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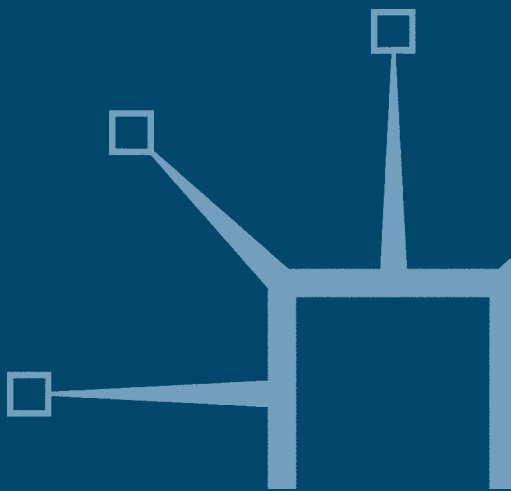
A NEW KABBALAH FOR WOMEN

Perle Besserman



a new KABBALAH FOR *women*

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a new KABBALAH FOR *women*

PERLE BESSERMAN

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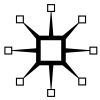

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Praise for Perle Besserman's
A New Kabbalah for Women

"Besserman does a fine job of weaving in the history of kabbalah into her own personal story of learning and practice as a woman."

—*Lilith*

"Perle Besserman is a wonderful story-teller in the best Jewish tradition; she writes beautifully, with a fine ability to integrate scholarly research with contemporary events, in a compelling and suspenseful narrative. As a Jewish woman and writer, I learned so much here about the Kabbalah that I've been eager to know. I read through the night, unable to put the book down . . ."

—Kim Chernin, author of *Seven Pillars of Jewish Denial* and *In My Mother's House*

"While reading *A New Kabbalah for Women*, I have the feeling the book is reading me: Perle Besserman has a remarkable gift for understanding the concerns and conflicts of contemporary Jewish women and her book goes straight to the heart. This is the best introduction to Kabbalah I have ever read, and one of the most sensitive guides to developing a Jewish spiritual life."

—Susannah Heschel, author of *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus*

"*A New Kabbalah for Women* is refreshing, heartfelt and profoundly insightful. This book defines the 'next step' for both women and men who are seeking balance in their spiritual practice."

—Rabbi Shoni Labowitz, nationally known speaker and spiritual leader, author of *Miraculous Living* and *God, Sex and Women of the Bible*, creator of the spiritual health spa *Living Waters*

"What a profound gift Ms. Besserman has given us. She describes the journey back to the divine feminine, back to ourselves. I was brought up Southern Baptist, so I found the specifics of Judaism and the Kabbalah fascinating. However, what spoke to me more was the universal journey of innocently buying in, questioning, rejecting, exploring other paths and finally being called back home to the truth of the Spirit which was always there, hiding under the heavy coat pile of other people's interpretation. Ms. Besserman reminds us that it is through direct experience in the body that we women know God in ourselves."

—Robin Carnes, co-author of *Sacred Circles: A Guide to Creating Women's Spirituality Groups*

For Perle Besserman's publications

"Explains the Kabbalah with as much clarity as it can be explained and with a genuine feeling for mystic lore. I recommend it to all readers."

—Isaac Bashevis Singer

"Jewish mysticism is a rose bush of a thousand thorns. Most books snare the reader on the thorns; Kabbalah allows us to smell the flower. This is a book to read over and over again."

—Rabbi Rami M. Shapiro, author of *Minyan* and *The Way of Solomon*

"Besserman makes this incredibly complex topic accessible for a lay audience. Besides giving a history of Kabbalah and where it fits into the Jewish religion, she explores the Kabbalah universe and introduces meditation techniques. Of immense interest is her final chapter, in which she discusses the issue of the ancient tradition vis-a-vis the technological age."

—Booklist

"A spiritual path open to regular folks."

—Utne Reader

"Besserman, who traces her lineage to Hasidism's founder, the Baal Shem Tov, gathers Jewish mystical writings from ancient times to the present. She describes mystics as wanderers traveling from town to town along the dusty roads from Safed to Jerusalem or along the winding valleys of the Carpathian mountains, embodying their wisdom and teaching by the way they live. Besserman's collection of stories, teachings, and sayings focuses on such topics as nature, creation, daily life, good and evil, female divinity, meditation and ecstasy. . . . The Baal Shem Tov once observed that when a commandment is observed with joy, there is reward without limit. Besserman's collection of short, thought-provoking tidbits of wisdom points to a universal practice of the heart."

—Publishers Weekly

NOTE

The author has changed the names of those people cited in personal anecdotes who might wish to remain anonymous. These names are designated by quotation marks.

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CONTENTS

in memory of my mother

INTRODUCTION

THE BETH JACOB SCHOOL FOR GIRLS

From very early on I wondered what it was like not to be Jewish—and a girl. I suppose it had something to do with my *yeshiva*, the Beth Jacob School for Girls, being across the street from the Chaim Berlin Seminary for Boys and with the fact that my teacher, the "Rebbitzen Asher," refused to show us how to wrap our arms in *tefillin* (phylacteries) when we prayed. She said Jewish women served God by having sons and being "footstools" to their husbands in heaven after they died. I didn't want to be anybody's footstool. What I wanted was to see God. The Torah said I'd been made in his image. But what did it mean to be made in God's image when God was an old man, and the face in the mirror was that of an eight-year-old girl?

"Mr. Mackler," the tutor my parents had hired to teach me Hebrew at home, had once shown me how every Hebrew letter was also a number, pointing out that the right combination of letters uttered at the right time and in the right tone of voice could connect you directly to God. For many weeks I tried matching numbers and letters and chanting the resulting phrases out loud in order to see God, but nothing happened. I remember the rainy winter day with the scabby Brooklyn trees swaying disapprovingly at me from beyond the window in tandem with Rebbitzen Asher's shrill, scolding voice when she accused me of being a "menace to Judaism" after I'd asked her to explain how to see God by pronouncing the secret Name combining the Hebrew letters *Yod Heh Vav Heh*. When I told my father about it he said nobody could see God and live.

"Rabbi Asher," the principal of the Beth Jacob School for Girls, was a tall, stoop-shouldered man with a black pointed goatee, big white teeth, and the eyes of a pirate. At the beginning of every school term he would call an assembly and welcome the new girls in the auditorium. Musty and smelling of dried candle tallow, its book-filled cupboards crammed with tales of God's stormy relationship with the patriarchs and sinners who pleased or, more often, enraged him, our auditorium had once been the grand salon of a beer baron's mansion, the only remnant of its former elegance a massive crystal chandelier hanging from a cerulean blue ceiling, its sockets empty of bulbs. I still have a strong memory of that auditorium because it was there, during one of our assemblies, as Rabbi Asher was making his announcements, that I experienced the first stirrings of my rebellion against God.

"During the week," Rabbi Asher said, "we will use the auditorium for morning prayer, music and dance classes in Hebrew, and school assembly. On Shabbat and the High Holy Days, you will not be permitted to sit here, because it serves as the neighborhood synagogue, and this is the Men's Section. You will, of course, be provided a classroom nearby which will serve as the Ladies' Section."

This made the ultra-Orthodox girls squirm. One of them, a tall girl in a brown corduroy dress that came down to her ankles, said it wasn't right for girls to be performing morning prayers in the auditorium because "unclean" women dared not enter the sacred space. The rabbi delicately pointed out that since we were not yet "of age," we didn't have to worry about ritual cleanliness, but the ultra-Orthodox girl registered her disapproval by giving him a sour look nonetheless. I didn't agree with her about women being "unclean," but I shared her anger at having to shut up, for I'd already begun resenting God and his rabbis for making all the rules and pitying the girls who had to obey them.

I soon developed the knack of second-guessing the rabbi, silently mimicking his predictable quotations from the *Sayings of the Fathers* even before they came out of his mouth. In time, I steeled myself against him and learned how to go deaf to his lectures while looking perfectly attentive. Convinced that I was doomed to become a wandering heretic when I grew up, I silently rejected both the rabbi and his God. But I paid for my transgres-

sions with a recurring dream of Rabbi Asher as God's avenging angel draped in a fiery prayer shawl, his arms bound in black leather plaits, the tiny cube on his head filled with the terrible secret names of YHVH. Trembling at the sight of him, I stuffed my fist in my mouth to keep from crying out for forgiveness.

Determined to overcome my fear, I made it a point to confront Rabbi Asher once a day at school by deliberately stopping him in the hall and asking him a question as he was rushing off to one of his many fundraisers. Answering me absentmindedly in Hebrew, he would hurry past me and out the front door to his black Plymouth. Seeing the rabbi in the light of day as an ordinary man going about his business made him less formidable. Finally, after catching a glimpse of him at prayer in his office, his phylactery box perched high on his head, his eyes closed, his prayer shawl draped over his stooped shoulders, I stopped dreaming about him. The rabbi's wife, however, proved to be less benign.

The Rebbitzen Asher taught us about "modest Jewish womanhood" from eight in the morning until lunch at twelve, wore a stiff reddish-brown wig, called history "*historia*" (which always made me think of hysteria and fall into laughing fits) and refused to answer any questions other than those dealing with women's duties, such as koshering dishes by putting any suspected unkosher utensils into a pot of dirt for 48 hours or salting chickens on a wooden koshering board. She would throw me out of class for the laughing fits or for having a "fresh mouth" and asking heretical questions. I hated wandering around in the streets alone until lunch hour, but what I hated even more was being easily distinguished from the public school girls by my knee socks, long skirt, and long-sleeved white blouse, especially in late spring, when the public school girls wore cool-looking cap-sleeved blouses, short skirts, and sandals without socks. At Beth Jacob we weren't even permitted autograph books at the end of the school year, those puff-covered albums with glossy pink and yellow and teal pages, on which public school girls wrote things like, "Roses are red, Violets are blue; Sugar is sweet, Don't you wish you were too?" Our yeshiva yearbook picture was taken with most of the class missing because the ultra-Orthodox girls equated snapshots with "graven images" and refused to be photographed. Undaunted, Rabbi Asher just wrote "camera shy" in the empty spaces above their names.

The turning point in my struggle with God came when my father informed me that I was a direct descendant of the Baal Shem Tov—a Hasidic master who in the eighteenth century brought Jewish mysticism to the masses in the form of ecstatic singing, dancing, and storytelling. This took me by surprise, for, unlike the ultra-Orthodox Hasidic fathers of the girls in my class, my father didn't wear a beard or a black suit and a big black hat, and he tucked the fringes of his little ritual apron, his *tzitzith*, into his pants where they couldn't be seen. The ultra-Orthodox girls at school said this was against the *Halakhah* (the law and precepts set down in the Torah and Talmud). I admired my father for ignoring the traditional Hasidic dress code and remaining immune to the criticism of the ultra-Orthodox. But I was confused by his otherwise punctilious observance of the *Halakhah*, refrainment from work on the Sabbath, choice to eat only kosher food, and performance of ritual obligations like praying daily and celebrating all Jewish holidays, even minor ones. A union organizer who spent his scarce free time writing poetry and short stories, my father would spend Saturdays at the synagogue, praying and studying the Torah. On Sundays, dressed in a pair of beige twill pants and an old white shirt with the sleeves rolled up past his elbows, he would take my mother and me to the park and row us around the lake before treating us to a double feature at the movies. Every night, after chanting "Hear O Israel," we'd read Dickens together or he would tell me a story he'd made up. On those rare occasions when in response to my questions my father talked about his Hasidic ancestors, I always had the feeling he was holding back information, as though there were something dangerously "un-Jewish" about the subject. I couldn't let it stop there, and though it often got me into trouble at school, I continued asking questions.

"Thank you God, for not making me a woman," says every Orthodox Jewish man first thing in the morning on rising. My father excluded this blessing from his prayers because he didn't like the idea of excluding *any* human being from God's family. Then again, my father was raising a different sort of woman—one he hoped would claim his spiritual inheritance. Calling himself a "Modern Orthodox Jew," he carefully nurtured my independence and to some extent even abetted my rebellion against rabbinic authority. Yet in many ways he was as rigidly conservative about

"modest Jewish womanhood" as Rabbi Asher, insisting my mother stay at home, keep kosher, raise the children, and sit upstairs in the Ladies' Section of the synagogue while he performed the service downstairs. This puzzled me, especially since it was my soft-spoken mother, and not my father, who had gone to school in Tel Aviv and was fluent in Hebrew. Yet, unlike the Rebbitzen Asher, my mother did not wear a wig or a headscarf. The only time she covered her head was during synagogue services, and the elegant hats she wore on those occasions were more fashion statement than religious observance. My mother was a beautiful woman, loved throughout the Orthodox Jewish community for her charitable work and saintly demeanor. I often heard her referred to as an *aysheth chayil*, "woman of valor," a title that I knew would never be bestowed on the likes of me. After all, hadn't I spent my entire childhood struggling to free myself from being an *aysheth chayil?* Hadn't I escaped my teacher, the Rebbitzen Asher, and her attempts to mold me into a perfect model of "modest Jewish womanhood"? Maybe not. The truth was that I was still wrestling with the God whose presence had filled the life of my parents' house. That cramped little Brooklyn apartment had been a magical place, where even ordinary acts like washing, eating, and sleeping were holy. But the invisible, omnipresent God of my father's prayers had never been enough for me. Even if it meant dying, I still longed to *see* God, to know him as intimately as I knew my own face in the mirror.

My desire for a personal encounter with God only intensified with the years. Driven by unrequited yearning, I learned to pray and study the Torah in Hebrew and earned prizes for my ability to recite long biblical passages and their Aramaic commentaries from memory. Yet none of these accomplishments seemed to please God enough to reveal his face to me. I had grown up believing that, like my illustrious Hasidic ancestor the Baal Shem Tov, I would someday see the God whose presence infused every moment and every mundane act with radiance. But I soon discovered that no matter how many prizes I brought home, even my "Modern Orthodox" father would willingly deny me my birthright. When I turned twelve and asked for a Bat Mitzvah, he waved me off. When I entered my teens and boldly challenged him about the contradictions in my upbringing, he cited the Talmudic injunction

to "[let] the words of the Torah rather be destroyed by fire than imparted to a woman," and turned away from me.

As a child, I was always making up stories. My father used to say I was a heroine in my own novel. It was a form of ironic praise—provided I didn't take it too far. When I did take it too far, he called me Mary-Mary-Quite Contrary. It was with his encouragement that I decided early on to become a writer and published my first story when I was nine years old. Yet I failed my art class that same year for painting a purple cow feeding upside down on a blue pasture in the sky. My teacher said I was old enough to know better: cows weren't purple, and there weren't any blue pastures in the sky. Luckily that didn't stop me from turning things upside down and painting them in my own colors, opening me to a world of ever-new and fluctuating possibilities. It especially came in handy when questioning what adults called *reality*. Like that purple cow, my skewed picture of Judaism was undoubtedly a product of the clash between my father's modern Orthodoxy and the ultra-Orthodox Beth Jacob School for Girls, which tried hard (but failed) to mold me into a patriarchal emblem of docility and ritual purity.

When I bucked up against my father's modern Orthodoxy, he transformed his description of me into *Moishe Kapoya*, the Yiddish male version of the contrary Mary. At first it made him sad when I refused the gifts he was bestowing on me: a Hebrew education, Yiddishkeit, Jewish holidays, the Sabbath. Then it made him angry. As for me, it drove me to do things like eat pizza topped with sausage on Yom Kippur to spite a god I didn't believe in. Many years later, when I married a man who wasn't Jewish, my father refused to see me. Still, he never went so far as to burn a candle and sit *shiva* for me. He was Orthodox, but he loved me even more than he loved his religion. He used to say that if you prayed long enough, your prayers were answered. My father prayed every day of his life and he lived long enough to change his mind and welcome me and my husband into his home, so I guess he was right.

At college, and later in graduate school, I sought to assuage my spiritual hunger by studying comparative mystical traditions. With the archetypal "Rebbitzen" still peering over my shoulder, I even managed to convince myself that Jewish mysticism was

somehow different from traditional Judaism with regard to women. Yearning more than ever to inject my secular life with a sense of the sacred, I thought I could bypass my childhood problems with "modest Jewish womanhood" by reading feminist meanings into the obscure mystical texts I was studying. Convinced that the secret location of an ideal spiritual community open to women and men alike lay there, I spent my days in libraries reading everything I could find in an attempt to unearth my Hasidic roots. Soon realizing that what I was looking for couldn't be found in books, I set out to search for a living Jewish mystical teacher to instruct me in the necessary analytical skills I would need to penetrate and resolve all of the conflicts, loose ends, and seeming contradictions I had found in the teachings. Only then could I develop an ability to interact with God on a spiritual plane in the tradition of my Hasidic forebears. But besides having an interest in Jewish mysticism, I had also been inspired by saffron-clad yogis who, as living emblems of enlightenment, also offered a path to higher self-realization. Intrigued, I scoured the ashrams and temples to find a master who would guide me to my heart's desire. Ironically, my first gurus both turned out to be Jewish. Both had been recommended to me by the woman who owned the health food store where I bought my vitamins.

"Yogi Bandhu's" 57th Street studio was plastered from floor to ceiling with snapshots of bearded Indian saints seated in full lotus with closed eyes and blissful smiles on their faces. He barraged me with stories of his years in India studying under his favorite "swamiji," a dark elflike man with shoulder-length hair whose photograph enjoyed the central place on the altar. On Fridays, Yogi Bandhu taught me to meditate. On Wednesdays, I studied the *asanas*, the physical Yoga postures, with Yogi Richard at the Hotel Ansonia. He was as silent as Yogi Bandhu was talkative. Although I never really felt comfortable meditating with Yogi Bandhu, I took to Yogi Richard's physical exercises from the moment I was instructed to bring my head to my toes in the Mahamudra posture and smoothly executed the feat without so much as a muscle twinge.

Yogi Richard glided down, panther-like, from the raised platform in the front of the room and headed directly toward me. "You've done Yoga before," he whispered.

Still engaged in the Mahamudra posture and not daring to look up, I shook my head. "No, never . . ."

"I mean in a past life," he said. "See me after class." And he slipped away as soundlessly as he'd come.

A year later I was demonstrating Yoga postures on Yogi Richard's morning cable television show.

For twenty minutes every morning and evening, I sat cross-legged on the floor of my apartment and recited Yogi Bandhu's "Shayam" mantra until purple lights flashed behind my closed eyes. On Fridays I came to his studio for a consultation about my progress.

"Well, there are these flashing purple lights . . ."

"Hmm . . . " Yogi Bandhu closed his eyes and placed his finger under his chin.

"And sometimes my body goes numb." That was true.

"Does the guru ever appear?" he opened his eyes and pointed to the photograph of the long-haired elf on the altar.

"Not really."

"Sounds like you're ready for the test of detachment."

"Detachment . . . ?"

"What do you feel most obliged to do?" Yogi Bandhu, typically Jewish, answered my question with a question.

"Go to my parents' Passover Seder next week," I blurted.

"That's it, then. You'll come here instead and we'll spend the time chanting and meditating instead."

Not daring to explain to my mother exactly why I wasn't coming home for Passover, I called the next morning and told her I was sick in bed with the flu. It was the first time in my life that I'd missed a Seder. Instead of reciting the Exodus story in Hebrew with my father, I sat in Yogi Bandhu's studio listening to tapes of his "swamiji" chanting mantras in Sanskrit. The experience proved traumatic, for after that night I never returned. I don't know if it was Jewish guilt that made me stop or simply the fact that Yogi Bandhu's brand of meditation never clicked for me. I'm inclined to think it was a combination of both. Still, it was Yogi Bandhu who initiated me into the secrets of meditation, and for that I remain grateful to him.

I continued practicing Yogi Richard's brand of Hatha Yoga until a fellow graduate student introduced me to S. K. Majumdar,

a Bengali philosopher and Yoga teacher who became not only my spiritual guide but also a close friend. "Sachin," as he liked to be called, opened my eyes to the deep spirituality of classic Indian texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Upanishads*, but even he could not provide me with a satisfactory meditation practice. Convinced that my experiences in the West weren't bringing me close enough to the source of spiritual wisdom that I craved, I began to travel eastward.

On a trip to Israel in the summer of 1977, while doing research for a book, I became fascinated with the Kabbalah, the esoteric branch of Jewish mysticism. Emerging in medieval Europe, the Kabbalah offered a way to use meditation and visualization to attempt to fathom the Torah. I saw the Kabbalah as a practice that would allow me to look deeper into spiritual questions that intrigued me, such as the nature of divinity and its relation to human self-realization. I didn't know it at the time, but the first person who agreed to see me turned out to be a rabbi who had forfeited his rights to dynastic succession in a renowned miracle-working Hasidic family and had become a rationalist.

The road to Holon was pitted with deep holes that gouged the springs of my rented Volkswagen. A wasteland of auto collision yards fronted by great rubber corpses and sulfur-belching factories converged onto a sudden paved highway leading to the center of town. The road out of heavenly Jerusalem had led me directly into the modern hell of an industrial town. Turning onto a palm-lined street, I pulled to a stop in front of a modest stucco house.

The rabbi was waiting for me in his study, nothing but his yarmulke announcing his status as an observant Jew. No visible *tzitzith*, no black suit. Soft-spoken and comfortable in English, he sat with his hands folded on the table between us and asked me what I wanted to know.

"Is there a place in Judaism for mysticism?" I asked.

"Jewish mysticism—Kabbalah—has no practical meaning for real life; it's an escape. Mysticism, with its goal of returning to God is not necessary for the life of faith. For the Jews, the Covenant is sufficient; we serve Him but we do not have to merge with Him." Frowning slightly, the rabbi took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one. "Being close to God as one would be

to his best friend is all the Jew requires. Mysticism deprives us of responsibility in the world of action, where the individual Jew only achieves importance as a member of the community of Israel. The Torah is not a mystical but a sociological document enabling human beings to live together in harmony. At its best, Kabbalah is a philosophical adjunct to Judaism. It makes no compromises with the imperfect present but always looks toward the redemption of Israel. Yet, no matter how deep its thoughts, Kabbalah is essentially an aberration in Judaism." The rabbi stopped talking, leaving the room so deadly quiet that I could hear the fluorescent bulb buzzing overhead. From across the table, his eyes seemed to be searching mine with infinite pity. "I have nothing more to tell you," he finished.

The other scholars I interviewed on that first visit to Israel were a bit more helpful in dispensing information, but they assured me that, as a woman, no matter how learned or mystically connected by birth, I was still barred from practicing Kabbalistic rituals reserved for men. Alienated from my roots, I knew I would have to carve out my own spiritual path. Back home in New York I cursed and raged at myself for digging around in such a stale, misogynous tradition, but I had a book contract to fulfill, and I doggedly continued reading Jewish mystical texts on dusty microfilm at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Gradually, those obscure archaic writings began to reveal tantalizing glimpses of the "holy sparks" I had intuited in my childish experiments with the Kabbalah. For two hundred years Jews had ignored their mysticism in the hope that it might go away. And now, here I was trying to dredge it up. After several months of work, I even began to see myself as the one "aberrant" Jew destined to bring it back into the world. Why not me? Wasn't I so hungry for sacred experience that I had devoted my life to searching for it? I was convinced that once I had exhausted all my doubts and questions I would one day discover the point at which knowledge and existence coincide to reveal the Infinite. If that made me a "menace to the Jewish people," then so be it.

Emboldened by my little epiphany, I returned to Israel later that year ready to challenge the rabbis. At a large dinner party, I got into a heated debate with a brilliant, very dogmatic young rabbi about the prohibition against drinking "unkosher" wine.

After telling me that it wasn't the wine itself that was unkosher but the production process, the rabbi went on to say that the real danger lay in the possibility of drinking wine with Gentiles, which could lead to intimacy and, God forbid, intermarriage.

"How does not drinking wine with Gentiles bring a Jew closer to God?" I asked.

My question apparently infuriated the rabbi, for he immediately shouted back at me, "If you want to know God, go to India and become a Hindu! Judaism is concerned with the laws that operate between man and man."

Frustrated by the living rabbis, I returned again and again to the words of the dead Kabbalists. My favorite was the Maggid of Mezerich, an eighteenth-century Hasid. His writings were so moving that I often found myself weeping. I was consoled by the thought that in the eyes of his rabbinic contemporaries the Maggid, too, had been regarded as a "menace to the Jewish people," and they had excommunicated him. I vowed not to rest until I had found such a teacher.

Rabbi Zvi Yehudah Kook's name turned up one day when I was absentmindedly reading an article in *The Jerusalem Post* about the troublesome Jewish settlements on the West Bank. I recognized the surname as belonging to the great early twentieth-century Kabbalist Abraham Kook and asked my friend Sylvie, an Israeli graduate student in Hebrew history, whether there was any relation between the two men. It seemed improbable, but the late Rabbi Abraham, the great peacemaker between Arabs and Jews, and Rabbi Zvi Yehudah, the fiery religious Zionist troublemaker, turned out to be father and son. A serious spiritual seeker herself, Sylvie further surprised me by saying she was studying Kabbalah with Rabbi Zvi Yehudah and would introduce me to him the next day.

My first reaction to the "Rav" Kook was shock. I had expected the son of the great Kabbalist to be middle-aged. The tiny ancient sage with the white beard and mischievous black eyes now beckoning me to sit down was in his eighties, hard of hearing, and gentle as a kitten. In Hebrew, he asked my name and purpose for coming, grinning broadly when I told him I was writing a book about Jewish mysticism.

"Don't be afraid to sit closer," he added.

I pulled my chair close to the table at his right. His black vest and ample beard smelled of nutmeg. His eyes searched mine for a long, penetrating minute. Taking a deep breath, I leaned over and said, "What does the Rav think about Kabbalah?"

He giggled. "Kabbalah?" A pair of tender young hands emerged from the sleeves of his black silk caftan, waving like little flags. "There is no other practice for a Jew. All these Eastern practices you young people are trying have nothing wrong with them—except that they are not yours! If you take a good look at yourself, you will see that you are yourself a transplanted Oriental who has been trying for generations to adapt, without success, to Occidental ways. That is why you are so eager to turn toward the East; it is in your blood, in your soul, this desire to return to the land of the prophets, where you will find your true identity.

"No gymnastics are needed, only a study of the Torah that goes beyond mere intellectual learning, a kind of concentrated prayer that can be achieved only by degrees of purification combining soul, mind, and body rather than one that cuts the soul from the body. What you are reacting against, and rightly, is the rigid *Halakhic* interpretation of the Torah. You identify Judaism with those who call themselves religious but have busied themselves making idols of the Law. Transforming God in their own childish image, these so-called observant Jews are less knowledgeable about God than the atheists. At least the atheists see God as no-thing. And that notion is closer to the truth than all the idol worship that passes for prayer among the Orthodox."

Totally unprepared for what I was hearing, I forgot all my questions and simply sat staring at the old man in silence. From the minute the Rav stopped talking I felt as if he'd begun communicating with me on another level entirely, not through words but through the language of my pulse and skin.

"Come back," said the Rav after what appeared to me to be a long interval of silence but was probably less than a minute. "We have to meet again. How long will you remain in Jerusalem?"

"Only a short while, a month or so . . ."

"Come back every day. I'll be happy to continue our discussion." Pointing to Sylvie, he added, "You come back with her. Her Hebrew needs improving," the Rav turned to me with mock disapproval.

Sylvie apologized, "I'm sorry, Rav, but I won't be able to come back every day."

"No matter, you can come alone." He nodded at me. "There will always be someone here who can interpret." Then, after a slight pause, he said, "Do you speak French?"

"Yes," I answered, thinking he was still making fun of me.

"*Bon . . . au revoir.* I speak a little French, too, as you can see." The Rav stood up and—miracle of miracles—shook my hand! "I'm really glad you came, we have some old, unfinished business between us. We can teach each other many things."

Groping for the door in a daze, I tried thanking him but no words came. Amazingly, he was following me out onto the landing in his carpet slippers calling, "And you can take off that ridiculous Orthodox outfit you're wearing and dress the way you do normally when you come back tomorrow. Ten o'clock in the morning."

As soon as I left I ran to the Hebrew University library, gathered all the books written by the Rav's father that I could get my hands on and spent the remaining hours familiarizing myself with his unique interpretation of the Kabbalah. Though they offered no practical instructions on meditation, Abraham Kook's writings were valuable in preparing me for the month I was to spend studying them with his son.

What I learned from Rav Zvi Yehudah were mostly commentaries on the central theme of the "Kook School," namely the importance of *teshuvah* as both "repentance" and "return." Abraham Kook clearly preferred the latter meaning to the idea of repentance for sin. According to him, the human striving to return to God represented liberation from the selfish desires of the ego. Like the Hindu notion of karma, or action produced by desire, "evil deeds" also referred to our enslavement to past habits, which, proceeding cumulatively, enmesh us in a net of mechanistic responses that result in destructive action. The impulse to return, like the Yogi's urge for *moksha*, liberation, means that the will has determined for itself a new direction, a dehabituation of the old character that opens us to purification and prepares us to receive divine illumination.

According to Rabbi Abraham Kook, "sin," or "evil" action, destroys the unity between the individual self and universal existence. "Perfect repentance," can only be achieved by uniting the

self through silent contemplation with its divine counterpart. The work of the Kabbalist therefore consists of delving into the secret meanings of the Torah—or divine Path—and acquainting one's self with its esoteric cosmic laws, that is, studying the map before actually embarking on the journey to enlightenment. Unlike ordinary intellectual work this study demands a high level of physical and mental effort and an egoless commitment to the Torah. Intense contemplation of the Torah leads to a loss of the self as we ordinarily experience it, a condition in which the Kabbalist's consciousness merges with the divine consciousness. In other words, the experience of union with the divine is inseparable from the goal. To withstand the struggle that ensues upon returning to dualistic consciousness, the seeker must be mentally and physically healthy. Hence, the warnings about the mental and emotional stability required for meditation, and the secrecy of the old Kabbalists whose experiential knowledge of these states taught them the dangers encountered on the spiritual path. The initial impulse toward true self-realization must therefore be accompanied by an equally strong commitment to refining one's character, working to create a balance between sacred and ordinary life so as not to fall into the abyss of dualism dividing them.

Responding to my Yoga-inspired questions about the necessity for withdrawing from the world in order to purify body and mind, Rav Zvi Yehudah emphasized again and again that participating in the "ordinary life" of the world was no less significant than participating in the life of God. "In fact," as he put it, "the two are actually one and cannot be separated, so there is no need for withdrawal."

Marked by the Rav's infinite patience in explaining his father's writings, our long study sessions became the highlight of my second trip to Jerusalem. I was particularly struck by his acceptance of me as I was, dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, openly sharing with him the details of my childhood rebellion against religious orthodoxy, even informing him that I was a Yoga teacher. None of it seemed to bother him.

One day a pair of Hasidic visitors appeared, dressed in black from head to toe with the usual long beards and *payos*, or sidelocks, and aggressively flaunting their *tzitzith*. Taking one look at me sitting on one of the two benches in the Rav's waiting room,

they covered their faces with their huge black hats and hurried outside to wait on the landing. Suddenly the Rav himself appeared at the entrance to the waiting room.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"There are two men waiting for you outside."

After shuffling out to the landing, the Rav reappeared with the two Hasidim in tow.

The men were babbling nonstop about how they could not tolerate waiting in the same room with me. "Not even if we turned our backs and faced in the opposite direction!" one man shouted. With that, the Rav took each of them by the collar and hustled them outside.

"What was that?" I asked, barely containing my laughter when he'd returned.

The Rav motioned me into the study. "Nothing . . . stupidity, that's all," he said, giving me a mischievous grin.

Often in our talks, probably because I had so shamelessly bragged about my Hasidic ancestors, the Rav (himself a descendant of the *Mitnagdim*, their rationalist opponents) went out of his way to downgrade Hasidic ecstasy. His own sharp, down-to-earth approach to spiritual life left little room for altered states of consciousness. To illustrate this he told me the story of a Hasid named Moishele who once mistook the bellow of a prankster for the call of God.

"It seems that this Moishele had so longed for a voice from heaven that he sat all night under the eaves of the synagogue waiting to hear the summons a second time. Not satisfied with shaming Moishele as he sat alone, the prankster fetched a bucket of dishwater and gathered the villagers on the roof to witness what would happen next. This time, as Moishele awaited the call, the prankster again shouted from the roof. On receiving his dupe's plaintive '*Hineni*'—'Here, I am!'—much to the merriment of the villagers, he poured the dishwater down on poor Moishele's head. You would think that the naïve Hasid would have seen through the joke by then; but no, so credulous was this Hasid that he cried out with joy at the blessing that had been bestowed on his head. No less than the celestial hosts themselves had seen fit to purify him with a ritual bath!"

Suddenly the Rav turned serious. "I have some important things to tell you today. Not so much for your book, but for yourself, just so

you don't misunderstand these teachings. When we accept ourselves as having been born as Jews, or Christians, or Hindus, we are accepting not only our given identity as part of the pattern of Creation, but the identities of all the other individuals and nations as well. Finding your identity as a Jew, as part of the Jewish nation, requires preparation. First, it entails the elimination of the confusion, the shame, the self-contempt perpetuated by exile and persecution. Then, spiritualizing your life—not by indulging prematurely in meditation practices and exercises, as people are doing today, fragmenting yourself even further from the universal plan, as you do when you live like an American, feel like a Jew, and pray like a Hindu. Do you see what I mean? I am trying to show you how we must integrate ourselves personally, socially, politically here on this earth before we indulge ourselves in practices that can trap you by diverting you from your true path to unity, the total communion with God that you are looking for. The danger is that those practices become an end in themselves.

"That is why I have not answered your complaints about not being given any *practical* exercises. I do not teach Kabbalistic meditation because I am not like the ancient masters who gave people the advice they needed on such matters. I have not reached their level of spiritual development, so what I teach is the 'straight path,' taking one's place in the Jewish community and, thereby, in the created world, going from life discipline to discipline of the intellect. Learning everything possible about life in this world before approaching the higher worlds is essential in this path. On each level there are natural laws, even in the realm of the so-called supernatural, and those laws must be learned before you attempt to walk there. Or else you will be hurt.

"The path I have been teaching you helps to bring light into the confusion and darkness instead of throwing you into the shadows without any weapons and telling you to fight. It's a question of gradually increasing the light, refining the human vehicle, the intellect, and then the spirit that lies beyond the intellect, so that more and more light can come in and reduce the darkness, so that, at the right time, there is no darkness at all, only everything flooded with light."

It was the day before my scheduled flight home and the Rav had finally responded to my previously ignored requests for a meditation practice with a refusal.

Seeing me so uncharacteristically quiet, he said, "All is possible in God's Creation, my child, even that we should meet. Everything and everyone here is on a continuum. . . . We all know each other."

"I'm leaving tomorrow," I said sadly.

Rav Zvi Yehudah looked at me thoughtfully. "Will you be back next year?"

"I don't know."

There was a knock at the door. "Open!" called the Rav.

One of his yeshiva students poked his head into the room. "There's a big class waiting outside."

With his gaze still fixed on me, the Rav motioned for the young man to close the door. "When are you coming back?" he repeated.

"Maybe next spring," I said, not really sure I was ready for the demanding commitment to the "Jewish path" he'd outlined.

"When?" The Rav cupped his hand to his ear.

The gesture recalled his age and vulnerability, and I grew tearful. "After Passover sometime, I suppose. I still have research to do."

"All right, then; you'll send me a copy of the manuscript?"

"If I ever finish it . . ."

"Nu, why not?" he said in Yiddish.

Taking my camera out of my bag, I asked, "Can I at least have a photo of you?"

"You don't need a photo, a physical reminder. We have a spiritual connection, a link now between soul and soul."

Afraid I might burst into tears I planted a hasty kiss on the Rav's cheek and ran out of the apartment. Only after closing the rickety front gate of his house behind me did I dare to glance back.

I never did become Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook's student, but our month-long study of his father's writings together did give me the courage to continue exploring the links between Kabbalah and Yoga on my own. However, my self-created meditative mélange soon complicated my spiritual journey even further. Intending to absorb the Rav's teachings into my own meditation rituals, I had also borrowed the notion of practicing Jewish spirituality from my practice of Yoga without realizing that I was mixing traditions that clashed! For instance, Yoga, whether based on physical exercises, meditation, or philosophical speculation, demanded that I

surrender to my guru by prostrating before him and literally "kissing the dust of his feet." This stood in contradiction to Judaic law, which prohibited me from bowing before any human being or worshiping my spiritual teacher, no matter how great or "holy." I realized that again I had to begin redefining what I was looking for spiritually.

In the course of poring over his father's Kabbalistic texts with Rav Zvi Yehuda Kook in Jerusalem, I had stumbled into a Zen center on the Mount of Olives. It was in that little whitewashed Arab house that I discovered for the first time the existence of a path to the experience I had been seeking. The message was so familiar it seemed to be coming from my very bones, coursing through the blood I shared with my Hasidic ancestors. Its language and images were different from theirs, but it was as spare and simple as the meditative practice outlined in the writings of the Maggid of Mezerich. Zen meditation, or *zazen*, also consisted of sitting in silence and following the breath. And like the Hasidic stories, the old Zen teachings, too, were playful, conveying the sacredness of ordinary life through paradox and poetry. The difference was that in the Zen center on the Mount of Olives I was taught how to meditate from the very first day. Most important, I was invited to search for what the *Roshi*, or Zen teacher, called my "original face"—*even if I was a woman!* I had found my spiritual home at last.

So, abandoning Yoga for Zen Buddhism and armed with Rav Kook's teachings, I decided to change the direction of my search and headed back to the university libraries and dusty shelves housing the old Kabbalistic books and manuscripts. But to my disappointment, sifting through the words of ancient mystical texts revealed only bits and pieces of a symbolic system of meditation on the Torah that was still so hard to interpret that it was almost impossible to read, let alone practice. Intent on my mission to uncover these hidden meanings, I became a regular at the Jewish Theological Seminary library where I was introduced to 45-year-old Kabbalah scholar and former physicist Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan. Though strictly Orthodox, Aryeh agreed to teach me the way of the Kabbalah on the condition that we always meet in his home, surrounded by his innumerable children and under the watchful eye of his wife. Unique in his ability to combine his love for Jewish

spiritual wisdom with scientific open-mindedness and a lively interest in other mystical traditions, Aryeh was more interested in our shared spiritual commitment than in the fact that I was a woman and a Zen Buddhist. During the course of our study, I published my first book on the Kabbalah and Aryeh wrote an early draft of what was to become his groundbreaking book on Jewish meditation. We worked together for three years before his tragic untimely death robbed me of the only person willing to guide me in the practice of Jewish meditation.

