

The Role of Women in Kabbalistic Tradition: a Personal Note

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to portray the role of women in Kabbalistic Tradition. Through many accounts both personal journey's note as well as literature study, it can be stated that women's positioning of roles are imprinted on what is considered "acceptable" behaviour. Religious structure, i.e. rules and regulations are needed to "force" people into desirable and preferred behaviour. This article also shed some views on the Tanakh and Talmud, the New Testament and the Ten Commandments as well as the interpretation of the Quran relating to women's role.

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1. Introduction

After drafting and re-drafting my final paper, and trying to capture the essence of my views on the transition from Mysticism to Spiritualism, I feel I am not given conclusive, satisfactory answers; when will Professor Garb enlighten me about the role of women in the Kabbalistic tradition. How can I possibly capture what I have come to realize, during the process of this course, with the limitations of just mere words, particularly as I chose to simultaneously take "Soul Beliefs, Causes and Consequences" [1], which seems to be an absolute paradox. Hence, I decided to do more than delve in all the material made available by our fellow students, which will take me a lifetime to study anyway, but to go back in my own history and revisit the places where I first encountered the manifestations of my own mystical experiences to understand the pure force of the female presence of God, what is identified as the Shekina.

As I explained earlier, I am a novice to the specifics of Kabbalah and only acquainted with the tradition of Judaism through my visits to Israel and the people I met there; first in 1987 and 2011. The only preparation was reading the book "The Source" by James A. Michener [2], an absolute must if you want to be taken through the history of the Jewish origins in a birds-eye view.

My first visit was a three week back-pack journey from Tel Aviv, where I wrote in personal diary in April 1987 "...where the air was heavy with the scent of orange blossom, and I could feel the earth vibrant beneath the soles of my shoes...", up North via Akko, Haifa, direction Tiberias via Nazareth, and as far North as Safed, travelling Israel in the time

before Pesach means eating savoury matzes, sweet matzes, crushed matzes, ground matzes, and miracle of miracles. I still like them.

We then went to Jerusalem for three days and I wrote in the same diary; *“I will never forget this sensation of being intensely alive; sitting on the steps of Jaffa Gate and watching the world passing by...”*. I remember walking through the Garden of Gethsemane, wondering what the age-old olive trees would convey if I put my ear to their weathered bole; *“what are they whispering, would they tell me what happened some two thousand years ago, what would I learn if I could attune to their spirit...”*

From Jerusalem, we went a little up North again to visit Jericho. In the middle of the town’s square there was a huge Bougainvillea, majestic and abundant in purple splendour, such a common feature of my native Indonesia. The Dead Sea, then Bethlehem, Hebron, Be’er Sheva, and finally to digest the many impressions, some “beach time” in Eilat. This first encounter with Israel will be engraved in my soul, as I have experienced such vivid mystical impressions, consciously in my mind.

This article is my personal note regarding women’s roles in Kabbalistic tradition, meaning that it is a reflective account of my experiences. The various places and life experiences, that I have had been to, provide a great learning process since these places have various traditions regarding women.

2. Method

A narrative story-telling approach may be best to explicate my effort to describe the role of women. My account, I realize is subjective, and such approach is accepted by the academics, especially in the tradition of solipsism [3]. The narrative approach requires exploration of a reflective personal notes.

3. Results and Discussion

I was raised according to a devout Roman Catholic tradition, as my mother was deserted by her own mother and raised by the Nuns in Indonesia. My father professed to be a Heathen, I would qualify it as Agnostic, but he was so rebellious when it came to the forced Catholicism by marriage to my Mother that he shunned any responsibility of parenthood, arguing that he had to consent to a Roman Catholic upbringing of his children, therefore he felt he shouldn’t interfere in our upbringing at all. In that respect I was lucky, being the youngest of three, and my mother recovering from tuberculosis during the first year of my life, my father took charge of my existence and cared for me; it set the pace of our relationship until his death in the year 2000.

It is not difficult to imagine that, set against this background, religious themes could be compared to living in a spiritual “no man’s land”, which shaped my ideas about religion in general whilst being subjected to private instructions and catechism lessons at our church with a priest who smoked “Roxy” cigarettes and blushed with every question I asked him. Fur coats and fashionable hats were heavily present during Sunday Mass, and my mother always seated us at the back, as if we were uninvited guests. When I reached puberty I told my mother I didn’t want to continue our weekly visits to the church, knowing that my father

would support me, invoking the wrath of the Roman Catholic Church plus my mother's grief and disapproval of my siblings.

