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**“*Black am I, but beautiful*” – active not passive: rereading Shekhinah’s sexual desire in**

***Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* (Song of Songs)**

Abstract: in *Sefer ha-Zohar* Shekhinah is the tenth *sefirah*, Malkhut. Unlike in earlier traditions Shekhinah is female. The androcentric underpinnings of Jewish mysticism are however extensively documented. But this should not preclude ‘counter-reading’ in constructing the significance of the zoharic texts. This approach recognises that the Zohar’s origins are unclear, its composition is disordered, and the discursive construction of Shekhinah is inconsistent. This is particularly true of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, the Zohar’s reading of Song of Songs, in which Shekhinah, echoing themes associated with the Shulamite of the biblical text, consistently initiates cosmic union. Sexual desire in the zoharic texts is a form of capital necessary to facilitate *sefirotic* intercourse, although scholarly readings of the zoharic corpus often identify Shekhinah as a passive receptacle. This, however, is only true if the endemic contradictions within the texts are glossed over. In Song of Songs the Shulamite’s sexual ‘initiative’ is core. This was not lost on the author(s) of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, who, in struggling to explain Shekhinah’s *sefirotic* role in line with the erotics of Song of Songs, inescapably echoed the ‘depatriarchalizing’ themes of the biblical text. *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*’s portrayal of Shekhinah’s active agency in initiating cosmic sexual activity is significant given that in scholarly interpretations of the zoharic corpus she is generally assumed to be reliant on stimulation from above in the form of Tif’eret (her lover) or Yesod (the phallic element of the Godhead), or below from male religionists engaging in Torah, *mitzvot* and marital sex. However, as this article demonstrates, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah is *active* and repeatedly both encourages and frustrates cosmic sexual intercourse rather than passively requiring inspiration from the upper *sefirot* or earthly stimulation from below. Accordingly, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah is ‘non-normative,’ destabilizes the androcentric ‘male space’ of the authors and encourages a reading beyond the ‘ideology of these texts’ and ‘men’s views of women.’ *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*’s reliance on the eroticism of Song of Songs means that it is possible to reread Shekhinah’s role beyond not only the androcentric bias of the authors, but scholarly assumptions about her passivity.

In *Sefer ha-Zohar* (*Book of Splendour*) Shekhinah is the tenth *sefirah* (emanation), Malkhut.

Unlike in the biblical and rabbinic traditions Shekhinah is female. Shekhinah is an immanent presence, even a ‘shield,’ who shares Israel’s pain (Devine, 2014: 8; idem, 2016: passim).

However, Shekhinah’s subjection and the androcentric underpinnings of Jewish mysticism are extensively documented (Raphael, 2003: 14, 53; Wolfson, 2007: 277; idem, 1997b: 5). As

Gershom Scholem (1995a: 37) argued, Jewish mysticism ‘is a masculine doctrine, made for men and by men’ and devoid of ‘feminine influence.’ Nevertheless, while elements of the

Zohar can be read as belonging to a phallogocentric genre (Wolfson, 1997b: 5, 370), or as essentializing (Ross, 2004: 44), pointing to the androcentric basis of Shekhinah’s biography

(Idel, 2005a: 38), if it can even be called that, should not preclude ‘counter-reading’ or diminish the centrality of the interpreter/reader in constructing the significance of the zoharic texts (Fuchs, 2003: 16; Sholza, 2017: xx). This approach recognises that the origins and authorship of the Zohar are unclear and that its composition is disordered to the extent that literal interpretation of its diverse texts and fragments is problematic (Sholza, 2017: xx). Likewise, the discursive construction of Shekhinah in the zoharic texts is both incoherent and inconsistent. Shekhinah frequently resists being assimilated into any traditional or historical norms and consistently maintains agency within a textual language that at times excludes, undermines and subjugates her (Butler, 2000: 77, 82; Fuchs, 2008: 64). Thus, it is perhaps Shekhinah’s portrayal in a system that is both oppressive and empowering that demonstrates her value as a “resource” (Armour quoted by Hornsby, 2006: 82, 89). This is particularly true of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, the Zohar’s reading of Song of Songs, in which Shekhinah, echoing themes associated with the Shulamite of the biblical text, consistently initiates sexual union by signifying her preparedness “to receive kisses from the King!” (*ZH* 69c).<sup>1</sup> Sexual desire in the zoharic texts is a form of capital necessary to facilitate cosmic intercourse. However, scholarly readings of the zoharic corpus often identify Shekhinah as a passive receptacle. This of course is true if the endemic contradictions within the zoharic corpus are glossed over and its counter-texts are ignored. In the biblical Song of Songs the Shulamite’s sexual ‘initiative’ and ‘female eroticism’ are core (Bloch, 2001: 310-12). This was not lost on the author(s) of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, who, in explaining Shekhinah’s *sefirotic* role in line with the erotics of Song of Songs inescapably echoed the ‘depatriarchalizing’ themes of the biblical text (Trible, 1976: 217; Idel, 2005b: 28), which was for the authors of the zoharic corpus a ‘nuptial hymn’ and explanation of the interaction between Malkhut (Shekhinah) and

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<sup>1</sup> In particular, for all *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* citations see Hecker, 2016: 345-634; for all other zoharic citations, unless otherwise stated, see *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*: Matt, 2004-2016, Hecker, 2016, and Wolski, 2016.

her lover, Tif'eret (Scholem, 1991: 184).<sup>2</sup> *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*'s portrayal of Shekhinah's active agency in initiating cosmic sexual activity is significant given that in the zoharic texts Shekhinah is shown throughout to be reliant on either stimulation from above often in the form of Tif'eret or Yesod (the phallic element of the Godhead), or below from loyal male religionists engaging in Torah, *mitzvot* and marital sex. Therefore, Shekhinah is generally associated with 'passive and receptive traits' (Scholem, 1991: 171). Thus, on the one hand, once 'filled' Shekhinah's womb is responsible for 'Creation,' the 'world below resembling the one above' (*Be-Reshit* 1:30a). Shekhinah is the 'tree' that gives birth to the 'fruit' (*Haqdamat Sefer ha-Zohar* 1:1a), Israel, which becomes her "'suckling ... child'" (*Ha'azinu* 3:298a). On the other hand, Kabbalists are duty-bound to 'arouse' Shekhinah and to ensure that through cosmic procreation she achieves orgasm and receives the 'Holy Light' (Green, 1997b: 157; Wolfson, 1997a: 305). However, as this article demonstrates, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah is *active* and repeatedly both encourages and even frustrates cosmic sexual intercourse rather than always passively requiring inspiration from the upper *sefirot* or earthly stimulation from below. In this context, Shekhinah, applying Michel Foucault's (1980: 81-82) classic term, is a 'subjugated knowledge' yet to be realised. Indeed, Shekhinah's role in the zoharic corpus is often 'non-normative,' destabilizes the 'male space' of the various texts and fragments, and modulates between traditional, historical and even contemporary gendered expectations (Butler cited in Hornsby, 2006: 82-83, 86), often signifying more than the authors' and even contemporary readers' own 'terms of reference' (Fuchs, 2008: 65). Undoubtedly the zoharic texts are androcentric in origin, but it is possible, as J. Cheryl Exum (2016: xix) suggests, to step 'outside the ideology of these texts' to avoid merely regurgitating an account of 'men's views of women' in the medieval period. *Zohar al*

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<sup>2</sup> The *Sefirot* as applied in the *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*: 1. Keter 2. Hokhmah 3. Binah 4. Hesed 5. Gevurah 6. Tif'eret 7. Netsah 8. Hod 9. Yesod 10. Malkhut.

