

THE FUTURE OF THE HOLY: FROM SEX TO EROS

M A R C G A F N I



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SEX. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE THAT SO GRABS our rapt attention, incessantly pursues us, occupies our daydreams, fantasies, and yearnings? The kabbalists state the obvious: God is trying to get our attention. Now I am not talking about the God who sends good people to burn in hell because they slipped up on one of his impossible demands. Nor even the Grandfather in heaven who hands out chocolate to do-gooders. Forget that God. The God you don't believe in doesn't exist. Rather, the God that exists for us is the personal erotic life force that courses through reality. The God we believe in is the vitality of eros. The God we believe in is the force for healing and transformation in the world. The God who knows our name¹. That is the God who so clearly calls out to us that sex *is* the answer.

When religion splits us off from our sexuality, we correctly intuit that something is deeply askew.

But sex is not a panacea. Sex is not a drug that will soothe away the lurking feeling of ennui that this cannot be all there is. Good orgasms will not a good life make. Rather, sex is the answer *as a model and not as the sum total* of eros. Sex, if we will but listen, is a great master of the spirit – better than any guru, psychologist, rabbi, or priest. Sex can teach us how to reclaim the erotic in every aspect and element of our lives.

THAT IS THE ESSENCE OF
HEBREW TANTRA,
THE KABBALISTIC SECRET
OF THE CHERUBS

The core of Hebrew tantrism was the cherubic mysteries which taught that the sexual was more than a force to be merely controlled or merely indulged. Rather, the sexual in all of its intense pleasure is the model for all spiritual wisdom. The goal of spiritual living is to become a lover and to engage all of life erotically. Sex is our most important guide, offering glimmerings of guidance that pave the way to illumination. Illumination, in Hebrew called Zohar, is achieved when one lives erotically *in every facet of being*². The cherubic mysteries – which we will unpack for the first time in two thousand years³ – teach you how. It is this tantric system that was the hidden core of the mysteries in Solomon's Temple.

The Temple in Jerusalem was the centre of the mystery cult which taught that erotic living was the core goal of the life of the spirit and that this erotic life was modelled but not exhausted by the sexual. We know that eros is very different from sex, but we also know that sexual symbolism was central in the Jerusalem Temple⁴. The most striking of these symbols were the sexually entwined cherubs perched atop the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies. Why should this be so if the Temple is the seat of eros, and eros we know is something very different from sex? Why wouldn't the Temple use some other image of eros? Wouldn't a statue of a runner who has become the wind or a painter engrossed in her colours be a more fitting figure to perch atop the ark? If eros and love are more than sex, then why does the Temple insist on using a blatantly sexual image?

The answer is simple yet elegant and powerful. Sex and eros are different, but essentially related. The relation is that sex models the erotic. That is to say,

within the sexual itself are the most important hints of eros. It is from the nature of the sexual that we learn what it means to live erotically.

When sex becomes virtually the only arena in which we experience erotic fulfilment, then the Shechina is in exile. The exile of the Shechina is the exile of the erotic into the sexual. The redemption of the Shechina is therefore the re-expansion of eros from the narrow confines of the sexual back into the broad expanse of living. The goal of life is to live erotically in all facets of being. There are four faces of eros hinted at in these mysteries⁵, which when taken together, form the essence of the Shechina experience. Being on the Inside, fullness of presence, yearning, and interconnectivity. These are all Shechina qualities, qualities of erotic living.

Being on the inside means not on the inside of your sexual partner, for that is limited to the masculine sexual experience; rather, it is about being on the inside of the experience itself. Yearning is of the essence of the sexual. So much so that it is often thought by poets and psychologists to be more pleasurable and intense than the fulfilment itself. Interconnectivity is nowhere more clearly manifested than in the sexual drive. We are born with an urge to merge. Finally, it is in the sexual where – in its ideal expression – we are most fully present to each other. Every gesture, fragrance, sigh, and whisper ripples through us as we listen deeply to the erotic instructions that well up from the depth of our soul's body.

All four of the primary faces of eros are modelled in the sexual; however, and this is the key, they are not exhausted by the sexual. It would be a great tragedy of the spirit if the only place where we experienced full presence, interiority, yearning and primal interconnectivity, were in the sexual. That would be to confine eros to the narrow confines of the bedroom, when it needs to soar through our kitchens, our offices, our carpools, our classrooms!

HEBREW TANTRA

Hebrew tantra is a term coined by a cluster of different people in the last thirty years. Myself, Kabbalah scholar Moshe Idel, and Hebrew scholar Raphael Pattai have all used the term independently. Each person is referring in a different way to the sexual symbolism which lies at the core of the Holy of Holies – the Secret of the Cherubs⁶.

What I mean by Hebrew tantra is ancient Hebrew wisdom rooted in the esoteric mysteries of Solomon's Temple. These teachings understood implicitly that the sexual models the erotic. They viewed the sexual act itself as a great sacred mystery reflecting all the

deepest truths of the spirit. Most of these teachings are hidden. One of the methods of concealment is the fact that the teachings are scattered across vast amounts of ancient material with no obvious way of tracing the ideas. The second method of concealment is the embedding of the mysteries in the internal symbolism of the Kabbalah, a code inaccessible to the unversed.

