

The Shekhinah in Jewish Renewal: Feminist Reinterpretations and Intrinsic Challenges

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Abstract: The Shekhinah, understood as the Divine Presence, occupies a central position in contemporary research on Kabbalistic thought, particularly due to its feminine attributes. During the Jewish Renewal movements, it emerged as a significant concept and gained substantial prominence within feminist theological discourse. However, previous scholarship has primarily focused on critiquing the methodological and theoretical shortcomings of feminist endeavors, often neglecting the inherent complexities and limitations of the Shekhinah and the broader Tree of Life framework itself. This article aims to address this gap by critically examining the complexities of the Shekhinah and its implications, preceded by an introductory discussion of its role in Jewish Renewal. Examining the complexities of the Shekhinah in Kabbalistic thought, this study highlights its role in Jewish Renewal and feminist theology. It concludes that, despite certain limitations and challenges in the concept itself, the Shekhinah represents a significant milestone in advancing feminist discourse and reshaping theological perspectives.

Keywords: Shekhinah, Kabbalah, Feminism, Jewish Renewal

1. Introduction

Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael remarked, “In the last two decades, God has been transformed. The King of the Universe has been exploring His feminine side.” [1] This statement regarding the mobility of God might seem eccentric, however, given that the omnipotence and eternity of God are the backbone of Judaism. Removing these foundational principles would risk the collapse of the entire theological structure; nevertheless, it also highlights a recent trend toward broader recognition of gender equality within the field of theology. If God is not solely of one gender, and the strict monotheism of Judaism precludes the existence of dual deities, the concept of divine gender dimorphism emerges as a compelling alternative. Therefore, to some extent, rejecting the notion of divine transformation inherently suggests the existence of canonical evidence that documents the feminine aspects of God, concealed yet awaiting discovery. And Chava Weissler underscored the significance of this pursuit, affirming its necessity by emphasizing that feminism involves recognizing the feminine aspect of divinity [2]. Informed by this principle, Jewish feminist theologians initiated their efforts to elucidate the importance of the Shekhinah, framing it as conclusive evidence of divine gender parity and a cornerstone for their theological explorations.

Despite its prominence, much of the current research has focused on identifying methodological and theoretical flaws in feminist interpretations, often disregarding the nuanced complexities and

inherent limitations of the Shekhinah and the broader Tree of Life framework. This paper endeavors to address this oversight by critically analyzing the multifaceted dimensions of the Shekhinah while situating it within the broader contexts of Jewish Renewal and feminist theological thought. It ultimately asserts that, notwithstanding its conceptual difficulties, the Shekhinah represents a pivotal advancement in the progression of feminist discourse and the reimagining of theological paradigms.

2. Shekhinah and the Role She Plays

Although the Shekhinah does not appear explicitly in the Hebrew Bible, its conceptual roots can be traced to Exodus, where the Lord commands, “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst” (Exodus 25:8, ESV). The verb שָׁכַן (sh-k-n), meaning “to dwell” or “to settle,” forms the basis for the noun Shekhinah (שְׁכִינָה), which, in post-biblical literature, came to denote God’s indwelling presence [3]. Early variants of the Shekhinah are discernible in the Hebrew Bible, where it is associated with the Ark of the Covenant, the Temple [4], as described in 1 Kings 8:10-13: “The priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled His temple,” and the pillars of cloud and fire guiding the Israelites [5]: “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light” (Exodus 13:21-22). Another subtle correlation arises in Jeremiah’s vision of Rachel weeping for her children (Jeremiah 31:15), which some interpret as an allusion to the sacred role of Shekhinah as the suffering mother for Israel [6]. The gender of Shekhinah in early texts remains obscure. In the Talmud and the foundational Kabbalistic work *Sefer Bahir*, the feminine aspect of the Shekhinah is not fully developed but certain hints emerge. For instance, the Talmud describes Shekhinah as sheltering the Israelites beneath her wings: “She will cover Israel under her wings” (Shabbath 31a) [7]. However, the *Zohar* marks a turning point, where the feminine identity of the Shekhinah becomes pronounced. The *Zohar* distinguishes between the Upper Shekhinah (Binah), often referred to as the Upper Mother, and the Lower Shekhinah (Malkhut), depicted as the Daughter or the Bride. Through the assignment of specific gender characteristics to the Shekhinah, the *Zohar* highlights the feminine dimension of the divine within Kabbalistic thought, offering a transformative correction in the historical understanding of the feminine divine in Jewish tradition. This concept has proved its success and prevalence in the last century were far from coincidental. It has made significant contributions to at least four key aspects of feminist movements within Jewish Renewal. First, the Shekhinah serves as an alternative to masculine images of deities. As a premise, it is essential to emphasize that the way people refer to God is far from trivial; numerous personal experiences have shown that pronouns can serve as barriers, hindering women from fully perceiving God and attaining a sense of belonging in religious communities [8]. Traditional pronouns in the Bible, such as “King” “Lord” [9] and “Father” risk conveying a bias that men are closer to God and more likely made in His image. This bias implies that women must first ascend to a masculine identity before gaining access to God. It is no wonder that such imagery rarely resonates with women. Conversely, it perpetually erodes their connection to the divine. As the feminine aspect of the Shekhinah is embraced, women are ultimately granted the chance to affirm their virtue within this spiritual paradigm.

