

The Delightful and Surprising

Mythology of Judaism



Hell



Angel of Death



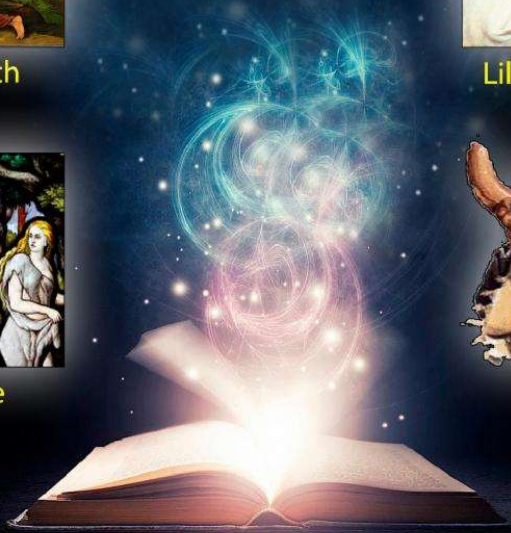
Lilith & Shekinah



Adam & Eve



Messiah



Tuesdays, February 2, 9, 16, 23 & March 2, 7pm

With Rabbi Michael Lotker



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261. ADAM AND LILITH

When God created Adam and saw that he was alone, He created a woman from dust, like him, and named her Lilith. But when God brought her to Adam, they immediately began to fight. Adam wanted her to lie beneath him, but Lilith insisted that he lie below her. When Lilith saw that they would never agree, she uttered God's Name and flew into the air and fled from Adam. Then Adam prayed to his Creator, saying, "Master of the Universe, the woman you gave me has already left me." So God called upon three angels, Senoy, Sansenoy, and Semangelof, to bring her back. God said, "Go and fetch Lilith. If she agrees to go back, fine. If not, bring her back by force."

The angels left at once and caught up with Lilith, who was living in a cave by the Red Sea, in the place where Pharaoh's army would drown. They seized her and said, "Your maker has commanded you to return to your husband at once. If you agree to come with us, fine; if not, we'll drown one hundred of your demonic offspring every day."

Lilith said, "Go ahead. But don't you know that I was created to strangle newborn infants, boys before the eighth day and girls before the twentieth? Let's make a deal. Whenever I see your names on an amulet, I will have no power over that infant." When the angels saw that was the best they would get from her, they agreed, so long as one hundred of her demon children perished every day.

That is why one hundred of Lilith's demon offspring perish daily, and that is why the names of the three angels are written on the amulets hung above the beds of newborn children. And when Lilith sees the names of the angels, she remembers her oath, and she leaves those children alone.

The haunting legend of Lilith finds its source in the rabbinic commentary on the biblical passage *Male and female He created them* (Gen. 1:27). It appeared to the rabbis that this passage contradicted the sequential creation of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:21-22). Therefore they attempted to resolve this contradiction by saying that *Male and female He created them* referred to Adam's first wife, whom they named Lilith, while Eve, who was created later, was Adam's second wife. They chose the name Lilith from Isaiah 34:14, where Lilith is mentioned (*Yea, Lilith shall repose there*), in what is believed to be a reference to a Babylonian night demoness.

Even though Lilith seems to leap fully formed out of a line in the Bible, it is likely that the legend was already told among the Jewish people, and that the rabbis sought out a text to attach it to. In any case, the mythological figure of Lilith almost certainly finds its origin in other cultures of the Ancient Near East. Lilith's role as a seducer of men is likely to have been based on the Babylonian night demon Lilitu, a succubus who seduces men in their sleep, while Lilith's role as a child slayer may well derive from the Babylonian demon Lamashtu. It is interesting to note that the roles of Lilitu and Lamashtu became blurred together, and Lilith took on the roles of both seducer and child slayer.

Having brought a powerful figure such as Lilith into being, the rabbis felt compelled to recount her entire history. In this case, the legend began to grow quite extensive. The first complete version of it is found in *Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira*, dating from the ninth century in North Africa, the primary source of the myth.

Here Adam and Lilith are described as having been created at the same time, and having fought over everything from the first. They had a final confrontation over the question of the missionary position. Adam insisted on it; Lilith refused, preferring the opposite, with the female dominant. When they couldn't agree, Lilith pronounced the secret Name of God, the Tetragrammaton, YHVH, which has remarkable supernatural powers, and flew out of the Garden of Eden and landed on the shore of the Red Sea. There Lilith took up residence in a nearby cave and took for lovers all the demons who lived there, while Adam, left alone, complained to God that his woman had left him. God sent the three angels to command Lilith to return. She refused, and they threatened to kill 100 of her demon offspring daily. Lilith still refused to return; she was never very maternal.

When Lilith offers a compromise, the myth takes a strange turn. She tells the angels that she was created to strangle children, boys before the eighth day and girls before the twentieth. But if a woman carried an amulet with the words "Out Lilith!" on it, along with the names of the angels, she would leave that woman and her children alone. What is really occurring is that another myth is being fused to the first, while the issue of Lilith's return to Adam is simply dropped. This second myth concerns Lilith's role as a child-destroying witch. Indeed, it is possible that a myth concerning another demoness has been incorporated into that of Lilith. In all likelihood, we can identify this demoness as Obyzouth, who is invoked by King Solomon in the first century text *The Testament of Solomon*. The king commands her to describe herself, and Obyzouth tells how she seeks to strangle children. Furthermore, she reveals that she can be thwarted by the angel Raphael and by women who write her name on an amulet, for then she will flee from them to the other world. What appears to be taking place is that the demoness Lilith, who up to this point had been concerned with issues of independence and sexuality, here takes on a new aspect from Obyzouth, that of the child-destroying witch, by a process of mythic absorption. Why did this happen? Probably because Lilith became such a dominant mythic figure that she absorbed the roles of the lesser known demoness. This likely occurred very early, between the first and third centuries, and Lilith has played a powerful dual role ever since in Jewish folklore and superstition. See "The Night Demoness," p. 223.

