

Essay

Rigpa and Shekhinah – The Convergence of Mystical Experiences

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I

This study will attempt to understand Shekhinah based on a view that goes beyond that of the historian of religious ideas,¹ however our analysis will greatly benefit from the work of such historical writings just as it will benefit from other disciplines trying to explain religious phenomena. However, the initial view assumed in this work will be the one proposed by Eliade, a historian of religious ideas, the particularity of his approach being that which studies religion using religion's own categories thus not allowing escape to other justifications for religious phenomena: "To try to grasp the essence of such phenomenon [religious phenomenon] by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false: it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred."² (*Patterns* foreword). In other words, Eliade's suggestion is that there may be a deeper meaning to be discovered when horizontal escape is not permitted. In order to capture the element of the sacred mentioned above this study will attempt to look at the understanding of reality from the perspective of the archaic human or that of the classical societies³ (biblical times would apply too). Eliade showed us that for the archaic human "nature was more than just nature", it was fraught with symbolism and a complex network of meanings; a mental synthesis as Eliade would say.⁴ Likewise, when ancient Hebrews during biblical times conceived of the hypostatized presence of God within the confines of a tabernacle where they placed the covenant, such a gesture in light of

¹ Based on Eliade's view "the religious historian must trace not only the history of a given hierophany but must first understand and explain the modality of the sacred that the hierophany discloses." (Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* 5).

² Eliade further says, "Obviously there are no purely religious phenomena [. . .] Because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic [. . .]."

³ Archaic human as defined by Eliade in "The Myth of the Eternal Return" page 3. To be more precise, Eliade uses the term archaic man. We will subsequently change the term man with human or people except when showing in quotation.

⁴ As an example of the capacity to hold in one's mind such complex networks of meanings is shown to us by Green in his study of the Zoharic Kabbalists (Arthur Green: "A guide to the Zohar").

Eliade's method, will suggest a certain nature and character of the ancient understanding of it.⁵ Furthermore, this study will have at its foundation the idea that, that which appears as symbol for the contemporary human may have represented a certain concrete reality for the people whose symbols are being studied. The preceding seems to be the deeper sense of Eliade's writings on the primitive religious mind. As an example, Eliade was wondering "what mental synthesis" could produce such a "so vast and so coherent a symbolism" when speaking of the view of the sacred tree of the archaic human (*Patterns* 267). That which appears to us as a mental synthesis of a series of concepts – religious valorizations surrounding the sacred tree – must have amounted to a specific way of experiencing reality, in other words an experience.⁶

The preceding brings us to the most important perspective assumed by this study resulting from the coalescing of the views and ideas mentioned above - the experiential perspective, (simply, if there was an experience how can we understand that experience).⁷ Ultimately, this paper seeks to discover the way the ancient Hebrews experienced the presence of God.⁸ Regarding the question of the possibility of such an endeavor the assumption of this paper is positive: such a possibility exists and is partly due to a deeper conceptual understanding of the presence of God. Our attempt to discover a deeper understanding of the presence of God will take us from the understanding of the reality of the ancient Hebrews (as a reflection of the archaic humans and their worldview) to the symbolism of the medieval Kabbalists and finally at some point we will cross cultural borders into a different religious tradition, namely Tibetan Buddhism.

Did the ancient Hebrews experience awe and fear when they felt the presence of God? Did they perceive a supernatural glow of light - the radiance (ziv) of Shekhinah? (Scholem 147). Was that a visible

⁵ The Ark of the Covenant (Aron ha-Berit) containing the tablets of the Law was placed within the Tent of Meeting (Mishkan). The Mercy Seat (kapporeth) represents the lid of the Ark of the Covenant and the space above it seems to be the focal point for the presence of God. The Ark of the Covenant, the tabernacle and the world outside can be viewed as concentric, space where God manifests, and thus the portable tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant conform to the symbolism of the center of the archaic humans as described by Eliade.

⁶ Perhaps one aspect of seeing reality as synthesis implies perceiving the same patterns manifesting at all levels of reality.

⁷ We believe using the term phenomenology at this point would unnecessarily complicate this part of the exposition.

⁸ As we will discern more of the ancient Hebrews, this assertion will be further qualified. Also, and most importantly, it is only after biblical times that the presence of God came to be denoted by the word Shekhinah.

phenomenon or an internal type of radiance? Did they hear a voice or voices? Could we make any sense of that? As they approached the tabernacle or when they opened the Ark of the Covenant, did they feel a heightened sense of alertness; the overwhelming of the profane by the sacred? How would one describe that? Or did the ancient Hebrews feel inspired - as they sat around God's localized presence in the Mishkan (Ariel 95) - in seeing more into (or beyond) the physical reality as the primitive human described by Eliade? Furthermore, are there other ways of perceiving the physical reality than the one corresponding to archaic humans?⁹

We are illustrating below the workings of the primitive mind by way of Eliade's dialectic of the hierophanies. For instance, for the primitive mind a certain sacred tree represented a power. Most importantly, "[. . .] that power was as much due to the tree as such as to any cosmological implications it had. To the primitive mind, nature and symbol were inseparable." (*Patterns* 268). For a stone or stones held sacred: "[. . .] it is not a question of actually worshipping the stones [. . .] the stones are venerated precisely because they are not simply stones but hierophanies, something outside their normal status as things [. . .] a thing becomes sacred in so far as it embodies (that is, reveals) something other than itself." (*Patterns* 13).¹⁰ There is another key aspect to the sacred objects as illustrated by the sacred tree or sacred stones:

But this power is in fact validated by an ontology: if the tree is charged with sacred forces, it is because it is vertical, it grows, it loses its leaves and regains them and is thus regenerated (it 'dies' and 'rises' again) times without number [. . .] and by its natural laws of development ('regeneration'), the tree re-enacts what to the primitive understanding is the whole cosmos. (*Patterns* 268)

Furthermore, "[. . .] the tree can, of course, become a symbol of the universe, and in that form we find it in more developed civilizations; but to a primitive religious mind, the tree *is* the universe, and it *is* so because it

⁹ The same question put differently - are there other modes of human cognition?

¹⁰ It seems that the "worship of stones" occurs when the sacred object - the stone in this case - loses its power as a symbol (when man lost his ability to see the referent of the sacred object), Eliade talks about the degradation and infantilization of symbols in *Patterns* page 440.

reproduces it and as it were sums it up as well as ‘symbolizing’ it.” (*Patterns* 269)¹¹ or relating to the “power” of stones as symbols, “[. . .] that something other [the sacred quality or the referent of the stone] comes from its unusual shape, its efficacy [. . .] or whether it springs from the thing’s fitting in with some symbolism [. . .] or being placed in a position”, or when relating to the physical characteristics of the stone as indicative of the nature of the sacred, “this stone shows that the sacred is something other than the cosmic surroundings, and like stone, the sacred is absolutely invulnerable, steadfast, beyond change” (*Patterns* 13, 25). Not pretending to better explain what Eliade already said, to make it simple, for archaic humans a certain sacred object such as a stone¹² indeed was a stone and at the same time more than just a stone – it stood as a symbol for something else; and the stone had certain characteristics, specifics of the stone itself, brought to the fore by the meaning – the religious valorization of the stone; thus the character of the stone matches the character of that which the stone stood for.¹³ Finally, the examples above illustrate that for archaic humans literally everything involving that which was held sacred had a meaning: the sacred object may have referred to some higher dimension - an aspect of the cosmos or the cosmos itself; the sacred object and its referent were inseparable; there is an ontology of the sacred object, an inherent way of being which was at the same time reflective of its referent.¹⁴

For the religious life of the Semites before the times of Moses, one of Eliade’s examples is that of Jacob sleeping with his head on a stone that he later consecrated as “Bethel” – house of God¹⁵ because while

¹¹ In the same paragraph Eliade says that for the primitive human “symbols” owe their validity to the fact that the reality they symbolize is embodied in them (*Patterns* 269). This seems to be the precursor of the immanent aspect of the divine in the religions of later civilizations.

¹² We are not concerned at this point why or how an object became sacred.

¹³ It is worth contrasting the archaic view with that of the contemporary man: for the contemporary man a stone is...a stone. We know that it has a certain hardness color etc., however we usually care about a stone when it serves some practical purpose: it may have a chemical composition we might be interested in, stones for construction purposes, decorative, etc.

¹⁴ Also, it may be helpful for understanding the primitive mind, to note what Eliade says, namely that, elementary hierophanies do not represent the whole of the religious “theory” and experiences of the “primitives”, and “no religion however primitive [. . .] is capable of being reduced to an elementary level of hierophanies [. . .].” (*Patterns* 24); more on the complexity of “primitive religions” on page 30, of the same volume.

¹⁵ The stone itself was consecrated and with it the place around the stone, the sacred stone indicated the sacred place; while Jacob consecrated the stone because the dream he had, interestingly enough the consecration of a stone where the stone becomes the center of the world is a gesture of the archaic man.

sleeping, he dreamed of a ladder connecting earth with heaven with angels ascending and descending on it and saw God of Abraham speak to him. The question whether the god Jacob saw in his dream was the “god of the father” – the Abrahamic god or a local god¹⁶ was posed because that would indicate to us the nature of the religion existing at that time and place. The investigations made on this subject, (*Patterns* 229) concluded that the god Jacob saw was indeed the God of Abraham, more specifically the god that resulted from the identification of the “god of the father” with the Canaanite god “El” (Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas* 173). However, it seems that the stone Jacob consecrated (the bethel) and the place surrounding that location came to be venerated later by the local population as a specific divinity Bethel (local divinities are closer to the cosmic religion of the archaic humans): “Where, traditionally, Jacob saw the angels’ ladder and the house of God, Palestinian peasants saw the god Bethel.” and “we must remember that, whatever god the local population may have seen in Bethel, no stone ever represented more than a sign, a dwelling [of the divine], a theophany.” (*Patterns* 229). Even during Moses’s time, after he disclosed to the people the god that they need to follow - Yahweh¹⁷ - the Hebrews, during an absence of Moses relapsed into that which characterizes the religious attitude of the archaic man (the golden calf episode described in Exodus 32).¹⁸

As for the times after Moses, the syncretism between the religion of Yahweh and the religion of Canaanite gods El and Baal (the Canaanite gods represent the cosmic type of religiosity) continued and hence the attitude of prophets who urged a return to the original, pure Yahwism, (Eliade, *History* 184-86, 354). What happens is that there are “two theophanies, two moments of religious experience” and not a “battle between faith and idolatry” (*Patterns* 230). Consequently, Eliade makes a distinction applicable to ancient Hebrews, between a “monotheist elite faithful to Moses’s message” and the general population that constantly seeks to

¹⁶ The Abrahamic God or the “god of the father” is described by Eliade in his “History of Religious Ideas” (vol.1, p.171). The “local god” would represent the archaic understanding of the divine as embodied in the natural world, the type of understanding of reality we have been discussing up to this point. The worldview of the archaic people is denoted by the term cosmic religion in Eliade’s writings.

¹⁷ Yahweh discloses to Moses that “he” is the god of Abraham and of the other patriarchs; Yahweh further discloses to Moses and thus the people “his” mode of being but not his “person”, also Yahweh as a name, indicates his mystery and his transcendence, (Eliade, *History* 179).

¹⁸ There is another moment when, after the split of the kingdom, the northern one - Israel - represented Yahweh as two golden calves, (Eliade, *History* 336).

return to the archaic mode of experiencing the divine. At some point in history, the monotheistic faith prevailed over the traditional cosmic view since “the prophets finally succeeded in emptying nature of any divine presence.” (*History* 354).¹⁹

This distinction allows us to qualify the statement regarding the object of this study: we are interested in the experience of the presence of God by the segment of the Hebrew population Eliade refers to as “monotheist elite”. While this particular experience of the presence of God corresponding to the “monotheist elite” may have appeared in its essential²⁰ form throughout the history of the Jewish people, we believe that the “closer we get” to wherever this experience appears in its symbolic representation as the Aron ha-Berit (the Ark of the Covenant) and the Laws of the Covenant placed in it²¹ or compatible symbolisms²², the better the chances are to elucidate the essential experience of the presence of God.

