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Returning Her From Exile: Making Teshuva For the Hebrew Goddess

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I was born with an imaginary friend.

I talked to Him as an equal. I felt His power and I knew that so long as He was with me, I would be able to stand tall. When I sang, particularly in Hebrew at my Jewish day school, He hummed through me. I felt Him in the stories I learned – of Adam and Eve, Jacob and Esau, Moses and Miriam. I named my eighteen-pound, alpha-male of a tabby cat, Moses, after His prophet.

In the second grade I transferred schools. I stopped singing the Hebrew prayers, I stopped learning Torah. I was frequently bullied. One night, after a day in the nurse's office warranted by a six hour fit of inconsolable crying, I rolled over in bed. He was gone.

As I grew older I felt Him return, slowly, in periphery. By the time I recognized His presence in my life once again, I understood that our relationship had changed. I was no longer androgynous, as children are. I saw myself in the binary, and He was watching me from the other side of the fence. When I entered into relationships with men I felt Him peering in through the windows, envious of my in-dwelling in this world, the world outside of the ethereal world of imagination, the realm of Him. When I made art, when I wrote, when I sang– I attributed these things to Him. I no longer saw myself as whole without Him.

Only recently has it occurred to me – not through a turn to atheism, but through an act of *teshuva*, of returning– that being incomplete without Him is a recipe for disaster. It occurred to

me, that I need a new imaginary friend, a Divinity that I can see my whole self in. This is when the notion of the Hebrew Goddess entered my life.

By examining the crossover of Jewish mysticism, the Jewish Renewal Movement and Jewish feminism, I will explain that, though Goddess worship is in fact a threat to monotheism, it is not only important for women to see themselves in the Divine, as Jewish men do, but is a necessary step in the fulfillment of the divine promise of the Messianic Era. The worship of the Goddess in her entirety – through earth based practice, prayer, and rewriting midrash – is an act of revelation. Through the study of the Zohar, I will show that, in order to enter the Messianic Era, Goddess worship is necessary. According to Jewish mysticism, it is only when the masculine and feminine come into union that we will be brought out of exile. I claim that we are not ready for this union. For the Goddess is still forgotten, broken, and purposefully concealed. Until she is exalted, no union can be healthy or pure. Simply, now is the time to focus on Her.

For in this age of the dawn of feminism and an oncoming environmental apocalypse, we are teetering on the edge of a Messianic choice – will we continue to ignore women, the marginalized, the exiled, the planet Herself, or will we choose to restore balance before we run out of time?

This essay will begin by examining the pre-Israelite Goddess, Asherah, showing Her evolution into the being of the Shekhinah, and finally the return of both forms of the Divine Feminine through modern Jewish thought and practice.

### **Asherah**

William G. Dever, author of *Did God Have a Wife?* states: “The Hebrew Bible may indeed be revealing, but I shall not regard it as Revelation... It is archaeology, and archaeology

*alone*, that can bring back those anonymous, forgotten folk of antiquity and give them their long-lost voice, allowing them to speak to us of *their* ultimate concerns. We must listen, especially to women, whom patriarchy has rendered largely mute.”<sup>1</sup>

The name Asherah, means ‘happy.’ The Zohar connects the matriarch Leah, who, in the mystical tradition is seen as an image of feminine divinity, to the root *alef-shin-reish*, which translates as ‘happy’ or ‘fortunate.’<sup>2</sup> It is stated in the Torah, that at the birth of Asher, Leah exclaimed, "Happy am I! For the daughters will call me happy: so she called his name ‘Asher’, meaning ‘happy’” (Genesis 30:13).<sup>3</sup>

In the last hundred years, archeologists have uncovered material from the ancient city of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra near the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean), which identifies Asherah as the chief goddess of the Canaanite pantheon. In his 1967 groundbreaking book, *The Hebrew Goddess*, Raphael Patai ascertains that Asherah is “the earliest female deity known to have been worshipped by the Children of Israel.” Asherah figured most prominently as the consort of El, the chief godhead of the Canaanite pantheon. Her full name was “Lady Asherah of the Sea.” She was also referred to simply as “Goddess” and was considered the “Progenitress of the Gods.” All other gods, numbering seventy, were her children – including Baal, Anath, and Mot.<sup>4</sup> As a mother goddess, she was widely worshiped throughout Syria and Palestine. In some sources she was frequently paired with Baal, who often took the place of El. However,

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<sup>1</sup> William G. Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?: Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), x-12.