So it is that Lilith is regarded both as a witch determined to strangle children and as the incarnation of lust. In her role as a witch, Lilith's actions provided an explanation for the terrible plague of infant mortality. Use of amulets against Lilith was widespread and is still considered necessary in some ultra-Orthodox Jewish circles. Only a generation ago grandmothers often tied red ribbons on a child's bed. These ribbons symbolically represented the amulet against Lilith and served the same purpose.

The text of this amulet against Lilith is taken from *Sefer Raziel*. The amulet against Lilith has been found in archeological digs dating back 1,500 years. The traditional use of such amulets against Lilith was widespread, and visitors to the ultra-Orthodox Mea She'arim section of Jerusalem will even today find protective amulets against Lilith available for purchase. Both the text and even the primitive drawings on the ancient amulet are still in use. See "A Spell to Banish Lilith," p. 218, for the text.

Sources:

Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira 5.

Studies:

Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives from Classical Hebrew Literature, edited by

David Stern and Mark Mirsky.

The Hebrew Goddess by Raphael Patai, pp. 221-254.

"Notes on the Testament of Solomon" by H. M. Jackson.

265. THE CELLAR

Every impurity engenders demons. Whenever a man's seed is spilled, his demon offspring are conceived. Lilith or one of the daughters of Lilith steals it. A drop is all that is needed.

These demon sons regard the man as their father. They find a place to live in his house, whether in an attic or a cellar, or even in a closet. They make their home there.

Not even married men are safe from the lure of Lilith. No sooner do their wives turn their backs, than Lilith seeks out victims among them. She appears to them in dreams during the night, and as visions during the day. Sometimes Lilith so sways a man that she becomes his secret wife.

That is what happened in the city of Posen, where there once was a goldsmith who was secretly married to Lilith. The demoness lived in the cellar, where the goldsmith had his workshop. He spent time with his demon lover every day, while keeping her existence secret from his family. Little by little the goldsmith yielded everything to her, lusting after her day and night.

Once it happened that the goldsmith even got up in the middle of the Seder, when the words "And they went down into Egypt" were read, and he went down to the cellar. His wife followed after him, afraid that he was ill. She peered through the keyhole of the cellar door, and saw that the cellar had been transformed into a palatial chamber, while her husband lay naked in the arms of a lover. Maintaining control of herself, she returned to the Seder and revealed nothing to the rest of the family. But the next day she went to the rabbi and told him everything.

The rabbi confronted the man with his sin and he confessed. Then the rabbi gave him an amulet to protect himself against Lilith, and he used it to free himself of her. But before she would release him, Lilith demanded that the cellar be bequeathed to her and their demon offspring for all time, and the man took a vow to this effect. He escaped her powers all the rest of his life, but as he lay on his deathbed, his demon children swarmed around him, invisible to his human family, crying out his name.

After his death the house became known as being haunted. Eventually it was sold, and the new owner had a workman break open the door to the cellar, which had been nailed shut. When that workman was found dead on the threshold, Rabbi Yoel Ba'al Shem was sent to investigate. He confirmed that the cellar was infested with demons, and he ordered a rabbinic court, a *Beit Din*, to be convened. The court ruled against the demons' right to live in the cellar there, on the grounds that the demons transgressed the boundaries of the cellar, and they were expelled into the wilderness.

One of the most popular and pervasive beliefs in Jewish folk tradition is that the demoness Lilith or one of her daughters, the *Lilin*, seek to steal a man's seed, in order to create a demon who is half-human and half-demon. These demonic sons are said to haunt their fathers all their lives. The struggle portrayed in this and other similar tales can be seen as one between humans and demons, with offspring who are half-human, half-demonic—or, as a struggle between Jews and Gentiles, where Jewish men are lured by Gentile women, and their offspring are half-Jewish, half-Gentile. In both cases the offspring are spurned by both sides.

Lilith plays a major role in Jewish lore as the incarnation of lust. She haunts men in their dreams and imaginations. Every time a man had a sexual dream or fantasy, he was believed to have had intercourse with Lilith, and the product of this intercourse were mutant demons, half human and half demon, who were spurned by humans and by demons alike. The story recounted here is a famous 17th-century folktale from the ethical text *Kav ha-Yashar*.

Among the oral traditions about a man's demon sons is that that when he lies on his deathbed, his demon sons surround him, crying out his name. So too are the demon sons said to accompany a man's human sons to the cemetery, where they mourn for him. To deceive the demons, his true sons do not take a direct path to the funeral, but set off in the opposite direction. Once they reach the cemetery, they read Psalm 91 out loud, to ward off the demons. Then they form a sacred circle and dance around the dead man seven times. This prevents the demon sons from approaching the deceased and demanding their inheritance.