After the encounter between Moses and Yahweh, the Hebrews henceforth called “the people of Yahweh” built a tabernacle (or Tent of Meeting - the Mishkan) that sheltered the Ark of the Covenant, inside which Moses placed the tablets having God’s “Ten Words” inscribed on them (Deuteronomy 10:5). While the larger space of the tabernacle came to represent the localized presence of God (Ariel 95), the focal point of the presence of God is the Ark of the Covenant since it is from above the Mercy Seat between the cherubim

¹⁹ The prophets associated the impending historical crises with the lack of adherence to pure Yahwism. We will discuss the link between Shekhinah and (God’s) Providence later in this study.

²⁰ We will later qualify the term “essential”.

²¹ The Ark of the Covenant contained the Laws of the Covenant: the Ritual Decalogue and the Ethical Decalogue. Some scholars suggest that the Ritual Decalogue was the one that was prominent during Moses’s time and that the Ethical Decalogue appeared later, however for our study what is truly important is the interpretation of this gesture, which we regard as a symbol.

²² As we shall see later, the presence of God as concept (which in post-biblical times was established as Shekhinah) was elaborated upon by the esoteric or mystical thinkers of Judaism (Kabbalists). The question remains, did Shekhinah remain a concept to meditate upon by the mystics or did they have an experiential awareness of it? If the latter, what was that they experienced? The primary ‘instrument’ used by Kabbalists in their quest for understanding God is the Tree of Life, or the Sefirotic Tree (for a genealogy of the Tree of Life see *The Assyrian Tree of Life: Tracing the Origins of Jewish Monotheism and Greek Philosophy* by Simo Parpola, *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Jul., 1993), pp. 161-208, Univ. of Chicago Press) and it is the basic analogy between the Ark of the Covenant (Aron ha-Berit) as symbol and the Tree of Life as understood by Kabbalists the key to our understanding of how ancient Hebrews experienced the presence of God in its essential or ultimate form.

that God's voice would emerge (Exodus 25:22). And as we have already mentioned, it is only later, that the term Shekhinah came to denote the presence of God.

In light of what was shown above regarding the archaic mode of understanding symbols (as something connecting to a certain reality) it seems that, in essence, the Ark of the Covenant having the Laws of the Covenant in it represented no less than a symbol. While this symbol is not a natural object such as a stone, a tree etc., it was nonetheless a symbol, and it represented the god Yahweh. Using Eliade's terminology, the Ark of the Covenant containing the Laws of the Covenant represents a modality of the sacred: a hierophany or "one of the many kinds of experiences of the sacred man has had." (*Patterns* 2). However, while the referent of this symbol changed, (instead of representing, say the regeneration of the cosmos as with the example of the sacred tree, it represented the "mysterious and transcendent" god Yahweh), due to the nature of the archaic way of understanding symbols, the symbol itself described in some way that which it represented. Simply said, this symbol described Yahweh.²³ The Hebrews chose to represent Yahweh, not by a plant or tree or stone or anything else from the natural world, they chose the symbol of the Ark of the Covenant containing the Decalogue for their god.

Inasmuch the Decalogue or any law represents a prescription for a certain way of acting (or thinking from which derives a certain way of acting) it represents some form of action. The Ark of the Covenant represents a space that contains the symbol for (a certain way of) action. Thus, Moses's experience revealed an aspect of the "god of the father" that may not have been revealed up to that point: the receiving or the passive. This sacred symbol of God would accompany the Hebrews wherever they went, it would also accompany the Israelite armies presumably in battle as well, whereas later the Ark of the Covenant was placed in the Holy of Holies²⁴ inside the Temple in Jerusalem (Eliade, *History* 335). Although, at least from a

²³ We can further add that just like the statement "I am who I am" reveals Yahweh's transcendence, the Ark of the Covenant containing the Decalogue represents in itself a mode of existence (that of Yahweh), thus this symbol reveals an ontology. Knowing how people understood their gods, one can achieve an understanding of the type of worldview and the type of sacred experiences those people had. This symbol, (the Ark of the Covenant containing the Decalogue) will represent the Hebrews' paradigmatic model. These paradigmatic models revealed to the archaic humans their mode of existence while in connection with the divine realm.

²⁴ Debiyr or Kodesh Hakodashim.

contemporary perspective it seems that the prescriptive part (the Laws of the Covenant) of this symbol of Yahweh took precedence in the lives of the Hebrews, it must have not necessarily been so especially for the “monotheistic elite” whose sacred experiences are the object of this study. The Ark of the Covenant was sacred in itself not only because it contained the Decalogue.²⁵ The act of containing²⁶ must have been just as sacred for the Hebrews during Moses’s time as the Divine Covenant itself. In other words, when the Laws of the Covenant were taken out of the Ark of the Covenant, the latter remained just as sacred as before. And inasmuch in this state (with the tablets being removed from it) it still represented the Divine it also represented a mode of being of the Divine that is, the receiving mode. Since the transcendental nature of Yahweh is well established, “what is in fact involved is a new, and the most impressive, expression of a deity as absolutely different from his creation, the ‘utterly other’ (the *ganz andere* of Rudolph Otto).” (Eliade, *History* 182) we arrive at this point at an understanding of Yahweh as a transcendental god symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant.

At this moment we can fully qualify the statement of the goal of this study by changing the word “essential”²⁷ with the word “transcendental” in the statement of our goal given before. The distinction between God and God’s presence is that while the ancient Hebrews knew that God created the world in which they lived (this knowledge may not had been based on actual experience; it is hard to imagine it otherwise), what

²⁵ The concept of sacred space is not alien to the religious mind, both archaic and civilized. As for that which contains or receives, it appeared personified (or mythologized) as the feminine (for a cross cultural view of the symbol of the feminine see “The Feminine spacious as the sky” by Miriam and Jose Arguelles)

²⁶ It is important to note the technical character of this paper which at this particular point, subsequent to Eliadean analysis, suggests in a rather direct way that the ancient Hebrews looked at the Ark of the Covenant and were conscious of the idea of space or the act of containing, that is, not just using the Ark of the Covenant as a carrying box to contain God’s commandments written in stone (which is probably the way a modern person would see this situation). What the ancient Hebrews must have had was an increased level of awareness of space – the place provided by God for the people to live, to develop etc. and this awareness became acute when approaching the Tabernacle or in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant. Also, as Eliade would say, here we do not have an elementary hierophany involving the Ark of the Covenant but a synthesis. Furthermore, we will see later that the pattern of a vessel being filled, sexual intercourse and the human being filled from above (by God) constitute a homology and was explicitly used by kabbalists to explain the relation between the divine and the earthly (lower) realms.

²⁷ The term essential was used up to the point where a minimal description of the transcendental was provided such as the quotation from Rudolph Otto. Another reason for the preceding is related to conveying an understanding that there are different ways of experiencing the same thing. We will make use of such an understanding at a later point.

they actually experienced was the presence of God, hence the term Shekhinah.²⁸ God manifested to the ancient Hebrews in a visual and auditory form (for instance the collective revelation on Mount Sinai), in visions and dreams. Seemingly the auditory form appears most frequently, as is the case with the prophets who “always received the word of Yahweh” (Eliade, *History* 344).²⁹ It would be very difficult to assess the singular revelation that occurred on Mount Sinai (the collective one); indeed, it would be difficult to associate the symbol that resulted from the encounter of Moses with God on Mount Sinai that is, the Ark of the Covenant, with the visual character of the mass revelation, however we could attempt to understand the symbol of God, or more precisely the symbol associated with the presence of God in terms of God’s transcendental nature. Whether a dialogue or the contemplation of their inner voice corresponding to their own thoughts, the voice heard by those who experienced God’s presence, may have come in a different way (as volume, pitch or pace) than the normal inner voice we all associate with our own thoughts. Whatever the case, it would be very hard to understand how a voice could assume a transcendental character. Here, different does not mean transcendental. On the other hand, for something to exist it needs space. Voices too, or more precisely our thoughts assuming the form of our inner voices, in order to occur they need space: the space within our minds. Could this space assume a transcendental character? The most immediate understanding of the transcendental is the concept of infinite due to its opposition to the finite nature of everything related to the normal human experience.³⁰ A transcendental space is an infinite space, hence the infinite space within our minds or the infinite mind. The experience of the infinite or transcendental mind is, as we shall see later, very different than that of the normal mind. Did the ancient Hebrews, the “monotheist elite” Eliade identified, experience the

²⁸ The words Miskhan and Shekhinah derive from the root verb to dwell i.e. shakhan. According to Scholem in his *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, page 147 the term Shekhinah representing the non-localized presence of God became extremely common in the talmudic literature starting between the first century BCE. and first century CE. And while in the Old Testament and in non-rabbinic writings the term Shekhinah does not appear, when it appears in the Talmud, the midrash and the Aramaic translation of the Bible (Targum Onkelos), “Shekhinah is always God himself, insofar as He is present in a specific place or at a specific event.” and “There are no doubt many passages in which the word Shekhinah could be substituted by ‘the Holy One blessed be He’ without any change in meaning.” (Scholem, 148).

²⁹ Our reasoning on the mode of receiving God’s revelation by the prophets seems a bit stretched; what Eliade may actually emphasize here is that it is Yahweh talking to the prophets and not some other god.

³⁰ Finitude is the norm when it comes to human experience therefore the infinite remains a concept for most people.

infinite mind? Is there a process that would lead one to the experience of the infinite mind? Does the description of the process elucidate the concept itself? If we apply the idea of infinite space to the inherent symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant we could redefine it as the infinite space containing the prescription for the right action. If in turn, we apply the idea of the infinite mind to the redefined symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant, we arrive at a new question: if acting while experiencing the infinite mind represents the presence of God, then what is God?

II

Space is that which allows something else to exist within it. Receiving and allowing (or accepting) is its inherent nature. A box would, most of the time, allow us to put something in it. In that case, it receives the object being put in it. A box does not always allow us to put an object in it; we could say it does not accept the object, for instance, when the object would not fit inside the box. The same would apply to any space. Any space smaller than infinite space receives conditionally. The conditional aspect of receiving could be interpreted as the discriminatory or active element of receiving – it is the degree of acceptance. Only the infinite space receives or accepts unconditionally, and it is completely passive. For receiving to realize its complete passive character, its discriminatory aspect needs to be fully realized. If the feminine is the personification or the mythical understanding of acceptance, passive or receiving, then wisdom in turn is, the mythical understanding of the discriminatory aspect of the feminine (for example represented by Goddess Athena in Greek mythology etc.). Is fully realized wisdom an aspect of infinite acceptance? What is the experience of complete or fully realized wisdom? Do religious traditions describe or possibly explain that experience?³¹

Going back to our previous understanding of Yahweh as a transcendental god symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant (the ark containing the prescription for the right action); inasmuch within mythical worldview action is associated with the masculine and the passive or receiving is associated with the feminine, we could

³¹ To answer these questions, we will first investigate Kabbalah and when necessary, we will transition to Tibetan Buddhism.

redefine the understanding of the inner mode (of the presence) of Yahweh given above, as the transcendental union of these two.³²

Medieval Kabbalists fully realized the inner mode or structure of God described above and subsequently provided us with symbolic descriptions of the feminine aspect of the presence of God that will enable us to gain further insight into the meaning of the transcendental Shekhinah³³ and the way it was experienced.

Not delving too much into the historical progression of the understanding of the nature of Shekhinah within the Jewish culture from its moment of appearance in post-Biblical times,³⁴ by the Middle Ages, Kabbalists understood Shekhinah as the archetypical female principle since it “[. . .] absorbs everything capable of such an interpretation [almost anything having a feminine character] in biblical and rabbinic literature.” (Scholem 160). As shown earlier the symbolism of the presence of God incorporates two aspects, the masculine and the feminine. Medieval Kabbalists seems to have recognized the one aspect capable of transcendence, the feminine, and they subsequently regarded the presence of God as purely feminine³⁵ with the addition that they made it part of a process where it is interacting with the masculine principle. In our reading, it seems that the inherent feminine aspect of the symbol of the presence of God has in some ways persisted in the consciousness of the Jewish people, it came to the fore and it was explicated to the highest extent (symbolically and conceptually, the latter in mythical terms) in the medieval Kabbalah. There are many potential factors that may have caused the “eruption” of the mythical consciousness in the Kabbalistic mind; Scholem describes two possibilities, the psychological (the psychology of archetypes i.e. Jungian) and the

³² Raphael Patai in his “The Hebrew Goddess”, pages 151 and 155 notes that Philo considered God having two components, a fatherly and motherly.

