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Moshe Idel

**R. Joseph Karo and His Revelations:  
Or the Apotheosis of the Feminine in Safedian Kabbalah**

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**R. JOSEPH KARO AND HIS REVELATIONS:  
OR THE APOTHEOSIS OF THE FEMININE IN SAFEDIAN KABBALAH**

By Moshe Idel\*

**Abstract:**

This study addresses a major topic related to the spiritual life of one of the most influential figures in Jewish culture, the 16<sup>th</sup> century famous Rabbi Joseph Karo, active in Safed. He was described by both contemporary Kabbalists and modern scholars as being visited by an angelic mentor, described as *maggid*, for several decades of his life, and a small part of the reports of those revelations have been printed later on under the title *Maggid Meisharim*. The present study makes the claim that unlike the external descriptions of the angelic power as revealing itself, a series of predominantly feminine divine powers were the source of his revelations, this being part of an apotheosis of the feminine in Safedian Kabbalah.

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\* Max Cooper Professor in Jewish Thought, Department of Jewish Thought at Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and Senior Researcher at the Shalom Hartman Institute, [idel@mscc.huji.ac.il](mailto:idel@mscc.huji.ac.il)

## 1. Introduction

Among the issues that preoccupied the study of Jewish mysticism in the last generation, was the authenticity of the attribution of a long series of revelations that took place over several decades, to R. Joseph ben Ephrayim Karo [1488-1575], the foremost authority in matter of Halakhah in the last half of millennium.<sup>1</sup> Printed under the late, and added, title of *Maggid Mesharim*<sup>2</sup>, the acceptance of their authenticity was a matter of dispute between scholars,<sup>3</sup> but by now it has been settled, in my opinion in a final manner, by the fine monograph of R.J. Zwi Werblowski on Karo.<sup>4</sup> Since then several scholars adopted the authorship of Karo on the content of *Maggid Mesharim* as self-evident, without however examining it again at any length. The gist of Werblowski's claim, as well as of that of the many scholars who followed his lead, including the present author,<sup>5</sup> was that Karo was visited by an angelic power, designated by scholars as

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<sup>1</sup> The secondary literature on R. Joseph Karo's influential literary activity is increasing rapidly, and I shall mention here some few items, in addition to what will be referred below in the footnotes. For discussions relevant for his view of Kabbalah and mysticism see Charles Mopsik, *Sex and the Soul, The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah*, ed. Daniel Abrams, (The Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2005), pp. 41-49, Mordechai Pachter, *Roots of Faith and Devequt, Studies in the History of Kabbalistic Literature* (The Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2004), pp. 265-276, Julien Darmon, *La Loi du secret: La kabbale comme source de halakha chez R. Joseph Caro et les decisionnaires sefarades ulterieurs*, (Ph.D. Diss., Ecole des hautes etudes en sciences sociales, Paris, 2007), Mor Altshuler, "Revealing the Secret of His Wives"—R. Joseph Karo's Concept of Reincarnation and Mystical Conception," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* vol. 31 (2004), pp. 91-104; eadem, "Rabbi Joseph Karo and Sixteenth-Century Messianic Maimonideanism," *The Cultures of Maimonideanism: New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, edited by, James T. Robinson, (Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2009), pp. 191-210, Jonathan Garb, *Manifestations of Power in Jewish Mysticism*, (Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2005), pp. 203-212 (Hebrew), Moshe Hallamish, "Ha-Kabbalah be-Pesikato shel R. Yosef Karo," *Ha-Kabbalah be-Tefillah, ba-Halakhah u-va-Minhag* (Bar-Ilan University Press, Ramat Gan, 2000), pp. 161-179 (Hebrew).

<sup>2</sup> Below I shall use the edition *Maggid Meisharim*, ed. Y.A. Bar Lev, (Petah Tiqwah, 1990) (below = *MM*). The title means the instructions of the Maggid, and it is not the original title but was given by the printers in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. See also below note 60.

<sup>3</sup> Hayyim Duberish Friedberg, *Rabbeinu Yosef Karo*, (Drohobitz, 1896), (Hebrew), Yekutiel Y. Greenwald, *ha-Rav R. Joseph Karo u-Zemano*, (New York, 1954) (Hebrew), H. L. Gordon, *The Maggid of Caro: The Mystic Life of the Eminent Codifier Joseph Caro as Revealed in his Secret Diary* (Pardes Publication House, New York 1949).

<sup>4</sup> See R.J. Zwi Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo, Lawyer and Mystic* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1962). The Hebrew translation of the book, printed more recently, tr. Yair Tzoran (Magnes, Jerusalem, 1996), did not update the book on the topics we are dealing with below. Neither are his chapters written after the completion of his book: "R. Joseph Caro, Solomon Molcho, Don Joseph Nasi," in *Moreshet Sepharad: The Sephardi Legacy*, ed. Haim Beinart, (The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 1992), vol. 2, pp. 179-190, and "The Safed Revival and its Aftermath," *Jewish Spirituality* ed. Arthur Green, II (Crossroad, New York, 1987), pp. 7-33, adding new material or insights.

<sup>5</sup> See M. Idel, "Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*: a Chapter in the History of Spanish Kabbalah," *Sefunot*, vol. 17, (1983), pp. 213, 219-226, (Hebrew), idem, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish*

Maggid,<sup>6</sup> who revealed to him some matters of Kabbalah, and rebukes or admonishes him on several issues related to his behavior.<sup>7</sup> In the last years I expressed however, my reticence from this unqualified centrality of the category of Maggid, as essential for understanding Karo's approach.<sup>8</sup>

Werblowsky argued that "There is thus sufficient evidence to show that Karo had a Maggid both in Europe...and in Safed."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this widely accepted claim as to the centrality of the concept of Maggid in the general economy of the mystical diary is far from being self-evident from most of the discussions of Karo himself. The power that reveals itself refers in those first-person revelations to a series of terms, like 'Em, mother, *Shekhinah*, namely divine presence, *Mishnah*, namely the earliest Rabbinic corpus as personalized, *Matronita*, the supernal Matron, *Neshamah*, soul, all terms that in Hebrew are grammatically, and some of them also conceptually, speaking feminine. The supernal power speaking from the throat of Karo often times identifies those terms with each other, as we shall see in some of the quotes to be

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*Mysticism* (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2005), pp. 197, 219, and *Kabbalah & Eros*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2005), pp. 177, 227.

<sup>6</sup> On this term see Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 265-266, Shlomo Pines, "Le *Sefer ha-Tamar* et les *Maggidim* des Kabbalists," *Hommage a Georges Vajda*, eds. G. Nahon et Ch. Touati, (Peeters, Louvain, 1980), pp. 333-363, and Mor Altshuler, "Prophecy and Maggidism in the Life and Writings of R. Joseph Karo," *Frankfurter Judaistische Beiträge* vol. 33 (2006), p. 83.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, (Dorset, New York, 1974), p. 72, Pachter, *Roots of Faith*, pp. 265-266, 267 n. 119, 271 etc., Meir Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri: Maran Rabbi Yosef Karo* (Assufot, Jerusalem, 1991), pp. 391-412 (Hebrew), Altshuler, "Prophecy and Maggidism in the life and Writings of R. Joseph Karo," pp. 81-110, Rachel Elior, "R. Joseph Karo and R. Israel Ba'al Shem Tov: Mystical Metamorphosis, Kabbalistic Inspiration and Spiritual Internalization," *Tarbiz*, vol. 65 (1996), pp. 671-709 (Hebrew), Lawrence Fine, "Maggidic Revelation in the Teachings of Isaac Luria," *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honour of A. Altmann*, eds. J. Reinharz and D. Swetschinki, (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 1982), pp. 141-157, Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square, Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1995), p. 138 note 118, and more recently Eitan P. Fishbane, "A Chariot for the *Shekhinah*: Identity and the Ideal Life in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah," *Journal of Religious Ethics* vol. 37 (2009), p. 388, and Amos Goldreich, *Automatic Writings in Zoharic Literature and Modernism* (The Cherub, Los Angeles, 2010), e.g., pp. 11 n. 4, 14 n. 16, 115 n. 14 (Hebrew).