Psalm 91 is the psalm used to ward off demons and is believed to invoke supernatural protective qualities. It is recited to keep away the forces of evil. Especially important is the verse, *He will order his angels to guard you wherever you go* (Psalms 91:11). It also includes verses such as, *You need not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day, the plague that stalks in the darkness, or the scourge that rages at noon* (Ps. 91:5-6).

These folk traditions grow out of a belief in extreme sexual purity, where any accidental or intentional spilling of a man's seed is regarded as a sin, the sin of Onan (Gen. 38:8-10). So too do they reflect the widespread belief—and fear—of succubi, in the form of Lilith and her daughters. For more on nocturnal emissions, see *B. Berakhot* 57b and *B. Yevamot* 76a.

Sources:

Kav ha-Yashar; Ohel Elimelekh; Sefer Or Yesharim story no. 199; *Zikaron Tov; Ohalei Shem; Zohar* 1:48a-b; *Ma'asiyot me-Tzaddikei Yesodei Olam; Moraim Gedolim; Hemdat Yamim* 2:98b; *Korban Shabbat* 18c; *Sha'ar ha-Kavvanot* 56b-c; *Ta'amei ha-Minhagim* 436; Oxford Hebrew ms. Oppenheim 540 (no. 1567 in Neubauer's *Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library*), attributed to Judah the Pious; *Ha-Sulam on Zohar, Vayishlah* 1-4; oral version collected by Howard Schwartz from his father, Nathan Schwartz.

Studies:

"Tradition and New Creation in the Ritual of the Kabbalists," in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* by Gershom Scholem, pp. 118-157.

"Two Magical Bowls in Teheran" by C. H. Gordon. *Orientalia*, vol. 20, 1951, pp. 306ff.

The Hebrew Goddess by Raphael Patai.

"Five Versions of the Story of the Jerusalemite" by Joseph Dan.

271. LILITH AND ELIJAH

Elijah was walking one day when he met Lilith. He said, "Unclean one, where are you going?" Lilith knew that she could not lie to Elijah, so she said, "I am going to the house of a woman who is about to give birth. I will give her a sleeping potion and kill her and take her child and eat it."

Elijah said, "I curse you in the Name of the Lord. Be silent as a stone!"

Lilith said, "O lord, release me from your curse and I swear by God's Name to forsake my evil ways. As long as I hear or see my own names I will retreat and not come near that person. I shall have no power to injure him or do evil. I swear to disclose my true names to you."

Elijah said, "Tell me what your names are."

Lilith said, "These are my names: Lilith, Abiti, Abizu, Amrusu, Hakash, Ode, Ayil, Matruta, Avgu, Katah, Kali, Batub, and Paritasha." Let them be written and hung about the house of women who are bearing a child, or around the child after it has been born. And when I see those names, I shall run away at once. Neither the child nor the mother will ever be injured by me."

And Elijah said, "So be it. Amen."

Here Lilith is portrayed not only as a witch intent on killing children, but as a cannibal as well, who seeks to kill the mother and devour the child. This is the vilest description of Lilith to be found anywhere. At the same time, Lilith is subject to the power of Elijah, who curses her in God's Name to be silent as stone. This would be a terrible punishment for Lilith, who uses her verbal wiles to bargain her way out of every difficult situation. Lilith then agrees to stay away from every pregnant woman or newborn child where Lilith's own names are posted in the house. This creates the kind of amulet against Lilith found in "A Spell to Banish Lilith," p. 218. Here, however, is a different story of the origin of the amulet. The more famous account found in *The Alpha Beta de-Ben Sira* tells how God sent three angels to force Lilith to return to Adam, but when she refused, they agreed on the creation of an amulet that would ward off Lilith. See "Adam and Lilith," p. 216.

Thus there are two important elements that differ from the usual folk traditions about Lilith: one is that she devoured her infant victims, and the other is about her encounter with Elijah having resulted in the creation of an amulet to ward her off.

An unknown Gnostic tale is referred to by Epiphanius in *Panarion*, in which Elijah was said to have been cast back into the world after his ascent on high. A female demon took hold of him and said, "Where are you going? I have children from you, and you can't go to heaven and leave your children here." Elijah said, "How can you have children from me? I was always chaste." The demon said, "But I do! While you were dreaming, you often had an emission, and I took the seeds from you and begot you children." The existence of this story indicates that Elijah and Lilith, or a Lilith-like figure, were regarded as traditional adversaries, one deeply pious, the other, the embodiment of evil.

Sources:

Yosef ba-Seder 6.

78. LILITH BECOMES GOD'S BRIDE

After God dismissed His Bride, the *Shekhinah*, from His presence, at the time of the destruction of the Temple, God brought in a maidservant to take Her place. Who is this maidservant? She is none other than Lilith, who once made her home behind the mill, and now the servant is heir to her mistress, as it is said, *A slave girl who supplants her mistress* (Prov. 30:23). She rules over the Holy Land as the *Shekhinah* once ruled over it. Thus the slave-woman has become the ruler of the House, and the true Bride has been imprisoned in the house of the slave-woman, the evil Lilith. There the Bride is held in exile with her offspring, whose hands are tied behind their backs, wearing many chains and shackles. That is a bitter time for the exiled Bride, who sobs because Her husband, God, does not throw His light upon Her. Her joy has fled because She sees Her rival, Lilith, in Her house, deriding Her. And when God sees his true Bride lying in the dust and suffering, He, too, will become embittered and descend to save Her from the strangers who are violating Her.

