

es and Studies in the Literature of Jewish Mysticism  
edited by Daniel Abrams

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## Sex of the Soul

The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah

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Edited with a foreword by  
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*Cherub Press*

Los Angeles 2005

There is no difficulty in recognizing the Platonist metaphor of the body as the vehicle of the soul in this text; similarly there are traces of another Platonist concept in the fact that the reincarnation of a male soul in a woman's body is characterized as a punishment. However, the consequences here are much more dire. The passage is steeped in the disorder and chaotic inconstancy of forms churned by the whirlwind of the 'fiery sword' – the Satanic serpent, a contradictory being, or even the demon of the absurd, since he is depicted with bizarre features, as an entity which 'kills indiscriminately' who 'walks when he sits and sits when he walks', devoid of the principle of mercy, embodying a frenzied logic encompassing all the 'figures of men and all the forms waiting to be cast at random into the body'. The most striking thing about these vivid and deliberately disturbing descriptions is the role of gender difference. In fact, if gender difference vanishes, if it no longer represents the true identity of the individual, illogic emerges, and this is what is described as 'abhorrent' in the text, a term taken from Leviticus (18:22) used to characterize the homosexual relationship. The situation which strikes the anonymous kabbalist who wrote this text as the most frightening is the imbalance between the individual's inner being; i.e., his soul, which is either masculine or feminine, and his phenomenal being, i.e., his body. The foundations of reality crumble when physical gender is not the gender of the soul. The normal criteria for identification are lost, since a male body exudes feminine force and vice versa.

The difference in approach is enormous between this medieval text and the Lurianic teachings as transcribed by R. Hayyim Vital, who nevertheless inherited much from early Kabbalah. For Vital, a mismatch between visible gender and real gender (the gender of the soul) was in no way 'abhorrent' but rather a given, something that no value judgment could alter. Naturally, this disparity is the result of a sin committed in a previous existence, but in itself it is a path of purification and restoration. If it leads to a dysfunction such as infertility, this can be overcome by other means and in no way is one's fate sealed. Let us look more closely at Vital's text, and its structural framework. This framework is composed first of all of a system of opposites, in which physical gender (= social gender) contrasts with the gender of the soul (=

נוקבא לדכורא, ואלין דהפכין לשלחנם גרמין הפוכין אלין. הפכפך הכלהו להט החרב המתהפכת מרע לטב ומטב לביש, והכא הוא דצדיק ורע לו רשע וטוב לו, ודא איהו גולל אור מפני חשך וחשך מפני אור, מאן דאלימ גבור, כד אלימ נוקבא על דכורא בגלגולא דיליה לית ליה דיקנא, עקר הוא. עובדוי כבעידא, תועבה איהו. [...] ובגין דא כד גלגולא דנוקבא קא רכיבת עליה, עובדוי איהו כאתתא, כד מליל מליל בפתוחו דידין, וקליה ורבודיה וכל עובדוי כאתתא, תועבה איהו, ובגין דא מברכין ישראל עמא קדישא, ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם שלא עשני אשה.

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individual gender) and their discrepancy leads to a lack of 'female waters', i.e. the power of fecundity, on the level of both the physical ('feminine seed') and the psychological (desire or feminine libido). This psycho-physical sexual incapacity (where procreation is impossible) is the translation of an internalized gender difference. The body and the soul form an individual who is a female but not a true woman. Rather, this individual is a masculine woman – a man in terms of the soul and a partial woman in terms of the body – partial since she lacks the strength of desire for a man, and the force to procreate, which are both intrinsically bound together. Femaleness as a concrete reality is missing. Her husband, who is hence married to a male being, cannot procreate. In order to do so, the sexual components need to be restructured. The masculine soul of this woman needs to become pregnant via a feminine soul, whom she temporarily harbors in her body. This feminine soul, which is thus incarnated in the body, instills femininity into the host woman which suffuses her with sexual desire and fertility. Thus three separate individuals are involved: the husband, the masculine woman, and the feminine woman. The child born from this union, in most cases a girl, is the feminine woman, reincarnated in a new body. This 'feminine graft' can 'take' successfully if there is an affinity or a similarity between the masculine woman and the feminine woman. In certain cases, a boy can be born from the sexual union, but this is a special circumstance. Structurally, R. Hayyim Vital's picture prompts a certain number of questions, which as we will see, have bearing on extremely modern concerns.