³³ The distinction between the transcendental and the non-transcendental Shekhinah will become ever more clearer as we move forward with our discussion.

³⁴ For that, one can look at Gershom Scholem, Raphael Patai and Arhur Green in our bibliography.

³⁵ Risking repeating ourselves, the presence of God, i.e. Shekhinah in Kabbalists’ view is no longer the union of masculine with the feminine. Skipping ahead to Zoharic Kabbalists we cite Green (52), “In a most blatantly sexual symbolization, She [Shekhinah] is aron ha-berit, the ark of the covenant, that in which the berit or covenant (meaning both the Torah and the circumcised phallus) is contained.” We feel the need to emphasize that both the covenant and Torah represent the male principle, the active or action. Also, the sexual symbolism in Zohar, had a pure character, “the inner world of the sefirot was completely holy, a place where no sin abided.” (Green 49).

historical, (161) whereas Green makes the case for the “availability of a parallel figure [Mary, Mother of God and the piety around this figure] in the surrounding Christian culture” (Green, “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs” 21).

Scholem, in his chapter on “Shekhinah: the feminine element in divinity” (140) closely follows the development of the Shekhinah as part of the larger Kabbalistic understanding of the Divine embodied in the symbolism of the Sefirotic tree, from its earliest known appearance all the way to the Lurianic Kabbalah. Below, we will make extensive use of Scholem’s material as we will direct our focus on the description of the dynamic aspect of the Shekhinah and at the same time we will attempt to provide an experiential meaning of it.

The Sefirotic tree of the Kabbalists is a complex representation of the Godhead,³⁶ it is a hierarchical model made up of ten interconnected Sefirah “each representing a hypostasis of a particular facet of God” or “aspects of His nature through which He manifests Himself to us” (Scholem 160, 159). The top level represents the “unknown and unknowable God”, the Ein-Sof (there is no actual graphical representation of Ein-Sof within the Sefirotic Tree). Below Ein-Sof are the triads, Keter-Binah-Hokmah, Din-Hessed-Tif’ereth, Hod-Netsah-Yesod and in the lowest position is the tenth Sefirah, the Shekhinah. Each Sefirah has associated with it multiple symbols ranging from the ideational (for instance cognitive functions) to biblical characters (such as Abraham, Jacob, David etc.).³⁷ Furthermore, Kabbalists provided descriptions of the dynamic relationships between the Sefirot: these links may assume or represent various types of relationships and processes, for instance balancing out each other, indicating a certain flow of energies or light etc. The first triad represents the world of the intellect, in order: the Crown or will, insight or discernment and wisdom; the second triad represents moral traits: severity or judgment, grace or love and mercy or beauty; the last triad:

³⁶ As Ariel mentioned in his “Kabbalah: The Mystic Quest in Judaism” page 75, “it is ironic that the Kabbalists should have so much to say about an unknowable God”. This observation is pertinent, and it leads one to realize a very important view of that which Kabbalists described.

³⁷ We are interested mostly in what one can view as the cognitive functions of the Sefirot. The association of biblical characters to the Sefirot indicates an understanding of people as embodiments of various aspects of the divine or the level they achieved in their ascension into the divine.

splendor or majesty, endurance and foundation or Tsaddik – the righteous one. The order of the Sefiroth above emphasizes the feminine Binah and Din. The three triads described above represent the “creative forces” within the Godhead and “all these active forces are in turn united in the tenth Sefirah, Malkhuth or Shekhinah, God’s royal rule, into which they flow as into an ocean.” (Scholem 43). At this point we are able to distinguish the recurrence of the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant within the symbolism of the Sefirotic Tree. We structure the latter as follows: the “unknown” part represented by the Ein-Sof, the active part represented by the three triads and the passive part represented by the tenth Sefirah, Shekhinah. The “unknown” part of the Sefirotic Tree corresponds to the transcendental nature of God whose presence is symbolized by the Ark of the Covenant³⁸; the active part within the Sefirotic Tree corresponds to the Covenant which is the prescription for the right action and finally Shekhinah corresponds to the space within the Ark of the Covenant representing the receiving nature of the Ark of the Covenant. And, in order to bring to completion the Kabbalistic image of the Sefirotic Tree we must specify that below the tenth Sefirah or the Shekhinah is the corporeal world and hence Shekhinah symbolized also as a gate separating the lower realm from the upper realm.

Kabbalistic symbolism embraces the visible and the invisible reality, unifies the exterior with the interior by accessing the principles that lay behind outer manifestations, and at the same time preserves the idea of transcendence.³⁹ However, for us, in order to be able to analyze the symbols that make up the worldview of the Kabbalists we take the path of simplifying as much as we can in order to get to the essence. Consequently, we will consider the Sefirotic Tree as the representation of the mind of the Kabbalist. Speaking of Hokmah and Binah (the wisdom and the discernment or understanding respectively, both within the Godhead), Green noted:

³⁸ We could say, albeit in a very technical manner that the space between the two cherubim, above the Seat of Mercy from where God’s voice would emerge could be homologized to the invisible Ein-Sof within the Sefirotic Tree.

³⁹ An idea of how this can be achieved is given to us by Green (57): “For the Kabbalist, each time any of these words appears in a text – be it the Torah, the prayerbook, or the Talmudic aggadah – all the other terms are evoked as well.” And of course, this is just one device that is part of their mental universe.

The terms Hokhmah and Binah reflect two qualities or stages of inner mental activity, and indeed they may be experienced within the self as two aspects of mind: the first flash of intellect, the creative spark, and the depth of thought that then absorbs the spark, shaping and refining it as it takes it into itself. This is a rendition in terms of mental process of that same image of the “point” and the “palace”, showing that the language of Kabbalah may be read simultaneously as a myth of cosmic origins and a description of events within the mystic’s mind. (41)

Green continues, “[the Kabbalist’s] mind is a microcosm of that which exists ‘above’ and has been created in such a way as to permit it to both reflect and affect happenings on the cosmic plane.” Green explains the way in which other Sefiroth interact, for instance when speaking of resolving the tension between Hesed and Gevurah as love and judgment respectively. Seeing Tif’eret as the synthesis that resolves the aforementioned tension Green explains (47): “[. . .] meaning that the struggle to integrate love and judgment is not only the great human task but as a reflection of the cosmic struggle. The inner structure of psychic life is the hidden structure of the universe; it is because of this that humans can come to know God by the path of inward contemplation and true self-knowledge.” Indeed, as we reflect on our conscious⁴⁰ thoughts, the basic process is that they come from somewhere (or nowhere; we do have an idea of intention and causality but that still does not tell us where our thoughts come from), they develop within our minds (they take up time and space and although we may have parallel thoughts, we transition between them) influenced by different factors - we call it judgment, and they ultimately go somewhere, they disappear. Of course, as a result of our thoughts we could establish a judgment or reach an understanding, it could also result in some course of action or we could just contemplate our thoughts by establishing a distance between our thoughts and ourselves etc. In Kabbalistic understanding all that results from the interaction between the Sefiroth flows into Shekhinah⁴¹ or we could

⁴⁰ We know that sometimes when we do not reach a definitive judgment on a particular topic, behind the scenes our brain still works on that topic and later we find ourselves having an answer to it. The hard part however is to not judge something at least not in a “definitive” way.

⁴¹ There is an overabundance in Kabbalistic texts of the description of Shekhinah’s role; Kabbalists assume that by overemphasizing it by using repetition and by using various metaphors the reader eventually will realize what

say that Shekhinah is the receiver of the outcome of our thought processes. By extension, we could say that Shekhinah is the repository of our distilled⁴² experiences. While we could justifiably consider the experiences we undergo important in and of themselves, the most important thing, at least based on Kabbalists' view, it is that which comes with the accumulation of experience. Experience is the ability to discern the reality, it differs from person to person, and it has a dynamic character – always changing. Of course, as we age seemingly but not always true, we acquire more experience or insight. Experience (obtained in different ways, for instance by interacting with other people or things, study, reflection etc.) leads to increased understanding, tolerance and acceptance. As such, Shekhinah represents the measure of our ability to accept or receive, the measure of tolerance and understanding. Thus, we could say that Kabbalists found the definition of that which in contemporary parlance is called spiritual development; ultimately, it is our ability to accept and understand reality. Needless to say, understanding enhances acceptance or the ability to receive, and acceptance leads to a higher understanding of reality.⁴³

Reality, as most of us experience it, is finite. Our ability to receive, our acceptance is limited. In order to understand the limits of our acceptance we only need look at the volume of transformative actions we undertake in every moment of our lives, in order to change the environment within which we are living, sometimes to make it more convenient, or to put up with societal demands etc. If we think of a certain individual experience, when for instance, one of us would be accused of some wrongdoing we never committed, or other personal experiences we would consider as negative it is clear that we would find such situations unacceptable and we would do everything in our power to change them.⁴⁴ In the corporeal world,

Shekhinah is (the same with other Kabbalistic symbols). In allegorical form, Scholem (162), "[. . .] what did the King do? He took his daughter [Shekhinah] and concentrated all paths in her and in her garments [i.e. her manifestation]" or by using metaphors, Scholem (176), "a garden in which all planting grow, as a pool fed by springs, as a sea into which the rivers flow, as a shrine and treasure house" or as Green (49) explains "The sefirotic process thus leads to the great union of the nine sefirot above, through Yesod, with the female Shekhinah. She becomes filled and impregnated with the fullness of divine energy [. . .]." What follows is that Shekhinah thus impregnated gives birth to the lower worlds.

⁴² This will become clearer as we continue our discussion.

⁴³ This aspect will be further discussed.

⁴⁴ Of course, in reality, consciously or unconsciously we always exercise acceptance since such voluntary or involuntary exercise is embedded (imposed upon us) within the reality we experience.

or in our existence Shekhinah may appear as transcendental (if we experience the infinite ability to accept, or infinite receiving) or finite due to the finite capacity for acceptance of human beings.⁴⁵ Therefore, when referring to people, due to their limited capacity for acceptance, by a stretch of language we could say, “their Shekhinah” is not infinite; in fact, it is finite.

Kabbalists must have had a fundamental understanding of life; everything they did, provided what they did conformed to the tradition, enlarged their capacity for acceptance, ultimately the acceptance of life itself. And that in turn, enabled them to recognize, everywhere they looked, representations of the principle of acceptance, i.e. Shekhinah. As we have shown above, Shekhinah changes all the time due to accumulation of experience, in Kabbalistic representation this change is due to the constant flow into her from the Sefiroth above. Kabbalists found ways, intricate as they may be,⁴⁶ to express change in Shekhinah. Referring to *sefer ha-Bahir*, Scholem (170) shows us that the “zarka” (the sign for scriptural cantillation, the latter meaning chanting a liturgical text) stands as a symbol for Shekhinah and besides being “thrown to the earth among the people [. . .] it also ‘keeps rising up to the very heights’ (presumably during Israel’s prayer, although this is not stated clearly).” Scholem continues,

Indeed, “it rises to that place from whence it was hewn”- that is, to the primal light of the supernal wisdom, from whence Shekhinah emanated, if not to the place of the first Sefirah itself. Thus, we already find here the theme of the internal dynamics within the world of the Sefiroth, where the lowest Sefirah can rise up to the highest. Within the Godhead, there takes place a secret movement upward no less than downward, and it is Shekhinah in particular that is the instrument of that motion.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ We are not concerned at this point in our discussion with the fact that since Shekhinah represents the immanent aspect of the divine everything may partake in the infinitude of God, or that there is something of the transcendental nature in all existence. We are concerned with the experience of that transcendental; in other words, the experiential awareness of the transcendental. When Scholem (164) says, “what characterizes the Shekhinah is her transitional position between transcendence and immanence”, does he say that Shekhinah is transcendental because of its infinite nature and immanent because it is present in everything?

⁴⁶ Due to the existence of multiple layers of symbolism corresponding to any given image.