<sup>8</sup> See my different view on the topic, to be elaborated here in more detail, that has been expressed succinctly in my *Nocturnal Kabbalists*, tr. N. Ratzkovsky (Carmel, Jerusalem, 2006), pp. 72-73 n. 152 (Hebrew) and "The Wives and Children of R. Joseph Karo from an Historiosophical Perspective: On a Unknown [?] Passage of R. Joseph Karo and its Significance," *Shalem*, vol. 8 (2008), p. 127 n. 4 (Hebrew), idem, "Jewish Mysticism Among the Jews of Arab/Moslem Lands," *The Journal for the Study of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jewry*, (February, 2007), p. 33 note 46 and *The Angelic World: Apotheosis and Theophany* (Yediyot Aharonot, Tel Aviv, 2008), pp. 11-12 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> *Joseph Karo*, p. 21. See also *ibidem*, p. 23.

translated below. In other cases the terms like *ha-mal'akh ha-go'el*, the redeeming angel, *qol*, voice, and *dibbur*, speech, as well as the resort to masculine form of the verbs expressing revelations, occur. The term *maggid* occurs indeed in many of the testimonies of other Kabbalists, some who were acquainted with Karo and reported his experiences, and this resort had indeed a deep impact on the manner in which modern scholars described Karo's experiences. In my opinion the Kabbalists' resort to the term *maggid* represents some form of value judgment as to the nature of the power that revealed itself to the venerable figure. On the other hand, incomparably more numerous references to the feminine nature of the source of his revelations, are found in Karo's diary, and they reflect an impact on his experiences of earlier Kabbalistic source, some of which passed unnoticed by scholars. Moreover, this ascent of the feminine should be seen as part of a broader process that I call the apotheosis of the feminine, which started much earlier but reached its apex in Safedian Kabbalah in mid-16<sup>th</sup> century.

This preponderance of the feminine depictions of the revealing power, is part of a wider range of revealing powers, and my assumption is that we shall better speaking about a series of supernal powers revealing themselves to the Kabbalist, which may be arranged hierarchically. Below we shall examine some aspects of these processes, each of which deserves separate and more elaborated analyses.

## 2. *On Joseph Karo's Kabbalistic Backgrounds*

In order to understand Karo's Kabbalistic thought we should take in consideration the entire range of Kabbalistic literature as potential background for his development. There can be no doubt that Kabbalah as it emerged and developed in Spain is one of the major sources of many of the Kabbalistic elements in his diary, especially the book of the Zohar. From this point of view, Karo was not only of a distinguished author of Spanish extraction but also a follower of the major development in Spanish Kabbalah, and the Aramaic language he adopted in order to

convey the messages amply illustrates this point. In principle, he could have been influenced also by Italian Kabbalah, though I could not detect such a substantial influence.<sup>10</sup>

However, as a more mature person, R. Joseph Karo was active in the area of today's Greece, and in Safed – then both considered part of the Ottoman Empire. By the time Karo arrived there as an infant from Spain, the former Byzantine area had an already substantial history as a distinct center of Kabbalah, different from both the Spanish and the Italian ones.<sup>11</sup> The prophetic works of Abulafia were known in the Byzantine Empire – the first of them was actually composed in Patros,<sup>12</sup> – and it is very likely that the last of the Kabbalists belonging to the circle of the Kabbalistic literature known as *Sefer ha-Meshiv* reached the Ottoman Empire and there composed their works.<sup>13</sup> This demonstrates that of all the centers of Jewish learning that existed, it was in the area considered Greece today that kabbalistic works of a revelatory-visionary nature were more prevalent than anywhere else in the world. Works of a pseudo-epigraphic nature were composed in the Byzantine Empire during the period approximately between 1350 until the beginning of the fifteenth century, for example *Sefer ha-Temunah*, *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah* and the *Sefer ha-Qanah*.<sup>14</sup> The two latter works were penned by the same author, who claims time and time again, of experiencing heavenly revelations, though this is hardly confirmed by his copying whole books from a variety of Kabbalistic schools. It is striking that in all three of these works there is a great interest taken in particular formulations of Kabbalistic theories that although they might have originated in Spain, were not prominent in Spanish Kabbalistic thought. My point concerns certain perceptions on *gilgul* as well as the cosmic cycles. That these issues were incorporated into these three aforementioned works contributed to

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<sup>10</sup> Compare, however, to Altshuler, "Revealing the Secret of his Wives", pp. 91-93, who opts for a vision of Karo as a Renaissance figure.

<sup>11</sup> See M. Idel, "Kabbalah in Byzantium: A Preliminary Inquiry," *Kabbalah*, vol. 18 (2008), pp. 197-227 (Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 199-208.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 221-223. For parallels between the Kabbalistic literature belonging to *Sefer ha-Meshiv* and Karo see Idel, "Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 213, 216, 217, 219-220, 222, 223, 225-226.

<sup>14</sup> For the location and datation of these two books see Michal Kushnir-Oron, *The Sefer Ha-Peli'ah and the Sefer Ha-Kanah, Their Kabbalistic Principles, Social and Religious Criticism and Literary Composition*, (Ph. D. Thesis presented to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1980) (Hebrew) and Israel Ta-Shma, "Where Have the Books Kanah and Peliyah been Composed?" *Sefer Jacob Katz*, (1980), pp. 56-63 (Hebrew). See also Michal Oron, "The Introduction to Sefer ha-Peliyah" *Qovetz al-Yad Jubilee Volume*, II (1989), pp. 273-295 (Hebrew).

their acceptance within the general economy of Kabbalistic thought, so much so that even Spanish Kabbalists with conservative leanings like R. Me'ir ibn Gabbai, the anonymous author of the book *Galliya Raza'*, R. David ben Avi Zimrah and to a certain extent, even R. Joseph Karo in his book entitled *Maggid Mesharim* – all accepted these theories in one way or another. The *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah* is replete with Abulafian material, most of which can be identified in the extant writings of the ecstatic Kabbalist, including copying of an almost complete version of his book entitled *Sefer Gan Na'ul*.<sup>15</sup>

Logically, we can assume that any Kabbalist, who lived in this area during the twenties and the thirties of the sixteenth century, could read and adopt most of the kabbalistic revelatory-visionary literature mentioned above. In any event, R. Shlomo Alqabetz was acquainted with Abulafia's Kabbalah and quotes his *Sefer Hayyei ha-'Olam ha-Ba'*,<sup>16</sup> while his contemporaries, R. Joseph Karo, and later on in Safed also R. Moshe Cordovero, and R. 'Ovadia Hamon, were aware of some of ideas originating in the circle of the *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.<sup>17</sup> In the same area that Alqabetz and R. Joseph Karo, lived, sometime close to the middle of the sixteenth century, another work was being written by a mid-16<sup>th</sup> century anonymous Kabbalist - *Sefer Galia' Raza'* - which also exhibits traces of the visionary elements present in the *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, combines Hebrew with Aramaic, and essentially continues a pre-expulsion Spanish kabbalistic tradition.<sup>18</sup>

There can be no doubt that an analysis of the extant parts of Karo's *Maggid Meisharim*, a diary based on Karo's revelations, which he first experienced while an inhabitant of the Ottoman Empire, will disclose that his revelations are closer in kind to those of the *Sefer ha-Meshiv* than to those of Abulafia. This is recognizable, first and foremost, in his use of language and recurring imagery, as well as by his basic kabbalistic perceptions. For example, the *Sefer ha-Meshiv* as far as it could, closely followed the Zoharic literary style and adopted its characteristic mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. This admixture of languages is non-existent in Abulafia's

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<sup>15</sup> See Kushnir-Oron, *The Sefer Ha-Peli'ah*, pp. 76-79.

