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Sexual issues in Jewish law

Jacob, Walter

Pittsburgh, Pa., 2006

Chapter I. JUDAISM AND SEXUALITY

urn:nbn:de:kobv:517-vlib-10189

CHAPTER I

JUDAISM AND SEXUALITY

Ernest I. Jacob*

Judaism – and we may well say – its daughter religion, Islam, have never glorified sex in their classical form; neither have they condemned or fought it. Both made conscious efforts to keep it out of their theology and to control the sexual life of their adherents. The extent of their success is the subject of this chapter. Jews and Moslems are, of course, no more or less sexual than any other human beings, not withstanding popular misconceptions.

ANCIENT ISRAEL - THE IDEAL

Even a superficial reading of the Hebrew Bible shows that we must distinguish between the ideal and the reality of life in ancient Israel. We will not concern ourselves with the question whether those ideals were the results of a slow evolution as expressed by modern biblical criticism, or whether they can be dated to the time of Abraham or Moses. The ideal certainly represents an enormous contrast to all other ancient religions. Judaism taught One God, who is not to be worshiped in any form of an image. It knew no mythology that described events in the life of God. God causes things to happen, but nothing happens to God, who is regarded as unchangeable. No sexual mythology as in all other ancient religions exists. Monotheism specifically excludes female deities. This may have contributed to the prohibition against images or caused it, as it is impossible to make an image of a deity who is neither male nor female. On the other hand the Bible could not avoid speaking of God as a male being as the Hebrew language demands that any noun, including names, be treated

* This essay has been taken from *Six Studies in Sex and Religion*, an unpublished manuscript completed in 1973. It has been edited and, especially the final section on *Kabbalah*, has been abbreviated.

as either masculine or feminine. God called king or father also reflected the lack of abstract thought and logical consistency so characteristic of Greek thought.¹ The divine relationship between God and Israel was compared to the love between a man and a woman and religious infidelity was seen as adultery. This is a figure of speech, deeply expressive of emotional ties, without sexual implications, nor any connection to a sexual myth of God.

ANCIENT ISRAEL - THE REALITY

This is the ideal picture of Israel's religion as understood by the teachers of later Judaism. The reality, however, of biblical times paralleled the other ancient religions of the ancient Middle East. Sexual traces can be claimed for passages that refer to God as the "bull" of Israel, as the bull remains among the oldest religious sexual symbols (Hos. 2, Is. 59:3-13; Jer. 3:8, etc.). So God's strength was compared to the lofty horns of an ox (Gen. 49:29, etc.). This was also reflected in Israel's sin of the golden calf at Sinai. Worship of a golden calf was reported later of Jeroboam (433-412 B.C.E.) when he set up calves in Bethel and Dan (1 Kgs. 12:29) upon the creation of the northern kingdom. The bull may also be connected to the "horns" of Moses, a passage usually translated as "the skin of his face was radiant" (Ex. 34:29). These represent older Israelite religious concepts.

The serpent, another ancient sexual symbol, has also left traces; in the tale of paradise, for example, and the copper serpent that Moses set up to ward off death from snake bites (Nu. 21:9). The Bible asserts that this copper snake was preserved for many centuries and worshiped through offerings under the name Nehushtan until King Hezekiah removed it. (2 Kgs. 18:4).

The common people of ancient Israel shared or acquired the religious concepts of the original Canaanite inhabitants; they worshiped *baalim*, the male gods of fertility. The very word *baal* possesses strong sexual implications, as it also means husband.

Furthermore, the ancient Israelites, like all their neighbors, worshiped goddesses; many of them from all periods of Israelite history have been excavated throughout Israel. The *ashterot* against which the prophets and Deuteronomy railed were not simply sacred poles,² but images of Astarte "upon every high hill and under every leafy tree" (Jer. 2:20), placed next to the male *baalim*. As they were carved from wood, they have not survived. The Second Book of Kings described such an image in the Temple in Jerusalem (2 Kgs. 23:6), probably set up by King Manasseh (642-634 B.C.E.). Even King Solomon, who built the Temple, had "gone after Ashterot, the goddess of Zidon." (1 Kgs. 11:5, 10) as well as other Canaanite gods, though ostensibly only in his old age to accommodate foreign princesses. It was, after all, the worship of the heathen Sidonian *ashterot*, that caused the prophet Ahijah of Shilo to instigate the rebellion of Jeroboam against him and to split the kingdom after his death. Worship of this goddess was well known in the northern kingdom, so when Ahab (875-853 B.C.E.) married the Sidonian princess, Jezebel, he built an altar to Baal and Ashterah in his capitol (1 Kgs. 16:31), images which were worshiped to the end of the northern kingdom in 722 B.C.E.. The biblical writers considered this worship as the primary cause of the kingdom's destruction.