<sup>2</sup> Jill Hammer, “An Altar of Earth: Reflections on Jews, Goddesses and the Zohar,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, December 11, 2013, <https://rabbijillhammer.com/2013/11/25/an-altar-of-earth-reflections-on-jews-goddesses-and-the-zohar/>.

<sup>3</sup> Harold W. Attridge et al., eds., *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books With Concordance*, New Revised Standard Version (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Raphael Patai, “The Goddess Asherah,” in *The Hebrew Goddess*, Third Enlarged Edition (Detroit, MI: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1967), 36-7.

inscriptions from two locations in southern Palestine seem to indicate that she was also worshiped as the consort of Yahweh.<sup>5</sup>

There are forty references to Asherah in the Bible.<sup>6</sup> “There can be no doubt that down to the very end of the Hebrew monarchy the worship of old Canaanite Gods was an integral part of the religion of the Hebrews.”<sup>7</sup> In her essay “To Her We Shall Return,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, a leading Jewish feminist theologian and co-founder of the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute,<sup>8</sup> explains that, “while the Bible presents the Israelites as monotheists plagued by occasional backsliding toward idolatry, archaeological finds, as well as references in the book of Judges, the book of Kings, Jeremiah, and elsewhere, suggest that many Israelite generations after Abraham lived side by side with goddesses and had little problem with them.”<sup>9</sup> Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb states in her book, *She Who Dwells Within*, that it was common for women and men to make shrines to Asherah. However, these public shrines to Asherah transitioned to the worship of a temple God. Women, however, continued to set up private altars in their homes, expressing their need to connect through everyday, practical symbolism to the feminine Presence. Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb demonstrates that this presence can still be felt today at the Sabbath table, when Jews welcome the Goddess through the ritual symbols of the candles, braided bread, and the image of the Sabbath Queen or Bride.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Asherah,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed May 18, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Asherah-Semitic-goddess>.

<sup>6</sup> Deborah Grenn, “Claiming the Title Kohenet: Examining Goddess Judaism and the Role of the Priestess Through Conversations with Contemporary Spiritual Leaders,” *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary e-Journal*, accessed May 18, 2021, <https://wjudaism.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/3545>.

<sup>7</sup> Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 31.

<sup>8</sup> Jill Hammer, “Rabbi Jill Hammer,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, accessed May 23, 2021, <https://rabbijillhammer.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2009), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells within a Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 9.

So why do so few people know about Asherah? First of all, like all other Gods besides Y-H-W-H, Asherah was carefully “driven out” of the Jewish liturgical faith by prophets, in favor of Y-H-W-H-ism. Rabbi Jill Hammer states that: “In general, the stamping out of Asherah-worship was one of the main concerns of the pure monotheists who established themselves as normative in the days of King Josiah and who are responsible for the composition, according to scholars, of much of the Torah.”<sup>11</sup> However she also explains:

The Goddess has never exactly been driven out, but rather absorbed, swallowed, interwoven with the fabric of the tradition that supposedly rejected her... The Shekhinah is a revision of earlier Goddess images—a revision created by Jews who, having left the Goddess behind, now found they could not do without her. The Zohar knows this and says: ‘The truth is that the *Hei* [the letter of God’s name that represents the feminine Divine] is called Asherah. (Zohar I, 49a)<sup>12</sup>

### **The Shekhinah**

Dr. Daniel Chanan Matt, Kabbalah scholar and professor at the Graduate Theological Union, teaches: “The Goddess may have been expunged from the official religion of biblical and rabbinic Judaism, but She re-emerges as the Shekhinah in medieval Kabbalah.”<sup>13</sup> Jewish feminists have made a practice out of reclaiming this Name and drawing Her to the forefront of their modern Jewish study and ritual. Rabbi Jill Hammer describes the Shekhinah in her own words, she questions:

Where can we find a powerful image of the Divine feminine within Jewish sources? One name for Her which has been with us for centuries is the Shekhinah, the ‘dweller within’... According to the Talmud, the Shekhinah, the Indwelling, is the Divine that resides within the life of the world, dwelling on earth with the Jewish people and going into exile with them when they are exiled. While the traditional Jewish image of the transcendent God is male, in the kabbalah, that image has been accompanied by the feminine image of the Shekhinah—the inner glory of existence.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Jill Hammer, “An Altar of Earth: Reflections on Jews, Goddesses and the Zohar,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, December 11, 2013, <https://rabbijillhammer.com/2013/11/25/an-altar-of-earth-reflections-on-jews-goddesses-and-the-zohar/>.