So it is that in the days to come news will come to God's consort, Lilith, that the time has come for her to go. Then she who plays the harlot will flee from the sanctuary, for if she were to come there when the woman of worth was present, she would perish.

Then God will restore the *Shekhinah* to Her place as in the beginning, and God and His true Bride will again couple with each other in joy. As for the evil slave-woman, God will no longer dwell with her, and she will cease to exist.

This startling myth describes the ascent of the demoness Lilith, in which she becomes God's consort after His separation from his Bride. It is based on an interpretation of the verse *A slave girl who supplants her mistress* (Prov. 30:23). The identification of Lilith as once living behind a mill is based on the verse about *the slave girl who is behind the millstones* (Exod. 11:5). In folk tradition, Lilith was especially likely to be found in places such as a ruin or behind a mill. Here a strong contrast is made between her low beginnings and her ascent to become God's consort.

This myth represents the apex of Lilith's ambitions, but it is also understood that her position is only temporary—until God's true Bride, the *Shekhinah*, returns at the time of the coming of the Messiah. The ruling presence of the demonic Lilith over the Holy Land, as she takes the place of her predecessor, is offered to explain the long exile of the Jews that followed the destruction of the Temple and subsequent exile.

Note that in this version of the separation of God and the *Shekhinah*, God is described as having dismissed Her rather than an alternate version, also found in the *Zohar* (1:202b-203a), in which the *Shekhinah* and God have a confrontation about the fate of the Temple and the children of Israel sent into exile, and she decides to leave on Her own. See "The Exile of the *Shekhinah*," p. 57.

It is impossible to read this myth without seeing a parallel to the story of Abraham and Hagar. Hagar was Sarah's maidservant, but when Sarah remained barren, Abraham conceived Ishmael, his first child, with Hagar, *And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem* (Gen. 16:4). The enmity between Sarah and her maidservant is thus parallel to that of God's Bride and the maidservant Lilith.

The *Zohar* (3:97a) adds a fascinating explanation for the link between Lilith and the *Shekhinah*: "This recondite mystery is that of two sisters." In kabbalistic mythology, the *Shekhinah* represents the feminine aspect of the side of holiness, while Lilith represents the feminine aspect of the side of evil. Thus they are tied together, like two sisters.

The myth ends by predicting the reunion of God and the *Shekhinah* and the end of Lilith's existence. It is unstated but understood that this will take place at the time of the coming of the Messiah.

Sources:

Zohar 2:118a-118b, 3:69a, 3:97a; *B'rit ha-Levi* 7; G. Scholem, *Tarbiz*, vol. 5, pp. 50, 194-95.

Studies:

The Hebrew Goddess by Raphael Patai, pp. 96-111, 221-254.

64. THE CREATION OF THE SHEKHINAH

God's heavenly treasures were hidden in the innermost of many chambers. They could not be revealed to anyone, for they were too well hidden.

So God decided to bring together His heavenly treasures in his daughter, the *Shekhinah*. That way he would make them available to the world, but only to those who knew where they could be found.

So God saw to it that His daughter, the *Shekhinah*, contained within Herself all the paths of wisdom. Whoever knows those paths has access to God, and to all heavenly

wisdom. And whoever would like to fathom those paths must turn to Her for help, for only She knows where God has hidden His heavenly treasures.

This myth is presented in the form of a parable in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, where God is identified as a king, as is standard in rabbinic parables about God. His daughter is the *Shekhinah*. Despite the allegorical format, the myth being conveyed is quite apparent—it is the myth of the divine pair, but here the male and female are both somehow contained within the same mythic figure. Thus God contains both the male and the female elements, even though they may appear to act independently of each other. Here monotheism reclaims the wholeness of God no matter how many aspects of God are portrayed. From this perspective, dualism itself becomes a form of monotheism. This paradox makes it possible to define a divinity capable of changing His mind, who could have masculine and feminine aspects and still be considered a single divine being.

The concept that God has masculine and feminine aspects is explicitly stated in *Zohar* 3:290a: "As the Ancient One, whose name be blessed, took on a form, He shaped everything in male and female form. In another form things could not exist. Therefore the first beginning of development was at once male and female, with *Hokhmah* as father and *Binah* as mother." And the *Zohar* restates the *Bahir's* identification of the *Shekhinah* as mother, daughter, and sister: "She (*Malkhut*—the *sefirah* representing the *Shekhinah*) is sometimes called daughter and sometimes sister, and here She is called mother. And in fact She is all these" (*Zohar* 2:100b).

What are the heavenly treasures in the parable? They are the secrets of Creation and other heavenly mysteries. God is not going to reveal these to everyone, but only to the initiated. These secrets were all used to create God's daughter, representing God's feminine aspect, known as the *Shekhinah*. Thus all the mysteries of God are focused in this single figure.

The parable in *Sefer ha-Bahir* also states that God hid His treasures not only in the *Shekhinah*, but in Her garments as well. These garments can be identified as the Oral Torah, or even as the Torah itself. This suggests that the Torah is the means by which God reveals His secrets of Creation.

See "God's Daughter," p. 312.

Sources:

Sefer ha-Bahir 63.

Studies:

The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God by A. Marmorstein, pp. 103-104.

"*Shekhinah: The Feminine Element in Divinity*" in *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead* by Gershom Scholem, pp. 140-196.

