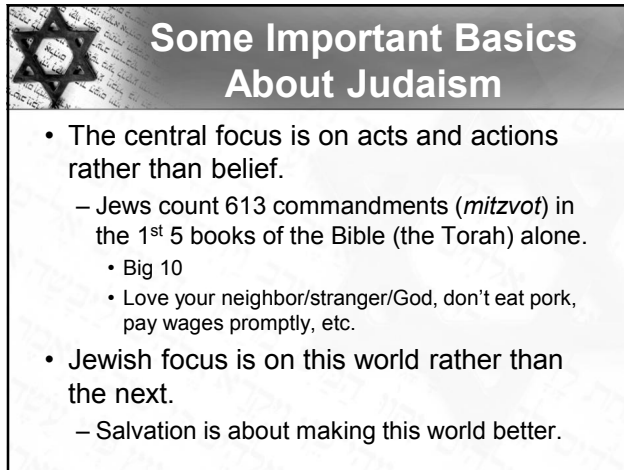


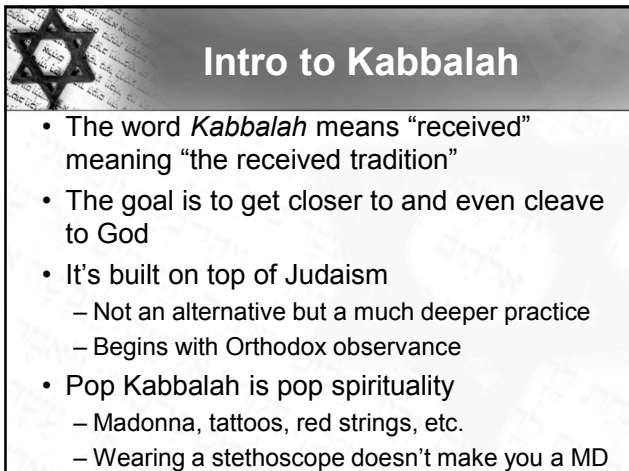


**Jewish Literacy #10:
Mysticism & Kabbalah**
Rabbi Michael Lotker



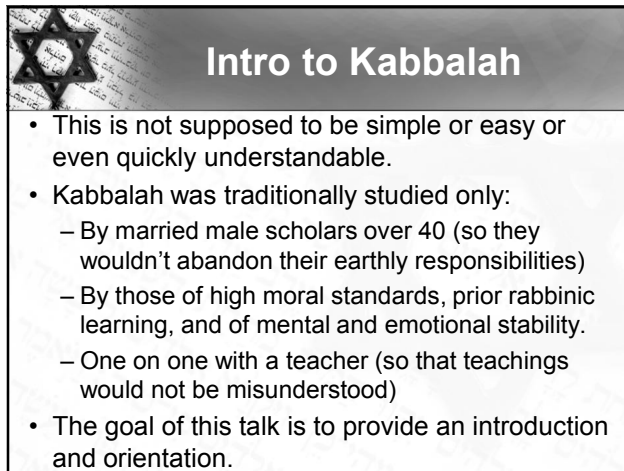
**Some Important Basics
About Judaism**

- The central focus is on acts and actions rather than belief.
 - Jews count 613 commandments (*mitzvot*) in the 1st 5 books of the Bible (the Torah) alone.
 - Big 10
 - Love your neighbor/stranger/God, don't eat pork, pay wages promptly, etc.
- Jewish focus is on this world rather than the next.
 - Salvation is about making this world better.




Intro to Kabbalah

- The word *Kabbalah* means “received” meaning “the received tradition”
- The goal is to get closer to and even cleave to God
- It's built on top of Judaism
 - Not an alternative but a much deeper practice
 - Begins with Orthodox observance
- Pop Kabbalah is pop spirituality
 - Madonna, tattoos, red strings, etc.
 - Wearing a stethoscope doesn't make you a MD




Intro to Kabbalah

- This is not supposed to be simple or easy or even quickly understandable.
- Kabbalah was traditionally studied only:
 - By married male scholars over 40 (so they wouldn't abandon their earthly responsibilities)
 - By those of high moral standards, prior rabbinic learning, and of mental and emotional stability.
 - One on one with a teacher (so that teachings would not be misunderstood)
- The goal of this talk is to provide an introduction and orientation.




