

Balance: sefirotic seeing

turning to see what may be seen: in the Jewish culture of learning

In *Midrash Rabbah* on Genesis a curious text is preserved:

"And it came to pass, when she was in hard labor" (Gen. 25.17). Two disciples of R Joshua changed their cloaks at the time of persecution. A certain [Roman] officer, an apostate, met them and said to them: 'If you are its [the Torah's] children, offer your lives for it; while if you are not its children, why should you be slain for its sake?' 'We are its children,' they replied, 'and we do incur death for its sake.' 'I will ask you three questions,' said he; 'if you answer them, it is well, but if not, I will destroy you.

This is not an unusual literary device, although it is a fascinating one. It is a provocative idea to depict a member of the oppressing society challenging the Torah-knowledge of the sages, and, ironically, this Roman is an apostate Jew, and it appears that he knows the traditions of correct Torah interpretation better than Rabbi Joshua's students do. The time is the Hadrianic persecution, a terrible time of danger for all who taught and studied Torah, and the students have apparently attempted to disguise themselves in order to avoid danger. The Roman officer who had been a Jew recognized them nevertheless, and they are in terrible danger.

The test of three questions is a classic device. The disciples of Rabbi Joshua fail the first two tests; in both cases the correct interpretation expresses a harsher judgment toward "the heathens", which suggests that the two disciples were attempting to avoid expressing the teachings' true impact in the presence of their interrogator, who after all had left Judaism, and joined those same heathens.

Finally he asked them: 'What is the meaning of "and it came to pass, when she was in hard labor, that the midwife said to her: fear not, for this also is a son for you"?' 'A woman in confinement is thus soothed,' they replied, 'and she is told when she is giving birth, "Fear not, for you have given birth to a male child." 'Your teacher Joshua did not expound it thus,' he answered, 'but with every tribal ancestor a twin sister was born. As Abba Halpa the son of

Korah said: An additional twin sister was born with Benjamin'.¹

The disciples fail the third test as well, although this one has nothing to do with heathens and, further, has no apparent connection at all to the first two questions. The text is silent regarding whether or not the two disciples were taken to meet their unfortunate fate by the Roman apostate who knew their Rabbi's teachings better than they. But what of this curious question of this teaching of Joshua and of Abba Halpa the son of Korah about unseen twin sisters, and why, after all, it is being asked as a question of life and death in these moments by this representative of the Roman Empire?

The interpretative device by which the verse is interpreted to include the birth of a twin sister with every male tribal ancestor depends upon the redundancy of the word "also" in the midwife's words to Rachel. The word "also" might refer to the fact that Rachel has already borne a son, Joseph, to Jacob, but nevertheless we have the evidence of this midrash, preserving an alternate interpretation, which according to this text is a tradition held and transmitted by at least two sages, and one apostate. It is a tradition without much impact, or import, in mainstream Jewish teaching, but it is nevertheless preserved. So also is a tradition that with Cain and Abel twin sisters were also born.²

Although this teaching is not developed extensively, it is worthy of study for the sake of the light it may shed upon the place of the feminine in Rabbinic

¹ *Bereshit Rabbah* 82.8

² BT *Sanhedrin* 38b, also see BT *Yevamot* 62a and *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*

tradition. If we are to reason from the context of this curious passage, it worth noting that this is an example of a type of traditional text which preserves a certain subversive message, in this case, the apostate who knows Torah better than its faithful students. This is something that the rabbinic texts are wont to do. In a variety of ways, sometimes in stories featuring women, the mistakes of rabbis are regularly displayed; stories of Beruriah, Ima Shalom, Yalta and other women tend to depict them as much more incisively intelligent than the prevailing male-rabbi world of the *beit midrash* is willing to recognize in any normative, *halakhah*-influencing fashion.

In this usually-overlooked tradition of a twin sister there is much to see for one who is ready to turn and gaze. There is certainly a hint of an idea which Jewish mysticism will pick up and develop, that the world – and God – consists of the balancing of two equal halves, one male and one female. The *peshat* level of the text states clearly: with every male tribal ancestor a twin sister was born. For the mystical, this is an invitation to interpret more deeply, toward *derash* and *remez*: birth, as the initial state of being, is in the beginning composed of a balance which is equally female and male. This idea applies to a human child, and, by way of reflection, this idea is also a window into the state of being of all beginnings, and all creation.