After Aryeh's death I set aside all my Kabbalah notes and spent the next ten years practicing Zen in Japan, Europe, and back in the States. But no matter how far I traveled, I could not evade my Jewish karma. Estranged from my father all that time, I finally worked up the courage to meet with my mother and tell her that I had taken vows and become a Buddhist—"converted from Judaism to Buddhism," as I dramatically put it. Pursing her lips, my mother responded to my announcement with the familiar "pooh-poohing" sound that had greeted all my childhood rebellions. Then she said, "Buddhism, Shmudism, you were born Jewish and you'll always be Jewish." Here I was, the author of several books on mysticism, a university professor who had rejected my parents' orthodoxy and left home at nineteen to travel the world in search of enlightenment—and that pooh-poohing sound could still bring about the old stomach-wrenching doubt. Where did this come from? I had never thought of myself as a "Ju-Bu," or hyphenated Jewish-Buddhist. I was one hundred percent Buddhist. Yes, I wrote books and gave talks on Jewish mysticism, but my *real* spiritual practice was Zen. Nevertheless, that pooh-poohing sound refused to go away. I couldn't drown it out no matter how loudly I chanted the sutras in Sino-Japanese. My husband, also a Zen Buddhist (but born into a nonpracticing Catholic family and a lifelong atheist) was puzzled. "Why would you want to give up your ethnic Jewish identity? It's what makes you uniquely you," he'd argue when I insisted I was no longer Jewish. It was all right for him to talk. He was a man, a non-Jew. How could he know what it was like to have been a girl raised in such a rigidly patriarchal religion?

I doggedly pursued other book projects, but my work on the Kabbalah had created its own momentum, and I found myself juggling spiritual identities, crossing back and forth between writing

about Jewish mysticism and practicing Zen Buddhism. Intuitively, I felt something was still missing from my life. Then, one night as I was giving a talk entitled "The Female Face of God" in a bookstore where my Zen group met I realized that *I* was missing. I understood for the first time that a woman-centered approach to my spiritual development would put me back into the equation. So I began to painstakingly piece together the fragments of history of the long-suppressed *Shekhinah*, a rabbinic term for God's "indwelling female presence" that appears in biblical commentaries from 200 C.E. onward. The more I researched God's female aspect the more I understood how ancient woman-centered fertility worship had been blended and reshaped in Judaism today. Inspired by the work of feminist scholars like Gerda Lerner, I began to question the anomalous position of women in goddess-worshiping societies that "had subordinated women economically, educationally, and legally [while] the spiritual and metaphysical powers of goddesses remained active and strong."[1] Finding a counterpart in Buddhist scholar Rita Gross, who had also abandoned Judaism for Buddhism, I too pondered monotheism's emphasis on the maleness of God, its persistent denial of the feminine, its portrayal of women as lightheaded at best and demonic at worst. I was committed to tracing the reasons that the female fertility deity was forced underground to understand how *She* might play a role in developing my own spiritual sense of self. This research convinced me that as a woman I could only come to know the feminine presence of God by experiencing her in my body through meditation. As I sat in the zendo focused on my breathing, I became aware that the Shekhinah was not sitting up in the heavens, bodiless and detached from human pain and suffering or the beauty and eroticism of this physical world. She was right there with me on the cushion, in every breath.

In the spring of 2000, I again traveled to Israel, this time as a keynote speaker at a conference on mysticism, and discovered that I was not alone in my search for the Shekhinah. After my talk, I was approached by a crowd of women eager to hear more about her. In the days that followed, we gathered in small groups to discuss ways of practicing Kabbalah with a feminine twist. It was then that the idea for this book was born.

The possibility of experiencing the female essence of the Divine is not easy for a woman. Although Jewish mystics agree that

the feminine Shekhinah provides the major entry to the experience of God, the Kabbalah has been closed to women for so long that many of today's Jewish feminists are abandoning the teachings of their male forebears and adapting traditional mystical practices in radical new ways for women. A prominent foremother of this movement is Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb who leads a liberal congregation in New Mexico and offers storytelling workshops and religious performances around the United States. It was she who first inspired me to branch out beyond the library in my quest for the Shekhinah. Gottlieb describes the Shekhinah as the "goddess" nature of the Israelite God Yahweh. Expressing women's experience of the divine in lyrical poetic images such as "waxing and waning moon," "evening and morning star," "Mother Wisdom," "Sabbath Queen," and "Tree of Life," she rejects what she calls the "helpless and dependent" image of Shekhinah provided in the texts written by male Kabbalists and draws on ancient goddess metaphors in creating her own liturgical forms of worship. Justifying her radical feminist interpretation of Jewish mystical tradition, Gottlieb asserts that it is only when women speak of "God She" that we will "finally picture ourselves created in God's image."[2]

In my case, it was Gottlieb's image of the Shekhinah as Sabbath Queen that struck most forcefully, reviving a host of childhood memories: the Friday night candles flickering in my grandmother's silver candlesticks; the long tin sheet covering the stove, where a tiny blue flame would burn through the night and the next day so my mother wouldn't have to light a fire on the Sabbath; the two braided *challas* arranged side by side under a white fringed cloth representing the braided hair of the Shekhinah, their fresh crust and poppy seed aroma her perfume; the gefilte fish steamed in its own jelly, with round orange carrot tops for hats; the musty secondhand smell of ultra-Orthodox girls' dresses; Rebbitzen Asher's wig oil; snuff on Yom Kippur sprinkled over the faces of old women swooning with hunger in the Ladies' Section of the synagogue. . . . All these female faces of God were rekindled anew by the Shekhinah.

Boulder-based Rabbi Tirzah Firestone similarly directed me to images of the Shekhinah that reflect women's spiritual experience beyond the roles assigned to them by patriarchy. Like Gottlieb, she too places greater emphasis on the subjective experience

of intimacy with the sacred nature of this world than on the traditional longing of male devotees to reunite with an absent God. For Firestone, wholeness is already part of a woman's birthright. Designed to induce ecstasy, her Kabbalistic meditations for women emphasize the experience of God in the body.[3]

Influenced by Asian mysticism, Rabbi Shoni Labowitz, another feminist interpreter of the Kabbalah, introduced me to a form of spiritual practice that combines Jewish mysticism and Taoism with body movement, singing and dancing, meditation and healing, and that is open to people of all faiths and backgrounds.[4]

In addition to the work of Jewish feminists like those cited above, teaching Feminist Spirituality and Women in Religion courses and engaging in many fruitful dialogues with Christian, Moslem and Buddhist feminists—both in the university and beyond—were also vital in helping me fashion my own portrait of God's female face for the future.

ENVISIONING A SHEKHINAH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Jewish feminists have only just begun to refashion a centuries-old image of the Shekhinah created by and for men. No longer seeking legitimacy from male authority figures—whether biblical scholars, rabbis, or Kabbalists—women have begun creating new forms of meditation that genuinely reflect their own spiritual experience. Until now, we have not been offered the opportunity to find such a self-authenticating practice. But as long as we rely on metaphors colored by patriarchal notions about the insatiable sexuality and boundless fertility of women, I think we are bound to fail. We must not be intimidated by so-called biological claims that a woman's reproductive anatomy is her destiny. In fact, I recommend we avoid socially constructed gender concepts like "masculinity" and "femininity" altogether—including the way both religion and science label human beings according to their genitalia and reproductive functions. Nor should we make peace with anthropomorphic images emerging from the rituals, prayers, and commandments of priests claiming to represent the word of God.

Let's not cling to a "feminine path" that identifies women with Nature, nurture, and domesticity in an attempt to turn our "inferior" status to our advantage. Elevating the rewards of the domestic sphere only reinforces the equation of "maleness" with activity and "femaleness" with passivity. Blending biblical matriarchs and pagan fertility goddesses may be useful in creating new Jewish rituals for worship, but in my opinion it comes dangerously close to reinforcing the old patriarchal stereotypes.

Because meditation is concrete and experiential rather than abstract and intellectual, we have to expand our definitions of "knowledge" to include nonverbal, nonwritten ways of knowing that encompass *all* the senses. At the same time, we must avoid stereotyping "women's wisdom" as solely physical, sensory, and intuitive. Rather than confine ourselves to gender, or any other marker, we ought to focus on the spiritual energy enlivening all human beings regardless of difference. In fact, as Carol Ochs argues, God does not even have to be androgynous "if maleness and femaleness are not opposed to begin with."[5] Or, as one of my Japanese Zen teachers so aptly put it, "We are all members of the same international nose-hole society," meaning that, in meditation, there are no "male" breaths and no "female" breaths, only breathing.

As a Zen teacher, my primary emphasis is on meditation rather than ritual observance. And since Zen is nontheistic, God doesn't pose much of a problem. But as a feminist, I've discovered that the hardest thing about embarking on any meditative path is letting go of gender stereotypes. It's hard for men to stop equating dominance and God (and, I might add, Buddha) with masculinity. But it's especially hard for women to abandon the idea that the female body only exists to serve as the material vehicle for God's transcendent spirit. Such divisions between spirit and matter have trapped women for centuries in a never-ending yearning for the Divine, which can never be satisfied as long as they occupy female bodies. Unfortunately, the Jewish mystical tradition is pervaded with this "negative" view of women's spirituality. For example, citing the illustrious thirteenth-century Kabbalist, Rabbi Nachmanides, Gershom Scholem, the great twentieth-century scholar of Jewish mysticism, defines the Shekhinah as the root of "all the prohibitions of the Torah." Concurring with his predecessor's

opinion that "women are obligated to observe the negative commandments, for they derive from the same source," Scholem goes on to claim that divine female energy is active only when "God gives birth to Himself" in the "upper world," and is passive when appearing [as the Shekhinah] in the "lower world."[6] In other words, except for being fruitful and multiplying, women are defined by what they do *not* do.

The Torah abounds with paradoxical similes of God as a mother birthing, suckling, nurturing, comforting, and caring for *his* children. Isaiah, for example, depicts God as a "midwife," a "nurse," and a "protective mother eagle" jealously guarding her young. I have always been amused by the mental acrobatics required to imagine a male God giving birth and mothering. Nevertheless, such gender bending can be useful in deanthropomorphizing God entirely—but only if we stop "joyfully accepting our [women's] lot and [sharing] in Shekhinah's travails," as one Jewish feminist advises.[7] Women searching for a nonpatriarchal form of Jewish meditation won't find it by visualizing themselves as long-suffering mothers idealized by men. Kabbalistic renderings of the Shekhinah may be rooted in patriarchal biblical imagery and rituals, and the male-centered Hebrew language itself, but this does not mean that they cannot be used in meditation that focuses less on religious orthodoxy and more on images that reflect our own experience and cultural context. Theologian Judith Plaskow, for example, recommends we start with "metaphors drawn from nature," such as "rock, tree of life, light, darkness," which simultaneously widen and personalize our experience of the Shekhinah's presence in the world.[8] From there, we can move on to more subjective forms of meditation that do not rely on imagery at all.

Meditation itself is gender neutral, but it is important to acknowledge the world of distinctions before slipping into ecstatic oneness. The Talmud says that there are as many paths to Truth as there are human faces. Barred from those paths by centuries of misogynist tradition, women have reflexively assumed the "faces" assigned to them by men. And because the Jewish mystical path is itself a product of patriarchy, women today are called upon to meditate in a way that more genuinely reflects their own spirituality. Any feminist version of Jewish meditation must therefore emphasize the body and life experience of women. For it is only when

we are anchored in the subjective and sensory experience of the world of form that we can open ourselves to the formless nonduality that is at the heart of all meditation—regardless of our religious or ethnic background. Here I would emphasize how important it is not to make a distinction between "sexuality" and "spirituality" nor to draw a line separating a woman's life in this world from the one God supposedly occupies in heaven. Debunking claims identifying evil and women with the "left side" of the body, feminists have pointed out that the left side is where the heart is located. It is where mothers tend to hold their babies, where the soothing sound of the heartbeat can be heard, and it is also the site of the left brain, usually identified with the "male" capacity for speech, linear spatial perception, and action, while the right brain is identified with "female" intuition, holistic spatial perception, and music appreciation. In our quest for equality with men we too often downgrade these right brain functions as inferior to those of the more "masculine," action-oriented left brain. Yet at the same time, we must not neglect the female images of power associated with the Shekhinah whose splendor is so great that "the angels must cover their faces with their wings so as not to see her. . . ."[9]

Based in part on my knowledge of the Kabbalah and in part on my experience as a Zen teacher, this book introduces readers to a Shekhinah for the twenty-first century. Tracing the history of God's female face through a feminist lens of biblical, Talmudic, and Kabbalistic commentary and personal anecdote, and culminating in a new meditative path for women, it explores the feminist implications of the shape-shifting Shekhinah as Divine Consort and Supernal Mother in the first centuries of the Common Era; the medieval Sabbath Bride and Lilith, her powerful, chastising alter ego; and the sixteenth- century Kabbalists' *Matronit*. Although based on an old tradition that glorifies a "bodiless" male God and demonizes women's "physicality," my twenty-first century version of the Shekhinah guides readers away from such preconceived images of God toward the experience of meditating on the breath without goals or expectations.

The position taken in this book is that a feminist notion of God is less about giving birth and nurturing than it is about a woman's power to create, destroy, and transform. The images and

cycles associated with the Shekhinah will therefore correspond to a woman's personal spiritual journey, her own *empowerment* through transformation and self-awareness experienced as stages in meditation.

Stage 1: Create a strong sense of self
Stage 2: Destroy the illusion of inferiority
Stage 3: Transform the self

The book itself is likewise divided into three parts. The Introduction provides the reader with my background and personal history as a spiritual seeker and evolving feminist. Comprised of three chapters, part one traces the origins of the Shekhinah. Chapter one is devoted to a discussion of the ancient historical and cultural contexts and Near Eastern roots of the Hebrew Goddess. Chapter two describes her transmutation into the "female" face of the Israelite God Yahweh, and her ultimate identification with the Jews in exile after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. Chapter three outlines the stages and changing forms of Jewish meditation from the first centuries of the Common Era to the present.

In part two, I present my twenty-first century Shekhinah versions of the traditional male-centered forms of Jewish meditation outlined in chapter three. Preceded by a brief section describing the lives and teachings of the Kabbalists most closely identified with the major schools of meditation, each chapter includes a description of their original meditative practices. In the introductory sections of each chapter, I share personal anecdotes about my encounters with the traditional meditations. I conclude with my own woman-centered variations on those meditations and a set of instructions for practicing the new forms.

Chapter four explores the ecumenical Hebrew letter meditation school of thirteenth- century Spanish Kabbalist Abraham Abulafia in a contemporary feminist context. Chapter five describes meditation on the Path of Emanations connected to the ancient image of the "Tree of Life" developed by Abulafia's Spanish contemporary Rabbi Moses de Leon. In Chapter six, I trace the evolution of the *maggid*, or spirit-guide, whose first call and later appearances to sixteenth-century lawyer and Kabbalist Joseph

Caro in uniquely female form set the stage for an entirely new form of Jewish meditation. Chapter seven is devoted to the Path of Song and Dance, created by Israel Baal Shem Tov, the eighteenth-century founder of the Hasidic movement. The short epilogue that follows offers my personal observations and hopes for the future of a women's Kabbalistic meditation practice.

Designed to reconnect a woman to her sacred Self, this book provides a concrete way for her to reclaim the Shekhinah in her own body. For the Shekhinah can only be known directly; she speaks most clearly through the language of meditation. Only in the silent spaces of the human heart does she break forth from her prison of arcane patriarchal imagery to reflect the original face of every woman who has been exiled from her for over 10,000 years.

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part one

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one

ANCIENT BEGINNINGS

THE DESCENT OF THE GODDESS

It is stunning to consider that all the major gender symbols in the West today are derived from Mesopotamian and Hebrew sources that emerged from the Middle East and developed over 2,500 years ago from approximately 3100–600 B.C.E. And that our laws, institutions, social, and interpersonal relationships, rooted in monotheistic Israelite religion, originated in a shared polytheistic culture. For, like their pagan neighbors, the ancient Israelites worshiped female fertility goddesses who were attacked, changed, and ultimately reintroduced by the male-centered prophets of Yahweh following the reforms of King Josiah in the seventh century B.C.E. Yet, even before monotheism, as far back as 3000 B.C.E., in Sumer, where temples were controlled by priestesses, there is evidence of the declining power of the goddess—and along with it, the subordination of women by men intent on dominating them through marriage, concubinage, and slavery.

Who was the goddess? How and why did she and her human counterparts meet such a sorry fate? According to Hebrew mythologist Raphael Patai:

> Her name varied from culture to culture—Inanna in Sumer, Ishtar in Akkad, Anath in Canaan . . . [Asherah in Israel]—yet her character remained the same for centuries, even millennia. The life domains in which she primarily manifested herself were love and war, and her

> personality exhibited everywhere the same four basic traits of chastity and promiscuity, motherliness and bloodthirstiness.[1]

One of the most powerful myths depicting the dual nature and autonomous sexuality of the goddess is that of the Sumerian Inanna, who ruled over the arts of weaving, lovemaking, beer brewing, animal husbandry, and the planting and harvesting of grain. In the course of her journey from girlhood to adulthood, Inanna rescues the Tree of Life from the Flood and, with help from her brother Gilgamesh, vacates its residents—a serpent, a bird, and "the dark maid Lilith" (a bird-woman appearing in later Jewish tradition as Adam's demonic first wife). Planting the Tree of Life in her garden, Inanna declares herself Queen of Heaven. Determined to steal her father's selfishly guarded divine powers—the *me*—for the benefit of humankind, Inanna gets him drunk, makes off with the *me*, and after graciously bestowing the gifts of civilization to her people takes Dumuzi, a human shepherd, as her consort. Finally, in her heroic descent into the Underworld, stripped of her precious articles of royal queenship at each of its seven gates, Inanna masters death. Emerging from her ordeal to discover that her husband has betrayed her, she transfixes him with "the eye of death." Then, immediately regretting her act, Inanna mourns him by smearing her head with ashes and lamenting loudly before restoring him to life.

After the conquest of Sumer by the Semitic Akkadians, the powerful goddess Inanna was eclipsed by her half-human warrior brother Gilgamesh, her fertility was usurped by increasingly dominant male warrior gods, and her Tree of Life was transformed into a symbol of male power over life and death. The transfer of power from Inanna to her human lover Dumuzi was accompanied by a change in the view of creation as an autonomous act of female fertility to one involving the ritual enactment of their "sacred marriage" by a temple priestess and the ruling king. Now no longer mediating between heaven and earth through Inanna's priestesses, women's bodies were regarded as obstacles to be conquered by male spiritual power. Death was seen as a demonic, wild female energy that threatened men and Inanna's descent into the Underworld as a fall into matter from the higher realms of holiness. Aspiring to banish death from the

world, male spirituality abandoned the cycles of birth, death, and renewal associated with the goddess for a linear path to static perfection in an eternal afterlife. Roslyn Lacks attributes this male usurpation of the goddess's control over fertility to the ancient belief that "contact between the sexes conveyed the quality of one to the other," leaving men too "womanized" to do battle.[2] And since male images of the goddess reflected social changes emphasizing kingship and military leadership, women's roles were duly limited to domesticity and motherhood.

SACRED MARRIAGE

If such contradictory images of women were built into the patriarchal records of earlier Near Eastern goddess-worshiping societies, it should come as no surprise that, like their pagan sisters, Israelite virgins and prostitutes were both veiled to indicate their sexual status or fertile and barren women were both feared as bearers of life and death. In ancient Israel, the triumph of monotheism never fully succeeded in eradicating the Hebrew goddess but instead transformed her into God's feminine presence. We can trace the origins of Jewish mystical tradition to ancient Near Eastern goddess-dominated fertility-based forms of worship. There is plenty of proof to substantiate the blending of goddess worship with the new religion of Yahweh as well as ways a woman can use this knowledge to interpret God's feminine side, adding depth to her own spiritual and sexual life. Evidence of fertility cults and goddess worship is scattered throughout the Hebrew Bible, with prophetic references indicating that these "pagan practices" posed a strong threat to the uncompromising monotheism of Israelite religion. In Deuteronomy, for example, God commands the Israelites to "destroy all the places where nations which you shall possess serve their gods . . . tear down their altars, break up their pillars, burn their Asherah trees, and chop down the statues of their gods." In a similar vein, the prophet Jeremiah describes a jealous Yahweh who rails against Israel for turning from him to other gods: "Hast thou seen that which backsliding Israel hath done? She is gone up upon every high mountain and under every green tree, and there hath played the harlot."[3]

Originally a Canaanite sea goddess, wife of the god El, and mother of the gods, the Israelite Asherah was "connected to trees and groves and her location at altars hints that she represented, in some way, the natural world and its powers of regeneration."[4] As waxing and waning moon, she was symbolized by the crescent horns of the bull, her power over death and renewal represented by the skin-shedding snake. Temples for Asherah were commonly built under trees and on mountainsides and were attended by female priestesses. Though these sacred areas gradually became off limits, archeological records reveal a direct connection between pagan and Hebrew goddess symbols such as the Tree of Life and agricultural rites like the mourning of the goddess's consort Tammuz to represent the death of the land on the autumn equinox and its resurrection in spring.

Altars in ancient Israel included an *asherah*—a wooden object representing the female deity—and a *massebah*—a stone altar representing the male deity. The Hebrew noun *asherah* means "sacred post." For centuries, Israelites addressed their prayers to Yahweh and his "wife," Asherah, a reconfiguration of the outlawed pagan Mother Goddess, thanking their "Mother" (symbolized by a wooden post) and their "Father" (symbolized by a stone altar) for giving them birth. Ironically, the Hebrew word for the sexual act between these primordial heavenly consorts was *yada*, "to know"—and it first appears in Genesis as "Adam *knew* his wife." The language used to describe this form of sexual intercourse had both a literal and an esoteric meaning. On the literal level, it assured the ordinary worshiper concerned with the fertility of his land, cattle, and wives that earthly cohabitation was a mirror of divine activity. But as translated by the spiritual elite, the metaphor of divine sexual union promised direct "knowledge" of God.

Jewish mystics later claimed that Adam's sin lay not so much in eating the fruit of knowledge as in performing the "sacred marriage" ritual incorrectly. They interpreted his transgression metaphorically as the disruption of the unity of the male and female aspects of God, an act which split off the divine feminine presence from the Tree of Life, banished her from the Garden, and thereby brought dualism into the world. Could this refer to the banishment of the Mother Goddess by the priests of Yahweh? The mystics' almost obsessive emphasis on rectifying Adam's sin

by reuniting the divine couple would suggest this is so. Mirrored by their earthly surrogates Adam and Eve, sexual intercourse between Yahweh and Asherah corresponded to the mystic's secret "knowledge" of God's female aspect embodied in the Torah, the "sacred marriage" an elaborate sexual metaphor for her mastery. Entering the "Garden" and sighting God's feminine presence in her orchard of "holy apples," in fact, became synonymous with practicing esoteric contemplative techniques for uniting the "male" and "female" aspects of one's own nature and becoming one with God. To the mystics, the letters of the Hebrew word for garden, *pardes*, contained the clue to the secrets contained in the Torah, the *female* body of God: P represents *Peshat*, the simple, exterior meaning of the Torah; R stands for *Remez*, the homiletical meaning, D is *Drush*, the allegorical meaning, and S is *Sod*, her secret or innermost meaning. Mastery of the Torah was equated with penetrating the four levels, or metaphorical "bridal veils," and gazing on her naked. Jewish mystics embraced this sexual metaphor in their own lives, mirroring a union of the soul (female) with its divine (male) source in their own earthly experience of making love to their wives. This practice of uniting with God's male aspect has never been open to women.

As the Israelites distanced themselves from the practices of their neighbors, less emphasis was placed on the female aspect of the deity. But their tense relationship with their single, transcendent male God was inherent from the outset. In the religion of the northern Kingdom of Israel (as opposed to the southern Kingdom of Judah), which was closest to that of the Canaanites and Phoenicians, a bull or calf was worshiped as a symbol of fertility. King Jeroboam I set up two cultic bulls at sanctuaries in Dan and Beth El. Two hundred years later, in the second half of the eighth-century B.C.E., the Israelites were still celebrating fertility rites at similar sites, though the prophet Hosea, whose own wife, Gomer, had been a priestess in a fertility cult, denounced such practices.

The Song of Songs and the book of Ecclesiastes would transform the image of Yahweh from that of a dominant male God to an androgynous divine couple consisting of a powerful transcendent Lord and his "Bride" or "Community of Israel." The result of this divine gender conflation is the implementation of an overtly sexual spirituality with a central metaphor of a male Yahweh wooing the

female Community of Israel like a lover determined to entice her away from the pagan gods who had seduced her from him. Interestingly, the sacred union of the male and female aspect of the deity was entrusted to priestesses who lived in temples and functioned as earthly representatives of Yahweh's feminine aspect. Worship of the Hebrew goddess entailed singing and dancing to erotic lyrical poems, gifts to the temple of livestock, fruit, wine, and special cakes baked by the Israelite women who defied Jeremiah's condemnation of these practices:

> As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of Yahweh—we shall not listen to you. But we shall without fail do everything as we said: we shall burn incense to the Queen of Heaven, and shall pour her libations as we used to do, we, our fathers, our kings and our princes in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and we were well and saw no evil. But since we ceased burning incense to the Queen of Heaven and to pour her libations, we have wanted everything and have been consumed by sword and famine.[5]

Despite every effort to stamp it out, God's androgynous image bloomed. The prophet Isaiah introduced the divine religious experience into the daily life of the people, lending a more intimate and compassionate feminine aspect to the Israelite God. Building on Isaiah's model, King Manasseh even went so far as to place an effigy of Asherah in the Temple at Jerusalem. But later in the seventh century, during the reign of Josiah, Temple practices were reformed when repairs disclosed a hidden manuscript of Mosaic Laws known as Deuteronomy. As a result, priests were forbidden to marry divorced women or perform any temple duties having to do with sexuality. The wages of a prostitute—once associated with fertility worship by the priestesses of Asherah—were no longer acceptable as temple gifts. The effigy of Asherah was also removed from the Jerusalem Temple and sacrifices that had been offered in the groves of trees sacred to the goddess were restricted to the worship of Yahweh. The books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, and Exodus were also revised, presenting Yahweh as a single male god, secret and unknowable, who insisted on eliminating all pagan (that is, fertility cult) practices from the faith.

In the book of Exodus, for example, the Golden Calf episode relates how women were singled out as betraying Yahweh and the punishment that would be exacted in return. The narrator says women contributed their gold jewelry to be melted down and fashioned into "the bull," a primary symbol of the fertility goddess. In response, King Josiah's reforms would obliterate all references to the goddess and bar women from participating in the life of the godhead. Women would no longer be allowed to perform priestly functions or enter into sacred dwelling places. The reforms not only destroyed the feminine nature of the Israelite God but also forced Asherah's devotees to find new ways of worshiping her. To this day a rift between fertility-based mysticism and mainstream Judaism continues.

Asherah had been worshiped by the Israelites for roughly six centuries, her statue removed on and off from the Temple for 236 years. By the fall of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., the celebration of her creative power, once considered "a proper manifestation of popular enthusiasm . . . became intolerable in the eyes of the sages."[6] The struggle to eradicate worship of Asherah was ultimately successful for a variety of reasons. First, no longer a predominantly agricultural society, the Israelites assumed a more urban character as people left the land and began settling in cities. Triumphing over his rivals, Yahweh's power increased with this shift, and worship accordingly became the province of men. Male ambitions to nationhood had finally subdued female concerns with creation, fertility, death, and rebirth in Israelite religion.

Since Yahweh's reformist priests had prohibited all traces of ritual involving the sacred union of the deity's male and female aspects, including the statues and altars where such rituals took place, the intimate experience of "knowing" God was no longer part of mainstream worship. Before the final destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, goddess worshipers hid the ancient enactment of the sacred union between Yahweh and Asherah in a dense language of symbols—going so far as to use the very Hebrew words and letters inscribed on the divine female "body" of the Torah. In secret, mystics performed elaborate visualizations, chants, and Hebrew letter manipulation of scriptural words and phrases to comprehend the true meaning of the sacred names containing the essence of the transcendent godhead. In this way devotees could simultaneously

worship the goddess, now literally embodied in the physical world of form, and reunite the divine couple. Only in the mystical marriage between the male "lover" and his female "beloved" could the divine union manifest itself to the male initiate.

GODDESS AS DEMON

Several ancient myths indicate a split between mainstream patriarchal religion and the valorization of the feminine divine. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish* depicts a brutal struggle between Ti'amat, a fertility goddess, and her son Marduk, a warrior god:

> Ti'amat and Marduk, the wisest of the gods, took their stands opposite each other.
> They pressed on to the battle; they approached in combat.
> The lord spread out his net and enmeshed her.
> The evil wind, following after her, he let loose in her face.
> When Ti'amat opened her mouth to devour him,
> He drove in the evil wind, so that she could not close her lips.
> As the raging winds filled her belly,
> Her belly was distended, and she opened her mouth.
> He shot off an arrow, it tore her belly,
> It cut through her inward parts, it pierced her heart.
> When he had subdued her, he destroyed her life;
> He cast down her carcass [and] stood upon it.
> . . . . . .
> The lord trod upon the legs of Ti'amat.
> And with his unsparing club he split [her] skull.
> He cut open the arteries of her blood. . . .
> He split her open like a mussel into two parts;
> Half of her he set in place and formed the sky. . . .
> [With the other half he formed the earth, dividing it into waters and dry lands.][7]

The triumphant Marduk emerges from his battle with the goddess as an omnipotent deity with fifty sacred names. The people worship him by building elaborate temples symbolizing the nexus between heaven and earth. Social institutions like kingship and caste emerge from his divine will, and earthly existence corre-

sponds to heavenly existence. Human beings participate in the divine life as descendants of the first man created from the earth by the *Elohim*, lesser manifestations of the all-powerful Marduk. It is humanity's obligation to serve the gods through their offerings and earthly activities, while an elect group of human beings—male priests, seers, and prophets touched by the gods—are given the power of divination through dreams, visions, and the performance of esoteric rituals.

In the Israelite version of the myth, Yahweh, a male warrior god, wrestles with and subdues a female sea monster that is relegated to the watery depths. With help from the *Elohim*, Yahweh creates the world and, according to Genesis 1, sculpts two images of himself from a clod of earth (*Adam*) in the form of a male and female couple and enlivens them with his own breath.

Like the Babylonian Marduk, the Israelite warrior god Yahweh lived in a temple and, from Genesis through the Book of Kings, was similarly depicted as an all-powerful male deity who had triumphed over an earlier Mother Goddess. The myth indicates that she will forever threaten to rise to the surface in the form of a great snake (Leviathan). Echoing the Babylonian heroic epic *Gilgamesh* (1600–2000 B.C.E.), which demonizes the goddess as "the one who kills newborn children," Jewish commentaries refer to the monster as Adam's first wife, the "demon Lilith," whom Yahweh punished for demanding sexual autonomy. Briefly mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud, Lilith refuses to assume a "missionary position" under Adam and in punishment is condemned to roam the earth seducing men in their dreams and causing nocturnal emission, miscarriages, and the death of infants. This myth indicates a male sublimation of female sexuality, which prior to the Babylonian Exile in 586 B.C.E., was portrayed in the image of the goddess as life positive.

ROLE BREAKER

Aviva Cantor, a founding editor of the Jewish feminist magazine *Lilith*, regards the legend of Adam's demonic first wife as largely a product of the Babylonian Exile, blame for the suffering of Jews in captivity. She suggests that today's women turn the old scapegoat

image of Lilith—"the flip side of Eve . . . 'mother of all life'"—to their advantage by becoming "role-breakers . . . [who] should be prepared to find themselves attacked, regarded as unattractive and frightening, [encountering] all kinds of hostility."[8] Here is what happened to me when I did just that on a summer pilgrimage in Israel to the tombs of the Kabbalists in the Galilean town of Safed.

Finding the women's section of the shrine rooms too hot and crowded, I'd gone to the canteen and was having a cold drink when I was approached by a man on crutches wearing a black suit, black hat, and black sunglasses.

"You from America?" he asked in Brooklyn-accented English.

I nodded.

"Alone or with your husband?" he grinned, flashing two rows of gold teeth.

"With my husband," I lied. "He's over there." I pointed at the crowded tomb site where the men were huddled in prayer.

The man in black turned around and wandered away among the weeds and broken bottles interlacing the outskirts of the shrine, and I walked closer to where the men were praying. Tiny folded notes, pleas from the faithful, were stuck into every crevice of every major Kabbalist's tomb. A wax-encrusted stove had been soldered into the head of each tomb and hundreds of memorial candles were flickering in the wind. Occasionally, a fervent devotee who'd gotten too close would let out a cry. Making my way to the tomb of the celebrated first-century mystic Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, I came face to face with another man dressed all in black, this one shaking his fists and screaming for me to get away from the tomb. As if singing counterpoint, a fat boy in a long striped caftan stopped in the middle of his prayers, pointed his finger in my face, and started screaming too. Hasidim with shoulder-length *payos*, trailing wives and children in strollers behind them, joined the screaming chorus, one of them ordering me in Hebrew to "Get to the back!"

The shrine was littered with glass and paper and thick with bird droppings. There was no caretaker in sight; clearly, the place hadn't been cleaned or tended to in years, yet none of these men who were so preoccupied by the "uncleanness" of women seemed to mind. Having seen them throw their empty lunch bags out the windows of the tour buses, I wasn't really surprised. Followed by

the windborne screams of a fat boy's "Shema Yisroel Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad," I walked down the steep path leading away from Rabbi Simeon's tomb toward the parking lot. Not yet ready to board the bus, I sat down on a broad flat stone under a tree, took out my notebook, and began to write. Noticing that a shadow had fallen over my notebook, I looked up to see the man with the crutches leaning over me, this time without his sunglasses.

"Why are you writing?"

Thinking it interesting that he didn't ask me *what* I was writing but *why*, I said, "I'm working on a book about the holy places in Israel. I'm an art historian," I lied again.

The man gave me a glassy-eyed look and said, "Then why aren't you praying? If you know these are holy places, why aren't you over there with the rest of the women praying?"

"How do you know I'm not praying?" I asked archly.

The man moved closer, his face taut with indignation. "If you really wanted to pray, you'd be back up there with the women, standing, not sitting out here writing."

Bile rising into my throat, I said, "Look, you pray the way you want, and I'll pray the way I want. Okay?"

The man flashed me his gold-toothed smile. Either he'd opted for a different approach or was manic depressive. "How are you enjoying the trip?" he asked amicably.

I decided to answer his question with one of my own. "You're American, right?"

Taken by surprise, my inquisitor nodded.

"This is the best of the tombs, don't you think?" I went on, not giving him time for a comeback, "a real power spot."

"Yeah . . ."

Now the shoe was on the other foot and I was interrogating *him*. "How did you find out about the pilgrimage?"

"My wife and I read one of the posters and she thought I might be interested. We've been living in Jerusalem for a year. I'm a composer. And you?" Appearing to have suddenly grown shy, he stopped staring me down. I looked into his sweating face and noticed that his newly-grown *payos* were sticking to his temples. I know this guy, I thought. He's a *Baal Tshuvah*, one of the hundreds of "returned Jews" wandering around Israel. Most likely just returned from an ashram in India, which is probably why his *payos*

are still new and why he looks so uncomfortable in his ultra-Orthodox black suit.

"I was told about this trip by the *shammas* at my *shul*," I said, deliberately throwing in the Yiddish. "How are you enjoying it?"

"It's been quite an experience," he said. "Riding in the bus . . . I mean these Sephardim are really something. They're fighting with each other like cats and dogs one minute, and the next minute they're singing. . . ." There was an awkward pause, then he shook his head and, growing suspicious again, said, "So you're married."

"And you're a composer," I said quickly.

"I'm composing. I'm learning, too—studying Torah in a yeshiva. It's been a wonderful experience."

Unguarded, the heretic in me blurted out, "I'm glad *someone's* enjoying it." Wishing I'd kept my mouth shut, I tried diverting him by dropping my pen and fishing for it among the weeds.

The man suddenly began gasping as if on the verge of an asthma attack.

"I . . . I . . . must . . . tell . . . you . . ." he sputtered between gasps, bending over and breathing garlic into my face.

"Here, let me help you," I said, now really worried about him.

He pulled away from me. His eyes opening wide, his eyeballs rolling back into their sockets, he screamed, "You must stop writing about the Kabbalah!" Spit from his mouth was flying into my face. "You lied to me before. You're no art historian! The bus driver told me—you're writing about Kabbalah! You must never write another word about it because you are disordering and, yes, destroying the worlds!" His chest chugging away like a steam engine, he swayed on his crutches and I was afraid he was going to fall into my lap.

"You're a married woman and your head is not covered! I've been watching you! I saw you put on the kerchief only when you came out of the bus. You must stop right now what you've been doing! You don't observe the *Halakhah*, so you have no right to put down another word about the Kabbalah, do you hear me?" He lifted one of his crutches as if to threaten me with it.

Instinctively, I pulled back and covered my head with my notebook. "How do *you* know who I am, what I write, or what I observe?" I screamed back at him, my voice cracking with a lifetime of accumulated rage at Orthodox men in black suits.

"You don't cover your head, and that means you're not pure. All of you who don't observe the *Halakhah* down to the letter and write about Kabbalah have destroyed the worlds, do you understand?"

My hands shaking, I picked up my pen. Holding my notebook over my head like a warrior's shield and giving him a killer glare, I yelled, "You get away from me right this minute!"

Black suit lowered his crutch. "You are endangering your life in the world to come. In your impurity you are endangering the life of your husband, your children, your grandchildren—all those in contact with you. Every letter you have written has endangered everyone on this trip. I urge you to stop!"

He'd stooped over and was gasping again, but I was no longer interested in helping him. In fact, I'd stopped giving a damn about him and all the other men on this trip blocking my way and spitting curses at me. For a split second I was tempted to slap his face. What's the point? I thought. He's crazy. Just another yeshiva boy gone crazy trying to restrain his sexual urges for a woman who doesn't happen to be his wife. That's all.

The blood in my temples was thumping so hard I was afraid my head would burst. I took a few deep breaths hoping to calm down, but my heart was still seething with hatred for all the black-suited men who but for the injunction against murder would have pushed me off the mountain for being a woman. I was sick of the pilgrims and their filthy shrines, pained at the sight of boys no more than seven years old giving me the stink-eye as I passed by them. Okay, I thought, if they see me as Lilith, I'll *be* Lilith.

I stood up and screamed, "Did you hear what I said? You get away from me right now!" Contorting my face, I hissed at him like a snake, startling him and causing him to back off. As he turned from me and hobbled away on his crutches, he was met by a beggar in a pair of baggy clown pants held up with a rope.

"... *Tzedakah!* Charity," the beggar pleaded, jabbing a smeared empty yogurt cup under black suit's nose before being pushed aside.

"... *Tzedakah!*" The watery-eyed beggar, whose fly, I noticed, was open, had now jumped in front of me and was shaking his cup.

I opened my bag and took out my change purse. "Here! Take it all!" Dropping every last coin into the beggar's cup I ran past

him to the parking lot, arriving just in time to catch the departing bus.

Many years have passed since that incident, but others like it kept cropping up during the course of my spiritual search. Though less confrontational and more subtle, such encounters left me pondering what it is that makes an "undomesticated" woman so threatening to men. Sometimes I wouldn't even have to say anything; all I'd have to do was appear in a synagogue to raise the resentment level of the men in the room. What is it, I wondered, that makes them see me as a potential destroyer of the world? I'm only a little over five feet tall, so it can't be my size. A product of Beth Jacob reflexively trained in "modest Jewish womanhood," I don't wear seductive clothing, so it can't be my sexuality that threatens them. So what could it be? It was while researching this book that I found a satisfactory answer in Raphael Patai's book *The Hebrew Goddess* alluding to the Canaanite goddess Anat, sister/lover of the god Baal—an earlier form of the Queen of Heaven worshiped by the Israelite women who defied Jeremiah—anathema to both the ancient patriarchs of Yahweh and their modern descendants. What these goddesses and their human "role breaker" counterparts have in common is not only their intelligence, their sexual autonomy and stubborn refusal to be "domesticated," but also their appetite for battle and, when provoked, their unmitigated wrath. Their modest facades hiding demonic female power, Anat's army of "women warriors" beckon their prey intending to slaughter any man who approaches.

