

Woman, Taken Out of Man...

An Aggadic Perspective on Genre Equality

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Dedicated to Charles, לוי, and Aline Mopsik

The effort to justify man's domination of woman with reference to the biblical account of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib has played a significant role in Western culture. Within the New Testament, for example, we may consider these oft-cited words of Paul of Tarsus and a follower¹:

Women should adorn themselves modestly and sensibly in seemly apparel, not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly attire; but by good deeds, as befits women who profess religion. Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet woman will be saved through bearing children, if she continues in faith and love and holiness, with modesty (I Timothy 2:9-15).

Man need not cover his head since he is the image and glory of God. As to woman, she is the glory of man. It was not man who was taken from woman, but woman from man. It is not the man who was created for woman, but woman who was created for man (I Corinthians 11:7-9).

According to this view, masculine hegemony rests on two exegetical pillars. The first, man's ontological primacy, is proven with respect to the woman having been created second, thus as man's natural subordinate. The second is the fact that Eve was more

¹ The Epistle to Timothy is considered by critical scholars today to be the work of a follower of Paul's, not of the apostle himself.

involved, thus more guilty in the series of events known in Christian circles as the “original sin”.

Before we explore this account in Jewish sources, we have to ask ourselves if it would be fair to say that Western society has developed its sense of gender because of this traditional Christian exegesis. The situation is more complex than readers might think at first. The main reason is that a foundation text reflects the social reality and power struggles of a particular time no less than it prints its own mark on that aspect of things in a given place and time. The damning interpretation about Eve could merely reflect the global subjugation of women in the ancient society. To some extent, it may be so that the biblical text, as a result of its sacred status, enhanced a certain social order, and thus chaining the faithful to a hierarchical model that eventually came to be considered self-evident and unchallengeable. Nevertheless, these mythic representations are not quite as fixed as they seem at first blush. As societies change, religious literature too develops, elaborating or incorporating new ideas that may slowly displace old ones. In turn, these new elements may themselves become the catalysts for new social models.

There is another good reason to consider the role of this exegesis and the responsibility of Christianity in this specific issue: what I have just observed about Christianity could just as easily be asserted about Judaism! For one thing, contrary to the widely held belief that Christianity alone is responsible for propagating the kind of biblical interpretation that justifies women’s subordination to men, many traditional Jewish exegetes maintained very similar views. Nor is it entirely obvious which culture learned **more** from which, or if the direction in which exegetical ideas flowed was always the same. **Certainly**, within the large world of Christian theology through history, the position was not unequivocally **misogynist**. Indeed, within the larger Christian corpus, there are many passages regarding women and their place in society that conform little or not at all to the basic lines laid down in Paul’s letters. That kind of inner-Christian analysis lays both beyond the scope of this paper and my personal area of expertise, however. Still, it is interesting to note that

ancient Judaism and primitive Christianity share this common feature of an official policy hostile to the concept of gender-based egalitarianism and ongoing efforts of lone authors to counter that trend by promulgating ideas that run completely contrary to it. With respect to Judaism, an examination of later efforts to interpret earlier traditional midrashim relating to the creation of Adam and Eve does suggest a clear course of exegetical development and suggests that there was, at least in certain circles, a radical effort to re-evaluate the relationship between the genders. Indeed, these amazing efforts present a nearly complete reversal of the ideas presented in the classic texts they purport to be explaining.

The Corrupting Initiative

The Bible contains two narratives depicting the creation of the primordial couple, Adam and Eve:

God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creepy things that creep on the earth. And God created man in His image, in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them (Genesis 1:26-27.)

The Lord God said: It is not good for man to be alone; I will make a fitting helper for him (Genesis 2:18). [...] So the Lord God cast a deep sleep upon the man; and, while he slept, He took one of his ribs and closed up the flesh at that spot. And the Lord God fashioned the rib that He had taken from the man into a woman; and He brought her to the man. Then the man said, This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. This one shall be called woman, for from man she was taken. Hence a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, so that they become one flesh (Genesis 2:21-24.)

At first glance, these two versions appear contradictory. According to the first, male and female were created simultaneously (*zakhar unekevah bara otam*). This egalitarian dimension is reinforced by the fact, noted unambiguously, that both man and woman were created in the image of God (called in Hebrew, the *tselem Elohim*). However, in the second version, the woman is taken from the man and seems already destined to the “auxiliary” status society later assigned to her female descendants.

Regarding the idiom *‘ezer kenegdo*, translated here as “fitting helper,” Rabbi Professor David Golinkin points out that it is quite uncertain if this phrase necessarily implies subordination.² Indeed, the term *‘ezer* (the word translated here as “helper”) occurs nine times in the Bible, commenting on God in his relationship with humanity!³ The term *kenegdo* (the word translated here as “fitting”) is a *hapax legomenon* and thus almost by definition a term of uncertain meaning.⁴ However, we may note that, at least in later books, this term almost always denotes an equal.⁵ Indeed, that could well be its meaning here, as the text lays the groundwork for readers to appreciate the contrasting curse pronounced after the sin against Eve: “Your urge shall be for your husband and he shall rule over you (Genesis 3:16).” Nevertheless, this expression (*‘ezer kenegdo*) was almost always interpreted as the ultimate exegetical cornerstone of the subjugation of women to men.