<sup>16</sup> See *Sefer Berit ha-Levi*, (Lemberg, 1863), fol. 14cd.

<sup>17</sup> Idel, "Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 193-196, 240-241.

<sup>18</sup> See the introduction of Rachel Elior to her edition of the unpublished section of the *Sefer Galia Raza'*, (The Institute of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1981), pp.1-16 (Hebrew).



writings but does play an important role in the *Sefer Maggid Meisharim*. In addition, the magical tendencies, so characteristic of the *Sefer ha-Meshiv*, primarily its information concerning techniques used to inspire visions, reverberated in Karo's work.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, Karo's choice of techniques for attaining revelations of the Mishnah is different from those advanced by either of the schools of revelatory Kabbalah, at least in one respect.<sup>20</sup> While both Abulafia and the *Sefer ha-Meshiv* utilize Holy Names in order to achieve their visions, what I have called anomian techniques, Karo in contradistinction mostly uses nomian techniques – techniques that are appropriate within the framework of Jewish law or *Halakhah* – in his case the repetitious recitation of chapters of the Mishnah. This constitutes a fundamental distinction, and we can assume that it reflects important socio-cultural differences between these Kabbalists. Abulafia belonged to the strata of society that could be deemed the secondary-elite, someone who was a cultured Jew but who did not occupy any formal position within the Jewish community. He was not an important legalist, nor a communal leader, nor was he a functionary within a royal court, namely a court Jew. This seems also to be the case concerning the anonymous authors of the circle of the *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.

In contrast, there can be no doubt that such a personage as R. Joseph Karo belonged to the first-elite of Jewish society. During his lifetime Karo enjoyed the status of a major religious figure in the Greek areas of the Ottoman empire and then in Safed, as well as throughout the Diaspora toward the end of his life, and even posthumously he retains special status in the annals of Jewish law, his authoritative rulings having sustained generations of observant Jews. Karo's adherence to the recitation of the Mishnah as a mystical technique reflects, in my opinion, the fact that he functioned within a wide consensus of Jewish society. Beyond this fundamental distinction we must stress the element common to these diverse techniques: they are all special types of inducements for attaining divine revelations. They are all short triggers, designed to work quickly and have an almost perfect success rate – if the conditions needed to perform the

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<sup>19</sup> See Idel, "Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 201-226.

<sup>20</sup> See Lawrence Fine, "Recitation of Mishnah as a Vehicle for Mystical Inspiration: A Contemplative Technique Taught by Hayyim Vital," *REJ*, vol. 141 (1982), pp. 183-199, Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 38-83, Elior, "R. Joseph Karo," pp. 678-680, 692-693. See also Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 167-168.

technique have been perfectly met. From this vantage point, the recitation of the Mishnah, albeit a nomian technique, is to be distinguished from the daily practice of Jewish law, because one's performance of the Jewish ritual are not meant to achieve an immediate revelatory result. As such, we can include Karo within the category of revelatory-visionary kabbalistic authors, since he used some few techniques meant to induce these experiences and they were of the quick and "easy" type. Moreover, in his diary, the impact of the view of R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi as to the ascent and descent of all beings on the cosmic ladder is evident, a view that is known – beside his writings - in the Byzantine Kabbalah<sup>21</sup> and on the other side, the interest in views concerning cosmic cycles and metempsychosis, are combined in a manner reminiscent of Byzantine Kabbalah.<sup>22</sup> In short, Karo was both a Spanish Kabbalist and a Byzantine one, and this fact is reflected also in the feminine imagery that he put in the mouth of the feminine power revealing to him for many decades.<sup>23</sup> Such a phenomenon of mixture of two types of Kabbalah is obvious also in the Kabbalah of R. David ibn Avi Zimra, another major Spanish expellee, who was also a Kabbalist and a Halakhic authority. Also R. Shlomo Alqabetz, is well acquainted with both Spanish and Byzantine forms of Kabbalah, as it is the case with another major Spanish Kabbalist, R. Meir ibn Gabbai. This is the case also of an anonymous Spanish Kabbalist who arrived to the Ottoman Empire, after been acquainted with, or even part of the circle of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.<sup>24</sup> Though hardly a social group those Kabbalists testify to the existence of a more complex phenomenon, of interaction between the Spanish Kabbalah, formative for their systems, and new ideas marginal or absent in that Kabbalah, they found in the Kabbalah of the former Byzantine Empire. Karo's Kabbalah should, at least in principle, understood also in this complex context.

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<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., *MM*, pp. 10-11. On R. Joseph Ashkenazi's view, which influenced the books *Qanah* and *Peliy'ah* see Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, tr. Joachim Neugroschel, (Schocken Books, New York, 1991), pp. 227-228 and for its impact in late 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy see Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth, Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah* (Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2009), pp. 18-21, 187, 193-194, 216-219, 279-280.

<sup>22</sup> See, e.g., pp. 273-274, 304-308. See the texts discussed in Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 246-247.

<sup>23</sup> For the view of Karo as taking in account both the Sephardi and Ashkenazi traditions in matters of Halakhah see Israel M. Ta-Shma, "Rabbi Joseph Karo: Between Spain and Germany," *Tarbiz*, vol. 59 (1990), pp. 153-170 (Hebrew).

<sup>24</sup> See . Idel, "Kabbalah in Byzantium," p. 225.