The first question is the following: Who are the real parents of the child born from this *'ibbur*? Although initially the father does not appear to be in doubt, he nevertheless is married to an individual who is in essence a man, even though his wife's outward anatomical features are female. Furthermore, although their sexual union produces a child, its existence is due to the temporary presence of a third person, a woman, who constitutes wife's femininity. She is the invisible mother of the child, while later becoming, through reincarnation, the child of this masculine woman and her husband. Of the two mothers, one is a man and the other a woman,<sup>72</sup> the former enjoys a

<sup>72</sup> Was a kabbalist of the end of the fourteenth century, R. Joseph of Hamadan alluding to a configuration of this type when he states that one of Lamech's two wives, Silla, 'was a man'? See Hamadan, *Fragment d'un commentaire sur la Genèse*, translation and critical edition by Charles Mopsik, Verdier, Lagrasse, 1998, p. 45. However the immediate context suggests a different reading (see note 3 in *Fragment d'un commentaire sur la Genèse*) although the idea of a family made up of three people: a

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social existence as the wife who, as such, is barren, and the latter, the real mother, does not exist as an identifiable social individual until she is fully reincarnated in her own daughter. There is no doubt as to the child's parents or its ascendancy: it is a descendent of the couple (man/male-woman), although its conception and birth are due to the presence of another woman assisting the masculine woman. She is basically a man, and what is more, a man who had intercourse with other men during a previous existence. Through *'ibbur*, an 'ontologically homosexual' couple can become fertile, because the two partners who basically are of the same gender are able to procreate. It might be assumed that in a situation such as this, gender difference would be seriously undermined. However, it is not only preserved, but is the factor that governs all relationships. Gender difference is not dependent on anatomy which it transcends, but has physiological and psychophysical manifestations. It is the partial and at times reversed expression of sexual identity which roots itself in the soul. Apparently, however, neither the body nor even the soul bears one gender or the other, but rather the 'feminine' and the 'masculine', acting as principles or pre-existing entities, are the substrates of the body and the soul. They 'incarnate' but do not constitute a gender. It would be more accurate to refer to 'ontological gender' rather than gender or type as social gender.

This leads us to a related question. Lurianic doctrine formulated the dissociation of ontological gender and outward sexual appearance, which was already a key factor in earlier kabbalistic writings, in a complex and influential way. Historical figures such as R. Joseph Karo used this dissociation to account for events in their personal lives. They realized that their sexual partner's soul had the same gender as they did, and that their child was the product of three simultaneous 'contributors'. We know nothing about the possible impact this scenario could have had on representations of family ties. A biographical study of a child born to parents who are both living and dead, of the same sex and the opposite sex, having three associated human genitors, in addition to the child's identity as the reincarnation of one of its two mothers (its feminine mother) would provide extremely interesting anthropological and psychological material. No particular dysfunctions in the emotional balance of such individuals have been recorded. The apparently smooth integration of this system of kinship, which is so strange in our eyes, into sixteenth century Safed society, involving individuals who were in constant communication with the community of the dead, and interacted continuously with them — the defunct at

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times helping them resolve their problems – played a key role in its normalization. This combination was clearly seen as self-evident, and not one that posed any type of social problem, in particular since one of the main figures who transmitted one of the most explicit personal accounts, was one of the major decision-makers and specialists in Jewish law of all times. The embroiling of all the typical and usual symbolic guidelines as concerns marriage, kinship and ascendancy did not foment social disorganization or disruption if it was accepted by society, and did not directly affect physical roles. Naturally the masculinity of the wife of R. Joseph Karo did affect her body as regards her physiological sexual capacities, and Lurianic theory states that the capacity to desire the opposite sex was also altered, but the feminine role of this masculine spouse as regards her husband was not put in doubt, nor was the hierarchy or dominance deriving from it.

