

Article

The Tabernacle as a Sacred Feminine Space: The Development of Mythical Images from Biblical Literature to Medieval Kabbalah

Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel 

Department of Jewish History, University of Haifa, Haifa 3498838, Israel; rutkara@gmail.com

Abstract: This article compares two biblical accounts: the description of the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex. 25–40), and its connection to the myth of Eve’s creation (Gen. 2). I aim to reveal the literary and symbolic links between “feminine” attributes in these two formative accounts, from their development in biblical literature to their appearances in rabbinic midrash and medieval Kabbalah. My reading seeks to combine gender, myth, and literary study, to explore how erotic images of the sacred were developed and proliferated over generations.

Keywords: Kabbalah; mysticism; myth; gender; femininity; Eve’s creation; Tabernacle

In Hebrew, the word *Shechina* shares the same root as the word *Mishkan* (Tabernacle or, as it is often translated from the Zohar, “dwelling”). Both pertain to the idea of nesting and residing in a place;¹ God resides in our hearts, and we reside in His holy place through the concepts of attachment, persuasion, and containment.

Based on my research on the Zoharic conceptualization of the *Bina* and the *Shechina* as symbols of the Great Mother and sacred “upper wombs”, in this paper, I probe whether the Tabernacle and the temple were conceived in the Jewish mystical tradition as spaces in which to worship the *Shechina*, through which psychological, sexual, and spiritual processes of individuation and integration become possible. In addition, I utilize the approach of Phyllis Tribble, who envisioned empowering images of the deity of the Bible with positive female attributes, and who exposed de-patriarchal readings of relations between man and woman, as well as between God and human beings. As we shall see, Tribble’s position on the story of the creation of Adam and Eve also sheds new light on the development of homilies about the Tabernacle as a female representation of divinity.

1. Introduction

The etymological connection between the Hebrew Goddess (*Shechina*) and the Tabernacle (the house of His/Her residence) is integral to the emergence of sacred femininity in the Zohar and in other religions. Eve is portrayed in Genesis as the “Mother of all the living” (Gen. 2, 20); by situating the story of the creation of woman alongside the biblical myth of the construction of the Tabernacle, I aim to examine the Zoharic conceptualization of the archaic holy space as a “heterotopic womb” from which sacredness is born.

In the world of the Zohar, the two sefirot *Bina* and *Shechina* (namely, attributes or qualities of divinity that symbolize the Mother and the Bride, her daughter) represent not only the fertility of feminine figures on Earth, but the divine powers that construct the sacred marriages in Heaven. The Kabbalistic double structure of *hieros gamos* allows for the birth of worlds and souls, and it reflects how the upper and lower wombs of *Bina* and *Shechina*, as well as the upper and lower temples, are linked. For example, Zohar *Vaikra* interprets the verses regarding the aim of the holy space and the secret of sacrifices as reflecting the need for that sacred sexual union (between *Hokhma* and *Bina*, the supernal parents, and between *Tiferet* and *Shechina*, which are coupling in the Holy of Holies) that is the source of the divine flow. It presents the Tabernacle as the canopy of the bride and groom (Moses is portrayed here as married to the *Shechina*).²



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The ability to dwell, to contain and reside, or to be situated in (*li-shkon*) demonstrates the transition from *doing* into *being*, in both the human and divine realms. Only when the *Bina* shines its light and abundance on reality—namely, upon the Mishkan and on her daughter, *Shechina*—is a nest and womb for the birth of the worlds created.

As I have demonstrated elsewhere, the Zohar links Eve, as the “first source”, to the archaic wombs of *Shechina* and *Bina*, from which new worlds flourish (Kara-Ivanov Kaniel 2022).

Influenced by mythologies of the goddesses of the ancient Near East and Israel, the Zohar references provocative notions of maternity and the powerful but threatening sexuality of the female body. These goddesses include Inana, Ashera, Lilith, Hathor (*Het-hert*), and Ishtar (worshiped in Mesopotamia and Egypt), provoking polemics and influencing various later adaptations that appeared in the Middle Ages, parallel to the emergence of the Cult of Mary.³

Though reflecting the patriarchal and phallogocentric assumptions common to classical texts written by medieval male writers for male readers, the Zohar nonetheless demonstrates progressive, even positive perspectives on femininity, motherhood, and sexuality. To be clear, there are those scholars who would disagree. Most notably, Elliot Wolfson has suggested that Kabbalistic literature as a whole is characterized by an androcentricity that develops rabbinic repression. Wolfson also proposes that the homilies that supposedly center on the *Shechina* were actually written from a patriarchal perspective that viewed women as objects and instruments within the social-familial structure of marriage and procreation.⁴

An alternative reading to the dichotomous approach (“either/or”) that encompasses a theoretical and methodological range (“and/also”) might enrich our understanding of the Jewish myth and the place of women in it.⁵ I am not dealing with the question of the Kabbalists’ attitude toward their wives in the Middle Ages here, which is also intensively debated. Rather, I suggest that understanding Kabbalistic notions of the Goddess and the resulting intensified discussion of female features of divinity can positively affect contemporary perceptions of the divine and contribute to the empowerment of women.

Indeed, in the Bible, Eve imitates the divine creation of the world through the act of giving birth. Yet the world, including the primordial man and woman, was created by God, while the Tabernacle—which reproduces a primal maternal space—was created by humankind, symbolizing the continuance of divine presence in the earthly realm. As a reflection of sanctuary, the Tabernacle and the temple allow for a channel of connection between God and humans. Consequently, this article also seeks to deepen the discussion of the connection between the human body, created “in the image of God (Gen. 1, 27)”, and the holy space, which human beings may be said to create “in their image and likeness”.⁶

In addition, the intertextual reading of feminine images in the two accounts, based on biblical correlations and associations, reveals erotic and feminine symbols hidden in the design of the sacred space of the Tabernacle. These representations reflect the presence of corporeality and the bodily–sexual existence of the Tabernacle, whose perception as a feminine primordial space that resonates with the creation of Eve has been practically ignored in feminist research. Just as God breathes life into humankind in the story of creation, so too do humans now breathe life into the house that they build for God, the sacred Tabernacle.

In this paper, I analyze the biblical sources through the lens of their later appearance in midrashic and Zoharic interpretations, emphasizing the parallels between the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex. 25–40) and the myth of Eve’s creation (Gen. 2). This intentional mixture of corpuses and epochs allows me to follow the path of mythical thought that blends different times and chronologies into *symbolic presence*. For example, we will see that in Zohar *Bamidbar* it is claimed that the Tabernacle completes the creation of Eve, and the Zoharic reading meanders between these two accounts, without any chronological constancy. On the one hand, the Zohar’s understanding of the links between these two myths signifies “the return of the biblical repressed”, which, according to Gershom Scholem, features prominently in Kabbalistic literature (Scholem 1941, 1987a). At the same time, however,

analysis of the midrashic elements of the story of Eve's creation in parallel to the construction of the Tabernacle reveals that the main ideas developed by the Zohar are present already in the words of the sages. Moreover, as Yehuda Liebes argued in his study of the Jewish myth, unlike Kabbalistic literature, which already schematized mystical ideas, in rabbinic literature we may find vivid, untamed, and unrefined forms of mythical thought (Liebes 1993). In this sense, my reading supports Liebes's claim no less than Gershom Scholem's approach.⁷

2. Eve, the Tabernacle, and the Temple

Influenced profoundly by the sages, and written as an interpretation of the biblical text, the Zohar, which appeared in Castile at the end of the 13th century, connects the construction of the Tabernacle with Eve's creation.⁸ The Zohar suggests that in both stories, God and humankind were partners in carrying out the procedure. The construction of the sanctuary is introduced with the words "*These* (אלה) are the accounts of the Tabernacle" (Ex. 38: 21), corresponding to and complementing the verse "*These* (אלה) are the generations of the heaven and the earth" (Gen. 2: 4; all emphases are the author's own). At the end of the accounting of the Tabernacle we read "Thus was all the work of the Tabernacle of the Tent of Meeting *completed* (ותכל) (Ex. 39: 32), corresponding to and complementing the completion of creation: "Thus the heavens and the earth were *completed* (ויכלו)... and God *completed* (ויכל) by the seventh day" (Gen. 2: 1–2). In light of this parallel, just as the seventh day includes all of the other days within itself and uplifts them, so too does the Tabernacle include within itself the essence of creation and divinity.