For thousands of years, beginning in antiquity and continuing through Talmudic and medieval times into contemporary literature, repeated attempts have been made to harmonize these two narratives. One attempt in particular merits our attention, since it played a central mythic role in later kabbalistic thought. The Talmud records the opinion of Rabbi Jeremiah ben Eleazar (a third century C.E. amora) that the first human was an

² In an unedited homily on *Breishit*, 5759.

³ For example: “Hear, O the Lord, and be gracious unto me; the Lord, be Thou my *helper* (*Psalms* 30:11).”

⁴ That is, it occurs only once within the Bible.

⁵ For example, see M Peah 1:1: “Talmud Tora ke-neged kulam: the study of the Tora is facing equivalently to them all”.

androgynous created with male and female “sides.”⁶ Rabbi Jeremiah’s contemporaries, Rav and Samuel, provide two possible explanations. According to one of them (the text leaves unsaid which one held which view), God revised a theoretical initial plan to create an androgynous human and instead created the first human being as a man. In this scenario, man’s creation was followed by the creation of woman, born from a rib (*tse^la*) or even from a mythical tail (*zanav*). According to the other, however, the first being was initially created as a true androgynous and it was only later that its female part, a side (also: *tse^la*) or even a “face” (*partzuf*), was extracted and granted independent existence.

Thus, according to these two interpretations, humanity (so to speak) enjoyed initially, at least theoretically, an egalitarian phase of existence.⁷ Nonetheless, most rabbinic texts didn’t maintain this vision and presented the same justifications for male superiority as those already quoted from Paul’s letters. But this cannot fairly be laid solely at Paul’s feet. Indeed, although Paul’s epistles were composed before the rabbinic statements cited above, he is not the originator of this conception. In fact, the oldest known text specifically condemning Eve for her role in the “original sin”, is an extracanonical source, the second century B.C.E. work known both as the book of Ben Sira, and as Ecclesiasticus. There, we read as follows:

It is woman who brought sin into the world and it is because of her that we must die (Ben Sira 25:24.)

This source may have inspired the Talmudic sages (and their latter-day followers) directly or indirectly. Let us cite a few examples of the rabbinic conception about the threatening nature of women. Rashi, basing himself on a midrash,⁸ interprets the divine command to

⁶ See, e.g., the parallels at B. Berakhot 61a, B. Eruvin 18a-b, and Genesis Rabbah 8:1.

⁷ Note however that the Talmud (e.g., at B. Eruvin 18b) reports that, even in the context of this primeval egalitarian existence, it was still the male part of the being that led the way.

⁸ Bereshit Rabbati to Vayishlah, ed. Albeck, p. 168.

Adam in Genesis 1:28 “to conquer her” (i.e. the land)⁹ as suggestive of man’s obligation to “dominate woman to prevent her from flaunting herself.” Additionally, the subsequent closing up of Adam’s flesh (i.e., after Eve has been removed from his body) uses the Hebrew verb *vayisgor* at Genesis 2:21. A very interesting midrash explains this usage in this way:

Rabbi Hanina son of Rabbi Idi taught: Here, the Torah, which has not yet employed the letter *samekh*, uses it for the first time to teach that, at the moment of the creation of Eve, the Satan was born (Genesis Rabbah 17:6).¹⁰

It is worth noting that these interpretations base themselves on verses that precede the story of the “original sin”. About Adam having been made in the likeness of God, Rabbi Banaa, a third century C.E. tanna, explains the difference between men and women in a way that calls to mind Paul’s remark about the “image and glory” of Adam. Indeed, the conception is precisely the same, only the formulation is even harsher:

When compared to the (exquisite) image of Adam, the beauty of Eve itself would be akin to a monkey’s when compared to a human being. And, finally, when compared to the splendor of the Shekhinah, the image of Adam would be like a monkey’s when compared to the beauty of a human (*BT*Baba Bathra 58a).

Eventually, most rabbis came to view the inequality between man and woman as “congenital”, or at least as quasi-original.¹¹ However, in the biblical tale itself, man’s

⁹ The term *v'khivshuha* (“conquer her”) lacks the letter *vav* which would have indicated the plural. This enables a reading in the second person: “He should conquer her”.

¹⁰ This misogynistic interpretation is hermeneutically very weak. Firstly, it assumes that the word *satan* is written with a *samekh* rather than with a *sin*, but also because it claims that the letter *samekh* had not yet been employed when, indeed, as conceded later in the same midrash, it had already been employed in verse 2:11. Nevertheless, it must be said that the intention here is not to claim that the woman herself is satanic, but merely that her natural behavior awakens men to temptation, lust and sin.