*Shir ha-Shirim* and its reliance on the eroticism of the biblical Song of Songs means that it is possible to reread Shekhinah's role beyond not only the androcentric bias of the authors of the zoharic corpus, but scholarly assumptions about her passivity.

In the zoharic texts Shekhinah's identity is fluid and exceeds even the imagination of the authors, entering 'realms of unspeakability' that fit no single prevailing discourse (Hornsby, 2006: 90-92; Butler, 2005: 308, 310). In fact, throughout the zoharic corpus Shekhinah's identity is in 'crisis' (Butler, 2000: 2). Shekhinah is therefore an example of what Judith Butler (2011: xiii-xiv; Foucault cited in Butler, 2005: 308) referred to as 'disidentification' – a sort of discursive 'impasse.' In the zoharic texts, Shekhinah is an identity 'yet to emerge' that not only does not always fit with traditional notions of femininity, but frequently defies definition (Butler, 2011: xiii-xiv). The poetic and esoteric style of the zoharic corpus means that Shekhinah can be read without an androcentric 'foundational anchor' and beyond the limits of the authors' milieu (Foucault cited in Butler, 2005, 319). This is because for the most part no such 'anchor' is workable or even exists given the fundamental differences between the texts of the zoharic corpus and the lack of evidence vis-à-vis authorship (Foucault cited in Butler, 2005: 319). Shekhinah, as a 'discursive production,' is not a fixed or definable hypostasis or the 'terminus of a given statement' (Butler, 2011: 139, 185). As Butler (2011: xxix, 185) points out, 'signifiability' is not 'controlled by the one who ... writes.' Instead, text can 'signify' in stark contrast to the writers' 'most precious intentions.' The complexities of explaining Shekhinah's role in the *sefirot*, likened to "“Dark-and-Not-Dark”" in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* (ZH 61d), means that interpretations of Shekhinah in the texts of the Zohar are diverse, confusing, and even dichotomous (Butler, 2011: xiv, xxvii, 139, 182, 184-185). This seems obvious given that the majority of scholars now accept that the Zohar represents the work of several authors (Meroz and Weiss, 2014: 249). Ronit Meroz (2008: 320) even suggests that the corpus was 'written

... by a large group of people ... whose activities spanned many years.’ The Zohar, as Gershom Scholem (1963: 9-10) pointed out, should not be read as a ‘unified text.’ For Daniel Abrams (see 2009: 7-142) the Zohar is too complex and contradictory to be characterised in this way. The various stories and theosophies mean that no single extract is representative, and each should be taken as distinctive (Idel, 2005b: 129-30; Giller, 2001: 5). The various manifestations of Shekhinah in the zoharic texts, such as her responsibility for the ‘sun’s light’ (Wolski, 2016: 138 n. 462), her role in Creation (Leet, 1999: 176), and her determination to protect Israel in exile, reveal that what began as a theological construct became a Shekhinah beyond the authors’ original understandings of her significance (Tyson, 2001: 9), which in any case were ambiguous from the outset. As a collection of midrashic texts, the ‘Zohar’ was probably written in Castile in the thirteenth century (Giller, 2001: 4; Scholem, 1995b: 39), although the authors’ identities and intentions are more or less unclear (Yisraeli, 2016: 1). The texts, which are in Aramaic, albeit with some pages in Hebrew (Liebes, 2006: 36), have been attributed to Moses de Leon, a thirteenth century rabbi, while classically Simeon bar Yochai, a first century *Tanna*, is considered the author (Liebes, 1993: vii; Garb, 2015: 150). The zoharic texts, nevertheless, are anonymous (Rapoport-Albert and Kwasman, 2006: 6). The difficulty of interpreting the zoharic corpus is also compounded by the fact that the various texts draw extensively on earlier biblical, talmudic and midrashic traditions (Wineman, 1998: 4). Likewise, the texts are composed in an imaginative, fictionalised, and metaphorical style particular to the writers (Fishbane, 2009: 328; Ross, 2004: 129). For Ada Rapoport-Albert and Theodore Kwasman (2006: 7) the ‘zoharic literature’ is a preferable term to the ‘Zohar’ given the multiplicity of theosophical perspectives evident in its texts.

Of course, some feminist theologians can only render Shekhinah ‘useable’ if lifted out of her traditional contexts (Plaskow, 1991: 123, 140, 164). This is understandable. Melissa

Raphael (2006: 201) argues that feminist theologians ‘tend to neglect or dismiss the androcentric tradition as too inhospitable and too negligent of women’s experience to be ... termed ... “useable.”’ However, there is no reason to assume that the zoharic corpus is based on indisputable definitions (Hartmann, 2007: 73), nor is it necessary to dismiss the ‘valuable tools’ its texts offer (Ross, 2004: 201). The mystical tradition neither exhibits a ‘romantically better past’ nor ‘an endless tale of female subjugation’ (Romney Wegner, 1998: 198). Therefore, gendered analysis of Shekhinah’s role in the kabbalistic tradition can be reliant on its texts without accepting its androcentrism (Umansky, 1989: 194; Hashkes, 2015: 223). The discursive construction of Shekhinah evident in the zoharic texts is beset by contradiction in any case. Accordingly, while Luce Irigaray’s (1986: 23) comment that ‘female sexuality has always been conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters’ can be applied to texts within the zoharic corpus, it is not always the case that sexual images of Shekhinah are merely symbolic of a concealed ‘phallus,’ as Elliot Wolfson (1997b: 274; Green, 1997a: 269-270) has suggested. In fact, the gender of each of the ten *sefirot* is fluid throughout the zoharic texts (Idel, 2005b: 130-31; Tirosh-Samuels, 2011: 191). Likewise, there are even ‘different narratives within the same text,’ as Moshe Idel notes. Idel (2005b: 129) further posits that the authors of the zoharic texts, even when describing Shekhinah through masculinist terminology, were aware of the underlying ‘feminine’ attributes. Furthermore, Tif’eret and Shekhinah are often discussed in androgynous terms, particularly in their determination to return to a time when ““Male and Female were joined as one”” (ZH 62c). In this process, Shekhinah can even be ““Male and sometimes Female”” given that ““She ... includes all those colours [*sefirot*]”” (Va-Yhi 1: 232a; Matt, 2006: 402-403 n. 498-499, 501). This means that the *sefirot* do not have to be read and interpreted through a ‘heteronormative’ lens (Hornsby, 2016: 3), or even through any framework that would preclude ‘LGBTQ,’ ‘genderfluid,’ or ‘trans’ readings – this list is not exhaustive (Tabb Stewart, 2017: 308, 314).