Yet, in all quests after the mysteries, the first source is never textual; it is rather the soul itself. In the words of Job, which take on dual meaning in this context, "Through my flesh I vision God." I was convinced from an early age that religion had lost what I believed must have been its original erotic vitality. I knew that the sexual somehow held the mystery of return to this much larger-than-sexual eros. Moreover, I was convinced that paganism stripped of its non-ethical practice had much to offer us in the renewal of the old religion for our postmodern souls.

Contrary to classical religion and much of psychology, Hebrew tantra insists that sex is integrally related to love and eros. There is no disconnect. Not because it is always nice if you love the person you are sleeping with. But far more powerfully, and this is the Secret of the Cherubs, because *the sexual is the ultimate model for eros and love*.

Thirteenth century Hebrew mystic Isaac of Acco said it most boldly, "Whoever has not desired a woman is like an ass and even less than an ass, for it is from the sexual one understands divine service⁷." Sex stands as the ultimate symbol, both signifying and actually modelling the erotic experience in all areas of life. The goal of life is to live erotically in all facets of being, and sex is the *model* par excellence for erotic living.

SEX IS THE ANSWER

Freud's understandings, which have so coloured our own unconscious view of the word, are the precise opposite of the secret of the cherubs. *For Freud everything is a metaphor for sex. For the kabbalists, sex is a metaphor for everything*. Freud was interested in reduction, in bringing everything down. He lived in an era still in rebellion against 1700 years of Church domination, crippling science, freedom and beauty. As a result, he, like most of the intelligentsia of his age, automatically rejected spirit as a serious force. So, Freud reduced everything in the world to sex.

The mystical project, however, is not about reduction; it rather seeks to raise up all the scattered sparks of light and return them to their source⁸. To the kabbalist, all the processes in the world, including sex, are erotic at their core. For the kabbalists, sex points to the erotic.

This opens an even deeper distinction between Freud and the Kabbalah. For Freud, sex was a human release valve that allowed for the release of tension and therefore assured more effective functioning. For the kabbalist, effective spiritual living was not facilitated by releasing tension, but by holding eros. A perfect world for Freud would be one in which everything was de-sexualized; then sex itself could perform its natural biological release valve function without creating neurosis and complexes. For the kabbalist, the ideal world would be one in which the sexual modelling of the erotic was made conscious with the resultant eroticizing of all of reality.

EXILED INTO THE SEXUAL

Now let's go back to our lost ark and its cherubs situated in the inner sanctum of the Temple. The ark in particular and the Temple in general are the mythic symbols of the Shechina – that is, of the erotic experience⁹. That is precisely what the mystery texts mean when they say the Shechina dwells between the cherubs atop the ark. The fall of the Temple is thus not a mere historical event. In myth, the fall of the Temple is the fall of eros. This experience is called by the kabbalistic masters *the exile of the Shechina*¹⁰.

Open your hearts and minds to hear the next sentence. The exile of the Shechina means no less than the exile of the erotic. But where did it go? To where was eros exiled? The answer is that the exile of the Shechina is *the exile of the erotic into the sexual*. That is to say, when the only place we access the core qualities of eros is in the sexual, then eros, or the Shechina, is in exile¹¹. When the only time I feel like I am on the inside is in great sex, then the Shechina is in exile. When intense desire is a feeling I touch only before exploding in orgasm, then my life is poor indeed. The Shechina is exiled. Eros has fallen.

However, we cannot live in a non-erotic world. So, unconsciously we seek compensation. We look to get our erotic fix in the sexual. But this doesn't work either. For when you de-eroticize the entire world except sex, then the sexual collapses as well. You see, we all have erotic needs. These needs require attention in all of life, but if we ignore them in all of life, then we demand that the sexual fill all of our erotic needs. And so sexuality shrugs, collapsing under the weight of an impossible demand.

EXILE WITHIN AN EXILE

In the language of the kabbalists, we are now in an exile within an exile¹². The first exile of the

Shechina is the exile of the erotic *into* the sexual. The second is the exile of the erotic *within* the sexual itself. The erotic is exiled to a very limited domain within the sexual: transgressive or illicit sexuality *which breaks your own boundaries*.

We have gotten to the point where we cannot even find the erotic in most of the arenas of the sexual. In order to touch that intense desire which brings us to a place deep in the infinity of the moment – on the inside of the inside – many people need a sexuality which breaks the boundaries of their own authentic story. We either downgrade or upgrade sex. The result of the first is adultery, degrading forms of pornography, and all varieties of sexual abuse. The second expresses itself in the search for sex in the form of the ideal true love. It is, of course, so ideal that is inaccessible, leaving us forever fantasizing about the perfect lover or reading endless varieties of the same sexy romance novel. *We are desperately searching for eros in all the wrong places*.

The yearning for a rebuilt Temple is not an artist or carpenter's fantasy. It is rather the dream of a world in which raw eros, today exiled to illicit sexuality, will be accessed in the context of committed relationships. The goal is to move beyond the need for stolen waters. To be able to access the full power and passion of the sensual within the context of your own highest story, where your own waters are satisfying and sweet¹³.

HARLOTS AND PRETENDING

One of most famous images of the Shechina in exile laced throughout the Zohar is the prostitute¹⁴. The problem with prostitution is not primarily an ethical problem. Ethical prostitutes can have far more moral decency than the ostensible pillars of the community. Images of the wise and good harlots abound in literature. From Rahab the harlot who marries Joshua in the Bible, to Mary Magdalene, to the Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.