Despite these key caveats, the writings which have come down to us from the mystics of Safed in the sixteenth century open up a certain theoretical possibility for the religious recognition of marriage between people of the same sex,<sup>73</sup> multiparentality, co-parentality, and homoparentality. We simply need to extend the reasoning behind the Lurianic doctrine and enlarge the societal and legal aspects to integrate the physical consequences of the sexual mismatch between body and soul into new directions for thought. Devising a scenario which made it possible to see someone who is physically a woman as in fact a man, or vice versa, in the deeply religious social setting of Safed that was extremely strict as regards religious observance, could provide a dynamic model and an example of a functional symbolic strategy that could lead to the acceptance of forms of modern social behavior by religious institutions which have up to now remained inflexible. Despite the current rigidity of normative religious discourse, certain complex doctrinal positions still include provisos which could help modulate the most intransigent stances – provided, however, that they demonstrate as much flexibility and intellectual prowess as our ancestors of yore. Only approaches that combine historical analysis with contemporary sociology are equipped to provide the paradigms for future reconciliation of the strained relationships between individual invention of personal lifestyles and the need to comply with models found in collective traditions. The vast reservoir of the historical memory of religions can fill in the gaps in modern social memory, and these should help understand certain

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<sup>73</sup> This was the case in Christian settings of the medieval institution of *Adelphopoiesis* (lit. 'brother-making') ritual that copied the Christian marriage ceremony in every respect. See John Boswell, *Same Sex Unions in Pre-Modern Europe*, New York, 1995.

modern-day givens that appear to be absolute novelties, and unthinkable other than as aberrations. Although the attempt is always risky, seeking out ancient intellectual formulations, as strange as they may seem, can provide an indispensable contribution to the sociological effort to understand social changes, even the most singular, and resituate them within human history, because they are no longer considered to be radical departures from it. This would be a way of reinvesting new features with the human profundity often stripped from them. What anthropology and ethnology contribute to the modern debate on new demands for shared lifestyles and alternative sexualities could also be considerably enriched by the exploration of ancient solutions that the West and its immediate neighbors have invented over the course of their long history, thus underscoring the basically problematic nature of the determination of sexual identities and the conduct associated with them.

### *Concluding Comments*

The quest for freedom and happiness in the modern world should not be impeded by the idea that anatomical determinism is the overriding determinant of gender – one which assigns people a social identity without giving them the chance to choose or object. The major religions were founded and continue to be viewed as the defenders of norms and opinions as regards sexual identities and their implications for behavior and conduct. Organized religion today is struggling to contribute to or help clarify the current debate over individuals' claims that run counter to dominant beliefs. The rigid interpretations of canonical texts and the laws derived from them, in particular the confusing evidence circulated by so-called edifying literature, makes it nearly impossible for this protest movement, which is perceived as subversive, destructive, or even pathological, to be heard. It has even been labeled a 'modern loss of direction' as though losing direction was something new that had greater negative impact on those who were forging new paths towards individual liberty than those who were clinging to preexisting norms. Kabbalistic writings of the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth century contain a wealth of interpretation, both of biblical text and actual daily existence, which enabled these authors to construct a system of gender difference that was complex to the point of paradox, where the reversals, the combinations and the distortions all found a legitimate and intelligible place. In their eyes, outside appearance is never an accurate reflection of [inner] reality and it is this inner reality which is the key to human relations and identities. On each level there is an interplay of forces moving now closer, now farther away. In this arena of freedom, social and

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religious norms based on appearance and the needs of inner reality clash and coalesce. The possibility for an interaction and a constructive dialogue between them depends on the survival of a tradition and individuals' ties to timeless collective values.