The diverse and conflicting discursive themes of the zoharic corpus need not be read as stable or privileged over and above the ‘silences’ that are yet to be unearthed (Foucault, 1998: 100-101).

Thus, while Arthur Green’s (1997a: 271) claim that the zoharic corpus is a ‘celebration of the female’ might go too far, Daniel Abrams is right to say that Kabbalah venerates the ‘female body’ as much as it does the ‘male body’ (Abrams, 2004: 5, 68-74). Indeed, regardless of how the texts are interpreted, male mystics envisaged Shekhinah’s vagina and womb as essential to the *sefirotic* system, celestial union, creation, redemption, restoration and Israel. Even when figured through masculinist symbology, it is never entirely clear that Shekhinah has actually taken on the masculinity of other *sefirot* or that zoharic assumptions about gender are any more than metaphorical positions (Butler, 2000: 9, 20). Teresa Hornsby suggests that criticism of ‘portrayals of women as passive and silent,’ as well as ‘submissive,’ can be problematic, particularly in a context where ‘submissiveness and service’ are encouraged of all religionists. As Hornsby (2006: 85-88) contends, these are not necessarily ‘signs of passivity or powerlessness.’ *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* best characterises this in Shekhinah’s statement explaining her role at the foot of the ten *sefirot*, which she contends is not problematic given her access to the “Supernal King”:

‘This is negligible to me. Despite my status in relation to you, *The king has brought me into his chambers* [Song of Songs 1:4] – I am elevated and loved by the Supreme King, with no lowliness, for He *has brought me into his chambers*. Where is this place? In  $\eta$  (*he*), the expansion above of the mystery of the Supernal King. Who enters there? It is I! Accordingly, I am greatly praised, in glorious exaltation .... I care only to be lying under You, with You ruling over Me’ (ZH 65c).

Shekhinah, given her devotion to and even symbolism as Torah, loyalty to the Holy One, blessed be He, and suffering with Israel, using Hornsby’s (2006: 87) term, is a ‘model’ religionist and no different to the male authors of the Zohar. Thus, Charles Mopsik’s (2005: 19) point that Shekhinah is ‘eminently passive,’ but with ‘the ability to act,’ is only workable



if 'passive' is defined negatively. Interpreters of the zoharic literature often see Shekhinah as indicative of 'pure passivity and receptivity' and portrayed through masculinizing symbols and 'male traits' (Wolfson, 1995: 99, 104; idem, 1997b: 274). These interpretations link masculinity to 'giving' while femininity is associated with 'receiving' (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2011: 191). This 'passive, receptive quality' and the notion of Shekhinah as simple 'repository' is a theme evident throughout the scholarly interpretation of the zoharic texts (Scholem, 1991: 165, 187). This perhaps says something more about the interpreters of the corpus than it does about the nature of its diverse texts. Shekhinah easily becomes who readers/scholars 'need' her 'to be' (Butler cited in Hornsby, 2006: 82; Butler, 2000: 1), with the general assumption that it was not until later forms of kabbalistic discourse that she became associated with 'active forces' (Scholem, 1991: 186-187). However, in the context of the *sefirot* to identify Shekhinah as emblematic of passivity or as a basic receptacle is perhaps problematic given that each of the *sefirot* emit, receive, and transfer divine flow, each is subject to necessary cosmic desire, and each is identified in a variety of masculine, feminine, androgynous, and undefinable terms vis-à-vis gender (Tirosh-Samuelson, 2011: 191). Even the authors of the zoharic texts struggled to adequately explain the contradictions arising from Shekhinah's active/passive attributes. This is because it is necessary for Shekhinah to receive divine flow in order to be impregnated, but given her responsibility for "conceiving," in the cosmic production of "generations" contrastingly "She is activity" (*Be-Reshit* 1:46b). Moreover, Shekhinah's role at the foot of the ten *sefirot* as the rung, Malkhut, means that she is the only *sefirah* connected to the corporeal world and therefore uniquely responsible for absorbing and transmitting the cosmic fluid from above and for refining and transmitting the good deeds of Israel below. In this context Shekhinah's active role in preparing for and encouraging procreation in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* should seem obvious, particularly given she is framed through sexually-charged language throughout the

zoharic texts (as are all the *sefirot*), even if in the matter of cosmic union she is frequently figured as devoid of agency (Scholem, 1991: 184).

In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, Shekhinah, reflecting the Shulamite's unashamed sexuality, is determined to "join with those letters ... all becoming the consummate Name" – "YHVH Elohim" (ZH 67a). Shekhinah is "guardian of the vineyards [Song of Songs 1:6]" and each *sefirah* is dependent on her: "I am a single point, guarding the other letters that are written with me. And I guard them, for I go into all the letters and they all spread out from me, expanding from my inwardness" (ZH 70b; Hecker, 2016: 468 n. 316). In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah can withhold cosmic sexual relations until "She is ready, preparing her mouth to receive kisses from her husband [Song of Songs 1:2]" (ZH 63d). Accordingly, sex between the divine couple is dependent on Shekhinah pursuing "kisses from Written Torah [Tif'eret]" (ZH 64a) only when she "is adorned and longs to approach her husband" (ZH 69b; Hecker, 2016: 379 n. 74). However, it is understandable that interpretation of the *sefirot* leads to the assumption of Shekhinah's mere passivity and over-reliance on the upper emanations. This is a logical position given that in the majority of zoharic texts and fragments Shekhinah's role is *passive*. The entire *sefirotic* system can be interpreted as a sequence of sexual activity which culminates in the last *sefirah*, Shekhinah (Idel, 1989: 210). As the 'lower waters,' Shekhinah 'call[s] to the upper, like a female opening to the male, pouring out water toward the water of the male to form seed' (*Be-Reshit* 1:29b). This process is explained through the cosmic fluid that will impregnate Shekhinah (Green, 1997b: 161 n. 33), who will then reproduce humans in the heavenly image (*Terumah* 2:136b-137a). In Shekhinah's words: 'From Me your fruit appears' (*Lekh Lekha* 1:85b; Matt, 2004b: 47 n. 363). So, beginning in *Haqdamat Sefer ha-Zohar* 1:1a Shekhinah is the 'rose,' the "Assembly of Israel," that is pollinated (Scholem, 1991: 184): "From here on: light – created, concealed, contained in the covenant, entering the rose, emitting seed into Her. This is the *tree bearing*