GODDESS AS WARRIOR

Written on stone tablets in Ugarit, a script similar to ancient Hebrew, the fourteenth-century B.C.E. myth depicts Anat as "the goddess of love and war, virginal and yet wanton, amorous and yet given to uncontrollable outbursts of rage and appalling acts of cruelty. She is the daughter of El, the god of heaven, and of his wife the Lady Asherah of the Sea."[9] A typical love goddess, Anat is both virgin and whore. "Conceiving but not bearing," she has it both ways—perpetually fertile yet remaining a virgin. Understandably, her sexual autonomy is hateful to the men who would tame her,

but even worse, like the Greek goddess Athena, Anat is also an intellectual and a warrior. In other words, she combines it all: chastity and promiscuity, wisdom and war—so why should she be dependent on any man? Already despicable in the eyes of the ancients for breaking the incest taboo by taking her brother Baal as her foremost lover, Anat's sexual dalliances are nothing next to her sadistic rampages. A thirteenth-century B.C.E. Egyptian magical text provides good reason for continuing male fear of a woman gone wild. Patai explains:

> [No] ancient Near Eastern goddess was more blood thirsty than [Anat]. She was easily provoked to violence, and, once she began to fight, she would go berserk, smiting and killing right and left. One sees her plunge into fighting with real pleasure: she smites the peoples of both East and West, so that their heads fly like sheaves and their hands like locusts. Not satisfied with this, she binds the severed heads to her back and the cut-off hands to her girdle, and plunges knee-deep in the blood of troops, and hip-deep in the gore of heroes. Now she is in her element: her liver swells with laughter, her heart fills up with joy.[10]

One is reminded here of the Hindu goddess Kali, similarly associated with war and violent death, depicted in her magnificent temples as a stunning, breast-baring woman wearing a girdle of severed heads and drinking blood from a skull, laughing maniacally as she tramples her enemies underfoot. Tibetan Buddhism, too, is replete with sex/warrior goddesses representing esoteric Tantric forms of spiritual practice symbolizing the "death of the ego" in the form of a chastising bloodthirsty woman. However, what seems to have threatened ancient Near Eastern men even more than these horrific images of bloodthirsty goddesses like Anat is that she was a gender bender—"a woman acting as a man, clad as a male and girt as a female." To the Israelites, for example, distinguishing the sexes by what they wore was so important that a woman who dressed in men's clothing was subject to death by stoning. Biblical scholars have speculated on the reasons for the harsh treatment of women who transgressed the dress codes, most concluding that nothing less than the social, spiritual, and economic status of men was at stake. Yet I would go further, agreeing with feminist archeologists like Maria Gimbutas and others whose

findings suggest that the notion of an all-powerful, sexually autonomous woman hides an even older, more deeply rooted threat harking back to the Neolithic Era. According to this view, it all started with blood. Man the Hunter noted that animals and wounded humans bled to death. However, he also noted that women bled every month and did not die, giving them supernatural power not available to men. It was not until Pastoral Man started collecting livestock and breeding farm animals that he understood the reproductive process to involve him as well. Before then, he had believed that women were impregnated by the windborne spirits of nature deities. By the time the Sumerians started worshiping Inanna, Patriarchal Man had convinced himself that his seed harbored the active source of life and that the womb was merely its passive "receptacle." Motivated by lingering fears of the goddess's power to rise up from the Underworld and punish his sacrilege with her "eye of death," he cut her into pieces, buried her deep in the earth, locked her in an underwater tomb, turned her into a "footstool"—but nothing he did could make her disappear, and she continues to haunt him to this very day.

DEGRADED WOMEN

If the powerful Queen of Heaven herself could be demoted to the status of a demon, we don't have to go very far to learn the fate of her human counterparts. Starting with Eve, the Bible is filled with examples of degraded women. Though she fares better than Lilith, at least in Genesis 1, the Eve who appears in later versions of the Creation story is clearly the product of a more misogynist group of authors. Where Eve 1 is made of the same clod of earth as her male partner and is equally formed in God's image, Eve 2 is inferior from the start. The Talmudic period collection of Jewish folklore, legend, and rabbinic commentary known as *Midrash* offers a colorful explanation of the biblical narrative. According to legend, pondering the best way to form Eve, God inventories Adam's body parts, eliminating the potential troublemakers until finally deciding on Adam's rib as the most "chaste." The list of candidates and the reasons for their elimination runs as follows:

Head—Arrogance
Eye—Wantonness
Ear—Eavesdropping
Neck—Insolence
Mouth—Tattling
Heart—Envy
Hand—Meddling
Foot—Gadding About

After putting Adam to sleep and removing his rib, God forms Eve, calling out to each limb and organ "Be chaste!" as he pieces her together. Of course, being what she is, Eve manages to return to her old goddess ways, resumes her friendship with the snake, takes charge of her Tree of Life, treats herself and her husband to a bite of one of her holy apples, and in so doing regains power over her own, and Adam's, sexuality. Acknowledging his failure to create a tamer human version of his divine ex-wife Asherah, Yahweh curses Eve and banishes her from the garden along with her husband.

The Talmudic sages blamed Eve's transgression for Adam's death. To remind Jewish women of their dubious legacy, the rabbis presented them with three penances: lighting the Sabbath candles for having put out "the light of the world" [Adam]; baking the Sabbath bread for having destroyed Adam, the "leaven of the world"; and performing menstruation rituals for shedding the "blood of life" by bringing death into the world.

However, despite God's cautious selection of body parts in creating her, woman was born to defy him. As the *Midrash* charmingly puts it, "the daughters of Zion were haughty and walked with stretched forth necks and wanton eyes; Sarah was an eavesdropper in her own tent, when the angel spoke with Abraham; Miriam was a talebearer, accusing Moses; Rachel was envious of her sister Leah; Eve put out her hand to take the forbidden fruit, and Dinah was a gadabout."[11] Could this list of women's faults be a rationale for a patriarchal society whose matriarchs are no more than mediums of exchange for the continuation of male lineages? Might it not be an excuse for bartering women in marriage simply to bear sons whose names appear throughout the scriptures to interrupt the narrative in a tedious litany of "begats?" Female prophets aren't treated

much better. When the aforementioned "talebearer" Miriam, Moses' sister, joins her brother Aaron in challenging their brother's spiritual authority, it is Miriam alone who God singles out for punishment with leprosy.

> The Lord came down in a pillar of cloud, stopped at the entrance of the [Tent of Meeting], and called out, "Aaron and Miriam!" The two of them came forward; and He said, "Hear these My words: When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with My servant Moses; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of the Lord. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moses!" Still incensed with them, the Lord departed.
>
> As the cloud withdrew from the Tent, there was Miriam stricken with snow-white scales!"[12]

Both Aaron and Moses plead Miriam's case, but God is adamant, commanding that she be shut out of the camp for seven days before she can be healed and readmitted. If Aaron is equally guilty of defying God, why is Miriam the only one to suffer? Reminiscent of taboos related to women's "pollution" and segregation during menstruation and childbirth, the answer probably reflects the overall attitude of Israelite men toward defiant women as "unclean." Further examination of the Book of Numbers bears this out. After forty years of wandering in the desert, as the Israelites are approaching goddess-worshiping Canaan, Yahweh gives them a set of rules governing women's sexuality, including the ritual ordeals awaiting any woman who transgresses against them. The list of potential crimes and punishments is long, covering everything from deliberate to unwitting adultery, a husband's jealousy, the false declaration of virginity to a prospective husband, and the marriage of a woman to her rapist without the possibility of divorce! Aside from the stoning to death of adulterous wives and licentious women, the "Ordeal of the Bitter Waters" is a particularly cruel test of a woman's guilt or innocence later adopted and embellished by the patriarchs of the Christian Church in their witch trials. In the case of a woman accused of infidelity by her husband:

> The priest shall bring her forward and have her stand before the Lord. The priest shall take sacral water in an earthen vessel and, taking some of the earth that is on the floor of the Tabernacle, the priest shall put it into the water. After he has made the woman stand before the Lord, the priest shall bare the woman's head and place upon her hands the meal offering of remembrance, which is a meal offering of jealousy. And in the priest's hands shall be the water of bitterness that induces the spell. The priest shall adjure the woman, saying to her, "If no man has lain with you, if you have not gone astray in defilement while married to your husband, be immune to harm from this water that induces the spell. But if you have gone astray while married to your husband and have defiled yourself . . . may the Lord make you a curse and an imprecation among your people, as the Lord causes your thigh to sag and your belly to distend; may this water that induces the spell enter your body. . . ." The priest shall scoop out of the meal offering a token part of it and turn it into smoke on the altar. Lastly, he shall make the woman drink the water.[13]

If innocent, the accused woman remained unharmed. But if guilty, as soon as she drank the poisoned water she was immediately crippled and rendered barren for life. Needless to say, no such ritual existed for men suspected of infidelity by their wives. The concept of woman as shadow, demonic "Other," or seducer persistently reappears throughout patriarchal history. Even those passages in the Hebrew Bible praising the matriarchs and extolling individual Israelite women for their heroism or their wisdom are permeated by fear of their sexuality, their power over life and death. In fact, the woman-as-shadow motif tends to grow more ingenious, and vicious, with the years. Postbiblical commentaries on the Torah purport to honor women within the domestic sphere but degrade them by prohibiting their participation in the public life of the Jewish community. Thus, although an entire Talmudic tractate, *Nashim* (Women), is devoted to regulating the most intimate details of their lives, women's exclusion from the rabbinic academies codifying Jewish law leaves them no voice in matters of marriage and divorce, inheritance and property rights, widowhood, and the disposition of penalties for adultery after the destruction of the Temple when the priestly test of the "bitter waters" could no longer be imposed.

To the Talmudic rabbis who identified humility with God's female presence even a woman's physical presence is anathema, her body a reminder of the soul's entrapment and the need for repentance. Take, for example, the obsession with segregation of women from sacred ground, whether in the ancient Temple or in the postexilic synagogue, simply because of their sex: "A woman's hair is an immoral thing" (Babylonian Talmud)—seen as an enticement to the "whorish" practices leading to the destruction of the Temple; hence the need for veiling married women in ancient times and, in today's ultra-Orthodox community, the reason married women shave their heads and wear wigs or headscarves.

Punishment of women, such as the following rationale for wife beating by the illustrious medieval philosopher Moses Maimonedes, only seems to grow crueler with time: "If a wife refuses to carry out such wifely duties as washing her husband's hands and feet, or serving him at table, she is to be chastised with rods." This advice to husbands no doubt reflects the diminished power of Jewish masculinity in the Diaspora, a time when, like his Talmudic forefathers, even a rationalist like Moses Maimonides was compelled to cast the blame for the Exile on the unruliness of Jewish women.

In the sixteenth century, Rabbi Joseph Caro, author of the *Shulkhan Arukh*—Code of Jewish Law—further expanded the onerous ancient *Toharot*, ritual purity laws: "A woman from whose womb issued a drop of blood, be it ever so small . . . even if it is the result of an accident, is considered ritually unclean. . . . Both man and woman who have sexual intercourse after the menstrual flow has begun incur the penalty of *Karet* [banishment] . . . and the temporal punishment for caressing one another is flagellation." Originally pertaining to Temple practices, the purity laws were applied to both men and women; however, once the Temple had fallen, in an attempt to exercise restraints on women's sexuality, the rabbis recast the *Toharot* to focus exclusively on menstruation (*Niddah*) in the *Nashim* (Women's) tractate of the Talmud.

"Though a woman be a pot full of excrement, and her mouth full of blood, still men rush after her" (Jerusalem Talmud)—no need for comment.

In our own time, the degradation of women is so subtle that even feminists often buy into it. Take the Jungian idea of the femi-

nine anima, the irrational shadow side of the human personality that always threatens to subsume its rational male partner. Or the dated neurological studies proving that the feminine mind is wired for "wholeness" and the masculine for "linearity." When, in fact, the latest studies in brain neurology indicate that there is much less of a split in right and left brain function than thought previously, and that both men and women are capable of using either side to compensate for damage to the other. As neurologist Leonard Shlain puts it: "The popular press has widely disseminated the essential features of right/left brain asymmetry. Most well-informed people know that each hemisphere of the brain controls the muscles of the body's opposite side. Most people also understand that the hemispheres work closely in concert with one another. . . . Recently, researchers have identified the feeling-states of happiness, optimism, and cheerfulness to be in the left frontal lobe, indicating that not all emotions reside in the right hemisphere."[14]

Labeling the mind "feminine" or "masculine" is where the problem starts. To those feminists who speak of a more natural feminine style of spirituality, I would ask, How do we know what is *natural?* Do we refer to that which is inborn and not learned or socially constructed? We must ask ourselves why, in the twenty-first century, we still remain prey to schizoid patriarchal messages about femaleness inherited from our ancient past. To me, these are not rhetorical questions but real dangers faced by women who, despite their strength and intelligence, continue to live as "footstools" to men.

FERTILE AND BARREN WOMBS

Even the most cursory reading of the Bible will reveal that a woman's single most important function is motherhood. Yahweh is totally in control of the situation, determining whether, how, and when a woman's womb will "open." Starting with Eve and continuing with the matriarchs, it is God who makes women pregnant, condemns them to suffer in childbirth, and sees to it that no matter how beautiful or favored, a barren wife will be pushed into the background by a second wife or concubine who bears sons. The

story of Sarah and Abraham is the prototype, not only because it establishes the origin of the Israelite nation, but also because it consigns the barren Israelite woman to a lifetime of guilt, envy, and hatred of other women for not being part of it. So great is the emphasis on Sarah's childlessness that even she, the greatest of the Hebrew matriarchs, emerges as mean-spirited and vicious in her treatment of her Egyptian rival, the fertile slave woman Hagar. (See Genesis 17:15–16.) Interestingly, the most significant moments of the narrative take place under the terebinth, a long-lived tree similar to an oak, believed to be associated with the goddess. God first promises Abraham the land of Canaan in Shechem under a terebinth, which the goddess-worshiping Canaanites referred to as the "Diviner's Oak." Later, at Hebron, Sarah is promised a son by angelic messengers under a spreading terebinth, site of altars dedicated to the Canaanite goddess Ningal, consort of the moon god Sin. Feminist biblical scholar Rose Sallberg-Kam identifies Sarah's original name, "Sarai" (princess), as that given to devotees of the goddess Ningal. Setting the custom for all the matriarchs to follow, Sarah comes to her husband from a goddess-worshiping society and continues her devotions alongside those of her Yahweh-worshiping husband.[15] A common result of ancient "inter-religious" marriage, such practices are explicitly described in the story of Rachel, the bold matriarch who steals the statues of her father's gods and takes them with her on her bridal journey to the house of Jacob.

Sadly, once they become wives and don't immediately produce sons, these proud, feisty Israelite women are reduced to scheming, squabbling shrews. Even after Yahweh intercedes on their behalf and they do produce male offspring, living as perpetual breeders has so robbed them of their dignity that they spend their days promoting the interests of their sons over those of their rivals. What other course is there to take for a woman told by God that her only reason for living is to become "a mother of nations" from whom "kings . . . will spring"?[16] Whether it is Eve's insatiable curiosity, Sarah's maternal ambition, Rebecca's treachery, or Rachel's rivalry with her sister Leah, the blame for generations of suffering is laid at the wombs of women.

According to Jewish legal scholar Rachel Biale, "A man who has been married to a woman for ten years without producing any

offspring is required to divorce his wife and marry another in order to fulfill his obligation [to procreate]." Interestingly, the Talmud expresses divided opinions on whether the same obligation applies to women. Since, with rare exceptions, Jewish law prohibits a woman from divorcing her husband without special concession from a rabbi, the situation of a childless woman is more complicated. Biale cites the case of a woman who came to Rabbi Johanan in Caesarea requesting "that her husband be required to divorce her because she was childless and believed that with another man she might be able to conceive. . . . At first it seems that Rabbi Johanan did believe that women are obligated to procreate and therefore awarded the childless woman a full payment of her *ketubah* [marriage contract]. But, in fact, he granted her the divorce on the basis of special considerations . . . as was the case with a certain woman who came to Rabbi Ammi [in which the same request was turned down] because the commandment of procreation does not apply to her." Only after making a special plea claiming that "she needed children to care for her in old age," did Rabbi Ammi grant the woman's request.[17] Today's rabbinic decisions regarding a woman's childlessness as grounds for divorce are still based on these ancient legal precedents. So it should come as no surprise that even many Orthodox Jewish women calling themselves feminists continue to rival the biblical matriarchs in the no-holds-barred competition surrounding motherhood. I speak from bitter personal experience. As a woman without children, I'm continuously dogged by friendships gone sour because of my refusal to fit the mold. The earliest and perhaps most painful break—with my closest yeshiva friend—haunts me still.

NELLY

I met Nelly at Beth Jacob when she was being introduced as a new girl during one of Rabbi Asher's assemblies. From the minute I laid eyes on her, I was determined to make her my best friend. I had two reasons: the first was that she had pierced ears, which, to me, immediately identified her as "boy crazy," and the second was that her brother Ruben was a student at the Chaim Berlin Seminary for

Boys, and I'd developed a crush on a boy named Levi Snow who was a senior there. The third reason came later, when I learned of Nelly's gift for lying to Rebbitzen Asher without cracking a smile and without getting caught.

On an unusually balmy March day, I convinced Nelly to accompany me across the street for a close-up look at Levi Snow when, according to her brother Ruben, the senior boys would be playing handball in the schoolyard. Pretending we were going to the ladies' room, we slipped out of Rebbitzen Asher's class and walked calmly out the front door and across the four-lane parkway dividing Beth Jacob from Chaim Berlin. Despite her pierced ears and her cool façade, Nelly's hands were as sweaty as mine as, clinging tightly to each other, we approached the schoolyard where, having been threatened with a hideous death from Leviticus, Ruben had sworn Levi would be playing handball. It was Nelly who saw him first, poking me in the ribs according to our prearranged signal. Unlike the other yeshiva boys, the blond-haired, blue-eyed Levi Snow was not wearing black pants and a black yarmulke; instead he wore light blue pants and a light blue yarmulke embroidered with white stars.

Closing my eyes, I prayed for Levi to stop playing handball and look at me, but he did not. Opening my eyes again, I saw Nelly now slumped under a mealy tree fanning herself with her hand. The street we were on was called "Saint Mark's Place"—an odd name for a yeshiva to be built on, I thought, odd, like the name "Levi Snow." The boys played on in silent concentration, as if they weren't playing a game at all but meditating over the Talmud. Every so often one of them would call "Interference!" or "You're out!" But nothing, not even the fact that two yeshiva girls from across the street had cut class and were standing there gaping at them could lift those budding rabbis from their trance.

"I'm going to the candy store so it shouldn't be a total loss," Nelly said.

Still faintly dazed with unrequited longing, I followed her into the hole-in-the-wall darkness of the candy store that flanked the school. Nelly bought a long sheet of purple and yellow marzipan "buttons," two sticks of red "shoe leather" licorice, and a *Wonder Woman* comic book.

"Shoe leather's not kosher," I said.

"I don't care," said Nelly, handing me one stick of her shoe leather licorice. "Rebbitzen Asher's going to punish us something awful when we get back, so we might as well enjoy ourselves now."

"Yeah, let's go," I said, stuffing Nelly's shoe leather licorice into my mouth.

I eventually left Beth Jacob for public school and lost contact with Nelly. I was sixteen when I received a letter from her, inviting me to visit after informing me that she'd married Levi Snow and had a baby boy. Nelly had added a postscript saying she didn't have a telephone yet but urging me to come "any time, because I'm always home with the baby." The news had taken me by surprise, not because it was so unusual for a yeshiva girl of sixteen to marry a yeshiva boy of nineteen and have a baby, but because Nelly had been so different from your run-of-the-mill yeshiva girl. Like me, she'd hated Beth Jacob and the "modest Jewish womanhood" refrain that was constantly being drilled into us. It was hard to imagine how things could have changed so drastically for her, and I was determined to see for myself. Though the city was in the midst of a blizzard and the schools had been closed, the trains were still running, so I immediately set out for the other side of Brooklyn.
Not sure whether I was disappointed in Nelly for giving in to Rebbitzen Asher or jealous of her for marrying Levi Snow, I tried thinking positive thoughts as I got out of the subway. First, I pictured her as a bride making seven circles around Levi Snow dressed as a bridegroom in a black silk robe and fur hat. Then I imagined a steaming hall packed with bearded men in black coats and fur hats carrying Levi Snow around on a chair high above their heads, the hall shaking as if a herd of bison was thundering through. Behind a paper screen, I placed Nelly, covered from head to toe in white lace, her new wig, half a shade darker than her own brown hair, smelling of Brilliantine and burnt toast, just like that of Rebbitzen Asher.

Nelly's building was a ramshackle brownstone repainted red, with a broken front stoop. A flight of dented stairs and a banister as wide as a subway trestle led to her second-floor apartment. A hand-lettered strip on an ancient mailbox in the front hall read: *Snow* 2A. A sign above the mailbox said the downstairs bell was out

of order, so I climbed to the second floor and, locating her door easily from the bulging ceramic *mezuzah* posted on the frame, rang the doorbell.

Baby screams; a thud, as if something had fallen or been thrust aside; an annoyed "Just a minute!" in a familiar voice that gave me goose bumps; the flip-flop of a pair of oversized felt slippers—and the door opened. Nelly was standing in front of me squinting as usual, only now she was a heavy ultra-Orthodox matron in a frizzy wig with sties on both eyelids. The air around her bristled with difficult pregnancy and hard labor, splayed feet and varicose veins; hers, I noticed, were wrapped in elastic bands fastened by silver clips. I thought, Oh, Nelly, what did they do to you? You're part of God's army of modest Jewish women, the kind you and I swore we'd never become. You're even decked out in full uniform.

Nelly saw me and shrieked, "You came! You got my letter?" It was part question, part sob. The ropes of a dumbwaiter rattled insistently from the square of light behind her that I took to be the kitchen. "Come in, take off your coat . . . it's the garbage," she pointed over her shoulder. "I never thought you'd come. You look great."

I noticed that Nelly's ears were still red as ever, but the flashy gold bobs for which she'd been famous at Beth Jacob were gone. Gesturing toward the living room, she told me to sit down and promised to be right back, then flapped off toward the kitchen in her oversized slippers.

"How'd you get my address?" I called after her.

"I wrote to Rabbi Asher at Beth Jacob. They keep a record of all the alumni. You're still in the active file. . . . Okay, okay, I'm pulling from my end," she yelled into the depths of the dumbwaiter.

The living room was painted the same cerulean blue as the auditorium at Beth Jacob. The sofa was brown and sagged, and a glass-enclosed bookcase, stacked in all directions with familiar black books bearing gold-lettered Hebrew titles, dominated the far wall. A desk with a string holding its splintered claw-foot pedestal overflowed with Hebrew pamphlets and an assortment of bills. In the corner of the room, a bassinet emitted noises resembling a sputtering faucet.

"So this is the baby." I took off my coat and put it on the sofa. "I can't believe it!" I called to Nelly. But she was arguing with

whoever was tugging at the other end of the dumbwaiter rope in the basement and didn't hear me.

I peered into the bassinet at a good-sized boy who didn't look like Nelly or Levi Snow. We stared at each other until, unblinkingly out-stared, I gave up and sat down on the sofa. A cupboard door slammed and water ran in the sink, then my once-best-friend came into the living room and raised the blinds.

"Stopped snowing finally, huh?" Nelly turned and gave me a big smile, and I almost rushed up and hugged her, she looked so much like the old Nelly then. "Look at your clothes . . . you're wearing pants! Remember how you always hated wearing the Beth Jacob regulation long skirts and long-sleeved blouses?" Nelly laughed then looked down at her feet. "I haven't been feeling so good. Having babies isn't easy for me. . . . Would you like something to eat? I'm making a nice chicken soup with matzo balls for supper."

"No, please don't bother. I can't stay long."

Nelly looked hurt.

"Well, maybe a cup of coffee," I said.

"Wonderful. I have some on the stove . . . just made."

Drinking coffee from a chipped cup, I watched Nelly wash and diaper the baby, whose name, she told me, was "Shlomo—after King Solomon, the Wise."

"How did all this happen? When? I mean you were never really religious, were you, Nelly? Or were you secretly ultra-Orthodox all that time?"

"No, but about six months after you left, Rabbi Asher expanded the curriculum and believe it or not, I even got to like the subjects after a while. I ended up getting As in Hebrew and English. "Miss Lichtenstein, the English teacher, remember her?"

I nodded.

"Well, I heard she converted and became a Catholic nun!"

I choked on my coffee.

"Yeah," Nelly went on. "Hinda Swerdlow told me. She's some kind of third cousin of hers. The family burned *jahrzeit* for her and everything, how do you like that?" Not waiting for a response, she continued, "Terrible, isn't it terrible? And Rebbitzen Asher died. I didn't like her, but I felt bad anyway. Imagine, she was sitting home one day, a week after having her new baby . . . the fifth,

I think it was . . . just sitting in a chair like you and me now, and she passed away right there with her baby in her arms. A clot to the brain . . .” Nelly snapped her fingers, “Just like that!”

I had hated Rebbitzen Asher, but I’d never wished her dead. And I’d adored Miss Lichtenstein, but she’d converted, which, in the eyes of her family, made her as good as dead.

“Nelly, please tell me something nice,” I said. “You sound like the voice of doom.”

“What’s nice?” Nelly leaned down and smoothed her elastic leg bands.

“Well, your marriage, for instance . . . how is . . . how is Levi?” I forced myself to say the name of the yeshiva boy I had once loved. “How did you meet him again after he graduated from Chaim Berlin?”

Nelly pursed her lips. “Oh . . . it’s the old story. You know how it is when you mix with the *Mesivta* crowd; you’re bound to meet up with the old Chaim Berlin boys. We met at a Purim party. He didn’t even remember me from Beth Jacob. When I told him later about the day you and I cut school to spy on him, he was surprised. He couldn’t imagine yeshiva girls doing that, he told me. Public school girls, yes . . . but us . . .” Nelly giggled and pursed her lips again. “You don’t mind if I diaper the baby while we talk? I’m still so disorganized, but you remember, I always was.” Again that familiar giggle. But this time, from beneath the ultra-Orthodox woman’s mask there emerged for one splendid second the conspiratorial Nelly I’d once trusted with my secret passion for Levi Snow.

“My goodness, when you think of all that’s happened already, it makes you scared of what’s in store,” she said.

“It’s weird, hearing you talk like that. You were never philosophical. Now you sound like “Leslie Kroll.” Is that your husband’s influence?” I said, picturing Levi Snow sitting next to Nelly on the lumpy sofa with his hands clasped, explaining all the Talmudic reasons for being fruitful and multiplying.

Nelly ignored me. “How about you, Pnina, do you have a steady?”

It had been years since I’d been called by my Hebrew name. “My God, no,” I said contemptuously. “People don’t go steady anymore, do they? That was back in the Stone Age . . . I won’t get

married for a long time . . . maybe thirty, maybe never." Thirty seemed far enough away; I was sure I was going to die young for secretly eating unkosher Chinese food anyway.

"Bite your tongue! You don't want to be an old maid, do you?"

"Why not?"

"God forbid. And never have children."

"Not everyone has to, you know. I read that the world will be so overpopulated by the end of the century that we'll have to live on food pills. I'd rather not add to the problem."

"Aiee, aiee . . ." Nelly pressed her hands against her cheeks and shook her head. "Heathenish talk. . . . It's a sin to even think like that, like the *goyim*. What about your obligation as a Jewish woman?"

"You sound like a brochure for Beth Jacob. What is that, propaganda? Did they brainwash you, too?"

"Shame, shame . . ." Nelly was so upset she stuck the baby with the safety pin. Poor baby Shlomo gave off a few dry hiccups in protest then sighed deeply and grew silent. "Good baby," Nelly leaned over him and kissed his chubby thigh. "Mama didn't mean to stick you."

I felt nauseated. "Nelly, I hate to disappoint you, but to my way of thinking . . . now don't take this personally . . . some people might just want something more out of life."

"Something more . . . what . . . will you be too busy to have children?" Nelly's face was all red.

"Don't get excited. It's not good for your circulation," I said, recalling how we'd argued for hours over who had stepped on the chalk line and was "out" when we'd played *potsy*. Nelly had once gotten so mad that she'd thrown the wooden *potsy* puck into the gutter and jumped up and down with glee as it was smashed to splinters under the wheels of a passing car. Another time, during a similar disagreement, we'd both erased all the chalk lines and numbers with the rubber heels of our shoes so that neither of us could go on playing.

"Too busy for what," Nelly cried, "for Nature? For doing what God put you here to do in the first place?" She reached for her coffee cup. A white, slimy cast had formed over the surface, but taking no notice, she drank it all down in one angry gulp.

I stood there thinking, Mrs. Levi Snow. You can put your name on the broken mailbox in the hall downstairs, carry it around in

your pocketbook like a *potsy* puck and show it off at the rundown shops along Pitken Avenue, but you are still a high school dropout, a listener to rabbinic radio sermons in Yiddish on postpartum ritual cleanliness, a dumbwaiter rope puller. But instead of saying any of these things, I said, "Look who's talking. Remember your life's great desire? Didn't you want to be on television? A girl who gives away quiz show prizes in a short costume with fishnet stockings and spike heels? Did you forget that?" My voice shaking, I dredged up every hurtful detail I could remember. At that moment I hated Nelly so much for her betrayal, for standing in front of the curtainless windows in her suffocating, smug little haven of modest Jewish womanhood and treating me as if I were the Whore of Babylon, that it was all I could do to keep myself from screaming, *You're fat and you look like an old hag in that wig. It's on crooked. Your teeth are rotting, the house stinks, and you're killing yourself having babies, just like Rebbitzen Asher.* I hated Nelly, and I loved her so much that I wanted to grab her and shake her free of her stale coffee mornings and the grim *Shabbos* afternoons she spent waiting for Levi Snow to come home from his endless round of synagogue services and Torah classes. I wanted to take Nelly in my arms and hug her until we both cried and laughed ourselves silly and peed in our pants, like in the old days.

"Get out!" Nelly screamed pointing at the door like a heroine in one of the soap operas she'd enacted for me in the Beth Jacob ladies' room when we were supposed to be at morning prayers. "Get out of my house! You're jealous! Jealous that I married him! JEALOUS! JEALOUS! JEALOUS! You wanted him, but I got him!"

"I'm sorry, Nelly . . . I didn't mean it," I said when I saw that she wasn't acting.

But Nelly wanted nothing to do with me. "Get out of here, you cat. You jealous cat, you . . ." she screamed. Dribbling, she flopped down on the sofa exhausted. Baby Shlomo gurgled once then started choking. Nelly leapt from the sofa and snatched him out of the bassinet, holding him to her breast with his face averted from mine, as if I were the evil-eyed Lilith poised to pounce on her newborn baby.

"What are you looking at? I told you to go!" Suddenly she was holding the baby out in front of me and yelling in her old, taunt-

ing *potsy* voice, "Here, he's live; he's real . . . and that's more than you'll ever have, Miss Too-Good-For-Beth Jacob. More than you'll ever have . . . ever . . . ever!"

Struggling with the sleeves, I pulled on my coat, got up, and walked out of the apartment. Behind me, I heard Nelly muttering. "Ever . . . ever . . . right baby dear, right, *Bubele?*"

All the way down the stairs, I heard Nelly's crooning, and the wet smacking noise of her motherly kisses.

Nelly had attended public school from the first to the fourth grade. Her father, a widowed jeweler, had sent her to yeshiva less out of religious conviction than out of the need to keep her off the streets until he came home from work. Nelly had never fully adjusted to Beth Jacob. She'd said whatever was on her mind, and like me, wasn't afraid of talking back to Rebbitzen Asher. Yet even as she fought it, Nelly probably knew she would never escape her Jewish girl's fate, surrendering to an early marriage after attending the *mikvah* where the old hags would wash her secret places and cut her hair and fingernails, holding up a sheet in front of her nakedness as the rabbis prayed to purify the bride of her "woman's uncleanness." Just as, after her sons were born, circumcised, bar mitzvahed, and ordained rabbis, and Nelly was dead, her naked body would once again be turned over to the old hags who would wash it by flickering candlelight in the icy cellar of the ritual bath house. Mumbling toothless prayers, their bony fingers dragging a sponge over her sightless eyes, along her belly, and into the place of shame between her legs, the old hags would again wash Nelly clean of her woman's impurity, preparing her to be a footstool to Levi Snow in heaven.

As I pondered Nelly's fate, I wondered if God watched over the old hags at work. Did he know their secrets? Or were they invisible to him? Was he still afraid of the dark power of those witch-goddesses living down in that icy cellar even before he created the world? If God hated the stench of women so much, what smells *did* he like—frankincense and myrrh? Palm leaf and citron? The smoke of animal sacrifice? Did God like it when Rabbi Asher waved the sacrificial hen over our heads before Yom Kippur, heaping her with our sins before handing her over to the *shochet* for

slaughter? You'd think such a bloodthirsty God would make women who bleed every month priestesses instead of footstools. . . .

Though we never saw each other again, that visit with Nelly only served to heighten my childhood frustration with "modest Jewish womanhood" and spurred my passionate pursuit of a feminist alternative for the sake of role breakers like Nelly who had been tamed into submission. Plowing through ancient misogynist texts paralleling the history of the goddess and the lives of women proved very discouraging and my encounters with male Kabbalists were often so debilitating that they left me feeling too depressed or hopeless to continue. I was tempted more than once to walk away from all patriarchal religion and never look back—but the thought of Nelly always drove me on.

Schooled by my union-organizer father, I have never been able to turn away from an injustice, and since I see women's exclusion from spiritual life as a monumental injustice equal to that of slavery, I have decided to act. Nonetheless, like many feminists, I remain ambivalent about structuring a new spiritual path for women around outmoded (and in some cases detestable) symbols of female divinity. I am also doubtful that Jewish mysticism can be "reformed" in the same way that contemporary feminists are reforming Jewish ritual and liturgy. For unlike communal religious practice, mysticism is less focused on systematized devotion than it is on subjective, sometimes even anarchistic experience. It is not difficult for a woman to learn to recite new feminist versions of traditional Hebrew prayers, blessings or supplications, or hymns of praise and perform them whether alone or in a group setting. But in mystical rituals, where Hebrew words are deprived of meaning to serve as vehicles for meditation, prayer assumes an entirely different purpose. Taken out of its religious and cultural context, Jewish mysticism doesn't make sense; it takes careful instruction from an experienced guide who, up until now, has been male and who, even if he is willing to teach a woman, is using the same sexist language and symbolism he inherited from *his* male teachers.

Does this mean that we have to abandon the ancient religious apparatus entirely, throw out the baby with the bathwater, as it were? I would argue not. Rather, I would suggest taking an "eclec-

tic" approach to restoring the female face of God, one that emphasizes the subjective experience of each woman individually. I agree with feminist Carol Christ that a woman who sees "the divine principle, the saving and sustaining power in herself . . . will no longer look to men or male figures as saviors"[18]—or in the case of Judaism, as authority figures. But I would point out that this does not necessarily apply to women who would rather meditate than worship. What relevance, for example, do the symbols of old fertility-based religions hold for a woman who does not identify herself as "Virgin," "Bride," "Priestess," or in today's terms, "Rabbi"—all labels for "the divine principle" borrowed from the very misogynist religions we are rejecting. Abandoning all preformed images, such a woman is better served by looking in the mirror knowing that the face reflected there is unique, shared with no one else, that it has never appeared before and never will again.

Another well-intentioned effort at solving the problem of women's spiritual subordination, the image of an androgynous god also strikes me as not very helpful to today's woman in search of herself. As the history of goddess religions has proven, it only serves to reinforce gender stereotypes of women as virgins or whores, mothers or child-murderers, cutting them off from the sacred functions assigned to men. As Ursula King writes: "[The] mother image is linked to religions with much greater sexual exclusiveness and division where women do not take part in ritual."[19] Nor is the biblical parent-child relationship to God appropriate to an increasingly egalitarian world where women are emerging from centuries of male domination and hierarchical religious models are increasingly giving way to democracy, friendship, and power sharing.

We have seen that ancient patriarchal notions about women's sexuality and the cult of motherhood lie at the root of their exclusion from spiritual life. And we have seen that those notions are still very much with us. Facing a backlash from both religious and scientific conservatives, today's feminists are fighting to retrieve a victory they thought they had won over the last three decades. British feminist scholar Asphodel Long ascribes the misogynist rationale of religious and biological determinists to the different parts that men and women play in procreation. She joins Esther Harding in observing that producing a child takes only a small

part of a man's time and energy while demanding the temporary—and sometimes final—sacrifice of a woman's life. "Women have always known and still do that sexual intercourse may inevitably lead to pregnancy, birth and death. In ancient times, a high proportion of women in a community would die within the year. . . . All fertile women in such a community would be in danger of such a death, would be aware of this every time they joined in sex with a man."[20]

Women grappling with the paradoxes inherent in ancient theistic religions are faced with a particularly difficult task. Some of us are quite comfortable with the traditional identification of women with Nature and motherhood. This is certainly the case with ecofeminists who advance the idea that the salvation of our planet lies with a return to traditional "female" values of nurturing rather than exploiting "Mother Earth" and her resources. Directly opposed are the technofeminists, radical separatists who advocate cloning as the solution to freeing women from their reproductive responsibilities. Clearly, as feminists learned early on in the women's movement, one size does not fit all.