<sup>12</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” in *New Jewish Feminism: Probing the Past, Forging the Future* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Pub., 2009), 31.

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Chanan Matt, “Beyond the Personal God,” in *God and the Big Bang: Discovering Harmony between Science and Spirituality* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publ, 1996), pp. 51-53.

<sup>14</sup> Jill Hammer, “The Shekhinah,” Tel Shemesh: Celebrating and Creating Earth-Based Traditions in Judaism, accessed May 18, 2021, <http://www.telshemesh.org/shekhinah/>.

According to J. Abelson, author of *The Immanence of God*, the etymology of the word, Shekhinah, comes from the word “Shachan” – “to dwell,” but whenever it is found in Targumic or Talmudic literature it is always in the sense of God’s dwelling house, the abiding of God in a certain place.<sup>15</sup> “By the 3rd century A.D. She is already thought of in some circles as a separate divine entity, even referred to as God’s ‘Holy Spirit.’ But a real ‘doctrine’ of the Shekinah does not develop until the late 13th century A.D. in Spain, when Moses de Leon wrote a mystical work called the Zohar (‘Book of Splendor’), crystallizing no doubt earlier Kabbalistic thought.”<sup>16</sup> The Zohar asks the question: “*If Asherah is the name of the feminine aspect of God, why is it not used as a sacred name?*” (*Zohar* I:49a). Jill Hammer explains, “The Torah wants to tell us that Asherah is the name for the Shekhinah, the feminine Divine presence, already at the altar.”<sup>17</sup> This is a powerful statement. Not only does it show the process of translation and subversion from a physically manifested version of the Goddess to an underground idea, but is an exclamation, a revelation, that deep within the bones of Judaism, there is awareness of the Goddess. She’s been lying there the whole time, and we know her Name.

The Shekhinah is an important figure in the Kabbalah and is often portrayed in erotic terms in her coupling with G-d. In the Zohar, it is believed that The Temple served as the sacred bedchamber of God, the King, and his Bride, the Shekhinah (*Zohar* 1:120b). Other kabbalistic myths express an altercation between God and His Shekhinah, due to the destruction of the temple – the Shekhinah's home in this world. This altercation concluded with the Shekhinah’s decision to abandon her spouse, G-d, and go into exile with her children, the Children of Israel

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<sup>15</sup> J. Abelson, *The Immanence of God: In Rabbinical Literature* (New York, NY: Hermon Press, 1912), 78-8.

<sup>16</sup> Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 301.

<sup>17</sup> Jill Hammer, “An Altar of Earth: Reflections on Jews, Goddesses and the Zohar,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, December 11, 2013, <https://rabbijillhammer.com/2013/11/25/an-altar-of-earth-reflections-on-jews-goddesses-and-the-zohar/>.

(*Zohar* 1:202b-203a).<sup>18</sup> In a way, we *are* the Shekhinah. And in a way, we are responsible for our own exile. For as long as women and the Goddess are marginalized, we betray ourselves, showing the way we hang onto the narrative of a one sided view of God. This narrative is damaging the life that we, as a collective people, live. As Yochanan ben Bag Bag, said of the Torah, ‘Turn it, and turn it, for everything is in it.’ So let us lend the book finally to the hands of women and the marginalized, let us turn it again, and again, and again, until we can touch with our fingertips the body of the Goddess that surely lies buried inside it. Perhaps she is written between the lines. Is this not what we have been practicing for?

Revelation in the Kabbalah and Jewish feminism converge when it comes to the Goddess and the longing for the Messianic Era. Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb states: “God has a female presence... the female presence is in exile. It is not until we redeem Her and bring Her home to rest in us that the entire world will be redeemed.”<sup>19</sup>

This female presence, in the form of the Shekhinah, is further exiled due to the fact that women were excluded from the study of Her. “Everything written about the Shekinah appears to be authored by men.”<sup>20</sup> Jill Hammer follows in this vein of thought, explaining that, “Many Jews use the word *Shekhinah*... Yet Shekhinah, as it is traditionally understood, represents only one experience of Goddess, by one group of male Jewish mystics, at one point in time.”<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that while men feverishly worshipped the Shekhinah in yeshiva, women were at home, likely making shrines to the Goddess. So where does that leave us?

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<sup>18</sup> Howard Schwartz, “Shekhinah, God's Bride,” Encyclopedia.com, May 18, 2021, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/shekhinah-gods-bride>.