¹¹ See Julia Schwartzmann, “The Medieval Philosophical Interpretation of the Creation of Woman” (Hebrew) in *Da’at* 39 (1997), pp. 69-87. Schwartzmann shows that such illustrious rabbinic figures as David Kimḥi (1160-1235), Gersonides (1288-1344) and Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508) affirmed the ontological superiority of man over woman and justified the subordination of woman in metaphysical terms. Commenting on Genesis 1:27, Isaac Abarbanel, in the same spirit as Paul and later Gratian (Italy, 12th c.)

dominion over woman did not actually start until the curse that befell woman as a consequence of the “original sin”: “...and he shall rule over you” (Genesis 3:16.) Thus, for the sages, the “original sin” merely enlarged the initial gap between the sexes. After it, every woman bears its stigma, as reflected in a midrash, which again calls to mind the words of Paul:

Why do men go out bare-headed while women keep their heads covered? Because women behave like one who has sinned and is ashamed in front of his fellows (Genesis Rabbah 17:8).¹²

Relating to the curse of Eve, one talmudic rabbi comments on the more evident features of her subjugation:

Rav Dimi taught: Women shall wear veils (i.e., to cover their heads) like mourners, be kept apart (in the menstruate period, or forbidden to any men other than their own husbands) and imprisoned (i.e., forced to remain at home permanently) (B. Eruvin 100b).

In the fourteenth chapter of the *Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer*, the text enumerates nine distinct curses borne by women because of Eve’s sin, including among them the explicit assertions that “the wife must serve her husband like a servant” and that “her testimony is invalid in legal proceedings”.

Although a gender-based hierarchy must have seemed natural to many Talmudic sages, a probing Talmudic text shows concern for the arbitrary element in this divine

declares that “Only the male was created in the image of God.” Maimonides’ (1138-1204) understanding seems to be quite similar. Although not implicit, it can be gleaned from *The Guide for the Perplexed* (2:30, 3:8, 3:7). Nahmanides (13th c.) asserts the superiority of men’s souls in holiness (as quoted by Rabbi Joshua ibn Shuaib, 14th. century, in his *Drashot al ha-Torah to Tazria-Metsora*, s.v. *vekhen amru*, ed. Cracow, 1573).

¹² Compare to the church father Tertullian (160-225): “You shall be in constant mourning, dressed in rags and deformed by penitence in order to make amends for having damned humanity... Woman, you are the doorway to Satan. It is you who touched the satanic tree and was the first to transgress divine law” (*The Apparel of Women* 1, 1-2).

discrimination and for the injustice it generated. Admittedly, this midrash does not deal directly with the creation of man and woman. Nonetheless, the meaning of the allegory of the sun and the moon in this passage did not escape later commentators, partly because of the parallel to the androgynous creature which was succeeded by a predominant male:

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi raised a contradiction between two segments of a verse. First it says, "And God made the two *great* luminaries," but then it says, "the *great* luminary... and the *small* luminary (Genesis 1:16)!" Rabbi Shimon ben Pazi explains: [Indeed, initially the sun and the moon were equal in greatness and luminance. But then,] the moon said to God: Master of the Universe! Can two kings wear the same crown? Said God to her: Go diminish yourself. Said she to Him: Master of the Universe! Because I have said a proper thing, I must diminish myself? Said He to her: You may rule both in the day and at night. Said she to Him, What advantage is there in that? What does a lamp accomplish at high noon? Said He to her, The people of Israel shall calculate their dates and years by you. Said she to Him, But the sun, too, shall have a part in that, for they shall have to calculate the seasons by it. Said God: The righteous shall be called by your name: "Jacob the Small" (as, e.g., at Amos 7:2), "Samuel the Small", "David the Small" (as at I Samuel 17:4). Still God saw that she was not appeased. So God said: Offer atonement for My sake, for My having diminished the moon. This is the significance of what Reish Lakish said: Why does the he-goat offered on the first of the month differ from the others in that it is specified "for God" (Numbers 28:15), an expression that does not appear in connection with the sin-offerings of the other festivals? God is saying: This he-goat shall atone for My diminishing of the moon (B. Hullin 60b).

The underlying implication of this midrash is that hierarchy of the sexes is not based ontologically on any *a priori* or essential difference between men and women. Rather, the established hierarchy is interpreted as a secondary development and as an attempt to pacify the world. The destructive rivalry which cannot be avoided between two equal creatures is averted by a hierarchical re-ordering of power. And why, then was it the feminine that was diminished? The text seems to suggest that it was almost accidental:

either male or female had to have priority over the other, and it was the woman who came second. Indeed, we get the sense that, if the masculine had been diminished, the same question could have been asked equally cogently. According to the midrash, though, the moon exhibited the greater wisdom in perceiving the inevitable conflict. Paradoxically, then, it was due to this enhanced sensitivity that God “chose” to diminish “her”. Still, the clincher here is the surprise ending. The discrimination borne by the moon necessitates divine atonement. According to the midrash, God required atonement of Himself, even if the sacrificial task of bringing the he-goat sin-offering on the first of the month was delegated to human-beings. This suggests that the asymmetry between the sexes could, possibly even should, one day be reexamined and a new more ethical order allowed, or possibly even encouraged, to prevail.