Furthermore, according to the Zohar, the story of creation features motifs that reappear and are emphasized in the description of the Tabernacle. For example, the trees in the Garden of Eden resonate with the acacia wood (*atzei shittim*) at the Tabernacle. The copper (נחשת) and the *tahash* (תחש) skins of the Tabernacle hint at the serpent (נחש) that features in Eden.⁹ Most importantly, at the heart of the Tabernacle stand the two cherubim (Ex. 26: 1), recalling the guardians of Eden: "and He placed the cherubim at the east of the Garden... to guard the way to the Tree of Life" (Gen. 3: 24). The beauty of the Tabernacle, which is fashioned out of gold, silver, and copper curtains, poles, and artistic embroidery, echoes the beauty of the world created by God. The rivers of Eden include "the land of Havila where there is gold" (Gen. 2: 11), which echoes the gold used in Solomon's Temple.¹⁰

While the Zohar emphasizes etymological and symbolic connections between Eve's creation and the construction of the Tabernacle, the sages based their homilies on these two accounts on the term *tzela* (side/rib), which appears both in the story of creation (Gen. 2: 21–22) and in the construction of the Tabernacle (Ex. 26: 20).

Ironically, at the opening of the Hebrew canon, Adam "gives birth" to Eve from his rib. In the same manner, as I will show below, the sages attribute a parallel process of sawing the rib of Eve and of the Tabernacle's wall, implying that another feminine sacred space has been born from man's hands. These masculine creations reflect the womb envy that reverses biological roles, by imitating the function of the womb in the natural process of an infant born from its mother's uterus.¹¹ Although appropriating feminine functions, these midrashim nonetheless highlight the essentially feminine dimension of the "holy space".

In addition, within the framework of the ritual weekly Torah reading, the rabbis established supplementary readings for the one-year cycle (*haftarot*, readings from the prophets), linking within this framework the biblical construction of the Tabernacle in the portion *Terumah* (in Exodus 25: 1–37: 19) with the construction of Solomon's Temple (in I Kings 6: 1–8: 11).¹² Although it seems that the temple is associated with more stable qualities of the sacred, while the Tabernacle connotes unstable and liminal qualities, many sources in the midrash link them both to the creation of Eve. We might suggest that these two events reflect two different models of the feminine. The prophets—especially Hos., Jer., and Ez.—compare the Jewish nation during Tabernacle times to God's wife who, in the beginning, stays loyal to God despite the trials of the wild desert (see, for example, Jer. 2: 2–3). Yet she strays from her devotion upon arrival to the promised land and the building of the temple

(see Isa 1: 21; 23: 15–18; Hos 2: 4–15; Jer 3: 1–3) (Biale 1992; Halbertal and Margalit 1992). Paradoxically, it is the established and steady stage that breeds the sin of infidelity, while the challenges in the desert strengthen the nation's (and the "wife's") loyalty to God.

The primordial serpent denotes dangerous powers that always appear near the female body, as well as at the entrance to sacred spaces. According to a late midrash in Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer, the serpent in Eden copulated with Eve, and the fruit of this union was Cain.¹³ Similarly, according to some Kabbalistic approaches, in the construction of the Tabernacle, which serves as the infrastructure of the temple, there is always the danger that the snake will appear again and that his filth will defile the gates of the holy garden (See, for example, Gikatilla (1998)).

Indeed, in mythical thought, sanctity is defined through separation from the profane and mundane. The sacred is in danger of dislocating from its place or its context through a blasphemous act that brings profanation. The erotic images of the Holy of Holies as a sacred space that unites man and woman, who were created "in the image of God" (Gen. 1: 27), testify to an awareness of this danger of profanation. According to various rabbinic homilies and later medieval Kabbalistic readings, God separated man and woman so that they could develop a *face-to-face* relationship and procreate—a theme that I will expand upon below.¹⁴ The process of the rib separation is called *Nesira*, a concept that is developed from Genesis Rabbah through the Zohar and the Lurianic Kabbalah. Further on, I discuss the connections between this human separation—*Nesira*,—and the construction of the Tabernacle. Here, I want to emphasize the importance of the "cutting"—the splitting and intersection—as an essential stage in sanctuary worship. This cut resonates with moments of human birth (imitating the cutting of the umbilical cord), the primeval differentiation between sexes (as in the creation of Eve) and, finally, the constitution of the holy dimension (as we learn from the building of the Tabernacle). Every birth starts with an act of charity, a consent to surrender, and a readiness to lose essential parts of the self in order to donate them to the world.

3. The Sacred Space: Myth of the Eternal Return

Using theories borrowed from the field of ritual study, here I analyze another prism of the primal story of creation. The establishment of the Tabernacle in many senses reconstructs and "replays" the Edenic plot, using similar sounds, expressions, and objects: gold, wood, snake, copper, rib, and cloth. The connection between the story of creation and the Tabernacle reflects Mircea Eliade's conceptualization of the sacred and of the myth of the eternal return (Eliade 1954, 1961).

Mircea Eliade describes the sacred as a space that, in various belief systems, represents the *axis mundi* connecting Heaven, Hell, and Earth: "Every Microcosm, every inhabited region, has a Centre; that is to say, a place that is sacred above all". He adds that different holy spaces have been "considered and even literally called the center of the world"; "each of these territories, cities, and temples have been imagined as standing at the navel of the earth".

Indeed, both the Tabernacle and the temple represent the heavenly temple to which prayers and sacrifices are directed; however, while the temple is a fixed, concentrated site of holiness, the Tabernacle is a portable sanctuary that people carry on their journeys from one station in the desert to the next.

Following Eliade, we might suggest that the myth of the eternal return is dramatized time and again through the parallel reading of the portion about the construction of the Tabernacle in light of the story of creation in Genesis. In both accounts, the collective birth is interwoven with the personal; furthermore, the idea of the cutting (*Nesira*) and the donation that characterizes every birth allows for the construction of the pillar on which Earth stands: that which connects Heaven and Hell; the *axis mundi* that links past and present, humanity and divinity, good and evil (Idel 2005a). In Genesis, this core source is disclosed in the *tzela* (rib) of Eve that was taken from Adam, while in the Tabernacle, as I will show, the building of the *tzela* (side) is dependent on human generosity and free will.

Both scenes represent premature stages of existence: the first precedes the differentiation of humanity into different sexes; the second is a crucial moment in the formation of the nation, as it transforms from dependency in an unstable nomadic world into a decisive entity, which creates its own center of worship and holiness.

The Tabernacle matches Eliade's description of the sacred place as the "heart of the world" closely, since the Bible emphasizes that it is created through contributions from the entire nation: "Of every man whose heart prompts him to give shall you take My offering... that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 25: 2–8). The Tabernacle thus represents the collective will and the "united heart" of Israel, imbuing all the stations on their journey with sanctity, as appears at the execution of the plan, a few chapters later: "Every man and woman whose heart made them willing to bring for all manner of work, which the Lord had commanded by the hand of Moses, to be made" (Ex. 35: 29). These extensive preparations and investment of collective generosity and effort imbue it with an aura of holiness.

In a broader sense, the Tabernacle represents a portable, changing, dynamic sanctity, reflecting the evolution of the Israelite nation from its embryonic stage to mature development. The concept of the Jewish people as a "newborn" is illuminated in Ilana Pardes's description of the birth of the nation in Egypt, with a daubing of blood on the doorpost and a splitting of water, evoking an actual birth (Pardes 2000; Kessler 2009). Indeed, the next stage of maturity is achieved via the challenges facing the nation, including the events in *Rephidim*, *Mara*, *Masa*, and *Meriba* (Ex. 15: 22–17: 7), and even through the sin of the golden calf, which is located between the command to build the Tabernacle and the account of its actual construction. The maturity of this newborn nation is revealed through its ability to see the other, to donate and submit an offering of the collective heart, which is composed of the hearts of all of the Israelite individuals.