Matters were not very different in the southern kingdom, although several Judean rulers, under prophetic influence, undertook religious reforms by destroying the *ashterot*. Yet these images quickly returned; they had a strong hold on the common people with their assumed promise of human and agricultural fertility.

The Syrian goddess, Anath, appeared in the Bible only through names of towns and individuals. It is likely, however, that she was the "Queen of Heaven" worshiped after the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem (586 B.C.E.) and was subsequently carried to Egypt by Judean refugees. There Jeremiah attacked her veneration, which he described in detail (Jer. 7:15-18). He interpreted the destruction of Judea as punishment for idolatry; his fellow exiles, however, held the

opposite opinion: "we have been consumed by sword and famine, since we ceased to burn incense to the 'Queen of Heaven'" (Jer. 44:18). Egyptian Jews continued to worship Anath as shown by traces in the Elephantine papyri of the fifth century. In one of them the name of God is combined with those of the Canaanite goddesses.³

Sexual overtones have been claimed for the Cherubim, the winged human figures of the Tabernacle on the lid of the holy Ark where Moses also received divine revelations (Ex. 25:17-18). Cherubim were also woven into the curtains of the Tabernacle (Ex. 26:1), used in Solomon's Temple (1 Kgs. 6:29-35) and in the Temple erected after the return of the exiles from Babylonia. One of these figures may have been female, although there is only slight evidence for such an interpretation through an obscure talmudic passage that stated that the cherubim were shown in embrace "like male and female" and that this divine sexual act was shown to pilgrims (Yoma 54a). The great medieval biblical commentator, Rashi, explained this passage as "similar to a man who is joined to and embracing his wife in his arms." The talmudic passage continued: "Once when Gentiles entered the sanctuary and saw the Cherubim interlaced with each other, they carried them to the market place saying - these Israelites occupy themselves with such things and they despised them" (Yoma 54a). Such an incident might have occurred during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes (170 B.C.E.), who tried to hellenize the population. These Cherubim in embrace, if they existed, would certainly have embarrassed the apologists of Judaism, who stressed its imageless character and contrasted it to the heathen religions. This may have led Philo, Josephus, and the *Letter of Aristeas* to avoid, whenever possible, any mention of the Cherubim in their description of the Temple.⁴

The two tall brass pillars set up "on the porch of the Temple" (1 Kgs. 7:21), *yahin* and *boaz*, may have been another sexual feature of the Solomonic Temple since in modern times, they have been interpreted as phallic symbols.

Sacred prostitution as part of the ancient Israelite religion paralleled the religious life of other Near Eastern lands as attested by the Hebrew terms for these prostitutes, *kedeshah*, meaning sacred. Male and female *kedoshim* and *kedoshot* were mentioned along with a house of male prostitutes in the Temple precincts (2 Kgs. 23:7). The marriages of the prophets Hosea and Isaiah have been regarded as *hierogamos*.⁵ The Israelites participated in the sexual religious orgies of their neighbors, like the Moabites, who honored their god *Baal Peor* and were castigated by the prophets (Nu. 21:1-9, Jer. 2.20).

Despite this mingling of sex and religion by the ancient Israelites, which paralleled other Near Eastern religions, we may still claim that the classical religion of ancient Israel, as it developed, was singularly asexual as compared with the others. It did not despise or condemn sex, nor fight it. Genesis showed God creating sex along with the pangs of childbirth (Ps. 139:13, Job 10:8-12; etc.). The Bible spoke frankly about sex and human reproduction as a divine commandment (Gen. 1:28, etc.). Human fertility was a divine blessing and barrenness a divine punishment, particularly after sexual transgressions (Gen. 20:18).

The male sexual organ possessed a sacred character and sometimes an oath was taken by touching it (Gen. 24:1-4; 47:29). The religious nature of sex in ancient Israel was also indicated by the rite of circumcision on the eighth day after birth (Gen. 17:11) and then demanded of all converts. Circumcision is found throughout the Semitic world,⁶ but the story of Abraham understood it as a sign of the covenant between God and him. It has always been seen as the "seal" of this covenant marked on the body of every male Jew. Neither the Bible nor later Judaism has ascribed any sexual significance to the rite.