Secondly, the Shekhinah’s frequent depiction as a weeping woman challenges stereotypes. In this context, tears are not a sign of weakness but rather a sacred expression of compassion. These tears represent the extraordinary fortitude of the Shekhinah, who shelters all individuals beneath her wings, demonstrating significant divine authority. As Faust proclaims, “Das Ewig-Weibliche zieht uns hinan” (“The Eternal Feminine draws us upward”). A parallel can be observed in Jeremiah 9:17-18, where the Lord calls for mourning women to lament on behalf of Israel during their suffering: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: ‘Consider, and call for the mourning women to come; send for the skillful women to come; let them make haste and raise a wailing over us, that our eyes may run down with tears and

our eyelids flow with water.” Both classics, though counterintuitively, underscore the power of tears and femininity.

Thirdly, the Shekhinah’s metaphorical function is particularly noteworthy. Modern feminist theologians regard her as a symbolic figure for women, asserting that “the exile or eclipse of Shekhinah refers to the absence of women’s voices and feminine spirituality from Judaism.” [10] This comparison empowers women to reclaim their voices within Judaism and emphasizes the importance of feminine spirituality. Ultimately, the Shekhinah functions as a mediator, connecting the fervor of contemporary feminist thought with traditional theological frameworks. For some feminists, Shekhinah is worshipped as an individual divine figure, separate from Yahweh, representing a departure from traditional Judaism. Although these practices may be perceived as compromises—yielding the foundational principles of classical Judaism, which, due to its pivotal role in modern discourse, constitutes an essential domain—the Shekhinah offers a pathway for reconciliation. She embodies a source of hope for feminists striving to affirm their identity while alleviating the conflicts between tradition and contemporary values.

3. Intrinsic Challenges

There is ample reason to believe that Shekhinah’s prominence as a symbol in the Jewish Renewal movement stems not from her perceived perfection but rather as a necessary, if desperate, recourse. Considering the limited presence of overt maternal imagery in the Hebrew Bible—mostly found in Proverbs and Psalms in relation to wisdom—it is not surprising that Shekhinah has become one of the few versatile terms within the biblical vocabulary. However, upon closer examination of the inherent flaws within this conceptual framework, it becomes clear why attempts to promote Shekhinah as a central theological idea have repeatedly faltered.