⁴⁷ Scholem (171) observes, in reference to the new attitude in the *Bahir*, the fact that Shekhinah not only appears in relation to the world but also in relation to God, that “whatever its historical origins, the breakthrough of a new attitude

To make it clear, since there is a hierarchy involved in the symbolism of the Sefirotic Tree, the understanding here is that a higher Shekhinah represents a larger absorbing capacity while a lower Shekhinah has a diminished absorbing capacity. According to Scholem (174) the Kabbalists of early thirteenth century made a distinction between the “upper” and the “lower” Shekhinah. The upper Shekhinah came to be identified with Binah, or the “upper mother” while the lower Shekhinah is the “lower mother”. In case of the upper Shekhinah, “That which flows out of Binah still belongs to the realm of Godhead, and is identical with God in His unfolding oneness [. . .] the divine potency in all its purity flows from it only back into itself [. . .]” (Scholem 175) the preceding being an expression of completeness or perfection within the act of self-contemplation.⁴⁸ The same does not apply to the lower Shekhinah, here the latter is linked to the world of creation, (creation of consciousness we may add, through life experience), “what emerges from the lower Shekhinah is no longer God, but creation.” and it is “a mirror that is not transparent, [imperfect reflection] in which the abundant flow of divine light is broken and reflected; it is precisely this refraction that here becomes the Creation.” (Scholem 175). We can see in the above too, the same hierarchy: the transcendental feminine or infinite ability for receiving in opposition to the lesser feminine, the limited one. There are a number of observations that could be made here: first, the fact that we have a description of a process here, the one we mentioned above i.e. the constant flow into Shekhinah changes her, and that, in turn is nothing more than the logical consequence of the symbolism used by Kabbalists,⁴⁹ second, as time passes, newer descriptions of the process tend to add further explications manifested in additional layers of symbolism, (it is possible that for earlier Kabbalists a simpler symbolism was sufficient; as we will see shortly the Zohar and post Zoharic Kabbalah expands further the symbolism of the Shekhinah). The third observation is that both the upper and the lower Shekhinah are

in terms of contents is heralded here and virtually takes place before our very eyes. What is most astounding about this attitude is the unabashed self-assurance with which this symbolism appears [. . .].” We are wondering, regarding the Kabbalists of the Bahir, did they speculate or did they access a deeper understanding of life - was that the experience of the infinite?

⁴⁸ Borrowing from the field of Systems Theory, the higher the capacity for reflection or feedback of a system, the more intelligent it is.

⁴⁹ Shekhinah as a “receptacle for all potencies” will necessarily have to “grow” somehow or move up on the sefirotic hierarchy or become impregnated and subsequently give birth etc.

constitutive of the Godhead. Consequently, in what seems to be a paradox, both upper and lower Shekhinah are infinite. Green (39) mentions that Kabbalists like other mystics “love the language of paradox”, and quite understandably: if the opposing statements that make up the paradox are at the same level, since either one is nothing more than a reflection of the other, solving the paradox leads one to a higher (or larger) level, since a true solution of a paradox will encompass (contain or accept) both opposites in a synthesis.⁵⁰ We can go even further with our reasoning, in case there is no judgment made, that is, if one has the ability to live with the paradox without escaping into the (lower) reality of either side, one has expanded one’s acceptance and thus one will transcend the level of existence embodied by the paradox. On the other hand, there could be an explanation for the paradox mentioned before. Scholem provides a quote⁵¹ from *sefer ha-Bahir*, from which we extracted a paragraph:

And what is “the glory of the Lord”? A parable: This matter is comparable to a king in whose room the queen was, and all his hosts delighted in her, and she had sons, who came every day to see the King and who blessed him. They said to him: “Where is our mother?” He said to them: “You cannot see her now.” They said: “Blessings to her, wherever she is!” (166)

The point Scholem makes is that Shekhinah, presented here as the “mother” is “at once hidden and visible, according to the phases and stages of her appearance. Only once in the *Bahir* is the Shekhinah represented by lunar symbolism [. . .] she is manifest as a queen, matronitha, who is hidden in her apartments and whom everyone nevertheless seeks.” (167).⁵² Scholem adds that, “Shekhinah shines her light into the lower world and even dwells within it” and “*Sefer ha-Bahir* does not call this an exile of the Shekhinah” even though “she comes from a faraway place”. While we could conclude from the preceding that there must be a distinction between those who are able to see Shekhinah (the transcendental or infinite one since in the paragraph from

⁵⁰ Speaking in contemporary language, a paradox, through the tension it creates, if it leads to a synthesis, it results in the expansion of the consciousness.

⁵¹ While Scholem here discusses the topic of the change “wrought” by Kabbalah in the concept of Shekhinah by identifying the Kavod (divine glory) with Shekhinah, he makes a point, which we will use for our purposes.

⁵² Eliade in his “The sacred and the Profane: The nature of Religion”, page 156 says: “In general most of the ideas of cycle, dualism, polarity, opposition, conflict, but also of reconciliation of contraries, of coincidentia oppositorum, were either discovered or clarified by virtue of lunar symbolism.”

the Bahir above, “the queen is in the same room with the king”) and those who can’t see her, however in light of our previous discussion of the paradox of the finite Shekhinah (the lower Shekhinah) being constitutive of the Godhead just as the upper Shekhinah is, the conclusion is one that brings out the concept of awareness: Shekhinah is infinite and it exists in everything because Shekhinah is seen as the “mythical hypostasis of the divine immanence in the world. [. . .] the Kabbalists termed this phenomenon ba-kol (‘in everything’).” (Scholem 171), therefore, what differentiates those who can experience the infinite and those who can’t is precisely the awareness of it. Only the concept of awareness can reconcile this paradox.

Scholem provides us with a passage from Tikkunei Zohar,⁵³ which further illustrates the nature of Shekhinah in the context of what was said above:

The Shekhinah is the form of the upper and lower beings; all of the shapes of the Sefiroth and all their names are formed within it, and all the souls and angels and holy beings are engraved in it....How does one engrave upon it the lower forms, which do not belong to its reality? (179)

As we can see, what we have here is the same paradox as above. Seemingly, “lower forms” do not belong to Shekhinah’s reality, however all the “angels” and “holy beings” belong to it. An explanation for the paradox is provided in the passage by way of an analogy made between the “king” and Shekhinah. Just like the “king” who is able to manifest himself in different ways (“the garments he wears in the morning he does not wear in the evening”), in the same way Shekhinah, may appear in different garbs. Some of these garments are of a lower nature and others are of the highest nature however, “underneath” is the same transcendental Shekhinah:

Likewise the Shekhinah: how many garments she has, from which the Holy One blessed be He has created thrones, angels, hayyoth and seraphim, and heaven and earth and all that He created within them. And all of the creatures that he made from these garments of hers, he has listed them all and engraved them upon his garment.... (180)

⁵³ Scholem uses this passage for his discussion of the Kabbalistic understanding that “all of God’s creatures are prefigured in the garments of the Shekhinah”. At this point we are not concerned with the full interpretation of this text, however later on, we will return to this idea and show that concepts such as “prefigured”, “preformed” and “shapeless” are associated with a distinct mode of cognition.

In conclusion, everything partakes in the infinite nature of the Shekhinah and at the same time Shekhinah appears to be different to various beings, as for instance for the upper and the lower ones.

In the Zohar as well, as described by Scholem, the upper Shekhinah, which is “indissolubly and uninterruptedly connected with the supernal Wisdom or Sophia” is distinct from the lower Shekhinah which is, due to her exile, cut off from “its constant union with the upper forces that she was supposed to carry and transmit to Creation.” (185). This separation of the lower Shekhinah from the upper forces (the ones within the Godhead, being of transcendental or infinite nature) means that Shekhinah in its current state cannot transmit the infinite nature down to the creation, that is to say, in our understanding, the awareness of the infinite was lost, or at the least it does not represent the everyday experience of life. Hence, the necessity of the sacred union between the two Sefiroth, Tif’ereth and Malkhuth (Shekhinah), translated as the reconnection of the Shekhinah with the upper forces. The centrality of the theme of the sacred marriage within the Zohar as illustrated by Scholem, “The entire dynamics of the Zoharic notion of God is based upon this doctrine, in which the oneness and unity of the divine life are realized in the sacred marriage” (185) represents the same constant preoccupation on the part of Kabbalists for the recognition of the feminine in everything they did. In the Zohar, the world is a union of the male and the female principles. One way of understanding this union is by recognizing the feminine and the change the masculine effects on it. The masculine or the active (the flow) comes from the Godhead therefore it is synonymous with the right action. In practice, the right action (mental activity and behavior) is the one sanctioned by the tradition.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the forces from above being infinite will ultimately enlarge a “narrow” Shekhinah, into an infinite Shekhinah. In other words, the right action will enable us to recognize the feminine (as acceptance), will give us the experience of it and from there we would be better positioned to elevate ourselves to the experience of the infinite. And the feminine is, in essence, the only way through which one could experience the infinite.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ How can one distinguish which are the right actions (right thoughts)? The legitimacy of the “right action”, (mental and behavior) derives from the initial theophany that gave birth to the tradition; in the archaic world it represents the repetition of the paradigmatic gestures “posited ab origine by gods, heroes, or ancestors” (Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* 5); in the case of the ancient Hebrews, the Law appears as a result of the theophany of Moses.

⁵⁵ In *Sefer Yetsirah* we have the following, “What did the king do? He took his daughter and concentrated all paths in her and in her garments [i.e. her manifestation], and he who wishes to enter the interior must look at her.” The daughter here is Shekhinah, (Scholem 163). Explicitly, (for instance, the Zohar contains many passages with Shekhinah as the

In the Zohar we see the return “of active and, in Kabbalistic terms, masculine aspects even in the lower Shekhinah, which had previously been seen as quintessentially feminine.” (Scholem 183). By highlighting the active or male aspect within Shekhinah, the Zohar is essentially describing levels of receptivity although seemingly in an indirect way. Describing Shekhinah as an angel (the “redeeming angel” from Genesis 48:16, “an angel who protects the world”) we read:

This is the angel who is sometimes male and sometimes female. For when he channels blessings to the world, he is male and is called male [. . .] But when his relationship to the world is that of judgment [i.e., when he manifests himself in his restrictive power as a judge], then he is called female. (186)

Scholem explains the above as follows:

The restraint of the flow of life, a quality intrinsic to the activity of judgment (Din), frequently entails destructive consequences for the world. But when the Shekhinah functions as a medium for the downward flow of life-giving energies, it is understood in male symbols [. . .]. (186)

What is depicted above is the relationship between the last Sefirah and the creation below it; the flow comes from the Sefiroth above, Shekhinah controls it and subsequently reflects it into the world below. Indeed, in the text above, just as Scholem interprets it, the female aspect of Shekhinah is associated with a restrained flow, which represents a decreased capacity for absorption or a “narrower” Shekhinah, while an increased flow represents a larger acceptance, that is a “large” Shekhinah and it is associated with the male or giving aspect.⁵⁶ A narrow ability to receive is like a narrow mind. Narrow mindedness manifests as the inability to understand others or to compromise and it leads to opposition and conflictual states. Therefore, a narrow Shekhinah has indeed destructive consequences, while a larger Shekhinah representing a higher degree of acceptance, is associated with compromise, understanding, balance and thus, peace.⁵⁷

intercessor to the King) or implicitly stated, this is the understanding of Kabbalah (the implicit statement of that is the centrality of Shekhinah, concept and process, in the Kabbalah).

⁵⁶ If it is not clear how a restrained flow means a diminished ability to receive and a higher flow represents a higher capacity to receive or absorb, one needs to disregard the intermediary position of Shekhinah between the Godhead and the world and consider her as the final recipient of the flow.

⁵⁷ Balance in a certain sense can also be understood as union, “marriage” etc. Also, a larger Shekhinah brings us everything that was mentioned. On the other hand, we will show what the experience of the infinite Shekhinah will entail in Kabbalistic view.