THE REGULATION OF SEX

Sex was regulated by the Bible in many ways. The sexual act brought ritual uncleanness; men and women were to cleanse themselves through ritual baths (Lev. 15:18). The Israelites were therefore to refrain from sexual intercourse for three days before the revelation on Sinai (Ex. 19:15) and before eating consecrated bread (1 Sam. 21:5). According to tradition, fasting included refraining from sexual intercourse (Yoma 54a). Intercourse with a menstruating woman, touching her or anything on which she might have been sitting was prohibited. Menstruation caused "impurity" (Lev. 15:16). Similarly, the emission of semen without intercourse brought impurity for a day (Lev. 15). Childbirth made the mother impure for a specified period.

Virginity was expected of women until marriage, and a girl who had lost it was to be stoned before the door of her father's house "for she did a shameful thing in Israel committing fornication while under her father's authority" (Deut. 22:13-21). This offense was punishable only if the man who married her complained that he had not found her a virgin. The father and the mother of the girl could produce contrary evidence by spreading the bed cloth and showing the virginal blood before the town elders. The accusing husband was then flogged and fined for his defamation of a "virgin in Israel" and could never divorce her. The Bible spoke of divorce only when a wife no longer found favor in the eyes of her husband (Deut. 24:1-4). If he changed his mind, he could remarry his original wife only if she had not been married to someone else in the interval (Deut. 24:1-4).

Adultery was punished through death as a moral crime (Lev. 20:10) and an awe-inspiring ordeal was designed to clear the accused woman of suspicion (Nu. 5). The prohibitions against the marriage of close relatives, rape, and abnormal sexual activity was placed under severe religious sanctions and was treated in detail (Lev. 18-20).

Homosexuality among men was called an abomination, in contrast to ancient Greece (Gen. 19:1-19). The tale of Sodom and Gomorrah indicated clearly for which sins God destroyed the cities – the inhabitants had demanded Lot's three guests in "order to be intimate with them" and Lot sought to satisfy them by offering his two virgin daughters. There is a similar tale in the Book of Judges (19:15 ff.) in a "time when there was no king in Israel"; the wicked of the city demanded that the host bring out his male guest so that they could "know him." After a vain effort to dissuade them, the master of the house brought out his own wife and they so abused her through the night that she died the following morning. This outrage caused a civil war among the Israelite tribes. Both tales dealt with sexual hospitality. Elsewhere, Leviticus prohibited "sodomy" and other sexual laxities that were considered typical of the Canaanites and Egyptians because Israel was a "holy" people (Lev. 18:1f.) Aversion to homosexuality also underlies the prohibition of women wearing men's clothing or men, women's garments (Deut. 22:5).

The tale of Onan (Gen. 38) shows that interrupted coitus to avoid pregnancy was also frowned upon. Onan's name gave rise to a term for masturbation, but this interpreted the tale incorrectly as the Bible was concerned with the refusal of a brother to perform the levirate marriage.

On the other hand prostitution was viewed with indulgence (Josh. 2:1f., Jud. 16; 1 Kgs 3:16) although it degraded the girl and her family (Gen. 34:31). No disapproval was expressed when Judah, a son of the patriarch Jacob and the father of Onan, "comforted himself after the death of his wife with a woman whom he thought to be a prostitute." Unfortunately, she was his own daughter-in-law Tamar, who had disguised herself in order to shame him as he had not given her his third son in Levirate marriage after the death of Onan (Gen. 38:12-26). A man should not allow his daughter to become a prostitute (Lev. 19:29), however, nor could the hire of a male or female prostitute be used to pay for a religious vow (Deut. 23:19).

Amos, the prophet considered it heinous for a father and son to have intercourse with the same woman (Amos 2:7).

RABBINIC JUDAISM

Postbiblical Judaism found its authoritative expression in the talmudic literature; it rejected the apocryphal and pseudepigraphical books of the Hebrew Bible, although they, too, were written by Jews. The talmudic literature continued the asexual ideal of Judaism in theology and practice. Sex was frankly discussed, as in the Bible, and with even greater frequency and detail. Major portions of the literature dealt with marriage, impurity, and related matters. The sections of the Mishnah *Nashim* (women), and *Toharot* (impurity) specialized in these areas.