Eliade emphasizes that actions acquire their sacred value through their ability to reconstruct an ancient, primal narrative. Here, I wish to demonstrate that the connection between the construction of the Tabernacle and the story of creation illustrates this archaic ontology: the creation of a sacred space entails a return to the primary source that echoes "lost" feminine imagery. Any creation—and certainly the creation of a place where divinity is to dwell—recreates the archaic story. The book of Genesis addresses the creation of the world, while the book of Exodus recounts the creation of the Jewish nation. Woman, who was created from Adam's "side" (*tzela*) and parallels the "sides" (*tzela'ot*) of the Sanctuary, represents the connection between the upper and lower dimensions. In the following discussion, I concentrate on the feminine symbolizations of the Biblical, midrashic, and Zoharic Tabernacle, as well as on sexual maternal images that appear at the heart of the sacred. This intersection suggests a conceptual unity of the world, humankind, and the sacred place with its inherently feminine essence.

4. Feminine Symbolizations of the Sacred

4.1. *Ishah el Ahotah*—"Each Joined to Her Sister"

Many components of the Tabernacle are connected to one another in a manner suggesting closeness, sisterhood, and intimacy, as reflected in the unique expression "each joined to her sister" (*ishah el ahotah*), which appears repeatedly in the description of the curtains, the handles of the boards, and the loops and the rings in Ex. 26: 1–6, 17.

Since Hebrew is a gendered language, and the Bible has other possibilities for describing a process of building, the use of feminine words in the expression *ishah el ahotah* in order to describe this connection seems through the Zohar's view to be an intentional choice, and not an arbitrary one. We can, however, also point to an example of the use of masculine words in the construction of the Tabernacle. When describing the specific type of connection between the two cherubim, who are also connected "one to the other", the Bible chooses to indicate their attachment quite differently: "The cherubim... shall face one to another (*Ish el ahiv*)" (Ex 25: 20), literally, "a man to his brother".

A similar feminine expression appears in the description of the holy creatures in the divine chariot, as depicted in Ezekiel's prophecy: "And every one had four faces, and every one had four wings... their wings were joined one to another [each to her sister]" (Ez. 1: 6). Unlike the inanimate curtains, handles, and loops, the divine animals reflect the face of the Godhead, and their intimate attachment might serve as a complement to the masculine union of the cherubim.

The expression *ishah el ahotah* is also mentioned in the list of incestuous relationships, in the prohibition against marrying two sisters (Lev. 18: 18). By combining the words "sister" (*ahotah*) and "woman" (*ishah*), the text emphasizes the femininity of the two entities to be joined and reflects the synergic relationship of sisterhood in the establishment of sacred objects within a sacred space, as well as the destructive nature of this union when constructed improperly.

A metaphorical reading of the reverse relationship between the incestuous example and the construction of the sacred implies that, when the connection of "each woman to her sister" is directed to a holy purpose—as with the construction of the Tabernacle—it produces unity; however, when it exploits this unity, it corrupts the sacred space. These images reinforce the centrality of the feminine and the integrity of the holy space, as arising also from the expression "that the Tabernacle may be one" (Ex. 26: 6). Although the explicit commandment regarding the construction of the holy space addresses only the men (Ex. 25: 2), a midrash in *Tanchuma* teaches that the women had previously tried to delay Aaron's creation of the golden calf, refusing to contribute their jewels for this purpose.¹⁵ Thus, the donations for the Tabernacle, which were meant to atone for the calf, were completely voluntary on the women's behalf. The sages, in their homilies, suggest that the women were the first to donate to the Tabernacle and drew the men along with them.¹⁶

The sages explored the idiomatic and linguistic links between these two accounts and added an additional layer to their biblical net of associations. For example, some of the Tabernacle's vessels bear a special feminine imprint—such as the *kumaz* (Ex. 35: 22), a piece of jewelry that, according to the midrash, symbolizes the uterus and emphasizes female sexuality,¹⁷ and the copper laver, which, according to the sages, was fashioned out of the mirrors that the women, under the conditions of Egyptian slavery, used to seduce their husbands in order to continue to procreate. Although Moses was initially wary of taking the copper mirrors, with their possible associations of licentiousness, God viewed the women's offering in a positive light.¹⁸

4.2. "And the Ends of the Poles Shall Be Visible"

Although the sages have diverse perspectives, in many midrashim and Talmudic readings the sages stress the erotic and feminine attributes of the holy accessories, using the connections between Eve's creation, the Tabernacle, and the description of Solomon's Temple. In the ceremony described in 1 Kings 8, the Ark of the Covenant with the cherubim is stationed in the most holy place, along with the stone tablets, "which Moses had put there" (8: 9), in ancient times, during his wandering in the wilderness.

This description indicates the transition from a nomadic life in the desert to the institutionalization of God's house, which is the site of religious pilgrimage and national gathering. The fate of the two sons of Aaron, who die during the inauguration of the Tabernacle owing to their breach of proper conduct (Lev. 10), is a world away from the experience of the attendees and celebrants in the Book of Kings. At the end of the ceremony, God's glory fills the sanctuary and a cloud settles over the new temple, such that even "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud" (1 Kings 8: 11). Intriguing interpretations pertaining to our discussion have been offered by the sages for verse 8, which reads as follows:

"And they drew out the poles, so that the ends of the poles were seen from the holy place, before the Sanctuary, though they were not seen outside, and there they are to this day".

The Talmud questions this seeming paradox:

“It is written (Kings I 8), ‘the ends of the poles were seen’, but it also says (ibid.) ‘but they were not seen outside’. How can this be? [...] Perhaps then [the ends of the poles] were pressed forth and protruded from behind the curtain, appearing like a woman’s breasts, as it is written, ‘My beloved is to me like a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts’” (b. Yoma 54a; emphasis my own).

According to this interpretation, the poles that bore the divine ark appeared like a pair of (female) breasts, while the ark lay between them, like the myrrh worn around the neck for ornamentation and fragrance.¹⁹ The ark and the poles are depicted alongside boldly feminine images. Inspired by the Song of Songs and the verse “My Beloved is to me like a bag of myrrh that lies between my breasts”, the Holy of Holies is imagined as the body of the beloved, while the holy vessels are perceived as its ornamented limbs and organs.²⁰

This midrash serves to reinforce the connection between the Divine Name *El Shaddai* (*shad* meaning “breast”) and the feminine quality of divinity that pervades the temple. The name *El Shaddai*, as various scholars have suggested, evokes the goddesses of fertility of the ancient Near East and suggests that not only did the Hebrew divinity also have feminine and maternal qualities, but this sensual and nurturing presence lay at the very heart of the Holy of Holies.²¹

Moreover, later in this homily, the sages develop the perception of the Holy of Holies as the source of *Eros* and fertility by describing the union of the cherubim as a symbolic coupling of God with His mate, embodied by the nation of Israel:

“R. Katina said: When Israel made their pilgrimage [to the Temple], the curtain would be rolled back for them, and they would be shown the cherubim, which were intertwined with one another ... The cherubim in the Second Temple ... ‘according to the space between each one, with *loyot* round about (Kings I 7: 36)’. What is the meaning of the expression, ‘according to the space between each one, with *loyot*’?—‘Like a man embracing his mate.’ Resh Lakish said, ‘When the foreigners entered the Sanctuary, they saw the cherubim with their bodies intertwined. They carried them out and said, ‘These Israelites, whose blessing is a blessing and whose curse is a curse, occupy themselves with such things?!’ And immediately they despised them, as it is written (Lam. 1), ‘All who had honored her, despised her, for they saw her nakedness.’” (b. Yoma 54a-b).