According to Scholem, in the Zohar we can find the “general principle that ‘every arousal from above’ requires a complementary ‘arousal from below’ – that is, human activity.” (187), in a sense somewhat different from the later Lurianic Kabbalah, in which one finds the “formulation of the concept of *mayin nukvin*”, representing the active forces within Shekhinah, (*mayin nukvin* – the “female waters” or the unique powers of the feminine). In the Zohar, the concept of the “Godhead being able to act below only when its powers are aroused and activated by the stimulus of human actions” does not refer to “the powers of the feminine as the basis for this arousal”. On the other hand, in Lurianic Kabbalah, Shekhinah incorporates active forces that “are not awakened by the sacred marriage but, on the contrary, it is their awakening that makes this union at all possible.” Explaining this topic based on the writings of Moses Cordovero in *Pardes Rimmonim*,⁵⁸ Scholem says, “In other words, even prior to the second aspect, the actual union in which forces of maleness penetrate into the Shekhinah, forces coming from the Shekhinah itself rise toward the male element and stimulate it.” Scholem continues,

Hence, the Shekhinah is charged with active powers, even in relation to the upper realms, and it is only as a result from them that it is also active in relation to the lower realm. However, the dialectics of femininity is primarily concerned – and this is worth emphasizing – not with its activity within creation, but rather within the context of the divine life itself. (188)

What we have here is the inverse situation: if prior to this, the flow representing the active or the male changed Shekhinah, at present, Shekhinah is the one that changes the active principle or the flow. Taken together, the direct and inverse relationships between the active and passive represents a one-to-one correspondence of these two. If we look at the Sefirotic Tree as the mind of the Kabbalist, an interpretation of the preceding would be that for a certain level of acceptance there are certain types of thoughts entertained by the Kabbalist. As we have already mentioned, “larger” or accepting thoughts will open up the Shekhinah, and a large Shekhinah corresponds to “larger”, more embracing type of thoughts. On the other hand, thoughts manifest in physical reality either as peace and understanding or, in the case of narrow or exclusionary thoughts, the result will be discord and suffering. Another, more complete explanation would be that since the Godhead represents the Divine, and we have seen based on what Scholem said above that Shekhinah

⁵⁸ Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria were contemporaries.

primarily directs its activity within the Divine, and the Divine is that which gives its blessings to the world or to the individual in the form of life, of the collective or the individual lives respectively, hence Shekhinah is that which determines how one's life will look like. And while the preceding would seem to be obvious based on our comments on the type of thoughts (and acts) one may entertain towards others, what is not to be forgotten is that our attitude towards the world is just one factor in our lives, a factor that seems to be under our control. The deeper meaning of the Kabbalistic understanding here is that Shekhinah determines the totality of the events in our lives, even the events that seem to be beyond our control (how other people relate to us or what they do to us, our paths through life – harder or easier, generally speaking all the experiences we undergo during our lives). Therefore, what we see here is a fuller correspondence between how large or small our individual Shekhinah⁵⁹ is and our lives. What is plain however, is the fact that it is very hard to assess one's openness or acceptance. And usually, life events are the ones that bring to light our inner measure of acceptance and many times in life we may find out that we are less tolerant, or more biased than we thought we were. Shekhinah, as portrayed above, having a determining role in our lives becomes synonymous to God's providence. In order to better understand providence, we need consider that "more embracing" thoughts are more likely to approach (or replicate as much as possible) the infinite nature of (the transcendental) Shekhinah as opposed to narrow, exclusionary thoughts or thoughts that involve the finite.

And that is precisely what the philosopher Moses Maimonides expounds in his "The Guide of the Perplexed".⁶⁰ Divine Providence as described by Maimonides, will safeguard a person from evils (any mishaps, bodily and mental harm) throughout his life and into death and will insure the continued existence of that person after death.⁶¹ The power of Divine providence is so great that such a person may cross path with two fighting armies and not suffer any harm

⁵⁹ The "individual" Shekhinah is a development that mirrors the development of the self in the western hemisphere. According to Scholem (192) in the sixteenth-century Kabbalah of Safed, one will encounter the "personal notion of the Shekhinah as the feminine within God" and paraphrasing Scholem, (193) we add that Lurianic Kabbalah introduces an intensely personal portrait of the Shekhinah.

⁶⁰ We will discuss the topic of God's providence, and with Maimonides's help we will gain a better insight into this topic and into related topics. Moses Maimonides was an exponent of those who propounded the transcendental nature of God. Nothing less than the notion of a transcendental God, a God about which there could be said nothing except in negative terms (such as God is not – anything that we as humans can sense or conceptualize) would be acceptable to Maimonides.

⁶¹ Existence after death or eternal life goes hand in hand with providence. In other words, if one is able to achieve providence here on earth one will be assured eternal life. This follows based on Maimonides's exposition.

(627).⁶² The condition for obtaining Divine Providence is to be close to God. Those who approach Him are best protected while those who keep away from Him are left exposed to what may befall them (476). Maimonides's understanding of being close to God, or to be connected to God is for one to be constantly thinking of God. Notwithstanding the transcendental nature of God in Maimonides's view,⁶³ the bond that holds together God and man is the human intellect if employed in the "love of God" meaning knowledge of God. Likewise, faith⁶⁴ as understood by Maimonides, will acquire a greater depth of meaning. He states, "belief is possible only after the apprehension of a thing". An extended passage from Maimonides further illustrates what was said above:

Providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God. On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else. However, its withdrawal then is not like its withdrawal from those who have never had intellectual cognition [of God]. But in this case that providence merely decreases because that man of perfect apprehension has, while being occupied, no intellect in actu; but that perfect man is at such times only apprehending potentially, though close to actuality. (624)

Summarizing, what Maimonides says is (by following the Jewish Law) one should achieve a true understanding of God as in "the perfection of man that may truly be gloried" is the "apprehension of Him" (638), which in effect means the understanding of the idea of the transcendental (since God is pure transcendence in his view) and also "this perfection will stay permanently with the one who has acquired it" and then one would have to continuously think of God and consequently that person will be rewarded by God's providence that, in essence, extends from this life to existence beyond death. Furthermore, we see towards the end of the paragraph presented above that something has built up within the "man of perfect apprehension", in effect the understanding of the transcendental⁶⁵ and the result of that is

⁶² Maimonides is referencing the Bible, Psalms 91: 7-8.

⁶³ Medieval Jewish philosophers and Kabbalists did not agree on a multitude of topics. See Scholem page 154, Green pages 15, 55 etc.

⁶⁴ We need remember with Maimonides we are in the world of Judaism. Faith does play an important part here, and what Maimonides exposes is the rational understanding of faith and ultimately of God.

⁶⁵ There is something large about such a type of understanding, even if it is not completely developed.

continuous, though sometimes, (due to escape into the worldly i.e., finite thoughts) decreased protection. Whenever Maimonides talks about God, in effect he refers to the transcendental, i.e., something that is beyond human categories. One can only imagine such an exercise - the comprehension of the infinite. Maimonides, in effect, propounds constant transcendental meditation.

We will attempt to make more explicit the convergence of the two conceptions of Divine Providence, on the one hand that of the Kabbalists, which derives from their understanding of Shekhinah, and on the other, the one belonging to Maimonides. Transcending⁶⁶ starts with transcending one's condition. One way of achieving that is by accepting that which happens to us. By accepting a certain condition, one goes beyond that condition; it will not affect him or her anymore. By extension we could say that if one fully accepts the human condition, one will transcend it.⁶⁷ Transcendental meditation means, in effect, letting go the things that make up the worldly realm (otherwise it is not transcendental meditation). But, as we have seen in Kabbalistic understanding of Shekhinah as providence, by influencing the upper realms, Shekhinah will change the blessings one receives from God, meaning one's life will change and therefore he or she will stay protected.⁶⁸ The same is being said by Maimonides: providence will proportionally protect those who are able to open their minds in order to encompass larger and larger spaces.

Regarding the Divine Providence and the continued existence after death as described by Maimonides, is there a similar understanding in the Kabbalah, one involving Shekhinah?

According to Scholem, the upper, that is the transcendental Shekhinah, is "also known as 'the Source of Life' and 'the World to Come' (which is the true dimension of bliss in the Kabbalah), as well as 'Return' (Teshuvah)" (176). Scholem continues, "Shekhinah is also explicitly described as the sphere of redemption. As the lower mother, the

⁶⁶ That is, going from the finite to the infinite condition.

⁶⁷ There is nothing else there to accept, except one's life. That is the only thing one can operate on. Also, accepting the human condition goes hand in hand with a certain degree of understanding of the human condition. A lower awareness would not achieve such an understanding, hence a lower Shekhinah (we need remember the connection between Shekhinah and wisdom; as cited above, Shekhinah is "indissolubly and uninterruptedly connected with the supernal Wisdom").

⁶⁸ The opposite is true as well: "Within the Godhead, there are Sefiroth of both love and judgment, both of which emanate their energies into the Shekhinah; depending upon which potency dominates, the lower Shekhinah appears either as a loving or as a punishing and chastising mother." (Scholem 189). But, we have seen that Shekhinah influences the upper Sefiroth based on its measure of openness; if one is judgmental and not capable of love, that person will have the same returned onto him or her (to make it ever more clear, since the Sefirotic tree is a reflection of one's mind, if one is judgmental and not loving, one will be returned exactly that).

Shekhinah is present in the cosmos in the work of Creation; as the upper mother, it constitutes the opportunity for the redemption of the world." On the other hand, in the Zohar, Shekhinah "contains dark and destructive traits [. . .] but even beyond this, in many passages the Zohar presents Shekhinah as bizarrely linked with the Other Side (Sitra Ahra), the demonic and destructive power." Possible reasons for that would include "the weakness and helplessness of the Shekhinah, because it is lacking the impetus created by man's good deeds; or it may be caused by the preponderance within her of those forces that, because of their stern and punitive nature (Din Kasheh), have an affinity with the Other Side." (Scholem 189). Furthermore, Shekhinah not only "becomes like the rose who is surrounded by thorns and thistles" but it becomes the "Tree of Death", and "the author describes the Shekhinah in terms of the image from the Book of Proverbs, 'Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on the netherworld' (Prov. 5:5)." (Scholem 190).⁶⁹ Based on the above we conclude that Shekhinah represents a continuum that extends from the lowest regions, where it becomes analogous to death,⁷⁰ all the way to the highest regions where it becomes salvific, that is, it brings eternal life. We could say that Shekhinah encompasses the entire reality, from one end to the other. And the way it accomplishes that is by being inherently huge (Scholem quotes from Zohar I, 223b):

A thousand mountains loom before her, and all are like a puff of wind to her. A thousand mighty streams rush past her, and she swallows them in one swallow. Her nails reach out to a thousand and seventy sides; her hands grasp on to twenty-five thousand sides; nothing eludes her rule on this side or the other [i.e., the Sitra Ahra]. (191)

By being able to contain all reality, Shekhinah transcends the realities it contains. And thus, life and death become two modes of existence since there is something able to contain them; and that something would be Shekhinah or the embodiment of acceptance. And as we have seen above, that is the foundation of the entire world.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Scholem (191) shows us further instances where Shekhinah is portrayed on one hand as "mother of Metatron, the highest potency in the angelic world" and on the other hand as "mother of two females from the demonic region: Lilith and Naamah."

⁷⁰ A narrow Shekhinah represents a finite condition; it is associated with that which is subject to death. Death here means not living past death i.e. not achieving salvation or eternal life (in religious traditions death is not the end of it all; living past death means achieving eternal life whereas not living past death, at least for mystical traditions, may entail reincarnation).

⁷¹ Shekhinah as the Divine Immanence or the "ba-kol" (in everything) of the Kabbalists.

The above gives us a better understanding of the nature of the transcendental and at the same time we can see the origins of the transcendental, it begins with acceptance. As we have already mentioned, acceptance is that which enables transcendence; if for instance one accepts the bad, it will stop having an effect on that person.⁷² Furthermore, it seems that if one is able to act in such a way, his or her reality changes and that person will not be subjected to the same bad experiences. Rejecting reality may lead to suffering, which in turn will increase acceptance.⁷³

On the other hand, how much suffering is needed in order for us not to be subjected to further bad experiences? Is it until our narrow acceptance, one that we may not be aware of is enlarged?

Using contemporary language, the transcendental is non-dualistic, it contains both the good and bad, both life and death. Only the infinite can contain all realities. Kabbalists, as well as mystics from other traditions tell us it is possible for humans to attain the infinite. The capacity for the infinite does reside in our minds and it is a reflection of a reality, a reality that transcends all realities.

III

In everyday life we experience Shekhinah to a smaller or a larger degree⁷⁴ whenever we are being passive (the “passive mode” – as opposed to the “active mode”) for instance when we are in a contemplative or meditative state of mind or when we experience the present moment etc. All of the situations above share the particularity of having a subdued flow of thoughts, a sort of inner quiet or peacefulness. Patience and wisdom reinforce each other in such a state of mind. In one particular situation the contrast between the active and the passive mode becomes highly visible, the case when in spite of the urge, we sublimate the need for action and at times the result of this is the recognition of a certain depth of one’s own psyche, which in turn, results in a sense of peace and self-satisfaction. The aforementioned recognition of the depth of one’s psyche

⁷² The exercise of acceptance, as some of us would agree, does not come easily.

