as the loving consort and coarchitect with the YHVH. In this Solomonic portrayal, she delights in humanity and provides us with her wise direction towards the path of truth and justice. (In this form, she is related to the Sophia of the Gnostics, who were influenced by Jewish thinking, and also included Hellenized Jews in their numbers.)

This association with humanity was emphasized by the Talmudists who saw her as suffering when human beings erred: "Acts of bloodshed, incest, perversion of justice and falsification of measures cause her to depart." They tell us: "Whoever is humble will ultimately cause the Shechinah to dwell upon earth. Whoever is haughty brings about the defilement of the Earth and the departure of the Shechinah." In the Talmudic view, actions harmful to other human beings or the earth cause the Shechinah to flee, and she rises upward to the Seven Heavens.' On the other side of the scale are the positive actions of humanity which attract her presence downward to the earth. The other way that the Shechinah is drawn

downward is when people are in need of her as a comforting presence. The rabbis tell us she hovers at the bed of all sick individuals and is seen by the dying as they exit the world into the great light. According to tradition, the Shechinah comes to the good and true at death, giving them the opportunity to go straight up the center of the heavenly ladder in a moment of pure consciousness, into the merger with the Divine.

The Shechinah is intimately connected with expressions of human love, particularly romantic and marital bliss. It is she who blesses the happy couple; the glow of lovers is considered to be the reflection of her presence. The rabbis say: "When man and wife are worthy, the Shechinah abides in their midst. If they are unworthy, fire consumes them." Early Jewish mystics emphasized the splendor of the Shechinah, often envisioning her as God's glory. In their conception, she is the jewel or precious stone represented by the Torah, as the crowned bride of God. She is the luminous presence of the Divine, the great light who shines on all creatures.

Similar concepts are expressed in later Jewish writings, reflecting the continuity of the received oral teachings back to the early centuries of the common era. This received knowledge or "Kabbalah" was further developed by the twelfth and thirteenth-century German "Pietists" (also called Hasidists) and reached its zenith with the later Spanish and Safed Kabbalists. It was the latter group, living in a spiritual enclave in Northern Israel in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, who articulated the qualities of the divine female in considerable detail. Within the Kabbalistic system of "sephiroth" or emanations of divine energy (known to the readers as the "tree of Iffe" or "cosmic tree"), the ten sephiroth are equally balanced with one side of the tree representing female qualities and the other male qualities. Within this system or map of consciousness, Shechinah is most often identified with Malchuth (which translates as "sovereignty") at the base of the cosmic tree, which to me represents the energy of the earth.

In the poetry of Rabbi Isaac Luri (the Ari), leader of the Safed Kabbalistic school, there are many phrases that describe Shechinah. The Ari's liturgical poems refer to her as the "Matronit..... holy

ancient one, the old of days, the holy old one without eyes," and the "holy apple orchard" (the latter consistent with the teaching that to experience the Shechinah one needs only to enter an apple orchard in bloom). While the outdoor rituals and breathing practices used to induce visions of the Shechinah declined with the sacred community of Safed, the images of Shechinah as Shabbos Queen were passed on in the prayers for receiving the Sabbath, which are still used each week by Jews around the world. Because the Kabbalists were devoted to the reunification of the dyadic Godhead, all of their prayers began with blessings that invited both the YHVH and the Shechinah. This form, too, has been preserved and continues to be used.

Yet another contribution of the Safed school was its emphasis on spiritualized sexuality as a part of sacred practice (of course, within Jewish marital guidelines and family purity laws). Despite the fact that this was an all-male esoteric movement, the writings acknowledge female orgasm and recognize the persona of wife and mother as earthly representatives of Shechinah. The Baal Shem master-teacher of the seventeenth-century movement believed that the prayers of women ascended directly to God. He also acknowledged women's capacity for prophecy, and he attracted many female followers. In the early years when the movement was still quite radical, the openness to women's spiritual charisma resulted in the emergence of women "rebbees," mostly daughters and wives of the great masters. Charisma is one of the blessings of Shechinah, according to the Talmud. Taking the teachings of Kabbalah and adapting them to community life in a more egalitarian way, Hasiduth restored the belief in each individual's ability to access the Shechinah and bring her back to earth through personal actions.