Ka-BAL-ah or Ka-bal-AH?

- Both!
- Ka-BAL-ah is the Ashkenazi way of pronunciation
 - Like SHA-bes or TAH-less
 - Ashkenazim are Jews of Eastern European origin – 95% of American Jews
- Ka-bal-AH is the Sephardic way
 - Like sha-BAT or tal-EET
 - Sepharadim are Jews of Spanish and Middle Eastern origin.



Magic vs. Mystic


- **Magic** suggests that if I follow all the commandments perfectly, pray correctly, use ritual objects, keep kosher, etc.
 - ***I CAN GET GOD TO DO MY WILL!***
- **Mystic** suggests that if I follow all the commandments perfectly, pray correctly, use ritual objects, keep kosher, etc.
 - ***I CAN GET ME TO DO GOD'S WILL!***



Speaking of Magic...

The Origin of Abracadabra

- From the Aramaic
 - אַבְרָא כְדַבְרָא
 - Meaning “I create as I speak”
 - The verb *bara* is only used for God’s creation (as is Gen. 1:1)
 - Maybe *Abracadabra* is God’s opening flourish to creation???




Jewish Spirituality

- Jewish spirituality begins with study of sacred texts.
 - The presumption is that our Bible and other sacred texts (Talmud, Zohar, etc.) are infinitely rich and deep in meaning.
 - Like a singular love letter from God.
 - So we read and re-read for messages from the most obvious to the most hidden.
- Let’s look at some texts.




Let's Begin With the Beginning


The First Letter of the Bible

- Is the Hebrew letter “bet” ב
- Why begin the text with this letter?
 - To teach that you can't ask what happened before, above, or below the Torah.
 - Physicists now say that this is also true of the Big Bang – you can't ask what happened before it.
 - To teach that there are two Torahs:
 - Written – 1st 5 Books of the Bible
 - Oral – The Talmud




We Cannot Simply Translate the Bible

- The first two words of the bible present a grammatical problem: בראשית ברא אלהים *“B'raysheet bara Elohim”* – Often translated: “In the beginning, God created...”
- But if we wanted to say “in the beginning God created,” we would write בראשונה ברא אלהים *- B'reeshonah...*
- *B'raysheet* is half of an expression – Hebrew grammar requires the next word to be a noun – but the next word is a verb.
- Rashi teaches that God was teaching us that we can't just translate – we must interpret.
- I think God put this lesson here (between word #1 & #2) so those of us with ADD wouldn't miss it.





Genesis 1:26

- וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ
- “And God said ‘let Us make humanity in Our image (*b'tzal-may-nu*), after Our likeness.”
 - Note: *tzel* can mean shadow as well as image. More on this later.
 - If we are created in God's image what does this tell us about God? About us?
 - Why “Us/Our” and not “Me/My”
 - Traditional Jewish answer: God speaking to angels.
 - Traditional Christian answer: God speaking to Trinity


 **Genesis 1:26**

- An answer I like:
 - God was talking to the animals!
 - We have divine and animal natures.
- I believe this is a biblical proof text for evolution!



 **Does God Have an Image?**

- The Bible's portrayal of God is very anthropomorphic.
 - God speaks, many see God (Ex. 24:10), God's nose get's red (Ex. 4:14), God takes us out of Egypt with an outstretched arm (Ex. 6:6), etc.
 - The Jewish philosophers say these are only figures of speech
 - The Kabbalists will go overboard in the opposite direction by thinking of God in scores of physical ways.