The Redemptive Initiative

The masters of the Talmud, and later of the Kabbalah, drew various conclusions from this symbolism. At an early stage, various laws and customs which related directly to women were regularly interpreted as a means of expiating the primordial sin which introduced death and perdition in the world:

Why do they [the women] walk in front of the corpse [at a funeral]? Because they brought death into the world, as it is written, “For he is borne to the grave...and all men draw after him, as they were innumerable before him” (Job 21:32-33). And why was the precept of menstruation (*niddah*) given to her? Because she shed the blood of Adam [by causing his death]. And why was the precept of dough (*hallah*) given to her? Because she corrupted Adam, who was the dough (*hallah*) of the world. And why was the precept of

Sabbath lights given to her? Because she extinguished the soul of Adam (Genesis Rabbah 17:8).¹³

Certainly, justifying religious practices with reference to primordial guilt does not by its nature valorize the role of women. Nor does the fact that we know that similar conceptions of retribution exist elsewhere in Jewish sources where they do not apply exclusively to women do much to change this sense. Nevertheless, the piety with which women may apply themselves in fulfilling these commandments can be seen as an opportunity to recover their lost dignity. Indeed, in Jewish thought, the failures of the ancestors do not relegate human beings to a state of helplessness and unerasable blemish, precisely because adherence to Torah constitutes the remedy to the ancient curse and its the most effective means of expiation...and ever more than that, for the sages took the power *of teshuvah* to be strong enough to convert sin into merit, and curse into blessing.¹⁴ Thus, the elixir of Torah is understood as the antidote to “original sin”, and as the “perpetual merit” that neutralizes the initial pollution which contaminated the world, and can even transform it into grace.

Indeed, referring to women as a whole, the sages of the Talmud attempted to demonstrate that there were several instances of great significance in Biblical history in the course of which women were able to prove their good judgment and their loyalty to God precisely at times when men failed miserably. These texts may well be read as a kind of counterpoint to the « original sin » texts cited above. Thus, the midrash exalts the refusal of women to cede their jewelry for the construction of the golden calf:

¹³ See the parallel in J. Shabbat 2:6. According to the Mishnah on this page, and its commentary in the Gemara (*ad loc.*), numerous women die during labor as a result of not having properly observed these practices, all deemed in some way expiatory of Eve’s original sin. This conception was supported by medieval rabbis who took the word *NaHaSH* (snake) as an acrostic intended to recall the three commandments of *Niddah*, *Hallah*, and *Shabbat*. See Abraham Grosman, “...And he shall rule over you”, in: *Sefer zikaron le-Professor Zeev Falk* (in Hebrew; Jerusalem, 2005), p. 55.

¹⁴ See B. Yoma 86b.

“And when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it” (Exodus 32:5). What did he see? That Hur, the son of its sister, had been killed [by the people eager to make an idol while he attempt to prevent them to do it]. Aaron argued with himself, saying: If I say to Israel, Give me gold and silver, they will bring it immediately. Instead, I will say to them, Give me the earrings of your wives, and of your sons, and forthwith the matter will fail, as it is said, “And Aaron said to them, Remove the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me” (Exodus 32:2). The women heard this, but they were unwilling to give their earrings to their husbands; but they said to them: You desire to make a graven image and a molten image without any power in it to deliver! The Holy One, blessed be He, gave the women their reward in this world and in the world to come. What reward did He give them in this world? They will observe the New Moons more stringently than men! What reward will He give them in the world to come? They are destined to be renewed like the New Moon, as it is said, “He satisfies you with good things in the prime of life, so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (Psalms 103:5). The men saw that the women would not consent to give their earrings to their husbands. What did they do? Until that hour, there were earrings also in their own ears, after the fashion of the Egyptians and the Arabs. They took off the earrings which were in their own ears, and these, they gave to Aaron as it is said “All the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears” (Exodus 32:3). “That were in the ears of their wives” is not written here, but “that were in their ears” (Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer 45).

This text goes beyond simply praising the women. Their merit is translated into the establishment of a monthly exemption from household tasks, at every first of the month.¹⁵ This time constitutes the first fruits of a future when their status will be renewed like the moon. Similar ideas are seen in relation to another significant biblical episode, the sin of the spies. According to the midrash, once again women distinguished themselves from men, here by their refusal to follow the recommendations of the spies against the conquest of the land.¹⁶

¹⁵ See J. *Pesahim* 4:1; Rashi on Megillah 22b *Rashei hodashim*.

¹⁶ Parallels: *Sifrei*, Numbers 133; Rashi on Numbers 26:64.