Clearly it is out of the question to draw a direct lesson from these classic texts and apply them to modern reality. The gap is enormous for instance between the specific type of homoparentality described in these texts and modern occurrences, which need not be described in detail. Nevertheless, even though there is no way of equating them, the parallels are thought-provoking and can guide attempts to find solutions to the problems raised, obviously in different terms, but whose formal structures are strikingly similar. The religious recognition and acceptance of polymorphism in human sexual identity, bisexuality, the acknowledgement of a gulf between external gender and ontological real gender, the existence of parents who are basically of the same gender, and a complex economy of desire differing vastly from so-called natural instinct, all demonstrate the flexibility of kabbalistic mystical belief as it attempted to grapple with the infinite variety of human existence. Whereas normative religious institutions which dominated doctrinal truths applied social pressure and exercised their symbolic violence to impose a pre-established single and universal model on individual singularities, certain mystical movements were able to bridge the gap between the traditional religious framework and the broad range of affects, drives, self concepts, alterity and modes of relational being, as we saw as regards gender difference. The societal censure of these movements in their original environments, the more or less deliberate sidelining of their concepts in highly orthodox Jewish 'catechisms' deserves study in its own right. Nevertheless the kabbalists were and are perceived as sufficiently subversive to be subject to silent evincing. Even though most of the kabbalists considered themselves to be perfectly Orthodox, the key factor here is that the society of the time viewed them with distrust. Their ideas and religious considerations have been received differently throughout history, which also merits future investigation.

Aside from the Kabbalah itself and esoteric writings before it, there are echoes of the vagaries of humankind's sexual identity elsewhere. A parable which dates back to the high Middle Ages comments on the biblical story in which the first man was banished from the Garden of Eden. According to the *Tanna devei 'Eliyahu Rabbah*, at the beginning of chapter 1 of Genesis 3: 'God

expelled [*va-yigresh*: also, 'divorced'] Adam as [one does to] a wife'.<sup>74</sup> God is thus considered to have been Adam's husband, and he as having been His wife, before being repudiated for the original sin. Adam is hence the 'wife of God' and this status has nothing to do with his external gender. This shows us that man is also a woman like the others, even in relations to God. The wife of God in Paradise, Adam was banned and since then has been a divorced woman. This divorce and this exile, the expulsion from paradise, is a lesson in humility and a motivator to learn about freedom. Since man was expelled from Paradise, he has lost eternal life but he has acquired his freedom. It thus behooves him to live this life to a fullness that coincides with his nostalgia and the possibility of return.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>74</sup> *Sefer 'Eliyahu Rabba*, Jerusalem 1959, p. 7: ויגרש את האדם מלמד שנתן לו הקב"ה גירושין כאשה.

<sup>75</sup> Aside from the works cited in the notes, I draw the reader's attention to the following publications: *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, volume 95, n.3, 1966: 'La religion; frein à l'égalité hommes/femmes'; N.-C. Mathieu, 'Identité sexuelle/sexuée/de sexe? Trois modes de conceptualization du rapport entre sexe et genre', in N.-C. Mathieu, *L'Anatomie politique: Catégorisation et ideologies du sexe*, Paris, Côté-femmes, 1991; 'Remarques sur la personne, le sexe et le genre' *Gradhiva*, no. 23, 1998; Fabienne A. Worth, 'Le sacré et le sida, les représentations de la sexualité en leurs contradictions et France, 1971-1996', *Les Temps Modernes*, février-mars, n.592, pp. 74-113; Gert Hekma, 'Les Limites de la révolution sexuelle. Grammaire de la culture sexuelle occidentale contemporaine', *Sociologie sociétés*, vol. XXIX n.1, printemps 1997, pp. 145-156.

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