As cited in the introduction, the first two stages leading to a woman's spiritual empowerment are the creation of a strong sense of self and the destruction of the illusion of inferiority. To initiate these transformations in consciousness, we must decide which aspects of our ancient beginnings to discard and which to preserve. Here, it would be useful to recall the old Talmudic claim that the ways to Truth are as numerous and varied as human faces. It applies even more urgently to women who are setting out to form their own spiritual path independent of men. Lover, Mother, Demon, Warrior—all, some, or none of the above—every woman must choose for herself.

two

THE *SHEKHINAH* IN EXILE

SACRED DIVORCE

The first century of the Common Era saw a radical turn in the way Jews viewed their androgynous God. Perhaps the single most influential figure shepherding this change was the Jewish Neoplatonist philosopher Philo of Alexandria. Impelled by the Hellenic mystical and intellectual currents of the period, and borrowing from the ascetic dualism of his co-religionists, the Essenes, Philo split the male and female faces of God into two distinct components. Associating Yahweh's male aspect with "spirit" and the female with "matter," he outlined a complex system through which a transcendent God, in the form of a redeeming angel, both protects and chastises the world. Philo's identification of God's feminine aspect with "matter" was to have a lasting negative impact on the role of women in Jewish mysticism, as seen in the following excerpt from the *Zohar*, a medieval Kabbalistic text that is otherwise friendly toward women. "God is sometimes male and sometimes female. For when he channels blessings into the world, he is male. . . . But when his relationship to the world is that of judgment . . . then he is called female."[1]

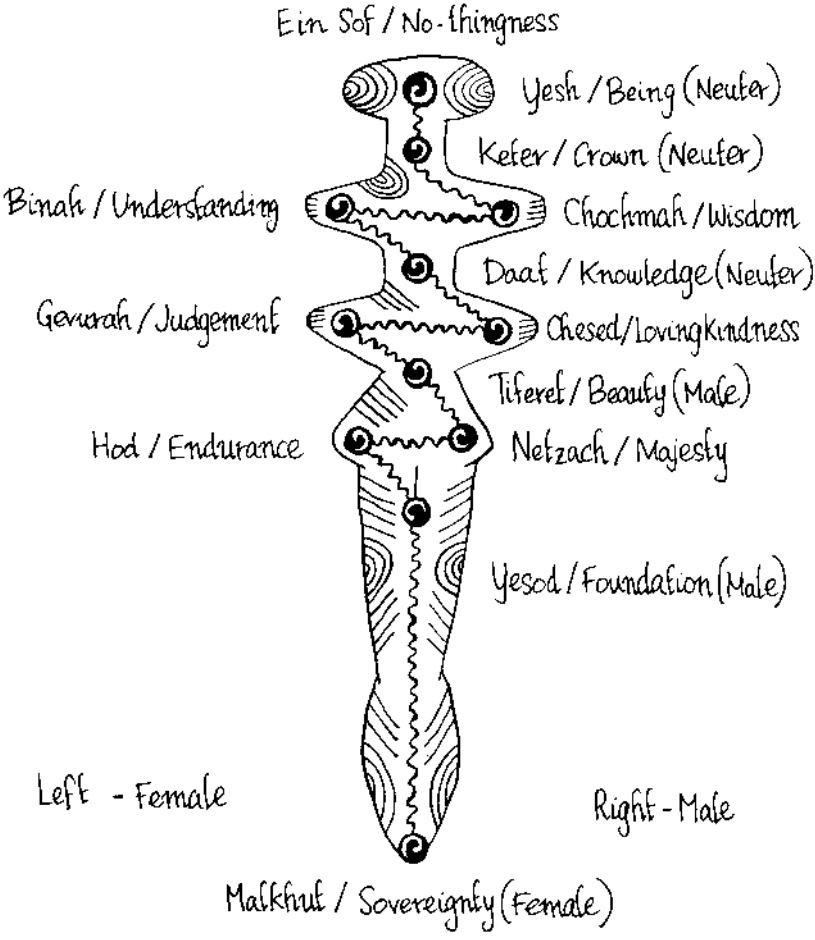
Locating the divine "feminine" on the left and the "masculine" on the right, Philo envisioned the splitting and descent of the ineffable "One" as a series of emanations (*sefirot*) on the Tree of Life. So, for example, the female *sefirah* representing the divine attribute of Understanding as the "Supernal Mother" on the uppermost branch

on the left side of the cosmic Tree is the counterpart of Wisdom, the "Supernal Father" on the right. By visualizing and mentally juggling the Hebrew letters of the divine names encoded in each sefirah, the devotee could reunite God's male and female aspects, thereby restoring "wholeness" to himself and the world.

> God enters human beings through [the "Supernal Mother"], his effusion and reflection, and she transforms them in such a way that they become his . . ."image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26). She directs the divine energy down to earth and enables humankind to redirect it to God. . . . Only in this state can human beings see her and speak with her; however, her actual place, the place of her origin, remains hidden from their view. . . . [She is simultaneously] 'united' with her origin and 'separated' from it. She is the outstanding part of the sefirotic system and . . . the power by which the divine sphere exerts influence on the earthly world, by which God communicates with humankind.[2]

After the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., in order to guard against the prohibitions of idol worship, the rabbis conflated the divorce and exile of the goddess and the breach between Yahweh and the exiled Israelites in a complex symbolic system rivaling even that of Philo. Based on Ezekiel's vision of God's chariot, the instructions they offered to the *Merkabah* (Chariot) mystics of the period carefully detailed the bodily postures and breathing exercises that accompanied Philo's Tree of Life meditations on the divine names and complicated sefirot visualizations. So important was the focus on the breathing exercises, in fact, that by the end of the third century C.E., God's feminine aspect appeared to the mystic in the form of the Divine spirit channeled through the physical breath that enlivens the universe.

The first reference to God's feminine aspect as *Shekhinah* (now a separate entity, no longer part of the divine couple) appeared around 300 C.E. in the Aramaic biblical commentaries of the sage known as Onkelos. Referring to God's "dwelling" (*shakhan*) among the Israelites in the flight from Egypt, Onkelos described the Shekhinah as the "dwelling place of the Divine Presence" in the world. Similarly drawing on Exodus in describing the mystical encounter with God, postbiblical interpreters of the


Ein Sof / No-thingness
Yesh / Being (Neuter)
Kefer / Crown (Neuter)
Binah / Understanding
Chochmah / Wisdom
Daat / Knowledge (Neuter)
Gevurah / Judgement
Chesed / Loving Kindness
Tiferet / Beauty (Male)
Hod / Endurance
Netzach / Majesty
Yesod / Foundation (Male)
Left - Female
Right - Male
Malkhut / Sovereignty (Female)

Torah claimed that Moses, the prototype for all Jewish spiritual seekers, was commanded to remove his shoes as a sign of ultimate humility in preparation for his meeting with the Shekhinah. Claiming that only the humble would ultimately restore the Shekhinah to her dwelling place in the world, the Talmudic rabbis condemned the haughty for bringing about the defilement of the Earth and the departure of the Shekhinah. As the rabbis saw it, the descent of the goddess, in the person of the Shekhinah, now corresponded to the "humbled" condition of the Israelites in exile.

> With his female force, the *Shekhinah*, God enters the world . . . [where] She plays an active part [helping] Israel gain access to God . . . affecting both Israel and God, suffering when Israel sins and benefiting when they do God's will. . . . It is only through [the *Shekhinah*] that God loves Israel and only through Israel [his children] that he loves her. . . . Feminine potency is the key to both worlds.[3]

Cut off from her spouse, the Shekhinah gradually evolved into the earthy, and therefore more limited, aspect of the deity. As her distance from Yahweh grew and she became more corporeal, the Queen of Heaven was transformed into *Matronit*, a mother figure synonymous with the material world of birth, decay, and death. Mediating between God and humankind, and particularly concerned with the fate of Israel, as the sole path to knowledge of the ineffable, "[the *Shekhinah* was] unquestionably the most poignant, and at the same time most Jewish expression of the idea of a goddess."[4] Unlike her transcendent Lord, she could be heard as well as seen, manifesting in the daily life of the Jews as the Divine Presence embodied in the Torah. Regarded as "the radiance that streams from everlasting light, the flawless mirror of the active power of God and the image of his goodness," she was literally—in the form of the Torah—reduced to a book.[5] In the heavenly realm, she is the written Torah; when she comes down to earth, she is identical with the oral Torah. In the guise of Torah, "she contains within her all the paths of wisdom."[6]

Clearly, though she was now regarded as the lowest manifestation of God, in classic Talmudic literature at least, the Shekhinah still enjoyed divine status. However, in the post-Talmudic

and medieval periods that followed, she began to assume a far less elevated position. Concerted rabbinic efforts to create a more philosophical view of the deity were led by biblical commentator Saadia Gaon (882–942 C.E.) who attempted to rid the Bible of gender imagery entirely. Distinguishing between the unknowable and manifest God in the form of *kavod* (glory) and *ruakh hakodesh* (divine spirit or breath), he identified the Shekhinah simply as God's "Great Light." Going still further, early medieval Jewish philosophers like Maimonedes abandoned even Saadia's "Great Light" metaphor for a formless, insubstantial deity free of gender, except on those occasions when it was convenient to refer to God as male.

SHEKHINAH AS SEX OBJECT

Dissatisfied with Philo's remote, asexual deity unavailable to those who would "know" the divine through visions, prayers, and meditations, medieval mystics later restored the concept of God as King and *Matronit* as his wife. The mystics reasoned that, since the Torah was the embodiment of Yahweh's feminine aspect, the Shekhinah, the single most important role of her earthly surrogates was to provide the male initiate with a physical vehicle for sacred union with God. And, because the old fertility rituals were now subsumed in meditating on the Torah, women who once worshiped the feminine aspect of Yahweh in the guise of Asherah were now excluded from the practice. In fact, in the form of the Torah, the Shekhinah became identified with the ultimate wisdom available to the (male) human mind. Her divine "Presence" infused the mystic's daily life and was with him when he prayed, studied, immersed himself in the ritual bath, and made love to his wife.

Since women were prohibited from active participation in Jewish sacred rituals, they did not have the option of performing the traditionally male visualization exercises in reverse, by making love and joining with the male aspect of God in the person of their husbands. Women were merely "conduits" for their husbands' uniting with God. From the Talmudic period to modern times, traditional students of Jewish mysticism had to be male, forty or

older, strictly observant, and have a child of each gender. Hypocritically acknowledging that the Shekhinah was embodied in women, the mystics nevertheless excluded women from their fraternity. Unlike Christian Puritans, Jewish mystics have never been antisex; on the contrary, rather than seeing the sexual act as a human failing or a necessary evil, they regarded it, within marriage, as a sacred enactment of divine union.

Yet although Jewish tradition frowned on celibacy and claimed that a man was incomplete without a wife, woman's social status within traditional Judaism was still restricted to the domestic sphere. Because meditation was practiced strictly by men whose goal was union with God, an experience often described in graphic sexual metaphors, the mystical image of the Shekhinah was modeled on the patriarchal stereotype of ideal Jewish womanhood. Influenced by the exotic Near Eastern imagery of books like the Song of Songs, the divine Shekhinah was a stunning queen with ruby lips and long, curled raven tresses. She was a dancing girl whose ankle bracelets jingled seductively when she walked. She was a veiled bride, urging her lover with a dark-eyed glance to "penetrate" her veils and gaze on her "naked." Meditating on Hebrew letters resembling male and female genitalia in the traditional position of sexual intercourse, some mystics even went so far as to visualize the androgynous God as a mating couple!

In the medieval world of the European Diaspora, God's "male" face too became increasingly abstract. Though still addressed in prayers as Lord and King, this transcendent aspect of the divine was hidden in the legal codes and commandments that provided a scattered people deprived of a spiritual center in Jerusalem with an unbroken sense of national identity. Ever fearful of persecution from their gentile host countries, the rabbis vigorously suppressed public displays of religious behavior such as miracle working and prophecy. Torah study and daily prayer in the synagogue were substituted for Temple ritual sacrifices that might call unwanted attention to the Jewish community. Meditation on God's faces—once openly practiced in and around Jerusalem by the first-century "Chariot" mystics—was regarded as a form of idolatry, and pronunciation of the Sacred Name *Yahweh* was forbidden. Yet, despite such prohibitions, God's "female" aspect continued to thrive in the rich underground mystical tradi-

tion. Isolated from the mainstream, Jewish mysticism, with its sexually tinged emphasis on the direct experience of God through meditation became identified with heretical practices that threatened an institutional rabbinic authority, which had deemed God "unknowable."

Submerged in little pockets of wandering mystical communities throughout the Diaspora, ancient Jewish meditation techniques based on the sacred marriage nonetheless continued to be transmitted directly from teacher to disciple. This personal interaction came to be known as Kabbalah—"received tradition." Originating in late twelfth-century Provence and incorporating elements of Neoplatonic mysticism and philosophy along the way, the movement truly began to flourish upon reaching Spain. Often risking banishment by the rabbis and death by the Inquisition, Spanish Kabbalists like Rabbi Moses de Leon and Abraham Abulafia instructed devotees in the art of achieving oneness with God to transpose the Hebrew letters of the Sacred Names and visualize the androgynous divine faces in images of the "male" and "female" sefirot on the Tree of Life. Radical as they were, however, the mystics nonetheless held fast to ancient patriarchal attitudes toward women. Like the mainstream rabbis determined to squash the movement (with the rare exception of Abraham Abulafia who welcomed women and gentiles as students) the Kabbalists, too, excluded women from their schools. Maybe it was because they didn't want to appear to be deviating too far from Jewish law, or because they truly saw themselves as observant Jews, or because it was part of some as yet undisclosed arcane Kabbalistic practice—whatever the reason, the mystics adhered to the same prohibitions against women's participation in sacred rituals enforced by Orthodox Jews to this day.

One of my favorites is that the sound of the female voice is considered to be so erotic that women are forbidden from joining in prayer for fear it might distract the men from their sacred ritual duties. Not to speak of a woman's presence on the floor of the congregation, where, in the form of the Torah scroll, the Shekhinah herself is passed hand to hand and kissed by the men. Anything, even the sight of a woman's pinky, could seduce a man's attention away from his female God. It was contradictions like these that used to drive me crazy at Beth Jacob and continued to

dog me even after I'd begun studying the Kabbalah with the liberal-minded Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan.

I remember a strenuous discussion with Aryeh surrounding the exclusively male sexual perspective in the original manuscripts of medieval meditation manuals we were translating, like the *Sefer Bahir* (Book of Light)—a combined fictional/factual rabbinic description of the sefirot on the Tree of Life. First appearing in Southern France at the end of the twelfth century, the *Sefer Bahir* purportedly originated in the "ancient" Near East. According to its anonymous compiler, the text is composed of the discourses given by the great first-century Rabbi Nehuniah ben Hakanah depicting the ten attributes of the "body of God" as stages of mystical ascent along the Cosmic Tree leading to union with the divine. Building on the metaphor of God as King, Rabbi Nehuniah depicts "Nature" as the King's emissary, the medium, through which the transcendent Yahweh projects himself into the world of form in the humble female disguise of the Shekhinah.

As God's human counterpart, the mystic saw himself comprised of both "male" and "female" energies flowing through the right and left side of his body, respectively. Uniting these energies in preparation for entry into the highest contemplative realm, symbolized by the neuter *sefirah Keter*, Crown, he would begin his ascent at the female *Malkut*, the tenth and lowest sefirah, where the mixing of the "seed"—the divine coupling—was believed to take place. Referring to the six "lower" sefirot as corresponding to a man's head, right and left leg, right and left hand, trunk, and place of procreation, Rabbi Nehuniah points out that the missing seventh *sefirah* can only be found in union with one's wife (Genesis 2:24).

Once he had completed the union below, the mystic would move upward through the secret byways of the great cosmic reflection of the body of God until he arrived at the level of the "Throne," where he would see himself in the outline of the cosmic man, *Adam Kadmon*. He was then directed to "journey" along the nine paths within the beard of the immense, glowing male countenance. Once he lost himself among the symmetrical hairs of the beard, the mystic had achieved his goal of becoming "mighty and strong" in the art of contemplation.

Judging from the overtly sexual language reminiscent of a Tibetan Tantric text, I noted that the *Sefer Bahir* seemed to suggest

that the union of male and female sefirot not only be visualized but literally *enacted* in sexual intercourse. Informing Aryeh that I was uncomfortable with the idea of a female Kabbalist visualizing herself reflected in the image of a "great bearded male countenance" and making love to her husband in the form of the Shekhinah, I asked if there was a way we might re-configure Rabbi Nehuniah's meditation for women. In other words, I was once again reiterating Lilith's age-old rejection of the passive "missionary position"—both literally and figuratively.

"Sure," Aryeh replied. "But it'll have to wait until we've deciphered all the meditations in their original form first."

"Fair enough," I said, never suspecting for a moment that my robust and indefatigable Kabbalah teacher would suddenly die of a heart attack within a year, leaving only the exclusively male "original forms" of the meditations to be published posthumously.

An even greater sticking point arrived in the form of the *Sefer Tashak*, a thirteenth-century mystical text by a Kabbalist known simply as Rabbi Joseph. Here, the mystic seeks to reunite the divine couple by visualizing himself as a male lover in pursuit of his female beloved. Contemplating God's countenance in the form of Adam Kadmon, the cosmic man, and the Shekhinah as a magnificent woman with seventy veiled faces, each hiding a soul wrapped in beautiful garments and wearing a crown, Rabbi Joseph's erotic imagery presents the cosmos in the form of a grand sexual embrace. In this meditation, the King and Queen of the universe are united, "the fingers of their hands are intertwined, forming a circle in which dwell the souls of the righteous and the holy angels."[7] Rabbi Joseph instructs his students to consider each emanation on the Tree of Life as a "limb" of the cosmic body and the Torah as the key to the entire anatomical structure. In this way, the very shapes of the letters inscribed in the Torah scrolls can be visualized as a sexual embrace between God and the Shekhinah. In Rabbi Joseph's unique and ingenious system, the Hebrew letter yod (י) sign of circumcision, represents the phallus of the King; the letter zayin (ז), an extended yod, the erect phallus as it is about to be received by the letter chet (ח), which Rabbi Joseph urges his disciples to visualize as "the Matronit whose legs are spread to receive the zayin." Since all human activity has its divine counterpart, he argues, the

Kabbalist's selfless "reunification" efforts on earth would restore wholeness to the (. . . universe).

My study of the Kabbalah had always been a strictly academic affair. I had never associated my deep spiritual longing with the highly erotic language of Jewish mysticism, and I must admit I was shocked by Rabbi Joseph's instructions. Not to speak of the graphic sexual metaphors employed by later Kabbalists and Hasidim that, according to Gershom Scholem, caused the prominent nineteenth-century scholar of Jewish mysticism Eliezer Zvi Zweifel to complain: "They make the reader's hair stand on end. . . . Woe to me if I copy it; woe to me if I do not copy it."[8] No matter that mystical erotic symbolism is rooted in ancient canonical books like The Song of Songs or, for that matter, in rabbinic language itself. Take, for example, the Talmudic passage cited by Scholem to illustrate Zweifel's point (*Yoma* 54a-b):

> Rab Katina said: When the Israelites entered the Temple in Jerusalem [during the three pilgrimage festivals], the curtain [to the Holy of Holies] was opened and they were told: Behold the love between yourselves and God is like the love between man and woman. . . . Resh Lakish said: When the Gentiles conquered the Temple, they saw the cherubim in intimate embraces. They hauled them out into the marketplace and said: "Behold! Israel, whose blessing is a blessing and whose curse is a curse, concerns itself with such things?!" Then they reviled them, as is said, "All that honored her despise her, because they have seen her nakedness" [Lam.1:8].[9]

True, the blond-haired, blue-eyed Levi Snow had once fit my image of the beloved in the Song of Songs, but taking God as a lover was unthinkable! My God was an old white-bearded hawk-eyed judge with punitive intentions sitting up in heaven watching my every move, ready to pounce at my first misstep. And since I had long rejected "modest Jewish womanhood" and was certainly not going to assume it in my spiritual practice, even visualizing Rabbi Joseph's Hebrew letters making love in the missionary position was out of the question. Moreover, the idea of God creating *man* in *his* image had so outraged me even as a little girl that it never occurred to me to substitute Eve's face for that of *Adam Kadmon*. Only much later did it dawn on me that the meditation

needn't be restricted to "male" and "female" lovers and could be stretched to shape any form of sexual preference. Why not visualize the divine couple as two women, or two men engaged in an erotic embrace? Better yet, why not throw out the whole idea of gender entirely and act according to the way you feel at the moment? But as I said, those liberating thoughts only came later.

LILITH VS. THE SABBATH QUEEN

Though largely expurgated from biblical texts, one reference to Lilith appears in Isaiah 34:14: "The ruins of Edom will be haunted by demons; the night hag [Lilith] will make her home there. . . ." In the Talmud, *Naamah*, a variation on Lilith, had been depicted as a charming woman who "entices men with the sweet, sensual sounds of her cymbals to worship idols." The rabbis had undoubtedly been inspired by such diatribes against women as the "Testament of Reuben," a popular example of the violently misogynistic apocalyptic literature immediately preceding the first centuries of the Common Era.

> For evil are women . . . since they have no power or strength over man, they use wiles by outward attractions, that they draw him to themselves . . . [Women] are overcome by the spirit of fornication more than men, and in their heart they plot against men; and by means of their adornment they deceive first their minds, and by the glance of the eye instill the poison, and then through the accomplished act they take them captive . . . thus they allured the watchers [angels] who were before the flood. . . . [10]

From the thirteenth to the seventeenth century, Lilith repeatedly appeared in Jewish mystical texts as Adam's first wife on whom he begot thousands of *Lilin*, "spirits" and "demons," that God killed each day. To make up for her lost demonic offspring by continuing to create new ones, Lilith is always present "in the bed linen of man and wife when they copulate, in order to take hold of the sparks of the drops of semen which are lost—because it is impossible to perform the marital act without such a loss of sparks. . . . To

chase Lilith away from the bed and to bring forth pure souls . . . [let the husband recite an incantation and cover his and his wife's head for one hour afterward]. . . ."[11] Influenced by Aristotle's ideas about the life-giving force of semen and biblical injunctions against spilling seed, the rabbis attributed to Lilith the power of robbing a man of his potency. Likewise, when Israel sinned, the divine union between the Shekhinah and Yahweh was transformed from an act of bestowing the seed of life to the curse of death in the spirit of fornication. Compare Hosea's identification of the "sinful" community of Israel with the wife/harlot relationship to God: "A people without understanding comes to grief; they are a mother turned wanton."[12]

In the popular Kabbalah that emerged from the Middle Ages, Shekhinah was both degraded and exalted. Raphael Patai attributes this ambivalence toward women's sexuality to the changing conditions of the Jews in Diaspora: "[Circumstances] determine whether one and the same feminine divine essence assumes the form of . . . good or evil. . . . And, since circumstances constantly change, the goddess appears once as good once as evil."[13] As the demon Lilith, she appeared to men in their sleep and seduced them into wasting their seed. Ever on the prowl for vengeance against Yahweh for killing her children, she caused women to miscarry or flew off into the night with their newborn infants under her wings. Yet at the same time, as "Daughter of God" she was—like the Christian Holy Mother Mary—elevated to the status of a divine virgin who was sinless for being motherless. In this guise, she was known as the divine attribute *Malkut*, incorruptible queen of this world. Imploring her to return with them from their physical and spiritual exile, Jewish mystics courted her with song and dance and made love to her, both symbolically and literally, in the person of their wives. They turned her into an object of worship, dressed her in veils that in ancient times had symbolized both prostitute and virgin, implementing a misogynistic set of rules for spiritual practice that rivaled their mainstream religious opponents in excluding women.

Perhaps the most important meditation manual in the history of Jewish mysticism, Rabbi Moses de Leon's thirteenth-century *Zohar* (Book of Radiance) is the source of the idea that the original Adam was both man and woman, that is, a hermaphrodite whose

"sin" lay in bringing dualism into the world by separating the divine attributes from the right (male) and left (female) sides of the Tree of Life. From this separation, de Leon concluded, there emerged the clash of opposites disturbing the absolute unity of the *Ein Sof* (boundless) into revealing itself in the form of the gendered sefirot. Manifesting as intellect in the first three sefirot, the nongendered *Keter* (crown), masculine *Chokhmah* (wisdom), and feminine *Binah* (understanding), and culminating in the feminine *Malkut*, the tenth and final sefirah identified with the physical body of the Shekhinah, the once unified "unmoved mover" is engaged in a continuous process of moving between transcendence and form. From the time of Adam, therefore, meditation on the male aspect of God is focused on transcendence, on the abstract world of the intellect; and meditation on the female aspect of God focuses on physicality, on the material world of form.

Subject to her wayward female nature, the Shekhinah sometimes was referred to in the *Zohar* as "Mother" or "the King's Daughter" or, in her lowest incarnation, as "the Slave-Woman, Lilith." The *Zohar* illustrates the evil side of God's female face in the image of Israel's descent into exile accompanied by the Shekhinah in the nakedly sexual form of Lilith, "mother of a mixed multitude." Yet, despite such occasional lapses into misogyny, Rabbi de Leon tended to favor the "good goddess," particularly in her incarnation as "Sabbath Queen." He depicted her clothed in cosmic veils, each representing a sefirah encountered by the ascending soul in meditation. Tradition has it that a Jew receives an "extra soul" on the Sabbath; de Leon interpreted this to mean that an additional capacity for concentration exists on God's day of rest. The soul that "penetrated the veils" and encountered the Sabbath Queen in all her splendor was said to have seen past the outer levels of Torah and gazed into her essence. Initiating the tradition of welcoming her with joyful singing and dancing, and culminating in a ritual enactment of the sacred marriage between husbands and wives, he wrote a hymn of praise that is still sung in Orthodox Jewish households every Friday night.

> The secret of Sabbath
> She is Sabbath.
> United in the secret of one.

When Sabbath enters she is alone,
Separated from the Other Side,
All judgments removed from her.
Basking in the oneness of holy light,
she is crowned over and over to face the holy King.
All powers of wrath and masters of judgment flee from her.
There is no power in all the worlds aside from her.
Her face shines with a light from beyond;
she is crowned below by holy people,
all of whom are crowned with new souls.
Then the beginning of prayer,
Blessing her with joy, with beaming faces.[14]

Rabbi de Leon's rationale for sexual intercourse as a form of divine union is derived from Philo's image of Yahweh's female counterpart splitting off from her place on the Tree of Life to join the male aspect face to face. "And when they united they appeared as veritably one body. From this we learn that the male alone appears as half a body . . . and the female likewise, but when they join in union they seem as veritably one body . . . [On the Sabbath] all is found in one body, complete, for the *Matronit* clings to the King and they become one body, and this is why blessings are found on that day."[15]

Moses de Leon's lyrical imagery notwithstanding, the whole idea of the soul as Sabbath Queen engaging in Friday night trysts with her divine Lord and master reifies a troubling stereotype of female passivity. A tamed version of the dangerously sexual Lilith, the Sabbath Queen too closely resembles what Virginia Woolf called the "pernicious" Victorian "angel in the house." Moreover, there is something vaguely prurient about this fantasy woman custom-tailored for what postmodern feminists call "the male gaze." The antithesis of the big-mouthed sexually autonomous role breaker, the Sabbath Queen is sexy but silent, always available and willing—a perfect "Stepford wife." This leads me to conclude that de Leon's Sabbath Queen was probably inspired by a feminine ideal derived from both the Song of Songs and the medieval romances of his Christian contemporaries. In any case, her role is that of a lover who makes her fleeting Friday night appearances like a favored concubine or mistress rather than a wife. She cer-

tainly has nothing in common with the Kabbalist's real-life woman, who spent all day Friday preparing for the Sabbath, cleaning, baking *challah*, and cooking gefilte fish and may not feel very much like playing the Sabbath Queen and making love—or, heaven forbid, she may be menstruating or have just given birth and is too "polluted" even to *touch* her husband—no less have sex with him!

In addition to my problem reconciling de Leon's erotic image of the Sabbath Queen with the notion of female modesty drilled into me since childhood, I have often wondered at the need for Jews to be given an "extra soul" on the Sabbath—or for an observant soul distinct from a heretical one like mine. I had always resented the Sabbath Queen for reminding me of the "wrath and judgment" awaiting me for transgressing the onerous Sabbath rules and regulations imposed on me by her husband, the King. I remember sitting squeezed between the dining table and the wall, watching my father recite the bread blessing, making mystical passes over the *challah* with a his special *Shabbos* knife, wondering if he could read my sinful thoughts. Why, if he was "Modern Orthodox," didn't he let me turn the light on in my room on a Friday night when we had electricity and no longer had to gather wood to light a fire, which was prohibited on the day God rested after creating the world? Why did he have to embarrass me in front of the nonobservant Jewish kids on our street who were eating Chinese Apples by telling them "Those aren't Chinese Apples, they're called *pomegranates* and each of their 613 seeds stands for every good deed a Jew can perform in a lifetime." Once, on a Saturday when the phone hadn't stopped ringing and I'd asked him why my mother couldn't answer it, as it might be an emergency, he'd said, "You go to a yeshiva, you know very well that Orthodox Jews don't respond to telephones or doorbells on *Shabbos*, when there is no radio and no cooking, and you aren't supposed to turn the lights on or off."

Determined to break all those rules once I'd left home, I'd stopped asking questions.

"One or two pieces?" My mother maneuvered her way around the table, a large porcelain serving dish heaped with evenly lined-up rows of gefilte fish.

I pointed to the smallest piece on the plate.

"Can't you answer your mother without pointing in her face? Jews aren't supposed to point at people."

My father looked very dangerous sitting there with the saber-shaped *Shabbos* knife in his hands, his nose sticking out of his thin, pale face—like Merlin's in the *Classic Comic* I'd been reading on the sly in the bathroom on Sabbath afternoons when you were only supposed to be studying Torah. He'd reprimanded me for whistling that morning because Jews weren't allowed to whistle for fear it might bring down the evil spirit Lilith. I prepared myself for the worst. But my father was diverted just then by "Harvey Katz," the upstairs neighbor who always decided to practice playing his saxophone as we sat down to Friday night dinner. My father got up from the table and made his usual trip to the ventilator grating in the foyer near the bathroom, shouting through it at the "heathens" upstairs for "peace on a Friday night!"

"Take it easy," my mother said, touching his arm with her free hand when he returned, then spooning a rich blob of gefilte fish jelly onto his plate.

"SOBs," he mumbled.

S-O-B spelled *sob*, a cry. The honking upstairs ceased. Leslie Kroll, the girl Nelly and I called "the little Rebbitzen," closed her eyes and sobbed as she prayed. Leslie Kroll and I should change places, I thought. My father would love having a modest Jewish daughter who closed her eyes and S-O-B'ed when she prayed, a real lover of God instead of a heretic who whistled and pointed in people's faces.

"I am talking to you!" my father shouted, cutting off my evil thoughts. "Stop sitting there staring like a golem. Sing the *zmiros* with us."

No use arguing with him. I took up the *Zohar*'s familiar Hebrew words, my mother joining in to bolster me. Big baritone, shaky soprano, little falsetto—all together now . . .

Basking in the oneness of holy light, she is crowned over and over to face the holy King. All powers of wrath and judgment flee from her. There is no power in all the worlds aside from her. Her face shines with a light from beyond . . .

It's been ten years since my mother died, exactly five months after my father. Looking back on those Friday nights around the dinner table now that my parents are gone has somewhat softened

my resentment against the Sabbath Queen. I no longer fault my father or my mother for their attempts to engage me in sacred rituals that, in their eyes, honored women. But neither do I feel inclined to embrace those rituals without making them more appropriate to the reality of my spiritual life as a woman today. Lately I've been entertaining the idea of giving the Sabbath Queen a makeover, that is, turn the *Zohar*'s patriarchal fantasy woman to my advantage. How to do this without sacrificing her original Kabbalistic function as a meditative device for men? Is it possible to create a "feminist" image of the Sabbath Queen that is both personal and universal at the same time? Prompted by the gender bending antics of pop culture icons like Madonna (who these days is almost as well known for practicing Kabbalah as she is for being a rock star), I imagine the straight woman meditator visualizing herself as the Queen approaching her lover, the King, as he primps in front of the mirror preparing himself for their meeting. For lesbian couples, the divine lovers could consist of a pair of Sabbath Queens. The older woman meditator might visualize the male and female faces of God as a pair of white-haired lovers. He might even be bald, with a bit of a pot belly and she could have wrinkles and puckered thighs. For any woman willing to step out of the box, the possibilities are limitless. Most important, in my opinion, is that we transform the image of an abandoned Sabbath Queen who but for one fugitive night with her lover is condemned to unrequited yearning for his return. This sorrowful manifestation of exile embodied by the Shekhinah as "abject bride" or "repentant wife" is demeaning to women. Unfortunately, it has dominated the world of Jewish mysticism throughout the Diaspora.

SHEKHINAH AS PENITENT

By the sixteenth century, the notion of permanent exile was so deeply embedded in the Jewish consciousness that it became the central focus of Jewish meditation practice. Subject to persecution, their dreams of return to the Holy Land too frequently turned into nightmares by the Inquisition and the apostasy of false messiahs like Sabbatai Zevi that resulted in mass conversions and

the unsettling of entire Jewish communities fleeing eastward, the mystics turned for solace to late Midrashic depictions of the Shekhinah as intermediary between God and the Jewish people. Driven by compassion for their suffering, actually arguing in their defense in a voice like a ringing bell, they saw her as a repentant wife imploring her husband to forgive her and her sinful children and let them come home.

> Master of the World! My heart breaks in me when I pass your house and it is destroyed, and the voice of silence is in it and says: 'The place which Abraham's seed presented sacrifices before you, and the priests stood on their platform, and the Levites intoned praise on their harps, how can it be that now foxes dance in it? . . . . But what can I do, since my sins brought this about, and the false prophets who arose in me led me astray from the way of life to the way of death. . . . '[16]

No longer the divine beauty embodied in Moses de Leon's Sabbath Queen, the Shekhinah was now relegated to the inferior position of a suppliant red-eyed with weeping because she had been sentenced to yearn for a *disembodied* lover who no longer shared her world. When persecution of the Jews intensified, she became an old woman in black, crouching before the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, simultaneously mourning the destruction of the Temple and the Exile. The image of the divine Shekhinah became synonymous with suffering. Thrust into the world of matter, form, distinction, and polarities, she served as the only remaining link between her human children and their absent father. Further extended as the embodiment of God's compassion by the Kabbalists, she appeared to humans and animals in need, to the sick and brokenhearted, to the abandoned and spiritually destitute. In this guise, her splendor was said to be so great that the angels had to cover their faces with their wings so as not to see her. Her body measured millions of miles, yet was small enough to fit inside the Tabernacle. Clearly, this reconfigured image of the Shekhinah from penitent "Widow Zion" into powerful "Mother Goddess" was fashioned by exiled Jewish mystics seeking to resurrect the ancient female protector who had once led them out of Egypt and would once again bring them back to the Holy Land.

Beginning with the little community of Kabbalists in the upper Galilee town of Safed under the leadership of Isaac Luria (the *Ari*—"Lion"), the breach between God and the Jewish community symbolized by the Exile was reflected in the split between God's male and female faces. The Ari referred to the event as *tzimzum* ("contraction")—a cosmological disaster occurring when the Shekhinah "contracted" the divine energy in giving birth to the world of form. The *shevirah*—"shattering of the vessels" resulting from the overabundance of godly energy released during the process—resulted in turn in the formation of *kellipot*, the shards that comprise our world. Dividing our "fallen" world of matter from the "pure" realm of the spirit, Kabbalists from the Ari's time onward taught that the object of Jewish meditation was to repair (*tikkun*) the breach between the "upper" (male) and "lower" (female) worlds by recalling the scattered sparks of divine energy; and "since every human thought and action contains a holy spark . . . nothing that is said or done on earth . . . does not have reverberation in heaven . . . because [both] are united in *Shekhinah*."[17]

According to the Ari, the task of the Kabbalist in his private meditations now encompassed the universe. Once the purified, humbled mind had attached itself to its divine source, it was obliged to plunge downwards into the descending worlds with renewed strength and withdraw the holy sparks from the husks of matter encasing every being, flower, mineral, and demon inhabiting them. For this purpose, the Ari developed an entirely new system of meditation focused on *yichud*—"binding" the material and spiritual worlds, and thereby simultaneously reuniting the Shekhinah with her divine consort. He presented his mental exercises in the form of *kavvanot* (contemplative symbols denoting specific visualizations) over the letters and phrases in the daily prayer book. Since performance of these exercises required the utmost purity of mind and body, the Ari initiated certain prescribed formulas, given individually to each of his disciples, to cleanse the soul of its defects and prepare the way for purification of all that it reflected. Instructing the members of his Safed community to pray continuously for the good of their neighbors and dedicate themselves "for Israel, in Israel, and with Israel," he inadvertently initiated the nationalistic stance that characterized a great part of Kabbalistic belief and practice for the next two hundred years.

Yet the Ari himself did love all of creation without exception. He carefully avoided harming even insects and worms, insisting that these too would evolve through the course of transmigrating souls. Even the divine energy coursing through the universe of forms could be communicated with through the language of the spirit. For this reason every word in Lurianic prayer is invested with mysteries that transcend all attempts at literal interpretation. "Peak experiences" resulting from these prayerful meditations were recorded by Luria's biographer, Chaim Vital. Beginning with a visualization of the *kavvanot* as the ten sefirot on the Tree of Life, the meditator might see them suddenly merging and bursting forth in a circle of colors, doubling before gradually diminishing until only the original ten sefirot remained. Finally, even these last ten sefirot were swallowed up in one brilliant white light, indicating that the disciple had achieved union with the divine. In the Ari's system, such real prayer could only be uttered by a pure man who had disappeared into the infinite reaches of the cosmic Crown on the Tree of Life even before he opened his mouth to utter God's praises. He therefore presented his disciples with formulaic chants to avert the "outside forces" of distraction from prayer, visualizations to remind them of their creation in God's own image, and exercises to induce sounds and scents conducive to meditation.

When teaching how to meditate on the body in the form of the Tree of Life, he told them to visualize the top of their heads as the sefirah *Keter* (Crown) without chanting the accompanying formulas, for the Crown ruled in absolute silence. Inspired by Rabbi Nehuniah Ben Hakanah's instructions in the *Sefer Bahir*, he told them while walking outdoors to imagine their legs as the sefirot *Hod* (Endurance) and *Netzakh* (Majesty) and their eyes as *Chokhmah* (Wisdom) and *Binah* (Understanding), always remembering that the body was the dwelling place of the Shekhinah. There were numerous formulas for use in religious observances, holiday worship, and the execution of Jewish law. Indeed, there were as many formulas for restoring wholeness to the world as there were life experiences.

"Everything," said the Ari, "depends on the intensity of your *kavvana* (concentration) and your *yichud* (binding) on high. Do not remove this from your eyes." The crucial point for the Kabbalist

performing the *yichud* occurred at the stage of "reversal," when he had "climbed" as far along the Cosmic Tree as he could and, having drawn the light from the highest sphere attained, he descended with it toward the physical world once again. This reversal of the divine flow, which made it possible for even the lowest creatures in the lowest world to absorb the light of the Infinite, required more than an ordinary share of purity, mental strength, and humility. The Ari felt that even the good men of Safed were not really equal to the task of pacifying the terrible guardians of the sefirot encountered by their ancient predecessors, the *Merkabah* (Chariot) mystics. So he encouraged each disciple to concentrate only on the sefirah that complemented his own disposition. If the Kabbalist was truly saintly, then he would evoke the assistance of the "good angel" occupying that sefirah. Those who managed to successfully bind their souls to each successive divine attribute, traversing them all until they reached the highest point on the Cosmic Tree, would experience a tremendous influx of light.

Sometimes a man was so stunned by the shock of the light traveling through his body that he fell back, trembling all over, or even fainting. On recovering, he was advised not to turn back but to continue still further, until he met the source of himself in a point known as "The Quarry of Souls," a meditative state in which he encountered his past, present, and future lives all at once—a sign that he had become *maskil* (enlightened). Only the man uttering the proper *yichud* in a perfect state of concentration, his body, mind, and soul yoked to the *Tetragrammaton* (the secret Sacred Name of Yahweh) encased in the highest realm on the Cosmic Tree, could penetrate the veils of matter enveloping the Shekhinah.

Once a man had seated himself, visualized the Tree of Life and its sefirot, and pronounced the *yichud* formulas, he could not stop, for not only was his own soul at stake but the "binding" of entire worlds to God as well. If he performed the exercise in a prone position over the grave of an ancient teacher, he had to keep in mind that the great soul too was prostrating itself in the grave for the duration of the procedure. Or he could sit in his room and visualize a great white curtain emblazoned with a white form composed of the letters of the *Tetragrammaton*, each "as tall as a mountain." Then he mentally interwove

the letters, juggling them until they lost their apparent meaning and just as suddenly lined themselves up into words providing "answers" to his most profound spiritual questions. But these complex meditations were not without danger, and the Ari always cautioned against the mental and physical disorientation that sometimes resulted from juggling letters. Clearly, only the elect could practice the Ari's intricate meditations, for they demanded the utmost psychological stability and an unfaltering commitment to redeeming the world as one liberated oneself.