Some teachings focus on the childlike image of the cherubim, based on the reference to them in the Babylonian Talmud as *rabia* (infants), symbolizing potential and innocence, while other homilies depict them as male and female in an erotic context. Both images converge in the verse from Chron. II 3: 10 “And in the most holy place he made two cherubim of *ma’aseh tza’atzu’im*, and overlaid them with gold”.²²

The expression *ma’aseh tza’atzu’im* indicates wooden or sculpting craft, yet symbolically it can refer to an act of intercourse, as a ritual of concealment at the very heart of the Holy of Holies. Furthermore, following midrashic interpretations, the Kabbalists suggest that forbidden sexual unions represent not only prohibited relations, but a dimension of uncoupling and inappropriate exposure. While during intercourse the partners are “intertwined”, hidden, and protected, when they are separated their nakedness is revealed and their privacy and intimacy violated.

Thus, for example, the Zohar interprets the verse “a slanderer separates intimate friends” (Prov. 16: 28) as follows:

‘Rabbi Hizkiyah said, ‘A slanderer separates intimate friends—that is, he separates the King from Matronita, as is written: “Your father’s nakedness and your mother’s nakedness you shall not expose”.’²³

The Kabbalist is charged with forging the connection between the divine masculine and the feminine sefirot—*Tiferet* (the King) and *Malkhut* (the Matronita)—visualizing them

in a state of sexual union, like the connection between the parental union of the sefirot of *Hokhma* and *Bina*, the supernal parents that are coupling in the Holy of Holies.²⁴

Indeed, the term *kitzutz ba-neti'ot* (literally, “cutting of the shoots”) is interpreted in *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* in a similar manner: as a separation of the couple, or the parents, and distancing them from one another, since the term *neti'ot* (shoots) suggests a union that is capable of bearing fruit, while *kitzutz* (cutting) is expressed in the separation of forces and the uncovering of sacred nakedness. Prohibited sexual unions, like the *kitzutz*, violate the bond between male and female, causing a breach at the heart of divine holiness.²⁵

According to the sages, the Holy of Holies evokes the experience of the maternal unknown by inducing the protruding breasts, as well as the enigma of the primal scene in which the parental couple—the cherubim—are intertwined and hidden from view. We might propose that the unification between the cherubim represents the mystery of the divine sacred marriage (*hieros gamos*), the union between feminine and masculine aspects of the psyche and the divinity, and the construction of the Holy of Holies as a *parental sanctuary*. In Kabbalistic terms, the ark’s maternal function symbolizes the feminine *sefira* of *Bina*, while at the center of holiness stands the *Shechina* (the feminine figure that represents the divine presence), who is united with the masculine partner—the *sefira* of *Tiferet*. The holy space includes all fundamental elements of existence: motherhood, nourishment, beauty, fragrance, and desire, but also awe and dread.²⁶

According to Resh Lakish’s concluding words in the Babylonian *derasha* cited above, the union between the two cherubim, when exposed at the time of exile in the marketplace, outside of the sanctuary, may testify against Israel, as it were, and expose their shame. This idea also appears in teachings from Lamentations Rabbah:

“We are ashamed... for strangers are come into the sanctuaries of the Lord’s house’ (Jer. 51: 51): At the time when enemies entered Jerusalem, Ammonites and Moabites entered together with them... They penetrated the Holy of Holies and found there the two cherubim, which they seized, placed in a chest, and carried around the streets of Jerusalem, exclaiming, ‘Did you not declare that this people were not idolaters? See what we found belonging to them and what they were worshipping!’ ... At that time God swore that He would utterly exterminate them” (Lam. Rabbah, Buber ed., Intr. 9).

The externalization and exposure of that which is meant to be hidden—as in the brazen removal of the cherubim into the marketplace—creates a harsh experience of profanation. This is a moment when the trauma of the destruction and exile is experienced directly and acutely, as a desecration of the parental sanctuary: the “mother”—the divine presence—is exposed and violated in her solitude and abandonment. She, who is shown honor at the beginning of the teaching through the symbolic description of the ark’s poles, and who symbolizes the very heart of the temple, is now dragged into the public sphere and displayed as a harlot and a menstruant (as she is described first in the chapters of Lamentations, then in certain midrashic teachings, and eventually in Zohar Eikhah, the *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* on Lamentations) (See Pedaya 2011, 2013). All of these texts use feminine images and express sexual retrogression as a way of symbolizing the deterioration that occurs during the destruction of the temple and the crisis caused by the collapse of the holy center.

5. The Myth of *Nesira* (Sawing) in the Midrash: The Other Side (*tzela*) of the Tabernacle and Human Beings

Following our examination of the models of destruction and intercourse that take place in the Holy of Holies, we will return to the association between the construction of the temple and the creation of Eve through an examination of the concept of the *tzela* (side/rib). We will first examine the rabbinic traditions (which first prompted the term *nesira*) within the cultural milieu of the Greco-Roman world and, later, discuss the Zoharic homilies on the notion of *nesira* (sawing), which distinguish between physical and spiritual androgyny. Finally, we will examine Phyllis Trible’s approach, which emphasizes the

process of separation between male and female, as key to understanding the egalitarianism that exists in creation and the bolstering of the feminine aspects of the divine. This discussion stresses that both the Tabernacle and the story of the creation of woman emphasize how differentiation forms the basis of the relationship between male and female, and between human and divine.

The Tabernacle represents both the place in which God and human are differentiated from one another, and an earthly location for God's presence. The construction of this holy space thereby develops human awareness of the boundaries between humanity and the divine, while opening up the possibility of connection between the two. As we noted in the introduction, the term *tzela* (side/rib) is attributed by the rabbis to both the construction of the Tabernacle and the creation of Eve. In a midrash that appears in *Genesis Rabbah*, we find the following:

“R. Jeremiah b. Leazar said: When the Holy One created Adam, He created him a *hermaphrodite* [androgene], for it is written, ‘Male and Female He created them and called their name Adam’ (Gen 5: 2). R. Samuel b. Nahman said He created Adam *double-faced* [*Du-Parzufin*] and *split* him [*nisro*] of two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side. To this it is objected: But it is written (Genesis 2:21) ‘He took one of the man’s ribs’ (*tzela*), this means one of his *sides*. Replied he, as you read (Ex. 26: 20) ‘For the other *side* (*tzela*) of the Tabernacle’”.²⁷

The term *tzela* in the description of the Tabernacle’s construction is understood by the sages as a codeword alluding to the creation of woman—a process that is reenacted in the creation of the Tabernacle—while the term build, or “building up” (*va-yiven*), connects the creation of Eve to the building of the temple (compare Gen. 2: 22 and Kings I, 6: 14 and below).

This homily offers an explanation for the contradictory descriptions of the creation of man in Genesis 1 and 2. In Genesis 1, God creates man and woman together, while in Genesis 2 man is created first, and woman is later created from his *tzela*. According to this midrash, Adam was created as a creature that combined both male and female, with the two parts joined together, back to back. The two halves of this entity are later separated into man and woman. The terms “androgynous” and “double-faced”, *Du-Parzufin*, also appear in a parallel teaching in the Babylonian Talmud, yet both represent a variation on the primal term androgynous.²⁸

Indeed, these two terms are borrowed from Greek and evoke the common legend of the separation of the sexes that appears in Plato’s *Symposium*. According to this legend, which Aristophanes relates in Plato’s telling, human beings were created as spherical creatures that were cruelly cut in half by Zeus, who sought to weaken them.

“He spoke and cut men in two, like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling, or as you might divide an egg with a hair... After the division the two parts of man, each desiring his other half, came together, and throwing their arms about one another, entwined in mutual embraces... And when one of them meets with his other half, the actual half of himself, whether he be a lover of youth or a lover of another sort, the pair are lost in an amazement of love and friendship and intimacy... And the reason is that human nature was originally one and we were a whole, and the desire and pursuit of the whole is called Eros”.²⁹

In contrast to the ancient legend, which views the appearance of Eros as a result of trauma and suffering inflicted by jealous gods, the rabbinical midrash views the “sawing” (*nesira*) as part of the process of creation, and as God’s gift to humanity. It is thanks to this separation that procreation is possible—a theme that is developed further in the Kabbalistic world.³⁰ The myth of “sawing” seeks to reconcile the two stories of creation and proposes that man and woman were first created as a single body fused back-to-back. Thereafter, woman appears before man as a side or flank taken from him, “bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh (Gen. 2, 23)”.