*fruit with its seed in it* (Genesis 1:12).” This establishes one of the prevalent discourses of the zoharic texts – that Shekhinah is dependent on divine fluid from Tif’eret (through Yesod, the *sefirah* above Malkhut). Intercourse between Shekhinah and Tif’eret is explained through Song of Songs 2:6 “*His left hand beneath my head, and south embraces passionately, as is written: his right hand embracing me*” (*Va-Era* 2:30a; Matt, 2007: 121 n. 194). Shekhinah, accordingly, is the vaginal entry point for Tif’eret (Button Pritchard, 1999: 86). As the vaginal ‘open *Mem*,’ Shekhinah is a ‘cistern, empty and longing to be filled’ (Kaplan, 1990: 14; Hellner-Eshed, 2009: 98). This discourse is central to the close of the zoharic corpus where Zion is likened to the ‘womb of the *Shekhinah*, in which God procreates the blessing that spreads to the world’ (Scholem, 1991: 185). In this process, Shekhinah, as the bottom rung of the *sefirot* and the only *sefirah* with access to the corporeal realm, is necessarily the ‘vast sea’ (*Be-Reshit* 1:29a). Accordingly, in the zoharic texts Shekhinah is frequently referred to as being responsible for the creation of humankind. Shekhinah is the ‘ocean, creating below, fashioning everything exactly as above’ (*Be-Reshit* 1:30a; Matt, 2004a: 180 n. 598-599; see also *Be-Reshit ZH* 7d; *Va-Yiggash* 1:205b). Accordingly, in Vayikra 3:19a Adam is the product of Shekhinah’s sexual relations with Tif’eret/Yesod (Unterman, 2008, 305). Indeed, “‘The holy soul is hewn from her’” (*Be-Reshit ZH* 10d). In fact, the other nine *sefirot* can only influence the earthly realm through the tenth and lowest rung, Shekhinah, who is the *sefirah* that absorbs everything from the upper emanations (Scholem, 1991: 171; *Sefer ha-Yihud ha-Amity* quoted in Scholem, 1991: 178-179). The process is explained thus: ‘from that flowing, gushing river [Yesod] all souls issue and soar, gathering into one site, and that rung [Malkhut] forms the spirit of a human ... forming the embryo in her womb’ (*Miqets* 1:197b). Once pregnant, Shekhinah becomes the ‘treasure-house within’ (*Va-Yeshev* 1:181a). These themes can be traced back to the *Bahir*, for Arthur Green (1995a: 16) the foundational text of the kabbalistic system, where Shekhinah is called ‘*Nekevah*’ (נקבה) given

‘her orifices (*Nekev*) are wide. ... They are the orifices of the breasts, the womb, and the receptacle’ (Kaplan, 1990: 66-67). In the zoharic corpus Shekhinah as *orifice* is symbolised by the ‘pavement of sapphire’ which rests below Tif’eret/Yesod (Kaplan, 1990: 36). In short, *Waera* (*Exodus*) III:24a explains that Shekhinah ‘receives from all of them [the upper nine *sefirot*], and ... through their influence can produce nourishment for the whole world’ (see Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff, 1984). Shekhinah, as the rung connected to the earthly realm, is therefore symbolically penetrated by Yesod, the equivalent of the cosmic penis, and receives the divine flow (*Haqdamat Sefer ha-Zohar* 1:12b).

Aside from being influenced by the *sefirot* above her, another prevalent discourse in the zoharic texts is the role of the kabbalist in arousing Shekhinah so that Tif’eret will copulate with her (Hellner-Eshed, 2009: 224; Wolfson, 1997a: 305). Shekhinah is therefore inspired by the earth below through “‘worthy deeds, by prayer and supplication, [and] by fulfilling the commands of Torah’” (*Terumah* 2:147a). In particular, *devekut* is a theologically erotic process through which the religionist can ‘cleave’ to Shekhinah (Sherwin, 2006: 86-87). Indeed, Shekhinah was symbolically close to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (*Hayyei Sarah* 1:133b; *Lekh Lekha* 1:81b) based on the premise, “‘My sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one! (Song of Songs 5:2)’” (*Toledot* 1:140b) vis-à-vis Abraham necessarily claiming Sarah was his ‘sister’ in Genesis 26:7 (Matt 2004b, 18-19 n. 133, 138; 251 n. 373-374; 279 n. 161, 165). Shekhinah was also ‘intimate’ with Joseph and Moses (*Va-Yhi* 1:227b; Matt, 2006: 371 n. 363; *Yitro* 2:69b; Matt, 2007: 386-387 n. 61; see also Patai, 1990: 141). One basis for Shekhinah’s intimacy with Joseph is Song of Songs 8:1: “‘If only you were like a brother to me! – Joseph in relation to *Shekhinah*, with whom he united, to whom he cleaved’” (*Va-Yeshev* 1:184a; Matt, 2006: 122-123 n. 237-238). On “‘Moses, one, as is written: *One* [*Shekhinah*] *is my dove, my perfect one, only one of her mother* [Binah] (Song of Songs 6:9). So Moses was master of the house [‘husband of Shekhinah’], ascending on high’” (*Va-Yetse*

1:152b; Matt, 2004b: 349 n. 238-239). Accordingly, the rising ‘souls of the righteous’ can stimulate Shekhinah without the influence of Tif’eret (Liebes, 1993: 53). Shekhinah, symbolic of virtuousness (*Tazri’a* 3:42b), conceals ‘Herself, like a woman secluded for her husband, not venturing outside the house, as it is said: Your wife like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your house’ (*Lekh Lekha* 1:84b). This is mirrored in sexual relations between the kabbalist and his wife, symbolically Shekhinah (Liebes, 1995: 214), who can drive the intimacy between Malkhut and Tif’eret in the cosmic realm (Biale, 1997: 110; Abrams, 2004: 179-180; Idel, 2005b: 33, 247-250). Even the act of returning to the marital abode for the Sabbath is symbolic of entering Shekhinah (Ginsburg, 1989: 60, 181 n. 43; Matt, 2004a: 165 n. 464). Only by climaxing can Shekhinah become sufficiently aroused to, in turn, ‘arouse the male waters’ (Wolfson, 1997a: 305; idem, 2006: 354). Thus, in *Beshalah* 56b (see Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff, 1984) Shekhinah “‘rises and starts from her place in order to enter the two hundred palaces of the king.’” As she ascends, Shekhinah is consequently able to experience sexual consummation (*Terumah* 2:157a). For the religionist, wellbeing can be found through engaging in marital sex given that Shekhinah will be symbolically present (*Be-Reshit* 1:50a). In turn, nuptial intercourse enables Tif’eret to successfully procreate with Shekhinah (Patai, 1990: 143). Similarly, religionists engaged in Torah study activate symbolic cosmic sexual relations (Merkur, 2014: 228-229). Even the High Priest’s entering of the Temple, where Shekhinah rested prior to its destruction and her exile, was later figured by kabbalists as symbolic of vaginal penetration (Wolfson, 1995: 262; Fishbane, 2005: 157). Likewise, the Holy of Holies came to be understood as emblematic of Shekhinah’s ‘clitoris’ (Wolfson, 1995: 225 n. 152). And in the union of Malkhut and Tif’eret, which helps to bring restoration of the Promised Land, Israel is symbolic of Shekhinah’s ‘vagina’ (Koren, 2011: 73, 204 n. 77). So, as the bottom rung of the *sefirot* Shekhinah absorbs the combined influence of the emanations above and is an access point to the earthly realm (Schäfer, 2000:

226). In the *Bahir Shekhinah* is explained as the ‘stone’ that is ‘thrown to the earth’ and which ‘keeps rising’ (Scholem, 1991: 169-170), while in the zoharic texts the ‘stone’ explains how, in a birth metaphor, the earthly realm and humankind are the product of Shekhinah (Greenstein, 2014: 81).