My life has evolved through encounters that seemed random and needed no specific investigation where religious ideologies were concerned. Whenever I felt I was over-exposed to trials and tribulations, doors opened offering sanctuary and I took them, to greater or lesser extent, for granted. In the UK, where I lived for a decade and experienced the hardship of single parenthood, I found shelter in my daily work environment through colleagues, who are Evangelists, and there I reacquainted myself with the texts of the New Testament; every Tuesday we went to St. Helen's in the City of London, to listen to words of comfort and I moved in a circle of people who covered my back and offered me protection from life's reality.

Returning to the Netherlands - re-married and mothering two more children - my mother's niece introduced me to her Roman Catholic parish and its Priest, a revolutionary thinker, an adversary in the RC Rome dominated doctrine and one of the propagators of the "8th May Movement"³. I remember the first mass I attended; he welcomed us saying: "*Well, you can all look at me as if I have all the answers...., but I haven't!*" It was the first time in my entire life I heard such an honest confession from a priest.

My professional life took me into the realm of Foreign Affairs and I worked for the Egyptian Ambassador in the Netherlands, a strong advocator for Human Rights. My Egyptian colleagues introduced me to the Quran, and one of my revered friendships was with a well-known Imam Ahmad El Helou. Through our countless discussions I began to understand how important it is to closely examine the motivations that move us to actions, and how much effort needs to be taken in our daily attempts to grasp what God asks of us. It is in the dynamics of our conversation with God, that we can find solace and true strength to develop our faith, commitment and endurance. It is through the influence of another key figure during that time, Mohammad Abulata, that I came to a greater awareness of concepts like "destiny" and fulfillment of our own role amongst the people that cross our paths. Ahmad El Helou ran a small publishing company "Oasis", and through his work I was introduced to Rabbi Soetendorp, Huub Oosterhuis, and Dr. van Koningsveld – possibly not known outside the Netherlands – but in that time prominent thinkers. I came to the conclusion that if we wanted to enhance a greater understanding between the World Religions, it could only be achieved through dialogue. It was under this title "Dialogue" that Ahmad published a significant book, bearing witness of his legacy.

During my travels to the Middle-East and Asia and the lasting impressions I gathered in Israel – specifically in contrast with my second visit in 2011 - the most profound mystical experiences occurred there; Nazareth - the church of Annunciation, Aswan – Aga Khan Mausoleum: sailing a Falucca on the Nile, Mount Sinai – watching the sunrise with my three children, visiting Isfahan (Iran) in 2010, and recently watching my friends at Tanjun Ahn (Lombok NTB, Indonesia) in prayer on the shore of the Indian Ocean.

These experiences should not be confused with revelations; no appearances of Christ, St. Mary, or sounds of distant drumming were revealed to me. Just the overwhelming sense of joy, and certainty of the existence of something so incredibly strong in its presence, that my heart was taken sky-high and would burst with gratitude for the gift of life, for the beauty I was allowed to observe and relish. Those moments were intense and on a higher level of

acute awareness, an increasingly heightened emotional state, and are totally different from the phenomenon of “the lifting of the veil”, as experienced when my father died. Although the latter state of acute awareness only lasted for a brief moment in time, the door to my subconscious never really shut, but remained ajar and gives me the ability to “look beyond”

During this 6 week’s course, we were told that in the tradition of the Kabbalah books, papers and thesis were written by men and for men. Roles of women in the Kabbalistic tradition were not significant, and to me this is highly questionable. The Jewish faith is inherited from Mother to child, there is no other way. One cannot convert to Judaism as is possible in other religions; of course you can take on the Jewish faith, but it is not really regarded as being equally valid. The old testament relates of the prominent roles of Deborah, Ruth, Esther and Rachel; what happened to their status in the Kabbalistic movement? Only in week the feministic influence is mentioned, as though it is a cumbersome item that has to be addressed, whilst in our feverish quest to discover that there is a phenomenon as “Shekina”, the female counterpart of God, a separate Facebook page is created for female students on this course. The aim and purpose is to start a circle in the tradition of the emergence of the Kabbalistic circles in the 16th Century.

As the course progresses and papers are submitted, I cannot help but go with the flow and trust my thoughts and experiences to be shared with some x-thousand students worldwide, and my antagonistic emotions subside as I allow myself to re-evaluate what I have known from my early childhood; mysticism. When did it all start?

And then, out of the blue, my husband decides to buy me a magazine that I would never have thought of buying myself, merely because of the title: “Happinez”, with the subtitle “the mindstyle magazine”....! Who can describe my surprise when flicking – reluctantly and skeptically at first – I find an article about a Dutch author, Geert Kimpen, with the title “Prague, searching for the Goddess” [4], announcing the publication of his book “Rachel, or the mystery of Love”. In all honesty, it is not the title of the article that draws my attention, but the mention of Prague, the most beautiful city in Europe!

“It seems as if the world is flooded with female energy. I watch in wonderment how women seek to connect with each other. How is sparkles and flows when they come together...”