Theologically, the sexless character of God was strictly maintained. This extended to angels when an elaborate angeology was developed (*Pesikata Rabbati* [ed. Friedman] 179b). The personification of God's presence as *Shekhinah*, a kind of feminine divine being, which has been so important for Jewish mysticism, was also without sexual implications. The *Shekhinah* was pictured as often confronting God and influencing His decisions. She was identified occasionally with the community of Israel, also using the feminine gender (*k'nesset yisrael*). The *Shekhinah* possessed aspects of mercy but could also punish severely.⁷

Sexual morality became more rigorous than in the Bible, which created a standard that impressed the non-Jewish world for two thousand years. This may be illustrated through the well-known tale of a man who became so infatuated with a woman that his health was endangered. The physicians prescribed intercourse, but the rabbis said "let him rather die." The physicians then prescribed that she stand naked before him, but the rabbinic response remained the same – also when the physician later prescribed that he at least speak with her (San. 75a). In commenting on this story, one teacher claimed that she

was married, while another stated that the prohibition stood even though she was not married and a common-law marriage through intercourse, although frowned upon, would have been permissible. The same rigor was applied by one sage to a woman who has intercourse with her husband while thinking of another man: "There was no greater adultery than this." (*Nu. Rabbah* 9 to Ez. 16:32). R. Lakish of the third century said: "Do not think that only a man who sins with his body is called an adulterer; he is called this even if he sins only with his eyes" (*Lev. Rabbah* 23) – a statement that we may compare with that of Jesus in the Gospels: "Whoever looks upon a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery in his heart." (*Mat.* 5:28).

This attitude led to the talmudic prohibition against walking behind a woman (*Ber.* 61a), listening to a woman's voice (*Ber.* 24a), or looking at her hair.⁸ The last injunction led to Orthodox women cutting their hair and wearing a wig (*sheitel*) following marriage. It also brought the segregation of the sexes; medieval rabbis labored, probably rather in vain, to enforce this. Maimonides (1135-1204), for example, demanded that the authorities place police in public parks and beaches to keep men and women from eating and drinking together and thus fall into sin. Men and women were not to mingle in their homes at parties, either (*Yad Hil. Yom Tov* 6.21). Later rabbis sought separate days for men and women to visit cemeteries.⁹ The segregation of the sexes at religious worship also became customary.¹⁰ A balcony for women was supposedly already built in the second Temple (*Suk.* 51b). Sometimes segregation was practiced in religious schools, weddings, funerals, and other religious public gatherings.¹¹

Virginity continued to be demanded as in biblical times, but it was reported of the Babylonians that they knew how to bend in coitus without destroying the signs of virginity (*Kid.* 82a). Wasting human semen in any way was prohibited and considered a sin equal to idolatry (*Ket.* 6b). The Talmud condemned masturbation; men were advised to avoid involuntary pollution through looking at their penis

or placing their hand below their belt (Shab. 118b) or wearing tight clothing, and so forth.

Unnatural sexual acts remained prohibited, and as Jews were not to have such inclinations (A.Z. 22b), they were assigned solely to the villains of certain biblical tales as the people of Sodom, Pharaoh, the pagan prophets, Balaam, and Nebuchadnezzar. The list also included the Romans, the oppressors of Jews in the talmudic period. This followed the universal human pattern of accusing political, religious, or personal adversaries of objectionable sexual behavior.

The serpent of Paradise could also be blamed for evil thoughts and deeds; one teacher claimed that it had intercourse with Eve and implanted dirt into human heredity; however, with Israel, this heredity, a kind of original sin, supposedly lost its power when the people stood at the foot of Mt. Sinai. Another talmudic scholar testified to bestiality by asserting that he had witnessed a non-Jew have intercourse with a goose that he had brought to market and then fried and eaten (A.Z. 22b). In reality, Jews could not have been free of such abnormal sexual behavior, otherwise there would have been no need to prohibit being alone with an animal (Kid. 81b) or a widow keeping a dog (B. M. 71a). Jews were also prohibited from exposing non-Jews to such temptations (A. Z. 22b).