Shekhinah then, whether through cosmic or earthly influence, aspires to sexually engage with Tiferet/Yesod and to receive the divine flow (Green, 1997b: 157). In the process, Shekhinah will eventually be ‘saturated, fittingly full, filled from all sides’ (*Terumah* 2:135b; Matt, 2009: 254 n. 184-185). These themes are evident throughout *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*. However, in this text Shekhinah warns Keter – *sefirah* ‘Crown’:

‘If You don’t draw me toward You, aspiration and Upper Will shall not rest upon You. For blessings do not inhere in womanless man.’ ... “‘*Draw me after you* [Song of Songs 1:4] to bond with you, absorbing blessings from Supernal Point above you. When we are Male and Female as one, once you take blessing and favour, I and the tip suspended from Me below, *we will run after you* [Song of Songs 1:4]” (ZH 65b).

In this instance Shekhinah demands that she be drawn towards her lover (Hecker, 2016: 398 n. 122), building on the ‘female terms’ applied in the biblical Song of Songs (Green, 2002: 10). As Rachel Adler (1998: 135) notes, the exchanges between the Shulamite and her lover can be interpreted as devoid of ‘sexual domination,’ ‘antipatriarchal,’ and based on mutual ‘sexual subjectivity.’ Equally, the ‘voices do not conform to masculine and feminine stereotypes’ (Falk, 2004: xxiii). Shekhinah’s plea to initiate sexual union in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* is steeped in the longing of the Shulamite:

‘She says, “*Draw me* [Song of Songs 1:4] to be with You, in a single union. *The king has brought me to his chambers* ... – beautifying Me with all kinds of adornments, sublime beauty, so I can be with You. Thus: *Let us delight and rejoice in you* ... – I and all my adornments, when I am with You in a single bond. ... *Let Us recount your caresses* ... – as has been said, Let Us saturate everyone, providing joy from that wine that gives joy to all. Let Us not cease from bringing them joy, since *upright ones love you*, never ceasing to give You since they *love you* [Song of Songs 1:4] – giving to You, spilling into You, illuminating You” (ZH 66d).

In this extract Shekhinah compels Tif'eret to “saturate everyone” with “wine” from Binah (Hecker, 2016: 421-422 n. 180), often figured as ‘upper Shekhinah’ though also as “king” given the necessity of releasing divine fluid (Scholem, 1991: 174-175). Just as Song of Songs is an allegory of the relationship between the Holy One, Blessed be He and the Jewish people (Green, 2006: 219), in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah is the Shulamite: “Thus, *Black am I* (Song of Songs 1:5) – from the side below. *But I am beautiful ...* from the side of totality above” (ZH 69b). Shekhinah relies on the upper *sefirot* for her ‘beauty’ in this instance (Hecker, 2016: 454 n. 271). But in pursuing her lover, Shekhinah takes the initiative and “proclaims that the King should kiss Her” (ZH 64a). In a further twist, three of the upper *sefirot* are dependent on Shekhinah’s “continual praise” for sustenance, so much so that they are forced to seek her out:

‘Up to this point, upper face and lower face are in the mystery of three [Gevurah, Tif'eret, Hesed] – three joined, contained in one another. With one face remaining from the lower chariot, everyone inquires after Her: ... Where is that remaining פן (*pan*), face? The verse responds, saying: Where is it? *On earth* (Ezekiel 1:15), so that those below will not be neglected, even momentarily. That face – when three other all coalesce – takes from them all, embraced by them all. It alone is comprised within them all, caring beneficially for the whole world. This face offers continual praise, stimulating continual arousal toward transcendent ones above Her’ (ZH 63b; Hecker, 2016: 372 n. 59).

The author(s) of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* cannot help but reflect the fact that in Song of Songs it is the Shulamite who is assertive, who searches for the ‘beloved,’ who invites his romance, and who takes control of ‘lovemaking’ (Bloch, 2001: 311-312). In 1:2 it is the Shulamite who pleads: ‘let him kiss me.’ In 4:16 it is the Shulamite who begs: ‘Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat his precious fruits.’ In 5:6 it is the Shulamite who bemoans: ‘I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.’ And in 8:5 it is the Shulamite who ‘under the apple-tree ... awakened thee.’ The Shulamite’s (Shekhinah’s) desire becomes a recurring point of analysis in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, particularly the avowal: ‘I am black, but comely’ (Song of Songs 1:5), which is a product of

working in the fields and, according to Chana Bloch, more of a boast than an apology (Bloch, 2001: 311). The author(s) of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* linked this line to Shekhinah's association with the moon (Liebes, 1993: 49).

In the zoharic texts Shekhinah is the 'moon' that rules the 'night': 'as night enters and the female grasps all, the house is ruled solely by Her – for then the reign belongs to Her, not to the male' (*Be-Reshit* 1:21a). Shekhinah as 'moon' draws on a talmudic text, Chullin 60b, where of 'two great lights,' Shekhinah is the 'lesser' of the binary. This text is frequently used as evidence of Shekhinah's (the moon's) primordial equality with the sun (*Be-Reshit ZH* 14a; Waskow, 1996: 268). *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, like so much of the mystical corpus, analyses these themes, with Shekhinah asking:

*'Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture* (Song of Songs 1:7) – how is it possible for You to conduct [the world] with two crowns at once. ... for moon is unsuited to shine and You cannot conduct [the world] with two crowns at once, with sun and moon – for what light does moon have at midday? Consequently, You cannot use two crowns at once. *Lest I be like one veiled* [Song of Songs 1:7]' (*ZH* 71a).