⁷³ The way we see it, that is the link between suffering and Shekhinah.

⁷⁴ This is the “lower” Shekhinah, not the “upper” or the transcendental one. Interestingly, Reuven Firestone’s entry on Shekhinah in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur’an*, (Volume four (P-Sh) Jane Dammen McAuliffe ed., Brill Pub., Leiden – Boston, 2004), describes the primary meaning of al-sakina in the Qur’an as stillness, quiet, tranquility and as secondary meaning to settle down, to dwell. Also, on other meanings of al-sakina, we read “The contextual meaning of the term therefore denotes divine aid and proof of the authenticity of God’s agent in the face of disbelief and adversity, and this aid or proof (or divine presence) comes in the form of divine victory in battle or its potentiality.”, here it seems that al-sakina appears as divine providence.

represents the conscious experience of the Shekhinah or one's awareness of it. Another way of experiencing the passive is when we look at the events in our lives and think of them as "things that are done unto me" or "things happening to me", as if we did not have any control over the things that are happening to us. Yet another example is when we cease looking for reasons and explanations for the things that happen to us.⁷⁵ A passive way of seeing us perform actions is when we contemplate that which we are doing, that is when we establish a certain distance between our activities and ourselves. To generalize, we could transform the active mode into the passive mode or change our awareness from an active one into a passive one if we regard life experiences as events that, in essence, change us (that is to say, when we look at the changes happening in our own selves as opposed to looking at the exterior consequences, either for us or to others, of the same life events). That which makes possible this change is the act of self-contemplation. Even choices we make could be viewed from a passive angle: "I see myself making this or that choice", or when we say to ourselves "I became aware of my own choice" whatever the choice was.

The passive mode seems to be more accommodating, more accepting or larger than the active mode. The active mode is constraining our openness or receptivity; the activity we perform is exactly that which limits our openness, that is to say our activity is our limiting condition. In the same way, our thoughts eventually become our own limiting factor. Up to a point, thoughts enable us to understand the world, provide meaning, they help us expand our consciousness, however eventually they become a drag. Husserl, (Stumpf, Fieser 450) introduced the concept of intentionality of the consciousness: "consciousness is always consciousness of something" and "our perception of things consists of our own projection toward intended objects."⁷⁶ Sartre develops further this concept and paraphrasing Solomon's rendering of Sartre, consciousness is pure activity, it is not passive or receptive, it is dynamic in reference to its perceptions and

⁷⁵ This is still the way in which many religious people experience events in their lives: God gave this; God made it happen; it was God's will etc. In this case, one is displaying the capacity for accepting things as they are i.e. without rationalizing them.

⁷⁶ For Husserl "intentionality is the active involvement of the self in creating our own experience". Furthermore, "intentionality is both the structure of consciousness itself and the fundamental category of existence", Stumpf op.cit.

in reference to the nature of things it experiences.⁷⁷ Furthermore, consciousness does not perceive things as they are, but according to a scheme which one imposes on reality. Consciousness imposes causal categories on the world, in effect transforming the world it perceives. In the light of the determinations of the philosophers above and as previously mentioned, our mental world, the one made up of our thoughts, by the imposition of its intentions becomes a limiting factor insofar it prevents us from perceiving an unbiased or larger image of reality. Restating what was said before, our awareness of reality is limited by our very own minds.

The Tibetan master Sogyal Rinpoche in his “The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying” describes the “ordinary mind” (or “sem” as denoted by Tibetans) by quoting Chögyam Trungpa:

That which possesses discriminating awareness, that which possesses a sense of duality – which grasps or rejects something external – that is mind. Fundamentally it is that which can associate with an ‘other’ – with any ‘something’, that is perceived as different from the perceiver. (46)

Sogyal R. goes on to say,

Sem is the discursive, dualistic, thinking mind, which can only function in relation to a projected and falsely perceived reference point.

So sem is the mind that thinks, plots, desires, manipulates, that flares up in anger, that creates and indulges in waves of negative emotions and thoughts, that has to go on and on asserting, validating, and confirming its ‘existence’ by fragmenting, conceptualizing, and solidifying experience.

[. . .] The masters liken sem to a candle flame in an open doorway, vulnerable to all the winds of circumstance. (46)

As opposed to the ordinary mind, there is “the very nature of the mind” or its “innermost essence” which is “absolutely and always untouched by change or death. At present it is hidden within our mind, our sem,

⁷⁷ Solomon’s “No Excuses: Existentialism and the Meaning of Life”, lecture twenty: “Sartre’s Phenomenology”, minutes six through nine of the lecture.

enveloped and obscured by the mental scurry of our thoughts and emotions.” The nature of the mind is “the very root itself of understanding. In Tibetan we call it Rigpa, a primordial, pure, pristine awareness that is at once intelligent, cognizant, radiant, and always awake. It could be said to be the knowledge of knowledge itself.”⁷⁸ Furthermore, Sogyal R. states: “Do not make the mistake of imagining that the nature of mind is exclusive to our mind only. It is in fact the nature of everything. It can never be said too often that to realize the nature of mind is to realize the nature of all things.” (47). Sogyal R. uses the sky as a metaphor to represent the nature of the mind:

Our true nature could be compared to the sky, and the confusion of the ordinary mind to clouds.

Some days the sky is completely obscured by clouds. When we are down on the ground, looking up, it is very difficult to believe there is anything else there but clouds. Yet we only have to fly in a plane to discover up above a limitless expanse of clear blue sky.⁷⁹ (48)

Additional descriptions of Rigpa (or buddha nature) are as follows:

So where exactly is this buddha nature? It is in the sky-like nature of our mind. Utterly open, free, and limitless, it is fundamentally so simple and so natural that it can never be complicated, corrupted, or stained, so pure that it is beyond even the concept of purity and impurity. To talk of this nature of mind as sky-like, of course, is only a metaphor that helps us to begin to imagine its all-embracing boundlessness; for the buddha nature has a quality the sky cannot have, that of the radiant clarity of awareness. (49)

⁷⁸ In the paragraph above, “always awake” may need to be taken literally. A type of consciousness that is beyond the finitude of the ordinary human experience does not need sleep. For instance, Maimonides in his Guide, vol 2, page 620 explains Exodus 34:28: “he did neither eat bread nor drink water.” by saying –referring to a prophet (Moses) or prophets - that “his intellect attained such a strength that all the gross faculties in the body ceased to function.” Also, the meaning of “pristine” is in opposition to the biased thus limited view of reality as determined by Husserl and other philosophers. The concepts, “pristine” and “cognizant” will be further clarified as we move forward. Furthermore, according to Sogyal R., Rigpa is the same as the “buddha nature” (47) or ‘buddha mind” (48).

⁷⁹ Since, according to Sogyal R. the great insight of Buddhism is that everything (life and death) is happening in our minds and nowhere else, (46) the distinction between our “true nature” (as beings) and the nature of our minds will cease.

In the fragments presented above, the author describes the ordinary mind as confusion and uses the metaphor of clouds in order to describe it, as opposed to the essence of mind, which is clear and limitless, in essence, an infinite expanse of “clear blue sky”.

Given the fact that our thoughts are the expression of our intentionality, our own thoughts are the “clouds” that prevent us from experiencing the infinite expanse of our minds.⁸⁰ In the discourse of the philosophers mentioned above, if consciousness is that which imposes a bias on the way we perceive reality, what follows is that the experience of the essence of the mind is in fact a different state of consciousness. It is a type of consciousness that does not project its own intentionality (or causal categories) or simply said, it does not project its own mode of seeing the reality, onto reality; it accepts reality as is - unbiased. The “boundless expanse” characteristic of this type of consciousness gives us an idea of how it can achieve an unbiased view of reality. In its limitless expanse all categories become insignificant, they disappear and consequently there will be no limiting of the view of the reality. A finite mind has a limited acceptance, it limits, it perceives finitely. An infinite mind accepts everything – that is, all reality. Such a state of consciousness, by virtue of its infinite capacity – as indicated by Sogyal R. above – is left untouched by change or death. Such a consciousness will contemplate its own (infinite) nature since there is nothing outside or external of it. And closing the loop, contemplation is that which allows for the unbiased view of reality (since in its ideal form it lacks intentionality) or at the least it is working towards the widening of our consciousness and thus reducing the bias. Also, the more the consciousness widens, or deepens for that matter, the more it turns inward since less and less tends to remain outside of it. We need emphasize that the experience of the infinite nature is that it is essentially objective (since as mentioned above there is no bias or projections). There

⁸⁰ As we shall see, Tibetans found a way around (or better said, through) our stream of consciousness to access the sky like, boundless space of the essence of the mind.

is no bias or projections because there is no subject involved;⁸¹ at the most, the subject is being part⁸² of that which is contemplated by the infinite consciousness. Additionally, as shown above this type of consciousness is accessing a common foundation for everything, since based on its description above, the nature of the mind is being the same with the nature of everything. On the other hand, as Sogyal R. says, “So whatever our lives are like, our buddha nature is always there. And it is always perfect. We say that not even the Buddhas can improve it in their infinite wisdom, nor can sentient beings spoil it in their seemingly infinite confusion.” and “For even though we have the same inner nature as Buddha, we have not recognized it because it is so enclosed and wrapped up in our individual ordinary minds.” (48). Since buddha nature is already there, one only need recognize or become aware of this nature.⁸³

As mentioned earlier in our study, one way of achieving the passive (and by now we should also understand this as a space without projections i.e. contemplation) is through meditation. Sogyal R. says: “Our lives are lived in intense and anxious struggle, in a swirl of speed and aggression, in competing, grasping, possessing, and achieving, forever burdening ourselves with extraneous activities and preoccupations. Meditation is the exact opposite.” The author continues by saying that meditation brings us to a state in which

⁸¹ There is a certain degree of similitude between the disappearance of the subjective as described above and the situation described by Eliade in his *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, (34) involving the primitive man. Speaking of the repetition of archetypal gestures Eliade says: “an object or an act becomes real insofar as it imitates or repeats an archetype. [. . .] everything that lacks an exemplary model is ‘meaningless’, i.e., it lacks reality. [. . .] This tendency may well appear paradoxical, in the sense that the man of a traditional culture sees himself as real only to the extent that he ceases to be himself (for a modern observer) [. . .].” In the primitive understanding of the world archetypes represent the pure, the true, the unbiased reality. Thus, “living a real life” as opposed to “living in an illusion” by confining oneself to paradigmatic gestures (since everything else is just an illusory projection of the mind) may represent a precursor (and thus an imitation), in the finite world, of that which happens once one achieves the infinite mind.

⁸² The infinite mind is contemplating its own nature through the “eyes” of the person that accessed this state of consciousness. Sogyal R. says that the infinite should be regarded as the normal state of consciousness: “when we realize it, [the nature of the mind] the masters tell us it is unexpectedly ordinary. [. . .] layers of confusion peel away. You don’t actually ‘become’ a buddha, you simply cease, slowly, to be deluded. And being a buddha is not some omnipotent spiritual superhuman but becoming at last a true human being.” (53). Sogyal R. goes on to say: “One of the greatest Buddhist traditions calls the nature of mind ‘the wisdom of ordinariness.’ [. . .] Our true nature and the nature of all beings is not something extraordinary.” and “The irony is that it is our so-called ordinary world that is extraordinary, a fantastic, elaborate hallucination of the deluded vision of samsara.” (54).