The problem with prostitution is the depersonalizing of sex. Eros is about the inside and face. The prostitute is faceless and nameless. Emotionally, the client is always on the outside. There is no intimacy. Ultimately, this erotic failure becomes an ethical failure. The person goes to the prostitute because he is lonely. He is eros starved and not sex starved, knowing the only place he can get an erotic fix is in sex. The Shechina, the erotic, is exiled in the sexual. All too often – through no fault of the prostitute – he feels emptier after sex than he did before. He will usually ejaculate, but he will rarely achieve fulfilment.

The highest paid courtesan, of course, is the one who heals the split between sex and eros; for at least that evening, she is not only sexual available, but also fully engaged, present, and loving. Generally, however, the eros is not real, as it is simply impossible to be truly available and present to so many people, day after day. So, the best-case scenario is an unspoken agreement. She will pretend, and he will pretend, and the pretence will be sufficient for that is all there is. Sex and eros are split. The Shechina is in exile.

THE TANTRIC PILGRIMS

Three times a year, pilgrims would gather in Jerusalem from all over the land of Israel. These gatherings were called the Holidays of Vision (*Chag HaReiya*). One can well imagine that on these holidays the adept among the pilgrims practiced visualizations, chanting, meditations, and a host of other spiritual techniques. These mysteries were passed from the Temple initiates in Jerusalem to the Greco-Egyptian community of Alexandria. They were disseminated by Solomon to all of the surrounding cultures. Indeed, two great nineteenth century mystical masters, Mordechai Lainer of Ishbitz and his teacher Simchan Bunim of Pshischa, already hint at a systematic program of spiritual teaching partially rooted in Goddess mysteries, initiated by Solomon and his wives¹⁵. Just so that we make clear what we are saying here, Mircea Eliade already notes that there are profound parallels between Indian yogic tantra of both the Hindu and Buddhist variety and Western mystery traditions from Hermetic, Gnostic, Early Christian, and Greco-Alexandrian sources. What Eliade fails to note is that these traditions had their probable source to a greater or lesser degree in the mystery cults of Solomon's Temple. The mystery of the cherubs are, then, not a Hebrew version of Indian tantra. Quite the opposite – they are the likely *source* of the Indian yogic traditions as well as much of the great Western mystery tradition.

So our return to Hebrew tantra is a return to a fountain from which all these great wisdoms sprang¹⁶. There are, however, two enormous differences between Hebrew and Hindu tantra in their classical sources. In much of Hindu tantra, it is the avoidance of sexual release which allows the adept to re-channel the sexual energy inward and upward instead of outward. In Hebrew tantra, it is the natural flow of sexual expression, including release, which models the lover's path in all arenas of living.

Second, in Hindu tantra, the sense of the sources is that the partner is almost a sacred object. She is a

symbol of the feminine principle, but in her being the symbol, she is fully depersonalized – a kind of nameless yogini who is a necessary aid in the spiritual tantric journey of the male adept.

In Hebrew tantra, the partner is both a Shechina incarnation and fully personalized at the same time¹⁷. The sexual, existential fulfilment and pleasure of one's partner is the primary ethical and erotic obligation of the Hebrew adept. The spiritual tantric journey is only sacred within that highly personalized intimate context.

Moreover, in the Hebrew tantric path, the partners must share a committed relationship beyond the sexual. Naturally then, there is no danger of splitting sex from eros in all facets of life. In the Hindu tantric model, there was no committed relationship between the man and woman. For the Hebrew mystic, this all is the exile of the Shechina. Classic Hindu tantra (not its Western offshoots) limited eros to the realm of spiritualized sex, effectively divorcing it from all other facets of living. Sex became a limited spiritual activity which did not spill over into day-to-day partnership and commitment of the rest of life.

COSMIC LOVE AFFAIR

A young man walks in on Master Baruch and his wife in the midst of a heated argument. Startled, he quickly turns away. Baruch responds with a wink, "You don't understand. You have just witnessed a discussion between God and the Shechina."

To really touch at what the ancient mystics meant when they so deeply linked the sexual, the erotic, and the sacred, we need to go one final step further. We mentioned earlier that the Holy of Holies is understood as the marriage bed, while the ark and its tablets alternately represent the male and female sexual organs. Well, whose marriage bed is it anyways? And to whom does all this sexual anatomy belong? To human beings or God, whatever that might mean?

The texts intentionally blur the lines on this issue, for the point is that human beings and God actually share the same bed. That is to say, the Cherubs are the symbol of the great marriage between the divine masculine and divine feminine¹⁷. Between Shakti and Shiva in Hindu myth, between Kudshah Brik Hu and Shechina in the kabbalistic storehouse of symbolism. Kudsha Brik Hu is the masculine divine energy, and Shechina the feminine divine energy. When the Shechina dwells "between the cherubs," the divine masculine and feminine meet in erotic union.

But here is the major new teaching of the mystics. That union is not only modelled by – but actually initiated by – the human sexual merging.

When the relationship is real, when there is commitment and mutuality and love, then human sexual union not only models the erotic in all facets of life, it participates and affects union in the universe. It becomes an agent for healing and oneness even and especially, within God. It is in this regard that the great lover and mystic Akiva says that when man and woman join in sacred union, then “the Shechina dwells between them”¹⁸.