The response is “go diminish yourself! *If you do not know, O loveliest of women* [Song of Songs 1:8]” (*ZH* 71a). However, Shekhinah persists in questioning her diminishment. Having “ascended upward” giving the slip to “Her troops and all of Her camps,” Shekhinah asks: “why should I be as one veiled [Song of Songs 1:7] ... self-contained, for I cannot spread out on any side at all?” (*ZH* 71a; Hecker, 2016: 478-479 n. 349, 352). Accordingly, “Supernal King” penetrates Shekhinah allowing her to expand “in all directions” (*ZH* 71b). The emphasis here however is not on the sexual activity itself, rather, it is the fact that cosmic union has only taken place at all because “She [Shekhinah] ... ascended upward” and protested (*ZH* 71b). Phyllis Tribble (1976: 232) suggested that there is ‘no female subordination’ in Song of Songs. For Athalya Brenner (2003: 273), based on her reading of Tribble, there is actually ‘female superiority’ in the biblical text. The Shulamite is



able to ‘initiate sexual encounters,’ not dissimilar to Ruth or Tamar (Meredith, 2012: 367; Carr, 2000: 238). In relaying these premises the author(s) of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* explains that Shekhinah can opt to completely detach from, and become imperceptible to, the earthly realm in order to seek connection to Tiferet and the upper *sefirot* (Hecker, 2016: 469 n. 320):

‘All this since She is  $\eta$  (*he*), constituted within Her own unity, ascending upward. She does not need to encompass any other within Her since She, in Her own unification, is an inward point among Her legions. All Her troops long to draw near, into Her midst. But after saying this, She withdrew, concealed from them, delighting above. Once She ascends, Her troops withdraw from Her. ... Upon ascending upward, She says to Her lover, “Tell me, you whom my soul loves, where do you pasture your sleep? Where do you rest them at noon? [Song of Songs 1:7]” (ZH 71b-c).

In seeking out her ‘lover,’ Shekhinah says: “*Black am I [Song of Songs 1:5], from the side below; but beautiful – from the side upon which lower collectivity depends*” (ZH 69b; Hecker, 2016: 470 n. 322). On the other hand, Shekhinah can choose to converse only with her “troops” (‘angels’) and/or Israel below as opposed to her “lovers” (ZH 69c). For Melila Hellner-Eshed (2009: 170) the zoharic texts consistently demonstrate Shekhinah’s longing to be symbolically filled by the nine upper *sefirot*. In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, however, this desire, based on the context of the biblical Song of Songs, becomes active initiation of cosmic intercourse. Indeed, in Song of Songs the Shulamite ‘calls on her lover to do things,’ ‘energetically seeks him,’ and through the text’s allegory her devotion is symbolic of ‘divine love’ (Carr, 2000: 241, 245). Song of Songs 1:2 enshrines the Shulamite’s ‘sexual initiative’: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for your lovemaking ... is better than wine” (Carr, 2000: 240). *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* interprets this line as Shekhinah’s arousing of her lover: “Of all those kisses of love, there are none like those aroused here by Assembly of Israel [Shekhinah]: *Oh, let him kiss me ..., with some of the kisses, of his mouth. ... What She asks for now is for some of those kisses*” (ZH 64b). Song of Songs (8:14) closes with the Shulamite’s plea (Haines, 2016: 132): ‘make haste, my beloved, and be thou

like to a gazelle or to a young hart upon the mountains of spices.’ In this way, the Shulamite ‘speaks openly about her desire’ (Exum, 2011: 25), as Shekhinah does throughout *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*. The analysis of the line, ‘*Black am I, but beautiful* (Song of Songs 1:5)’ (ZH 68d), in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* builds on the ambiguity throughout the zoharic texts in relation to Shekhinah as ‘moon.’ In *Aḥarei Mot* 3:59b, for example, Shekhinah says: “‘*You cannot see me, for I am blackish* (Song of Songs 1:6), *Why am I blackish? Because the sun has scorched me.*” This explanation is frequently repeated, but so is the reasoning that Shekhinah took the initiative in ensuring her necessary diminishment, for example, in *Be-Reshit* 1:20a:

When the moon shared a single cleaving with the sun, she was radiant. As soon as she was separated from the sun and appointed over her forces, she diminished herself, diminished her light. ... The moon said, ‘*Where do you pasture your sheep? Where do you let them rest at noon?* (Song of Songs 1:7). How can a little lamp shine at noon? Lest I be like one enwrapped ... - how can I abide in shame.’ So she diminished herself, becoming head of those below ... The blessed Holy One said to her, ‘Go diminish yourself!’ From that point on, she has light only from the sun. Whereas at first they dwelled as one, later she diminished herself on all her rungs.

The author repeatedly says: ‘she diminished herself,’ with only belated clarification of Tif’eret’s role (Matt, 2004a: 154 n. 363). Similarly, in *Yanuqa* 3:191a Shekhinah’s agency in her own diminishment helps to elaborate on Song of Songs 1:5-6:

‘*Black I am but beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem – like the tents of Kedar, like Solomon’s curtains. Do not look at me for being blackish ...* (Song of Songs 1:5-6). ... However, when She is immersed in great love for Her Beloved, through the pressure of love that She cannot bear, She diminishes herself extremely until nothing is seen of Her but the tiniest single point. ... What do mighty warriors, Her legions do? They roar like mighty lions, ... the Beloved above hears, and He knows that His Beloved is as passionately in love as He is, until none of Her image or beauty can be seen. ... Her dear Beloved emerges from His palace with many gifts and many presents, with fragrances and spices, and comes to Her and finds Her nearly dead, with no image or beauty at all. He approaches Her, embraces Her and kisses Her, until gradually She is revived.’

In this extract Shekhinah opts to diminish herself out of devotion for Tif’eret, only for him to desperately revive her. The moment echoes the Shulamite’s declaration in Song of Songs 8:6 that ‘love is strong as death.’ What these examples reveal is that the authors of the zoharic

texts struggled with interpreting Song of Songs given its emphasis on the sexuality and agency of the Shulamite. Likewise, the authors could never adequately explain how, before and after Shekhinah's diminishment, the 'moon [initially] shared a single cleaving with the sun' (*Be-Reshit* 1:20a), a sort of primordial parity, and how she would eventually be restored when “*The light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun*” (*Va-Yeshev* 1:18b). Indeed, throughout the corpus the authors frequently describe debates over why ‘the moon [Shekhinah] was uneasy with the sun [Tif’eret]’ and extended analyses of the oft repeated question, asked by Shekhinah: “*where do you pasture your sheep? ... (Song of Songs 1:7)*” (*Be-Reshit* 1:20a). This is not to mention the lengthy analysis arising from a question, asked by both ‘Rabbi Shim’on’ (*Terumah* 2:126b) and ‘Rabbi Yehudah’: “*who is this looking forth like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun ...? (Song of Songs 6:10)*” (*Va-Yishlah* 1:170a). The answer is Binah/Shekhinah (Matt, 2009: 184-185 n. 2-3). But clearly the authors were concerned with the fact that in Song of Songs the Shulamite (Shekhinah/‘moon’) is “*bright as the sun*” and therefore potentially equal in *sefirotic* influence to Tif’eret.

In Song of Songs, just like in the zoharic interpretation of the biblical text, ‘female self-assertion,’ the Shulamite’s ‘erotic perspective,’ and her ‘desire’ are central (Burton, 2005: 180). In fact, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah is the “*song*” of Song of Songs:

‘This radiance [Shekhinah] is comprised of two names and crowned with this name: *Adonai*. Then it is  $\text{סר}$  (*sar*), Prince, of all worlds, and all forces and legions of upper and lower realms offer praise – glorifying it, uttering song, exalting above. When this radiance is consummated it is  $\text{שיר}$  (*shir*), Song ... completed by all.  $\text{שיר}$  (*shir*), Song, of Rungs. Chief and Master, appointed over all troops and legions – rungs below’ (*ZH* 61d).