MASTER OF THE HOLY NAME

Two centuries later, Israel Baal Shem Tov, Master of the Holy Name, took the cosmology and practice of the Ari's Kabbalah and made them accessible to the masses in the form of Hasidic (pious) ecstasy. The heart of his teaching, *devekut* ("cleaving" to God) presented a far more personal and emotional version of Jewish mysticism than any that had existed before. To his Hasidic disciples the Baal Shem Tov emphasized meditation as a joyful celebration of the divine in daily life. Here is an example taken from my book *Kabbalah: The Way of the Jewish Mystic:*

Once, when a simple cart driver confessed that he was worried about serving God properly because he could not get to morning services on time, the Baal Shem Tov asked him if he accepted poor travelers into his cart without payment.[18]

"Yes," replied the Hasid.

"Well then, you are serving God as if you had been in the synagogue," the master assured him, signifying that Jewish spirituality was no longer limited to sacred occasions but was part of the market place.

A living example of the teaching, the Baal Shem Tov never wrote or formally preached from the pulpit but wandered through the streets and countryside guiding his disciples' attention toward the wonders of Creation, his very own person a channel for their *mohin de gadlut* (expanded consciousness). All his teachings were orally transmitted until they were finally collected after his death in the notes of his closest disciples.

As with other great Jewish mystical teachers, the details of the Baal Shem Tov's life have been expanded to legendary proportions. Scholars agree that Israel ben Eleazar (later known as the Baal Shem Tov, or Master of the Holy Name), was born around 1698 in Okup, in the western Ukraine region. Orphaned at a young age, he was left to the care of the sympathetic Jews of his village. An early prodigy, he hid his wisdom under a mantle of laziness and near idiocy, working as a janitor in the local synagogue and studying Kabbalah in secret at night. Much to the disapproval of his future brother-in-law, Gershon Kitover, Israel was married to the daughter of the great Rabbi of Brody. Given a wagon as a wedding gift, the Baal Shem Tov drove off with his new wife to an isolated retreat in the Carpathian Mountains where he earned a living as a charcoal digger by day and meditated at night. During that time, the couple had two children, a boy and a girl. Years passed before the Baal Shem Tov descended from the mountains with his family and announced to his brother-in-law that the time had come for him to reveal himself to the world. Convinced of the Baal Shem Tov's holiness, Gershon Kitover became his first disciple. The word spread quickly, and thousands of villagers flocked to him for spiritual encouragement, healing, comfort, and blessings.

Seeing that it was his daughter, not his son, who displayed a gift for the spiritual life, the Baal Shem Tov made her his disciple. Legend has it that she became one of his successors, following the precedent of Bruriah, a first-century female Talmudic sage who had taught her male students from behind a screen. It was clear from the start that the Baal Shem Tov had a deep respect for women. Even when surrounded by his illustrious inner circle of Hasidic disciples, he was always accompanied by his wife. When she died, he was inconsolable. Since the members of his household had never seen him in such a state, they asked the reason for his grief.

"I was looking forward to rising in a flame. But now [without my wife], I am but half a body, and it is impossible. It is for this reason that I suffer so," he replied.

More than a mere expression of grief from a man who could no longer practice the commandment to "cleave" to his wife, the Baal Shem Tov was inconsolable because he would no longer be able to practice *devekut* by "cleaving" to the Shekhinah in her person. And since he read the erotic Song of Songs as a path leading

directly to God, he no doubt preferred making love to his wife to other more abstract forms of meditation. The importance of physically experiencing God also relates to his teaching of the existence of a *zivvug* or soul-mate shared by all human beings as they transmigrate through the various stages of life, death, and rebirth. According to the Baal Shem Tov's Kabbalistic view of "karma" and "reincarnation," human beings are animated by but half a soul until they find their complementary "other half"—the reason we spend lifetimes searching for the twin soul that will complete us. This event is so rare that when it does happen—as it apparently did in the Baal Shem Tov's case—it is a sign that one has reached the level of physical and spiritual development necessary for union with God. The Baal Shem Tov therefore meant it quite literally when he referred to himself as "half a body" with his wife gone. Bereft of his *zivvug*, he would have to rely on ecstatic prayer and Torah meditation to achieve union with the Shekhinah.

THE WAY OF ECSTASY

Though the Baal Shem Tov left no written instructions for the practice of *devekut*, several of his immediate disciples did record his teachings and pass them on to their successors. Gershom Scholem distinguishes the work of the early nineteenth century Rabbi Solomon of Karlin as one of the most authentic records of Hasidic prayer and meditation taught by the Baal Shem Tov. To illustrate he offers the following quote from Rabbi Karlin's text: "when [the Hasid] fulfills the commandments or studies the Torah, the body becomes a throne for the soul . . . and the soul a throne for the light of the Shekhinah which is above his head, and the light as it were flows all round him, and he sits in the midst of the light and rejoices in trembling."[19]

The Baal Shem Tov taught that reaching such exalted levels of consciousness through prayer broke the boundaries dividing the "upper" and "lower" worlds. He likened this condition to that of "a small child" with nothing to intrude on the sheer joy of resting in his mother's embrace or "a lover merging with each word" of prayer. Having thus removed the barrier between himself and the "upper world," the Hasid would come to see that there had been

no barrier there in the first place, no evil but the illusion of evil conjured by his own thoughts.

The Baal Shem Tov saw human beings as the Shekhinah's helpmates. Since she had constricted herself for humanity's sake, the Hasid was obliged to purify the entire material world so that her divine light might again radiate without the obstructions cast by the illusion of dualism. Even the idea of an "upper world" was nothing more than another screen shielding the Shekhinah from view. With devotion as his instrument, the Hasid could either speak to her extemporaneously or confine himself to the words in the prayer book. It did not matter how he lost himself in prayer, the important thing was to elicit the spontaneous flow of divine energy residing within him and the world around him. As a physical channel for the divine influx, each daily act—eating, dressing, sleeping, and especially joyful singing and dancing—would serve to draw the animal, mineral, and vegetable kingdoms back to God as well.

Simply standing at prayer, a Hasid could lose himself in formless Unity, the spontaneous words that might issue from his lips themselves transformed into divine emanations, new formulas for those who would follow. To induce ecstasy, the Baal Shem Tov counseled his disciples to perform their daily prayers with their eyes closed. A man might stand in silence or he might move about, swaying his body as he prayed. Or, if the spirit moved him, he was encouraged to sing or even to engage in an intimate "conversation" with God as a friend. The Baal Shem Tov himself was particularly fond of communing with Nature and could often be found wandering in the forest, conversing with God in the form and "language" of animals and birds. He even went so far as to declare that ten trees, rather than ten men, could serve as the necessary *minyan* (quorum) for prayer. Such liberal attitudes toward prayer no doubt contributed to the eighteenth-century rabbinic ban on Hasidism.

After the Baal Shem Tov's death, however, his more ascetic-minded successors reversed the master's emphasis on ecstasy—the reason, of course, being sex. Prey to the seductive distractions of women, nineteenth-century Hasidim set about mortifying their flesh with the same enthusiasm the movement's founder had expended on sensory pleasure. Enormous energy was placed on

eradicating lecherous thoughts and the inevitable train of evils following them. Exercises like visualizing oneself flayed alive were seen as cures for "excessive" sexual enjoyment. "Do not look outside your immediate four cubits," one master warned, "and if you are walking outside and encounter a woman . . . picture God's [feminine] name *Adonai* before your eyes." To banish stubbornness, laziness, and envy, Hasidim went about mumbling the names of ancient enemies of Israel such as "the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, the Perizzite, the Hivite, the Yebusite, and the Girgashite." Many refrained from talking but prayed compulsively throughout the day over everything from getting up in the morning and evacuating to taking off their clothes at night.

The generation of Hasidic masters who followed the Baal Shem Tov's first circle of successors exerted harsh disciplines against distraction in the study hall, even going so far as to extract confessions from their disciples about their most intimate thoughts and to intrude on their relationships with their wives. Penitence became the watchword where joy had once reigned and extreme self-chastisement became the order of the day. As one Hasid put it, "Man was created in this physical world only to break down his instincts." The dour and guilty vision that characterized much of early nineteenth-century Hasidism was a far cry from the free and life-asserting proclamations of the Baal Shem Tov. Natural human functions were no longer emblematic of God, but a foul necessity: "The instant you feel that you must move your bowels, you will do so and not allow the excrement to remain inside you and pollute your brain. . . . Do not defile your soul by retaining such stool and urine inside yourself for even a moment."[20] Such distortions of the Baal Shem Tov's teachings fortunately are disappearing as twentieth-century teachers like Aryeh Kaplan, Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, Arthur Green, and their male and female successors have redefined Hasidism, providing a more liberal version of Jewish meditation for a new generation of practitioners.

DEMYSTIFYING JEWISH MYSTICISM

Today's resurgence of interest in Jewish mysticism has brought about a revival of meditative techniques long hidden in manu-

scripts on dusty library shelves. Kabbalists are translating and to some extent demystifying esoteric texts like the *Zohar* and the intricate "binding exercises" of the Ari. However, the demands of modern life, the fact that we no longer live in hermetic mystical communities led by charismatic *tzadikkim* ("holy men") makes this communal form of practice difficult, if not impossible for most people. And for women there is an even longer way to go. Nonobservant Jewish women face an especially difficult challenge in that they don't fit the mold created by their Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed Jewish sisters. How, for example, can a woman who doesn't attend a synagogue or belong to a prayer group meditate using Isaac Luria's elaborate system of *kavvanot* (symbols for concentration) in the daily prayer book? My answer is she can't—at least not without changing her life entirely. And what about non-Jewish women like Madonna and other celebrities whose embrace of a popular secularized Kabbalah beckons gentiles to the practice as well? Since I am not conversant with the practices of Madonna's Kabbalah teacher I can make no comments on their "authenticity." However, judging from the public display of her protective red thread bracelet, I am reminded of the practices of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Anglo-American theosophists like Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. Reinterpreting occult medieval European Hebrew texts like the anonymous compilation of amulets and spells known as the *Sefer Raziel* for contemporary audiences, these Christian Kabbalists applied the "powers" described in the book of the angel "Raziel" to protect their users from enemies, fires, sickness, and other misfortunes and to gain love, children, long life, wealth, and professional success. Often less concerned with the spiritual than the supernatural, such practices derived from the medieval Jewish "popular Kabbalah" have always flourished in times of massive political turmoil, global economic transition, and spiritual malaise spurred by wars, epidemics, and the social disintegration left in their wake. In our own tumultuous era, it should therefore come as no surprise that Americans in particular—women as well as men, Jews as well as gentiles, celebrities as well as ordinary people—are turning to spiritual traditions like the Kabbalah for control over the powerful impersonal forces threatening their personal sovereignty and collective existence.

As part of an earlier generation of Americans that had enthusiastically embraced Asian mysticism, I too had experimented with "foreign" cultural practices before finding a more "homegrown" form of meditation. Twenty years ago I thought that entering a Japanese monastery, cropping my hair, and trading my jeans for long black robes was the only *authentic* way to enlightenment. I was so eager to become "one of the monks" that I willingly overlooked the misogyny of my male Zen teachers—a privilege I had never granted their Jewish counterparts. But the rampant sexual abuse of women coming to light in the "Zen scandals" of the eighties forced me to stop idealizing my male teachers and look to my own experience for spiritual authenticity. Determined to inaugurate changes that would make Zen less feudal and hierarchical and more compatible with lay life in the West, my husband and I began meditating in 1991 with a small group of friends in Princeton, New Jersey. Thirteen years later, our "Princeton Area Zen Group" is still together practicing an egalitarian form of "grassroots Zen" based on principles of power sharing and friendship. I have often asked myself if there is a similar possibility, a place in our unsettled postmodern world for practicing the freewheeling Hasidic teachings of the Baal Shem Tov. A product of the Eastern European Diaspora rooted in the occultism of the medieval "popular Kabbalah" and patriarchal notions of female "impurity," do they offer anything to today's secular or non-Jewish woman in the way of meditation? True, the Baal Shem Tov not only changed the way the Kabbalah was taught but opened the gates of meditation to everyone—rich and poor, scholar and illiterate, male and female. He also seems to have been psychologically astute, creative, and kindly in disciplining his students while at the same time deriving their maximum commitment. The spontaneity of his teaching style, custom-tailored to an individual's needs, predispositions, and capacity, strikes me as a fine model for contemporary meditation practice. Yet, even the Baal Shem Tov could go only so far in overcoming traditional sexist attitudes toward the role of the gifted women in his circle—starting with his wife, and even more sadly in my view, his daughter. He may have crossed gender lines in passing the teaching on to her, but the fact that she had to teach from behind a screen proves that he was certainly no feminist. The idea of a

woman's "impurity" was so ingrained in Judaism that even a spiritual giant like the Baal Shem Tov could not see past it.

COMING FULL CIRCLE: THE BRESLOVER

I have spent most of my life wrestling with my mystical heritage, only to conclude that my Hasidic ancestor, the Baal Shem Tov, was no less a product of his time than I am of mine. Working with Aryeh Kaplan had offered the promise of a brighter spiritual future for Jewish women, but for me, at least, that promise died with him. After Aryeh's death, I returned to Israel in the hope of continuing my Kabbalah studies. I knew no one could replace him, but I had heard there were Hasidic and Lurianic Kabbalists in Jerusalem who were opening their doors to secular spiritual seekers, some even agreeing to talk with women. If they won't see me, I thought, at least I'll be surrounded by the spirit of the Shekhinah. But my response to Israel this time was strange. Surrounded at the airport by American tourists falling on their faces and kissing the tarmac with gratitude for being able to step foot on holy soil, I could only stand there wondering what this parched desert place had to do with me. I had felt so much more at home in Aryeh's Brooklyn kitchen arguing over whether the *Shema* was a "mantra" or combining breaths and Hebrew letter sounds while his wife, Toby, scolded the kids for scrambling around our feet under the table. Aryeh had brought me right back to where I'd started. Leaving Brooklyn in search of my Hasidic ancestors, I'd come full circle. I had to travel all the way to Israel to acknowledge the depth of my loss. Bereft and alone, I wandered through Jerusalem as I'd once wandered the streets around Beth Jacob.

Realizing soon enough that my time and financial resources were limited, however, I resumed my search. In my first attempt to discover more about Hasidism, on a Friday night, I climbed a hill high above Jerusalem to welcome the Sabbath Queen with a group of Breslover Hasidim, the descendants of Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, great-grandson of the Baal Shem Tov. The synagogue was packed with voluminously bearded men wearing striped silk caftans, white stockings, fur-trimmed black hats, and black patent leather pumps. I had once asked my father whether my grandfather

(a member of the Izpitzer Rebbe's rival Hasidic lineage) had worn such clothing. Always touchy about the subject of my grandfather—who'd left his wife and two young children to spend thirteen years at his Izpitzer Rebbe's table—my father had brusquely replied, "That costume has nothing to do with Hasidism. The Baal Shem Tov's disciples split after his death, and several factions adopted the clothing style of their aristocratic Polish oppressors. There's still so much infighting among the Hasidim that the disciples of feuding masters refuse to acknowledge each other's legitimacy, let alone their attire. Some even go so far as to forbid their children from *intermarrying!* The anti-Hasidic rationalists—the *Mitnagdim*—have only added to the confusion by wearing the same outfit, making it impossible to tell one ultra-Orthodox faction from another."

None of this infighting had fazed Aryeh Kaplan, however. Hasidim, Mitnagdim, the ultra-Orthodox, the Modern Orthodox, religious Zionists, Satmer anti-Zionists, Reform, Conservative, secular, and even female Jews who'd converted to Buddhism were all welcome to sit at his table. I wondered whether I hadn't been too spoiled by Aryeh's acceptance to make my way back through my ancestral maze on my own. My first test came when I entered the Breslover synagogue and took a seat in the Ladies' Section behind the *mechitzah*—the screen separating the women from the men in the main room of a single-storey Orthodox synagogue. Well, I told myself, it's better than having to sit upstairs like in my father's *shul.* At least here I can push aside the screen a crack and get an eye-level view of the goings-on.

The Breslovers were praying as the fancy took them, facing in all directions, moving about, walking up and down the aisles, nodding, swaying, and clapping hands. Mini versions of their fathers, little boys stood in front of the *bimah*, the reader's platform before the ark, eating sunflower seeds or dreamily picking their noses. Someone suddenly announced the entry of the Sabbath Queen and flung open the door, and, followed by the boys, the clapping, singing men rushed forward all at once. One man passed around a vial of snuff, and I caught a whiff. The singing and dancing grew louder and wilder and my feet started tapping. I could barely restrain the urge to leap up, grab the two other occupants of the Ladies' Section, and dance. But the two women were preparing to

leave. Alone now, I pushed the screen open even further and saw a ruddy-faced Hasid on the other side shaking his finger at me. It was unbearably hot and I was having a hard time breathing, so I decided to go outside for some air.

A group of Hasidim had trickled out of the synagogue and were standing around talking. One of the men—maybe because he was wearing horn-rimmed glasses and looked like an intellectual—struck me as approachable.

"Excuse me," I called out in Hebrew. "I'm a student from America. Can I ask you a few questions?"

Wrinkling his nose, the Hasid took a tiny step toward me. "Speak Yiddish, only Yiddish, the holy tongue isn't used for profane conversation," the Hasid called back at me in Yiddish.

"Are the Breslover still practicing Kabbalah?" I asked in broken Yiddish recalled from my grandmother's sparse conversations with me, the grandchild she hadn't favored for being born a girl.

"The sect doesn't practice Kabbalah. Only Rebbe Nachman himself . . . he knew all the practices, but only he could perform them. He passed them on to only one disciple that he personally selected."

"And that man . . . did he pass them on to anyone else?"

Ignoring my question, the Hasid in the horn-rimmed glasses continued. "The Breslover Hasid's single purpose in life is to love God with a full heart, to connect himself to God through joy, in prayer, never in sorrow. Dancing keeps the feet warm, and with warm feet and a warm heart, one must pray."

"What about meditation?" I called out when he'd stopped talking.

"Only the great ones knew how to do this. But they died some fifty years ago." Then, abruptly turning his back on me and entering the synagogue, the Hasid put an end to our long-distance interview.

THE TORAH SCRIBE

"Isaac," a French-born Hebrew University Kabbalah professor I had contacted through an American graduate student I'd met on my previous trip to Israel, declined my telephone invitation to meet over coffee but agreed to see me in the apartment of a married colleague

whose wife was at home. Apologizing for "the complication," he informed me that his wife was visiting relatives on a kibbutz in the Galilee and wouldn't be back until evening, which made it impossible for him to meet alone with a woman. At the colleague's apartment, Isaac sat across the dining room table from me with his eyes lowered. There was so much space between us that we had to raise our voices to be heard over the noise of the television set streaming in from a neighboring balcony. In addition to teaching Kabbalah, I'd been told, Isaac was a Torah scribe, famous as much for his saintly purity as for his artistry. Struck by his blond good looks, I was immediately reminded of my childhood crush Levi Snow and couldn't stop staring at him. Looking up and meeting my glance, Isaac reddened and turned away.

"Jerusalem is the only place now for true Kabbalah," he said breathily. "No one is practicing it outside of Israel."

I wanted to inform him otherwise but held my tongue.

"Kabbalah is not *mysticism*, in the sense that most people mean it. It is rather a scientific, logical study of the faculty beyond the intellect. Realizing our true humanity since Adam's fall, we are making it up, so to speak," he paused, his hands moving about nervously as if trying to catch words in the air before continuing. "Kabbalah can't be practiced alone in this century. It is a communal effort, the responsibility of the Jews who are living in their own community, on their own spiritual ground—the center of spiritual power—Jerusalem. The Kabbalah of Isaac Luria, the Ari, is the only kind that applies to our age. His form of concentration is a particular study to be accomplished by each individual Kabbalist in his own way—according to his specific destiny and role in the life of the Jews and the world—when he truly understands and performs *kavvana*, concentrated intention. The technique can only be learned from a spiritual master. It does not concern itself with ecstatic states or union with God; it is not like Hasidic, yogic, or Christian mysticism. Anyone who has studied Lurianic Kabbalah knows that it is impossible to become one with God. For this kind of Kabbalist there are no supernatural events, no divine visions. Such a man is an ordinary, observant Jew following the Commandments, studying the Talmud."

Isaac was too much of a gentleman and a scholar to tell me outright that, as a woman, I ought to stop poking around where I

didn't belong. His reference to the "man" who kept the Commandments and studied the Talmud was dropped to accomplish that more discreetly. As soon as he had finished talking, he glanced at his watch and excused himself, saying that he'd been fasting in preparation for working on a Torah scroll commissioned by a synagogue in Tel Aviv the next day and would have to go to bed early. I knew that Isaac had discreetly omitted several equally important details—namely that, to ensure both his humility *and* his sexual purity—he would not only have to fast but immerse himself in the *mikvah* (ritual bath) and remove his shoes before inscribing the letters on the sacred female body of the Shekhinah. And most importantly, he would have to abstain from making love to his wife that night.

Apologizing for taking up his time, I forgot about keeping my distance and started moving toward him to shake his hand.

"It's fine . . . it's fine, you could not have known," he said, avoiding my outstretched hand and making a wide berth around me on his way to the door.

A SEPHARDIC SAGE

Thinking I might have better luck with the Sephardic Kabbalists, I contacted "Sarah Alouf," an Orthodox Moroccan doctor to whom I'd been introduced by friends.

"I can take you to see someone," she said. "But you'd better dress Orthodox."

Dressed in a head scarf, long-sleeved blouse, and ankle-length skirt, I accompanied Dr. Alouf through the shabby streets of the Oriental Jewish quarter. We stopped in front of a blue door on the third floor of a cinderblock housing project, and she knocked. A girl of about ten opened the door, revealing a kitchen, where an ancient woman lay on a cot mumbling to herself in Arabic. Dr. Alouf told the child we'd come to see her father, and the girl ushered us inside. "Rabbi Shalabi" was waiting for us in the dining room, sitting before a pile of books on a huge polished oak table. A toddler in a loose diaper walked around the table sucking on a lollipop. Although seated, it was obvious that the rabbi was a big man, well over six feet tall. I was delighted to find that despite his

size he had the same wise laughing eyes of my diminutive Japanese Zen teacher. Placing his big red knuckles on the table, he motioned for us to sit down.

"I've been told you understand Hebrew, so I can speak to you without stopping for translation, yes?"

I nodded.

Smiling, the rabbi said, "So, you want to learn Kabbalah." He shifted his weight and leaned back in his chair. "Kabbalah is a living study, not merely an intellectual one. It's a lifetime practice, the final aim and end of Judaism and Torah. Do not take it lightly."

The toddler in the diaper sucked loudly on his lollipop and we all laughed, Dr. Alouf modestly covering her mouth.

"The emulation of Moses is the purpose of every Jew—that is, cleaving to, and knowledge of, the Divine. To begin to study Kabbalah, you must steep yourself in three primary texts: Psalms, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. These three degrees of apprenticeship cure the individual of worldliness. They provide the necessary preparation in ridding us of the ego. Studying these texts turns one inward toward 'charitableness' and transforms the *ani*, the 'I,' into the *ayin*, nothing. Is that clear so far?" Unlike his Ashkenazi counterparts, this Sephardic rabbi obviously had no problem looking me in the face as he spoke.

I nodded, turning to Dr. Alouf for approval. The light from a large, shadeless lamp was reflecting in her glasses, making it hard for her to see. Noting this, Rabbi Shalabi advised she change her seat. Once out of his line of vision, she raised her eyebrows at me. Before agreeing to bring me to him, she'd assured me that although Rabbi Shalabi was "liberal" by Orthodox standards, willing to talk about Kabbalah to a woman scholar, I should not take advantage of his kindness by asking to become his student. Now she was restless and fidgety, clearly worried about what I might do or say.

"Can we bring you some tea?" the rabbi asked, defusing the tension.

"No, thank you," I said.

A much relieved Dr. Alouf shook her head, "None for me."

Rabbi Shalabi folded his hands over his ample belly and said, "The search for mysticism in the West is, for the most part, only another stimulus in an already overstimulated culture—another

toy, another food, or 'candy.' The search for visions and other such spectacles are not at all like the commitment to self-purification that marks the path of the true mystic. The West is too materialistic for Kabbalah. You must come to live in Jerusalem if you are sincere in your wish to study."

Dr. Alouf was raising her eyebrows at me again, indicating that I had overstayed my welcome. The sticky-faced toddler had finished his lollipop. With one hand, the rabbi scooped him up and tucked him in his lap. Dr. Alouf quickly thanked him for his time and, getting up to leave, motioned for me to do the same.

Out on the street, she said, "You should be honored at the way he talked to you. He practically offered to teach you himself, do you realize that?"

"I am honored," I said. What I did not tell her was that I had no intention of leaving my corrupt life in the West and coming to live in Jerusalem.

Five fruitless weeks passed before I understood my position. The Sephardic Kabbalists were willing to teach me, even if I was a woman—but only on the condition that I immigrate to Israel. They were convinced that Jerusalem was the literal "heart" of an otherwise corrupt Diaspora and that the Shekhinah only revealed herself there. The Ashkenazi mystics were just like the ones back in the United States. Either they studied the Kabbalah and didn't practice it; or if they did practice it, they didn't teach women. As one Hasidic American émigré told me bluntly, "God forbid I should seed the ground for a false messiah by teaching women!"

That was in the eighties. When I returned to Israel to speak at a conference on mysticism in 2000 things had progressed somewhat, but still not enough for me to feel comfortable practicing Kabbalah as a woman. If it were not for my serendipitous meetings with other feminist conference participants and my later discovery of women from many religious traditions articulating their vision of a spiritual future, I probably would have given up trying to create my own version of a Jewish meditation practice for women. One meeting in particular—a gathering of Goddess-worshiping women that took place on a dark night in January in the Midwest—made a lasting impression on me.

The stars were too high and skimpy to shed any light, but the moon was full, and it set my path aglow. It was cold. So cold it hurt

my teeth just to walk the fifty short steps from my porch to the front gate mailbox, where Diane was waiting for me in her Ford Explorer. Am I the only woman in Central Illinois who isn't driving an SUV? I wondered. It sure looked that way. My best friend Hanan drove a huge white Toyota van I called "the truck," just so I could watch her pucker her lips and get mad and yell at me that it was "a van, not a truck!" But even Ramallah-born Hanan seemed to fit into the Midwestern "van culture" better than I did. Maybe it was because she was Catholic and went to church every Sunday that people tended to overlook the fact that she was Palestinian. Maybe it was because I was the only Buddhist woman in my rural university town. Did anyone really think of me as a Buddhist? Or was I still seen as a "Jewish girl from New York"?

Diane opened the door and I climbed into the Explorer. "How do you do it without a ladder, Diane? You're as small as I am."

Diane laughed, switched on the overhead light and turned to address a young woman in the back seat. "I'm used to it, and so is Jane. This is my daughter. Jane, meet Dr. Besserman," Diane said as she gunned the motor and pulled out of the driveway. I removed my glove and shook hands with Jane. With her friendly smiling face, her long legs and corn-silk hair, she could have been any one of my students.

Diane had approached me after I'd given a talk on Zen meditation at the campus ecumenical center. There'd been a mixed crowd, including one or two Hindus and Muslims, but no Buddhists and no Jews—mostly Presbyterians, who, as a man in a plaid shirt and blue overalls informed me afterward, were looking for "something less stale and more spiritual."

Emboldened by the evening's success, I'd presented a more radical feminist talk entitled "The Female Face of God" when next invited back to the campus ecumenical center—and was greeted even more enthusiastically than the first time. Women and men had surrounded me during the "cookies and punch" reception afterward, asking me to lead an ongoing Female Face of God Workshop. Some people had brought along copies of my books for signing. I'd answered questions until the building closed, even as we walked out to our cars in the parking lot. I told them I was too busy teaching, writing, and leading Zen retreats in Princeton to commit myself to giving an ongoing

workshop, but I'd been so taken by Diane's sincerity that I couldn't refuse her request to address the women in her "Sacred Circle."

The gathering took place at "Louanne's" house over on the West Side of Bloomington. Louanne, a social worker, had deliberately chosen to live on the "unfashionable" side of town among her working-class clients. A Catholic who had spent a lot of time working to protect indigenous people in El Salvador, she'd been a good friend of one of the Maryknoll nuns who'd been raped and killed there by paramilitary thugs. Pulling up in front of the big white clapboard house, Diane informed me that Louanne had presided over the baptism of a lesbian couple's newly adopted baby.

"I thought women weren't allowed to perform baptisms," I said.

"Not officially, but that hasn't stopped Louanne from doing it," Diane said.

The house was packed with women, twenty of them traveling all the way down from Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, to hear me talk about the Shekhinah. Most were feminists who, Diane informed me as we entered, had fallen away from their traditional churches. "Some of us were Catholic and some were Presbyterian, and there were even some Evangelicals among us. But we all consider ourselves Goddess worshipers."

Louanne had done a professional job of organizing the evening. In addition to the printed program on a table set up in the foyer announcing my presentation, she had stocked several tables located throughout the ground floor of the big house with tasty Latin-American dishes, labeled "meat" or "vegetarian," and a variety of home-made punches, labeled "alcohol" or "non-alcohol." Several women had brought home-made desserts, and a woman named Connie came through the door behind Diane, Jane, and me carrying a basketful of four different kinds of breads fresh from the oven. The house was decorated in Central American fashion; hand-woven tapestries covered the walls, Indian blankets were tossed on the sofas, thick votive candles lined all the tables, and colorful rugs were scattered on the polished hardwood floors. There were plants everywhere: lemon trees in huge ceramic pots, ferns overflowing from hanging baskets, and fresh cut flowers in milk-glass vases—magically transforming a cold dark night in Illinois to a festive sunny plaza in El Salvador.

Louanne rang a bell and all conversation stopped. Wordlessly, women formed a circle. Caroline, a Presbyterian minister and leader of the Wisconsin group, took up one of the votive candles and turned to me. "We usually create a Sacred Circle and recite Jan Richardson's *By Earth Be Blessed* in opening our gatherings, if that's okay with you, Dr. Besserman."

"Of course, but only if you call me Perle," I said.

Caroline smiled and said, "Okay, Perle, it's on page one in the program you're holding."

Turning the page to the "Goddess Prayer," I suddenly felt myself transported back to morning services at Beth Jacob. Part of me loved the idea of praying to a female God, but the other part, reminded of my ambivalence toward the Sabbath Queen, went full throttle into resistance mode.

"I hate praying," my Moishe Kapoya self whispered into my ear.

"But this is different," countered the Sabbath Queen.

"Why should I believe in a Goddess when I don't believe in a God?" Moishe Kapoya persisted.

"Just try it and see," said the Sabbath Queen, and before Moishe Kapoya could say another word, I was chanting along with the other women in the circle.

May you know the embrace of the Earth.
May she teach you the wisdom of time:
the unfolding of Spring
the ripening of Summer
the turning of Autumn
the shedding of Winter.

May she teach you the wisdom of intimacy:
seed embraced by warm, dark soil
crevice traced by insistent stream
raindrop clinging to new soft leaf
precious stones in hidden places.

May she teach you the wisdom of grace:
flowers entwining fallen oak
healing gifts of common 'weeds'
grain for bread, fruit for wine
dancing stars through barren branches
May you be known in Earth's embrace.[21]

As the last words left my lips, I was reminded of my mother lying in her grave and my eyes welled up with tears. I thought of her spending her entire life sitting up in the Ladies' Section of the synagogue, where, despite her flawless Hebrew and beautiful voice, she had never been allowed to lead the prayers. It was then and there that I resolved to write my mother out of her spiritual exclusion into the sacred circle of the Shekhinah.

A NEW KABBALAH FOR WOMEN

The Kabbalah has been so steeped in stereotypical expectations of male dominance and female submission that it has been virtually impossible for a woman to join a community of mystics, no less become "enlightened" on her own or guide others to self-realization. Jewish mystics today still speak of "ascending" to a linear point, a male "transcendent reality" above and beyond female "bodily experience." As Riane Eisler argues, this split between spirit and matter derived from ancient Hellenistic sources is symbolic of "man's yearning for reconnection with woman in a society in which the loving sexual bonding between woman and man is considered a threat to the domination of man over woman."[22]

No matter how well intended, the mystics' categorizing of women as "physical" and "emotional" still declares their inferiority to "spiritual" and "rational" men. Unfortunately, these binaries have been with us for so long that they almost appear inborn. It should therefore come as no surprise that even women who consider themselves "liberated" continue to validate them. As viewed by biblical scholar Tikva Frymer-Kensky, the dichotomizing, hierarchical forms of spirituality we inherited from our forefathers are at best ambiguous and at worst downright harmful.

> Having a literary figure of Woman-Wisdom can reinforce the idea that women are wise; having a beloved Zion teaches that women are lovable. Similarly, the later Jewish images of the Sabbath Queen-Bride and the Torah are positive and reinforce women's self-esteem. . . . Nevertheless, despite the obvious appeal of these images to women, when union with them is described as *marriage*, women are excluded from the symbolic relationship. Both the human community and God become increasingly male,

> and women are the liminal and marginal figures who buffer the relationship.[23]

As positive as they may seem, images of female power such as the outpouring of the "lower waters" resulting from the Shekhinah's arousal and activation of the male "upper waters" no longer reflect today's sexual realities. Even Orthodox Jewish feminists reject the idea that their bodies are merely intermediaries between "lower" female physicality and "higher" male spirituality. But unless we expel the idea of woman as Other by ridding ourselves of negative images associated with materiality, sexuality, and "uncleanness" and affirm our *right* to practice, we will, as psychologist Judith Jordan says, "unconsciously sabotage" our own efforts.[24]

Perhaps, like the exiled male Kabbalists who once resurrected the Shekhinah hoping she would guide them back to the Promised Land, women too must prepare for her return—but, as feminist-therapist Kim Chernin warns, in a totally new and unexpected way.

> Is it possible then? The female God is coming back to the world after thousands of years of suppression by the father-culture? She is breaking through the earth of her actual burial? Unearthing herself from the female psyche? Making a claim to us? Taking us by the hair? Calling out when we try to ignore her? Bringing us to our knees? Can it be that the initiation process occurring among women today is part of a historic moment in which the Great Goddess of the ancient world is hastening back to redress the patriarchal imbalance in our culture? If so, initiation must be the meeting place of self with history, the spiritual with the political, the intensely personal with the power relations of a troubled world. When a woman seriously asks herself what it means to be a woman she is pulling at a thread that can unravel an entire culture.[25]

At first glance, unraveling a destructive patriarchal culture doesn't seem like such a bad thing. Feminist theologians like Mary Daly, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Judith Plaskow have argued that a woman-empowering spiritual practice might do more to heal our troubled world than all our male-dominated religious institutions put together. Yet, although I agree that our male-dominated religions have unfortunately done more to exacerbate than

ameliorate the violence in our troubled world, I would avoid the temptation to elevate women at the expense of men. Directed at the wonders of the Creation and focusing primarily on the reality of human experience in the world we occupy right here and now, my version of a "women's Kabbalah" would retain the Mosaic understanding of the "I am that which is" as an expression of pure delight in moment-by-moment Being. Rather than excluding men, it would correct the imbalance created by a male-dominated practice by emphasizing the subjective and sensory experience of a woman's body/mind and the world of "things," resulting in direct awareness of the original "No-thing" that lies at the heart of Hasidic meditation.

Spurred by the explosion of interest in Eastern meditation practices over the last three decades, two generations of Western women have begun to explore, and influence, our own spiritual traditions. Those already seasoned by years of meditation practice are at the forefront of this movement. Jewish/Buddhist meditation teachers like Sylvia Boorstein and Sharon Salzburg have comfortably blended practices that reflect both traditions without encroaching on their original ethnic roots. Physician Eileen Yager combines holistic healing with Sufi and Kabbalah meditations in her medical practice, and Israeli-born Zen teacher Eve Marko offers Jewish *koans* to students who wish to meditate on spiritual themes that reflect their own religious and cultural tradition. I liken the spiritual task of today's women meditation teachers to being confronted by a fresco, parts of which have been rubbed away by time and others that have been deliberately hidden under many coats of paint. With only the faintest traces available, those of us wishing to restore the female face of God to Jewish mysticism must be guided perhaps even more by personal experience than by tradition.[26]

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HITBODEDUT-MEDITATION

THE DIVINE BREATH

Embodied as the Shekhinah, God created the world by uttering ten "primal words . . . which reside in all things as a perpetual or renewing force. . . . [Every] act of Divine Speech indicates an act of the Shekhinah."[1] Regarding language as the first emanation of the godhead, *Ayin* (Formlessness) in the world of form, Jewish mystics deduced that meditation on the Hebrew letters brought one to union with the Shekhinah through the divine breath encased in every letter of the ten primal words of the Creation—a state of consciousness they called "the end of thought."

Personifying God's feminine aspect as *ruach hakodesh* (divine spirit, or breath), the mystics devised meditations based on the premise that spiritual enlightenment is accessible to human beings in the form of the divine breath with which she brought the world into being and continues to enliven it. Pointing to Genesis 2:7 ("the Lord God formed Adam from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life") they argued that as direct recipients of God's own breath, human beings were particularly blessed with an abundant supply of *ruach hakodesh*. And since breath, language, mind, and thought were on a continuum, direct knowledge of God was available to those who, concentrating on the breath, had mastered the mind in meditation.

Perhaps the best known technique for evoking the "divine breath" and inducing visionary experience is ascribed to the first-century sage

Rabbi Simeon Bar Yohai. Using the *Shema* (Hear O Israel, the Lord our God the Lord is One), the daily declaration of God's unity with the Sacred Name, as the focus of the meditation, Rabbi Simeon claimed that the three names contained in the blessing—YHVH, ELOHAYNU, YHVH—were synonymous with the "fire," "air," and "water" comprising the human breath. Visualizing the three highest sefirot (the divine emanations—*Keter*-Crown; *Chokhmah*-Wisdom; and *Binah*-Understanding) on the Tree of Life as he recited the *Shema*, the meditator could draw on his own breath to transform himself into a channel for the divine influx and experience union with God.

Until recently, Kabbalists tended to be very secretive about *hitbodedut* (meditation), demanding years of preparation before allowing their disciples to perform even the most rudimentary exercises. Declaring that detachment from worldly pain and pleasure were necessary prerequisites to union with the divine, they put novices through a strict course of ego humbling exercises, testing their worthiness at every stage of their development. And even then, enduring years of harsh discipline and punctilious adherence to the stringent requirements did not guarantee the student a place in the innermost circle of the teaching. Though the mystics claimed that all human beings possessed the capacity to "know" God through meditation, women (either because they were presumed to be less than human or because they were supposed to be egoless to begin with) were excluded from the practice.