turning to see what may be seen in Jewish ritual

This shadowy tradition of unknown, half-glimpsed twin sisters expresses the

sense of the under-recognized female presence in patriarchal Judaism, which nevertheless still asserts its presence rather in the way that one's nerves still register the presence of an amputated limb. There is much in the Tanakh which offers insight into the ways in which the female half of humanity became less than half in her permitted religious impact. Eve herself, the original *ezer k'negdo*, carries the entire blame for the sin and misery of the human condition in some rabbinic traditions; the assertion that the male God of Israel was fully capable of taking over the traditional place of the fertility goddess in assuring the fruitfulness of womb and field; the prophetic employment of misogynistic metaphors such as the image used by the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, of Israel as a whore spreading her legs under a tree for all comers.³ That powerful image of the tree itself, identified with the goddess through the ancient Near East, is an example of the way in which female aspects of religion can be suppressed but not eradicated: the tree becomes the seven-branched Menorah which stands in the Temple next to the Ark, and the Torah is called *etz khayim*, the Tree of Life. The relationship between the symbol of life and the woman who bears it was thus disconnected on the level of religious consciousness, and driven underground. Only the Song of Songs was left to pique our curiosity, and even that erotic love poetry was re-assigned to the relationship between God and Israel.

As we have noted, the teaching which asserts that twin sisters were born

³ Ezekiel 16 is a litany of misogynistic accusations; the association with "every leafy tree" appears in Jeremiah 2 and 3

with each of the tribes' ancestors are a striking example of the Talmud's willingness to subvert its own mainstream message: the sisters' existence is asserted, but they are never seen in the Torah's narrative. In mystical speculation they, along with the Tree of Life and the Mother of Israel, appear clearly in all their holy glory in of the female half of the *sefirot*. They are the necessary equal and opposite which stands over against the more visible male expression of Judaism. They are that which balances the whole.

What would Judaism look like if the female aspect – of God, of humanity, of the individual – occupied a place which was truly *ezer k'negdo*, of equal and opposite strength for the balancing of reality between the Her and the Him of life?

It is not enough to add the names of the Matriarchs alongside those of their husbands in the daily *Amidah*, the central prayer of the Jewish liturgy; in such a way the women whose names are recited – Sarah, Rivkah, Rakhel and Leah – are barely more than supportive appendages. In some ritual matters the female place may be taken alongside the male's, such as the creation of *bat mitzvah*, which is identical in liberal Judaism to *bar mitzvah*; but there is no feminine equivalent for *brit milah*, nor should there be. Women's experience is not just like men's, and equality is not served in every case by creating space for "equal time". Far more interesting is the feminist liturgical creativity which fills in the egregious gaps left by male rabbis, such as the fact that there is no traditional ritual to celebrate a first menstruation, nor a prayer that a woman can recite when she gives birth. Just as

compelling are feminine explorations of the deeper spiritual significance of *mikvah* for both women and men, as recognition of passage through transitional states and as a vehicle for that transition. For women or for men recovering from any kind of bodily harm, ritual immersion wields a power to move one from one state of being to another that observant Jewish women know well.

The current state of Jewish religion is imbalanced and listing toward the side of the male; we detect signs of the choking off of divine *shefa'* when those in power cannot balance compassion with judgment and resolve the injustice of *agunah*. Striving for a different, fuller, religious understanding of women, and of the place of the female in the *sefirot*, will lead to a rebalancing and repair of this sefirotic brokenness, and promises a far more interesting and healing experience than simply to rail at ancient misogyny, or to condemn the whole system as hopeless. It requires creativity and boldness; one cannot simply search the literature for precedents, although the ancient texts have far more to say on the subject than some might assume. Repair of this breach requires diving deeply into the level of *remez*, and remaining open to the daring necessary to speculate upon *sodot*, thus to try to make out the shape of the golden apple which is hiding behind the ornate silver filigree surrounding it.

The impact of a broader understanding of what is possible upon Jewish ritual practice and prayer is clearer if we focus upon aspects of Jewish life which are obviously associated with maleness. In the collection of his teachings called the

Tzava'at haRivash, the Ba'al Shem Tov is recorded as teaching the mystical doctrine *ki adam helek Elohi mima'al*, "for a human being is a piece of God above".

Identifying the soul with God leads to interpretations such as *lekh l'kha* "go to yourself", and praying to God as directed not only out and/or up but also inward.

Thus one cannot truly pray without confronting oneself, as in the Hasidic play on words which takes the exhortation *da mah l'ma'alah mimkha*, "know what is above you", and focuses upon *mimkha*, "you", which in the Hebrew may also be translated "from you". Thus the phrase may be interpreted *da shekol mah shehi l'ma'alah hakol hu mimkha*, "know that all that is above you, it is all from you".