### 3. *The Motherly-Revelations and Their Source*

Revelations of feminine powers in the context of Kabbalistic topics are known since late 13<sup>th</sup> century. This is the case in the book of the *Zohar*,<sup>25</sup> in *Sefer ha-Qanah*<sup>26</sup>, and later on in R. Asher Lemlein of Reutlingen's vision of the hypostatic prayer.<sup>27</sup> This is also the case in Karo's diary, though he is much more insistent on this issue and the revelations stemming from feminine powers lasted for some decades. In several instances, the power revealing itself to Karo identifies itself as an "admonishing Mother."<sup>28</sup> So, for example, we read in one case:

Indeed I am the *Mishnah* speaking from your mouth, I am the mother that admonishes her sons, I am embracing you and you should adhere to me always, so that my splendor will be upon you and your splendor upon me etc. I shall elevate you to be a minister and chancellor on the entire diaspora of Israel in the kingdom of Arabistan, since you have dedicate yourself to cause the return of the ordination [*semikhah*] to its former glory, you will merit to be ordained by all the sages of the land of Israel and by the

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<sup>25</sup> See *Zohar*, II, fol. 99b. This story has enjoyed a variety of interpretations in modern scholarship. See, e.g., Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics," in ed. Michael Fishbane, *Midrashic Imagination* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1993), pp. 155-203, Daniel Abrams, "Knowing the Maiden Without Eyes: Reading the Sexual Reconstruction of the Jewish Mystic in a Zoharic Parable," *Daat*, vol. 50-52 (2003), pp. lix-lxxxiii, Shifra Asulin, *The Mystical Commentary of the Song of Songs in the Zohar and its Background* (Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2006) (Hebrew), Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 227-229, Wilhelm Bacher, "L'exegese biblique dans le Zohar," *REJ*, vol. 22 (1891), pp. 36-38; Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, (Schocken Books, New York, 1969), pp. 55-56; Frank Talmage, "Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism," in ed. Arthur Green, *Jewish Spirituality* (Crossroad, New York, 1986), vol. 1 pp. 316-317; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar, An Anthology of Texts*, tr. D. Goldstein, (Littman Library, London, Washington, 1991) vol. 3, pp. 1084-1085; Stephen D. Benin, *The Footprints of God, Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1993), pp. 168-169, M. Idel, *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (Yale University Press, Los Angeles, 2002), pp. 304-305, and, as to the later reverberations of the parable, Fischel Lachover, *'Al Gevul ha-Yashan ve-ha-Hadash* (Bialik Press, Jerusalem, 1951), pp. 38-51 (Hebrew) and for Hasidic discussions influenced by the Zoharic parable of the maiden, or at least in its vein, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (SUNY Press, Albany, 1995), pp. 23-25, and Oded Yisraeli, *The Interpretation of Secrets and the Secret of Interpretation*, (The Cherub Press, Los Angeles, 2005), pp. 207, 240-241 (Hebrew). According to Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature* (The Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2004), p. 43 (Hebrew), the maiden represents a supernal feminine entity, who may be described in terms related to the last *sefirah*.

<sup>26</sup> This issue will be discussed immediately below in this section.

<sup>27</sup> See M. Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1998), pp. 140-142.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g., *MM*, pp. 10, 91, 115, 211, 361.

sages abroad, and by you I shall return ordination to its former glory and I shall cause that you will finish your book.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure: this is not the personal mother of Karo, but the communal one, reminiscent of a long development that started already in the Bible, and continued in some Midrashim and reaching one of its most important expressions in the book of the Zohar.<sup>30</sup> Here, however, the qualification of the Mother is quite specific: she admonishes the sons. Such a task is attributed to the theme of the mother in the Byzantine *Sefer ha-Qanah*:

My son, you have seen the bad custom<sup>31</sup> performed by the sons of exile: it does not suffice that they eat like a lion, and use oil like a bear, but they are not ashamed to cause us by wandering their bad deeds, and cause the Holy One, blessed be he, to admonish them, since the mother is admonishing the sons, and they are those who have angered not others.<sup>32</sup>

This is a reverberation of the mythologoumenon of the mother, rather than the father, as responsible for the education of the sons and thus as admonishing them, as it is found in a series of Kabbalistic texts. However, the context is of certain importance. Unlike the classical Kabbalistic discussions of the religious sins of the sons, as generating certain alienation between the divine mother and the divine father, here we are told that customs, like eating and resorting to oil, perhaps in an exaggerated manner, are conceived of as inducing the same result like the sins. In other words, the emphasis moved from religious sins, as understood in Rabbinic literature, to modes of behavior that indulge in what is perceived of as excesses, which however do not conflict with the Halakhic behavior. In other words, the admonishing mother is worried now with the betrayal of a certain more ascetic type of behavior, an indulgence that is envisioned as constituting a sin. This tendency is obvious also in Karo's *Maggid Meisharim*, and represents a

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<sup>29</sup> See *MM*, p. 211. See also Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 126. It should be stressed that here we have not only a hypostatic vision of the feminine power but also a sexualized description of the encounter between the Kabbalist and the source of revelation. Compare to the more reticent attitude to this issue in Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 268.

<sup>30</sup> See Idel, *Eros & Kabbalah*, pp. 137-142.

<sup>31</sup> *Minhag ha-ra'*.

<sup>32</sup> *Sefer ha-Qanah*, Berakhot Qeryiat Shema', (Jerusalem, 1998), p. 55. The book *Qanah* has been mentioned explicitly in *MM*, p. 101, though it is plausible that he refers to *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*, a book mentioned twice in Karo's *Shulhan 'Arukh*.

major theme in the mother's admonishing of Karo, and one of the traces of Byzantine Kabbalah in Karo's diary.

I assume that it is the feminine power that recommends, time and again, a total concentration on the power revealing to Karo, almost a form of jealousy:

My son, cleave to me and do not separate from me even for one minute, since I, the mother, return to you etc., and you should direct [your thought] as if the Tetragrammaton is written with black ink as against your eyes on a parchment and you should think as if your modest father stands in front of you, and you should be ashamed to separate your thought from me even for one minute, and to enjoy this world etc., and you should be in peace<sup>33 34</sup>.

This technique of concentrating on the Tetragrammaton recurs in Karo's diary<sup>35</sup> and it constitutes a practical recommendation how to achieve a permanent consciousness of the divine, which is depicted as constituted by both a masculine and feminine powers, again a form of nomian technique:

Regard yourself as standing before the King, King of kings, the Holy One blessed be He, whose Shekhinah hovers over you and continuously accompanies you. Accordingly, be wary of taking pleasure in eating, drinking, or sexual relations, as I have taught you; such pleasures should be repugnant to you and you should not crave them.<sup>36</sup>

It is important to point out that the *Shekhinah* is depicted as hovering over the body, though she is also speaking from his mouth. The dwelling of the divinity is requiring therefore a pure body, which should not be defiled by immersion in corporeal acts. However, those acts in themselves are not condemned but rather what Karo conceived of as an exaggeration, and the pursuit of pleasure while performing the permitted acts. This is the reason why I prefer not to refer to Karo's views as ascetic but as austere or sober. This does not mean that Karo did not

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<sup>33</sup> This is the formula for the end of the speech, that occurs in many cases in *MM*.

<sup>34</sup> This passage is not found in *MM*, but in the Jerusalem edition, 1960, p. 89.

<sup>35</sup> For a similar praxis see also *MM*, pp. 91, 211.

<sup>36</sup> See *MM*, p. 138.

practice ascetic forms of life from time to time, but as a general approach, it seems to me that a description of his instructions as sober, would be more appropriate. After all, marrying three or perhaps five times is not the best way to practice sexual asceticism, not to speak about begetting several children. Here it is not the place to enter in a more detailed analysis of this issue and of Karo's attitude to the body as the image of God in *Maggid Meisharim*. Let me turn to another passage articulated in Karo's mouth by a feminine figure, the Mishnah:

You should cleave to me and to my awe<sup>37</sup>, and to my Mishnayyot, and should not separate your thoughts even for a minute, since I am the Mishnah that speaks within your mouth, I am the mother who admonish her sons, strengthen yourself and cleave to me, since I and all my retinue surround you and you are amidst us as a 'king in his army,' and would your eye been capable to see, the eye would see to all the sides the entire army, some of which were created out of the vapor of your mouth when you are preoccupied with the Mishnah<sup>38</sup>, and they are dwelling around you and they embrace all my armies, and you are amidst them like 'a king in the army'<sup>39</sup>, and all declare saying: 'Give glory to the holy image of the king'... This is the reason, my son, that you should be careful for your soul on your way [of behavior], so that you will cleave always to me, and should not separate your thought from me even for one minute, and I shall cause your ascent to sublime degrees. And if you will dedicate special times for [the study of] the wisdom of Kabbalah, I shall open your heart to it, so that you will understand concealed secrets that no one understood them for many years.<sup>40</sup>

Thus we have in the final part of the passage an example of the disclosure of Kabbalistic secrets to an accomplished Jewish figure, by a feminine divine power, as it is the case already in the book of the *Zohar*. However, there is more than teaching or revealing secrets, as we have here an imagery of two camps, Karo's and that of the feminine power, whose main protagonists are found in the center of circles that nevertheless intermingle. As we shall see below, it is possible that the reciprocal surrounding refer to a more intimate experience, despite the resort to the imae of the mother.