In the same way that the women did not participate in the sin of the golden calf, they did not utter an evil report in the case of the spies: “And the men...when they returned, made all the congregation to murmur against him” (Numbers 14:36), and against this congregation the decree [not to enter the land] was issued, because they had said: “We are not able to go up” (ibid.13:31). The women, however, were not with them in their counsel, as may be inferred from the fact that it is written in an earlier passage of our section, “For the Lord had said of them: They shall surely die in the wilderness. And there was not a man left of them, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun” (ibid. 26:65). Thus the text speaks of “a man” but not of “a woman”. This was because the men had been unwilling to enter the Land. The women, however, drew near Moses to ask him for an inheritance in the Land¹⁷. Consequently the present section was written down next to that dealing with the death of the generation of the wilderness, for it was there that the men broke down the fences and the women built them up (Numbers Rabbah 21:10).

Here the immediate benefit for women is the ability to inherit territory in the land of Israel, albeit only in the absence of male heirs. It is worth noting that a motif of feminine initiative is present throughout the Bible itself, especially in episodes related to the redemption from Egypt. (I am thinking of the refusal of the midwives to euthanize newly born males told in Exodus 1, the rescue of Moses from the Nile described in Exodus 2, and Zipporah’s initiative in circumcising her son, recounted in Exodus 4). But the midrash pursues and amplifies this theme, drawing halakhic implications and, through them, advancing the status of women. Thus, several midrashim of the Talmudic era declare that it was “by the merit of the righteous women of the generation that Israel was saved from Egypt (B. Sotah 11b).” Consequently, cultic regulations one might have expected to be assigned solely to men were made obligatory for women as well, such as drinking the four cups of redemption at the Passover *seder* (B. Pesahim 108b), reading the scroll of Esther (B. Megillah 4a), and lighting Hanukkah candles (B. Shabbat 23a).

¹⁷ See the account of the daughters of Zelophehad, in Numbers 27:1-11.

The ability of the sages to codify, and thus to endorse, such equal practices accords ill with the conception of women's ontological inferiority. Indeed, it overturns the concept entirely. Rashi relates an eloquent midrash where this is readily apparent:

The women of Israel had mirrors in which they would gaze as they made themselves beautiful. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate to give them up and offer them to the Tabernacle. Moses was repulsed by their offer because the mirror seemed to him an object of narcissism. The Holy One, Blessed be He, consequently told him: Accept these mirrors since they are more precious to me than anything else. It is on their account that the women were able to conceive numerous populations (Hebrew: *tseva'ot*) in Egypt. Indeed, when their husbands were exhausted by hard labor, the women would bring them food and drink, sustaining them. Then, they would pick up their mirrors. Each would gaze at herself and her husband, and in a voice most tender say: I am prettier than you! Thus, the women would arouse their husbands and become pregnant. Thus, it is said: Under the apple tree I roused you (Song of Songs 8:5).¹⁸

Here women show initiative by participating in the construction of the Tabernacle, thus making amends for the sin of the golden calf.¹⁹ Moses' hesitancy to receive their gifts of the mirrors, image of vanity, reflects a classic suspicion of seductive women. However, his caution only serves to emphasize their merit. Thus, in the lesson that God teaches Moses there is a suggestion to the reader that women's responsibility for Eve's "original sin" needs to be re-examined. Here lust is transformed into a desire for reconciliation with God, and women are the agents of this restoration. This interpretation is supported by a midrash describing an initial phase of the revelation:

Rabbi Phineas said: On the eve of Sabbath the Israelites stood at Mount Sinai, the men apart and the women apart. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Go, speak to the daughters of Israel, asking them whether they wish to receive the Torah. Why were the

¹⁸ The source of Rashi's comment on Exodus 38:8 is the *Midrash Tanhuma* to *Pikudei*, chapter 9.

¹⁹ See Nahmanides (Commentary on the Tora, Ex 35:22) and R. Joshua Ibn Shuaib (*Drashot al haTora, Vayakhel-Pekudei*, incip. *veod lamadnu*) who explained that women outstripped men by bringing their personal jewelry for the building of the Tabernacle, making atonement for the sin of the Golden Calf.

women asked first? Because the way of men is to follow the opinion of women, as it is said, “Thus shalt thou say to the house of Jacob,” which refers to the women, and “And tell the children of Israel,” which refers to the men (Exodus 19:3). They all replied as with one mouth, and they said “All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey” (Exodus 24:7) (*Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer* 41).

The statement that “the way of men is to follow the opinion of women” is yet another allusion to the primordial sin translated into fear of the formidable power of the dangerous woman. In this spirit, a famous Talmudic passage reads, “Rav said: Whoever follows the (bad) advice of his wife will fall into hell (Baba Metsia 59a)”.²⁰ Here, at this key moment in the sacred history of Israel, the fact that God addressed the women first is an attempt at reconciliation, even perhaps a form of protection against inauspicious precedent. This is related explicitly in the following midrash:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: When I created the world, I commanded Adam [not to eat of the forbidden tree] prior to Eve, with the result that she transgressed and upset the world. If I do not now (at Revelation) call unto the women first, they will annihilate the Torah (Exodus Rabbah 28:2).