"*Daughter, Sister, Bride and Mother: Images of the Femininity of God in the Early Kabbala*" by Peter Schäfer.

"*The Metamorphosis of Narrative Traditions: Two Stories from Sixteenth Century Safed*" by Aryeh Wineman.

69. THE GARMENTS OF THE SHEKHINAH

The *Shekhinah* has many garments, consisting of holy angels from above and Israel from below. From these garments God created the Throne of Glory, as well as heaven and earth and all the creatures therein.

The robe of the *Shekhinah* is made of light. The light of the first day is reflected from that robe. The *Shekhinah* wears that robe whenever Israel gives forth light through good deeds. But when Israel does evil, She is garbed in the black garments of Lilith, and She is forced to wear them until Israel repents.

The *Shekhinah* is often described as a bride wearing a garment of light. This myth describes the *Shekhinah* as wearing garments of light whenever God is pleased with the good deeds of Israel, and black garments when Israel sins. *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* explains that the *Shekhinah* puts on these harsh garments to protect Israel. Alternately, the harsh garments are identified as black garments belonging to Lilith, thereby putting the *Shekhinah*, the positive feminine aspect of God, under the power of the evil Lilith, who represents the dark feminine. Indeed, in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic texts, Lilith and the *Shekhinah* are portrayed as feminine polar opposites.

The robe of the *Shekhinah* is linked to the light of the first day of Creation. See "The Light of the First Day," p. 83.

Sources:

Tikkunei ha-Zohar 22 (65a); *Zohar* 3:273a.

70. THE SACRED BEDCHAMBER

On the very day King Solomon completed the building of the Temple in Jerusalem, God and His Bride were united, and Her face shone with perfect joy. Then there was joy for all, above and below.

As long as the Temple stood, it served as the sacred bedchamber of God the King and His Bride, the *Shekhinah*. Every midnight She would enter through the place of the Holy of Holies, and She and God would celebrate their joyous union. The loving embrace of the King and His Queen assured the well-being not only of Israel, but also of the whole world.

The King would come to the Queen and lie in Her arms, and all that She asked of Him he would fulfill. He placed his left arm under Her head, His right arm embraced Her, and He let Her enjoy His strength. Their pleasure in each other was indescribable. He made His home with Her and took His delight between Her breasts. They lay in a tight embrace, Her image impressed on His body like a seal imprinted upon a page, as it is written, *Set me as a seal upon Your heart* (S. of S. 8:6).

As long as the Temple stood, the King would come down from his heavenly abode every midnight, seek out his Bride, and enjoy her in their sacred bedchamber. But when the Temple was destroyed, the *Shekhinah* went into exile, and Bride and Groom were torn apart.

This explicit myth portrays the interaction of God and His Bride as a highly eroticized coupling, a sacred copulation (*zivvug ha-kodesh*). This is a primal image of the sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*). In *Zohar* 1:120b, this is referred to as “the one total coupling, the full coupling, as is proper.” *Zohar* 3:296a expands on this: “The *Matronita* (the *Shekhinah*) united herself with the king. From this, one body resulted.” This illustrates the strong sexual dimension of kabbalistic thought, especially in the *Zohar*. It also demonstrates the direct correlation between the unity and union of God and His Bride and the existence of the Temple in Jerusalem. The destruction of the Temple

brings about the separation of God and the *Shekhinah* and sends the *Shekhinah* into exile. All of this comes about because of the sins of Israel. When Israel sins, these sins give power to the forces of evil, preventing the *Shekhinah* from uniting with Her husband, and forcing the divine couple to turn away from each other. When Israel repents, God and the *Shekhinah* turn back to each other.

So important is the coupling of God and the *Shekhinah* that in *Zohar* 3:296a, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the principal figure in the *Zohar*, describes it as the deepest of all mysteries.

According to *B. Ta’anit* 16a and *Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:66, one of the names for the place where the Temple was built was “the bedchamber.”

Sources:

Zohar 1:120b, 3:74b, 3:296a; *Zohar Hadash*, *Midrash Eikhah*, 92c-92d.

73. THE LAMENT OF THE SHEKHINAH

Since the destruction of the Temple, the *Shekhinah* descends night after night to the place of the Temple, enters the Holy of Holies, and sees that Her dwelling-house and Her couch are ruined and soiled. And She wanders up and down, wails and laments, and weeps bitterly. She looks at the place of the cherubs and lifts up Her voice and says, "My couch, My couch, My dwelling-place, where My husband would come to Me and lie in My arms, and all that I asked of Him, He would give Me. My couch, My couch, do you not remember how I came to you in joy and contentment, and how those youths, the cherubim, came forth to meet Me, beating their wings in welcome? How has the Ark of the Covenant which stood here come to be forgotten? From here went forth nourishment for all the world and light and blessing to all. Now I seek My husband in every place, but he is not here. My husband, My husband, where have You gone? Do You not remember how You held Your left arm beneath my head and Your right arm embraced me, and You vowed that You would never cease loving Me? And now You have forgotten Me."

This myth offers a moving account of the *Shekhinah* as a spurned lover. It follows the explicit husband-wife imagery of "The Sacred Bedchamber," p. 54, which derives from the same source, *Zohar Hadash*.

Sources:

Zohar Hadash, Midrash Eikhah, 74b.

75. THE EXILE OF THE SHEKHINAH

When the Temple was still standing, Israel would perform their rites, and bring offerings and sacrifices. And the *Shekhinah* rested upon them in the Temple, like a mother hovering over her children, and all faces were resplendent with light, so that there was blessing both above and below.