This, of course, is precisely the same phrase the biblical myth text uses to describe the Shechina which “dwells between the cherubs.” Between the cherubs and between the human lovers is the same place! For the mystics, then, those cherubs symbolize the masculine and feminine, both in the human and in the divine realm. Simply put, at the apex of sexuality, humankind touches, participates in, and heals divinity. This is the potential for world healing implicit in the sexual, which models the erotic and the holy.

AKIVA – MYSTIC AND LOVER¹⁹

In the kabbalistic tradition, Akiva is the penultimate lover²⁰. He is a poor shepherd who lived and walked in Israel only a few years after the death of Jesus. He witnessed the destruction of the Temple and understood deeply that the Temple was the axis of eros, and that eros is the essential force of attraction – the clasp upon the beaded necklace that holds the whole world together.

Akiva, however, initially learns of eros not from books or old wise masters. His life journey begins as a simple shepherd who passes his time in the fields, playing his flute for his God and his sheep. He is beheld late one afternoon by Rachel, the beautiful daughter of Kalba Savua, patriarch of Jerusalem’s wealthiest aristocratic family. She sees him and she *knows*. Great love and passion is kindled. They marry against the fierce objections of her family. For marrying a simpleton she is disowned. But with love and eros as their spiritual masters, Akiva makes his way to the academy and emerges twelve years later as the greatest spiritual master the Hebrew tradition has ever known.

To all his disciples, he makes clear: My true teacher is Rachel. Not just because, as is usually understood, she urges him to study for many years away from home in the academy, but because the love and eros they had between them were the greatest teachers of the spirit he ever had. Indeed, the kabbalists understand Rachel to refer both to

the real woman who loved Akiva and to a metaphor for the Goddess, for the Shechina. So when the Temple falls, Akiva needs to make people understand that for all of its magnificence and even holiness, in the end, it is but a symbol of something more: It is the symbol of eros.

A TEACHING FROM AKIVA: THE FIRE BETWEEN THEM

To that end, Akiva teaches the people two great teachings which are really one. First, he points to the Hebrew words for man and woman – I-Y-SH (א״ש) and I-SH-A (אשׁה). They are made up of two sets of letters. The first set of common letters – I-SH – appears in both man and woman. These two letters together, comprised of the Hebrew aleph (I) (א) and shin (SH) (ש) letters, form the word Eish, fire (אשׁ). Fire represents sex and passion. The Y (י) and A (א), which appear respectively in the Hebrew man and woman words, are in Hebrew *Yud* and *Hei* – יה . These are the letters of the name of God.

א״ש = man

אשׁה = woman

אשׁ = fire

יה = Yah, the name of God

When man and woman come together in sacred union, God is a third partner in their intercourse. They participate not only in the potential creation of new life below in the visible world, but also create new life above, in the divine²¹. They not only fulfil themselves in eros, but they fulfil God. “The Shechina dwells between them.” Akiva is suggesting no less than that the Shechina which dwells between the cherubs in the Temple, now dwells between man and woman in sexual union. Sexual Union in the kabbalistic tradition is the great mystical act that heals all the worlds above and below. The Zohar in a typical passage writes:

They should prepare themselves to be of one desire and one intent so that when they join they become one in body and soul; they become one in soul by aligning their wills in cleaving; when they unite in sexual union they become one in body and soul [...] It is then that God dwells between them in unified oneness.

Eros, we now begin to understand, is the primal desire from which the word springs into being. God’s eros created the world. Our lack of eros could destroy the world. Love or Die. The mystics of every religion – those who lived on the inside – understand that this is not mere metaphor. Every act of union causes and participates in divine union. The human being participates in the divine love affair, even as God participates in the human love affair. For beneath the veil of illusion, all really is one²¹!

SONG OF SONGS, HOLY OF
HOLIES

Akiva had a second teaching which takes us one step farther on the path of eros and love. Akiva participated in a great debate with the other sages over whether to include the Song of Songs in the biblical canon of sacred books. It is written as a dialogue between two lovers. “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth [...] His fruit is sweet to my mouth [...] His thrust is upon me in love” The man responds, “Your lips are like the thread of scarlet [...] Your breasts are like two roes [...] Your closed garden, your secret fountain [...]”

The Song of Songs appears to be a sexual love song, perhaps to be sung in ancient taverns and beer halls. What place could it have in the sacred writ? To this argument of the sages, Akiva has a two-fold response. First, he says, know that all of the Song of Songs is a *mashal*, an allegory. Second, know that while all the books are holy, the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies.

One way to read the text, and a way that it is usually read, is that Akiva is saying two distinct things. First, he says do not be afraid of the content of this book; it is not about sexuality. The sexual is but an allegory for the spiritual love between the human being and God. Second, know that this great spiritual love is central to the religious endeavour. This book, therefore, is not only holy, but the Holy of Holies.

That reading is but the cloak which allows Akiva to hide his truly radical esoteric doctrine. This doctrine is no less than the Secret of the Cherubs – the spring of enlightenment from which we have been sipping this entire chapter. When Akiva says that the Song of Songs is a *mashal*, he means not an allegory but a model. That is to say, the sexual story of the lovers in the Song of Songs is a model for the erotic. The erotic is identical with the sacred itself. This is Akiva’s intent when he cries out with such passion and pathos that “the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies!” This is not a casual metaphor affirming the importance of the book. It rather contains Akiva’s deepest mystical intention. The Holy of Holies in the Temple destroyed just a few years earlier was, for Akiva and the people, the personification of eros. The cherubs reminded the people that the sexual was the window to the sacred. The secret of the sexually intertwined cherubs atop the ark was not that sex *is* the erotic and the holy, but that sex *models* the erotic and the holy.