For women who must overcome the misogynistic text in order to get to the poetic metaphor, interpretation must come early in the study process. This is why Jewish women are writing new Midrash, expositions of the significance of biblical texts, to restore the Torah to both sexes as a meaningful source of sacred knowledge. Contemporary Jewish feminists have had to confront sexism in religious life and language including the exclusion of women from

the sacred professions. As a result of our activism, some important doors have opened in the last decade. Increasingly, we are now working on bringing forth our own images of the Divine and turning to the creation of new forms to nourish those who are ready for change.

In this process, the Shechinah that is emerging, especially in North America is a varied Goddess, indeed a Goddess with a thousand faces. For what is apparent in the workshops and conferences on Jewish feminism and in the New Moon groups (which are springing up spontaneously in many places) is that Jewish women carry the imprint and the images of the Goddess within them; in the traditional Shechinah and the earlier Canaanite and Middle Eastern forms. Because this generation is serving as the midwife for the rebirth of the Shechinah, we will have to be familiar with the ancient knowledge and traditional prayers which invoke her, at the same time that we are creating new forms. In this ancient/future subculture we will need poets and prophets, rebels and rabbis, musicians and mothers. What is clear is that we have the beginnings of a movement without a hierarchy, a central leader, or a single organization.

An Altar of Earth



Excerpts from: An Altar of Earth: Reflections on Jews,

Goddesses and the Zohar Rabbi Jill Hammer

"It says in Deuteronomy, "'You shall not plant for yourselves an asherah or any kind of tree beside the altar of the Lord thy God which (asher) you shall make for yourselves." Are we to suppose that anywhere else it is permitted [to plant an Asherah]? [Of course not!] The truth is that the He' [the letter of God's name that represents the feminine Divine] is called Asherah, after the name of its spouse, Asher, and the meaning of the verse is therefore: "You shall not plant another Asherah by the side of the altar which is established upon this [Asherah]." (Zohar I, 49a)

The Jewish mysticism of the Zohar (a twelfth-century mystical document from Spain that influenced the course of all Jewish mysticism after it) is saturated with panentheism, the belief that God is both separate from and embodied in the natural world, i.e., that God "surrounds and fills" the universe. Even so, the passage that appears at the beginning of this article is so shocking that it is hard to decode. The Zohar quotes a classic text from Deuteronomy prohibiting pagan worship: "You shall not set up an asherah, or any kind of tree, near the altar..." An asherah, as most scholars agree, based upon excavations as well as other ancient references, is a pillar or tree representing the goddess Asherah.

Stone inscriptions show that Israelites may once have worshipped Asherah, a goddess of love and fertility known as "She Who Walks on the Sea," as the female counterpart to the Israelite god we call Adonai. References in Jeremiah 7:18 and 44:17 indicates that Israelite women worshipped the "queen of heaven" by baking cakes-this queen may have been Asherah.

Yet the Zohar, steeped in multiple personalized, sexualized, gendered images of the deity, chooses to read this passage in a radically different way. The Zohar writers do not equate Asherah with Lilith or another demonic figure, which would be an easy theological move. Instead, they reread the verse. It is not, they say, that the Torah wants to tell us not to plant an asherah by the altar because it is an idolatrous object. If the Torah had wanted to tell us that, it simply would have said: "Do not plant an asherah anywhere." Rather, the Torah wants to tell us that Asherah is a

name for the Shekhinah, the feminine Divine presence, already at the altar. The Zohar does not choose to say that the goddess Asherah is evil or false and that worshipping her is a theological mistake. Rather, it says that the theological mistake would be to assume that Asherah (the tree) is separate from Shekhinah (the altar), when in fact they are one. ... The Zohar implies that we abstain from using the name Asherah, not out of theological exactness, but out of courtesy: we abstain in order to empathize with the pain of the Shekhinah.

The unspoken implication of this is that in the world to come, when the Messiah has arrived, we will be able to call the Shekhinah Asherah. It is only in this imperfect world, where the Shekhinah is exiled, that we are banned from doing so. In a completed world, the Zohar implies, Jews would be able to rejoice in the fact that gods and goddesses can be aspects of divinity.

If we take seriously the idea that God speaks not only in fixed revelation but also through human experience, we cannot help but entertain the idea that the ancient poets who praised goddesses and gods were, at least part of the time, praising the same infinite holy source that we wish to honor. When I look at some of those ancient poems, and the modern ones that echo them, I feel a desire for the sacred that stretches across history and theology to meet mine.