

wujʿd al-mutlaq (Unbounded Existence), thus liberating them from the shackles of their “ego” or “delimited existence.”

Establishing the *rʿbita-yemuhabbat* (tie of love) is viewed as a precondition for placing the *murʿd*'s heart at the disposal (*tasarruf*) of the shaykh. The spiritual states of the shaykh are conveyed to the *murʿd* through the tie of love—the stronger the love, the greater the *fayd* the *murʿd* receives. Hence, the disciple must never allow the *rʿbita* to weaken the utmost effusion of the Divine Energy. Owing to the tie of love, first the acts, then the attributes, and, eventually, the very essence of the *murʿd* is replaced with those of the shaykh. Thus the former becomes a *badal* (‘replaced one’)—a mystic, who has experienced a spiritual rebirth.

Yanis Eshots

See also Liturgy in Islam; Qurʿan; Spiritual Discipline in Islam; Sufism; Teachers in Islam

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Shekhinah

The Hebrew term *Shekhinah* means *presence* or *indwelling*. It was first used in classical rabbinic sources (100–500 CE) to refer to God’s immanent presence in this world, and more specifically in the Temple’s Holy of Holies, in Jerusalem, and amid the People Israel. That presence reflects God’s love for Israel, both a parental love, widely documented in Biblical sources, and a spousal-erotic love, supported largely by the allegorical reading of the *Song of Songs*. The *Song of Songs* interprets the Community of Israel (*keneset yisraʿel*)—the historically defined Jewish people—as God’s chosen bride. Israel is the redeemed slave-girl who faithfully followed Him through the wilderness: “Who is she who comes up from the desert?” (*Song of Songs* 3:6) into the Land of Israel and the Holy Temple: “The King has brought me into His chambers” (*Song of Songs*

1:4). Despite the grammatically feminine form of the word, *shekhinah* refers to God, who is described almost exclusively in masculine terms in these early sources.

Beginning in twelfth-century western Europe, a major change took place in the emergence of Kabbalah. Along with many other symbolic terms, *shekhinah* came to represent the last of the ten inner manifestations of the Godhead, or the feminine-receptive element within the divine self. As the personal God emerges from the indescribable mysteries of infinity, it reveals itself as androgynous, following the ancient Platonically-based myth concerning Adam and Eve. The two aspects of the divine self are then separated and turned face-to-face with each other to permit their (sexual) reunion. The union of the male and female selves within the single Godhead, referred to as “uniting the blessed Holy One and His *Shekhinah*,” is the primary goal of the religious life as understood throughout the kabbalistic tradition.

The greatest work of Kabbalah is the *Zohar*, composed in Castile in the last decade of the thirteenth century—although traditionally attributed to Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai, who lived in the Land of Israel a thousand years earlier. The *Zohar* consists of a series of mystical homilies and conversations that take place in the circle of Rabbi Simeon and his disciples. Its authors—probably a group of kabbalists around Rabbi Moses De Leon in Guadalajara—see themselves as lovers and faithful devotees of *Shekhinah*, ever seeking to adorn her with finery and to lead her into the bridal chamber where she will be united with her divine Spouse. It should be noted that this mystical union in the Godhead represents a dramatic departure from what had been an essential claim of all prior Israelite and Judaic monotheism: The God of Israel has no consort, and therefore all His love-energy is turned earthward, toward his chosen people. Now the *hieros gamos* is said to take place *within* God, and Israel—

especially the kabbalists—are its offspring and supporters.

Throughout the *Zohar* and other concurrent literature, the allegorical interpretation of the *Song of Songs* is predominant. The *Zohar* quotes the text very frequently, but even when it does not invoke it directly, the heady atmosphere of the perfumed gardens and royal bed-chambers of the *Song of Songs* sets the tone for the intense and erotically charged discussions of love and “holy union” that fill its pages. The love of Rabbi Simeon’s disciples for one another, as well as for the Jewish people suffering in exile, is infused with their great passion for *shekhinah* and nourished by the overflow of divine bounty (*shefa*) that pours down upon them in those moments of grace when the upper union is brought to fulfillment.