EGO HUMBLING

Borrowing the biblical image of Jacob's ladder as a simile for the arduous psychological work that preceded meditation training, Kabbalists instructed their students to visualize the teaching as a spiritual ladder that, though rooted in the earth, would inevitably lead them to God. Only after a man had successfully climbed the first step and reached the required state of humility called "Awe" in the continued presence of the Almighty, could he then move on to "Love," the second step, denoting that he had achieved the level of *devekut* (cleaving) a state of concentration dispelling all distinctions between himself and God.

The Baal Shem Tov's successor, the Maggid of Mezerich, wrote: "A man should actually detach his ego from his body until he has passed through all the worlds and become one with God, till he disappears entirely out of the bodiless world." This loss of ego was known as *bittul ha-yesh*, literally, annihilation of the "desiring self" (ego). Only such a person could be counted on to perform the meditations without selfish motives; and since meditation entailed a commitment to liberate not only oneself but all of creation, humility was regarded not as an endpoint but as an ongoing process.[2]

Interchanging images, teachers might cast their exercises in the form of a ladder or a Tree of Life or a journey through the multiple rooms of God's heavenly palace or a cosmic chariot ride through the spheres—but regardless of how they interchanged them, the images were always linear, the disciple striving toward the silent, formless realm of the Infinite while simultaneously rooted in our world of human beings, animals, plants, minerals, pain, suffering, joy, procreation, and death. In this condition, the mystic infused every daily act with *ruach hakodesh*, divine breath, yoked to God with the power of loving-kindness derived from pure awareness. As his *hitbodedut* deepened, he expanded his concentration to contemplate all of Creation—from the furthest star to the tiniest insect—until he was indistinguishable from it.

To accommodate the different personalities and capacities of their disciples, the Kabbalists created a variety of techniques for inducing the ego humbling that preceded the attainment of pure awareness. Focusing primarily on sight, sound, and mental visualization, ego-humbling meditations were designed to culminate in an experience of the self as "No-thing." Based on the assumption that thinking interfered with the dissolution of the boundaries between the absolute and relative worlds, twentieth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook characterized the results of this form of meditation as a blissful state "transcending all humiliations or anything that happens, by attaining equanimity, by becoming one with everything that happens, by reducing yourself so extremely that you nullify your individual, imaginary form, that you nullify existence in the depth of your self."[3]

One visual technique for subduing the ego into pure awareness, "gazing," consisted of contemplating any aspect of the world,

including one's own body, without associating any thought to it. The Kabbalist might stare at his right or left hand while mentally reciting the Sacred Name YHVH associated with its corresponding sefirah on the Tree of Life. Or he might contemplate a candle flame until its white, green, red, black, and blue colors became visible. Continued gazing at the image would produce an aura, indicating the presence of the Shekhinah. His concentration thus established he would begin to repeatedly chant the Sacred Name YHVH aloud, a technique known as *hagah* practiced by the first-century *Merkabah* (Chariot) mystics for advancing meditative absorption. The sixteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria expanded on the ancient method by selecting a biblical verse and repeating it until it "spoke" to him from the text in the "living voice" of his *maggid*, or spirit-guide. The meditation was further refined by Luria's colleague Joseph Caro, famous for receiving regular Friday night visits from a spirit-guide known as *Matronit*, believed to be the embodiment of the Shekhinah herself. Author of the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the Code of Jewish Law, Caro was said to have written down every word of the tract as she dictated it to him.

Designed to reveal the "voice" of the Shekhinah resonating throughout the Creation, the Baal Shem Tov's meditation on the sounds of everyday life could induce the egoless condition of pure awareness anywhere and at any time. Like most Hasidic meditation, his technique of "simple listening" bypasses esoteric Kabbalistic visualization and chanting for direct experience. Rather than retreating to a dark, silent room at midnight and inducing visionary states, the meditator is advised to take a daily walk and listen to the sound of the birds and the wind until, as the Baal Shem Tov's successor, the Maggid of Mezerich, put it, "You are nothing but an ear which hears what the universe of the Word is constantly saying within you."[4]

In our own time, calling it "Jewish mantra meditation," Aryeh Kaplan reformulated the chanting technique of *hagah* as a mantra for contemporary western practitioners using the Hasidic "conversation with God" meditations initiated by Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson.[5]

A popular, though more complex technique combining visualization and chanting to humble the ego and induce pure awareness is based on the fact that each of the twenty- two letters of the Hebrew alphabet corresponds to a number, a spatial dimension, and a

geometric form capable of an infinite variety of permutations and combinations. Lacking vowel points, Hebrew letters can be read any number of ways to reveal an endless array of sounds, visual images, and phrases for meditation.

According to the mystics, the Hebrew letters are the building blocks of everything in Nature from the subatomic particles of an electron to the highest mountain. They are calligraphic engravings embodying the *ruach hakodesh*, divine breath, that sustains the universe. As tools for human speech, the Hebrew letters combine to produce thought. As vehicles for meditation, they serve equally to bring one to pure awareness, or what some teachers called "nonthinking." Combining visualization, controlled breathing, and bodily posture, Kabbalists recited the sounds derived from permutations of individual letters of the Sacred Name יהוה.

In one of the earliest examples of Hebrew letter meditation found in the twelfth-century *Bahir*, Rabbi Nehuniah ben Hakana instructs his students in the method of linking breath, recitation, and visualization: "Open your mouth in uttering the *aleph* [Hebrew letter A], and you extend your mind from the localized toward the boundless . . . to the end of the world."[6] Despite the deceptive simplicity of this technique Kabbalists continuously warned of the psychological perils accompanying the altered states of consciousness resulting from hours of staring at the Hebrew letters until they grew "as big as mountains" or "swallowed up" the practitioner entirely!

A still more demanding form of pure awareness meditation called "Climbing the Tree of Life" combined Hebrew letter permutation with visualization. It required not only full mastery of Hebrew letter permutation but also flawless memorization of every detail of the sefirot (divine emanations) on the branches of the Tree of Life. Once this had been accomplished, the meditator was instructed to visualize his body—including every anatomical detail, his limbs, facial features, and inner organs—corresponding to each sefirah on the Cosmic Tree. Dividing his right and left sides into their "male" and "female" components, he meditated on those energies that he felt required balancing. For example, if the Kabbalist found his spiritual motivation faltering, he would meditate on the sefirah *Gevurah* (Strength or Judgment) located on the left side of the Cosmic Tree, visualizing its corresponding color, angelic

guardian, mineral, and sound while mentally permuting the Hebrew letters of its corresponding Sacred Name. At the point where he lost all self-consciousness and "dissolved" into the sefirah, he was said to have achieved union with God.

The coded instructions in the *Zohar* provide an interesting example of the "Climbing the Tree of Life" meditation that combines the ascending states of consciousness achieved by permuting the Hebrew letters and visualizing the sefirot with the biblical story of Abraham. Using the patriarch's journey toward the Holy Land and away from his birthplace in Haran as a metaphor, Moses de Leon describes the mystic's ascent to the sefirah *Chokhmah* (Wisdom) as an arduous meditative journey demanding total self-abandonment in the quest for enlightenment. De Leon instructs the meditator to prepare for the task first by taking control of his bodily desires, for only a perfectly humbled man such as Abraham could hope to survive the symbolic tests of faith awaiting him. Once he had successfully surmounted these tests, he would become like Abraham, the embodiment of "Wisdom"—one of the highest sefirot attainable on the Tree of Life. The man who, like Abraham's son Isaac, had survived the supreme sacrificial test by offering his body to God became the embodiment of "Judgment," which though slightly lower on the Cosmic Tree was still an elevated state of consciousness. Jacob, the "prudent" patriarch, stood for the attainment of the meditative stage corresponding to "Beauty," the sefirah located at the center of the Tree. As the mystic went through the succeeding stages of meditation he visualized each sefirah and its corresponding patriarch as a limb of the Shekhinah, a color, a light, and a geometric form while chanting the Hebrew letters of the Sacred Name of God and symbolically enacting a Temple ritual such as offering incense. Only after such total humbling of the ego could a man hope to transform his body and mind into the dwelling place of the Shekhinah.

I came to understand the gravity of the Jewish mystic's responsibility after Rabbi Shalabi, the Moroccan Kabbalist I had interviewed in Israel, offered to teach me how to meditate only after I had consecutively practiced the prescribed exercises in withdrawal from worldly attachment provided in Ecclesiastes; the transition through the psychological heights and abysses encountered on the spiritual path outlined in Psalms; and the dissolution of the ego in

union with God depicted in the love poetry of the Song of Songs. Indeed, in the hands of the Kabbalists, the entire Torah functioned as a grand meditation manual charting the mystic's way up and down the ladder linking the Shekhinah to her Creation.

However, I had had my fill of "ego humbling." Like Zen teacher Charlotte Beck, I felt that women meditators in all spiritual traditions have a greater need for "ego strengthening" than they do for "ego humbling." You need a strong sense of self before breaking it down, and women have been taught for too long that self-sacrifice was the highest spiritual practice for which they could aim. The Bible is full of heroines like Ruth, Hannah, and Tamar respectively extolled for sacrificing home, child, and respectability to the religion of the patriarchs. In addition to rejecting these biblical images of self-sacrifice, I found the linear approach to pure awareness off-putting. I had developed a more holistic, cyclical approach to spirituality that didn't jibe with the linear notion of a "ladder" reaching up to an unknown, unseen, omniscient, and omnipotent God beyond human reach. To me, the Shekhinah was not an object of veneration and awe but a subject, capable of action, an agent, perpetrator of her own experience, acting rather than acted upon. Nor was she my lover, my mother, my daughter, or my queen. There was no need to anthropomorphize her. There was no need to go in search of her, for she was with me always, manifesting in every breath I took. So, instead of trying to "climb" to her by memorizing and visualizing an endless stream of complicated divine names, emanations, arcane images, and permuting Hebrew letters, I turned my attention to the simple experience of breathing. Inspired by the Baal Shem Tov, I knew I would be better served by attending to what *is*, right here in the physical world—taking a daily walk and experiencing the changing cycles of the seasons, birth, ripening, decay, death, and new beginnings—instead of locking myself in an attic at midnight cultivating "awe" (the Hebrew word, *yirah*, also means "fear") for a distant male God or "repairing" the "shattered vessels" resulting from an overflow of his divine potency.

Noticing that the spate of books on Jewish mysticism being published in the nineties largely confirmed my approach to meditation, I was pleased to find that I was no longer alone in formulating a "New Kabbalah." From meditation teacher Rabbi Avram Davis I learned

that in addition to the traditional Hebrew letter permutation and Tree of Life visualization, the main schools of *hitbodedut* (meditation) being practiced today are *Ayin*—non-directed meditation, whose emphasis is on silence and the spaciousness of Being—and *Chesed*—loving-kindness. Nonetheless, I was disappointed to see that most authors of books on Jewish mysticism were still men who had derived their meditations from the traditional texts, though a few of them were therapists who framed the Kabbalah in psychological language to accommodate contemporary westerners. Liberal teachers like Edward Hoffman, David Cooper, and Arthur Green were welcoming women students on an equal footing, but none had gone so far as to rethink the entire system of meditation from a feminist perspective.[7] And indeed, one wouldn't expect—or want—them to. This, women would have to do for themselves. Fortunately, it did not take very long.

Under the leadership of innovative women teachers like Lynn Gottlieb, Marcia Falk, Shoni Labowitz, and Tirzah Firestone, several specifically feminist schools of Jewish meditation have arisen to parallel the traditional forms of *hitbodedut* outlined by Avram Davis. Centered on the female aspect of God and the restoration and healing of Jewish women, these women Kabbalists nonetheless remain rooted in the Hebrew Bible and Jewish liturgy. Imagery and techniques may be borrowed from other religious sources (such as Rabbi Labowitz's blending of Taoism and Kabbalah) but the basis for these feminist meditation practices is still Jewish. Calling themselves "reformers" rather than "radicals," some women meditation teachers content themselves with revising and reinterpreting patriarchal biblical and Talmudic imagery and language through a feminist lens. Others are combing through centuries of textual, oral, and archeological evidence for a lost or forgotten women's perspective on Jewish history. The rest are still grappling with the possibility of abandoning the entire patriarchal structure and creating a new "Women's Kabbalah" from scratch.

My own solution to the problem has been to take a middle course. Years of studying Jewish mysticism have convinced me that, no matter how you interpret it, there is no such thing as a "generic" Kabbalah. As we have seen, goddess worship, Creation myths, and religious symbols were shared by Israelites and pagans

alike throughout the ancient Near East. But centuries of monotheistic reinvention of these cultures and the primacy of the Bible—whether we "believe" in it or not—have left their indelible mark on women today. Exile and Diaspora may have opened the door to new feminist readings of the texts, but we cannot get away from the fact that Jewish mysticism is still firmly based on the Torah. Practicing Jewish meditation in any other context turns it into something completely different. That is why, despite the terrible misogyny that informs the image of the female face of God, I have chosen to build my system of meditation for women around the Shekhinah.

Drawing on the Kabbalistic notion that the Hebrew texts and written words are "masculine" and direct mystical experience is "feminine," I equally bypass traditional mystical demands for Jewish religious observance and textual interpretation in favor of direct experience. Rather than creating a "fence around the Torah" or "merging" with her, this form of meditation starts from the premise that there is no difference between a woman and the Shekhinah to begin with. Unremittingly nondualistic, nonlinear, and process oriented, this experiential approach to meditation is cyclical and makes no distinctions between "formed" and "formless" worlds, but sees the Creation and the individual woman herself as part of an energy system moving from formlessness to form and back again to formlessness in a perpetual circle of change.

The form of meditation I envisage for women does not seek altered states of consciousness, visions, spirit-guides, or psychic powers. It is not devotional. Nor is it aimed at uniting with a "higher" being that exists beyond, or somewhere at the "end" of thought. A woman does not have to be religious, observant, or even Jewish to practice it. It is simply a tool for discovering that she and the Shekhinah and the ever-changing Creation are one and the same.

The meditations that comprise the remainder of this book are therefore focused solely on a woman's immediate experience of the moment, beginning with attention to the breath. Avoiding theological questions about the "male" or "female" nature of God or the divine structure of the cosmos, visualizations are kept to a minimum, and language, when it *is* used, functions more as a vehicle for concentration than a conveyer of "meaning."

My feminist variations on traditional Jewish meditation are divided into four paths:

The Path of Letters
The Path of Emanations
The Path of Sounds
The Path of Song and Dance

Each will be preceded by a description of the teachers and schools with which they are associated. I invite readers to submit their own variations on these meditations, subtracting and adding new ones as they see fit.

part two

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four

THE PATH OF LETTERS

ABRAHAM ABULAFIA

The Hebrew letter meditations presented here are derived from the teachings of Abraham Abulafia, an unconventional thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist whose practice was based on the premise that nothing was more important than the immediate experience of union with God in the shortest time possible. An ascetic who himself spent many years meditating, fasting, and often not sleeping for weeks at a time, the tolerant Abulafia did not impose these disciplines or any other restrictions on his disciples. And since he taught Moslems and Christians, as well as women, Jewish orthodoxy was not a prerequisite for joining his circle of Kabbalists.

Perhaps the most radical of all Jewish mystics, Abulafia believed that he had a prophetic mission. Indeed, his daring public pronouncements indicate that he might have thought of himself as the Messiah. On one occasion, declaring his "messianic mission" in defiance of both the rabbinic authorities and the Catholic Church almost cost him his life. Following the prediction of Kabbalist Rabbi Moses ben Nahman in 1260 that the end of days would see the Messiah commanded by God to confront the Pope and ask for the liberation of the Jewish people, in 1280, Abulafia claimed to have received the call to travel to Rome and "confer with [the Pope] in the name of Jewry."[1] Predicting that the notoriously anti-Semitic Pope Nicholas III would have him arrested and burnt at the stake but that he would emerge alive and free twenty-eight days later, Abulafia embarked on

the journey to Rome. As soon as he arrived, the Pope ordered his arrest and subsequent execution at the stake. It was the eve of Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year and start of the High Holy Day season, and Abulafia sat meditating in his prison cell. As morning dawned, a guard entered to inform him that the Pope had died during the night, resulting in a stay of execution and a transfer of the prisoner to a Franciscan jail outside of Rome. Convinced that his meditations had influenced the course of events, Abulafia was released twenty-eight days later—exactly as he had predicted. In writing of his ordeal, Abulafia attributed to the Shekhinah the heavenly voice that had called him to his messianic mission and saved his life.

Born in Saragossa, Spain, in 1240, Abulafia was guided in the study of the Torah by his father, who died when Abraham was eighteen. His mother moved the family to Toledo, but impelled by tales of ten lost tribes living in the Holy Land on the banks of the mythical river "Sambatyon" the restless young scholar left home soon after to begin a life of spiritual searching. Prevented from moving any further than the coast of Palestine by fierce battles between Christian Crusaders and Moslem holy warriors, Abulafia traveled on to Greece, where he married and settled for the next ten years. However, his ongoing search for a "true Kabbalah master" led him to abandon Greece for Italy, where he studied with physician-scholar Hillel ben Samuel of Verona before returning again to Spain.

In his autobiography, Abulafia writes of his dissatisfaction with the first group of disciples that gathered around him in Barcelona. Accused by his rabbinic critics of teaching Trinitarian doctrines and turning young Jews to Christianity, the thirty-one-year-old Kabbalist again took to the road in search of spiritual guidance—this time inspired by the first in a series of the "prophetic calls" that were to recur at critical phases throughout his career. Impressed by the writings of Rabbi Baruch Togarmi, Abulafia—who had already established his own reputation—sought out the older man and became his student.

It did not take long for the charismatic young Kabbalist to gather a second, more satisfactory group of disciples, and within a few short years, Abulafia was writing his own meditation manuals and had published his spiritual autobiography, *Hidden Treasure*

Garden, under a pseudonym. But establishing his reputation as a master of Hebrew letter meditation was not enough for the irrepressible Abulafia, and he continued provoking the Jewish authorities with his "prophetic" proclamations. In addition to condemning the traditional rabbis for undermining the "true" Jewish practice of cleaving to God with their dry speculations on the Torah and Talmud, Abulafia also alienated his fellow Kabbalists by declaring the superiority of his own school of Hebrew letter meditation over the Tree of Life techniques found in the *Zohar* of his esteemed Spanish contemporary, Rabbi Moses de Leon. Claiming that contemplation of the *sefirot* (divine emanations) along the Cosmic Tree was only a prelude to meditation on the Sacred Names embedded in the Hebrew letters YHVH, Abulafia boasted of being the only Kabbalist to have fully mastered both techniques. He described his manipulation of the power inherent in the Sacred Name of God as a twofold process: it was physical in that it combined recitation and manipulation of the breath, and it was spiritual because it was linked to the realm of the *ruach hakodesh* (divine breath) present in each letter. Known as *tzeruf* (permutation) the exercise consisted of mentally juggling and transposing the Hebrew letters of God's Sacred Name YHVH and chanting the resulting phrases until they were no longer recognizable.

Here, in his own words, are Abulafia's *tzeruf* instructions for attaining what he called "prophetic consciousness":

> Take each letter . . . and vocalize it with a long breath. Do not breathe between the two letters, only hold the breath for as long as you can, and then rest for one breath. Do this with each and every letter. There must be two breaths with each letter, one to hold it in during the utterance which *moves* every letter. . . . Each single breath . . . [comprises an inhalation and an exhalation. Do not pronounce the word with the lips between the exhalation and inhalation, but allow the breath and] vocalization to emerge while you are exhaling.[2]

Bypassing the lengthy preparations for Hebrew letter meditation demanded by his fellow Kabbalists, Abulafia invited all spiritual seekers to accompany him on the "short path" to God because he believed that the divine breath embodied in language connected all human beings—regardless of religion, gender, race, or

ethnicity—to their sacred origin. In this pursuit, all language became for him one language. Divesting words and phrases of meaning, he taught anyone willing to learn how to permute individual letters, spinning them out of recognition until breath and sound merged with their divine source. That was enough to set him apart from his peers. But Abulafia didn't stop there. In addition to opening the practice to women and gentiles without demanding lengthy preparations, he also alienated the rabbinic authorities by predicting that the Jewish Messianic Year would arrive in 1290, causing many Jews to sell their belongings and move to Palestine to await the end of days. When the "Messianic Year" came and went without incident the rabbis publicly denounced Abulafia as a charlatan and he died, disgraced in the eyes of all but a few loyal followers.

Jewish mystics were (and still are) regarded as "aberrant" by the religious mainstream; but none seem to have been so vilified as Abraham Abulafia. He was undoubtedly the most innovative master of Hebrew letter meditation, yet he is rarely named even among his fellow Kabbalists. Still, Abulafia continues to fascinate students of Jewish mysticism. Perhaps it is his defiance of religious authority that makes him so attractive to contemporary spiritual seekers in pursuit of a radical new direction. Though tinged by patriarchal attitudes toward the body, his liberal ecumenism certainly provides a healthy foundation for a more "woman-friendly" Kabbalah. His practical, detailed instructions on combining breath and vocalization of the letters (a happy departure from most impenetrable Kabbalistic meditation manuals) invite even novices to practice—or so I thought when I tried experimenting with Abulafia's Hebrew letter meditation on my own.

JUGGLING LETTERS

Since I was already familiar with more complicated yoga breathing techniques, Abulafia's instructions seemed simple enough when I sat down on a floor cushion in a corner of the dining alcove in my Greenwich Village apartment, my legs crossed in lotus position and my right hand in my left palm, and began visualizing the transposed Hebrew letters of the *Tetragrammaton* (YHVH) on the

white wall in front of me while reciting the Divine Name. Within a few minutes I lost consciousness of everything but my breathing, which seemed to be coming from the wall opposite. The color of the room around me had changed, and I, like the dining table and chairs, was infused by a blazing light that alternated between blue and green. It had been a sunny spring day when I started, but the sun disappeared suddenly and a flash of lightning crashed through the open window into the room only a few inches from where I sat reciting the Name. The distinct scent of some flower or spice was the last thing I noticed before I heard my neighbor banging on the door.

"There's a burning smell coming from your apartment!" she shouted. "Are you all right? Did you hear that incredible clap of thunder?"

Blinking my eyes, I looked at her, still uncertain about how I had gotten up and opened the door without knowing where, and who, I was. The sun was shining and the birds were singing outside as if nothing had happened. All that remained of the spooky event was the strong scent of flowers.

"I was just meditating," I said.

"Were you burning incense?"

"No."

"Well, you'd better stop whatever you're doing or you'll burn the house down," she said.

Taking her advice, I stopped meditating and made myself a cup of tea. An hour later, I left the house to mail a letter. The only lingering aftereffect of my meditation was that the sun felt too bright and hurt my eyes. An uptown Madison Avenue bus was barreling along at top speed. Though I hadn't planned to go further than the corner mailbox, I suddenly felt impelled to get on the bus and go—where, I didn't know. Though I was standing on a corner two blocks from the bus stop, the driver pulled up alongside me, opened the doors and said, "Get in." I paid the fare and was about to sit down when he stopped at a mailbox a few blocks away and, nodding his head, said, "Go ahead and mail your letter. I'll wait." Never thinking to ask how he knew I was carrying a letter in my bag, I got off, mailed the letter, and got back on the bus. It seemed exactly right that the bus driver would know exactly what I wanted to do and comply with it.

At 42nd Street I got off and walked to the public library certain that there was something in the building that I had to see. Entering the front hall, I saw a sign announcing an exhibition of etchings by William Blake. Instantly, I knew why I had come. In a trance I walked from room to room staring into the glass cases at the now familiar electric blues and burning greens of Blake's visions. It was as if I were still sitting in meditation on the floor of my apartment perspiring and my heart pounding. My mind seemed to have separated itself from my body. Yet at the same time I was alert, even mildly euphoric at knowing that I had the power to make things happen. Unfortunately, my high was short-lived.

Leaving the library, I felt myself growing increasingly uncomfortable. My body yearned to curl up in a dark corner and let my mind fly off on its own. Struggling not to give way to the impulse, I forced myself to walk to the Lexington Avenue subway station, stopping for black coffee when I felt myself drifting off. Somehow, I managed to get on the train and arrive home in one piece. But I couldn't sleep that night; every time I closed my eyes, I would see the electric blue and green colors. Numbed and exhausted, I dragged myself through the next two days before the trance wore off.

My experience with Abulafia's Hebrew letter meditation taught me that his techniques were useful only if they were not aimed at inducing prophecy or visions but at concentrated self-awareness. And even then, they had to be approached with caution. Grounded in the everyday experience of women, my feminist version of Hebrew letter meditation would have to surrender the fugitive "high" of Abulafia's prophetic consciousness and be brought back down to earth. With that in mind, I went back to explore what Kabbalists consider the basic building blocks of life—the Hebrew "Mother Letters" *Alef*, *Mem*, *Shin* (אמש)—with the intention of seeing how they could be practically applied by women meditators.

FIRST MEDITATION: THE "MOTHER LETTERS"

Comprising the elements of air, water, and fire inherent in the breath, the "Mother Letters" are agents of transformation synony-

mous with the cycles of creation and change. Shorn of their esoteric meaning, they not only represent the physical components of the breath—they *are* the breath. In other words, instead of using them to manipulate the breath, all a woman has to do is *just breathe naturally* letting the "Mother Letters" do their work. To emphasize their uniquely "feminine" quality, she can see them as a simple meditative device for evoking the power residing in every woman to create and transform herself.

(To ensure that this and all the other meditations in this book will effectively bring about this transformation, I recommend setting aside a practice period of 25 minutes, preferably at the same time every day.)

INSTRUCTIONS

Begin by seating yourself comfortably either on a floor cushion or a straight-back chair with your spine, head, and neck aligned. With eyes partly open, follow the rhythm of your breath, experiencing it as the distinctly feminine life force flowing through your body. Gradually, as your breathing slows down, you may begin your inhalation as the inaudible sound "AH," followed by the inaudible sound "MESH." Continue breathing this way, opening yourself entirely to the sensations around you and allowing them to become one with your breath. Do not shut out any sound, smell, or tactile sensation as it arises. Do not try to control your breathing. If your mind wanders or you are distracted, simply return to letting the Mother Letters "breathe" as you.

At the end of the twenty-five minute meditation period, open your eyes fully and sit quietly for a few seconds before getting up.

SECOND MEDITATION: "LADY WISDOM"

The earliest reference to the Shekhinah as *Chokhmah* (Wisdom) appears in the Book of Proverbs: "I am Wisdom . . . understanding and power are mine. . . . Before the mountains were settled in their place, long before the hills, I was born" (8:12–30). Much has been written about the many guises of Lady Wisdom in both Jewish and

Christian traditions.[3] But for purposes of meditation, it is essential to recognize that *Chokhmah* is more than a metaphor for the Shekhinah, revealing herself as the sustainer of life only to those women who meditate and actually experience themselves as her dwelling place. To avoid speculation on the meaning of *Chokhmah* this meditation focuses attention solely on the letters comprising her name.

Transposing the Hebrew letters of the word *Chokhmah* results in the formation of the question *Coakh-Mah?*—"The Strength of What?" (*Coakh*—Strength—is identified with the Shekhinah as the divine emanation of *Gevurah*—Judgment.) But the question resulting from transposing the letters is not an intellectual conundrum to be solved by logical means. It is not a mantra. Neither is it a riddle. Similar to meditation on the "Mother Letters" in its approach, meditating on the question "*Coakh-Mah?*" is a more advanced way of focusing the mind on a single point. See it as a vehicle for concentration, to be inwardly repeated with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

INSTRUCTIONS

Seated comfortably with back, neck, and head aligned and eyes partly open, begin by following your inhalations and exhalations. As you did in meditating on the Mother Letters *Aleph*, *Mem*, *Shin*, identify the life force flowing through your body as the "feminine" attribute of Wisdom as *strength* or *power*. When you have established a comfortable breathing pattern and your mind is quiet, allow the question "The strength of what?" to arise from the depths of your belly. Merely let it float up on the breath on its own, without thinking about it. Do not look for a rational answer to the question. Do not mentally repeat or chant it as you would a *mantra*. When you have reached the point where breath, mind, and body are indistinguishable, the answer to the question will come of itself.

As in all meditation, do not get up immediately after twenty-five minutes, but remain seated with your eyes fully open for a few seconds before resuming activities.

FROM "MOTHER LETTERS" TO MOTHER GODDESS TO EVE: GUARDIAN OF THE TREE OF LIFE

In this first set of meditations, I have presented the "Mother Letters" *Alef*, *Mem*, *Shin* as the combined primordial female energy of the goddess *Asherah*, the Shekhinah, and "Lady Wisdom." But since letters and language are potential containers of "meaning," I find a still more intimate, nonverbal experience of the Shekhinah in the image of the Tree of Life—symbol of the Near Eastern fertility goddesses for over two thousand years.

My first reading of the significance of the Sacred Tree in establishing the spiritual and political power of the goddess came from Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer's translation of the Sumerian epic of Inanna—specifically the section of the poem devoted to the "Huluppu Tree."[4] Wolkstein's brilliant performance of the poem, in fact, became the centerpiece of a course on goddesses I was offering at Illinois State University in the spring of 2000. In the "Huluppu Tree" episode, where Wolkstein depicts Inanna as "a young woman in search of her womanhood," the goddess encounters a mysterious tree on the banks of the Euphrates River whose branches are occupied by a bird (*anzu*), a snake, and the "dark maid Lilith." Though she boldly claims the tree and tends it with her own hands, Inanna cannot dislodge its unwanted tenants and must enlist the help of her half-human brother Gilgamesh in evicting them. Freed of the bird, snake, and dark maid, the huluppu tree legitimizes Inanna's sole ownership and disposition of its sacred power as Queen of Heaven and Earth.

Wolkstein and Kramer's portrayal of a triumphant goddess seemed to offer a sufficiently satisfactory finish to the first of Inanna's trials on the path of transformation. However, it wasn't until I came across feminist religion scholar Johanna Stuckey's penetrating analysis of the "Huluppu Tree" episode three years later that I became aware of a side to the story of Inanna that I had missed—one that presented her as a patriarchal construct. Examining an array of disparate images identifying the goddess with storms and wars as well as love and fertility, Stuckey concludes

that, like the sacred huluppu tree itself, Inanna "was life—the great, continually changing cycle of being and becoming." Why, then, in taking charge of the tree and planting it in her garden, was such a powerful goddess unable to dislodge its occupants on her own? Why could she not "charm" the snake from its roots or force the *anzu* bird from its branches? And who was the "dark maid Lilith"? Tracing the image of the serpent to its Mesopotamian artistic portrayals as guardian of the entrance to the underworld, Stuckey postulates that as a "threshold creature" the snake might in fact be an aspect of Inanna manifesting "her underworld self." As a "boundary creature, living between earth and sky," the *anzu* bird "too was able to move across thresholds," thus providing yet "another aspect of Inanna." Finally, Stuckey derives the image of "the dark maid Lilith" from the *lilu*—female demons associated by the Mesopotamians with sexually predatory unmarried women who "wandered about seeking to entrap men" into performing "unnatural" sexual acts with them. Identifying these female demons with the sexually autonomous Inanna, Stuckey argues that "male-dominated society had slowly separated Inanna's independent, socially uncontrollable self from her other attributes and divided that difficult self in two, prostitute and demon."

Thus, according to Stuckey, "Inanna did not see the three interlopers as other selves, for the [Huluppu] poem presents her as already co-opted by male-dominated society." In an interesting psychological twist, this also accounts for Gilgamesh's co-option of Inanna's power, for in enlisting him to rid the huluppu tree of the bird, snake, and dark maid Lilith she "had to instigate the murder of one aspect of herself and the banishment from her city of two others. Perhaps a more important point, she had to sanction, indeed beg for, the destruction of the huluppu tree, that is, her united self. . . . She . . . was completely alienated from the sacred tree that was herself, so much so that she could not only allow but actually arrange for, her body and her transformative power to be at the disposal of the male-dominated city-state."[5]

Stuckey's feminist deconstruction of the huluppu tree image in the story of Inanna led me to speculate on the version adopted by the Hebrews. Identified in the Bible with the secret containing the male god's power to bestow immortality, Inanna's huluppu tree was transformed into the conflated Tree of Life/Knowledge at the

center of Yahweh's garden—now totally off limits to the goddess and her women worshipers. Feminist historian Gerda Lerner cites the story of Eve's transgression against God's command to refrain from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life as "the historic moment of the death of the Mother-Goddess and her replacement by God-the-Father and the metaphorical Mother under patriarchy."[6]

If the Tree of Life was a vehicle for patriarchal condemnation of goddess worship, how, I wondered, could it be reconciled with biblical references to the Shekhinah like the following from Proverbs 3:18: "She is a tree of life to those who grasp her and whoever holds on to her is happy"? Is it possible to retrieve the Tree of Life from its ancient Near Eastern context for purposes of meditation while disregarding its patriarchal intention? Most important, can any image of the Shekhinah be totally independent of past habitual associations to the Tree of Life and emerge fresh from our own body/mind experiences as twenty-first-century women? These are some of the questions I attempted to address in constructing the "Path of Emanations" meditations on the Tree of Life appearing in the next chapter.

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five

THE PATH OF EMANATIONS

THE TREE OF LIFE AND THE *ZOHAR*

No description of the mystical significance of the Tree of Life to Kabbalah meditation practice matches that found in the *Zohar*. It is as important to meditating on the *sefirot* (divine emanations) along the branches of the Tree of Life as Abulafia's work is to meditating on the Hebrew letters. In fact, I would venture to say that without the *Zohar* meditation on the Tree of Life would be impossible; even today's feminist Kabbalist cannot ignore it. Yet, although acknowledged as the greatest surviving Kabbalistic text still used as a meditation manual by contemporary Jewish mystics ranging from Breslover Hasidim in Brooklyn to Lubavitchers in Sydney to Lurianic Sephardim in Jerusalem, scholars continue to remain divided over its authorship. Practicing Kabbalists believe the *Zohar* to be the work of Simeon bar Yohai, a great first-century mystical sage, but they are in the minority. The majority of scholars of Jewish mysticism do not practice the Kabbalah, and they believe the book was written by thirteenth-century Spanish Kabbalist Rabbi Moses de Leon.[1] According to this second view, de Leon sought legitimacy in the persona of Simeon bar Yohai by claiming to have discovered an Aramaic manuscript containing the teachings of the ancient master. Calling it the *Zohar* (Book of Radiance), de Leon presented the manuscript as both an esoteric gloss on the Torah and a meditation manual providing a map of the mystic's "ascent" through the sefirot on the Tree of Life. De Leon's choice of Simeon bar Yohai as his

mouthpiece was deliberate, for the ancient sage had been a disciple of the saintly Rabbi Akiva and was himself legendary among medieval Kabbalists. Even their opponents, the mainstream rabbis, venerated Rabbi Simeon. All were familiar with the story of his escape from the Romans who had tortured and killed his teacher, how he and his son Eleazar survived for thirteen years on the outskirts of what is now Tel Aviv, hiding in a cave and living on food and water from a carob tree and a fountain that miraculously sprang up at the entrance to their secret dwelling. Leaving the cave by day and burying themselves to the neck in sand to escape the scorching heat, Rabbi Simeon and his son were said to have been taught the mysteries of the Kabbalah by no less than Elijah himself.

With the death of the Roman emperor Trajan, father and son emerged from hiding, only to find that the remaining Jewish community had no interest in their hard-won mystical teachings. A disappointed Rabbi Simeon returned to his cave to meditate for yet another year, after which he was called by the voice of the Shekhinah to emerge once more and offer personal instruction to the small group of loyal "companions" he would find awaiting him. Presented by Moses de Leon twelve centuries later, the *Zohar* professed to be an authentic record of those ancient teachings in Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai's own voice. Though couched in esoteric biblical-sounding poetic language and densely patriarchal imagery, Moses de Leon's "Book of Radiance" nonetheless remains the starting point for my Tree of Life meditations on the Shekhinah.

THE SEFIROT

> God is unified oneness. . . . Down to the last link, everything is linked with everything else; so divine essence is below as well as above, in heaven and on earth. There is nothing else.[2]

Centered on the ancient image of the Tree of Life, the *Zohar* offers an elaborate cosmological description of the interdependent worlds-within-worlds linking God and Creation. Divided into "male" (right) and "female" (left), each of the ten branches of this

androgynous Cosmic Tree bears an emanation or sefirah representing one of ten divine attributes. Starting from *Ein Sof*, a nonmanifest point above the Tree, divine energy in the form of a lightning flash flows down into the first sefirah, *Keter* (Crown), located at the top of its central branch. Continuing its descent, first to the sefirah *Chokhmah* (Wisdom) on the right, "male" side of the Tree, crossing to the "secret" sefirah *Daat* (Knowledge) on the neutral central branch, and then over to the sefirah *Binah* (Understanding) on the left, "female" side, the primordial divine energy divides further, assuming a variety of physical qualities symbolized by names, colors, and forms until it comes to rest in *Malkut* (Sovereignty), the tenth (female) sefirah representing our world.

Each of the ten sefirot is a hologram, depicted by the sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalist, Moses Cordovero, as a "brain within brain and spirit within spirit, so that one is a shell to another." Since each sefirah constitutes a "fragment of the Absolute," any aspect of the physical world can thus spark a revelation of the unity in diversity contained within it. Expanding on the *Zohar*'s holographic image of the divine emanations, Cordovero described each sefirah as a "mirror, which the supernal light strikes and from whence the light is reflected, until in this manner the light ascends directly and is infinitely reflected."[3]

To illustrate, let us assume the Kabbalist chooses to begin his ascent along the Tree of Life by meditating on the sefirah *Chokhmah* in order to reach the stage of consciousness represented by *Keter*, its highest point. Placing his head between his knees and breathing "in the same way that the sea takes and gives, and therefore is not full," he simultaneously focuses his attention on the right side of the Cosmic Tree and the male sefirah *Chokhmah*, its corresponding archetypal world, *Atzilut* (Emanation), its sacred name, *Yah*, his own right ear, and the sefirah's reflected color, blue. But concentrating at length on this high level can be too strenuous, so the Kabbalist turns his attention to the slightly "dimmer" light of the female sefirah *Binah*, which he uses as a "ladder" for his contemplative ascent through *Chokhmah* toward *Keter*. As his meditation deepens, he sees the sefirot change positions, engaging in a cosmic dance until all merge with the Shekhinah—referred to in the *Zohar* as "Woman of Light": "[She] is the form of the upper and lower beings; all of the shapes of the *Sefirot* and all their names

are formed within it, and all the souls and angels and holy beings are engraved in it. . . . For everything is hinted at in the *Shekhinah*, who is dressed in the garments on which are drawn all created things, and it is called by all their names."[4]

Binah is the "upper *Shekhinah*," the creative energy of the concealed power of the hidden *En Sof*. As the active feminine principle, *Binah* is "Mother of the Universe." She emits the seven lower sefirot, referred to in the twelfth-century *Bahir* as her "children." She is the "heart" representing the thirty-two paths of wisdom by which the world was created. (The Hebrew word for heart is *Lev*, whose combined letters equal 32.)