 **God's Physical Measurements**

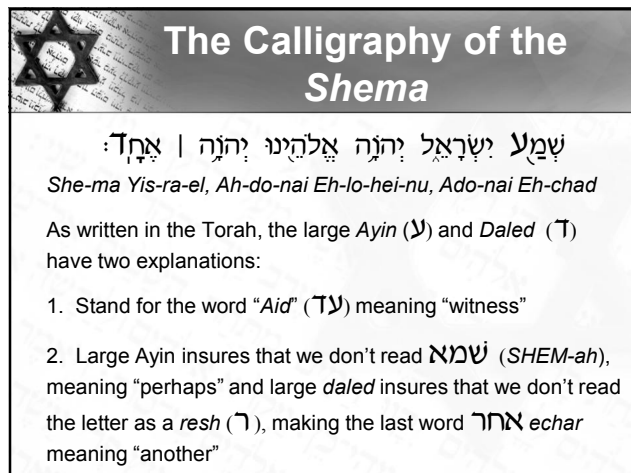
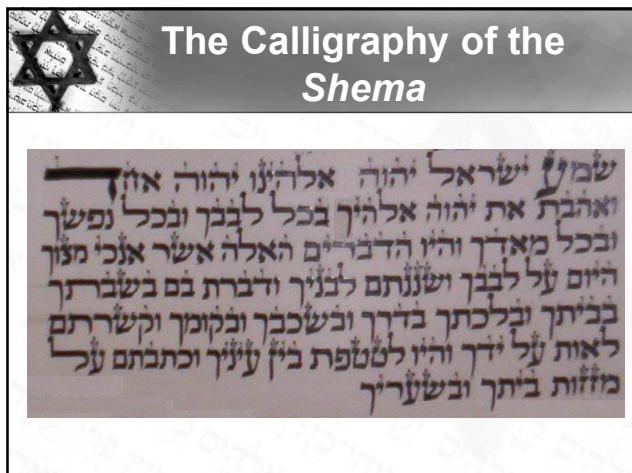
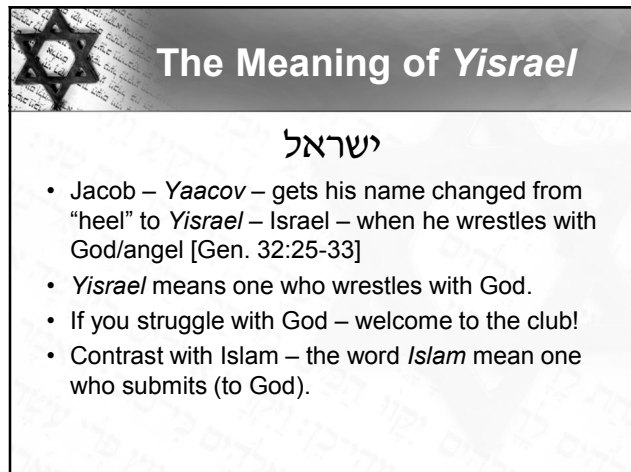
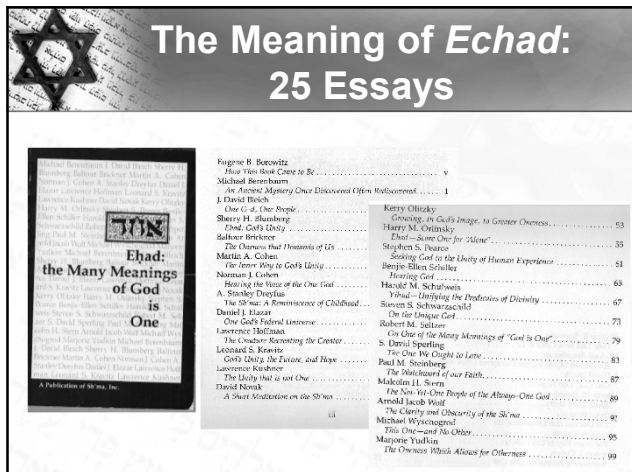
- God's feet: 105 million miles
- Ankle to knees 665 million miles
- Neck size: 455 million miles
- Circumference of head: >10.5 billion miles
- Length of beard: 40,250 miles
- Each finger: 105 million miles
- The black of His eye: 40,250 miles

• **Source:** *Shi'ur Qomah* (6th century) quoted in D. Matt, *Essential Kabbalah*, pg. 74

 **Deuteronomy 6:4**

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

She-ma Yis-ra-el, Ah-do-nai Eh-lo-hei-nu, Ado-nai Eh-chad
 Hear O Israel: Adonai is (now) our God, Adonai (will be) One.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai alone.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai our God, Adonai is one.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, one indivisible Adonai.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai our God is a unique Adonai.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai our God is Ultimate.
 Hear O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is Unity/Everything.