Since one of the most profound ways in which we know ourselves is in terms of our sexuality, it is vital that both men and women come to an understanding of the holy potential of their specific sexuality. The Besht compares the act of prayer with the act of sexual intercourse, and he does so from a specifically male perspective. This is evocative of many aspects of mystical teaching, included but not limited to the act of creation in which *Hokhmah* penetrates *Binah*, and the unification of the *Kudsha berikh Hu v'Shekhintey*, between *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, which is the theurgic⁴ goal of the mystic on erev Shabbat. There is so much more, however, that such a doctrine could offer if one considers what might be learned, and theurgically gained, from the female aspect of prayer as well.

Consider the Besht's description of prayer.⁵ The male prayer posture is with

⁴ Jewish theurgic mystical doctrines assume as their starting point the human capacity to affect the divine through prayer

⁵ *Tzva'at haRivash*, Baal Shem Tov, 16

feet together, in a rocking motion reminiscent of sexual activity. The male reenacts the penetration of *Hokhmah* into *Binah*, and can seek to have an impact upon the flow of *shefa* even at heights such as this. What is missing from this male perspective is the development of the feminine aspect, that of reception: as important as the active penetration of *Hokhmah* is the capacity of *Binah* to receive. Knowing how to receive is one of the more difficult of human acts. All are taught of the importance of giving. But unless one also knows how to fulfill the mitzvah of receiving, and is able to develop the capacity for taking offerings of learning and of love into ourselves, how can the mitzvah of giving be truly fulfilled?

How does the woman come to observe the mitzvah of *lekh I'kha*, of "going to yourself" so that her prayer will fulfill its holy purpose of bringing God into the world? Rashi taught in connection with the journey of Abraham and Sarah that they brought many under the wings of the Shekhinah. The feminine complement to the male prayer posture is to focus upon the *Shekhinah haporeset*, the Shekhinah of the spread wings. It is to stand with feet apart, not together as men do, but at least a bit apart, in a natural stance in which the feet are about as far apart as the distance between one's shoulders. This is the stability of the Tree position in Yoga practice, the Tree of Life which symbolizes women's holy creative power.

The woman focuses her *kavvanah* upon the position of the *Shekhinah*, which receives the flow of the divine *shefa* from above. She concentrates upon the *shem havaya* and upon unification with Tiferet, identified with the *yud hey*. She visualizes

the *vav hey*, which is identified with the *Shekhinah*, and she becomes the *hey*, and invites the *vav* to fill her and to become the conduit which she grasps with her whole being, and by which she rises toward the *vav hey*, and toward the unification of the *sefirot* in the *zivuga kadisha – p'nei Shabbat n'kablak*, eleven letters which equal *vav hey* in gematria and which describe her goal. Her desire is for her receptivity to allow her to rise through being filled, and she rises toward *Binah*. As she is identified with the left side of the *sefirot*, she has a unique ability to raise *Gevurah* above itself, above its own potential power, and to redeem it by uniting it with *Binah*.

The feminine principle...is...identified with the *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 *Nekevah* 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* -ה.⁶

Rather than to copy male prayer postures, the woman focuses upon the letter *hey* to help her draw from the knowledge her own body has, on the most elemental and profound of levels, to open herself to God. Women are, bodily and socially, receivers and transmitters: they receive the flow from above, and they emit the creativity of the new life which is thereby created. This knowledge of how to both receive and emit is theirs to divine; and this will only enhance our understanding of the art of receiving, and the importance of transmission. In this

⁶ *Sefer haBahir*,

light, the function of the *Shekhinah* as both receiving and emitting is instructive. Recall Elimelekh of Lizhensk's teaching that the *Shekhinah* functions in both male and female ways. God's presence among us both receives and emits; it is both female and male in function. Mystics know that there are two kinds of receiving (*Kabbalah*, after all, literally means "receiving"): passive, and active. The female strength in every woman and man is the capacity which is uniquely suited to explore profound depths of receptiveness, and discover new aspects of Kabbalah in both the passive, and the turning of that which is passive into active love, toward the world and toward the self.

turning to see what may be seen in theology: what Miriam saw

The effort of the human to rise upwards toward God in prayer and in holy act is universal in mystical teachings. The Piacezna Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, Rabbi Kalonymus Shapira, taught in the name of his father that when a man makes this effort to rise,

when there is a sense of rising up (*itaruta d'l'tatah*) from below, this is really only because the Holy One has caused the sense of knowledge and desire from above, so that there should be a sense of rising up from below....this is the mercy God shows! God rewards the individual as if it were the individual who initiated the action; "you are a merciful God, for you reward us according to our acts (Psalms 62.13). In truth, it is God who stirs the individual, and gives the strength and the desire."⁷

There is a special quality of courage in the woman who seeks to rise, because no one is reaching out to help her. She must find the will and the capacity within herself.