The stereotype of woman’s destructive power is still predominant. Nevertheless, by suggesting that it was the perverse effect of putting woman in second place which led to her delinquency, the lesson becomes quite evident. It is not effective to subjugate woman; rather, it is only by giving her a turn to come first that God (and man) can make her a trusted ally!

²⁰ But note this passage as well: “Once upon a time there was a pious man married to a pious woman. Since they had no children, they told each other: “we are not productive for the Holy One” and divorced. The man remarried an evil woman who made him evil. The woman remarried an evil man and made him into a good man. Conclusion: everything depends on the woman (Genesis Rabbah 17:7).”

Feminine Tomorrows

It is precisely the reversal exposed in these sources that reflects woman's status in the ultimate redemption. The medieval Kabbalists wove together these two themes, the symbolism of the sun-moon couple and the kindling of Sabbath candles, to elaborate their vision. We have seen how both of these motifs reflect women's submission. The Kabbalists base themselves on an ancient midrash (Genesis Rabbah 12:6) that responds to the talmudic text concerning the diminishment of the moon which we cited earlier, and predicts an eschatological reversal through the restoration of the moon, a symbol provided by Isaiah:

And the light of the moon shall become like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall become sevenfold, like the light of the seven days, when the Lord binds up his people's wounds and heals the injuries it has suffered (Isaiah 30:26).²¹

The vision of two equal luminaries "once again" illuminating the sky is then associated with the equal shine of the two Sabbath candles, as can be seen in the words of an anonymous 13th century Catalonian kabbalist:

Since then (in the time of the seventh millennium, which is the world to come) darkness will resemble light, and the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, [the sages] said that it is imperative to light Sabbath candles, because that is the source of peace in the house²². The act of lighting is performed by the woman because it is she who

²¹ See the liturgy for the sanctification of the new moon, attributed to Judah the Pious (13th c.): "May it be your will, the Lord, my God and God of my fathers, to restore the moon so that she never again knows diminishment and may her light become once more as the light of the sun and as the light of the seven days (of creation), as it is said: and the two great luminaries (Genesis 1:16). And may the words of the prophet be fulfilled (Hosea 3:5): They shall seek their God and David their King, amen."

²² See Maimonides: "If a man is forced to choose [due to poverty] between lighting the candles of Hanukkah and the candles of the home [in honor of Shabbat], he shall light the Sabbath candles because they bring peace to the home. Scripture tells us that God himself consented to let His name be erased in order to establish peace between husband and wife (e.g. Numbers 5:12-31). Great is peace for the whole Torah was given for the sole purpose of bringing peace into the world, as it is said: Her ways are ways of pleasantness;

extinguished the primordial light: it is on account of Eve that the hidden light was removed (Sefer Ma'arekhet HaElohut, ed. Mantuva, 1558, fol. 185a-b).²³

The Shabbat is ultimately the time when peace will be inaugurated on an egalitarian basis. In his comments on the above text, the Kabbalist Reuben Zarfati (Italy, 14th century) transcends the reference to Eve's sin, and addresses its eschatological implications:

The Sabbath alludes to the seventh millennium. At that time, the diadem will be restored to its initial state²⁴ and the two kings will wear the royal crown, as it is said: "at the end in action" (*sof ma'aseh*). At that time, woman will no longer be subservient to her husband, as is the case presently, since the current situation is yet "first in thought" (*b'mahshava tehilah*). She will no longer be bound by any form of subjugation, like what happens when she is diminished below (Commentary on Sefer Ma'arekhet HaElohut, ed. Mantuva, 1558, fol. 137a).

For this reason, in the current phase of the cycle, woman too (like man) must sanctify the Sabbath, to signify that her love for her husband will surely permit the pouring of the influx from all the *sefirot*. Therefore, she is obligated to sanctify the Sabbath day even though she should in principle have been exempt due to the time-bound nature of this obligation²⁵. "It is fitting for the servant to be as the master" implies that woman will then be bound by all the commandments (already) incumbent on man since both crowns will be of equal stature in the seventh millennium (*ibid*, ed. Ferrara, f. 183a).

Her paths lead to peace (Proverbs 3:17; *MT* Hilkhot Hanukkah 4:12-14, see also *Shulhan Arukh*, Orah Hayim §273.)

²³ See the French translation of Charles Mopsik in *Cabale et Cabalistes* Paris, Bayard, 1997, p. 216-7. I am indebted to my friend and master, Charles Mopsik, of blessed memory, for having pointed me to these Kabbalistic sources.

²⁴ As indicated by Charles Mopsik, this refers, following the Talmudic conception on the primordial couple, to the equality between the *sefirot* (spheres of divine emanation) *Malkhut* (royalty) and *Tiferet* (splendor) in the hierarchy of the *sefirot* tree, prior to their separation (e.g. his introduction to *La lettre sur la sainteté*, Lagrasse, Verdier, 1986, p 136, note 284). The diadem (*atara*) corresponds to the *sefira* of *Malkhut*. The site of the first association is the *sefira Binah* (discernment), third degree of emanation after *Keter* (crown) and *Hokhma* (wisdom).