According to Karen Horney, this legend, in which woman is born of man like an infant born of his mother's womb, reflects the womb envy of male writers and creators (Horney 1935, 1967). At the same time, this myth may be read in another way, as a symbolic process whereby man discovers his "true self" and undergoes a spiritual individuation of the feminine and masculine parts of his psyche—a process that resonates with the revealing of the "other side (*tzela*) of the Tabernacle".³¹

6. Nesira (Sawing) in the Zohar: The Concept of Differentiation

In various readings on the myth of sawing, the Zohar notes the loneliness that characterizes human creation in the back-to-back stage. Although this construction seemingly provides physical closeness, it also signifies the furthest distance between man and himself, and between male and female.³² According to the Zohar, it is precisely this situation that prompts God to say "It is not good for man to be alone (Gen 2, 18)":

"Adam was created with two faces... However, he did not engage with his female, and she was not a helper facing him, *since she was at his side (tzela) and they were as one back-to-back. So, Adam was alone...* What did the blessed Holy One do? He sawed him (*nisro*), and took the female from him... He adorned her like a bride and brought her so that she would be facing him, face-to-face" (Zohar III 44b, Matt 7, 271–272).

Here, the term *tzela/side* is attributed to the woman in the sense of a "helper" or "support" for the man. The Zohar emphasizes that support can be created only through healthy distance, and not between entities that are joined back-to-back. Only when the two sides are separate can each appreciate the personality of the other.

In a different teaching, which challenges the perception of Lilith as the "first Eve" (*Hava ha-rishonah*), the Zohar presents Eve as being intended for Adam from the moment of her creation. This emphasis represents a polemic against a tradition rooted in "ancient books", according to which Lilith was the first woman, preceding Eve. Indeed, in the 9th century composition *Toldot Ben Sira*, Lilith flees from Adam prior to the creation of Eve, since she refuses to be subservient to him:³³

"When the Holy One, blessed be He, created His world, and created Adam, He saw that [Adam] was alone. He created a wife for him from the ground, like himself, and called her Lilith, and brought her to Adam. Right away they started arguing: He said, 'You will lie beneath', while she said, 'You will lie beneath, since both of us are equal and we are both from the ground'" (Ibid., version 2, 231–232).

This midrash goes on to describe how Lilith is forced to sacrifice 100 of her babies every day in order to gain her freedom. She remains in "the cities of the sea", far away, choosing not to return to Adam. In contrast to *Toldot Ben Sira*, the Zohar claims that only Eve, who emerges from Adam's side, is his true partner. This homily expands upon the parallels drawn by the sages between the creation of Eve and the construction of the Tabernacle:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, sawed Adam (*nisro*) and prepared his female, as it is written, 'The Lord Elo-him built up the side' (Gen. 2: 22). 'The side'—as already established, as is said, 'And on the side of the Sanctuary' (Ex. 26: 20)... And in the Ancient Books it is written that she [Lilith] had fled from Adam before this. But we have not learned so" (Zohar III 19a; Matt 7, 119).³⁴

This homily interprets the term *tzela* from the perspective of the creation of the Tabernacle, as a site of sanctity. In the same way that God who builds up the *tzela* also "saws" Adam and Eve apart and transforms their connection from a static physical fusion into a spiritual union of love and attraction (associated with the image of "the adornment of a bride for the canopy"), he gives human being the responsibility to continue his "building" and the construction of the sacred. This text depicts the soul, which begins united, as undergoing a "sawing" that parallels the sawing of the bodies, in contrast to the idea

that the soul is divided from the outset into male and female halves. The idea of spiritual androgyny, or the *androgynous soul*, is developed in medieval exegesis, starting with the philosophy of Saadia Gaon and continuing in the writings of the Spanish Kabbalists and the Zohar,³⁵ as evidenced, for example, in the following excerpt:

“At the moment the blessed Holy One brings forth souls into the world, all those spirits and souls comprise male and female joined as one. They are transmitted into the hands of the emissary appointed over human conception... When the time of their coupling arrives, the blessed Holy One, who knows those spirits and souls, unites them as at first and issues a proclamation. When they unite they become a single body, a single soul, right and left, fittingly” (Zohar I 91b, Matt 2, 76–78).

This teaching describes the descent of the souls of males and females from the storehouse of souls, via the lower Garden of Eden, to this world and into human bodies.³⁶ The original conception of the souls is affected by an angel whose name is *Layla* (night).³⁷ While in rabbinical literature this angel is “appointed over [human] conception”, in Kabbalistic thought this angel also pairs the souls.

In Charles Mopsik’s view, these Zoharic teachings reflect the wish for a unity of the soul—a desire that is more profound than the desire for physical unity. Mopsik emphasizes that the biological and social differences between male and female signify the even more primal and profound difference between the male and female parts of the soul, which were separated from one another. The gender distinction is not essential; rather, it is the result of the primal sawing; therefore, the manifestation of an individual as a man or woman is a constant testimony to the androgynous source from which human beings are created.³⁸

Another Zoharic teaching draws a connection between the creation of Man and the entire genealogical chain from Genesis up until the Book of Exodus. It is only with the establishment of the Tabernacle, which resembles the form of the human body, that the work of unification, which began with the sawing apart of Adam and Eve, is complete. Although the term sawing (*nesira*) does not appear here explicitly, it is nonetheless strongly implied in the description of the stages of transformations in the process of the creation of Adam and Eve, as well as in the portrayal of the union between the Torah and the *Mishkan*,³⁹ as the Zohar emphasizes in the lines “Even though the female was adjoined to his side she too was composed of two sides—to be totally complete” and “The forces of Torah and the forces of the Dwelling inseparable from one another—all corresponding to the pattern above”:

“God created the human in His image, why in the image of God? Come and see: when the blessed Holy One created the human being, he made him in the image of those above and below: he was composed of all, and his light shone from one end of the world to the other... [He created him] surely two rungs, comprising male and female—one for male and one for female. *Du-Partsufin*, with two faces (Gen 1: 27)—He was complete on all sides. *Even though the female was adjoined to his side she too was composed of two sides—to be totally complete* [...] When Jacob came, the world stood firm and did not totter. Even so, it did not take root until [Jacob] engendered twelve tribes and seventy souls, and the world was firmly planted. Even so, it was not perfected until the blessed Holy One gave the Torah at Mount Sinai and *the Dwelling was erected. Then worlds were established, and those above and below became fragrantly firm* [...] The forces of Torah and the forces of the Dwelling inseparable from one another—all corresponding to the pattern above” (Zohar III, 117a; Matt 8, 250–253; emphasis my own).

This teaching emphasizes that the construction of the Tabernacle symbolizes the completion of the creation of woman and man. As Moshe Idel notes, the Kabbalists view androgyny as a deficient state of being, since it offers no possibility of procreation or real Eros.⁴⁰ We might develop this concept further and propose that the Tabernacle be viewed as a process of sawing that separates humankind from divinity. As a holy place, the Tabernacle signifies the boundary between the divine and human realms, while at the same time

facilitating a space in which God can dwell. The construction of the Tabernacle nurtures an awareness of the separateness between human beings and the maternal source. In addition, in Kabbalistic thought, the entirety of the Jewish people represents the figure of the *Shechina*, as she is called *Knesset Israel*. Thus, the link between this Hebrew Goddess and the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) symbolizes an attachment to the feminine qualities of nurturing and containment, yet it also reflects the distance between the nation (or the *Shechina*) and God. A point of encounter indicates that there are two parties that meet, and that these two entities must necessarily be separate from one another. A similar notion was developed by Phyllis Tribble who, as mentioned above, proposed a de-patriarchalizing approach; that is, a rereading of the biblical text with an emphasis on positive feminine images of divinity, such as the womb of God and the functions of nourishment and nursing attributed to the Godhead. She found evidence that the “image of God” in Genesis 1: 26–27 indeed includes both woman and man.⁴¹ Tribble also wishes to maintain the religious meaning of the biblical story, deriving from it a message of gender equality specifically *from the processes of differentiation* described within it (between Heaven and Earth, man and woman, man and God). It is for this reason that differentiation is such a central theme in the description of creation, as Tribble says:

“For instance, separation, differentiation, and responsibility characterize all levels of creation... As *Yahweh* shaped dust and then breathed into it to produce the earth creature, so now he takes out the rib and then fashions it into woman. Built of raw material from the earth creature, rather than from the earth, the woman is unique in creation. She does not fit the pattern of dominion that the preceding episodes have established. She belongs to a new order that will by itself transform the earth creature”.⁴²

In Genesis 2: 23, we can read “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman [*Ishah*] for out of Man [*Ish*] this one was taken”.