⁷ Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Eysh Kodesh, parashat Hukat*, "Miriam died there..." Numbers 20.1

When a woman becomes a *Tzaddeket* and studies Torah and fulfills the *mitzvot*, this is really of her own doing, for she is not obligated to the mitzvot and nevertheless, she acts, and it is not that she was caused to from above.⁸

The Rabbi is not arguing for egalitarianism. Given this, we see the boldness of his teaching, which celebrates a woman who, left out of the system, refuses to be left out. She generates her own ascent, which Shapira describes as *novea mimenah*, "flowing from herself"; this echoes the famous well with which Miriam is linked in midrash; water flowed forth from it to nurture the wandering Israelites. Listening more deeply for the hint of the *remez* level, however, one also detects an echo of the kabbalistic doctrine taught in the *Zohar*, which notes that in the beginning, according to the Creation story, water to nurture the earth welled up first from below, and then blessed the earth from above. The world was and still is blessed by the will of the lower and the weaker to bring forth that which sustains and redeems life.

In the Warsaw Ghetto on Shabbat *Hukat* of 1942, the Piaczezna Rebbe pointed out to his students their own link to the feminine, to that within every human being which is weak and helpless. The Rebbe, whose teachings were miraculously preserved from the darkest days of the *Shoah*, saw the plight of the Jews at that time as comparable to Miriam's, not that of Moshe or Aaron. And he insisted that, even as Miriam's strength and courage enabled her to rise without a boost from God, so too could his own students, feeling similarly bereft of any Divine

⁸ Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, *Eysh Kodesh, parashat Hukat*

attention at all. The challenges that face 21st-century Jews in Western society certainly cannot compare; yet there are those who fear that what determined anti-Semites could not do, the anesthesia of assimilation may yet accomplish. It is difficult by oneself to find time to be a Jew; it is difficult not to be by oneself, to find a teacher and a community.

On larger levels of national and global community, the individual struggles with the sense of weakness and helplessness that the overwhelming scale of society can impose. Women and men can learn from the Kabbalistic insight that even in the grip of awesome and overwhelming forces, the individual still has the capacity to choose to respond, and to act. The *Sefat Emet* sees this in the phrase "Abraham stretched forth his hand" in his commentary on the *Akedah*, that terrible story of awe, terror, and near-sacrifice which has overwhelmed the religiously observant Jew's ability to find rational meaning in it for generations.⁹ The phrase is expressed in the active sense, hinting that Abraham acted on his own volition at this point, and that he

was lifted by his own independent strength. This is the meaning of the "test", as written in the Midrash (Genesis Rabbah 55.1): "You give those who are in awe of You a test, by which they lift themselves up as banners" (Ps. 60.6). This means that they do it on their own.¹⁰

There are times when the appeal for rationality will not be heard. Miriam, despite knowing that the world would never hear her plea for equal time, or

⁹ Hebrew University Bible scholar Israel Knohl suggests that the *Akedah* is an example of what Rudolph Otto meant by the human sense of the *mysterium tremendum*, an awe that transcends rationality or ethics.

¹⁰ *Sefat Emet*, Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger, 102.

affirmative action, on the ladder of mystical ascent, nevertheless grasped it and pulled herself up. Never mind that God did not invite her to try, did not empower her to rise through the loving mutuality of *hesed*; her courage was in nevertheless insisting on her own ability and worth as a reflection of that same God's holy image. Shapira saw this as the truth his own people needed in his day; to understand that when no one holds out a hand, the real trial of courage which required may be in asserting that we, created in the Divine Image and capable of seeking out our source on our own, are still able to find a way to be uplifted.

There has been much energy invested in the effort to gain women's access into the male-centered legal system of Judaism, but not enough exploration of this neglected power of the feminine which resides within both women and men, "by which they uplift themselves as banners". This power is already there, cloaked and concealed, but available to one who investigates what is behind the veil. To grasp the ladder of the *sefirot* and rise requires that one learns to take care of oneself, and to respect the image of God in oneself. Having discovered one's own sense of authenticity, one reaches up and grasp the ladder for oneself, that one may bring down enough *shefa* to re-open long clogged conduits of the divine feminine. Then, much that has been concealed will be seen.

Understanding the power of the feminine, not as derivative of men's power, nor a secondary phenomenon, but as a unique reflection of God and an expression of the Divine attributes, will enhance women's ability to share this teaching with

men. They need women to teach it to them, to help them realize it in their own natures, even as women need men to teach them the things that are the other half of themselves. In this way each gender comes to more fully reflect the image of God, that wholeness which is beyond gender definition. In this way we explore one more way in which we may effect the healing one of the causes of exile, that of the alienation of masculine and feminine, by seeking the unification of *Kudsha Berikh Hu v'Shekhintey*.