Binah's mirror image, the receptive feminine principle, is the "lower *Shekhinah*," *Malkut*, who returns the energy upward. She is the transition between transcendence and immanence. Unlike the *Zohar*, which depicts her as passive and "exiled" from *Ein Sof*, the *Bahir* characterizes *Malkut* as the indwelling female aspect of God in the formed world. It is she who calls to those who would ascend the Tree of Life:

> I am the Matrona.
> I am the redeeming angel.
> I am the emissary of the Holy One . . . I watch over you steadily. . . . The *Shekhinah* talks to you. . . . Unify your heart constantly, at all times, at all hours, in all places, thinking of nothing except me . . . This is the mystery of unity . . . [the] Camp of the *Shekhinah*.[5]

With Moses as his model, the meditator hopes to reach *Keter* and achieve union with the "upper" Shekhinah all at once, avoiding the pitfalls experienced by the patriarch Jacob, whose worldly attachments prevented him from reaching any higher on the Cosmic Tree than the sixth (male) sefirah, *Tiferet* (Beauty). However, in the form of the fifth (female) sefirah *Gevurah* (Strength), the divine emanation of "Judgment," the less spiritually evolved meditator might also encounter the "lower" Shekhinah as "Woman of Darkness." In this guise, she is Lilith, the whorish woman, the "demonic" Queen of the Underworld who will skewer him on the branches of her Tree of Death. Note that the greatest danger to the mystic's ascent is posed by the female sefirah *Gevurah;* in none

of her male counterparts on the right side of the Cosmic Tree do we find such a demonic threat, for it is only through woman that "evil" came into the world.

Recalling that the Tree of Life/Knowledge and the blooming "apple orchard" are identified by the mystics both with Lilith/Eve (bad woman) and the Shekhinah (good woman) we are once again faced with the tension pervading male-authored Kabbalistic texts like the *Zohar*. Take, for example, Rabbi Moses de Leon's view of the *niddah*, menstruating woman. "One who cohabits with a *niddah* drives the divine presence from the world. . . . When a person draws near to a *niddah*, her impurity passes to him and resides in all of his limbs. . . ." This must have been especially troubling for the mystic who believed that the "divine presence" was itself the embodied female Shekhinah. Yet Moses de Leon's Kabbalistic descendants continue to adhere to the misogynistic teachings of the master emphasizing woman's "impurity"—albeit in a more romantic light. Falling back on the Talmud, today's Kabbalists reason that separation from a *niddah* during her days of uncleanness will make a husband more desirous of a wife whose familiarity might otherwise have made her "detestable" to him. It appears never to have occurred to them that a husband might be "detestable" to a wife!

Raphael Patai puts a contemporary psychoanalytic spin on the problem:

> The goddess . . . speaks to man with four tongues: keep away from me because I am a Virgin; enjoy me because I am available to all; come shelter in my motherly bosom; and die in me because I thirst for your blood. Whichever of her aspects gains momentarily the upper hand, there is a deep chord in the male psyche which powerfully responds to it. Her voices enter man and stir him; they bend man to pay homage to her, and they lure man to lose himself in her in love or in death.[6]

If we are to judge the influence of such patriarchal images of woman on biblical history we must understand that woman's "heresy" lay in defying the authority of first a male priesthood and later a rabbinate that not only wrote, but also interpreted, the sacred texts outlining the path to God. Sadly, that rabbinic hegemony still persists even among well-intentioned male Kabbalists who

welcome women into their circle—as I discovered for myself when I attended a lecture given by Gedaliah Fleer. Hopefully without sounding ungrateful to Rabbi Fleer (who generously opened his home and not only lectured but provided dinner to his students afterward free of charge), let me explain why I felt excluded.

CHICKEN SOUP FOR THE KABBALIST SOUL

Seeking to learn more about the cosmological complexities of the Tree of Life from an expert on the subject, at Aryeh Kaplan's suggestion, I joined the class of his Hasidic colleague Gedaliah Fleer, who, like Aryeh, had been a scientist before becoming a rabbi. It was in the early eighties and Rabbi Fleer was then developing a reputation in the progressive circle of Kabbalists I'd come to think of as the "Hasidic Underground." The class was held in the second-floor flat of his small two-family house in Brooklyn and consisted of a mixed group of men and women in their late twenties and early thirties, some recently "returned" to Judaism from forays in India, Nepal, and Japan. The women were dressed like the yeshiva girls of my childhood, in long skirts, long-sleeved blouses, and headscarves. I spotted one pregnant young woman in a wig who reminded me of my friend Nelly, sitting on an ancient sofa telling another woman that the baby she was carrying would be her fifth child.

Gedaliah Fleer was a heavyset, bearded man in his early forties wearing thick glasses and a black silk yarmulke. He strode into the room, greeting some in the audience by name and nodding affably to those he didn't know. Not bothering to introduce himself or the evening's topic, with the potent smell of chicken soup wafting over his shoulder from the open kitchen behind him, he opened the huge book on the lectern in front of him and peered into it, meditatively rocking from side to side. The audience waited with suspended breath as he began to speak. At first he seemed self-conscious, but the encouraging sighs and murmurs of assent he got from his students inspired him as he went along, and he soon began interpreting the text with great fervor, moving his hands around in the air as he described the Creation, explaining how God as *Ein Sof* (Boundless), without beginning or end, is both

here and not here at the same time, and how He had constricted Himself at the first act of creation. (No matter that this supposedly boundless *Ein Sof* was without body or form, it was still a "He.")

The rabbi then asked us to try to understand how something could come out of nothing by imagining how God, by constricting His limitless being into form, had created a vacuum. This constriction, which the sixteenth-century Kabbalist Isaac Luria had called "*tzimtzum*," resulted in a process of emanation during which God then divided Himself into a descending series of ten vessels (sefirot) that, because they were material and could not contain His boundlessness, overflowed. It is these vessels and their overflow that comprise the created worlds and, with them, God's emanations.

Fleer stopped for a moment, waiting for his audience to absorb the mystical version of the Creation story he had related. Scanning the faces in the room and satisfied that he'd been understood, he continued.

"The work of the mystic is to emulate God by refining his own physical 'vessel,' his body and mind, by living a spiritual life, ascending to the higher worlds on the Tree of Life, and knowing God through meditation on the Torah, God's 'body' in the form of the Shekhinah. In the Creation, God set the stage upon which to enact His goodness and upon which we enact our lives, recognize Him through the agency of our free will, and receive punishment and reward according to our actions."

Assuming the voice of a father telling his children a story, the rabbi leaned forward and delivered one of the *Zohar*'s most often used homilies. "In the same way a king needs a kingdom, God needs to be acknowledged by His creation. And the way to the king appears when man, in imitation of God's emanations, becomes perfect and thereby merges with the *Ein Sof*. As limited physical vehicles, we cannot understand the process and purpose of Creation. It is only by literally merging our will with God's that we can attain perfect understanding.

"To look at the universe and comprehend it through God's eyes, as it were, Jews have the Torah, their most accessible path to mystical experience. Since we are created in the divine image, that is, as replicas of the emanations that are themselves perfect and limitless, we too must *constrict* our existence and aim it toward

God by contemplating the Torah, the living manifestation of the divine will, the physical, psychological, and spiritual means for the Jew's enlightenment.

"God's will manifested itself in ten fiery spheres that, to us, represent His ability 'from a distance,' so to speak. Since divine will and ability are interwoven, we cannot know where one leaves off and the other begins. God's self-constriction of will resulted in the paradox that exists in the spiritual contradiction between God's omniscience and man's free will, a question that provides a purpose for human existence to begin with and to physical choice, or action in the world. In other words, we are presented with the stage and the sets; we adopt our roles—freely, to a certain extent—and, with our divinely inherited will, we choose perfection.

"*Tzimtzum*," Fleer explained, "is God's direct supervision, his action in our constricted physical world. That is why everything is for the good no matter how 'evil' it appears. You must believe that everything literally happening in the universe is under the direct supervision of God and not within a general, overall pattern of events. Everything in the plan must occur. Only time is subject to change—depending on the spiritual activities of the Jewish people."

Here I resisted the impulse to raise my hand and interrupt the rabbi's discourse. Why had he suddenly interjected history, and why specifically single out the Jewish people, when all along he had been talking so eloquently about God's universal blueprint for *all* of Creation? And didn't Fleer, as a scientist, realize that he had set up a tautology by assuming the existence of a beneficent king who needed universal love but precluded it by reserving a special destiny for only one segment of his kingdom, leaving the others to remain ignorant of their divine origins? Rankled by his paternalistic royal imagery and demand for "obedience," I could all but keep from blurting out in protest. But who was I, an interloper in this room of believers, to challenge the rabbi? I decided to wait until he'd finished. Then I might try to catch him alone and bring up my objections where they wouldn't be heard by the star-struck women sitting next to me nodding at his every word.

Licking his finger and turning a page, Fleer continued, "We human beings and our world were given just enough time to perfect ourselves as God's plan determined. And justice is meted out accordingly. Since we are bound by matter and time, we observe

only the outer shell of things—matter, as conforming to time. The inner essence of all material things, however, conforms to God and may be known—though not by physical intellection—for direct knowledge is the purpose of Creation. Our problem, it seems, derives from the vacuum into which God filtered His own light. As the light left the center, the farther it went the more material it became. So great were the glory and brilliance of God's light that it broke the vessels during the first Creation—an event symbolically described in Genesis as a world populated by the angelic beings who, disastrously, married the daughters of men; or, in Kabbalistic terms, the overabundance of divine light interacting with ill-adapted gross matter."

There it was—the inevitable slap at "gross," "polluted," and "impure" women unworthy, in their "materiality," of being married to spiritual, presumably male beings of pure light. No point cornering the rabbi afterward; the best I could do would be to just leave, quietly, without making a fuss.

Rotating his yarmulke on his head with his left hand like my old yeshiva principal, Rabbi Asher, Fleer said, "From this first attempt at Creation a few early sparks of the light separated themselves and departed. God filled new vessels, this time working more quickly, for He wished to create a vacuum and overflow it in order to create evil as illusorily 'separate' from Himself. Nothing in the world is therefore intrinsically evil, only in the way it is used."

Now that Fleer had moved from imagining God as king to God as mad scientist, pouring evil into test tubes filled with his own divine energy just to spice things up a little, I liked him better. Besides, combined with the rabbi's way of rotating his yarmulke on his head, the pervasive smell of chicken soup had made me nostalgic.

"Our purpose in all this," Fleer said, raising his voice as he approached the denouement of his cosmic drama, "consists of reuniting the original sparks to their source—or reuniting with God—by using all that exists to confirm our existence in God. Willing players, we only come to the Absolute by recognizing it under the mask of this physical world—which only conceals the Absolute so that we may peel away the obscuring layers that divide us from it. All secular knowledge, all invention, all creativity, art, science, emerge from those departed sparks of holiness. And since the sciences themselves are part of the inadequate secular knowledge derived

from man's reasoning faculty, his brain, they are inadequate to examine the Absolute. So-called supernatural power, too, comes from this extraneous holiness embedded in the sparks comprising the divine emanations on the Tree of Life. Philosophical speculation about God emerges from the vacuum where He is hidden; therefore philosophy provides the bridge between the intellectual and spiritual worlds. Thus the Jewish mystical attitude directs us to remember always the sacred in the ordinary."

Removing his glasses, Gedaliah Fleer shut the big black tome with a thump.

I had resolved to leave without making a fuss, but my gnawing lifelong questions wouldn't let me. Why did the rabbis always have to fall back on the "chosenness" of the Jews to explain their position in the world? Why was God so punitive, so willfully sadistic as to inject just enough evil into the Creation to make us suffer? Was it to keep "Himself" from getting bored? I remembered Einstein's observation that "God doesn't play dice with the universe"—also no doubt derived from his Jewish patriarchal assumptions about the benevolent dictator who created and continues to direct its destiny. And most important—what about the "daughters of men"? Were they, trapped in women's bodies, infused with an especially large dose of evil that would doom them forever to be excluded from ascending the Tree of Life and becoming one with their divine source?

The overpowering smell of chicken soup now rolled into the room like a heavy fog. "Why did you specify the *Jewish* people when you spoke of God's plan?" I asked, trying to edge the rabbi against the lectern as the class dispersed. But my question was lost in a welter of shouts and greetings and manly handshakes, and he eluded me.

As I was making my way to the front door, I glanced into the kitchen where a rosy-cheeked woman in her twenties was leaning over a huge cast iron pot and ladling soup into two rows of bowls lined up on a table near the stove. I noticed that the bowls had the same blue-rimmed pattern as my grandmother's *fleischig* (meat) dishware and that the table was covered by the same red and white checked linoleum cloth she'd used on weekdays.

"The Creation may be in a constant state of flux, but chicken soup never changes," I called to the woman in the kitchen.

"Exactly right," she concurred, flashing me a big smile.

Looking back on that night, I am inclined to think it was the young woman's chicken soup more than the rabbi's talk that prompted my insight into the Talmudic saying: "There is no place that is empty of the Shekhinah, not even the thorn bush."[7] By putting me directly in touch with my senses, the smell of chicken soup—like the Talmud's lowly thorn bush—had closed the gap between my body and the body of the Shekhinah. Almost as soon as I walked out the door I knew that my "chicken soup" moment of pure awareness had led to a spontaneous experience of the Shekhinah manifesting as the body of the world. My next step would be to devise a meditation that by reinforcing such moments would enable me to practice "pure awareness" in everyday life.

FIRST MEDITATION: THE BODY OF THE WORLD

To find a way of formally structuring the spontaneous experience of pure awareness evoked when we let our senses do our "thinking" for us, I turned to *ayin*, the nondirected form of Jewish meditation referred to by Avram Davis. It taught me that the best way of bypassing the *Zohar*'s obstructive arcane imagery and reclaiming the sacred female body is to condense the image of the Tree of Life into a meditation that focuses intensely on any sensory experience of the physical world (hearing, seeing, touching, tasting, smelling) and getting lost in the moment of that encounter. Confronting the world strictly through the senses results in an awakening to the "interdependence" symbolized by the sefirot—without having to memorize a complicated set of "divine attributes." Embracing all the sefirot at once, what I call the "Path of Emanations" is actually a meditation on the Shekhinah as "the body of the world." It can be seen as an ongoing series of opportunities for a woman to wholly immerse herself—physically and mentally—in the life of the moment, eliciting a "sacred" spark from even the most ordinary encounter. The emphasis, as always, is on direct experience—the immediacy of a woman's body/mind encounter *with* and *as* the world rather than on conceptual thinking *about* the world.

Incorporated into a woman's daily activities, meditation on the physical world requires the fine-tuned attention resulting from the regular practice of sitting and attending to the breath. Only when she has quieted her mind, can a woman be truly "mindful" of her body, her senses, and her place in the world. The power of her attention will determine the intensity of her experience of the interdependence of all things.

INSTRUCTIONS

Seated and focusing on the inhalations and exhalations of the breath, experience your body as the body of the Shekhinah manifesting as the five senses. Allow yourself to concentrate intently on the sounds, smells, and other physical sensations you experience as you sit and breathe. Do not judge any sound, sight, smell, and so on as "pleasant" or "unpleasant." Without visualizing or creating a "story" around the sensation, continue concentrating on it until it becomes indistinguishable from your breathing. Remain with the sensation for twenty-five minutes before opening your eyes fully and getting up from your seat.

SECOND MEDITATION: THE CYCLES OF LIFE

Traditional techniques for visualizing one's body as the human form of the Tree of Life were drawn exclusively for male meditators. All the Kabbalistic illustrations that come down to us, both figurative and literal, represent the male body. Although technically neutral, the central branch of the Tree is identified with the male spine, the various sefirot—even the female ones on the left side—from the top of the head, facial features, arms, fingers, torso, genitals, and feet, are all male. In "unifying" the male and female sefirot during the sexual act, Kabbalists always assumed the male (active) role by visualizing themselves as the masculine "upper" sefirah *Yesod* (foundation), and their wives as the female (receptive) "lower" sefirah *Malkut*.

Because the female limbs of the Tree of Life, located on the left (sinister) side have been regarded as inferior for so long, the

"Cycles of Life Meditation" offered here is designed specifically to eliminate the fear and shame associated with the female body. It avoids the old patriarchal stereotypes by focusing attention less on individual sefirot than on the cycles of life embodied in the Cosmic Tree. Like the previous meditation, this one blends attention to the breath with sensory awareness, only now the focus is on your body/mind as a dynamic process—flowing and changing from moment to moment.

INSTRUCTIONS

Sitting with your eyes partly closed, experience your body/mind as a Tree of Life. Its blood is the "sap" coursing through your limbs. Its breath is the "oxygen" flowing through your leaves and branches. As your mind quiets and your breath grows deep and calm, you are exquisitely aware of yourself as the embodiment of the cycles of life. You are at one with the Earth, at home with change. Your limbs nestle all of Creation. Stay with the feeling as long as you can. If your mind wanders, simply come back to the breath. When you get up after twenty-five minutes, you will find that you feel vitalized and relaxed and that your perception of the world around you has sharpened considerably.

THE RADIANT REALM OF THE SENSES

I cannot emphasize enough the importance of trusting the senses in meditation. Too often we live in a fantasy world, allowing our daydreaming minds to take over our lives. Fearful that we aren't being "spiritual enough" when we're just sitting and breathing, we tend to confuse trance with awareness and hallucination with vision. Hoping meditation will bring us supernatural powers, like the man in the Paul Simon song, we too often find ourselves walking into a brick wall. If there is one thing I learned from Zen, it is that "ordinary mind is the Way." Ordinary sleeping, walking, eating, working at the computer, answering the telephone, laughing, crying—this is the "sacred" stuff of meditation. There isn't a spell or an amulet powerful enough to match it. Here are two

"teaching stories" that illustrate this point perfectly—one Hasidic and one Zen.

The first story is about how Dov Baer, the Maggid of Mezerich (1710–1772) met his teacher, the Baal Shem Tov. A renowned Talmudic scholar, Dov Baer was known for his saintliness. When speculating on the Torah no longer satisfied his spiritual yearning, he embarked on a strict course of fasting and self-mortification to the point at which his body grew so weak and sick he could hardly walk. In constant pain, he could no longer study, and so decided to seek out the Baal Shem Tov for healing. After an excruciating journey on foot, Dov Baer (known as a *maggid*, or itinerant preacher) at last appeared at the Baal Shem Tov's door and was met by the great holy man himself. Invited in, the Maggid described his purpose for coming and waited to see what the Baal Shem Tov would do to heal him. To the Maggid's surprise, instead of praying or performing a healing ritual, the Baal Shem Tov immediately launched into a description of his coachman's diet. This seemingly frivolous monologue about the food habits of a man who wasn't even in the room went on for hours. Finally the Baal Shem Tov finished and the disappointed Maggid returned to his inn and began packing for his return journey home. Suddenly there was a knock at the door and when the Maggid opened it, none other than the Baal Shem Tov's coachman himself was standing there. Would the Maggid please consider coming back, the master had something more to say. Fearing a continuation of the evening's boring monologue but not wanting to be rude, the frustrated Maggid returned to the Baal Shem Tov's house.

This time, the Baal Shem Tov was sitting in front of an open book on the table. Pointing to a page, he asked the Maggid to interpret a Kabbalistic passage from the work of the Ari (Isaac Luria). Seeing his chance to impress the great master, the Maggid delivered the most penetrating discourse of his entire preaching career. But no sooner had he stopped speaking than, looking him straight in the eye, the Baal Shem Tov said: "You have learned only the body and not the soul," and picking up the book, launched into his own interpretation of the Ari's Kabbalah. Suddenly the Maggid felt as if he were being set on fire; his body grew light and a great radiance filled the room. Only when the Baal Shem Tov

had finished talking did the radiance fade and everything become as before.

That night the Maggid not only became the Baal Shem Tov's disciple, but his first and greatest successor.[8]

The second story also concerns a learned scholar who, not finding spiritual satisfaction from interpreting scriptures also made a long, hard journey on foot to meet a renowned master. The Chinese Buddhist monk Tokusan, famous for his brilliant commentaries on the Diamond Sutra, traveled south to refute the Zen teachings that had taken hold there. On his way, he stopped to rest at an old woman's tea shop. Seeing him lugging a cart filled with manuscripts and scrolls, the old woman asked, "What's all that stuff you're carrying in the cart?"

"They're my commentaries on the Diamond Sutra," Tokusan replied.

The old woman said, "According to that sutra, past, present, and future mind cannot be caught. Tell me, venerable monk, with which mind are you going to drink your tea?"

Brought up short, Tokusan, for all his learning, was unable to answer and asked her if there was a Zen master in the area.

The old woman directed him to the monastery of the great Ryutan, a few miles away.

Like the Maggid, Tokusan, too, met the master himself in the doorway and was invited in. The two men sat and talked for a while, until Ryutan said, "It's late. Let me show you to your room." Lifting the door curtain, he looked outside and turned back to Tokusan. "It's dark out, you'll need a lantern." Ryutan lit the lantern but just as Tokusan reached for it the master blew it out. At that moment Tokusan was vastly enlightened and became Ryutan's foremost disciple. The next day, he took out all his commentaries on the Diamond Sutra, dumped them in a heap, and burned them.[9]

At first glance, these stories are simply describing the meeting of a gifted student with a teacher who, recognizing the student's potential, pushes him over the edge into "enlightenment." Looking a bit closer, we see that in each story a scriptural scholar comes to a teacher in search of a spiritual answer to his conceptual questions. In each case, the answer is right in front of the scholar's nose, but he can't recognize it because he is too dismissive of its

"ordinariness." The Maggid is put off by the Baal Shem Tov's description of his coachman's food preferences and Tokusan is stumped by an old woman selling tea. Both men are sincere spiritual seekers, but they can't get past their conceptual notions about what is "sacred" and what is "ordinary." It is only when their "lights are blown out"—that is, when *thinking* gives way to *experiencing*—that the two men actually "see the light." Both are given a second chance when they miss the first, more obvious one—the Maggid when the Baal Shem Tov, after talking about the ordinary daily food habits of his coachman, shocks him by telling him he has only a superficial understanding of the Ari's Kabbalah; and Tokusan when Ryutan follows up on the old woman's "tea teaching" by unexpectedly blowing out the light and allowing Tokusan to experience his own "darkness."

What I come away with from both these stories is the importance of opening up to the experience of "just seeing." Now let's move on to the experience of "just hearing" explored in the next chapter, "The Path of Sounds."

six

THE PATH OF SOUNDS

JOSEPH CARO AND THE VOICE OF THE SHEKHINAH

The voice of the Shekhinah, whose "divine breath" brought life into being, continues to vibrate throughout the entire Creation as "the sounds of the world," or what Kabbalists refer to as the *Baat Kol* (Daughter of the Voice). Moses was said to have heard it in fire, Job, in wind, and in a meditative transposition of the senses known as "synesthesia," the Israelites at Sinai *heard* it as "light" and *saw* it as "sound." And in sixteenth-century Safed, long after these experiences had been canonized in the Bible, the Shekhinah spoke to Joseph Caro in the unique form of a female *maggid* (spirit-guide).

If any place could be called a haven for Jewish mystics it was sixteenth-century Safed. In this remote Galilean mountain hideaway, far from the eyes of the mainstream rabbis and the Inquisition, the Kabbalah flourished as never before or since. Home to a sizable Jewish community from the first to fifteenth centuries, the population of Safed swelled after the Spanish expulsion, turning what had been a pastoral village into a thriving economic, intellectual, and spiritual center. Shlomel of Moravia, biographer of Safed's most illustrious Kabbalist, Isaac Luria, described it as the communal dwelling place of "great scholars, saints, and men of action" who were unashamed to perform physical as well as spiritual labors, including "housework"![1] Modeled on the Messianic teachings and ascetic practices of

the ancient Dead Sea Essene Commune, the Safed circle produced many gifted spiritual figures—not the least of whom was the amazingly versatile lawyer, rabbi, and Kabbalist, Joseph Caro. Like the Spanish-born Abulafia three centuries before, he too had received a "prophetic call" while in an ecstatic trance ordering him to leave his home in Spain and make his way to the Holy Land. However, conditions for Caro's arrival from Constantinople in 1536 were considerably more favorable than those of his predecessor, and upon receiving a warm welcome from his fellow Kabbalists, he soon settled comfortably in Safed.

A practical attorney by day, Joseph Caro inaugurated the *Shulkhan Arukh*, the code on which the modern Jewish legal tradition is founded. An inspired mystic by night, Caro met regularly with a group of Kabbalists known as the *Chaverim* (friends) to meditate at the graves of departed masters, engaging afterward in spirited scriptural discourses that often continued until dawn.

A unique combination of law and mysticism, the articles of association Caro drew up for the *Chaverim* became the template for all Kabbalists to follow. Directed by their leader, the prominent Kabbalist Solomon Alkabez, the men pledged themselves to remain constant in their attention to the Torah both mentally and physically. With the aim of turning their hearts into the "abode of the *Shekhinah*," they were to refrain from anger, gossip, swearing, hypocrisy, and cruelty to animals. Vowing to share equally in the sufferings and joys of his peers, each *Chaver* was responsible for rebuking an erring comrade, which the admonished party had to endure without reply. After morning prayers and meditation the group would meet to discuss spiritual matters for an hour each day, devoting Fridays to a general review of the week's progress.

Except for communal feasting and celebrating on the Sabbath, the *Chaverim* were committed to a scant vegetarian diet. At home, they trained the members of their families in the Kabbalistic technique of meditating on blessings before meals by chanting, repeating, and savoring every word. On Friday evenings, accompanied by their families, they poured into the streets and celebrated the arrival of the Shekhinah in the form of the "Sabbath Queen" with singing and dancing. Afterward, the entire synagogue congregation assembled at the home of Rabbi Joseph Caro. Gathering

round his table, they listened to the voice of the Shekhinah speak to him through his female maggid as he sat in trance.

THE LAWYER AND THE MAGGID

Slightly lower than the gift of prophecy, the appearance of a maggid offering advice and spiritual guidance from deceased mystical sages of the past was not an uncommon phenomenon in Kabbalistic circles. But perhaps the most famous and versatile of all was Joseph Caro's female maggid. When he meditated on Scripture, she manifested herself as the embodied voice of the Torah. Contemplating the Tree of Life, he communicated with her in the form of the tenth sefirah *Malkut* (Sovereignty). When he chose to study ancient Talmudic texts, she appeared to him as the spirit of the *Mishnah* (Oral Law) or *Gemarrah* (Scriptural Commentaries). We know all this because Caro methodically documented her many appearances and guises in the *Maggid Mesharim* ("Angel-Guide to Correct Behavior"), a 160-page diary that turned up unexpectedly in a Polish bookshop seventy-one years after his death. Kept from the ages of thirty-two to eighty-four, in addition to noting the verbatim discussions between the Kabbalist lawyer and his maggid, Caro's diary is a fifty-two-year record of his life, including his three marriages, six children, and daily activities in Safed.

Losing himself in deep meditative trance at the onset of every Sabbath, Caro opened his body and mind to possession by the spirit of the Shekhinah. Depending on the form and intensity of his trance and object of contemplation, she spoke through his mouth to a rapt audience on a variety of subjects ranging from the spiritual activities of the deceased masters in the heavenly palaces to philosophical discourses on the Tree of Life to personal events in Caro's own life and those involving his Jewish contemporaries. No subject was too sacred or too mundane. Jumping from a detailed description of angels to the solution of a complicated *halakhic* (legal) problem he might be facing, the maggid assumed a variety of appropriate guises. Depending on the form and intensity of Caro's trance and contemplation of the *Mishnah* (Yehudah Ha Nasi's 200 C.E. sixty-three-volume compilation of Jewish Oral Law) she

might offer him the innermost secrets of that ancient text—"provided you cleave unto me, unto my laws, unto my service, unto my fear, and do not separate your mind from me even for one moment." Or, detecting even a hint of distraction on his part, she might warn him: "There may be wandering thoughts in your mind that interfere, and these cause that not all my words come true, and they also cause me to stammer and prevent me from revealing to you everything."[2] Though conscious and alert during his trances, Caro would occasionally lose track of the maggid's instructions and begin stammering in his effort to articulate her words. Apparently, no one in Caro's circle thought it odd that the maggid speaking through the scholarly rabbi's mouth was female. In fact, the maggid herself often alluded to Caro's second wife, claiming that this woman's Kabbalistic ancestry and great spiritual depth were responsible for the Shekhinah's appearances in the first place.

Although the diary does not offer information about the onset of the maggid's appearances, Caro's idolization of the Portuguese Marrano mystic Solomon Molko provides a clue to its source. Although not as fortunate in his early predictions as his thirteenth-century Spanish predecessor Abraham Abulafia, Solomon Molko too harbored messianic notions about confronting and overpowering the Inquisition. He was perhaps best known for flamboyantly revealing his Jewish origins by circumcising himself in public, proclaiming the opening of the Messianic Age and ending his life at the Inquisitor's stake in Italy. Caro's diary notes that on hearing of Molko's death the aspiring mystic vowed himself to a similar fate. The diary goes on to describe what was to become Caro's obsessive desire for public martyrdom in the Jewish cause, even after he had long settled into his successful, relatively peaceful life in Safed.

Driven as a young man in his search for prophetic experiences, Caro had moved from his home in Toledo to Constantinople and become a student of Rabbi Joseph Taytazak, a Kabbalist and medium. Famous for his asceticism, Taytazak would evoke his maggid by studying the Torah eighteen hours a day, sleeping in a painfully convoluted posture in a wooden box, and eating virtually nothing. Yet, when news of Solomon Molko's death reached Constantinople, even the saintly Rabbi Taytazak could not keep Caro from rushing off to the Holy Land to await the coming of the

Messiah. According to Caro's diary, his own maggid had already appeared to him while he was studying under Taytazak, advising him to "Go to the Holy Land, because not all the periods are equal and there is no obstacle to bringing help. . . . And do not feel sorry for your property, for you will eat of the best of the upper land [Galilee]; therefore, hurry and emigrate, for I will maintain you. . . . Be courageous!"

Of the 135 dated appearances of Caro's spirit-guide, 109 occurred on Friday nights, when Sabbath observers were believed to have been loaned an *ibbur*, additional soul. Thereafter the maggid's appearances are recorded in no specific order, the diary recording random discourses in the first person preceded by the times, places, and circumstances of her manifestations as "The Mother," "The *Matrona*," "*Tiferet*, the divine emanation of 'Beauty' on the Tree of Life," "The Redeeming Angel," "The Emissary of the Holy One," or "The *Shekhinah*."

"I am the emissary of the Holy One, blessed be He . . . I watch over you steadily. . . . The *Shekhinah* talks to you . . . You have attained what no one in a generation, during many preceding generations, succeeded in attaining."

Most often presenting herself as "The *Mishnah*" (Jewish Oral Law), the maggid advised Caro to enhance his meditations by reciting the *Shema* (Hear O Israel, the Lord Our God, the Lord is One) using the accompanying breathing techniques derived from the first-century instructions of Rabbi Simeon bar Yohai, outlined and expanded by fellow Safed Kabbalist Chayim Vital.

"If your eye could only be permitted to see, you would find yourself encompassed by troops [of angels] from every side. Some of them were created by the breath that comes out from your mouth when you study the Mishnah," the maggid proclaimed.

Using the Mishnah as a springboard to ecstasy, Caro recited extensive sections from the ancient text by heart, an exercise popular with fellow *Chaverim* like Rabbi Isaiah Hurwitz, who wrote: "Happy is he who comes to know the six orders of the Mishnah by heart, for thereby he makes a ladder on which his soul ascends to the highest degree." To ease the spirit of a departed relative Caro could have drawn on any number of published manuals offering meditations on chapters of the Mishnah beginning with the consonants spelling out the name of the deceased. If, for example, the

deceased relative's name were Dan, Caro might meditate on the treatises *Niddah* and *Shabbat*, which open with the letters *Dalet* (D) and *Nun*, respectively.

In addition to providing details about Caro's personal career as a medium, his diary also offers valuable information about Kabbalistic techniques for evoking spirit guides in sixteenth-century Safed.

> Go to a pure place, thinking constantly of Torah without letting your thoughts wander even for a second, even while you are eating or talking. You must unify your limbs, body, and soul in constant service to me, thinking of no other thing. This is certainly true during the time for prayer. Nullify all thoughts that enter your mind, for they are manifestations of the ego . . .
>
> Unify your heart constantly, at all times, at all hours, in all places, thinking of nothing except me, as I appear in my Torah and ritual. This is the mystery of unity, where a person yokes himself literally with his Creator. For the soul that attaches itself to Him, along with its body and limbs, literally becomes a "Camp of the *Shekhinah*." This is what the Torah means when it says, "You shall fear the Lord your God, serve Him, and cleave to Him . . ." Your attitude toward everything in this world must be one of detachment, for if one does not equate the good of this world with its evil, he is not unifying himself with his source completely.[3]

Caro's concentration eventually deepened to the point where he no longer had to recite the Mishnah to evoke the maggid; accompanying him at all times, she addressed him admiringly as a *tzaddik* (holy man). "Whenever you go out into the street, my seven worlds and all their hosts escort you and proclaim before you, 'Pay homage to the holy image of the King! . . . Make place for the holy image of the King!" But to make sure her praise didn't go to his head the maggid admonished him, adding, "You must not sever your attachment to the Blessed Name for a single instance; for should you do it, the *Shekhinah* will fall down. And woe to the man and to his fate who causes the destruction of all the worlds."

Ever aware of his delicate position as potential redeemer or destroyer of the world, Caro spent his days compulsively meditat-

ing. Walking along the road, he would visualize the letters of the Sacred Name suspended before him; eating, drinking, and talking were occasions for "thinking Torah thoughts." Promising him the highest prophetic experience, a vision of Elijah, the maggid grew increasingly more punitive, first demanding that Caro stop spicing his food and later that he go on forty-day fasts without drinking so much as one glass of water during the day. "Elijah clothes himself in a body to be visible to you, concentrate on [him] at bedtime. There are three ways of seeing him: in a dream . . . while awake and greeting him . . . while awake, greeting him, and being greeted in return. You will be raised to the third degree. You will see him while awake, greet him, and be greeted by him in return; but he will appear to you when you do not expect him."

Having fasted for three days and nights seven weeks running, Caro was at last awarded the vision the maggid had promised. According to his diary, he was seated on his bed when the prophet Elijah, dressed all in white, entered the room, sat down on a chair opposite, and engaged him in face-to-face conversation.

Although by the eighteenth-century the word "maggid" no longer referred to a spirit-guide but to a human (male) preacher, Joseph Caro's conversations with the Shekhinah remain viable spiritual guideposts for women. Divested of their ascetic messianic trappings, his meditations remind us that the *Baat Kol* is available to anyone who is willing to listen. A departure from Caro's arduous evocations of his (too often for my taste) punitive spirit-guide, my "Daughter of the Voice" meditation requires single-pointed attention rather than self-mortification. It takes the form of a *yichud*—the practice of "binding" oneself to the moment of listening to the sounds of the world, no matter how ordinary or sacred, pleasant or unpleasant. It is based on the Baal Shem Tov's teaching that the *Baat Kol*, which pervades the entire universe, can even be heard in the shout of a mad person in the street.

FIRST MEDITATION: DAUGHTER OF THE VOICE

Since the "divine voice" is always "audible"—carried by the song of the birds, the chirping of crickets, the howl of the wind, and, in

our own times, by the hum of traffic, the buzz of the air-conditioner, the percolating coffee pot—simply sitting and listening while concentrating on the breath can result in a direct experience of the *Baat Kol* manifesting as the sounds of the world. Although listening might appear to be a simple task, it is actually one of the subtlest forms of meditation. For, we must first learn to listen until we are nothing but our ears. Next we must reach the stage where our ears have merged with the sounds. And finally, we must disappear into the world where there is no listener and no sound. Only then will we realize that we ourselves are the "daughters" through whom the voice of the Shekhinah resounds.

The *Baat Kol* first called to me when I started writing this book. I was sitting in front of my computer one evening despairing of ever coming up with a meditation on sound for women. I had just finished reading that the Talmud had once permitted women to be called to the Torah but that Maimonedes, who considered a woman's voice an "abomination," had later abolished the practice for fear of besmirching the honor of men.

To divert myself from my rage and despair, I decided to check my e-mail, finding only one readable message among the spam. It was from my niece in Northampton, Massachusetts. Rachel had just emerged from a concert of "Kabbalah Music" by a woman named Laura Wetzler and had become so excited to find "another female Kabbalist besides my aunt" that she'd immediately rushed backstage and, cornering the artist, told her about me. As it turned out, Laura knew my work and had been looking to get in touch with me. Rachel gave her my address, and a few days later a package arrived containing several promotional materials, concert announcements, and a CD titled "Kabbalah Music: Songs of the Jewish Mystics: Meditations, Devotions and Ecstasies New and Old from Around the World."

Intrigued by the CD's subtitle and liner notes, I decided to play it right away. What happened next was as dramatic for me as it must have been for Joseph Caro on hearing his maggid for the first time. I knew as soon as the first notes of the first song started and Laura's magical voice rang throughout the house that the Shekhinah herself had come to call. For 57 minutes and 18 seconds, I sat transfixed, unable even to wipe away the tears running down my face. The sound of that voice was unearthly, like nothing

I had ever heard before, overwhelming even the beautiful Hebrew, Aramaic, Ladino, and Yiddish lyrics of the music gathered from around the world.

As soon as the disc ended, I sat down and wrote a meditation on the *Baat Kol*, the Daughter of the Voice. Dedicated to Laura Wetzler, I offer it here.

INSTRUCTIONS

Begin by sitting comfortably and following your breath, only now when you have settled and your mind is quiet, focus all your attention on the sounds, beginning with the soft sound of your breathing. Leave yourself open; make your entire body into an "ear." Do not try to shut out any sound you might identify as "unpleasant," do not think of any sound as "noise." Do not associate thoughts or images to any sound. If your mind wanders, bring your attention back to the sound of your breathing. Gradually, you will enlarge your focus to encompass the sounds around you until there is no distinction between the voices "inside" and "outside" you.

For this meditation, it would be good to use a bell-timer that goes off after twenty-five minutes. Let the reverberation of the bell continue until the sound dies away. Then open your eyes fully and slowly stand up.

SECOND MEDITATION: CONVERSING WITH THE SHEKHINAH

Although undoubtedly aware of Joseph Caro's conversations with his female maggid, the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov, chose a more "Hasidic," down-to-earth way of encountering the Shekhinah. In the homely Yiddish conversations with God practiced by women barred from performing synagogue rituals, he discovered a profoundly devotional form of meditation on sound. In adapting the technique for his Hasidim, Rabbi Nachman referred to it as a conversation between "sons" and their "Father"; and that is how this meditation devised by women came down to us with an all-male cast. But bypassed as

they were, the women who originated these conversations with the Shekhinah surely must have felt they were talking with her as intimately as they would with a mother, sister, friend, or daughter. They no doubt heard her answering them in the familiar voices of the women with whom they shared their lives, "creating an enlarged vision . . . transforming their personal self-doubt and confusion into clarity and conviction . . . [their] sense of [individual] powerlessness . . . supplanted by the experience of relational power."[4]

This new version of women's conversations with the Shekhinah combines permuting and chanting aloud the sounds of the "Mother Letters," *Alef*, *Mem*, *Shin*. Building on earlier meditations outlined above, it combines breath, sound, and physical articulation of the transposed letters by the vocal cords. This meditation may be practiced individually, but chanting is always more powerful when performed in a group.