The article relates of his search for material for his latest book⁶, where he visits Prague to meet with Rabbi Michael, who is knowledgeable on matters that relate to the female visage of God. When he meets him, Geert relates: “... will Rabbi Michael be the man who is able to point me toward the return of the female part of God in this era? Will it again be a Kabbalist⁷ to reveal this mystery to me?” Rabbi Michael takes him to the old synagogue in Prague where in the 16th Century the famous Rabbi Loew [5] fought for the wellbeing of the Jewish community, and who was an expert in the secrets of the Shekina; including lust, love and sexuality that are hidden within the Thora itself. He continues, and his observation seems to contradict Professor Garb’s opinion on studying the old texts that are available to us:

“Who takes the writings of the Thora literally is a fool, so say the Kabbalists. They examine the hidden meanings of the old texts like peeling the segments of an onion, and

in the process of dismantling they discover new insights. Under each segment they recognise what the last generation was not able to see. The Kabbalist view the Thora as a tempting, veiled bride. To whomever truly desires her, she will show a glimpse of her beauty, only to cover up her nakedness as part of her tantalising act....". Geert asks the Rabbi: "Why does the world long for femininity?", the answer is strikingly simple and unambivalent:

"As God needs us to be whole, so we must seek our opposite to become whole. This entails our desire for femininity. Desire itself is the fuel for love. A man's desire for a woman is to be complete. He, who has never experienced the force of passionate love for a woman, will never know the female soul of God..."

There it is, the essence of the Shekina and the full impact it should have determined in empowering women in Kabbalah. Rabbi Michael continues:

"Eve showed that women are hungry for wisdom. She was not seduced with diamonds, but with knowledge..."

My jaw drops! What? Did I read that correctly, whilst the entire religious doctrine pointed for centuries toward Eve, as being the guilty party and the main reason for being expelled from Paradise? Women have borne the guilt of that accusation with them for as long as Adam was made out to be a sucker and the victim of this hussy! Wasn't it her fault after all, and have women not always been deemed "unfit, unclean, unworthy" because of that one interlude with a snake? Robert S. McElvaine outlines the consequences of this stigma, borne by women in his book *Eve's Seed* [6] throughout history, and in an earlier paper, I have given a totally different interpretation in connection to the role of Lilith, who had the guts to return her list of tasks to God, arguing that she was created out of the same matter as Adam, and would not be "subsumed".

Back to the search for the Shekina in the intertwining alley ways of Prague, Geert meets a young woman who describes the female soul of God to him:

"For me the Goddess is here and now, full of life. She is energy. She is fluid with love, longing, joy and happiness. She is erotic and ecstatic ... She is all that comes to life. She emerges through his love and brings him to life through her surrender. And when she is joined with him, then the entire cosmos shudders and vibrates awareness. If a man would learn to implode instead of explode¹¹, he would feel the incredible force with which he can offer heaven to his woman. A man in love looks at a woman he desires through the eyes of a wild beast, whilst a woman in love observes the man through the eyes of God..."

The name of the woman is Martina and they decide to visit Rabbi Michael at the Jewish Cemetery, where he is studying an old book from the 16th Century, in which all important Rabbi's have recorded their findings on sexuality. He recounts and translates the Hebrew words, written by Rabbi Loew:

“look, in the Thora is written.... And he named them Adam. Them, not him..., the female part is part of ourselves! That’s why we need to respect the women in our lives more than ourselves; without her we are no longer Adam.”

I can hardly contain my excitement, and realise that all this knowledge was available for centuries. Yet the interpretation we learned was that Adam was non-sexual and the two were divided, woman was also non-sexual keeping only the spirit, whilst Adam kept the fire [7]- the separation was created by the emergence of their sexuality; and though Jung projected the idea of unifying two opposite forces [8], in the justified attempt for redemption, in practice I doubt whether the organised religious institution took any notice, or rather chose to persist in their views that the female attributes needed to be distrusted, ignored and shunned.

The journey through Prague draws the hopeful conclusion in the final comments, and after the rain subsides, making way for the rays of the sun:

“....We never really vanished, but now in this age, we dare to show ourselves. That is the sparkling energy you noticed in the women around you. Every woman is a Temple Priestess. In every woman you can discover the hidden face of God, which reveals itself in the thousand faces of the Goddess... ”.

4. Conclusion

The closing paper for this course has been submitted, and my arguments for preferring the transition from Mysticism to Spirituality is largely based on the fact that we cannot expect to progress in the dynamics of the modern world of today. We cannot justify denial of the latent potential unless we stimulate a greater awareness for a common cause.

By doing so it will alleviate divisions that we allowed politics and organized religious institutions by manipulating and feeding our fear of other traditions, beliefs and cultures. In the end, I truly believe that we can address inherent biases, prejudices and inequalities by sharing what initially Eve hungered for so much; knowledge.

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