The Mystics' Interpretation of *Echad*

The mystics understand *echad* to mean unity.

- So "*Adonai echad*" means God is unity
- God is the ultimate unity of the universe
- Everything is God and God is everything
 - The separations are illusions
 - Like a wave seems to be a distinct entity but is really one with the sea
 - Like the various parts of a tree. We may give these parts separate names but the tree doesn't know where the roots end and the trunk begins, where the trunk ends and a branch begins, etc.

Where is God?

When I count to three, point to God!

Two Valid Images of God: #1: Conventional/Rational

- In this image, God is "up there" and I am "down here"
- This is reflected in conventional Jewish blessings which begin with "Blessed are You, *Adonai*..."

Two Valid Images of God: #2: Mystic/Kabbalist

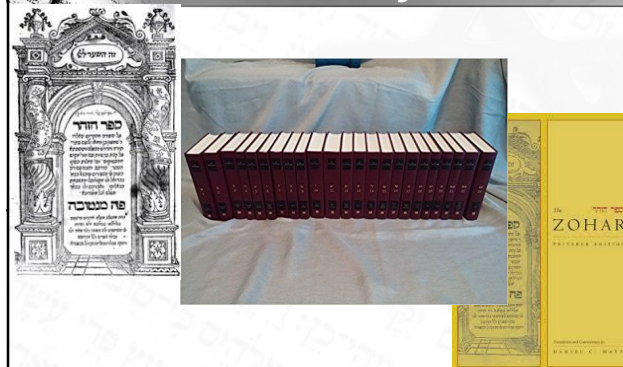
- In this image, God is everywhere and everything (indicated by dashes)
- And my separation from God is an illusion (also indicated by dashes)

The Mystics' Understanding of Free Will

The mystics understand that since everything is God, then everything is under God's control and everything is just as it should be.

- This is a theology that should not be brought into a hospital.
 - It says that the cancer, the accident, even the war (holocaust, gas chambers, etc.) are under the control and will of God.
- I personally have great difficulty with this.

The Zohar: the Central Text of Jewish Mysticism



The Zohar: the Central Text of Jewish Mysticism

The Zohar is a work of pseudepigrapha.

- It reads as though it was written by Shimon Bar Yochai, a 2nd century CE Mishna teacher. It is written in the Aramaic of the period.
- But it was actually written in the 13th century in Spain by Moshe de Leon or his school. We see examples of 13th century Hebrew and even medieval Spanish in the text.

The Zohar

The *Zohar*:

- Is structured as a commentary on the Torah.
- In it, we read of a brilliant rabbi of 2,000 years ago, wandering the Galilee with his disciples (sound familiar?)
- Provides a structure to the study and practice of *Kabbalah*.
- Introduces the 10 *Sefirot*
- Is very difficult.

Some Zohar Text

“At the head of the potency of the King, He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed with in the concealed of the concealed, from the head of infinity – a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring, not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all. As a cord surveyed, it yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of *Ein Sof*. It split and did not split its aura, was not known at all, until under the impact of splitting, a single concealed supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called *Reshit, Beginning, first command of all.*” (*Zohar Be-Reshit*, 1:15a)

- This modern translation is accompanied by three pages of 13 footnotes.



The Sefirot

Isaac Luria and His School

- Luria’s family was expelled from Spain.
- Taught in Safed only 2.5 years before dying in an epidemic in 1572
- Called “Ha-Airi” – the lion – acronym for “the Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac”
- He wrote almost nothing but his students recorded his teachings.



Lurianic Kabbah and Creation

The Foundation Stone *Even Ha-shteyah*


Lurianic Kabbah and Creation

- The Breaking of the Vessels and the release of divine sparks.
- This results in a universe that needs repair.
- Every time a mitzvah is performed, a holy spark is released and a bit of the universe is repaired.

Tikkun Olam & the Messiah

- Perhaps the most astonishing insight of Kabbalah is that God cannot repair the universe without our help.
- This repair is called *Tikkun Olam* and is the centerpiece of Reform Judaism.
- Thus, our efforts, as God's partner, are required to bring the Messiah and redemption.