The power of this idea does not fall with the destruction of the Temple. The fall of the Temple, insists Akiva, must not be the fall of eros. For every moment that engages life erotically, the Temple is rebuilt. Moreover, Akiva reminds a people who have just been disempowered politically that in

the end political power structures are but illusion. The human being is powerful because he/she – by living erotically – participates and creates the divine union because human consciousness and action are the touchstone.

EROS EXPANDED

Erotic fulfillment is reached when I have expanded the realm of eros beyond the sexual to embrace all of my existence. Indeed, the root of the Sanskrit word *tantra* – *tan* – means expansion. True tantric energy expands into all realms of life. This expansion is the goal of kabbalistic tantra.

The Zohar weaves this esoteric teaching into a seemingly innocent passage. The original quote is so striking that I decided to leave it virtually intact. Read it slowly, almost as a tantric meditation.

“Every person must find himself in Sexual Union (of male and female) [...] for in that way the Shechina never parts from him. And if you will say, one who travels (and is separated from his partner and therefore separated from sexual union) does not the Shechina depart from him? Come and see – before a person begins his journey, he should organize his prayer – from a place where he is in sexual union – in order to draw the Shechina down on him before he sets out on his path [...] Once he has learned the order of prayer – and the Shechina dwells on him through his sexual union, he should set out on his way – for the Shechina can now remain with him [...] in the city or in the field [...].”

“As long as he is on the way, he needs to be mindful of his path in order that the higher union, the Shechina not part from him. Even when he is not in sexual union [...] this higher union does not leave. When he arrives home he should rejoice (be sexual) with his partner [...] for she is the one through whom he accessed the higher union with the Shechina²².”

This passage, part of the cherub mystery tradition, makes the merging with the Shechina *dependent* on sexual union. Clearly, then, they are not the same thing. The goal is “higher union with the Shechina.” The higher union takes place when one has been able to move beyond the bedroom to transpose the sexual to his/her broader world. To greet the divine at every doorstep, every crossroad, in every sparrow along the way. After returning from the way, he is instructed to again be sexual with his partner in order to re-cast his life once more in the model of the sexual. In this way, sex leads him to Shechina.

It is in the move through the sexual to the erotic that we achieve the ultimate goal of the spirit: higher union with the Shechina, erotic fulfillment in every arena of living. 

¹ “He counts the number of the stars, and calls them all by name” (Psalms 147) – So, too, when Israel went down to Egypt, He counted them. And since they were compared to stars, he called all their names, as it says, “And these are the names of the children of Israel” (Exodus 1:1) (*Midrash Rabba* Exodus, 1:3).

“And how do we know that below, too, He calls them by name? As it says, ‘See, God has called by name, Betzalel the son of Uri the son of Hur of the tribe of Judah’ (Exodus 21:2, 35:30) (*Midrash Rabba* Exodus 48:1). The source for man being called by his name is none other than Betzalel, the architect of the Sanctuary.

² The Baal Shem Tov taught: “There is nothing large or small that is separate from Him, for He is to be found in all possible realities. The complete human being is therefore able to effect higher unities (*yihudim*) even in his physical reality, whether that be food, drink, sex, business, or mundane conversations with his friends [...] This is what is meant by the biblical verse “Know Him in all your ways” (Proverbs chapter 3) as is written, “And the man *knew* Eve his wife” (Genesis 4:1) – [the word *knew*] means union and erotic coupling (*zivvug*) (*Baal Shem Tov al Hatorah*, quoted from *Toldot Yaakov Yitzhak, Bereshit* 189).

One of the greatest practitioners and adherents of this teaching was Rabbi Yitzhak Yehuda Yehiel Safrin of Komarno. He repeats this over and over again in his somewhat inaccessible writings. Quoting the Maggid of Mezeretch, he says: “Concerning this, our holy master, the pure light, our teacher Dov Ber, said that this is the meaning of what is called in the Zohar “she wears *kisbutin delo havu* – jewelry that never was” (Zohar vol. 2 95a). The *mitzvot* are called “jewelry that was,” but when a person unifies the things of this world and thus adorns the Shechina, this is called “jewelry that never was” [...] for even in the lowest level there is (erotic) unity and embracing” (*Ketem Ofir* on the first verse of Esther).

³ See especially the book *Mystery of Love* (2003) and *The Erotic and the Holy* (2006) audio series.

⁴ Not only in the case of the cherubs was there sexual symbolism in the Temple. The poles of the ark were said to have protruded from behind the veil that concealed the Holy of Holies into the sanctuary. The Talmud says that they looked like the two nipples of a woman’s breasts to someone who saw them from the Sanctuary (tractate Yoma 54a).

⁵ See Chapter 2 of *Mystery of Love* (2003) or “Interiors, Face, and Reconstruction of Eros” in essay form at www.mar-cgafni.com.