The theory that some Sefirot on the Tree of Life are representatives of the feminine Middot was initially posited based on their grammatical gender. However, if this connection between grammar and actual gender is taken seriously—as predecessors did—it places the entire Kabbalistic framework into paradox. According to Kabbalists, the ultimate goal of humanity is to “reunite the Divine Feminine with the Divine Masculine,” as the world, at its creation, existed in perfect balance. Following this foundational belief, Kabbalists conceptualized the Tree of Life, arranging the Sefirot along three pillars: the feminine pillar on the left, the masculine pillar on the right, and the balanced energies in the middle. Nevertheless, although the central pillar is conceptually neutral, it is only Malkhut, located at the base of the Tree, that is grammatically classified as feminine. The other Sefirot along the central pillar—Yesod, Tiferet, Keter, and even Ein Sof—are all grammatically categorized as masculine. Moreover, Malkhut, the furthest Sefirah from Ein Sof, is described as “owning nothing but taking in the colors and energies from all the vessels preceding her.” Before ascending to divinity, Malkhut must first be elevated through the masculine vortexes of divine energy, particularly Yesod. This configuration suggests that masculinity is more aligned with the divine than femininity, reinforcing an androcentric discourse. Even the three Sefirot on the feminine pillar—Binah, Gevurah, and Hod—seem to perpetuate traditional gendered roles. Binah is depicted as the cosmic womb, Gevurah as the educator, and Hod as the radiator of divine glory, roles that place the feminine in positions of receptivity and conception. This echoes a historical division of labor, where women are relegated to being containers or channels for others’ aspirations rather than autonomous individuals. A poignant modern analogy might compare this dynamic to a supporting character in a blockbuster film—present on the stage but serving only as the means through which the protagonist actualizes their great ambitions. Even the Supernal Mother and Upper Shekhinah (Binah), revered as *tzror ha-chaim* (the treasure house of all souls), is defined as a mirror reflecting the divine light and designs conceived by the Upper Father. Furthermore, while Tiferet (the Son) and Malkhut (the Daughter) are supposed to hold equal status in this *hieros gamos* (the Sacred Marriage), it is Tiferet alone that

receives the title Kadosh Baruch Hu (the Holy Blessed One), while Malkhut is never granted this honor. The metaphor frequently invoked by the Rabbis during the Talmudic era illustrates this disparity: the Shekhinah is the moon, while Tiferet is the sun. The moon merely reflects the light of the sun, incapable of shining on her own. Similarly, the Shekhinah is depicted as the bride yearning for reunion with her groom (Tiferet), a longing that lies at the very heart of her ordeal. While the itching for reunification speaks to the priority of balance and harmony, it remains unexplained why it is Malkhut (or the feminine) that must endure exile and overshadowing. In summary of all the reasons mentioned above, when the Tree of Life is analyzed through the lens of grammatical gender, it is unsurprising that a tilt toward the right (masculine) side becomes evident.

This asymmetry between the masculine and feminine aspects of divinity is what motivates the search for alternative explanations to this long-held belief, as it obviously deviates from the ideal equilibrium of creation. One plausible postulation is that grammatical gender cannot be directly equated with physical sex. This interpretation aligns with the Second Commandment, which forbids visual representations: “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth” (Exodus 20:4). Beside this prohibition, early Hasidic writings provide clear clues that challenge anthropomorphic interpretations of Shekhinah. Some propose that the Shekhinah may simply serve as “an alternative way of referring to God,” an interpretation particularly emphasized and embraced within Jewish Renewal. Supporter of this idea promotes the use of the terms “Adonai, Shekhinah, and Yah” as a whole to refer to God without pronouncing the Tetragrammaton, in the spirit of pluralism. The intriguing phenomenon that Kabbalistic literature, particularly the Zohar, establishes strong parallels between King David, a male figure, and the Shekhinah, an alleged female should also not be overlooked. Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel argues that King David may even be seen as an incarnation of the Shekhinah. This association is grounded in several key similarities. First, there is a shared longing for divine immanence. King David’s relationship with the Temple reflects a profound desire for closeness with God, a characteristic that aligns with the Shekhinah. This is evident in Psalm 27:4: “[...] that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in His temple.” Second, both King David and the Shekhinah experience exile and persecution. Like the Shekhinah, who embodies vulnerability and resilience, King David endures exile due to Saul’s threats. The harmful spirit afflicting Saul (1 Samuel 19:9) is often interpreted as Amalek or the kelipot—forces opposing the Shekhinah. This parallel solidified by their shared narrative of struggle: “And Saul sought to pin David to the wall with the spear, but he eluded Saul, so that he struck the spear into the wall. And David fled and escaped that night” (1 Samuel 19:10). Third, both figures assume the role of a guide and sovereign. King David’s nomadic life mirrors the Shekhinah’s guiding role during the Exodus, as noted in 2 Samuel 7:6: “I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling.” Additionally, the Shekhinah, often associated with Malkhut (sovereignty), resonates with David’s role in establishing Israel’s monarchy: “He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever” (2 Samuel 7:13). This connection further extends to the restoration of the Messianic world, paralleling the Kabbalistic concepts of Shekhinah’s dominating role in teshuvah (returning) and tikkun shevirah (repairing the brokenness). All the resemblances mentioned above highlight the profound symbolic alignment between King David and the Shekhinah in Kabbalistic thought.