Moreover, just like in Song of Songs, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* the Shulamite (Shekhinah) does not merely linger in the ‘garden’ for her beloved, ‘she herself is the garden’ (Bloch, 2001: 311): “*Garden of Eden! She Herself is Garden of Eden*” (*ZH* 65c). Shekhinah “*inherits them all, Female becomes luminous, producing fruits and greenery, as is written:*

Let the earth sprout vegetation ... It is the force of this point, standing below, that generates fruit and verdure” (ZH 74a). As in Song of Songs, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* the ‘garden’ (Shekhinah) is symbolic of the Shulamite’s ‘sexuality’ (Bloch and Bloch, 1998: 192). Likewise, while the couple meet in the ‘vineyard,’ the Shulamite/Shekhinah is ‘guardian of the vineyards’ (Song of Songs 1:6) and can ascend to be with Tif’eret (Bloch, 2001: 311): “‘They made me guardian of the vineyards ... I am a single point, guarding the other letters that are written with me. And I guard them, for I go into all the letters and they all spread out from me, expanding from my inwardness” (ZH 70b). The ‘vineyard’ symbolises Shekhinah’s femininity (Bloch and Bloch, 1998: 220). In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah’s ascending to be with Tif’eret is explained as a “‘מסע (massa), journey” (ZH 62b). On the one hand Shekhinah’s *massa* is initiated either by “‘the blessed Holy One” (ZH 62b) or “‘by virtue of the voice of Israel” (ZH 62d). On the other, Shekhinah can independently “‘elevate the flux of holy seed, producing fruit and greenery in this world,” even when Israel “‘are not worthy” (ZH 62d), thus initiating her own *massa*. In fact, Shekhinah even “‘veils the light of the Moon” (Song of Songs 4:1, 3) to protect Israel and so that the “‘Sun [Tif’eret] does not approach Her” (ZH 69d; Hecker, 2016: 460 n. 289). In doing so, Shekhinah avows, repeating Song of Songs 1:5: “‘*Black am I, but beautiful*” (ZH 69c). Indeed, Shekhinah “‘ascends, saying to Her Beloved, ‘Draw me [Song of Songs 1:4], stretch out your right hand toward Me, to receive Me.’ ... If You don’t draw me toward You, aspiration and Upper Will [Keter] shall not rest upon You” (ZH 65b; Hecker, 2016: 397-398 n. 122). So, “‘when Female [Shekhinah] longs to be seen by Him, She declares that She has been ornamented at the behest of Mother [Binah]” (ZH 66c; Hecker, 2016: 418 n. 172). In this way Shekhinah is “‘*city of the great King* [Binah]” (ZH 70a). Another explanation of the line, “‘*Black am I, but beautiful*,” is that Shekhinah can ascend as the letter “‘” (Yod),” a “‘single point, with no whiteness” (ZH 69d). This explanation again builds on the confusion

throughout the zoharic corpus. On the one hand, Shekhinah/moon is hidden “in darkness” given Tif’eret, ‘the sun,’ has ‘scorched’ her (*Tazri’a* 3:45b; Matt, 2012: 279-280 n. 72-74). On the other, in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam*, one of the preceding foundational texts of the Zohar (Giller, 2001: 6; Dan, 2007: 32), Shekhinah’s role takes on the twist that the “sun’s light is emanated from the splendor of the speculum above [Shekhinah] and its light is not its own” (*Be-Reshit ZH* 15b; Wolski, 2016: 138 n. 462). Accordingly, “all that is above and below was emanated ... From the Throne of Glory [Shekhinah]” (*Be-Reshit ZH* 15b). Nathan Wolski (2016: 139 n. 463) speculates that the ‘Throne ... may refer to Metatron’, but it can also be read as Shekhinah (Matt, 1983: 36; Scholem, 1995a: 67; Wolfson, 1995: 8), as it is earlier in the text in reference to the “souls of the righteous” and “angels that are formed from the Throne of Glory” (*Be-Reshit ZH* 10a) and in describing “the *Shekhinah* of the blessed Holy One – His Throne of Glory” (*Be-Reshit ZH* 6a). Normally in the zoharic texts the “Throne of Glory” is sat on by ‘the male’ (*Terumah* 2:133a; Matt, 2009: 234 n. 123), but in *Midrash ha-Ne’lam* ‘Rabbi El’azar’ states that the “sun” is actually dependent on Shekhinah (Wolski, 2016: 140-141 n. 467-468):

‘A spring in the garden, a well of living waters, a flowing stream from Lebanon (Song of Songs 4:15). Scripture calls her a spring, afterward a well, afterward a flowing stream. Here one should contemplate! The spring extends from the well, and the well from the flowing stream, and the flowing stream from Lebanon – to convey that they were all emanated ... So it is with the sun. Its light is not its own, but rather one thread of splendor exists, illuminating the sun’ (*Be-Reshit ZH* 15b).

In Song of Songs 4:15 the Shulamite is the ‘fountain,’ ‘well,’ and ‘stream.’ In a similar discussion of 4:15 in the ‘Zohar proper’ (Wolski, 2016: xi), “the well” is identified as “*Shekhinah*,” which considering Shekhinah’s association with the Shulamite seems logical, but in this instance it is clarified that she is “illuminated only when seeing the sun” (*Toledot* 1:136a). In other zoharic texts, this issue is further clouded given Shekhinah’s exile. Despite being “A woman of strength – Assembly of Israel [Shekhinah],” in calling out to Tif’eret,

bemoans: “*I called him, but he did not answer me* (Song of Songs 5:6) – for I am dwelling among other nations” (*Tazri’a* 3:42b). Accordingly, Shekhinah is “*A locked garden, ... a locked fountain, a sealed spring* (Song of Songs 4:12),” yet responsible for Creation (*Ha’azinu* 298a). Clearly, for the author(s) of *Parashat Be-Reshit* (*Midrash Ha-Ne’lam*) Shekhinah’s diminishment was confusing, as is reflected in the outline of a fictional rabbinic debate in *Be-Reshit ZH* 14a: ‘Rabbi Ya’akov says: “the matter is not settled in my heart.” In response, ‘Rabbi Yehudah’ defiantly asks: “Do you wish to overstep your Companions’ words?”’ The root of the heated debate is a question tabled by ‘Rabbi Yitshak’: “What is the meaning of the verse *You are entirely beautiful, my darling; there is no blemish in you* (Song of Songs 4:7)?”’