⁸³ One could also say one need build his or her own “buddha nature”; what is significant in the way Sogyal R. explains this topic is his use of the passive mode: it’s already there or existing, one does not need build anything, one just need recognize it or become aware of it. The preceding signifies contemplation with its characteristic mode of seeing reality.

there is “no desire to possess or grasp at anything, no intense and anxious struggle, and no hunger to achieve: an ambitionless state where there is neither acceptance nor rejection, neither hope nor fear, a state in which we slowly begin to release all those emotions and concepts that have imprisoned us into the space of natural simplicity.” (57).⁸⁴ The purpose of meditation is “to awaken in us the sky-like nature of mind, and to introduce us to that which we really are, our unchanging pure awareness, which underlies the whole of life and death.” Regarding meditation, what makes “all the difference between your meditation as a means for bringing temporary relaxation, peace, and bliss, or of becoming a powerful cause for your enlightenment and the enlightenment of others” (59) is an attitude⁸⁵ based on ideas conducive to the diminishing of the self (for instance by identification with all the sentient beings), the act of refraining from concretizing experience, (“a non-grasping attitude...free of any conceptual references...inspired by the realization of the nature of the mind”), and going even beyond non-concretization by understanding the “illusory and dream like nature of reality” (60).⁸⁶ The consequence of the above is the gradual enlargement of one’s consciousness by relinquishing one’s identification with a narrow definition of the self (the definition of the self changes, it expands).⁸⁷

When speaking about the stream of consciousness, Sogyal R. says:

⁸⁴ This state of mind is very close to the transcendental, it attempts to escape human categories. One does not need strive even for acceptance (that too would qualify as intentionality). Since there is no desire and no ambition therefore no intentionality, reality is taken in as is and that is passive receiving. What is being received is then released as follows: “release all those [. . .] in the space of simplicity”. And by virtue of opening up in such a way, wisdom starts building up leading to the “knowledge of knowledge” in the state of Rigpa proper (the connection between the “sky-like” nature of mind and this special form of wisdom will be visited later). In the state of meditation (contemplation) one only becomes aware of things, and by not being tied down in one’s own activity or intentionality, the essence (and the essentials for that matter) of one’s existence becomes visible. And that is what is being recognized. In sum, what takes place here is the release of one mode of being (our limited existence) in order to access a larger one, the transpersonal one.

⁸⁵ There is intentionality here; one that helps expand the consciousness. Ultimately, intentionality will annul itself.

⁸⁶ Concretizing experience means for instance, desiring things, grasping, judging, making practical decisions, performing actions etc. Concretizing experience will keep one anchored in human categories, i.e. one will remain in the finite realm. The opposite of concretization is the understanding of the “illusory” nature of what we call concrete reality. Sogyal R. discusses impermanence, emptiness etc. in the third chapter of his book.

⁸⁷ In Rigpa the self is expanded infinitely, however since the infinite mind (or the true self - as Sogyal R. says - “that which we really are”) is, as said before, contemplating its own nature through the “eyes” of the person that accessed this state of consciousness, the reality which is perceived is limited. What gives it the quality of infinitude is partly the experience of one’s own nature as the nature of everything else; hence, the infinite depth of the experience.

In the ordinary mind, we perceive the stream of thoughts as continuous; but in reality this is not the case. You will discover for yourself that there is a gap between each thought. When the past thought is past, and the future thought not yet arisen, you will always find a gap in which Rigpa, the nature of the mind, is revealed. So the work of meditation is to allow thoughts to slow down, to make that gap become more and more apparent. (74-5)

The preceding shows us that thoughts need space in order for them to occur; the realization of the importance of space or that which has the ability to receive will balance out the primacy of the active, the thoughts or actions in one's comprehension of the world. In regard to negative experiences, the author says:

Negative experiences are often the most misleading because we usually take them as a bad sign. But in fact the negative experiences in our practice are blessings in disguise. Try not to react to them with aversion as you might normally do, but recognize them instead for what they truly are, merely experiences, illusory and dream-like. The realization of the true nature of the experience liberates you from the harm or danger of the experience itself, and as a result even a negative experience can become a source of great blessing and accomplishment. (76)

In the last sentence above, the basic idea is that if one realizes the meaning of a certain (negative) experience, one will be less affected by that experience.⁸⁸ On the other hand it would be very difficult to understand the meaning of any experience if the experience were to be rejected (such as projected outside, onto other people or things), or repressed.⁸⁹

According to Sogyal R. (151), the Dzogchen (Great Perfection) teachings, one of the many traditions within the body of Tibetan Buddhism, describe a meditation technique that penetrates through the stream of consciousness into the infinite expanse within our minds. This meditation technique is, in a certain sense, a

⁸⁸ It is a common knowledge that assigning meaning to, for instance suffering makes it more tolerable. However, Sogyal R. goes even further, saying that one will be free from harm or danger coming from that experience if one understands its (true) nature.

⁸⁹ And for this reason the need to accept the (negative) experience. Accepting the experience will enable us to assign a certain meaning to it (there is a reciprocal relationship between acceptance and meaning in reference to life experiences).

direct experience of the essence of the mind (Rigpa). The following describes the “essence of [the] meditation practice in Dzogchen”,

When one past thought has ceased and a future thought has not yet risen, in that gap, in between, isn't there a consciousness of the present moment; fresh, virgin, unaltered by even a hair's breadth of concept, a luminous, naked awareness? Well, that is what Rigpa is! Yet it doesn't stay in that state forever, because another thought suddenly arises, doesn't it? This is the self-radiance of that Rigpa. However, if you do not recognize this thought for what it really is, the very instant it arises, then it will turn into just another ordinary thought, as before. This is called the “chain of delusion,” and is the root of samsara. If you are able to recognize the true nature of the thought as soon as it arises, and leave it alone without any follow-up, then whatever thoughts that arise all automatically dissolve back into the vast expanse of Rigpa and are liberated. (160)

As we can see, in order to experience the infinite expanse of Rigpa one need not reject thoughts; thoughts are to be accepted without grasping and then let go. The way of preventing ourselves from being attached to our own thoughts or emotions is described as follows:

Rather than suppressing emotions or indulging in them, here it is important to view them, and your thoughts, and whatever arises with an acceptance and generosity that are as open and spacious as possible. Tibetan masters say that this wise generosity has the flavor of boundless space, so warm and cozy that you feel enveloped and protected by it, as if by a blanket of sunlight.⁹⁰ (61)

In order for us to better understand the mode of cognition specific to the essence of the mind or Rigpa, (or, as we have shown – this specific state of consciousness corresponding to the infinite mind) we need simplify

⁹⁰ A significant step in each meditation technique, a sort of elevation of the meditation to a larger dimension, is by not seeing one's thoughts as distinct from one's life (one's entire being), meaning the integration of the meditation practice with one's life. For instance, “generosity” towards thoughts could be expanded into “generosity” towards a life situation. Integrating meditation with everyday life is discussed by Sogyal R. on page 78 of his book.

some of the descriptions provided by Sogyal R. so that we could focus on the essential ideas.⁹¹ The essence of mind is,

“[. . .] introduced upon the very dissolution of conceptual mind.”⁹² (154) and as we have seen above, in this state of consciousness thoughts are recognized for what they really are, (the true nature of thoughts) as soon as they arise as, “[. . .] manifestations of the energy of the Rigpa itself”.⁹³ The recognition of the nature of thoughts in the same instant in which they arise implies that thoughts do not develop in a discursive way, the usual in ordinary cognition.⁹⁴ In this immediate type of awareness, thoughts must be perceived as preformed, since as they begin to arise they are instantaneously being liberated; concomitantly, one becomes aware of the content and the true nature of those thoughts.⁹⁵ At the same time, in common experience thoughts being perceived as immaterial, they are perceived even less so in the experience of the infinite mind. Sogyal R.

⁹¹ The full description of these topics can be found in the tenth chapter of Sogyal R.'s book.

⁹² This shows us that there is a different mode of cognition involved in this state of consciousness.

⁹³ As mentioned before, Rigpa as the innermost essence of the mind (the very nature of the mind) is, the same as the nature of everything else. This is restated by the author (162) as follows: “In Dzogchen the fundamental, inherent nature of everything is called the Ground Luminosity or the Mother Luminosity.” and it is the same as Rigpa, the nature of our minds (for the purpose of facilitating the explanation of the teachings, different terms are used to express the same reality). In other words, thoughts arise from this infinite space which one becomes aware of if one is having the experience of Rigpa. Furthermore, in common consciousness we identify ourselves with the thoughts that arise in our minds (our stream of consciousness); as long as we hear the inner voice of thoughts arising in our minds there will be an “I” and we consider those thoughts to be ours. In Rigpa, one is aware of the infinite space of one's mind and since Rigpa is the nature of everything, there is no “my Rigpa” and “my” will disappear altogether. On the other hand, if one cannot identify oneself with arising thoughts, the latter must appear as external to somebody who is experiencing the infinite mind. Consequently, thoughts do not have a real hold on the person experiencing Rigpa, and according to Dudjom Rinpoche, “the karmic law of cause and effect can no longer bind you in any way.” (Sogyal R. 164).

⁹⁴ This special type of awareness is not conceptual, it is direct awareness: “If we are not contriving or manipulating the mind in any way, but simply resting in an unaltered state of pure and pristine awareness, then that is Rigpa.” (159). There could be a certain resemblance between this special type of cognition and intuition.

⁹⁵ In this type of cognition time and space manifests differently, at least at the level of thoughts since thoughts do not develop, they are instantaneously recognized, their appearance and disappearance being simultaneous. A cognition which is not affected by the spatiotemporal dimension of thoughts represents that which is beyond time and space, thus beyond a mode of existence that experiences death. As the author says: “[Rigpa is] absolutely and always untouched by change or death”. Also, with regard to the process of simultaneousness of the appearance and disappearance of thoughts, it is worth mentioning Sogyal Rinpoche's metaphorical description: “One way to imagine this is as if you were riding on the sun's rays back to the sun: You trace the risings back, at once, to their very root, the ground of Rigpa.” (161). The preceding situation is the cognitive embodiment (the concrete experience of a specific mode in which the mind works) of that which used to be conceptual (or just comprehension): simultaneously beholding in one's mind of two opposite concepts (which subsequently may become a synthesis of the two).

quotes one of his masters Dudjom Rinpoche: “The View [essentially the experience of Rigpa] is the comprehension of the naked awareness, within which everything else is contained: sensory perception and phenomenal existence, samsara and nirvana. This awareness has two aspects: ‘emptiness’ as the absolute, and appearances or perception as the relative.” (152). This type of immediate awareness of the entire thought even though it dissolves as it begins to enter (or arise) into the vast expanse of Rigpa, renders the thought empty or non-existent; there is nothing in the mind having the consistency of thoughts, there is only awareness as in: “[in the state of Rigpa one experiences] all the wisdoms, and bliss, clarity, and absence of thoughts, but not separate from one another [. . .].” (158). As for the inextricable link between the infinite mind and a superior type of wisdom as in, the “knowledge of knowledge”, or “recognizing the thought for what it really is”, this wisdom must come also by virtue of the awareness of total interconnectedness since “[the nature of mind] is the nature of everything”. Realizing the way in which everything is interconnected may allow one to access “the very root itself of understanding”.⁹⁶

IV

Scholem tells us about a certain realization belonging to medieval Kabbalists:

Another element, which emerged only after the Bahir, is asserted emphatically and clearly in the Spanish Kabbalah and the Zohar: namely, the thesis that the form of each and every individual thing is preformed in the Shekhinah. This idea has two facets, which by no means always occur together. On the one hand, the Sefiroth first receive their various potencies and shapes in the Shekhinah; prior to their appearance within the upper or lower Shekhinah, they do not have a shape of their own. On the other hand, this implies, not only that all things in the

⁹⁶ Realizing the interconnectedness of everything opens up the infinite dimension (the more we are able to see how things are interconnected the more something of a different quality opens up in us; the same as the concept of transformation of quantitative into qualitative changes initially formulated by Hegel). Also, Rigpa being a state of consciousness beyond thoughts (thoughts are liberated as they arise leading to instant awareness etc.), the “recognition of thoughts for what they are”, indicates a realization of the function of thoughts (what thoughts do to us or their *raison d'être*), and also the function of particular thoughts that goes beyond their actual content. Rigpa being an outcome of common cognition, thoughts could be seen in terms of their function of bringing one closer to Rigpa or pushing one away from it. There could be additional categories, which could help us gain insight into the “knowledge of knowledge”.

creaturely world obtain their form from the Shekhinah, insofar as it exerts a formative power upon every created thing, but that they already have this form while they are in the Shekhinah, insofar they are constituted and prefigured in it. (178)

One of the illustrative fragments presented by Scholem associated with the above is as follows: “This is the potency of the Shekhinah, which receives all things, in that they enter shapeless, but emerge from it with [differentiated] matter and image and shape.” (179). Whatever enters shapeless or formless into Shekhinah could be understood as something that has not undergone a process by which it acquires a form or shape. At the same time, once it appears in Shekhinah, just as Scholem says in the extended quotation above, not only Shekhinah may “exert a formative power” upon it, but that it or they (whatever enters Shekhinah), “already have this form while they are in the Shekhinah, insofar as they are constituted and prefigured in it”. In short, upon entering Shekhinah whatever enters it lacks form: it is shapeless or formless. Once in Shekhinah it appears to have a form, it appears as prefigured or preformed. In the preceding we have a situation in which whatever enters Shekhinah from a state of being shapeless, it acquires (a certain) form without undergoing a formative process since from formless it goes to prefigured. That, which Scholem describes in his explicative text as the “formative power of Shekhinah”, is the same thing that differentiates (or discerns) as it appears in the illustrative text.⁹⁷ As discussed previously in this study, seeing the Sefirotic Tree as the mind of the Kabbalist, applying the above to thoughts entering Shekhinah, we realize that what we have above is a description of a different mode of cognition; it is the same cognition one experiences in Rigpa. Thoughts entering Rigpa are formless, they do not develop (there is no awareness of thoughts developing in the mind), and at the same time, even without the thought having had a chance to develop, the awareness of the thought in its entirety appears (as if the thought was prefigured or preformed). Also, the superior type of wisdom characterizing Rigpa may be equated to the differentiating (or discerning) characteristic of Shekhinah. Scholem presents additional supportive examples for this realization as he traces the development of

⁹⁷ The word “differentiated” was introduced by Scholem himself in the quoted fragment as the explanatory note of the author.