Normal sexual activity was never prohibited and was considered willed by God. This thought was colorfully expressed through the story that God once delivering the *yetzer hara*, "evil inclination," (sexual urge) into the hands of the pious, they imprisoned it. As a result all procreation ceased and not even an egg could be found throughout the land. The sages debated and stated that if we execute it, the world will come to an end, so they pleaded that its power be reduced by half, but Heaven did not permit it. So they blinded it, with the result that people are at least not infatuated with their close relatives (San. 64a). Another talmudic sage stated "let us be grateful to our parents. Had they not sinned we would not have been born." (A. Z. 5a). Another recommended that the *yetzer hara*

should be pushed away with the left hand and befriended with the right (Sotah 47a).

In postbiblical times Jewish leaders had neither the inclination, nor normally the power, to carry out death sentences demanded by the Bible for sexual crimes. Instead, they used disciplinary measures to maintain sexual morality. In cases of adultery, the husband was forced to divorce his wife and she was prohibited from marrying her paramour (*Sifre* [ed. Friedmann] p. 122b; M. Sotah 5:1). The ordeal for women suspected of adultery disappeared with the Temple (M. Sotah 9.1).

The religious duty of procreation based on God's command to Adam and Eve, "Be fruitful and multiply," was frequently stressed in the talmudic literature as otherwise the Divine image would be diminished on earth (Yeb.63b). The sages debated whether the obligation of marriage applied only to men or to women also (Yeb. 65b) and said, "A man who has no wife is no human being." Interestingly enough, the medieval Christian censorship of the Talmud forced the wording to change to: "A Jew who has no wife. . .," probably with an eye to Christian monasticism.¹² Every man was commanded to marry and beget children as long as he was physically able to do so, an attitude that promoted early marriage among Jews. It led to a strict prohibition of castration, which was extended to animals (Shab. 110b) and made birth control unlawful for the husband, while some teachers permitted it to the wife in special circumstances as when she was so young that childbirth might endanger her life (M. Ket. 5.6). The obligation of marriage carried with it the religious duty to have sexual intercourse, which was specified by profession: "Those who have no work, should cohabit every day, workmen, twice a week, people whose occupation forces them to be absent from home, once a week, or even once a month; sailors once every half year" (M. Ket. 5.7). Monetary penalties existed for husbands and wives who refused to fulfill their marital duties (Ned. 20b). Intercourse between married individuals is permissible in any form or position, and everything that

a man wishes to do with his wife, he may legally do (Nid. 13a). This was balanced by statements that suggested that a man should not have too frequent intercourse with his wife and be "like a cock who is after the hens." Numerous talmudic sayings also advise modesty and maintained that the purpose of intercourse is procreation, an idea that may have been strengthened in Judaism through Christian influences.

We cannot conclude this brief survey without stating that significant modifications were made by sects such as the Essenes and Jewish mystics. The religious order of the Essenes which may have originated as early as 200 B.C.E., claimed that its members lived in strictly male societies. They did not despise sex itself, but feared the religious "impurity" that is almost unavoidable in contact with women.¹³ We should also note that the Hellenistic philosopher Philo introduced a feminine element stating that God as father united with his own wisdom (Sophia) as mother to beget the world. Sophia received the divine sperm and gave birth to the cosmos, this visible universe.¹⁴ Philo declared this act of procreation unlike any human sexual act.

THE KABBALAH

Rabbinic Judaism succeeded in keeping sex out of its theology and controlled sexual activity through religious law. Eroticism entered through a side door, however, as it became a major element in Jewish mysticism similar to the mystic movements in other religions, the mystical tradition known under the general heading of Kabbalah, whose very name claimed an ancient tradition handed down through a select few. It flourished particularly during and after periods of major persecution, such as the expulsion from Spain and the persecutions of eastern Europe in the sixteenth and seventh centuries. Its emotional and other-worldly appeal provided hope and comfort lacking in the rationalistic Judaism of the talmudists and philosophers. Its sexual concept and often strongly erotic language may have

contributed to its popularity.

The Kabbalah, which originated in the early Middle Ages, developed certain ideas of Philo along with those of ancient non-Jewish philosophers. It found its major expression in the *Zohar* (*Book of Splendor*), in which sex plays a major role. Written in Aramaic, perhaps to enhance its esoteric character, it was mainly the work of the thirteenth century scholar, Moses de Leon, although he claimed that it was the work of Simeon ben Yohai and his circle of disciples who lived in the second century B.C.E.¹⁵ Although the authorship of this pseudepigraphic book was even clear to a contemporary, Isaac of Akko, kabbalists believe in the authorship of Simeon bar Yohai whose hagiography included many miracles. Simeon bar Yohai was sufficiently sure of himself to state, "I could redeem the entire world from judgement . . . ; if only two men could ascend heaven, it would be I and my son." (Suk. 45b) – a statements which may have led to the ascription of the *Zohar*.