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<sup>37</sup> Cleaving to the divine awe, *Yir'ah*, occurs in many instances in *MM*.

<sup>38</sup> This clarification means that the energy generated by recitation was not necessarily reified as an entity that reveals itself.

<sup>39</sup> Cf., Job 29:25.

<sup>40</sup> *MM*, p. 133.

#### 4. *Mishnah-Study and Mishnah-Appearance*

The Mishnah is not only a canonical book but also which has been intensely studied and commented in the Middle Ages. However, in the 16th century, we witness a new mode of approach to this classical text: it was recited not only studied, and in the cases of some major figures in Jewish culture, like Karo and Hayyim Vital, it turned into a technique for acquiring a revelation, stemming from an entity some Kabbalists called *maggid*, while Karo describes it much more as stemming, as is my claim here, from the *Shekhinah* or the Mishnah. Since this topic has been studied by scholars, let me adduce only some few passages to this effect. Let me emphasize the obvious: those recitations of the Mishnah were scarcely done for the sake of memorizing the canonical texts: the authors doing it were accomplished masters in interpretive literatures on this text which much more complex and at least Karo contributed vast literary texts which demonstrate mastering the content of the Mishnah. Thus, recurrent recitations were not intended to keep fresh in memory its content. They are coming closer to a sacramental praxis, though this type of explanation does not, in my opinion, exhaust its aims. This is a praxis intended to induce an automatic type of speech. To what extent such an approach to revelation either in public or in private did not disturb Jewish authorities we learn from an interesting document. In a text found in the approbation of the Jerusalem rabbinate to the printing of Karo's *Maggid Meisharim* it is said:

“And the Lord was with Joseph, [namely Joseph Karo] and he was a prosperous man”<sup>41</sup>  
reading and studying the six orders of the Mishnah, so that the spirit of the Lord moved within him, and he heard the voice speaking through the [the means of] the Mishnah itself...“But thou, blessed of the Lord, hast helped me and comforted me by the melody of your voice with which you recite and study the Mishnah.”<sup>42</sup>

No doubt this technique may be described as a short trigger, as the revelation may take place after the recitation of two, or five chapters, namely relatively short recitations. This affinity between the technique and the identity of the power, which appears as continuous with the

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<sup>41</sup> Genesis 34:2.

<sup>42</sup> Translated by Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 18-19. See also *ibidem*, pp. 109, 111, 267.

technique is quite evident in many other instances in Karo's book. What seems to be interesting is the feeling that the recited Mishnayyot possess some form of ontological status, and the reciter may adhere to them.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the Mishnah is speaking through the mouth of Karo.<sup>44</sup> In psychological terms we may assume a mechanism by which the oral activity overtakes the consciousness of the recitator, possesses it, and communicate by its means. It should be mentioned that the emphasis in several cases is not on the mental absorptions of the content but on recitation, thus giving to human voice a special status, both as part of the technique and part of the process of revelation. In the case of Karo, this achievement was due less to magical recipes - resort to divine names - but to quite nomian techniques, the recitation of the Mishnah. To be sure: I do not assume that Karo did not use magical recipes, in order to enhance his spiritual capacity, or for exorcism<sup>45</sup>, but I assume that for the sake of attaining the revelation of the supernal power he resorted mainly to the repetition of the Mishnah-chapters. May this resort to the Mishnah as technique has something to do with the resort of R. Yehudah the Prince to the garment, according to a passage from *Sefer ha-Meshiv*?<sup>46</sup> As pointed out by Werblowsky, this visionary apparition of a text, which has been studied previously by the same person, is not new with Karo but has some few earlier sources.<sup>47</sup>

While in the case of the identifications of supernal orders with linguistic entities creates a consonance and a resonance between the human and the divine planes, in the case of *Sefer ha-Meshiv* and the various Safedian Kabbalists' resort to the concept of Maggid the consonance is between the human individual activity and its personification. The latter Kabbalists were aware that their techniques participate much less in a collective enterprise, and they look for more personal type of contacts with an entity that is specific for them. Those created entities are sometimes related to the divine realm, as it is the case of Karo's revealing power which was identified also with the *Shekhinah*, though their common ontological status is that of a

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<sup>43</sup> *Joseph Karo*, pp. 159, 261.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 267-268, 276.

<sup>45</sup> See Idel, "Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 226, 262.

<sup>46</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 239-241.

<sup>47</sup> *Joseph Karo*, pp. 275-277.



personalized mesocosm. This consonance can be taken one step further: when the studied text is referred by a term which is, grammatically speaking, feminine, it is identified with feminine hypostases, and shape them, and is shaped by them because of such identification.

##### 5. *R. Joseph Karo and the Multiple Sources of Revelation*

Let me turn to another important Safedian instance of a close relation between a feminine power and Kabbalistic issues. In the case of the revelations received by eminent legalistic figure R. Joseph Karo, feminine entities - known basically as the "admonishing mother," the *Matronita'*, or the *Mishnah* - are the dominant factors in his spiritual life, as we learn from his diary. All those entities are designated by terms which are grammatically speaking feminine, and perceived conceptually to be so. In those revelations, they express a major desire of the power that reveals "herself", namely, that Karo should continuously concentrate his thought on feminine entities like *Torah*, *Mishnah*, or *Shekhinah* and they reflect a need to concentrate on these values.<sup>48</sup>

In the vein of the Zoharic story about the beautiful maiden, elsewhere the feminine power reveals herself to Karo and teaches him Kabbalah.<sup>49</sup> This is the case also regarding the revelation that Karo had during the two nights of Feast of Shavu'ot he spent in Nicopolis, in the Greek part of the Ottoman Empire in 1534, a revelation that can be described as the foundation, though certainly not the actual creation of the ritual of *Tiqqun Leil Shavu'ot*, - the Amendment of the Night of *Shavu'ot* - as reported by his close friend and Kabbalist, R. Solomon ha-Levi Alqabetz's important epistle describing this mystical event.<sup>50</sup> Sometimes the revealing power is described by Alqabetz as Maggid though in other ones, when quotations from the speech of Karo are quoted, it is the *Shekhinah* who is described as speaking from Karo's mouth. The tension between the assumption that a Maggid revealed itself to Karo, a term which can be described as grammatically speaking masculine, and the repeated feminine depictions that accompany those revelations have been solved by scholars in basically two different ways. Werblowsky opted for

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<sup>48</sup> See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 148-167.

<sup>49</sup> *ibidem*, pp. 316, 319.