⁶ The first hint at another more profound if esoteric reading of the sources alluding however vaguely to sexuality as an erotic model came when I was 22 and studying a text of Tzadok the priest cited in a work by Gedalia Schor, which enigmatically alluded to the secret of the cherubs and cited the key talmudic texts. Eliyahu Dessler in his *Michtav MeEliyahu* makes scattered veiled references in the same direction. In the academic world, Raphael Pattai’s 1947 book on the Temple also contained important hints. Also helpful was an excellent short monograph of Saul Liberman’s on the esoteric mystery of the Song of Songs to which I was referred by Daniel Abrams. Similarly helpful was Pattai’s later work *Hebrew Goddesses* as well as the work that Pattai was greatly influenced by, *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves. Two other monographs (Ohad Ezrahi’s “Shnei Keruvim” Heb.

1997 and Moshe Eisen’s “Ye Shall be as Gods, Conceptions of the Yetzer Hara,” 1992) cite some of the scholarship on the Cherubs (Ezrahi) and give extensive primary sources material (Eisen). The same is true of a number of articles by Moshe Idel, most important among them being his article “Sexual Praxis in Kabbalah.” The limitation of all the important work cited here is that while they note that there is a mystery and that it is connected to sex, eros, and the temple, they do not examine the nature of eros and generally do not distinguish between it and sexual vitality. Similarly, they do not suggest sex as a model for eros, nor do they unpack specific paths of eros.

⁷ Rabbi Isaac of Acco is quoted by R. Elijah De Vidah at the end of *Shar Dalet of Shaar HaAhava* in his master work *Reishit Hohmah*.

⁸ In Luriannic myth, these are the 288 sparks of light that remained in the shattered vessels of the Kings after they died and are waiting for redemption. The sparks are numbered 288, based on a reading of the biblical verse in Genesis 1:2: “And the spirit of God hovered (*merahfet*) over the water.” The Hebrew word *merahfet* is broken down into *rafah met* – i.e. the “dead 288.” These sparks are redeemed by means of the “arousal of the feminine waters” (this is the water from the biblical verse) that “cause anew a Higher Coupling, and through the light that is created as a result of that *zivvug*, these Kings will be fixed” (*Sha’ar Habaqdamot, drush Ka’asher Ala, Etz Hayim, Sha’ar Hatiqqun*, chapter one). This process, according to R. Isaac Luria, is the secret meaning of the “revival of the dead” (*Etz Hayim Sha’ar Rafah*, chapter one). Although this process is “built-in” as part of the Luriannic *Tiqqun* stage of development, as a result of the Sin of Adam, which caused creation to fall to a level lower than what was originally intended. It has become the work of the *tzadiq* to raise these sparks up. The degree of his success is dependant on the magnitude of the mitzvah he performs or the intensity of the prayer he prays (*Etz Hayim, Sha’ar M”N uMD*, eleventh discourse, seventh principle). The Baal Shem Tov and the Hasidic movement in general placed greater emphasis on the fact that one raises up the sparks in all forms of encounter with the material world. *Baal Shem Tov al Hatorah, Ki Tisa* 29, where the Baal Shem Tov is quoted explicitly on the subject of the 288 sparks.

⁹ In the Zohar, note is taken of the fact that the biblical verse in Joshua 3:11 refers to the “ark of the covenant, the Master of the all the earth.” The verse is commonly read as meaning “the ark of the covenant of the Master of all the earth.” However, as the Zohar notes, the word “of” is missing, implying that in a sense, the ark is the Master. The Zohar therefore derives that when the Torah speaks of the ark, it is referring to the Shechina, Whose divine name is *Adonai* (master). It is called the ark of the covenant, *brit* – the *sfira* of *yesod*, since this life-bestowing *sfira* fills it with prolific abundance. The erotic imagery is clear. As such, it is an animate source of life, as it says in the *Tosefta* that appears in Zohar vol. 2, p. 13a: “In it [in the ark], one holy source is hidden, which is constantly flowing into it, and filling it. It (the source) is called the God of Hosts, blessed be He forever and in all worlds.” See also *Midrash Han’elam Eiha*: 92c, where it is written: “[...] From the ark of the Torah, food would go out to all the world, and light and blessings for all.”

¹⁰ The original idea of the exile of the Shechina emerges when the people are exiled from Israel to Babylon. In its original formulation, it indicates that the divine presence moved with the people wherever they were exiled (see for example *Midrash Rabba* on Lamentations Chapter 34). The home, the study hall, and the

communal worship center all became places where the Shechina – eros – dwelled. At the same time, the exile of the Shechina indicates a fallen state. The Shechina is not in its natural home. The people are not in their place – in their story.

This is both a geographic and existential reality – the former and the latter emphasized in different ways in various strains of rabbinic and kabbalistic thought.

I am, of course, not claiming that this reading exhausts the idea of exile of the Shechina; I am rather – in the tradition of all creative thought – weaving together a number of different kabbalistic strains of thought into the fabric of a larger vision.