Angel or Messenger?

The Hebrew word for angel is, *malach* מלאך


And the Hebrew word for messenger is מלאך

Judaism teaches that God sends us into the world to complete creation:

- Are we simple messengers or divine angels?
- Speaking Hebrew, there's no difference!

Being God's Shadow

Recall that one understanding of Gen.1:26 is that we are created as God's shadow.



- If I look at these shadows, can I tell what the people are doing?
- The shadow and its source are deeply linked.

Being God's Shadow



This leads to the mystical idea that we, God's shadows, "force" God's hands by our actions.

- So, for example, by making harmony on Earth, we make harmony in the heavens.
- And, I would add, when we do good things inspired by God and God's teachings we bring God into the world.
- Example of feeding the hungry, visiting the sick. When we, God's shadow, do this, God is doing it. And it doesn't matter if God actually exists!

Being God's Shadow

Carrying this thought to the end of life.

- When does a shadow disappear?
 - When the image and the Maker of the image touch at last.

Judaism and the Afterlife

What do Jews believe about the afterlife?

- I don't know – go ask them!

What does Judaism teach about the afterlife?

- That there is one.
- Resurrection – a mainstay teaching of the rabbis.
- Reincarnation – a key element of Kabbalah
- Communication between worlds - a Talmudic teaching.

Becoming More Spiritual

Step #1: Blessings and prayer

- The traditional blessings of Judaism:
 - “Thanks for the good stuff” blessings such as for bread, wine, and even going to the bathroom.
 - Mitzvah blessings
- Fixed liturgical prayer
 - Not because God needs our prayer
 - But because we need to pray together
- Simply talking to God.

Becoming More Spiritual

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.



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Becoming More Spiritual

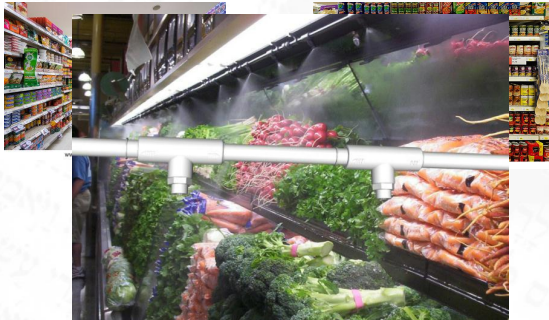
Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.



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Becoming More Spiritual

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.



God's Gift of Mustard

- If I didn't have any mustard at all, I could be happy.
- If I only had deli mustard, I would be fine.
- So how many choices of mustard do I find?



God's Gift of Mustard

One time, preparing for a sermon, I counted 39 choices of mustard at Gelson's!



God's Gift of Olive Oil


So how many choices of olive oil do you think I found at Whole Foods Market?




God's Gift of Olive Oil

92!




 **But You've Got to Notice the Miracles**

REVEREND FUN REG. INC.



Rabbinic story of Reuven and Shimon: They never looked up to see the miracle! All they saw was the mud and the muck (*Midrash Exodus Rabbah 24.1*)


MAKE SURE YOU STOP FOR A SECOND, MOSES, AND REALIZE JUST HOW AMAZINGLY COOL THIS IS

 **Becoming More Spiritual**

Step #2: Seeing the holy in the world.


The point:

- Notice the miracles in your life!
- Notice when you've been blessed!
- The "thank you card" for these gifts is to share your blessings with God's children.
- A gift without acknowledgement is a theft!

 **Becoming More Spiritual**

Step #3: Religious New Year's Resolutions.

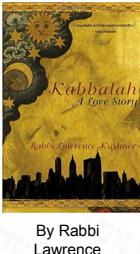
- Resolve to take on one new spiritual practice each year.
 - Prayer
 - Dietary
 - Good deeds
- Don't let the best be the enemy of the good!

 **Becoming More Spiritual**

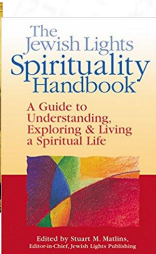
Step #4: Seeing yourself as God's hands.