According to Tribble, this statement indicates “the similarity of woman and man, not the subordination of woman to man. Paradoxically, to be taken from man is to be differentiated from him, while being bone of bone and flesh of flesh. Differentiation, then, implies neither derivation nor subordination. The poetic usage of the phrase ‘taken from’ argues, in fact, for the mutuality of woman and man”. She stresses that only after this process of operating on this earth creature does the human identity become sexual:

“With this altered meaning, the retention of the word *ha’adam* allows for both continuity and discontinuity between the first creature and the male creature, *just as the rib allows for both continuity and discontinuity between the first creature and the female creature...* Furthermore, the ambiguity in the word matches the ambiguity in the creature itself—the ambiguity of one flesh becoming two creatures... In the very act of distinguishing female from male, the earth creature describes her as ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’ (2: 23). These words speak unity, solidarity, mutuality, and equality. Accordingly, in this poem the man does not depict himself as either prior to or superior to the woman. His sexual identity depends upon her, even as hers depends upon him. For both of them, sexuality originates in the one flesh of humanity”.⁴³

The Zohar, like Plato in the *Symposium*, teaches that it is rare for one to meet up with one’s destined soulmate; most humans are not fortunate enough to meet up with their other half. Nevertheless, every soul, without exception, seeks its completion in the other, and therefore every sawing symbolizes an opportunity for rebirth (through the memory of the trauma).⁴⁴ Similarly, the invitations to build the Tabernacle symbolize the quest to find and reunite with the missing “side” and to become one with the divine soul. Yet, in a way that resonates with the necessity of separation discussed by Tribble, the mythical discussion of *Nesira*, in midrashic and Kabbalistic sources, describes the process of sawing (separating the rib and building the sides of the Tabernacle) as an essential and positive moment, as opposed to Greco-Roman legends, which present it as a traumatic split. For

example, another passage in Zohar *Beshalah* on the building of the *Mishkan* reflects both the separation and connection that the process of the world's creation constitutes:

'Adam was created with two faces, as we have established. "He took one of his sides (Genesis 2: 21)": the blessed Holy One sawed him, and they became two, from east to west, as is written: Behind and before You formed me (Psalms 139: 5)—behind, west; and before, east. Rabbi Hiyya said, What did the blessed Holy One do? He adorned that female, consummating her beauty above all, and brought her to Adam, as is written: "YHVH Elohim built the side He had taken from the human into a woman and He brought her to the human (Genesis 2: 22)". What is written above? "He took one of his sides (mi-tsal'otav) (ibid., 21)". What is one? as is said: "She is one, my dove, my perfect one (Song of Songs 6:9)". Mi-tsal'otav—of his sides, as is said: *ul-tsela*, and on the side of the Tabernacle (Exodus 26: 20)" (Zohar II, 55a; Matt 4, 284–5).

Moreover, while the sages speak of the male and female sides of a human being that are sawn apart by God, in the Zoharic and Lurianic Kabbalah the sawing takes place within divinity, and in the human world only as a result of this. Divinity itself needs sawing, followed by the building up of the side that was separated—a holy process that is enforced by man. The construction of the sacred teaches us that every sawing of the woods of the Tabernacle builds anew the rib/side between Adam and Eve and helps divinity itself to experience creation and reconstruction. The Tabernacle and the temple represent the safe space in which the transition between "back-to-back" fusion and "face-to-face" union can take place.

7. Divine and Human Building

The verb "built" (בָּנָה) serves as a key word in the establishment of the temple (I Kings 6), as well as in Gen. 2: "And the Lord God built of the side which He had taken from the man, a woman, and He brought her to the man" (2: 22). The sages illuminate the "building" as God's personal involvement as a wedding attendant, and as fashioning Eve's body so as to be equipped for childbirth:

"The Holy One built Eve like a storehouse, narrow at the top and wider at the bottom, so as to contain the fruit—to contain the fetus. 'And He brought her to the man'—functioned as Adam's wedding attendant" (b. Berakhot 61a).

In light of this teaching, the Zohar envisions the construction of the Tabernacle and of the Temple as a reflection of the creation of the world, and as depicting a miraculous act of extracting the living spirit from within the material.⁴⁵

The Zohar compares the beauty of the Tabernacle to the varied hues of the eye, and to the light hidden for the righteous to see:

"Come and see: The Beauty of the world and the vision of the world were not seen in the world until the Dwelling was built and erected. From that moment, vision of all was seen in the world and the world was perfected" (Zohar II 222b, Matt 6, 274).

In the Zohar, the concept of beauty connects the creation of the world and of the feminine with the splendor of the Tabernacle, and it generates an affinity between the practice of adornment and the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun* (repair), as two central labors in which both God and man are engaged. In addition, the Tabernacle symbolizes the *Shechina* (divine presence), which, in this instance, draws from the forces of the right side and *hesed*, while Moses, the "husband" of the divine presence and the "master of the house", inaugurates the Tabernacle, drawing down blessing from on high.⁴⁶

Further on, the Zohar emphasizes that the Tabernacle and the temple unite not only man and woman, but also the two feminine *sefirot*—*Bina* and *Shechina*, the supernal Daughter and Mother. The link between the upper and lower spheres underscores the connection between the "Upper Mishkan of Testimony" (*Bina*) and the "Lower Mishkan" (of the

Shechina). At the end of this teaching, the Zohar addresses the verse “And the house, when it was being built, was built of stone made ready...” (I Kings 6: 7) and describes the miraculous way in which the construction itself taught the builders what to do:

“When all those artisans began to work, the very work they began was completed on its own... For even though all the works of the world were completed one by one, the whole world was not fulfilled in its existence until the seventh day arrived... When the Temple was built, all the work that was done was done on its own. The artisans began, and the work showed them what to do—it was traced before them and completed by itself” (Zohar II 222b, Matt 6, 275).

According to another Zoharic homily (I 74b), the work of construction parallels the production of the voice via the throat, as a totality of the action of the inner organs and their realization as a verbal expression. It is also compared to the process of birth and the creation of the fetus from its mother’s body. In Zohar Bereishit, in an excerpt from the *Tikkunei-Zohar* literature, the building up of the side is bound up with the building of Jerusalem in the time to come (I 28a). At the time of redemption, the supernal Father and Mother (*Hokhma* and *Bina*) are destined to rebuild the *Shechina*—Jerusalem—using the rib/side taken from their child, the Son (the *sefira* of *Tiferet*), the brother and consort of the divine presence.

These texts indicate the hidden soul of the temple stones, which echoes the Tabernacle’s vessels and jewelry. The holy place’s completion begins with human construction but ultimately requires miraculous divine intervention, which brings about *tikkun* (repair) in the upper worlds. At the very heart of holiness, masculine and feminine opposites are united in a *heterotopic womb* of the universe. As we learn from the links between the two myths discussed in the paper, this “second union” may be achieved only after the primal process of differentiation is completed, and each side acknowledges the boundaries of his/her/its existence.