When the Temple was destroyed, the *Shekhinah* came and went up to all those places where She used to dwell, and She would weep for Her home and for Israel, who had gone into exile, and for all the righteous and the pious ones who had perished.

At that time the Holy One, blessed be He, questioned the *Shekhinah*, and said to her, "What ails you?" And She replied, weeping, "My children are in exile, and the Sanctuary has been burnt, so why should I remain here?" Now the Temple is destroyed and the *Shekhinah* is with Israel in exile and there is no joy to be found, above or below.

The myth about the separation of God and His Bride is a primary example of the emergence of the *Shekhinah* as an independent mythical figure. The story also resembles the conflict between an angry couple, where the wife leaves the husband and accompanies the children, here the children of Israel.

From the perspective of the *Zohar*, the fact that the *Shekhinah* accompanied Israel is evidence of God's attachment to Israel: "All the time Israel was in exile, the *Shekhinah* was in exile with them. And since the *Shekhinah* was with them, God remembered them, to do good to them and bring them out of exile" (*Zohar* 1:120b).

The exile of the *Shekhinah* is presented in the form of a parable about a king in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, in which the king had a beautiful wife and children, but when the children turned to evil ways, the king became angry with the children and their mother. The mother then went to the children and upbraided them for their behavior and its consequences until they changed their ways and did the will of their father. Then the king remembered them and loved them as much as he did in the beginning, and also remembered their mother. The king, of course, is God, and the king's wife the *Shekhinah*, while the children are the children of Israel. According to Rabbi Shlomo Rabinowitz of Radomsk, "The *Shekhinah* protects Jews like a mother taking care of her children" (*Tiferet Shlomo* on Deuteronomy 29:27). The myth of the exile of the *Shekhinah* found in the *Zohar* follows this earlier parable closely, and the earlier parable may well be the inspiration for it. It is interesting to note that in the parable from *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the queen is responsible for the well-being of her children, and the fate of the queen depends on the fate of her children. When the children repent and God loves them once again, He also remembers His love for their mother, the queen.

According to the *Zohar*, the exile of the *Shekhinah* that took place at the time of the destruction of the Temple was not Her first exile, but Her second. The first took place when Adam sinned, and the *Shekhinah* went into disgrace and was dismissed from the celestial palace, going into exile. Thus a distinct parallel is drawn between the consequences of the sin of the forbidden fruit and the destruction of the Temple. Both are regarded as cosmic catastrophes.

The weeping of the *Shekhinah* in this myth has parallels with the weeping of Rachel in Jeremiah 31:15, and with the weeping of Mother Zion in Jeremiah 15:9, 4 Ezra 9:38-10:24 (where there is a Mother Zion-type of figure) and in *Pesikta Rabbati* 26:7. Indeed, it is likely that Mother Zion was a precursor figure to the medieval kabbalistic evolution of the concept of the *Shekhinah* into the Bride of God. See "Mother Zion," p. 46.

The weeping of the *Shekhinah* is also central to the sixteenth century tale, "A Vision at the Wailing Wall." See this story, p. 63.

The kind of conflict between God and the *Shekhinah* reflected in this myth resembles the marital disputes between Zeus and Hera in Greek mythology. See the Introduction, p. lxxv, for a discussion of the parallels between Zeus and Hera and God and the *Shekhinah*. See Graves, *The Greek Myths*, 13c, 13.1.

Sources:

Sefer ha-Bahir 76; *Zohar Hadash*, *Midrash Eikhah*, 92c-92d; *Zohar* 1:202b-203a; *No'am Elimelekh*; *B. Megillah* 29a; *Tiferet Shlomo* on Deuteronomy 27:2-7.

77. THE SUFFERING OF THE SHEKHINAH

Wherever Israel is exiled, the *Shekhinah* is exiled with them and suffers with them. Those who are in this bitter exile should not be concerned with their personal distress, but should only lament the exile of the *Shekhinah*. For through Torah study and prayer, one is able to repair the limbs of the *Shekhinah* that were shattered in exile.

Here the exile and suffering of the *Shekhinah* are seen as a communal expression of the exile and suffering of Israel. Therefore, individuals "should not be concerned with their personal distress, but should only lament the exile of the *Shekhinah*." A similar view was expressed by Rabbi Nathan of Nemirov (1780-1845), the scribe of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, in writing about the meaning of Rabbi Nachman's story "The Lost Princess" in *Sippurei Ma'asiyot*: "Everyone in Israel is occupied with the search for the lost princess, to take her back to her father, for Israel as a whole has the character of the minister who searches for her." See "The *Shekhinah* Within," p. 63. For more on the limbs of the *Shekhinah* see "The Wailing of the *Shekhinah*," p. 56.

Above all, this myth insists that the quest to end the exile of the *Shekhinah* is a communal one for all the people of Israel. And until that takes place, the suffering of the *Shekhinah* must be shared by all of Israel. Rabbi Dov Ber offers a different perspective on the concept that all Jewish souls are the limbs of the *Shekhinah*, identifying each Jewish soul as a tiny particle of the *Shekhinah*, like a drop in the ocean (*Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov* 66.)