The emergence of such an erotically laden mystical piety within medieval Judaism is somewhat surprising, especially given the great efforts made by prominent philosophers over several prior centuries to “purify” the idea of God even from the anthropomorphic elements that are found within the Bible. Some scholars—notably Gershom Scholem, the leading authority in the field until his death in 1983—viewed Kabbalah as a reaction against philosophy. They see in it a statement that the deeper religious needs of the suffering community required to be expressed in myth, and that such a mythic outburst would inevitably contain elements of *eros* and assertion of the female side of the human spiritual self, in quasi-Jungian terms, projected onto the Godhead.

More recently this development has also been treated in a historical-cultural context, claiming the influence of the great Marian revival of twelfth-century Catholicism on the Jewish minority in western Europe. Followers of Judaism and Catholicism read the same text of the *Song of Songs*, and each interpreted its own sacred story—the Exodus-Sinai narrative or the Passion—as overlaid with the *eros* of the Canticle. Christian interpretations of this text, widely popular among the monastics of

the Middle Ages, were constrained by the veneration of Marian virginity and by the celibacy of the authors and intended readers. Jewish exegetes suffered no such limitations: Once a female figure was described within the divine realm, it could be seen in full coital union with its male counterpart, and that union could be described in language such as “living limb” or “female waters,” which represented full awareness and acceptance of sexual love within its proper bounds. However, the kabbalists also insisted on the most restrictive and repressive views of human sexuality, alongside their attraction to extreme expressions of sexual symbolism.

Kabbalah achieved its greatest acceptance as the common theology of Judaism in the sixteenth through mid-eighteenth centuries. The pietists of Safed, a small town in the mountains of Galilee, set the tone for a devotional revival within Judaism that took place after ca. 1550 and lasted until the inroads of modernity. The figure of *Shekhinah*, now described in boldly feminine terms and occasionally even encountered as such in visions, assumed major importance in this revival. The spirit of this renewed focus on devotional intensity generated many new kabbalistic rituals. Best-known among these is *Kabbalat Shabbat*, a service for the welcoming of the Sabbath, wherein the seventh day—following long-standing symbolic associations—is greeted as bride and queen. The central hymn of this service is *Lekhah Dodi* (Come, My Beloved!), written by Shelomo Alkabetz, a key member of the Safed circle. In this hymn, sung in Jewish communities throughout the world, the worshippers call upon God to join them in greeting *Shekhinah* in her temporal manifestation as *Shabbat*, where she is celebrated both as the bride of God and the beloved of His holy people.

From a psychological perspective, it may be speculated that *shekhinah* emerged from Kabbalah as a way to legitimize intense religious passion between the still mostly “male”

God of Israel and His human community. Although Israel saw itself classically as the “bride” of God, its public worship was conducted exclusively by males and its mystical literature was written by, and for, men. Given the severe strictures against homoerotic love in traditional Jewish society, it is possible to see *Shekhinah* as a female homeostasis projected to stand precisely between God and the earthly community of Israel, a female figure toward whom both could direct their passions in a safely heterosexual context.

In contemporary Jewish life, much interest has focused on *Shekhinah*-centered piety in the religious life of some Jewish feminists, and a popular literature of new devotional texts dedicated to Her—considered quite controversial in other Jewish circles—has begun to emerge.

Arthur Green

See also Androgynous Myths; Catholic Mysticism; Desire; Eros; Feminist Thought in Judaism; God as Father; God as Mother; Kabbalah; Mary; Sabbath; *Song of Songs*; Spiritual Love in Women Mystics

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Shema

See Divine Love in Judaism; God as Father; Liturgy in Judaism; Rabbinic Judaism

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