Furthermore, we have seen that the Tabernacle and the temple are symbolized by rich feminine and maternal images, such as the appearance of the *tzela* in the story of creation and in the Tabernacle; the poles of the ark, which protrude like breasts; and the curtains and loops and the handles that are joined “each to her sister”, like the wings of the cherubim in Ezekiel’s chariot. To this we might add the perception of the Tabernacle as a nomadic womb, like the ark that moves upon the water during the flood. This capsule, with the pairs of animals, represents a reminder of the era of creation. It is pervaded by an air of a concentrated feminine divinity that has the power to bring life and fertility to the world, as well as to protect living creatures from the ravages of reality. These sources speak to the feminine space that is at the heart of the Tabernacle and temple rituals, and they illuminate the ongoing processes of the creation of woman as interwoven in the creation of Heaven and Earth.

The Zohar reveals how motifs such as the creation and cutting of the rib/side relate to the processes of separation, unification, and independence that take place within the Godhead. In the Zohar, and later in Lurianic Kabbalah, God Himself and the *Shechina* go through an ongoing, cyclical process of *Nesira*.⁴⁷ God therefore repeats the story of creation and the building of the Tabernacle, as a process that cannot be fulfilled without human intervention. Moreover, we might say that these two mythical accounts confirm basic Kabbalistic concepts relating to the human ability to theurgically influence the divine world. Divinity develops and is sanctified only by the hands of man, and the Godhead imitates basic human processes of creation and formation.

The myth of the creation of Eve and the process of *Nesira* (which I have discussed as a parallel to the separation of the “rib” of the Tabernacle) are ritually present in Kabbalistic ceremonies such as the intentions of the new year (Rosh Hashanah), the seven wedding blessings, and other daily liturgical practices (Giller 2008). Since the sawing of the woman also symbolizes the continued separation of the *Shechina* from her partner, the Holy One, the *sefira* of *Tiferet*, whenever a human gives his “charity of heart” to build a space of holiness, he is in fact establishing a space for God and a divine home in earthly reality.

The Zohar, in its poetic way, creates a repetitive illustration of an event that took place in the prehistoric past. The Zohar connects earthly and supreme reality and places the two images side by side. Its ceremonies meander from the creation of the world to the establishment of the Tabernacle, claiming that the Mishkan completes the creation of woman, who in fact does not exist as a female entity until its construction. In other readings, the Zoharic plot, unlike the biblical chronology, is reversed, claiming that the Tabernacle preceded the creation of woman, or the two myths are positioned as parallel symbolic events within a supreme divine reality, in which “there is no sooner or later”.

An analysis of the feminine images of the Tabernacle in the Zohar supports Scholem’s claim regarding the biblical “return of the repressed” and reflects the Kabbalists’ great freedom in describing the sexual union that takes place within the Holy of Holies: the beauty and passion that are presented in the Tabernacle as a symbolization of the *Shechina* and the feminine body, in Heaven and Earth.

8. Conclusions

The parallel analysis of biblical, midrashic, and Zoharic layers of interpretation in this paper reveals synchronous and diachronic readings of feminine images. The creation of Eve, as an event of sacred history that belongs to the past, is reconstructed through its ties to the building of the Tabernacle and is given a ritualistic character. For example, the ritual of pilgrimage in the three festivals is linked to the exposition of the feminine and erotic aspects of the sacred. In addition, within the framework of the ritual weekly Torah reading, new connections between the Tabernacle and the temple are exposed every year.

The study of sexual and feminine images in the story of Eve’s creation and the construction of the Tabernacle—as it developed from scripture, through *midrash*, to Kabbalah— informs us of the centrality of feminine and maternal symbols in the heart of the Holy of Holies. Aided by gender, literary, and mythical–ritualistic theories, we uncovered an emphasis placed by the midrashic and Zoharic sources on this connection that the different motifs and stations we have examined reflect. Thus, the later homilies interpreting in this way the biblical choice to describe the linkage of the curtains to one another through feminine language (*ishah el ahotah*, “each joined to her sister”); thus, the Talmudic description of the miraculous poles of the ark as female breasts, and of the cherubim as a conjoined pair; to this is added the midrashic and Kabbalistic description of the Holy of Holies as a parental sanctuary and as the site of coupling in times of peace, as opposed to the profanation of the mother’s body during times of destruction and exile. Finally, the lengthy discussion of the myth of the *nesira* and the notion of separation that exists between man and God, as well as within divinity itself, instructs us on the connection between human creation and construction and divine creation, and between the human body, created “in the image of God”, and the holy space, which human beings created by imitating the divine “in the image of Man”. Furthermore, the holy place’s completion begins with human construction and is completed by a divine act, whereas the creation of man and woman begins with a divine act and requires human completion through sexual intercourse that causes, in turn, its theurgic affect. Since, in the Zohar, the *Shechina* represents the “Hebrew Goddess” that is revealed in sacred spaces through the process of *nesira*, the perception of the sacred space as a feminine presence and as the appearance of the Great Mother allows us to be reborn from the upper womb, through the reinterpretation of these two archaic and constitutive narratives.

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Notes

- ¹ Sokoloff (1990, 2002); Jastrow (1950). Sokoloff defines the *Shechina* in rabbinic literature as the divine presence that “dwells” on Mount Sinai and among the sons of Israel. Jastrow defines Her as a “royal residence” and “house of my residence”, which links the two concepts. For an elaboration of these terms, see, for example, Zohar *Teruma*, 3: 126a regarding the verse “and they shall make me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25, 8). The root י.ד.ו means “to inhabit”; the Tabernacle is the place where God resides. The *Shechina* expresses the “action” of the one who dwells, but the reference is to the dweller himself, who is called so metonymically because of divine honor.
- ² Zohar 3: 3a describes the *dedication of the Tabernacle as a holy marriage, based on the connection between the verses “yom klot Moshe”, meaning “On the day when Moses had finished setting up the tabernacle” (Num. 7, 1), “bati legani ahoti kala”, meaning “I come to my garden, my sister, my bride” (Song of songs 5, 1), and the term kelulot (“betrothal”, “wedding”). See its portrayal of a person who is unable to make a sacrifice as one who is unmarried (3: 5b), the appearance of the *Shechina* as a bride and the daughter of the king (3: 6b–8a), and the call to her hinted in the opening word “Vaikra” as a theme that weaves the whole section together.*
- ³ On the possible influences of the “the Cult of the Virgin” on the emergence of the *Shechina*, see Green (2002). For a contrary reading, see Liebes (2005).
- ⁴ Wolfson (1995) and other books. Discussed in Kara-Ivanov Kaniel (2022).
- ⁵ By contrast, in my aforementioned book and in many articles, I have suggested other subversive Zoharic *derashot* in which one can identify opposing trends of female empowerment and expressions of the worship of the Goddess. I have sought to reveal the potential of Zoharic literature, which is striking in its daring, compared to contemporaneous Kabbalistic texts such as the Halachik and Jewish philosophical corpora. Here, too, I have discussed the liberating models of motherhood and sexuality, androgyny, perversion, and desire. Decoding terms such as “tikla”, “messianic mother”, and “the female redeemer”, I have emphasized the *multi-vocality* that allows for an alternative reading of the dichotomous. I claim that while Zoharic literature addresses many dialectic and paradoxical issues, most scholarly discussions of the Zohar focus on only *one* aspect of the power dynamic between the sexes, suggesting a narrow analysis of the term “gender”, rather than using it as a “useful category” in the study of religion and culture. See also: Scott (1986); Abrams (2004).
- ⁶ On the concept of *tzalem elohim* see: Lorberbaum (2015).
- ⁷ The continuous development of mythical notions and themes from the midrashic world in medieval Kabbalah has gained broad scholarly attention in the last generation; see, for example, Liebes (2001), Idel (2008), Yisraeli (2013), and Benarroch (2018).
- ⁸ For a discussion of Zoharic layers and their editing process according to different perspectives, such as those of Huss, Abrams, Meroz, and others, see Abrams (2010) and Meroz (2018). All of the units discussed in this article are from *Guf ha-Zohar*. On the building of the Tabernacle in the sample of the letters with which “Heaven and Earth were created”, see Nahmanides on Ex. 31: 2, and in his introduction to the book of Exodus “When they came to Mount Sinai and made the Tabernacle, and the Holy One, blessed be He, caused His Divine Presence to dwell again amongst them, they returned to the status of their Fathers (*avot*)... and they were constituted the Chariot, then they were considered redeemed”.
- ⁹ It is interesting to note that at the time of the temple, Josiah got rid of *nahushtan* — the serpent on a bronze pole from the Tabernacle years.
- ¹⁰ See Kings I, 7, especially verses 38–51, and II Chron. 2:4–16. In Kings I, 7: 23–26, we find reference to a “molten sea” that had the appearance of “the petals of a lily”, with golden pomegranates and flowers accentuating its beauty, paralleling the colorful splendor and intimate connections between the curtains and rings in the Tabernacle.
- ¹¹ On “womb envy” and “pregnancy jealousy” in the story of creation, see Pardes (1992), following Horney (1967, 1935).
- ¹² The *haftara* of *Terumah* does not include the full description of the temple building; rather, it highlights Solomon’s attachment to God (I Kings 5: 26–32; 6: 1–13). For the three-year reading cycle in the land of Israel, as opposed to the one-year cycle that was customary in Babylonia, see Nae (1997).
- ¹³ Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer 21.
- ¹⁴ See note 30 and below.
- ¹⁵ Tanchuma *Ki-Tisa* 19.
- ¹⁶ A different view concludes that the women were included from the outset in the command “let them bring Me an offering, of [*me’et*] every man”; see Or-haHaim on Ex. 25:2.
- ¹⁷ b. Shabat 64a; Rashi on b. Berachot 24a. see also Num. 31: 2; Isaiah 3: 16–24. Hellner-Eshed (2006).
- ¹⁸ Tanchuma *Pekudei* 9; Num. Rabbah 9:14, Rashi on Ex. 38:8. Compare to Exodus 32:3, where the people (assumed here to be men) took the earrings from their wives, sons, and daughters in order to build the golden calf.
- ¹⁹ This may also be an echo of the midrash, according to which “the Ark carried itself and its bearers” (B. Sotah 35a).
- ²⁰ The midrash adds “That lies between my breasts—this refers to the Divine Presence, which rested between the two cherubim” (Shir ha-Shirim Zuta [Buber ed.] 1,13. Cf. B. Menahot 98b).