<sup>19</sup> “Lynn Gottlieb (1949 - ),” Lynn Gottlieb, accessed May 18, 2021, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/lynn-gottlieb>.

<sup>20</sup> Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within: A Feminist Vision of a Renewed Judaism* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 20.

<sup>21</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” 28.

Knowing this, is it enough for us to worship the Shekhinah or must turn ourselves fully toward the being of Asherah? As Rabbi Julia Watts Belser writes, “Goddess is a being, not a belief.”<sup>22</sup> Is it enough to worship yet another idea? Or is it time to embody ourselves, to see ourselves whole in the Divine?

### **Consoling Pantheism, Polytheism, and Hebrew Monotheism**

Both the Shekhinah and Asherah pose threats to monotheism. “The Rabbis were aware, of course, that the veneration of the Shekinah as a divine entity raised the old specter of polytheism.”<sup>23</sup> However, the Zohar states, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me. This prohibition of other gods does not include the Shekinah,” (Zohar 86a). Jill Hammer, in her essay, “To Her We Shall Return,” differentiates between the ‘God-She’ (Shekhinah) and the ‘Goddess’ (Asherah), with regards to modern Jewish comfort levels in worshipping a non-male God:

There was a time when the concept of the Goddess was off-limits to feminist Jews who defined themselves as part of the established Jewish community. God-She, the Divine Feminine, and Shekhinah were all acceptable options, but the *Goddess* was a pagan term and therefore unavailable to those who wished to remain within Jewish theology and Jewish community... God-she was considered valuable because her female form offered self-esteem and justice to Jewish women, but the Goddess was carefully excluded... while Jewish women wanted equality, feminist theologians did not want to abandon the monotheistic faith of their forebears.<sup>24</sup>

Monotheism is one of the central facets that contributes to Jewish exclusivity. As Jill Hammer asserts, “One last benefit of Goddess theology: it punctures monotheistic self-congratulation.”<sup>25</sup>

Judaism is a religion bestowed with the gift of the ability to change. The Messianic promise itself is in fact a promise of seismic change. If the very soul of Judaism longs for the return of the Divine feminine from exile. Yet, if we long to return from exile, why do we resist this change?

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<sup>22</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” 25.

<sup>23</sup> Dever, *Did God Have a Wife?*, 303.

<sup>24</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” 22.

<sup>25</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” 33.

## Modern Goddess Worship

“The growing number of Goddess followers is partly due to the success of the feminism spirituality movement.”<sup>26</sup> There are numerous organizations dedicated to worshipping and understanding the Hebrew Goddess, notably: Shekhinah Sanctuary, Suppressed Histories Archives, Red Moon Rites of Passage, Tel Shemesh, Shuv Tamid, Kol Ha-Ruach, Mishkan Shekhinah, The Lilith Institute, and The Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute.<sup>27</sup> For the purpose of this essay, I will be focusing on the Kohenet Hebrew Priestess movement, through the work of Rabbi Jill Hammer.

Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute reclaims and innovates embodied, earth-based feminist Judaism. Kohenet’s spiritual leadership training, ordination programs, publications and community offerings center ritual as transformative practice... Kohenet honors the ways in which Shekhinah appears to us through traditions, imaginations, prayers, dreams, ancestors, and role models throughout Jewish history. We celebrate the sacred in the body, the earth and the cosmos.<sup>28</sup>

Earth justice is integral to the Hebrew Priestess movement. Jill Hammer explains that some of the urgency with which these groups have emerged is due to the notion that: “Jews who seek the Goddess are well aware of the political and ecological benefits of incorporating this theology into Jewish life.”<sup>29</sup> Hammer understands that the way we see God is a blueprint for our lives. When we worship the earth like a deity, and not simply a resource to exploit, we may treat our planet differently.

Not only is Goddess worship important in seeing the planet personified, in order to promote respect for Her, but an understanding of the Goddess helps women understand

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<sup>26</sup> Elyse Goldstein and Jill Hammer, “To Her We Shall Return,” 28.

<sup>27</sup> Deborah Grenn, “Claiming the Title Kohenet: Examining Goddess Judaism and the Role of the Priestess Through Conversations With Contemporary Spiritual Leaders”. *Women in Judaism: A Multidisciplinary E-Journal* 5, no. 2 (2008): 2, accessed May 17, 2021, <https://wjudaism.library.utoronto.ca/index.php/wjudaism/article/view/3545>.

<sup>28</sup> “Mission,” Kohenet Hebrew Priestess Institute, accessed May 18, 2021, <https://www.kohenet.com/mission>.