The popularity of the *Zohar* also rests on the fact that when initially printed it was edited in the form of a commentary on the weekly Torah readings and the *Song of Songs*. The *Song of Songs*, of course, already provided an interpretation of the divine love for Israel. Although restricted to small learned circles for a long time, the number of kabbalists grew after the expulsion of Jews from Spain and with the rise of the false Messiah Sabbatai Zevi in the seventeenth century. It continued as an influence on Hassidism in the eighteenth century while waning among western Jews.

SEXUAL ELEMENTS IN KABBALISTIC THEORY

The sexual elements of the Kabbalah consisted in the introduction of female components into the concept of God along with the description of a kind of divine sex life. It also introduced a devilish anti-God realm, ruled by sexual figures like the male demon Samael and his female counterparts, chiefly the she-devil Lillith. The

Kabbalah contains a good deal of general erotic symbolism that is sometimes rather crude. The modern scholar Patai felt that this constituted a rise of a mythology within Judaism, so contrary to the amythological or antimythological history of Judaism.¹⁶ Yet the kabbalists emphasized the abstract and purely spiritual nature of these forces represented by the anthropomorphic and erotic language. This has been best demonstrated through the names assigned to the male and female figures of the godhead, such as *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), *Binah* (Understanding), *Tiferet* (Glory), *Shekhinah* (Presence). Most kabbalists consistently warn that the terms must not be taken literally and only "as it were," that is, not in a human way. Nevertheless, the border between symbolism and mythology was, particularly in the *Zohar*, clearly crossed "out of unknown emotional and visionary motives that are active in the recesses of the soul and demand release."¹⁷ This remained a fundamental problem for the Kabbalah as it has to reconcile its dynamic and organic theology with the uncompromising monotheism of Judaism. The *Zohar* and all kabbalistic literature strive mightily to uphold the Oneness of God and yet to loosen it for their purposes, an almost impossible undertaking.

God is unknowable, beyond the limits of human experience and understanding for the Kabbalah. God reaches out into the world through a succession of emanations that are part of him, however, and that never cease. These emanations are the Ten *Sefirot* with their abstract names, and through them God maintains contact with our lower world. Many terms have been used for the internal process within the godhead. It has been likened to a stream flowing from above, like light radiating from its divine sources, and it has also been expressed in sexual terms, as for example: God, about whose real being nothing can be said, brought forth "Wisdom" (*Hokhmah*). "Wisdom" brought forth "Understanding" (*Binah*). These two first *Sefirot* unite sexually with each other, and from their sacred marriage, all other *Sefirot* are born. Six of them are sons, and at the lowest level, which is closest to this world, a daughter, the divine

"Presence" (*Shekhinah*), known also through other names like "Kingship" (*Malkhut*) or "the Matron," has been identified with the community of Israel. The sons are all contained in one central male figure "Glory" (*Tiferet*). "Presence" and "Glory" unite in a lower sacred marriage from which all the blessings and souls of the righteous are born. The two sacred marriages within the godhead, the higher *hierons gamos* between "Wisdom" and "Understanding" and the lower between "Glory" and "Presence" are not quite alike. The first two hold each other in constant embrace of which is said: "In the hour when the male partner ejaculates and the semen flows forward, he does not need to seek out the female, because she abides with him, is never separated from him, and is always ready for him. For the semen does not come forward except when the female is ready and the desire of both is like one in one ecstatic embrace" (*Zohar* III 290). Through the stability of their harmonious union these two *Sefirot* represent archetypes of family life. "Understanding" was often described as a mother bird sitting over her young or nursing them (*Zohar* I 162a, f.).