¹¹ The idea that the exile of the Shechina is the exile of the erotic into the sexual is possibly best expressed in the *Raya Mehimna* and *Tiqunei Zohar* literature. Based on the biblical verse “and a maidservant that inherits her mistress” (Proverbs 30:23), the Shechina in exile is said to be the state in which the maidservant has inherited her place. The “maidservant” includes a range of possibilities (see *Raya Mehimna*, Zohar vol. 2 117b, where it says explicitly that “not all Shechinas are the same”), from the lack of fullness that resulted from Moses’ passing and the ensuing leadership of Joshua (*Tiqunei Zohar* 14b), to the most commonly defined “maidservant” state – that of the “evil one” (often identified with Lilith) – who invariably takes the Shechina’s place because of some sort of sexual sin (e.g. *Raya Mehimna*, Zohar vol. 3, 226a, *Tiqunei Zohar* 24b). She is called menstrually unclean, heathen, and a prostitute – all expressions of what we have called “fallen sex.” When she is not in union with her true lover, when all of her fullness is not being loved – when eros is exiled into the sexual – she is replaced by/becomes “maidservant” (this may have implications for feminism) (see *Tiqunei Zohar* 132b, and *Raya Mehimna* Zohar vol. 3, 222a). In some sources, it is only her clothes that have become “blackened” (*Raya Mehimna* Zohar vol. 3 279b). Although Shechina and maidservant are two expressions of the one Feminine, sometimes She is depicted as hiding herself in Metatron, so as to be protected from the evil maidservant, and she is then called Mitatron (Metatron with a *yod*) (*Tiqunei Zohar* 15a) – a description with immense theological-psychological implications. In passing, we should also mention a wildly radical twist that this kabbalistic school adds to this teaching – the fact that the maidservant is *mishna* (secondary) to the Shechina. For the author(s) of *Raya Mehimna* and *Tiqunei Zohar*, the maidservant-*mishna* represents the bothersome, dialectical, Tree of Consciousness of Good and Evil, *pipul* tradition of the Oral Torah, as opposed to Shechina as Kabbalah, the place of true intimacy, the Tree of Life, the secrets of the Torah. Although this is not the context to present and analyze this idea in all its fullness, the curious may want to look at *Tiqunei Zohar* 22b, 27b, 43b, and 147a, for starters.

¹² See above, note 11, where we showed how the Shechina in Exile is Herself in an additional exile, that of the “maidservant.” I would only add here that the *Tiqunei Zohar* presents another unusual idea – that *Kudsha Brih Hu*, the Divine masculine Himself, when He is not unified with Shechina – i.e. during the time of exile – is “exiled within the exile” into Metatron (who, in *Heihalot* texts, is referred to as *YHVH Haqatan*). To quote: “And when He is below, in Metatron, without His Shechina, He changes. This led Elisha-Aher to say, ‘Could there be two Powers?’ This is why it says “Do not replace Me with Him” (comment in tractate Sanhedrin 38b on Exodus 23:21), for My name is within

Him. For Metatron is second (*shani*) to the King” (*Tiqunei Zohar* 15a). During the time of Exile, the Shechina Who is the mistress/lover of Metatron may be helpful, if Israel merits. But if they do not, then she becomes evil desire, unclean menstrual blood. Exile within exile (*Zohar* vol. 1, 27b). This section of the Zohar is actually not part of the Zohar (from 22a-29a). Its content (including this piece) is characteristic of the *Tiqunim-Raya Mehimna* style).

¹³ “Drink the water of your own cistern, and running water of your own well. So will your spring be prolific outside, and streams of water will flow in the streets. They will be yours alone, and strangers will have no place in your intimacy. Your source will be blessed, and rejoice in the wife of your youth” (Proverbs 5:15-18).

¹⁴ Of course in a literal reading of the Zoharic literature the Shechina and the harlot are separate figures. A deeper reading, however, collapses them into one complex personae. See, for, example, *Tiqunei Zohar* 24b: “The maidservant enters the place of her mistress. She is unclean, a servant, a heathen, a harlot, and she defiles the place where the Shechina would rest.” See also above, notes 11 and 12.

¹⁵ R. Simha Bunim of Pshischa in *Kol Simba*, quoted in *Kol Mevuser* on I Kings 11:6: “King Solomon desired to heal evil, that is, that evil be integrated in good. This is why he married foreign women – in order to rectify them and to introduce everything into holiness, just as it will be in the future, at the time of the Messiah. Since it was not yet the time of the Great Fixing, Solomon was incapable of completing this work. R. Mordechai Lainer, *Mei Shiloah*, on I Kings 11:1: “For all the strength of the nations of the world can be found in their women, especially in their princesses. For this reason, he married princesses, in order to subjugate their energies to the sacred.” These are not isolated passages, but part of a broader strain of thought that runs through Pshischa and Ishbitz. I expand significantly on this strain of thought in my doctoral thesis. This school picks up on earlier strains in exoteric and esoteric Hebrew literature, which read Solomon’s wives as part of a broader proto-feminist mystical project initiated by Solomon and opposed by the prophets. In this reading, the prophetic opposition is tactical, not essential; they argue that Solomon was before his time. There were not yet vessels to hold the full erotic power of Shechina consciousness.

This reading is in response to modern writers who accuse the prophets of slaying the goddess. I significantly expand on this topic in *Radical Kabbalah: The Enlightenment Teaching of Unique Self, Non-Dual Humanism and the Wisdom of Solomon – The Great Teaching of Ethics and Eros from Mordechai Lainer of Izbica* (Integral Publishers, 2012).