INSTRUCTIONS

After sitting and following the breath for five minutes, making no associations to their meaning, chant each of the following words seven times for twenty minutes:

EMESH
SHEMA
MAH-SHEH
HA-SHEM

As always, do not get up from your meditation seat abruptly. I recommend drinking a glass of water after chanting. Or, if you practice with a group, it is always nice to drink tea together afterward. In general, I have found that chanting is best practiced with other people. Not only are we energized by the sound of other voices, but we become less self-conscious. If we really let go and chant with everything we've got, forgetting whether we "sound good" or whether we're "doing it right," we enter more easily into the state of concentrated absorption known as *devekut* (cleaving).

I have observed that when women practice together without men the energy in the room is different. Notice that I said "different," not "better" or "more conducive" to concentration. I had years of experience of praying daily with a group of girls at Beth Jacob; after leaving the yeshiva it took me a while to get used to attending Reform or Conservative synagogue services with boys. So I know what that "difference" feels like. It's almost palpable. Later, in Princeton, there were times when I would lead a Zen retreat comprised entirely of men. Whenever we chanted, mine was the only woman's voice in the room. And those occasions, too, I noticed, produced a "different" kind of energy. Now it doesn't matter to me at all with whom I am chanting. I imagine that as more women get comfortable with assuming leadership positions, it won't make as much difference whether we chant in mixed or single-sex groups. It is not making beautiful music but losing ourselves in the act of vocalizing the breath as sound that is important. Like sitting in silence, chanting is a very powerful form of meditation. And if we combine chanting with movement, a staple of Hasidic meditation, practicing with a group is essential. This is most evident in the Baal Shem Tov's innovative "Path of Song and Dance," the subject of my next chapter.

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seven

THE PATH OF SONG AND DANCE

THE HASIDIM

The Baal Shem Tov saw the entire physical world as a divine instrument that could be plucked at any moment to release the divine music within. And since most of the Baal Shem Tov's constituents were simple townsfolk, releasing that divine music through singing and dancing rather than formal meditation became the preferred Hasidic path to God. Even the Baal Shem Tov's most learned disciples found that contacting the divine music reverberating throughout the body was a more direct way of performing the complex *yichudim* (binding exercises) practiced two centuries before by the Kabbalists of Safed; and they too communicated their teachings through ecstatic song and dance, each putting his individual stamp on this unique Hasidic form of meditation.

The most famous eighteenth-century master of Hasidic song and dance was Shneur Zalman, first disciple of the Baal Shem Tov's successor, the Maggid of Mezerich, and founder of the Lubavitcher branch of Hasidism. Meditating on the colors of the divine emanations on the Tree of Life as he sang, Shneur Zalman initiated the *niggun*, a spontaneous wordless melody that started out as a quiet hum and rose to a roar when picked up by his swaying, circling disciples. Going beyond words to the "essence" of melody itself, the song was designed to transcend all rational thought. Like the blast of the *shofar*, the pure sound of the *niggun* was believed to be even more exalted than chanting the transposed Hebrew letters of the Sacred Name.

Known as "The Rebbe's Song," Shneur Zalman's four-bar *niggun* is still used today by his Lubavitcher descendants.

Shneur Zalman's contemporary, the poetically inclined Levi Isaac of Berdichev added passionate words of praise to his *niggun;* and the saintly Aaron of Karlin even went so far as to declare that singing and dancing were the spiritual equals of Torah study and meditation. But regardless of how it was practiced, the Hasidic *niggun* became the most powerful instrument for inducing meditative absorption. Corresponding to the inherent "music" vibrating through each sefirah on the Tree of Life—and by extension, each limb of the singer's body—the spontaneous *niggun* begun by the teacher and picked up by a swelling chorus of disciples was a powerful form of group meditation available to novices and experienced practitioners alike. The practice required no knowledge of Hebrew, no Torah study or prayer, and there were no lengthy ego-humbling preparations before embarking on the Hasidic path. The only requirements were a sincere spiritual yearning and a willingness to surrender to the pure joy of the moment. In the twentieth century, no Hasidic teacher better embodied this ecstatic way to God than Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

THE SINGING RABBI

I was already deeply immersed in Zen practice in the early eighties and nothing was further from my mind than Hasidic ecstasy when I received an invitation to spend an evening at the Upper West Side synagogue of the "Singing Rabbi," Shlomo Carlebach. Why not? I thought. I'll do it for old time's sake. The celebration was scheduled for 8:30, and though Shlomo was notorious for being late, I knew it would be best to arrive early if I wanted to find a place. No matter. When I got there, the room was already packed with hippie Hasidim, barefoot girls, one or two turbaned Sufis in long white robes, all hugging, kissing, calling out to each other; it was bedlam. Shlomo's band, the Mount Zion Boys, five voluminously bearded, long-haired, bare-chested young men wearing colorfully embroidered Sephardic yarmulkes, leather vests, and beads, were tuning up their instruments. We waited for two hours

before Shlomo himself bolted into the room with his guitar held high above his head in one hand as he high-fived each of the musicians with the other.

"Shalom, my little holy brothers and sisters," he shouted, flashing us his famous toothy, red-faced grin.

Was the Baal Shem Tov like this? I wondered. Were his followers as wild as Shlomo's? Could that have been why the Baal Shem Tov's illustrious contemporary, the Vilna Gaon, personally excommunicated the Hasidim? Not that Jews could be excommunicated. What was it my father had called it? Banned? Yes, that was it. The Maggid of Mezerich had sent two of his most brilliant disciples to plead his case with the great Vilna Gaon. But the Gaon had not even let the Hasidim past his front hall; proclaiming them heretics, he'd banned them on the spot.

In a somewhat less dramatic fashion, the same had been done to Shlomo Carlebach. Every time his name came up, the rabbis would raise their eyebrows, or sigh, or shrug their shoulders. Even the radical Lubavitcher Hasidim found his brand of singing and dancing too "far out."

A sound engineer in a flowered Hawaiian shirt tinkered with two speakers and a tape recorder at the back of the room. Releasing an ear-splitting squeal from the equipment, the sound man gave the signal and Shlomo began strumming his guitar and delivering his half-sung, half-spoken melodic recitative.

"Approaching Mount Sinai required preparation for three days before . . . No boundaries, no boundaries divide us from that place." Shlomo slapped the guitar strings, then, his voice rising, he chanted, "The Torah says only so much in teaching us how to connect with God. Half in black and white, the other half, unknown, requires intensive, devout prayer . . . David's prayers over the five Books of Moses resulted in the Psalms. The unrevealed Torah requires prayer to get behind its literal laws. Searching beyond the written words of Torah is the way of connecting to God . . . returning one's portion to God. He, in exchange, returns His portion. You can only reach this level of exchange with God through preparation. Those who search only for the highest, most absolute light reach a high level of preparation—like Rabbi Akiva. They taste not only the words and letters of the Torah, but much more deeply than this. . . ."

Closing his eyes, Shlomo rocked and swayed. Then suddenly breaking into his meditative mood he opened his eyes, flashed his audience a toothy grin, and burst into song. The engineer at the back of the room gave the signal, and the audience immediately joined in. Three young men with *tzitzith* hanging down to the knees of their jeans jumped up and began clearing chairs from the floor. Soon everyone was singing and dancing. A group of hippie girls linked arms with the three young men in the enormously long *tzitzith*, kicked off their sandals, and started circle dancing. There was no separation of men and women here.

Accompanied now by a pony-tailed guitarist with a Frank Zappa mustache and a feathered headband, Shlomo played, stamped his feet, and sang still louder and faster, urging the circling dancers into frenzy. Some closed their eyes; others stepped back, allowing the inspired ones more space, clapping their hands and singing as they swayed their bodies in time to the music. Several older people who had been standing off to the side watching lost their initial shyness and joined the whooping, leaping inner circle. One of them, a white-haired woman with a long pigtail, waved for me to join them, but I hung back. Shlomo was doing well enough without me, bringing his little straying Jewish holy brothers and sisters back into the fold. His sincerity was endearing. But I wasn't buying.

On my second visit to Shlomo's synagogue, I found a sparse audience and a more somber, reflective mood. Shlomo's sermon was about the esoteric nature of the Jewish holidays; but this time he delivered it straight, without his guitar.

"God gives us a taste of His plan when we suffer. When we cry and are angry at Him, He gives us a taste of what He really wants of us. . . .

"Why Death? God gives *Pesach* [Passover] to counteract it. *Pesach* is freedom, the revival of the dead, spring. God opens the gates of heaven on Passover. . . .

"Why does the Torah prohibit a crippled priest from serving in the Temple? God gives us *Shevuoth* as the answer, a taste of how complete we can be, how perfect. . . .

"We ask, 'Why did I not complete my life's deeds?' Blowing the *shofar* on *Rosh Hashanah* shows that we have always been where we were supposed to be.

"*Yom Kippur* means leaving everything behind, giving up the world and serving God. . . .

"In answer to the fact that there is no guarantee of permanency and perfection, God gives us Succot, His own guarantee that He will always be where we are. . . .

"Shabbat is the acceptance of the world with detachment because we are on such a high plane of consciousness.

"Mount Sinai is a sign of the real existence of the world; the holiness of utmost existence. The knower of One God is he who has directly heard the voice on Mount Sinai. . . . The Torah is words on the level of the mundane world and letters that give the relation of God to man. . . . Utmost existence allows man to taste what is beyond existence. . . ."

Shlomo delivered his sermon with much impressive swaying, pausing, and head-shaking. And though none of its parts seemed to form an unbroken whole, I knew that, in his own way, he was a gifted teacher. His ecstatic singing and dancing could bring the Kabbalah to life as no other Hasid I'd seen. In addition, his ostracism by the mainstream rabbis had endeared him to me, so I decided to seek him out again.

On a Saturday night, in an upscale West Side Conservative synagogue not far from Shlomo's own "alternative" congregation, I took my seat among the well-dressed crowd that had gathered to listen to him sing. Shlomo, as usual, was over an hour late, and the synagogue officials, who had no doubt paid him well, were fuming. Put off by the mocking remarks of the well-dressed men and women sitting next to me, I felt myself becoming defensive about Shlomo's lateness. I was so uncomfortable, in fact, that I started to get up to leave, when Shlomo suddenly burst into the room. It didn't take him five minutes to get that hostile crowd up on their feet, snaking through the aisles with his ragtag musicians in ecstatic singing and dancing.

My face-to-face encounter with Shlomo took place after a concert at Yeshiva University in the Bronx. Despite the chaos surrounding him, I'd grown really fond of Shlomo. Having seen him perform only for Conservative, Reform, and secular audiences, I thought it would be interesting to observe his reception by "Modern Orthodox" college kids. The dancing that night at Yeshiva University was wilder than usual but something had definitely been missing.

"Did you notice, there wasn't one rabbi in the audience—only students. Why do you bother with the Orthodox when they reject

you?" I asked Shlomo after the concert as we headed for his van and the tightly cramped ride downtown.

"These are my little Yiddishe souls," Shlomo replied impatiently.

"What do you mean *your* Yiddish souls? I persisted. "Who appointed you?"

Shlomo stopped in his tracks and handed his guitar to his nearest disciple, a bearded young man in a Che Guevara beret.

"If I don't get them back from the swamilas and the yogilas, who will? And then there won't be any Yiddelach left to greet the Meshiach when he comes!" Shlomo shouted, waving his hands in the air.

"What does it matter anyhow? If the Jews go to swamis and yogis to find God, it means the rabbis haven't succeeded as well in introducing them to him. Anyway, it doesn't make any difference how you get to God, or even if you get to him. . . ."

"Oh, but it makes a big difference, a big, big difference!" Shlomo wagged his finger in my face, his silver beard shimmering in the moonlight. "You don't see the rabbis running around India and Japan gathering little Hindulach and Buddhalach and converting them to Judaism. How many Yiddelach do you think are following the holy swamis—God forbid I should cast aspersions on them—in America? Sixty percent of their flock is Jewish! Do you hear that, Jewish!" Shlomo screamed. Without waiting for a response, he raised his head heavenward and cried, "Oy, *Gott in himmel!* What should we do, lose them entirely? There weren't enough little Yiddelach wiped out in the crematoriums? What do they want from us? How many are we, hundreds of millions, maybe, like the Arabs? Have we so many to spare that we should give them away to the Hindus and the Japanese and the Tibetans?"

"I'm a Buddhist, Shlomo. Maybe you don't want me to ride home with you. I'll take a taxi," I said.

Shlomo turned and walked away.

"Of course he won't let you take a taxi," said the bearded disciple in the beret. "Come on, he always gets excited like that when anyone has this discussion with him. It hurts him like hell when he sees all those Jewish followers of foreign spiritual traditions."

We rode downtown in silence; then, as I was getting out of the van Shlomo sprang from his privileged rabbinical seat up front to

plant a forgiving kiss on my cheek. "I'm sorry I yelled at you, my little holy sister. Don't take it personally."

"I'm sorry, too, Shlomo."

I saw him again in Jerusalem that summer. He was giving a concert the day after a deadly bombing in Zion Square. The streets were crawling with army vehicles; soldiers in full battle dress patrolled every corner shouting into walkie-talkies. A long, dark, uphill trek led into a lighted square at the heart of the Diaspora Yeshivah. The courtyard was packed—standing room only, squatting room on the cold stone floor. Hippies, American tourists, white-haired Christians in cowboy boots, Israeli teenagers, and black-frocked Hasidim of every variety elbowed each other for space near the stage. The inevitable barefoot girls were there, perched on the ancient walls alongside recently "returned" women in tie-dyed dresses with babies in slings across their breasts. On the stage, Shlomo's band, the Mount Zion Boys, was tuning up.

The Jerusalem sky was filled with dazzling stars.

Shlomo arrived over an hour late here, too, and again whipped the crowd into frenzied singing and dancing. Tourists and hippies, white-haired Christian cowboys, and black-clad Hasidim locked arms. I tried holding back from joining them but couldn't; the mood of the crowd was too contagious. Leaping into the circle between two barefoot girls and locking arms with them, I danced and sang myself hoarse. Everyone was sweating and panting and crying and laughing crazily. Without pausing, Shlomo and the band segued into a heart-rending version of the Psalms in English, and I found myself crying unashamedly for the twenty people killed by the suicide bomber the day before on the very spot where I was dancing now, for the Palestinians killed in an Israeli raid two days before that. *God gives us a taste of His plan when we suffer.* Was the endless killing a taste of God's plan? *Why does the Torah prohibit a crippled priest from serving in the Temple?* Were those thousands maimed in the never-ending round of vengeance being given a taste of God's Shevuoth, *of how complete we can be, how perfect?* Why all these excuses for human suffering? For God's "plan"? Why did Shlomo have to apologize for God?

That night was the last time I saw Shlomo Carlebach. I later heard that he'd died suddenly, his heart giving way after a strenuous

performance. Not long after I was listening to NPR and heard an interview with Shlomo's daughter. Much against the wrath of the rabbis, she had broken with Hasidic tradition and become her father's successor, the first woman to lead her mixed group of female and male disciples in ecstatic singing and dancing.

Though I had never been officially condemned by the rabbis, I too had experienced public humiliation as a woman on more than one occasion. Yet the one that hurt me most came not from outsiders but from my own family. Years before, while still a graduate student, I had traveled to Chicago to attend the wedding of a cousin on what I thought was my father's "Hasidic" side of the family. I had already begun my research on the Kabbalah and was especially excited to meet my great-uncle, a renowned ancient Near East scholar who had recently retired as Dean of a large Midwestern university. Determined to ask him more about my family's Baal Shem Tov connections, I was delighted to find myself seated next to him at the reception dinner following the wedding ceremony. It was a large table filled with aunts and uncles and cousins representing three generations. Since I had only heard about but never met any of them in person, I spent most of the time socializing. Then, at one point, as I was describing my work to a cousin who was working on a doctorate in education, my great-uncle's wife (a formidable matriarch in her eighties) stopped all conversation by interjecting: "So *you're* the one who turned out to be the Hasid! Who would have imagined it? We always thought it would be your brother!!" Suddenly all faces were turned toward me and everyone was laughing. Realizing that my family was mocking me, I made a feeble joke and pretended to laugh along with them, but my cheeks were hot and my voice was trembling. I knew then and there that I would have to forgo questioning my great-uncle about the subject—just as I had as a child when my father had shut off all further discussion of his family's Hasidic roots. But I did get up the courage afterward to ask my cousin why my father's relatives had such a derisive attitude toward their own family heritage. Interestingly, she informed me that the bride whose wedding we were celebrating came not from the Hasidic branch of the family but from their opponents, the rationalist *Mitnagdim*, and that my great-uncle's sister, my paternal grandmother, had been ostracized from her family of "German Enlightenment

intellectuals" for marrying my grandfather, a direct descendant of the Baal Shem Tov and scion of a Galician Hasidic dynasty famous for its miracle-working rabbis. Emboldened by that information, I decided to live up to my reputation and show the "rationalists" in my family what an antic Hasidic female could do. I owe the following singing and dancing meditations to that long ago wedding day encounter with them in Chicago.

FIRST MEDITATION: *NIGGUN*

Although Hasidim were known to have female teachers and disciples (mostly from their own families), women were not allowed to participate directly in the singing and dancing meditations with men. A curtain or screen was put up to separate them from the men, but they could still presumably hear the *niggun* and dance on their own. The physical segregation of women is no longer practiced in most contemporary Kabbalistic circles, but the psychological barriers exist. Hasidic chanting, singing, and dancing remain the product of a spontaneous upsurge of insight experienced and directed by male teachers. Perhaps this will change as more women invent and teach new Hasidic forms of meditation. The meditations presented here construct a bridge between old and new by insisting that *niggun*, though practiced by mixed groups of men and women, be the spontaneous creations of a rotating women's leadership, and that all accompanying dance movements be similarly choreographed and led by women.

With her body as a vehicle for the divine music coursing through her, a woman cannot help but dance as she disappears in ecstatic union with the Shekhinah.

INSTRUCTIONS

This group meditation begins with sitting and listening to the sound of your breath until you locate its source in the sound of the universe. Gradually, the individual breath becomes one with the universal sound, and the voice of the Shekhinah spontaneously emerges from the leader. Making the leader's body her instrument,

the Shekhinah comes forth from within as a low hum, a wordless chant, or even as a full-fledged melody. Accompanied by a bell and drum, her voice grows louder; the rhythm of her song slows or quickens—a sign for the group to join her.

The meditation ends as spontaneously as it began with a bell or drumbeat signal from the *niggun* leader.

SECOND MEDITATION: THE DANCING SHEKHINAH

This meditation is based on a dream in which I found myself standing at the front door of my old yeshiva, The Beth Jacob School for Girls, on a winter day. Opening the door and stamping my feet on the long rubber runner in the front hall, I removed my coat, scarf, and boots and hung them in the students' wardrobe. Then I entered the double doors of the auditorium on the first floor that had been used as a synagogue on Saturdays and holidays. I walked boldly into the forbidden men's section, heading straight for the altar steps leading to the purple velvet chair reserved for Rabbi Asher and opened the door in the wall behind it, releasing the familiar musty smell of prayer books in their velvet sacks embossed with lilies and winged sphinxes. Picking up the rabbi's prayer shawl, I stroked its long silken fringes and black striped border then draped it over my head and around my shoulders.

Turning around and looking out across the pews, I saw the synagogue filling with people, men and women dancing together up and down the aisles, carrying Torah scrolls in their velvet and gold wrappings, shaking and jingling their filigree and silver crown bells. Children danced alongside them, waving blue and white paper flags. Orange candles stuck in shiny red apples at the top of the flags dripped juice and wax. The children were laughing. They were joined by a group of ancient women who emerged from behind a screen running, dancing up to the wall where the plaques for the dead flickered in the glow of the children's candles. Snaking their way through the aisles, the congregation disappeared out the front door into the street, leaving me alone in the synagogue.

I reached into the cupboard behind the altar and removed Rabbi Asher's *shofar* from its lacquered box. Lifting it to my lips, I blew a flat, piercing note: "*Tekiah!*" A treble of broken cries: "*Shevarim!*" A medley of wailing trills: "*Teruah!*"—and the dream ended.

INSTRUCTIONS

A blend of movement and chanting, this meditation celebrates the changing moment as the dancing Shekhinah. Circling the room under the direction of the *niggun* leader, the group chants: *Tekiah! Shevarim! Teruah!* Depending on the leader, the rhythm of the chanting and movement can be slow and deliberate (pacing each step to an inhalation and exhalation of the breath and its accompanying recitation of the chant) or brisk and spontaneous (improvising patterned dance steps to the quickened beat of the chant).

The chanting and dancing end when the *niggun* leader rings the final bell.

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EPILOGUE

exploring the world of the Kabbalah has made me poignantly aware of the deep spiritual yearning of women—and of their exclusion by men so burdened by the desire to unite with the Shekhinah that they remain blind to the suffering they inflict on her human counterparts. Still, I can't say that there were not moments of hope that things would change for the better, high points, among my pervasive feelings of despair, and I remain optimistic about the future. It seems fitting that the idea of a "Kabbalistic" meditation for women was initiated at a conference on Mysticism held in Israel in 2000, the first year of a new millennium. Since then, thanks largely to celebrity women like Madonna, interest in the Kabbalah has skyrocketed. Yet one can only wonder if, like so many other ancient spiritual practices that capture the Western imagination in our age of globalization, this one too won't dissolve after enjoying its ephemeral moment in the limelight.

Teaching Women's Studies at Illinois State University, I am constantly observing changing patterns in women's lives, not only from the theoretical feminist perspective of my academic colleagues but from daily interactions with my students—some of which, given the generational difference between us, aren't always comfortable for either side. For example, as a "second wave" feminist I have often felt that the "third wave" feminists in my classes are too apolitical, too consumerist, and frequently even too "sexist" in their approach to gender roles. I once spent three class hours explaining why I found an episode of *Sex in the City* titled "A Woman's Right to Shoes" offensive until I discovered that more than half the women who were arguing with me weren't aware of the title's substitution of the word "choose" for "shoes." My Women in Religion classes consist of a largely self-selected group of

undergraduates who fall into one of three clear-cut categories: female and male religious fundamentalists, feminists who are either struggling with their faith or have rejected it out of hand, and sympathetic or openly hostile men. Discussions there have been "fiery," to say the least. There have been times when debates over abortion, gay marriage, and religious gender inequality almost crossed the line of civil discourse and I had to intervene. Sad to say, especially in the realm of religion, women today are suffering from a backlash throughout the world that threatens to dispel all we have fought for and thought we have won in the way of rights. For every step forward, women seem to be taking two steps back. Right here in the United States, several thousand married Southern Baptist women, assuming the biblical injunction to "obey" their husbands as "helpmeets" (a common term for "wives" among religious fundamentalists) recently took a pledge against working outside the home. In developing countries, economic disasters resulting from policies imposed by transnational organizations like the IMF and the World Bank have caused jobless and landless families to sell female children as young as five in a burgeoning global "sex slave" trade. War has not only increased violence against women in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East but also in countries independent of the former Soviet Union, like Tajikistan, which has returned to the outlawed tradition of "kidnapping brides." In modern Jordan, for example, "honor killings" of girls and women suspected of having been raped continue while feminists working to bring such atrocities to light are threatened with death from fundamentalist Islamist clerics.

Why, then, do I remain optimistic? Because of my work with women who, despite the odds, continue to transform themselves and the world through the creative power of the Shekhinah. Like the courageous lesbian student who, by standing up in class and openly telling her own story, frees other rape victims from their secret self-loathing; or the graduate student from Sierra Leone who travels throughout the rural villages of her war-torn country educating women about the dangers of genital circumcision; or the African American Evangelical pastor's wife who dares to write about the "glass ceiling" for women in the ministry. And outside the university, because of the women I have met while traveling throughout the world giving book readings and radio, television, magazine, and newspaper interviews, workshops, and seminars on

Kabbalah, Zen, and feminist spirituality. All these women have enriched my own spiritual practice in countless ways. I have learned compassion from Christian feminists serving the poor and disenfranchised in India, the Middle East, Asia, and Latin America with no intention of converting them. I have sat on the floors of Catholic retreat houses meditating after taking the Eucharist with nuns who deliver the sacraments despite the prohibitions against them, set by a church they love yet are determined to reform. I have danced with Sufi dervishes led by an American woman *sheikha* in New York. And I am an active member of the *Na Wahine Hui*, a women's collective working to save the land, culture, and religion of Indigenous people in my home state of Hawai'i. Yet of all these, two encounters stand out in my mind as capstones of the frustration and hope expressed by the women I met who urged me to write this book. Both took place in Jerusalem.

The first encounter occurred in 1979. I had been invited to interview a prominent Sephardic Kabbalist in the Old City. I was standing in the doorway of his tiny synagogue, poking my head inside when I caught a glimpse of six swaying figures covered from head to foot in prayer shawls. One of them turned around, flipped aside his prayer shawl, and, in a hostile tone of voice, demanded to know what I wanted.

"The women's section," I whispered, "I'm waiting to interview the rabbi."

The man stalked over to the doorway where I was standing and roughly pushed me into the street. "There is no women's section here," he snarled. "This is a Kabbalists' congregation. Women are not allowed here!"

Before I knew what was happening, I found myself propelled by his huge, hairy paws past an open toilet through an adjoining doorway into a kitchen where a little boy was sitting and eating at a long table.

"What do you mean coming here? One in a hundred-thousand men understand Kabbalah, so what do you, a woman, even think you are doing here?" the man screamed, not giving me a chance to answer.

From beyond the kitchen door came the sound of the men's soporific chanting. The little boy looked up at me from his bowl then resumed eating.

"I—"

"Women must not *dare* approach it. I have been studying for twenty years, and I do not understand it—so much less you." The man pulled down a tattered copy of the *Zohar* from a nearby shelf.

"Tell me, what is this?"

"*Zohar*," I said, my voice cracking.

Opening the book and holding it out to me, the man pointed to Rabbi Moses de Leon's commentary on the Creation. "Here! Go on and explain this to me!"

"Standing here, like this—or will you give me twenty years?"

"Now, you tell me—right now—what it means!" he screamed, jabbing at the page with his hairy forefinger.

I backed off. "No! Not now."

"Where did you study?" he asked.

I looked into the man's face and saw that it was actually generous and open; he was some Sephardic little girl's jolly father who brought boxes of toys and bags of candy home on Friday nights. He loved his little girl, probably tucked her under his vast, winged prayer shawl in the synagogue on *Shabbat*. But of course she was not "of age," not like me—a ritually impure American woman who'd brazenly entered his sacred Kabbalists' cell. . . .

"My teacher was Aryeh Kaplan."

"Ach!" the man waved his hand. Obviously he'd never heard of Aryeh. "You understand nothing, you know nothing! A woman must not touch Kabbalah!"

"I've written a book."

"What kind of book?"

"On the Kabbalah . . ."

"On Kabbalah? *Nothing!* It's worth nothing!" The man stepped back then came forward again. "In what language?" he asked, suddenly interested.

"English, obviously," I said pettishly.

"Nothing! Just stupidity and uselessness—that is what you have accomplished." Then just as suddenly changing his tone, he said, "Bring me this book of yours. Bring it here."

"But you don't read English. We can't talk about the book or about the Kabbalah because you don't read English."

"I read. I understand enough," he replied in English.

A woman in a bathrobe shuffled into the kitchen holding a tiny kitten in her palm. Kneeling, she placed the kitten at its

mother's breast in a box under the sink and shuffled out of the kitchen again.

"Come here with the book tomorrow," the man said, ignoring the woman, the kitten, and the mother cat in the box under the sink.

Turning away from him and stepping out the kitchen door into the street, I said, "Shalom, good-bye. I'm sorry, but I do not give away free copies of my book to anyone but friends."

The second encounter took place a year later, in 1980, when I was visiting my friend Shmuel, the caretaker of the tiny Iraqi Kabbalists' synagogue across the courtyard from the house I was renting. Shmuel met me as I entered the gate with a glass of steaming coffee on a tray then led me inside. For several minutes I sat alone in the Ladies' Section drinking my coffee and waiting for chanting services to begin. Shmuel appeared for my empty glass.

"The afternoon chanting for men is over here. Women's chanting starts in five minutes. Each synagogue in the neighborhood gets a turn; now they're meeting and singing across the street. Don't you hear them?"

The faint, raspy sound of men chanting purled through the silent streets and into the open window behind me.

"There was a light on in the synagogue all night," I said.

"That was my little group of Kabbalists; we were reciting Psalms throughout the night in preparation for Yom Kippur."

Shmuel went to the kitchen and returned carrying a plastic bag filled with cakes in one hand and a sack of candies, chocolates, and gum in the other. Between his thumb and forefinger he had pressed a bunch of freshly picked wild herbs that he held up to my face. The chanting from across the street grew louder.

"These are for a blessing; you must hold them in front of you and inhale their sweetness while chanting." Shmuel pressed the herbs into my hand. "And the candies—here—take—do you like Bazooka Bubble Gum?" He emptied the entire bag of gum and fruit drops and mints and chocolates into my lap.

"Take all the candies you want," Shmuel said giving me a mischievous toothless smile. "One more minute," he said, again vanishing into the kitchen.

Two women in white scarves entered the synagogue then.

"Shalom," they saluted me, kissing the ornate bronze *mezuzah* at the door before sitting down.

Shmuel appeared in the doorway and greeted the women in Arabic, still smiling toothlessly. Clearly, he'd been in too much of a hurry to fetch more candy and had forgotten to put in his false teeth. In his right hand, he triumphantly held up a transparent bag bursting with multicolored spherical candies.

"Here! Share it with the women after you've finished chanting!" Shmuel, who I had long since decided was my *maggid*, my very own spirit-guide, gleefully tossed me his prize.

I caught the bag and clutched it in both hands. Printed in thick black Hebrew letters on the outside was the word *SIMCHA*—"JOY."

I pondered the meaning of Shmuel's advice for a long time before realizing that this book has been my way of sharing a taste of the joy and sweetness of the Shekhinah—not only with the women in the synagogue that day—but with women everywhere.

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GLOSSARY

Abulafia, Abraham: Thirteenth -century Spanish Kabbalist master of Hebrew letter meditation
Adam Kadmon: Great male figure symbolizing the "Body of God" in meditation
Adonai: Feminine Hebrew Name of God
Alef, Mem, Shin: The Hebrew "Mother Letters," symbolic building blocks of life used by Kabbalists in meditation
Anat: Ancient Semitic War Goddess
Ani: (Hebrew) "I" or ego
Anzu: Bird in goddess Inanna's huluppu tree
Asanas: Yoga postures
Asherah: Israelite version of ancient Near Eastern fertility goddess
Atzilut: Emanation
Ayin: "No-Thing," formlessness
Ayshith Chayil: "Woman of Valor," ideal Jewish woman described in Proverbs
Baal Shem Tov: Eighteenth-century founder of Hasidism
Bahir: "Book of Light," twelfth-century Provence meditation manual attributed to Rabbi Nehuniah ben Hakanah
Baat Kol: Daughter of the Voice, Shekhinah manifested as sound
Besant, Annie: Successor to Helena Blavatsky
Bimah: Reader's platform in a synagogue
Binah: "Understanding," third sefirah on Tree of Life
Blavatsky, Helena: Founder of theosophical movement, Christian Kabbalist
Bruriah: First-century female Talmudic sage
Carlebach, Shlomo: Twentieth-century Hasidic master of song and dance
Caro, Joseph: Sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalist, author of *Shulkhan Arukh*, Code of Jewish Law
Challah: Braided bread eaten on Sabbath
Chesed: "Loving-kindness," fourth sefirah on Tree of Life
Chokhmah: "Wisdom," second sefirah on Tree of Life
Cordovero, Moses: Sixteenth-century Safed Kabbalist
Daat: Secret Knowledge—"hidden" sefirah on Tree of Life

Devekut: Cleaving to God
Drush: Allegorical meaning of the Torah
Dumuzi: Human lover/husband of Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna
Ein Sof: Boundless, highest nonmanifest point above Tree of Life
Elohim: Babylonian god Marduk's helpers; Hebrew plural form of El (God) referred to in Genesis Creation story
Enuma Elish: Babylonian Creation story
Essenes: First-century C.E. ascetic Jewish community in the Dead Sea area—associated with Dead Sea Scrolls
Gevurah: "Judgment" or "Strength," fifth sefirah on Tree of Life
Gilgamesh: Babylonian heroic epic of Gilgamesh, half-human brother of Sumerian goddess Inanna
Goyim: (Hebrew) Gentiles
Hagah: Chanting
Halakhah: Jewish law and precepts set down in the Torah and Talmud
Hasidism: Eighteenth-century Jewish mystical movement for the masses emphasizing union with God through daily life activities and ecstatic prayer
Hitbodedut: Meditation
Hod: "Endurance," sixth sefirah on Tree of Life
Huluppu Tree: The "Tree of Life" associated with the Sumerian fertility goddess Inanna
Inanna: Sumerian Great Mother Goddess (3000 B.C.E.)
Ishtar: Akkadian version of Inanna
Jahrzeit: (Yiddish) Memorial anniversary for the dead
Kabbalah: (Hebrew) "Receiving" direct transmission of Jewish mystical teachings from master to disciple
Kali: Hindu goddess of death and transfiguration
Kaplan, Aryeh: Twentieth-century Kabbalah teacher who reintroduced Jewish meditation practice to both religious and secular students
Kavannah: Concentrated intention
Kavannot: Mystical symbols above Hebrew letters of daily prayer book devised for contemplation by Isaac Luria (Ari)
Kellipot: Husks of matter shed as a result of the divine contraction of Ein Sof
Ketubah: (Hebrew) Jewish marriage contract
Lilith: Legendary first wife of Adam cast out of Eden by God for demanding equality with her mate and turned into a demon by God
Lilin: Lilith's army of demons
Luria, Isaac: Sixteenth-century Kabbalah master of Jewish mystical community in Safed
Maggid: Spirit-guide; preacher
Maggid of Mezerich: Dov Baer, eighteenth-century first Hasidic successor of the Baal Shem Tov

Mahamudra: A specific yoga posture
Malkut: "Sovereignty," tenth sefirah on Tree of Life
Marduk: Babylonian warrior god
Maskil: Enlightened
Massebah: (Hebrew) Stone altar in ancient Israel, symbol of male deity
Matronit: (Hebrew) "Mother"—Kabbalists' name for Shekhinah
Me: Sumerian divine powers taken by Inanna from the father god Enki, origins of civilization
Mechitzah: Screen in an Orthodox synagogue separating the women from the men's service
Merkabah: First-century C.E. "Chariot" mysticism based on symbols from the Book of Ezekiel
Mesivta: Rabbinic Academy
Mezuzah: Plaque at entrance of Orthodox Jewish household containing Sacred Name of God
Midrash: Legend, story, and folklore versions of Torah, companion to Mishnah, traditional rabbinic commentary on Torah
Mikvah: Ritual bath
Miriam: Sister of Moses, female Hebrew prophet
Mitnagdim: Rationalist opponents of Hasidism
Mohin de gadlut: Expanded consciousness
Moishe Kapoya: Yiddish male version of "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary"
Moksha: Hindu spiritual liberation from delusion
Naamah: Talmudic variation on Lilith
Nachman of Breslov: Renowned Hasidic teacher, the Baal Shem Tov's great-grandson
Nashim: (Hebrew) women
Netzakh: "Majesty," seventh sefirah on Tree of Life
Niddah: Menstruating (or otherwise "impure") women and purification rituals
Niggun: Wordless Hasidic melody leading into group meditation
Onkelos: Aramaic biblical commentator (about 300 C.E.) who defined Shekhinah as God's female presence or "dwelling place"
Ordeal of the Bitter Waters: Temple priests' test for a wife accused of infidelity
Pardes: (Hebrew) Garden, also a symbol for entering the Jewish spiritual path
Payos: Long facial side-locks worn by Orthodox Jewish men
Peshat: Literal meaning of the Torah
Philo: First-century Neoplatonist Jewish philosopher
Rebbitzen: Rabbi's wife
Remez: Homiletic meaning of the Torah
Roshi: Zen master

Ruach Hakodesh: Divine breath, identified by Kabbalists as another manifestation of the Shekhinah
Sabbath Queen: Aspect of the Shekhinah embodying the Sabbath
Sacred Marriage: Earthly enactment of "divine coupling" by Near Eastern goddess worshipers
Safed: Sixteenth-century Galilean town housing a flourishing Kabbalistic community
Schachter-Shalomi, Zalman: Contemporary ecumenical Hasidic Rabbi who teaches women and secular students
Scholem, Gershom: Noted twentieth-century scholar of Jewish mysticism
Sefer Raziel: Popular Kabbalah collection of medieval spells and amulets of the angel "Raziel"
Sefirot: (Hebrew) Plural for "sefirah," divine emanations or worlds within worlds along the Tree of Life—used extensively in Kabbalistic meditation
Sephardim: Oriental Jews
Shabbat: (Hebrew) Sabbath
Shabbos: (Yiddish) Sabbath
Shamas: (Yiddish) Synagogue sexton
Shekhinah: God's female aspect
Shema: Daily Hebrew chant proclaiming the unity of God
Shevirah: Shattering of the "vessels" (matter) with the infusion of God's divine energy
Shiva: Seven-day mourning period for the dead
Shofar: Ram's horn blown during High Holy Day services in the synagogue
Shochet: (Hebrew) Ritual slaughterer of "kosher" animals
Shulkhan Arukh: Code of Jewish Law (See Joseph Caro)
Simeon bar Yohai: First-century mystic sage, hero of the *Zohar*
Sod: Secret meaning of the Torah
Swami: Hindu holy man
Swamiji: Affectionate term for swami
Talmud: Rabbinic commentaries on the Torah
Tantra: Hindu spiritual path of esoteric sexuality
Tefillin: Phylacteries, leather straps and box containing the Sacred Name of God worn at daily prayer by Orthodox Jewish men
Tekiah, Teruah, Shevarim: Rhythmic blasts on the ram's horn
Terebinth: Tree associated with pagan fertility goddesses
Teshuvah: "Return" or "Repentance" associated with a return to Judaism by secular Jews
Testament of Reuben: Medieval misogynistic text condemning women
Tetragrammaton: Sacred Name of God (YHVH)
Tiamat: Babylonian Mother Goddess

Tiferet: "Beauty," eighth sefirah on Tree of Life
Tikkun: "Repair" of the shattered vessels of the world of matter resulting from God's contraction of divine energy; "correction" of misdeeds
Toharot: Ritual purity laws
Tree of Life: Image associated with Eve and ancient fertility goddesses; meditation symbol used extensively by Kabbalists
Tzadikim: Holy men
Tzeruf: Hebrew letter permutation associated with Abraham Abulafia
Tzimtzum: God's "contraction" of divine energy into the sefirot (emanations)
Tzitzith: Ritual fringed apron worn by Orthodox Jewish men
Yada: (Hebrew) "Know"—also indicates sexual act
Yahweh: Scholars' pronunciation of God's name from the acronym of Hebrew letters Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh (YHVH)
Yesh: Self-consciousness or "ego"
Yeshiva: Jewish parochial school
Yichud: "Binding" visualization exercise devised by Kabbalist Isaac Luria (Ari)
Yiddishkeit: Jewish life style
Yirah: Fear or "awe" of God (a stage in meditation)
Zevi, Shabbatai: Sixteenth-century false Jewish Messiah
Zivvug: Soul mate
Zmiros: Songs celebrating the Sabbath Queen
Zohar: Renowned thirteenth-century mystical text written by Spanish Kabbalist Rabbi Moses de Leon

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INDEX