²⁵ According to the principle established in the Mishna (Kiddushin 1:7), women are exempt from time-bound positive commandments.

What are the implications of all this for the present time? True, the accession of women to full equality with respect to the divine commands is only envisaged here as a feature of distant messianic times. Nevertheless, various sources have demonstrated that following opportune demonstrations of female initiative, and contrary to male established authority, Jewish law modified various statutes, *hic et nunc*, associating women with practices that had previously devolved only upon men.

Appendix

In light of what I have written here, an unusual talmudic midrash unexpectedly reveals a hidden level of meaning that, if I'm not wrong, suggests this text as an important source of the kabbalistic developments I cited above. A small section of this midrash is cited in the body of the piece, but now I wish to present it more clearly:

Rabbi Banaa went (to Hebron) to take the precise measurements of the cave (of Makhpela.)²⁶ When he approached the tomb of Abraham, however, he came across the latter's servant, Eliezer, who was guarding the door. Rabbi Banaa inquired, "What is Abraham doing at this precise moment?" Eliezer answered, "He is asleep in Sarah's arms, and she is contemplating his head." Rabbi Banaa said, "Go tell him that Banaa is waiting at the door." To this, Eliezer responded, "(There is no need for advance warning, and) you may enter, as it is well known that in "that world" (i.e. the world of truth where the dead reside), the evil inclination is absent." (In other words, there is no flagrancy or possibility of interrupting them inadvertently in an intimate moment.) He (Rabbi Banaa) thereupon entered and looked around, then left. When Rabbi Banaa next wished to enter the tomb of Adam, a celestial voice issued forth and said, "You have cast a glance on something resembling My appearance, but actually to see (the one formally created in My image) is forbidden to you." Rabbi Banaa answered, "But it is absolutely necessary that I take the measurements of the cave!" To this, the heavenly voice responded, "the outer measures are the same as the inner ones." (And in the version of the story that supposes, as some do, that the tombs in the cave were built one atop the other and not side by side, the voice answers that the measurements of the upper one is the same as the lower one.) Later, Rabbi Banaa confided (that he managed to take a peek inside anyway, but that he didn't see much): "All I was able to see (of Adam) were his two heels, which resembled two solar stars." But, compared to the effulgent splendor of Sarah, any human beauty would have to be evaluated as existing roughly in the same ratio as the loveliness of a monkey would exist in pale comparison to the handsomeness of a human being. Nonetheless, when compared to the splendor of Eve, even Sarah splendiferous beauty would on par with a monkey's looks when compared to that of a human being. Moreover, when compared to the (exquisite) beauty of Adam, the beauty of Eve itself would be akin to a monkey's when compared to a human being. And, finally, when compared to the splendor of the Shekhinah, the beauty of Adam would be like a monkey's when compared to the beauty of a human being (*b* Bava Batra 58a.)

The mythical visit of Rabbi Banaa to the cave of the patriarchs constitutes a kind of visionary excursion to the world beyond the tomb, which itself resembles a kind of foyer

²⁶ The concept of measuring the cave's exterior space has to do with marking it off properly so as to limit the possibility of inadvertent contamination with impurity.

leading into the World to Come. Where the bodies of the deceased rest, there are also to be found their disembodied souls, Rabbi Banaa's unexpected interlocutors.²⁷ (According to the midrashic conception, the cave called Makhpela does not solely contain the mortal remains of the three patriarchs and their respective spouses, other than Rachel, but the remains of Adam and Eve as well.²⁸) The midrash is thus setting up a kind of hierarchy of beauty in which the ultimate source of glory is, of course, the Shekhinah, against whom the others are measured in terms of the degree to which they match or fail to match that ethereal standard of splendor and thus represent, degree by degenerative degree, reflections of divine beauty, then mere reflections of those reflections as the effulgent splendor of the divine becomes less and less discernable in the world below.

In our sense, the astral, lunar and solar symbols analyzed above constitute the key for unlocking the true meaning of this vision. As we enter into the cave with Rabbi Banaa, we discover the fate of the dead as they return to their celestial source. The love between Abraham and Sarah, a relationship that has somehow transcended their years as living people on earth and which is by its very nature suggestive of the most intimate secrets of human love,²⁹ points us to a powerful collusion between the feminine and masculine principles, a relationship imagined to recapitulate the relationship of the sun and moon. The unity of the couple is aptly summarized by the capture of the light itself, as encapsulated by the loving gaze that Sarah trains on Abraham's face. This vision, wholly redolent of masculine superiority, is then contrasted with a vision that takes the reader to an even higher level, symbolized here by interior or upper cave. What is viewed there in a furtive glimpse—Adam's heels—exists at the confluence of diverse symbols. The intense luminosity of the heels suggests the effulgent reality of the divine as it exists in the supernal world in its various guises as the divine chariot and the throne of glory.³⁰ The very limited glimpse of Adam's body vouchsafed the errant rabbi also reminds us easily of the "back" of the divine glory, as revealed to Moses.³¹

Adam's two magnificent heels require just a bit of further attention. The midrash is imagining Adam in his glorious garment of light, or at least now, post-mortem, as fully effulgent as he was before his great sin.³² But, furthermore, after having seen Abraham

²⁷ Cf. Jeremiah's vision, in which he hears Rachel weeping for her children from within her tomb (Jeremiah 31:15-17.) Cf. the treatment of this story at B. Shabbat 152b.