- 21 See Tribble, *Rhetoric of Sexuality* (note 11 above); Biale (1982); Haskel (2012). For other meanings of the name El-Shadai, see b. Hagiga 12a.
- 22 b. Sukka 5b; cf. Rashi on Ex. 25:18. The term *ma'aseh tza'atzu'im* is translated in the Anchor Bible as "molten cherubs". As Jacob Myers stresses, "the word is uncertain but probably refers to a figure of precious metal". He also mentions the Vulgate version "statuario opere", which means sculpting craft, while the Septuagint states "wood craft". Rashi defines the term as an image of little children (*tavnit yeladim*) made of gilded wood. His interpretation is based on the abovementioned midrash that describes the cherubim as a male and female or as infants (*ke-rabia*), and thus connects *tza'atuza* to the word *tze'etza* (offspring). See: Myers (1965).
- 23 Zohar III 74a. All translations from the Zohar are from Matt (2006–2013). See Matt, *Zohar*, 7, 500; for parallel sources see ad. loc., n. 464.
- 24 See Zohar III 74b–79b; *Tikkunei Zohar*, tikkun 56, 89b–90b. For a discussion of the incestuous relationships and their ramifications in the divine sphere, see Idel (2004) and Hellner-Eshed (2009). For a different reading of the prohibition of "uncovering the nakedness" of the mother as an exposure of the children that she is protecting, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 101–103.
- 25 As suggested by the introduction to *Tikkunei Zohar* II 2b, as well as 5a. For different models of cutting the shoots "*kitzutz ba-neti'ot*", see Scholem (1987b, 1993), Roi (2017), and Weiss (2015).
- 26 I hope to expand elsewhere on the Holy of Holies as a locus of parental union and a psychoanalytic "primal scene", as well as the threatening aspects of sanctuary as representations of the maternal body.
- 27 Genesis Rabbah 85: 11 (Albeck edition, I, 55).
- 28 b. Berakhot 61a uses the term "double-faced" rather than "androgynous", indicating that the side from which the woman was built up parallels the "face" or "tail". "Face" means a part equal to the male, while "tail" indicates a lower, animalistic part. In contrast to the quality of *partzufim*, the perception of woman as a mere "tail" creates a discriminating hierarchy. Boyarin proposes that the teaching of R. Shemuel ("two faced") interprets the opinion of R. Yirmiya b. Elazar ("androgynous"). In his view, in both instances, we are told that the first creature was a hermaphrodite, containing two sexes within a single body that, like Siamese twins, were separated through surgery. See Boyarin (1993). Moshe Idel indicates that the Kabbalists prefer the term *Du-Parzufin*, since the *Halachic* discourse views the androgynous as a damaged creature; see Idel (2005b).
- 29 Plato, Symposium, *The Complete Works of Plato*, Loeb Library, Vol 3, 189c 2–193d 5.
- 30 As Idel emphasizes, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 53–103. In Plato's depiction there are three types of creatures: all-male, all-female, and androgynous (half-male and half-female). The sages recognize this third possibility, for it is only by means of such an arrangement that procreation could take place.
- 31 Jung and Kerényi (1973). On Philo's interpretation of Eve based on Platonic dualism, see Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, ch. 1.
- 32 For a discussion of the spiritual processes of individuation and the symbolism of the states of "back" and "face", see Pedaya (2015, chp. 6).
- 33 Yasif (1985). See also Gen. Rabba 22:7 and b. Shabbat 110a.
- 34 Cf. Zohar I 34b, where we find another tradition hinting that Lilith was from Adam's *tzela*. See recently Walfish (2023).
- 35 Mopsik (2006); Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 73–81.
- 36 See, for example, Zohar I 91b, III 43, 283b, II 246a, and the discussion by Tishby (1989).
- 37 For more on the angel appointed over conception, see b. Nidda 16b, *Seder Yekzirat ha-Valad*, and Urbach (1975). For the androgynous soul, see Idel (1988) and Liebes (1976).
- 38 Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul*, 31–32.
- 39 See the comments of Matt, (Pritzker vol. 8), p. 258 n 8–9, regarding the separation and union of the sefirot *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. See also Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 867–940.
- 40 Idel (2012). As he emphasizes, in the Kabbalistic view, the urge for sexual union leads to the "augmentation of divinity by procreation", and this situation unquestionably stands in contradiction to the aspiration to return to a primal unity such as the androgynous. Even an ecstatic kabbalist like Avraham Abulafia notes that the gematria of the word "androgynous" equals that of "male and female" (p. 390).
- 41 See, for example, her statement "In the Hebrew Scriptures the Womb belong to God... God conceives in the womb, God fashions in the womb, God judges in the womb, God destines in the womb, God brings forth from the womb, God receives out of the womb, and God carries from the womb to gray hairs". Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 34–35.
- 42 Idem, 126–129.
- 43 Idem.
- 44 More on this idea, see Kara-Ivanov Kaniel (2015).
- 45 For discussion of the poetics of the Zohar and its aesthetics, see Liebes (1994) and Fishbain (2018). For more on the connection of the Tabernacle and the creation of the world, see Zohar II: 127a.

- ⁴⁶ The Zohar (II 222a) states that Moses undertakes an ordering (*poked*)—a word that denotes administrative authority, but also has an erotic, procreative sense. The temple might be described as representing the masculine quality of sanctity, while the Tabernacle is the sanctuary of the divine presence, representing the feminine quality.
- ⁴⁷ Idel, “Androgynes”; idem, *Kabbalah and Eros*; Pedaya (2011, 2013), *Psychoanalysis and Kabbala*; Kara-Ivanov Kaniel (2022), *Birth*.

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