Kabbalah. For instance, regarding the Zohar and later Kabbalah, Scholem tells us that the process of individuation (the differentiation of all things) is shifted “to the lower Shekhinah. It is designated there as ‘the form that embraces all forms’ in which each specific form is already prefigured in its specific individuality, just as it takes in and manifests all possible forms of those Sefiroth that are above it.” (179).⁹⁸

Regarding the process of dying, Rabbi Arthur Seltzer in his chapter, “Judaism: The Journey of the Soul”, presents a fragment from the Zohar:

R. Eleazar said: When a man is on the point of leaving this world, his soul suffers many chastisements along with his body before they separate. Nor does the soul actually leave him until the Shekhinah shows herself to him, and then the soul goes out in joy and love for the Shekhinah. If he is righteous, he cleaves and attaches himself to Her. But if not, then the Shekhinah departs, and the soul is left behind, mourning for its separation from the body, like a cat which is driven away from the fire. (Seltzer 8)

Scholem, on the other hand, as already seen in this study, presents a number of Kabbalistic writings, which show that in order to gain access to the king’s rooms or see his face, one must first see his daughter or the queen respectively.⁹⁹ Thus, if one is able to look at the daughter or see the face of the queen one will be able to enter the king’s innermost rooms or see the king’s face, and since in the process of dying, the righteous will be able to see Shekhinah because she appears to everyone, and also cleave to her, we can conclude that in

⁹⁸ The “form that embraces all forms” is a metaphor for the infinite. It shows that Shekhinah is the space, which is capable of accepting everything i.e. any form. Additionally, everything is prefigured in Shekhinah; there is no development or forming process.

⁹⁹ For instance: “[. . .] Did it behoove the king to allow everyone to enter his rooms by these paths? No! But did it behoove him not to show his pearls and jeweled settings and hidden treasures and beautiful things at all? No! What did the king do? He took his daughter and concentrated all paths in her garments [i.e. her manifestation], and he who wishes to enter the interior must look at her.” (Scholem 162). Or, another text: “A parable is told about a king who entered a certain land and issued an edict, saying: Whatever lodgers are staying here may not see my face until they have first seen the face of the Matrona [i.e., the queen].” (162). The inseparable connection between the king and his daughter is illustrated in another fragment: “This is compared to a king who had an only daughter, whom he loved very greatly and would call ‘my daughter.’ And he did not leave his love for her until he called her ‘my sister.’ And did not leave his love for her until he called her ‘my mother.’” (163). It is interesting to note the coalescing of daughter, sister, mother into the feminine principle; the love towards the daughter is in fact the love of the feminine principle. And love at its highest becomes identification (or union) with that which is being loved.

death, the righteous is prepared to see the king. The texts clearly show that in order to see the king's face one must go through Shekhinah. In other words, in the process of dying, for one to be able to see God one must experience the presence of God, i.e. Shekhinah first.

In Tibetan Buddhism, as described by Sogyal R., there is a similar awareness of the process of dying. As mentioned before, for the “purposes of explanation and practice” in the Dzogchen teachings, the “Ground Luminosity” (or “Mother Luminosity”) which is the “fundamental, inherent nature of everything” is separated from Rigpa (the innermost essence of the mind, or as we have shown, the infinite mind) which is now called the “Path Luminosity” (or “Child Luminosity”), although they are “fundamentally the same” (Sogyal R. 162). As we have seen, nothing really has a hold on someone experiencing Rigpa, since anything that arises in the mind is promptly liberated (i.e., it is recognized for what it is, and it dissolves in the vast expanse of Rigpa). Using the terms from above, the liberation of everything that arises is described as follows: “[. . .] as soon as a thought or emotion arises, the Path Luminosity – the Rigpa – recognizes it immediately for what it is, recognizes its inherent nature, the Ground Luminosity. In the moment of recognition, the two luminosities merge and thoughts and emotions are liberated in their very ground.” And, regarding the process of dying, the author goes on to say:

It is essential to perfect this practice of merging of the two luminosities and the self-liberation of risings in life, because what happens at the moment of death, for everyone, is this: The Ground Luminosity dawns in vast splendor, and with it brings an opportunity for total liberation – if, and only if, you have learned how to recognize it.¹⁰⁰ (162)

In order to better understand this, we will have to do some reflection. The inherent nature of everything is the same as the nature of Rigpa. Rigpa on the other hand represents the experience of the infinite mind (the limitless expanse, the mind that does not project, the embodiment of acceptance etc.), in other words it represents the infinite capacity. What Rigpa recognizes in its capacity to “absorb” the whole of reality (life

¹⁰⁰ Sogyal R says that “No one can die fearlessly and in complete security until they have truly realized the nature of mind. For only this realization, deepened over years of sustained practice, can keep the mind stable during the molten chaos of the process of death.” (150).

and death etc.) is its own radiance since “All the risings are seen in their true nature [. . .] [that is] its ‘self-radiance’, the manifestation of its very energy.” (Sogyal R. 160). In effect, what we have here is that Rigpa, which is infinitely passive, is at the very same time radiating the whole of the reality, meaning, it is infinitely active.¹⁰¹ However, what one (as a living person) must experience in the infinite mind is the radiance of the infinite, manifested as (or reduced to) thoughts and whatever one sees and experiences in life (the same as what we experience in what is called normal state of consciousness) except that it happens in the infinite space (of one’s mind). At the moment of death, that which is “radiating the whole of reality” will dawn “in vast splendor” meaning that it will manifest its infinitude (the reality we experience in everyday life is a constrained version of the infinite radiance, the character of this limitation gives us the experience of life or reality as we know it),¹⁰² and if one is not having the experiencing of Rigpa as the “passive part of the infinite” at that moment, one will not be able to receive or absorb that which is “infinitely radiant”. In other words, only the infinite can absorb the infinite.¹⁰³

As shown in our study, based on the texts we have covered, there is a convergence of the realizations of Kabbalists and Tibetan Buddhists. The study of the main symbols or concepts of both traditions, Shekhinah as the feminine aspect of God and Rigpa as the nature of the mind respectively, revealed the foundation of

¹⁰¹ Buddhist worldview and consequently their teachings are much less dualistic than that of western societies and western religious traditions. To eliminate any potential for confusion, Rigpa is both at the very same time, infinite radiance and infinite absorbing capacity, in other words it is as if the “king” and the “queen” from Kabbalah were one and the same. As described by Sogyal Rimpoche, for the purpose of teaching the process of dying Rigpa was divided into Ground Luminosity (infinite radiance) and the Child Luminosity or Path Luminosity (the infinite capacity) which correspond to the kabbalistic “king” and the “queen” respectively.

¹⁰² Sogyal R. says in reference to Rigpa: “Yet even though the essence of everything is empty and ‘pure from the very beginning,’ its nature is rich in noble qualities, pregnant with every possibility, a limitless, incessantly and dynamically creative field that is always spontaneously perfect.” (153).

¹⁰³ When Sogyal R. says “The Ground Luminosity dawns in vast splendor” in reference to the moment of death, what comes to our mind is the possibility of the Pleroma manifesting at that moment. In order to be able to accept the vastness of the Pleroma one need be in a state of consciousness that is able to absorb it.

In the same sense, using the Kabbalistic (more precisely, Zoharic) symbolism, we could say that the ultimate union that will take place in the Sefirotic world is that of the Shekhinah with Ein-Sof. Regarding the preceding, we ask ourselves whether Scholem anticipated such a possibility, since when he spoke of the dynamics of the Shekhinah within the world of the Sefiroth (the upward and downward movement of Shekhinah), he stated: “Indeed, ‘it rises to that place from whence it was hewn’ – that is, to the primal light of the supernal wisdom, from whence the Shekhinah emanated, if not to the place of the first Sefirah itself.” (Scholem 170).

these, namely acceptance. Acceptance is that which grows within individuals if they follow the norm (right behavior and thought, etc.) as defined by each of these traditions. Shekhinah as the embodiment of acceptance or receiving appears in Kabbalistic descriptions as a dynamic reality ranging from the narrow to the infinite, whereas Rigpa is a description of the reality experienced at the level of infinite acceptance or infinite receiving. At this level – the infinite – Shekhinah and Rigpa describe the same reality. Shekhinah, in reality, is always passive, receiving and transcendental; the dynamic aspect of Shekhinah represents the change of the awareness of the individual. Rigpa is always there, unchanged, immovable and the individual has to become aware of this dimension in the depths of his or her self. And in both cases, the statement that one has to become aware of something (in our case the infinite nature of Shekhinah or Rigpa) elicits the passive mode, since awareness just like contemplation is passive; the active aspect of the passive is due to limited discernment; when the discernment attains perfection¹⁰⁴ the active aspect of the passive disappears.¹⁰⁵ The basic similarity of the structure of the divine model (i.e. the Godhead) of the Kabbalists with the symbolism of the Ark of the Covenant of the ancient Hebrews, leads us to the conclusion that the ancient Hebrews had the experience of the transcendental in the form of the infinite mind. It is the transcendental wisdom, or the “knowledge of knowledge” obtained during such an encounter with the infinite that gave continued legitimacy to those who had such experiences, together with the adherents – the “monotheistic elite” described by Eliade, and thus to the Laws of the Covenant.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Discernment attaining perfection: as expressed in the language of the traditions under scrutiny means discernment attaining the level of the transcendental wisdom or Hokhmah (which in turn is indissolubly linked to Shekhinah within the Godhead), or the level of “knowledge of knowledge” found in Rigpa.

¹⁰⁵ We could say here that the active creates the passive. In other words, one comes to the passive through the active. Sartre discovered this truth towards the end of his life; Stumpf and Fieser (468) quote what Sartre said in 1945: “no matter what the situation might be, one is always free.” At this stage one sees everything in terms of one’s own projections (consciousness is pure activity), whereas in 1972 Sartre revisited his position and said that “There is no question that there is some basic change in [my] concept of freedom.” and that “social conditioning exists in every minute of our lives.” Notwithstanding the larger problem of freedom of choice, we could say here that the admission of the fact that there are “limitations upon human choice” (or conditioning) is a reflection of an increased level of acceptance or that of the passive mode; one is increasingly ready to accept things as they are, irrespective of the fact that they may be or may not be under his or her control.

¹⁰⁶ The Laws of the Covenant correspond to the world of “exemplary models”, the ones that need to be imitated or followed by the primitive man, in order for him to “live in the presence of the gods” (Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* 105). In the case of the ancient Hebrews, following the laws would have enabled them to experience the infinite mind.

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Given our experiential approach with its inherent focus on the mind, we could say that the primitive man must have trusted his own thoughts as long as he remained in the world of the paradigmatic models, that is the space directly connected to (the experience of) the divine. Straying out of that space would have meant entering a world of illusions (or mental projections that must have been considered profane). The same reasoning would apply to the world of the ancient Hebrews.

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