Note the parallel here to the exile of the *Shekhinah* and the Ari's myth of the Shattering of the Vessels. Indeed, from a mythic perspective they are one and the same. The search for the lost princess is identical to the effort that must be made to Gather the Sparks, and in both cases the ultimate aim is to bring about the messianic era. See "The Shattering of the Vessels and the Gathering of the Sparks," p. 122.

Sources:

No'am Elimelekh; *Iggeret ha-Kodesh* 31 in *Tanya*; *Maggid Devarav le-Ya'akov* 66.

81. THE FACE OF THE SHEKHINAH

In the days of Moses even the ordinary Israelite had the privilege of being spoken to by the *Shekhinah* face to face. In later times, not even Ezekiel was accorded this privilege.

It is said that whoever leaves a synagogue and enters the House of Study to engage in the study of the Torah will have the merit of seeing the face of the *Shekhinah*. So too when scholars discuss the Torah, they often behold the face of the *Shekhinah* and are surrounded with fire.

Such was the case when Rabbi Hiyya came to visit Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. As he passed the window, he saw a fiery curtain inside the house, with the *Shekhinah* on one side of the curtain and Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai on the other. They were studying Torah that way, and Rabbi Shimon's countenance was aflame with the intoxication of the Torah.

Rabbi Hiyya was so electrified by this sight that he could not even knock on the door. All at once the door opened, and Rabbi Hiyya looked inside. As he did, he glimpsed the face of the *Shekhinah*. And he lowered his eyes and stood frozen in place.

When Shimon bar Yohai saw that Rabbi Hiyya had been struck dumb, he said to his son, Rabbi Eleazar: "Go to Rabbi Hiyya and pass your hand over his mouth." Eleazar did this, and at last Rabbi Hiyya recovered his senses.

Some say that to see the righteous and saintly sages of one's generation is to see the very face of the *Shekhinah*. Why are these called the face of the *Shekhinah*? Because the *Shekhinah* is hidden in them, and they reveal Her.

This much is certain: Before they died and gained entrance to the celestial palace, all the saints who had descended from Adam came face to face with the *Shekhinah*. Of them it is said, "A cord of the Divine will has been grasped here on earth."

The meaning of the phrase “the face of the *Shekhinah*” can also be understood as the presence or immanence of the Divine. In the Kabbalistic era, the figure of the *Shekhinah* shifted from being identified as God’s presence in this world to the role of God’s Bride. However, some scholars, such as Ephraim Urbach in *The Sages* and Max Kaddushin in *The Rabbinic Mind*, have argued that the term *Shekhinah* should be regarded as one more name of God, like *Adonai* (the Lord), *ha-Shem* (the Name), or *ha-Makom* (the Place), etc. Of course, the Name of Names is YHVH, the Tetragrammaton.

Beginning with the Bible, a living person was forbidden to see God face to face, as stated in the verse, *No man shall see my face and live* (Exod. 33:20) Moses is the sole exception. Yet, somehow, it is far more common to see the face of the *Shekhinah*. This suggests that the term *Shekhinah* was not a simple synonym for God, but a term with special meanings, referring to the perception of the presence of God.

The use of the term face does bring with it suggestions of personification, an important fact in light of the later evolution of the term “*Shekhinah*” to refer to the Bride of God. For these descriptions of those who somehow experience the face of the *Shekhinah* have the quality of personal encounters. We note that the Divine appearance was far more common in the earliest biblical times than later, since even Ezekiel was denied the right of seeing the face of God. Yet it could also be argued that his detailed account of his vision in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, known as a vision of the *Merkavah*, God’s Divine Chariot, is actually another kind of vision of the face of the *Shekhinah*, since both involve visions of God.

But the best explanation is that the term *Shekhinah* had one meaning in the rabbinic era and another in the kabbalistic and Hasidic ones. Yet even in the rabbinic period the precise meaning of “*Shekhinah*” is far from certain, and varies considerably among its many sources. See *The Immanence of God* by J. Abelson for a thorough overview of these sources.

The tale of Rabbi Hiyya's striking glimpse of the face of the *Shekhinah* is found in the *Zohar*, one of a cycle of tales about Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his disciples. In all of these tales, Bar Yohai is portrayed as a consummate mystical master, guiding his disciples to experience the divine mysteries. Mystical union is the most essential aspect of any mystical tradition. Yet it is rarely portrayed as openly as it is here, where Rabbi Hiyya sees the face of the *Shekhinah* inside Shimon bar Yohai's house. He perceives that Shimon bar Yohai is studying the Torah with a divine being, with a curtain of fire separating them. Note that what Rabbi Hiyya sees is not presented as a vision, but it affects him as a visionary experience. Indeed, he is so caught up in the moment of mystical union that Rabbi Shimon sends his son Eleazar to cover Rabbi Hiyya's mouth, which brings him back to this world. One of the fascinating mysteries of this tale is why Bar Yohai chooses to have Rabbi Hiyya's mouth covered, and not his eyes, which had witnessed the vision. One possible answer is that he does not want to cut off the vision, but rather to prevent Rabbi Hiyya's soul from leaving his body during the instant of mystical union. Another possibility is that since Rabbi Hiyya has been struck dumb, the gesture of the hand restores his speech. The curtain of fire that separates Bar Yohai from the *Shekhinah* suggests both the *Pargod*, the heavenly curtain that separates God from the rest of Paradise, and the curtain in the Holy of Holies in the Temple beyond which only the High Priest was permitted to go. The fact that a curtain remains separating Rabbi Hiyya and the heavenly being suggests that even in the grip of powerful mystical experiences, there was not a complete loss of self-identity for Jewish mystics, as is so often associated with mystical union in other religions. There is also the suggestion that just as God remains apart from the angels, so humans must remain separated from divine beings.