<sup>50</sup> See Elior, "R. Joseph Karo." More on this issue see at the end of this article.

the assumption that “Occasionally the genders and the sexes were mixed up.”<sup>51</sup> In fact, he straightforwardly identified the revelation of the *Shekhinah* with maggidism<sup>52</sup> though such an identification is not supported by any texts in *Maggid Meisharim*.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, Elior and then Altshuler opted for a more complex solution, namely that Karo’s view is that an “androgynous angel” was revealing itself to Karo.<sup>54</sup> Other authors dealing with Karo, do not refer at all to the feminine dimension of these revelations.<sup>55</sup>

I find both solutions unsatisfying, since they operate with an assumption that is not explicated, namely that Karo operated with a unified entity underlying all the revelations, whose gender could and should be determined, as either male or female or androgynous. This assumption, however, is not evident in his texts neither is it necessary. Scholars tended to assume that the Maggid and maggidic revelations are the fundamental type of mystical experiences that characterize Karo’s inner life. This is obvious from the very choice of Werblowsky’s titles of the chapters in his book dealing with Karo’s revelations: “The Maggid of Karo”<sup>56</sup>, “The Halakhah and the Maggid”<sup>57</sup> and finally “The Maggid.”<sup>58</sup> Though explicitly acknowledging the recurrence of feminine gender-themes, they have been explained by scholars as the result of a mix up, or of a mixture, while the assumption is that the authentic nature of the revealing entity reflected by the term Maggid, and is therefore masculine, or at least androgynous.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Joseph Karo*, p. 268.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 21,111, 266-268.

<sup>53</sup> See *ibidem*, p. 108, where he writes, in a rather more appropriate manner, that in Alqabetz’s epistle on the Shavu’ot vigil, “presents the closest possible identification of the *Shekhinah* with the Maggid.” Nevertheless, this more cautious remark has been ignored in his monograph, where he introduced the term Maggid freely in many texts, as if it is self-evident. See, e.g., pp. 117, 119. This malpractice has been adopted also by many other scholars.

<sup>54</sup> See, respectively, “R. Joseph Karo,” pp. 678-680 and “Prophecy and Maggidism,” pp. 83-86, 90. It should be emphasized, that Karo never resorted to the term androgynous in order to describe the source of the revelations he received. This is a proposal of scholars, which in my opinion assume a homogenous type of experiences Karo underwent for almost fifty years, always stemming from the same revealing power.

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., Yehudah Leib Klirs, “‘Sefer ha-Maggid’ le-Maran ha-Beit-Yosef,” *Tzefunot*, vol. 6 (1990), pp. 79-86 (Hebrew).

<sup>56</sup> *Joseph Karo*, pp. 9-23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 169-188.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 257-285.

<sup>59</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 206-233.

What was in fact the textual basis of such a preponderant role attributed to the Maggid and its masculine gender-oriented approach? There are two different answers to this question: scholars relied on what other Kabbalists had said about the source of Karo's revelations, but we should also take in serious consideration what is found in Karo's own explicit references to the source of his revelations. In this context I shall address only the few usages of this term in Karo himself, assuming as I do that other Kabbalists' testimonies, important as they may be for the reception of Karo's diary, cannot dictate the nature of the numerous discussions found in the remnants that reached us.<sup>60</sup>

Surprisingly enough, checking the extent parts of his diary, we encounter only four occurrences of the lexical form *maggid*, one of which have nothing to do with revelations or a supernal power, as it is just a quote of a verse from Isaiah 46:10, which contains the verbal form *maggid*, which means there: to say.<sup>61</sup> The other occurrence is an interpretation of the term *maggid* in the Passover Seder, again no connection to revelation.<sup>62</sup> What remain are two explicit references to a *maggid*.<sup>63</sup> In one of the two, the significance of the blessing over the new moon in a certain day of the month is explained, and the *maggid* is mentioned as writing the Kabbalistic solution for the question,<sup>64</sup> in the other, we have the only extant occurrence of the *maggid* as speaking, in the context of a discussion, that is not quoted, concerning the meaning of the secret of the supernal roots of evil, within the divinity.<sup>65</sup> This means that in the available parts of Karo's diary, the term *maggid* is not described as part of a revelation as the feminine power is, it does not introduce itself, it does not say good bye when it leaves, and what is even more important, it does not address Karo personally, neither instructs him or admonish him concerning

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<sup>60</sup> In this context let me point out that in all the extant manuscripts of the diary, the title is *Sefer ha-Maggid*, the book of the Maggid. See Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri*, pp. 391-412 and Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 24-37. However, none of them reflect the original structure of the book, as a series of revelations, or any other structure, but the new arrangements of the topics according to the pericopes of biblical books. This is the reason why I do not consider the title as an original one, but an addition by copists.

<sup>61</sup> *MM*, p. 115.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 222. Compare also to Alqabetz, *Berit ha-Levi*, fol. 38d-39a, (and Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1665, fol. 56c), where the term *maggid* occurs in a similar context, namely as devoid of any connotation of revelation.

<sup>63</sup> See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 266.

<sup>64</sup> *MM*, p. 367: *katav ha-maggid*.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 254.

his behavior. In the two instances what we have are interpretations of theosophical issues, not different from what may be found in Kabbalistic books where revelations are not even mentioned. However, being the marginality of the term in Karo's book, there is something more essential that distinguish the source of Karo's revelations from the manner in which many Kabbalists understood the term *maggid*. As pointed out by Shlomo Pines, this term – which appears earlier in Jewish literature – was fraught with astro-magical overtones.<sup>66</sup> However, such a conceptual framework is absent for the powers that revealed to Karo, though some forms of magic of a different nature are indeed found in some of the extant discussions in *MM*.<sup>67</sup>

Let me emphasize that though the fact that the feminine power is fond of identifying itself with a series of other feminine entities, as mentioned above, the term *maggid* is never mentioned in those contexts. This crucial absence cannot be a matter of accident. Even more surprising as to the status of an angelic mentor, or the *maggid*, as the main speaker during those revelations, is the pervasive resort to the term: “My Torah” and “My Mishnah”. Would indeed a being created out of the oral activity of Karo, allowed to resort to such a language? Would not a higher entity, identical with an aspect of the deity, more appropriate to use such a language than a *Maggid*? In some instances, the feminine power speaks about “my worship” *‘avodati*, a term which is hardly fitting an angelic power. The occurrences of those lexical forms tip the balance quite strongly in another direction than the assumption that an angelic mentor is the major source of revelation, and diminish the importance of the theory of the *maggid* as the reification of the sounds someone emits when studying a text.

On the other hand, at least in one instance, the revealing power mentions an earlier revelation that may hardly be related to an angelic power. It is no less that *‘Attiqa’ de-‘Attiqin*, the Ancient of most Ancients, a Zoharic term for the highest term for a deity, was mentioned as coming to dwell on Karo and obliterate a negative decree related to him.<sup>68</sup> Elsewhere, Karo's

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<sup>66</sup> Pines, “Le *Sefer ha-Tamar* et les *Maggidim*.”

<sup>67</sup> See Idel, “Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*,” pp. 225-226.