<sup>29</sup> Jill Hammer, “An Altar of Earth: Reflections on Jews, Goddesses and the Zohar,” Rabbi Jill Hammer, December 11, 2013, <https://rabbijillhammer.com/2013/11/25/an-altar-of-earth-reflections-on-jews-goddesses-and-the-zohar/>.

themselves. Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb states: “Just as the Shekinah has been in exile, so Jewish women have been in exile. Our exile, however, has been in the midst of our own culture.”<sup>30</sup> By reconnecting with the Goddess, we bring both Her and ourselves out of exile, in an act of *teshuva*, and revelation.

Deborah Grenn, PhD, founder of *The Lilith Institute*,<sup>31</sup> describes her experience of watching women engage in this form of Goddess worship. She states:

We have seen the effect on women of immersion in women-centered sacred texts, research, history, philosophy, arts and literature, and it is, without question, transformative. I have seen as well the freeing, mind-awakening effects on women of seeing themselves reflected in deity. After all, if we are made in God’s image, what are we to think if there is no “She” there? How are we to feel but invisible?<sup>32</sup>

This understanding and reclaiming of the Goddess is not only essential for women to see themselves embodied in the divine image, but is important for the spiritual health of men, to be able to experience their own femininity. In his book, *The Hebrew Goddess*, Patai describes the typical archetypal images that Jewish men have attributed to the Hebrew God: “King,” “Man of War,” “Master of the Universe,” “Our father in heaven.” Yet he explains: “Comparative religion... teaches us that there is in man an equally great, or possibly even greater need for yet another symbol: that of the divine woman who appears in many different forms throughout the world, yet remains basically the same everywhere.”<sup>33</sup> Without a powerful personification of the feminine divine, and with an overwhelming array of names for the divine masculine, the world undoubtedly remains out of balance. To quote the Reverend, Dr. Martin Luther King: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of

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<sup>30</sup> Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within*, 6.

<sup>31</sup> “About,” The Lilith Institute, accessed May 18, 2021, <http://www.lilithinstitute.com/lilithwp/about/>.

<sup>32</sup> Grenn, “Claiming the Title Kohenet,”

<sup>33</sup> Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess*, 31.

mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”<sup>34</sup> While women remain in exile, so does the soul of every man.

## Conclusion

There must be a place for both men and women, the body and the intellect, the earth and the heavens, and all that which lies in between (but that is another discussion).<sup>35</sup> As Arthur Green states, “*Home is earth*, the mother we abandoned so many centuries ago... *Home is male and female*, the restored harmony of man and woman... There is no wholeness for us humans that leaves aside this most basic of human dualities. As we come home to ourselves each of us will have learned along the way to accept the sexual ‘other’ that lies hidden inside us.”<sup>36</sup>

The Messianic Promise, to all people regardless of their sex and gender, is the consolation of the Divine Lovers, the two becoming one, resulting in the world become whole.

A Kabbalistic prayer spoken before enacting a mitzvah says: “I perform this sacred deed for the sake of the unification of God and His Shekinah.’ This prayer expresses the longing deep in the soul of Jewish tradition for that which is broken to be repaired, for that which is lost to find its way home, and for the grace of Spirit to bring renewing love to wounded hearts... Yet many of the paradigms meant to lead us toward that wholeness are based on sexist gender assumptions... In a time when so many women are trying to experience meaning in their life apart from identification as wife, lover, or mother, we need metaphors other than sacred marriage to lead us toward a whole self.”<sup>37</sup> - Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb

A being cannot become one with another if one is not whole to begin with. It is not enough to return the Goddess to Y-H-W-H as she is – forgotten, bruised, exiled. We first need to care for her. We must seek to understand her, feel her in embodied practice, welcome her into our spaces and homes, look for her in nature, remember her in her entirety. We are not ready for Their union, we are not ready to focus on Them. Now is the time to focus on Her.

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<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther King, *Letter from Birmingham City Jail*, First (Philadelphia, PA: American Friends Service Committee, 1963).

<sup>35</sup> See *The Ein Sof*, in Gershom Scholem, Allan Arkush, and R. J. Werblowsky, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton University Press, 1987), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv39x7c9>.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Green, *Seek My Face, Speak My Name: a Contemporary Jewish Theology* (Northvale, NJ: J. Aronson, 1992), 161.

<sup>37</sup> Lynn Gottlieb, *She Who Dwells Within*, pp. 35-36.

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