Sources:

B. Berakhot 64a; Deuteronomy Rabbah 7:8; Zohar 1:94b; Zohar 2:14a-15a, Midrash ha-Ne'elam; 2:155b.

Studies:

The Immanence of God by J. Abelson.

Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to the Early Kabbalah by Peter Schäfer.

83. THE SHEKHINAH AT THE WALL

The *Shekhinah* is said to hover over the Wailing Wall, and She doesn't move from there. The northern corner of the Wall is where the *Shekhinah* reveals herself. Whoever desires to see the face of the *Shekhinah* must devote his life to the study of Torah. Very few have been found worthy to see the *Shekhinah* hovering over the Wall.

The presence of the *Shekhinah* is strongly linked to the Western Wall, the retaining wall that is all that is said to remain of the Temple in Jerusalem. There are many accounts in rabbinic texts and Jewish folklore about visions or encounters with the *Shekhinah* at the Wall. But only those who have truly studied the Torah are considered worthy of seeing the *Shekhinah*. See "A Vision at the Wailing Wall," following.

Sources:

Midrash Tehillim 106; Kav ha-Yashar, chap. 93; *Otzar ha-Ma'asivot*, collected by Reuven Na'ane from Shalom Levi.

387. THE WEDDING OF GOD AND THE SHEKHINAH

When they are first engaged, God sends His betrothed nuptial presents and a meal of celestial bread. So too does He make preparations for the wedding feast. On the eve of Shavuot, before the wedding takes place, the members of the heavenly household remain with the Bride all night, and rejoice in the preparations for the wedding. They study Torah, progressing from the Five Books of Moses to the Prophets, and from the Prophets to the Writings, and then to the midrashic and mystical interpretation of the text, for these are the adornments and finery of the Bride.

Throughout the night, the Bride rejoices with Her maidens and is made ready by them. And in the morning She enters the bridal canopy, illumined with the radiance of sapphire, which shines from one end of the world to the other. Shining in all Her finery, she awaits each of those who helped to prepare Her. And at the moment when the sun enters the bridal canopy and illumines Her, all Her companions are identified by name. And God inquires after them, and blesses them, and crowns them with bridal crowns, and blessed is their portion.

Then the Bridegroom enters the bridal canopy, and He offers the seven nuptial blessings and unites with His Bride, joining with the Queen in perfect union, and *the heavens declare the glory of God* (Ps. 19:2).

This Shavuot myth describes the wedding of God and the *Shekhinah*. Since Shavuot commemorates the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, it is the appropriate time for the wedding of God and the *Shekhinah*. The night of Shavuot is traditionally devoted to Torah study, including study of the mystical texts, and here that study is identified as the adornments of the Bride. Thus the scholars who study on the night of Shavuot are identified here as members of the heavenly household who remain with the Bride all night and assist Her in preparing for the wedding.

The myth that follows, also a Shavuot myth, describes the wedding of God and Israel. Both versions are quite common, although the wedding of God and Israel, because of its appearance in the Sephardic *Mahzor* (holiday prayerbook), is the better-known myth.

Note, as well, a remnant of a sun myth—the entrance of the Bride of God into the bridal canopy is described in terms of the sun rising. Thus the *Shekhinah* is also linked to the sun, as well as to the moon. Other remnants of sun myths can be found in the transformation of Enoch into Metatron, where Metatron is described in terms identical to the sun.

Sources:

Zohar 1:8a; *Or Zaru'a* Ms. JTSA ff. 39b/54b.

Studies:

The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah by Elliot K. Ginsburg.

395. THE SABBATH BRIDE

Every seventh day her coronation takes place. Before the start of the ceremony, the dwelling place is prepared like the chamber of a Bridegroom set to receive his Bride. Meanwhile, the Bride herself remains alone, separated from the forces of evil. There she adorns herself with a crown for the Holy King, and prepares herself for their union. Then, as the Sabbath begins, the radiant Bride is escorted by angels on high and Israel below, and she is ushered into Israel's abode, to be in their midst. There she is crowned by the prayers of the holy people, and they, in turn, are adorned with new souls, so that they all are united above and below.

This describes a mythical ceremony that is part coronation and part wedding between God and His Bride, the *Shekhinah*. The union, clearly intended to be understood as a sexual union, between God and His Bride, comes close to portraying them as independent mythic beings. This one passage from the *Zohar* can be subjected to many interpretations. It might be viewed as a union between two of the ten sefirot, those representing the marriage of the King and His Bride. At the same time, it is also an enthronement myth as well as a wedding. This heavenly ceremony is paralleled on earth by the ritual of *Kabbalat Shabbat*, going out to greet the Sabbath Queen at the beginning of the Sabbath. The Ari and his followers wore white, and left the city of Safed to go out into the fields to welcome the Sabbath Queen. Thus heaven turns to earth and earth to heaven, and they meet in a rare union of peace, which is the Sabbath. See the next entry, "Greeting the Sabbath Queen."

Sources:

Zohar 2:131b, 2:135a-b, 3:300b-301a.

Studies:

"The Aspect of the 'Feminine' in the Lurianic Kabbalah" by Yoram Jacobson.

"Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynisation" by Elliot R. Wolfson.