¹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this work to fully document the historical path of Hebrew tantra. Suffice it to say that on a scholarly level Eliade already provides the Alexandrian link between Indian tantra and the Western mysteries which took root roughly contemporaneously to the end of the Second Temple period. The links between the Israelite community and their Alexandrian bothers and sisters are well known, documented in Philo, the Talmud, and numerous other sources. Alexandria is the center of the western mystery traditions, which Eliade links with Indian Tantrism. It requires no great leap to infer an internal esoteric Temple tradition linking the first and second Temples. Indeed, it would make no sense if there were not such a tradition. The Talmud clearly assumes such a tradition. So the link between Solomon and the Alexandrian communities of the second Temple, which were a hub of the spiritual mystery traditions that Eliade sees as possible sources for Indian Tantrism, is

then clearly apparent. I should add that although all of this is true, it is not the source of my surmise. My intuition about the relationship between the traditions comes from a deep place of knowing which is supported by research but moves beyond the important but narrow reach of scholarship.

¹⁷ The *Baal Haleshem* says explicitly that the cherubs are *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Nukva* (*Sha'arei Haleshem*, section 1:17; section 2:2). He cites *Raya Mehimna* (Zohar vol. 3, 255b), where a beautiful analogy is made between sitting in the *sukkah* (literally – protection) and being under the protective wingspread of the two cherubs., who are respectively YHVH (*ziferet*, the divine masculine) and ADNY (*malhut*, the divine feminine). When these two are in perfect erotic union, we intermingle the letters of their name, creating a new name – YAHDVNHY. The numerical value (*gematria*) of these two names together, that is, of this ideal *zivvug*, is 91 – the *gematria* of *sukkah*!

¹⁸ Tractate Sotah, 17a.

¹⁹ Tractate Nedarim, 50a.

²⁰ It is not within the scope of the present essay to discuss the kabbalistic, particularly the Luriannic, traditions concerning the soul of Rabbi Akiva, which took on entirely mythic proportions. It is certainly deserving of a work of its own. I would like, however, to mention only in passing, a couple aspects of these traditions that bear directly on our discussion. The fact that Akiva was considered to be a *ben gerim*, i.e. a descendent of converts, was seen as a sign that since his soul had roots deep in the *qlippot*, he was capable of elevating them. In addition, his name contains the letters *áqv'*, creating the word *egev*, heel, which is reminiscent of *'iquata demeshiha*, the heels of the Messiah, which refers to the lowest, but concluding, therefore the most critical, soul-elements. In fact, in *Sha'ar Ma'amarei Rashbi* (on *Zohar Shir Hashirim*), this extraordinary quality of his soul is linked to Solomon, the fullness of the moon, the Temple, *bina*, and Yom Kippur. He is therefore a principle propagator of the fullness of eros. Add to this the even more bizarre tradition that he was a reincarnation of Zimri, *who had intercourse with Kozbi at the door of the Sanctuary!* (see *Gilgilei Neshamot* of R. Menahem Azarya of Fano, the letter *kaf* for Kozbi). What image could be more appropriate for our discussion?

But this goes even deeper. Akiva is one of the Ten Martyrs, who were murdered by the Romans because of their refusal to abandon their religion. In the Luriannic corpus, they died so as to rectify the sin of Joseph's ten brothers, who sold him into slavery. (In the Ten Martyrs myth, this is the rationale of the Roman governor for putting them to death, as the Torah says that if a man kidnaps a man and sells him, he must be put to death (Exodus 21:16). However, it is more profound and even disturbing than that. The role of the "Ten Martyrs" in Luriannic myth was to restore erotic union that was violated – either because the Shechina took part in the selling of Joseph, or for the sake of sparks who were so deeply embedded in the *qlipot* that they could not be redeemed. The souls of the ten martyrs became *mayim nukvin* for the cosmic *zivvug* that is accomplished through the *kavanot* of the Shma – that is, feminine waters to awaken the erotic cosmic union. This is the Luriannic interpretation of "his (R. Akiva's) soul went out as he said *ehad*" (*Berahot* 61b) – One, the last word of the Shma. For by his martyr's lover's death, he restored erotic oneness. This is one of the teachings we have from R. Isaac Luria himself. (see *Sha'ar Hagilgulim* from Chapter 35 on, *Liquetei Hashas* on tractate *Berahot* (one of the places where R. Isaac Luria himself is quoted), *Sha'ar Ma'amarei Rashbi* on *Zohar Shir Hashirim*, etc.).

²¹ In the kabbalistic tradition, sacred union creates "new souls" "Rav Metivta said: 'And Sara was barren, she had no children' – 'If it says that Sarai is barren, then I know that she did not have children. Why must the verse say 'she had no children?' But Rav Metivta said: She did not give birth to children, but she gave birth to souls. By the clinging of the passion of those two righteous ones [Abraham and Sarah], they gave birth to the souls of converts the entire time that they were in Haran, just as the righteous do in the Garden of Eden" (Zohar vol. 3, 168a). This became a major goal of the *tzaddikim* in Luriannic teachings, connected with the Zoharic tradition of the "light that was sown for/by the *tzaddik*" (Zohar vol. 2, 165b, and *Sha'ar Ma'amarei Rashbi*, the commentary on *Idra Rabba*, *Sha'ar Ma'amarei Razal al Baba Kama*, and *Sha'ar Hagilgulim*, introduction: 15). The fact that *tzaddik* is identified with the *sfera* of *yesod* (*tzaddiq yesod olam* – Proverbs 10:25) makes him the perfect candidate for this task.

²² Zohar vol. 1, 49b.