The difficulty of adequately applying Song of Songs to the *sefirotic* system is evident throughout the *zoharic* texts. In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, linking the Shulamite to Shekhinah means describing the latter as analogous to a corporeal woman:

‘Female proceeds between right and left, receiving these vowel points that give Her perfect knowledge. But they do not settle there in any way – rather, they are overturned within Her, in a lighter fashion. ... It is an eternal verity that a woman’s mind is facile, for the vowel points cannot settle within her to perfect her understanding, as is the case above. Instead, they are inverted within her in a simplified way, so that her comprehension is diminished’ (*ZH* 74a).

This however is problematic for the author(s) given that Shekhinah occupies the decisive rung of the *sefirot*. Thus, entirely contradicting the previous example, in *ZH* 63a, Solomon, the author of Song of Songs according to tradition, can only realise the aim of merging the ten *sefirot* with the interjection of Shekhinah given she is the “witness of unity” (Hecker, 2016: 368-369 n. 48-51):

‘Consequently, all of the praise of Song of Songs goes to the King [Binah] who possesses all peace, producing unification in this place entirely. It takes all desires of all the limbs, all delight, all supernal longing, gathering all within. Therefore, He is called One. King Solomon, in the mystery of Holy Spirit [Shekhinah]: when Holy Spirit settled upon him,

he desired to join everything in complete devotion, fittingly, to unite everything in affection, in the desire that everything shall be one, above and below.’

This example demonstrates that the zoharic texts should not be read as ‘homogenous’ (Idel, 2005b: 129). As Arthur Green notes, the authors, not always successfully, tried to style the texts as if they had been written in the first and second centuries. Moreover, the authors’ determination to convey ‘secret meaning’ means that the fragments and texts of the Zohar are ‘often startlingly different’ (Green, 2004: 64-65). For Gershom Scholem (1995a: 157-59), the zoharic texts are ‘deliberately unsystematic,’ sometimes profoundly insightful, and on occasion ‘torturous’ given the diversity of the authors involved and their inability at times to adequately convey a point. In fact, for Scholem (1990: 55) there are ‘side by side texts that presuppose completely different conceptions of the same subject’ in the mystical corpus. This is compounded by the fact that the zoharic texts are predicated on instilling a sense of ‘mystery’ (Fishbane, 2011: 56). *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* is perhaps paradigmatic of the zoharic corpus in that its contradictions capture the ‘push-me/pull you’ style of Song of Songs and its ‘several voices’ (Merkin, 1994: 25). This means that Shekhinah can still be read in terms of passivity, although at the same time she is an *active* hypostasis:

‘When King Solomon arrived and the Temple was built, what did Scripture say? *Solomon sat upon the throne of YHVH as king* (1 Chronicles 29:23). Then this throne [Shekhinah] was crowned above and below, soaring upward in song. When she ascended in praise, the King extended His right hand toward Her to receive Her. He took Her in, between His arms, speaking words of love, instructing that She be given gifts, largesse, and abundant honor’ (ZH 73a).

In this instance, following the construction of the First Temple, Shekhinah was able to ascend “‘in song’” – Song of Songs (Hecker, 2016: 506 n. 434). In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, Shekhinah, just like the Shulamite, “‘yearns to render praise, to rise up within other radiances, to be encompassed by them; to ascend and see that sublime beauty’” (ZH 62a). Moreover, *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* repeatedly points to the necessity of Shekhinah’s arousal: “‘Just as there is a need for arousal of delight, arousing from this world upward, so is it

necessary to arouse delight and joy from the realm of the Moon [Shekhinah] toward the upper realm” (ZH 62b). But most significantly, Shekhinah’s presence and consent are integral to the *sefirot* given that Yesod, the *sefirah* corresponding to the divine penis, is effectively impotent, “unequipped to produce offspring,” “uncircumcised” and “not perfected,” until Shekhinah identified as “ה (he)” is present (ZH 72c; Hecker, 2016: 496-497 n. 408-411).

Accordingly, returning to the term “Dark-and-Not-Dark” (ZH 61d) seems appropriate given that it symbolises the fact that throughout *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, and indeed the zoharic corpus, Shekhinah is presented through dichotomous, entirely contradictory terms. This is hardly surprising of a collection of ‘disparate’ texts with no ‘clear literary structure’ (Abrams, 2003: lix). Even the individual texts of the zoharic corpus are ‘multivocal’ and ‘polysemic’ (Hellner-Eshed, 2009: 17). Shekhinah is both passive and active; a receptacle and demonstrative of independent agency; like the other *sefirot*, engrossed with desire, but equally capable of withdrawing consent; reliant on Israel, but able to extricate herself from the corporeal world, and dependent on the upper emanations, though capable of ascending according to her own terms. These dichotomous binaries are the product of the authors’ reliance on esoteric anti-rationalist symbolism, imaginative imagery and iconography, deliberately puzzling, incomprehensible lines, and contradictory premises (Green, 1995b: 31-32, 41). This was all to foster a mystical atmosphere whereby even devotees of the *sefirotic* system would not be able to comprehend the mystery behind each *sefirah* and the cosmic path to Ein Sof. David Brodsky (2006: 440) even speculates that the authors of the zoharic texts ‘feared’ Shekhinah’s agency to the extent that they tried to downplay those elements of her sexuality that were considered ‘outside the realm of subjugation.’ These factors are indicative of *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim*, which draws on the erotics of the Song of Songs, as well as the sexuality of the Shulamite, but in the process struggles with Shekhinah’s agency,



initiative, and *sefirotic* interactions with Tiferet. In this way the text constructs a Shekhinah *who is active*, not assimilable into gender norms given the diversity of imagery used to explain her role in the *sefirot*, and who upsets the androcentric and essentializing language inculcated by the authors, who struggled to adapt Song of Songs to the vague conventions of the mystical corpus (Butler, 2000: 82; Giller, 2011: 51). Thus, in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah takes the initiative in a system that at times subjugates her; read in this way, Shekhinah appropriates and de-contextualises the discursive constructions of the authors and resists being formulated into a finite identity (Butler, 2000: 82). This is not to say that Shekhinah is a ‘feminist model’ (Fuchs, 2008: 65). Rather, Shekhinah in *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* can be interpreted as beyond stable identification, limitations, and the androcentric spaces of the zoharic texts (Butler cited/quoted by Hornsby, 2006: 81-83). In *Zohar al Shir ha-Shirim* Shekhinah can be read as resisting ‘normativity,’ constructions of femininity, and the strictures of the biblical and rabbinic traditions. Shekhinah is readable in ways that do not reify misogynist, sexist, and essentializing understandings of her role in the *sefirotic* Godhead, even if the zoharic corpus is androcentric in origin (Hornsby, 2006: 86). Indeed, using J. Cheryl Exum’s (2016: xxiv) terms, Shekhinah can be read beyond the ‘androcentric ideology’ of the authors of the zoharic texts. There is of course no ‘proper way’ to interpret these texts. But, as Exum argues, the ‘reader’ can be paramount in providing ‘a different narrative voice’ and a range of ‘reading strategies,’ not to mention in developing new representational interpretations of Shekhinah.

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