<sup>68</sup> *MM*, p. 386. This term recurs several times in *MM*, without, however, mentioning revelations.

voice speaks about a future experience that he will be granted, when

I shall grant thee to behold Elijah, for the Ancient of Days will be clothed in white garments and will sit facing thee and will speak unto thee as a man speaketh unto his friend ‘and thine eyes shall behold thy teacher’<sup>69</sup>; and although thy wife and other men and women will be in thy house, he will speak with thee and thou shalt behold him but they shall not see him and the voice of his speech shall appear to them as if it were thine.<sup>70</sup>

I read this passage as reflecting a view that in the future the deity, referred here as ‘*Attiq Yomin*, is resorting to Elijah as a garment to manifest itself visually, and to Karo’s mouth to proclaim itself vocally. In this case, two different supernal elements will be involved, none of them feminine. The view of Elijah as a garment of a much higher entity reflects, in my opinion, the influence of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.<sup>71</sup> Though Elijah, an angel, will become Karo’s teacher, the power he represents is however, conceived of as much higher than the *Shekhinah*, speaking to Karo in the present. This theory of revelation as related to a garment is not new but follows trends found in 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalah.<sup>72</sup> However, here it is put in service of a personal revelation of a specific historical figure. In one of the trends found in late 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalah, the angelic world is described as some form of organic manifestation of the sefirotic, namely divine world, with angels serving as limbs of the divine powers.<sup>73</sup> Such an approach is reflected, implicitly, in the last quote, when the garment is understood as hiding the divine power. In some cases in 13<sup>th</sup> century Kabbalah it is specifically the *Shekhinah* that is described as embodied in

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<sup>69</sup> Isaiah 30:20.

<sup>70</sup> *MM*, p. 185, as translated in Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 22. See also *MM*, p. 184 on the personal relation of the Ancient of the Days, to Karo. For the revelations of Elijah in the writings of R. Joseph Karo and Hayyim Vital see Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 76-77, 269-270.

<sup>71</sup> See Idel, “Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*,” pp. 239-241.

<sup>72</sup> See Elliot R. Wolfson, “The Secret of Garment in Nahmanides,” *Daat*, vol. 24 (1990), pp. XXV-LXIX, and Idel, *The Angelic World*, pp. 56-60.

<sup>73</sup> See Idel, *ibidem*, pp. 23-27, 54-59.

the angelic world.<sup>74</sup> More explicit in the context of the theory of *maggid* is R. Moshe Cordovero, who writes:

the angels possess some revelation of the glory of the King of the world, by the way of the light that is clothed in them and this is the benefit they have and the explanation of their power. Even more so that the *maggidim* say many times sublime names<sup>75</sup> in the verse ‘My commandments’, ‘My statues’, ‘My Torah’, and such matters that seem to be prima-facie, bizarre. But this is simple since they say so because of the descending influx, namely the light that clothes within them and they are called limbs, since the light is descending [becoming] sparks, and clothes itself in each and every angel, so that the angel is a limb of the limbs of the [supernal] chariot, as it is a clothed light.<sup>76</sup>

This emphasis on the organic structure that is represented by a divine body, garbed within an angelic body, revealing itself within a human body, is an issue that reflects the more widespread tendency of correspondences between different levels of reality and the sympathies between them. If we assume that Karo reflects a theory similar to that of Cordovero, then the *Shekhinah* is using the human limbs in order to reveal Herself, just as the angels are limbs of the *Shekhinah* according to earlier Kabbalists and Cordovero. In other words, Karo is not receiving a revelation from an angelic mentor who is a *maggid*, but he is himself serving, structurally speaking, as a *maggid*.<sup>77</sup> From this point of view, Karo’s revelation as a matter of the speech spoken by the recipient himself, is reminiscent – phenomenologically speaking - more to Abraham Abulafia<sup>78</sup> than to *Sefer ha-Meshiv*. This emphasis on the vocal revelation, without a visual one in the present, can be explained better if we assume that Karo’s body is the “limb” of

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<sup>74</sup> See the view of R. Joseph of Hamadan and of the Kabbalist who authors *Tiqqunei Zohar* quoted in *ibidem*, pp. 59-63. For Cordovero’s acquaintance with this view see *ibidem*, p. 178 n. 140.

<sup>75</sup> In Hebrew *shemot yeqarim*. This phrase reflects a usage found in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*. See e.g., Idel, “Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*,” p. 187 and the anonymous passage found in Ms. Sassoon 290, pp. 174-176.

<sup>76</sup> *Pardes Rimmonim*, XXIV:11. For another description of the *Maggid* see Cordovero’s ‘*Or Yaqar*, on *Tiqqunei Zohar*, (Jerusalem, 1973), vol. II, fol. 99ab, which deserves a separate analysis.

<sup>77</sup> For Cordovero’s understanding of R. Shimeon bar Yohai as a *Maggid*, see his ‘*Or Yaqar*, on *Tiqqunei Zohar*, vol. II, fol. 214a, because a soul of a deceased righteous clothed itself within him.

<sup>78</sup> See M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* tr. Jonathan Chipman, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1987), pp. 83-95.

the *Shekhinah*.<sup>79</sup> As we shall see below, Karo conceives the purified human body to be the camp of the *Shekhinah* and perhaps in this context we may better understand the concern of Karo with disentangling the pure from the impure and the divine from the demonic.<sup>80</sup> The superiority of the future revelation mediated by Elijah is obvious: Elijah is the garment of a much higher entity than the *Shekhinah* on the one hand, and contents of the revelations extant in *Maggid Meisharim*, only rarely dealt with to highest topics in theosophical Kabbalah.

In any case, in the general economy of the extant parts of the diary, these two single occurrences of the term *maggid* in the context of providing some information are rather negligible. Moreover, the difference between the oral nature of the revelation of the feminine power, which uses Karo's mouth to deliver its message, differs from the written medium mentioned above in the context of the *maggid*, and indeed elsewhere he refers to a written message stemming from an angel.<sup>81</sup> This form of written revelation seems to reflect the attitude found in *Sefer ha-Meshiv* literature.

The very scant role played by the *maggid* in the diary, was not addressed by scholars in an appropriate manner, to say the least. Instead of emphasizing the marginal role it played in the general economy of Karo's book, scholars imposed the masculine gender of the *maggid*, and focus more on the feminine hypostases as the main source of the revelation it was the title *maggid* that became the general label for the sources of revelations, and then invoking mix up or mixtures. My assumption is that it would be better, insofar as Karo is concerned, not to impose one form of discussion on another in order to create a homogenous category designated as *maggidism*, but assume a wider spectrum of sources that reveal to the Kabbalist, an approach found already in *Sefer ha-Meshiv*.<sup>82</sup> This means that the imposition of the term *maggid* in the scholarly analyses of Karo's diary, so widespread in scholarship, represents a drastic simplification of a more complex situation.

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<sup>79</sup> Visual experiences are extremely rare in the extant parts of *MM*. See, e.g., pp. 182, 379, the resort to the term *mar'ot*, visions, for a type of revelation in the past and in the future.

<sup>80</sup> See Gershom Scholem, "Tradition and the New Creation of the Ritual of the Kabbalists," in *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* tr. Ralph Manheim (Schocken Books, New York, 1969), p. 129.

<sup>81</sup> *MM*, p. 391.

<sup>82</sup> See Idel, "Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 189-191.

## 6. *The Erotic Dimensions of the Hypostatic Feminine Power in Karo's Diary*

In fact, the dominant role played by the feminine power is obvious in dozens of discussions, and many of them are characterized by extensive erotic and implicit sexual themes describing the relation, absent in the two texts mentioned above as well as in the other discussions related to the phenomena identified as *maggid*, in the writings of other Kabbalists, between the revealing power and the recipient of the revelations.