²⁸ Cf. Genesis 49:31; B. Eruvin 53a.

²⁹ Cf. B. Hagigah 11b, where the text discusses the specific precautions necessary to make safe those who would discuss the secrets of conjugal intimacy, the creation of humanity and Ezekiel's vision of the divine chariot.

³⁰ Cf. Ezekiel 1:26-27.

³¹ Cf. Exodus 33:23.

³² This, from the various rabbinic sources concerning the appearance and apparel of Adam based on the exegesis of the verse "And Eternal God made garments of leather (Hebrew: *'or*) for Adam and his wife, and dressed them in them (Genesis 3:21.)" However, in the Torah scroll of Rabbi Meir, the text read *kotnot 'or* (with an alef) instead of *kotnot 'or* (with an ayin, as our received text has it), thus suggesting that God dressed the primordial couple in garments of "light", not "leather". Indeed, other rabbinic texts described these garments as wide at the bottom and narrow at the top, thus resembling flames. Rabbi Yitshak Rabbah

and Sarah, we would have expected Rabbi Banaa to see both Adam and Eve, or at least their four heels! That this does not happen suggests that the soteriological concept of an immaculate “astral body” (i.e., the garment of light) is intimately related here to the image of the heels of Adam resembling two suns, which, in turn, cannot but bring the reader back to the eschatological theme of the verse from Isaiah cited above “And the light of the moon shall become like the light of the sun (Isaiah 30:26.)” However, the matter here does not only have to do with the precise equivalence of the two sources of light, but also with the fact that Adam, only having two heels, leads us to consider that the primordial couple has reattained its (or, rather, their) original state as an androgyne, that is, as a being in which the gendered aspect of human life exists in an integrated manner that, by its nature, negates the subsequent dissociation and inequality of the genders that became a feature of subsequent history. Adam and Eve have thus fulfilled in their own destinies the verse from Genesis, “The man shall unite with his wife and they shall thenceforth be one sole flesh (Genesis 2:24.)” All these symbolic elements in the vision of the Adam’s heels appear thus to have come together to illustrate the reconstituted “image of the man” and the specific way in which this image is pressed into service to give formal reality to the denouement of the eschatological drama.³³ The emblematic ritual supporting this new situation is then no more the two, distinct (albeit equal) Shabbat candles, but the Havdalah candle lit at the very end of the Sabbath with its intertwined wicks braided in such a way as to create a single flame.

said, “These garments were as smooth as a fingernail, and as splendid as pearls (Genesis Rabbah 20:12, cf. Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer, ch. 14.)” As the ancient mystic literature attests, it is necessary to rid oneself of the protective suit (that is, garment and flesh) of this world, in order to ascend to the divine world wearing garments solely made of light: “And Michael removed my garments and anointed me with oil (2 Enoch 22:6.)” In the Ascension of Isaiah (7:22), Isaiah is said to have put on such garments, and a crown of light as well, when he finally penetrated the seventh heaven.

³³ The theme of the Afternoon Service on Shabbat is that of unity, as exemplified by the very prominent opening paragraph of the middle section of the Amidah: “You are One and Your name is One. And which among the nations of the world is as wholly unique as Your people Israel?” It is also worth noting that the two ways in which the commandment to keep the Sabbath are stated in the Torah (see Exodus 20:8 and Deuteronomy 5:12), *zakhor* (remember!) and *shamor* (observe!), and which somehow, mystically, both should appear on the tablets of the law are explained in the midrash (in the Pesikta Zutarta to *parshat Va’ethanan* 9:2) as having been spoken “with a single word” at the moment of revelation. For an interesting interpretation of *zakhor* and *shamor* as having to do both with the kabbalistic idea that the commandments serve to bring about the unification of the masculine and feminine elements within the godhead and also with the practice of lighting two Shabbat candles on Friday evenings, see, e.g., the comment of Rabbi Isaac Abouhav (1433–1493, Spain, commenting on a passage in the *Arba’ah Turim* of Rabbi Yaakov bar Asher), “The two wicks (of the two Shabbat candles), insofar as there are two of them and insofar as they serve in the world below as receptacles (i.e., for the divine spirit), correspond to *zakhor* and *shamor* having been spoken with a single (divine) word....whereas, in the supernal world, they exist as a single flame (cited by Reuven Kimelman in his Hebrew-language *The Mystic Significance of Lekhah Dodi in the Kabbalat Shabbat Service* (Los Angeles and Jerusalem: Cheruv Press/Magnes Press, 2003, p. 41, note 54.).