- Moving your prayer from
 - "Give me" to "Teach/help me" to "Use me"
 - Mystic – not Magic!
- You are God's shadow so bring God with you wherever you are.
 - Isaiah 43:12 quotes God as saying "You are My witnesses and I am God."
 - The rabbis say that this means God can only be God if we serve as God's witnesses!

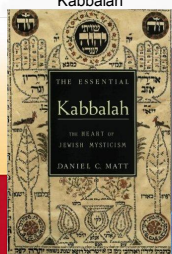
Suggested Reading



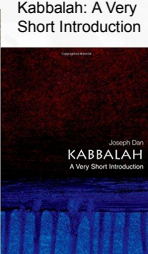
**Kabbalah:
A Love Story**
By Rabbi Lawrence Kushner



**The Jewish Lights
Spirituality Handbook**
A Guide to Understanding, Exploring & Living a Spiritual Life
Edited by Stuart M. Matlin, Editor-in-Chief, Jewish Lights Publishing
By Stuart Matlin



**The Essential
Kabbalah**
THE BEAUTY OF JEWISH MYSTICISM
DANIEL G. MATT
By Daniel Matt



Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction
By Joseph Dan

Some Texts

HOW TO LOOK AT TORAH
(עומא ז'אשדא)

RAASH SHIM'ON said,
"Wise to the human being who says
that Torah presents mere stories and ordinary words!
If so, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary
words,
and better than all of them.
To present matters of the world!
Even rulers of the world possess words more sublime.
If so, let us follow them and make a Torah out of them.
Ah, but all the words of Torah are sublime words, sublime
secrets!"

"Come and see:
The world above and the world below are perfectly balanced:
Israel below, the angels above.
Of the angels it is written: 'He makes his angels spiries.'
But when they descend, they put on the garment of this
world.
If they did not put on a garment befitting this world,
they could not endure in this world
and the world could not endure them.

If this is so with the angels, how much more so with Torah,
who created them and all the worlds,
and for whose sake they all exist.
In descending to this world,
if she did not put on the garments of this world,
the world could not endure. --

"So this story of Torah is the garment of Torah.
Whoever thinks that the garment is the real Torah
and not something else—may his spirit deflate!
He will have no portion in the world that is coming.
That is why David said:
'Open my eyes, so I can see wonders out of your Torah,'
what is under the garment of Torah.

"Come and see: There is a garment visible to all.
When those fools see someone in a good-looking garment
they look no further.
But the essence of the garment is the body,
the essence of the body is the soul.

Some Texts

"So it is with Torah.
She has a body: the commandments of Torah,
called 'the embodiment of Torah.'
This body is clothed in garments: the stories of this world.
Fools of the world look only at that garment, the story of
Torah,
they know nothing more.
They do not look at what is under that garment.
Those who know more do not look at the garment,
but rather at the body under that garment.
The wise ones, servants of the King on high,
those who stood at Mount Sinai,
look only at the soul, root of all, real Torah.
In the time to come, they are destined to look at the soul of
the soul of Torah.

"Come and see: So it is above.
There is garment, body, soul, and soul of soul.
The heavens and their host are the garment.
The Communion of Israel is the body,
who receives the soul, Beauty of Israel.
So she is the body of the soul.

The soul we have mentioned is Beauty of Israel, real Torah.
The soul of the soul is the Holy Ancient One.
All is connected, this one to that one.

"Woe to the wicked who say that Torah is merely a story!
They look at this garment and no further.
Happy are the righteous who look at Torah properly!
As wine must sit in a jar, so Torah must sit in this garment.
So look only at what is under the garment.
All those words and all those stories are garments."

Some Texts


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 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 let Her enjoy His strength. Their pleasure in each other was indescribable. He made Her 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.




Some Texts

This explicit myth portrays the interaction of God and His Bride as a highly eroticized coupling, a sacred copulation (*zivrug 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 (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 speaker in the *Zohar* describes it as the deepest of all mysteries.

According to B. Ta'arat 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.



Some Texts

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, walls 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," which derives from the same source, *Zohar Hadash*.

Sources:
Zohar Hadash, *Midrash Eikhah*, 74b.