The two other sacred marriages, the lower one between a son "Glory" (*Tiferet*) and a daughter "Presence" (*Shekhinah*), which often means between God and the people of Israel, is of a different nature. These two have often been separated and quarreled when Israel sinned. Then God retreated from his people. The *Zohar* expressed a philosophy of Jewish history through this lower marriage. The suffering of the Jewish people was a result of their unfaithfulness to their divine lover, an idea with roots in the prophet Hosea and others. In anger, God sent His people into exile and dismissed his beloved. Through the pious among them, however, they could strive for reunion with God. The proper attitude in prayer and religious deeds could restore and maintain the divine union. The entire order of the universe was understood to depend on the pious. This secret of *yihud*, bringing Oneness, is the highest endeavor of the Kabbalists. Through it the individual soul can enter the realm of the divine and the divine light can stream into the world. On the other hand, sinners

impair God's Oneness and force Him into contact with "the other side." When God separated from the *Shekhinah*, His legitimate wife, her place was taken by the she-devil, Lillith, the maid-servant. Thus, He deprived himself of his honor, for how could a king associate with the maid in place of the queen (*Zohar* I 122a; III 69a). God, however, always longed for the *Shekhinah* when they were separated. Her image remained imprinted on His heart like the imprint of a wax seal (*Zohar* II 114a). What happens between them has also been expressed through the metaphor of a man whose female friend resided in an ill-smelling portion of town that he normally would not enter, but through her it seems like a sweetly fragrant section (*Zohar* III 115b). Such statements must have moved Jews who lived in the ghetto slums.

The Kabbalah also gave reality to the "other side" (*Sitra Ahera*) and so explained the existence and power of evil in this world, a teaching that is dualistic. The *Zohar* also contains additional views of the "other side," which mitigates this dualism. The "other side" had strong sexual components. Evil was understood to thrive particularly in sexual sins (*Zohar* I 348). It has been personified by the male and female powers who live in darkness in the cave of the abyss. The male devil, Samael, has as his wife Lillith, also called the woman of whoredom. Like "Glory" and "Presence" on the divine side, they are closely bound up with each other (*Zohar* I 148). Through their copulation many kinds of tribulations such as murder and warfare enter the world. "If one does not ride on the other and they are not connected, they could exercise no power." (*Zohar*, II 143a, 144 a). Other female demons such as Na-amah were also active.

KABBALISTIC SEXUAL PRACTICES

The sexual speculations of Jewish mysticism affected the actual sexual life of kabbalists and gave matrimony a more outspoken sacral character than in rabbinic Judaism as the Kabbalah claimed that human sexual activity paralleled and even influenced the sexual life in

the divine realm above. As the deity contains in itself female elements and God copulates with His "Presence" (*Shekhinah*), man is not complete without woman, not a real image of the divine (*Zohar* I 55 b) and so does not deserve the appellation "man." (*Zohar* III 154b).

Already the talmudic literature contained a version of the platonic idea that man at creation was bi-sexual and only later were the sexes separated. "Man was cut in half and the two halves long for and seek, perhaps even find, each other in marriage" (Ber. Rabbah 8). According to the *Zohar*, the male and female souls are born together from the cohabitation between "Glory" and "Presence"; then a special angel separates them, an effect of the sin committed by Adam and Eve (*Zohar* III 43b). Whether they will be reunited depends on their meritorious conduct and God's assistance. As religious scholars are busy studying Torah, they perform their marital duty only on the Shabbat eve (*Zohar* III 82a), the night of God's union with the *Shekhinah*, which provided special significance. Copulation means participation in God's creative activity. It multiplies God's image in the world (*Zohar* I 186b). All this conveys a high measure of esteem for women in Jewish mysticism, although at times a demonic aspect also finds expression in the *Zohar*.¹⁸

These brief thoughts demonstrate that the Kabbalah and particularly the *Zohar* augmented the rabbinic thoughts on sexuality and brought major changes for those who followed its thought and practices. They remained a minority within Judaism but demonstrated the continuing struggle with sexuality waged through both theology and practical regulations.

Notes

1. Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York, KTAV, 1967), p. 21.
2. William L. Reed, *The Ashterah in the Old Testament* (Fort Worth, Texas, Christian University Press, 1949).

3. E. O. James, *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1958), p. 137.
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- 14.. Leisegang, p. 95; Josephus, *Wars* II 8.2.
- 15.. See the introduction of F. Lachover and I. Tishbi in his monumental *Mishnat HaZohar* (Jerusalem, Mosad Bialik, 1957), to which this section is indebted.
16. Patai, *The Jewish Goddess*.
17. Tishbi, *Mishnat Zohar* III, p. 290.
- 18.. *Ibid.*, II, 610.