However, such interpretations also challenge the traditional consensus of regarding the Shekhinah as entirely female, suggesting that the Kabbalistic worldview may not be as progressive as some earlier scholars assumed. This tragic blind trust in the original canons might, unfortunately, contribute to the friction faced by feminists attempting to “translate Biblical faith without sexism”, as they

mistakenly assume that, prior to its interpretation by the male-dominated church, the Bible's original text was devoid of any inherent sexist tendencies.

As Judith Plaskow cautions, "Shekhinah is a usable image for feminists only if it is partly wrenched free from its original context." While Shekhinah may serve as a panacea for placation, it is crucial to remain aware of the potential connotative inappropriateness such reinterpretations may carry. The androcentric tendencies of the Hebrew Bible persist as difficult to deny, and any attempt to ascribe impartiality to God must grapple with this foundational tension.

With all the intrinsic challenges raised in this article, however, the positive significance of the reinterpretation of Shekhinah and Kabbalistic customs should not be overlooked. For example, the relationship between Imma (Binah) and Abba (Chokhmah), although often depicted as marital, is, on many occasions, described as "brotherly". Similarly, while Gevurah is sometimes reproached as a destructive force, the revenge she enacted is better understood as "divine retribution." Her actions are framed as protective and for the sake of her child—the Israelites—rather than motivated by selfish desire, contrasting with portrayals of divine figures in other mystical traditions of the time. For instance, in Gnostic myths, the goddess of wisdom, Sophia, is depicted as traumatized by conjugal affairs and becomes the culprit for the fall of all beings. Another important attribution is the association made in the Talmud between the Shekhinah and sacred sound. It is stated: "[...] if ten people pray together, the Divine Presence is with them" (Berachoth 6a), and "[...] the Shekhinah speaks from his throat." This portrayal of the Shekhinah as expressing herself through voice signifies a brief detachment from the historical loss of female subjectivity and right of speech.

While the reinterpretation of Shekhinah may contain certain imperfections, its positive and transformative impact on feminist movements within and outside the Jewish Renewal is significant enough to warrant profound gratitude from women worldwide. The struggle to gain the right to interpret biblical texts—a domain long monopolized by patriarchal authority—represents a sacred and historic fight. This reinterpretation has empowered women to reclaim their voice in the field of biblical hermeneutics, a field from which they were excluded for centuries. Similarly, despite its potential flaws, the significance of Shekhinah herself is beyond question. She has planted a seed in the consciousness of women, even those who are not Jewish, ensuring that, centuries after the emergence of Kabbalah and the Zohar, women have carved out a space—a "trench," so to speak—within which they can defend their place in religious discourse. Her legacy has not only paved the way for the reimagining of divine femininity but also laid the groundwork for future feminist engagement with Jewish theology.

4. Conclusion

The reinterpretation of the Shekhinah within Kabbalistic thought and Jewish Renewal has emerged as a pivotal moment in feminist theological discourse, offering profound implications for both traditional and contemporary values. Despite its inherent challenges and conceptual limitations, the Shekhinah's evolution as a symbol of divine femininity has opened new avenues for gender inclusivity within theology. This study has highlighted the Shekhinah's dual role: as a complex theological construct intertwined with traditional androcentric narratives and as a transformative emblem of feminist empowerment. By addressing the often-overlooked intricacies of the Shekhinah and situating her within broader theological and feminist frameworks, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of her multifaceted nature.

While critiques of its underlying connotation reveal persistent inequalities, the attempt itself has undeniably advanced feminist efforts to reclaim their voices within religious scholarship. Her presence has inspired a reimagining of divine identity, demonstrating the potential to challenge entrenched patriarchal norms and redefine spiritual belonging. This heritage not only affirms the importance of Shekhinah within feminist discourses but also highlights her function as a foundational

element for continuous discourse, connecting the gap between traditional frameworks and contemporary theological exploration.

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