Though obviously conceived of as mother in many texts, the revealing power is sometimes depicted in terms which are quite erotic.<sup>83</sup> The permanent devotion that this feminine power requires is overwhelming in its expression. However, there are also some passages where the erotic concentration on the feminine hypostasis is portrayed in a more concrete manner, which means that not only the human thought is required to focus on the Mishnah or the Torah, but also there is a requirement, stemming from the feminine power, to unify the limbs of the mystic and elevate them.<sup>84</sup>

My son, hearken to my voice,<sup>85</sup> to what I command you and always cleave to me so that your limbs are always united and cleaving to me. And your limbs will be elevated by you, since the ancient sages were cleaving so much to me, that their limbs and body were the camp of the *Shekhinah*<sup>86</sup> and there was neither blemish, nor worm, maggot or rot...as king David, blessed be his memory, said: 'My flesh also will rest in hope,'<sup>87</sup> and so their body will rest under the wings of the *Shekhinah*, and you will also deserve to be burned [as a martyr] for the sake of God and your dust will be stored under the [supernal] altar.<sup>88 89</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> See already Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 267-268.

<sup>84</sup> See Lawrence Fine, "Purifying the Body in the Name of the Soul: The Problem of the Body in Sixteenth-Century Kabbalah," in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. H. Eilberg-Schwartz (SUNY Press, Albany, 1992), pp. 117-142, Jeffrey R. Woolf, "'La'avodat Bor'o': The Body in the Shulhan Arukh of R. Joseph Caro," *The Jewish Body: Corporeality, Society, and Identity, in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*, eds. Maria Diemling – Giuseppe Veltri (Brill, Leiden, 2009), pp. 159-177.

<sup>85</sup> Let me point out that the resort to the term voice here or elsewhere, does not constitute a sign of the masculine gender of the power that reveals.

<sup>86</sup> See also *MM*, pp. 137, 138, 156.

<sup>87</sup> Psalms 16:9.

<sup>88</sup> As we learn from the medieval Ashkenazi traditions about the dust of Isaac. See Shalom Spiegel, *The Last Trial: On the Legend and Lore of the Command to Abraham to Offer Isaac as Sacrifice: The Akedah* tr. Yudah Goldin, (Random House, New York, 1967).



The feminine nature of the revealing power is obvious: the mystic is addressed as “My son” and the elevation of the limbs transforms them into a camp of the *Shekhinah*. Here it is not the intellectual dimension that is highlighted but the corporeal one: the body of the mystic should be purified and thus it merits turning into a camp, as we shall see immediately below, of the dwelling of the divine presence. Thus, some form of union that concerns the body not only the thought, is envisioned here. This is the case also in the following passage: “At the time of Qeriyat Shema’, unify all your thoughts in order to become a basis for the *Shekhinah* and all your limbs will be unified in order to surrender for the sake of the holiness of my name.”<sup>90</sup> Thus, Karo attributes to the feminine hypostasis an instruction to prepare one’s body for becoming the place for the feminine presence, a theme that occurs already in the Midrash and in Kabbalah<sup>91</sup> a theory that will be elaborated, as we shall see immediately below, by his student Moses Cordovero. Like him, the supernal feminine in Karo is active insofar as this issue is concerned. So, for example we learn from another passage, “God is with you etc., it is incumbent on you to cleave to my Mishnayot and should not cease even for one minute, since I am embracing you and am cleaving to you all the time.”<sup>92</sup>

Thus, the cleaving of the *Shekhinah* to the mystic consists in some form of more corporeal act: embracing. This is the case also in another discussion, where the feminine power, now identical with the Mishnah, says:

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<sup>89</sup> *MM*, p. 92.

<sup>90</sup> *MM*, p. 51. The correspondence between this prayer and the 248 limbs, based on the number of the words of the prayer, namely 245 +3, is a leitmotif in Kabbalistic literature since late 13<sup>th</sup> century. See Israel Ta-Shma, “”*El Melekh Ne’eman*, The Metamorphosis of a Custom,” *Tarbiz*, vol. 39 (1070), pp. 184-194 (Hebrew).

<sup>91</sup> For the earlier views of the assumption that human may become chariots of the *Shekhinah* see *Genesis Rabbah*, 47:6, p. 475; 82:6, p. 983. On the mystical interpretations of this dictum see the learned studies of Georges Vajda, *Le commentaire d’Ezra de Gerone sur le cantique des cantiques* (Paris: Aubier, 1969), pp. 339–351 and Micheline Chaze, “De l’identification des patriarches au char divin: recherche du sens d’un enseignement rabbinique dans le midrash et dans la Kabbale pré-zoharique et ses sources,” *REJ* vol. 149 (1990), pp. 5–75. See also Fishbane, “A Chariot for the *Shekhinah*.”

<sup>92</sup> *MM*, p. 130.

Because of the merit of the Mishnayot that you innovate<sup>93</sup>, you have ascended, and behold I am the Mishnah that is speaking with you, since you did not finish to study it in its entirety, since you have studied the greater part of the tract of Qodashin, each time you read it, it is as if you sacrifice sacrifices in the front of the Temple, and you embrace the entire Mishnah and she is with you.<sup>94</sup>

The concentration of human thought on the divine sphere, as represented by the Torah and Mishnah, and the presence of the feminine power onto the human body, are not exclusive achievements but rather complementary ones. So, we learn for example from the following passage:

you should unify your heard all the time and in every minute not to think but on my Torah and my worship, which is the secret of unification, that someone is indeed unifying himself with his Creator, since his soul is cleaving and unifying to Him, blessed be He, and his body and limbs are the camp of the *Shekhinah* indeed.<sup>95</sup>

There is no doubt that Karo is indebted to a view found in Nahmanides's understanding of the mystical union, - who at his turn has his source in R. Yehudah ha-Levi's *Sefer Kuzari*<sup>96</sup> - and he put it in the mouth of the revealing power.<sup>97</sup> However, while ha-Levi's and Nahmanides' discussions do not resort to erotic imagery, Karo, following the *Zohar*, did resort to such imagery. Indeed, in other instances the feminine power's acts of kissing Karo are mentioned together with her embracing him.<sup>98</sup> Thus, I would not diminish the corporeal aspects of Karo's imaginary as to his relationship with the supernal divine power neither underestimate its erotic dimension, even less its feminine dimensions as essential.

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<sup>93</sup> The meaning of the verb *mehaddesh* in this context is not so clear.

<sup>94</sup> *MM*, p. 379.

<sup>95</sup> *MM*, p. 138. See also *ibidem*, p. 137. The Hebrew phrase is *Mahaneh Shekhinah*.

<sup>96</sup> See Diana Lobel, "A dwelling place for the *Shekhinah*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* vol. 90 (1999), pp. 103-125 and Adam Afterman, *Intimate Conjunction with God: The Concept of "Devekut" in the Early Kabbalah* (Provence and Catalonia) (Ph. D. Thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 2008), pp. 88, 93-94, 100, 108-1109, 181-182, 200, 227, 239-240 (Hebrew).

<sup>97</sup> For Karo's acquaintance with Nahmanides see Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 172, 174.

<sup>98</sup> See e.g., *MM*, p. 362.

This issue should be seen also from another point of view: Already in the *Zohar*, the biblical Moses has been conceived of as the husband of the *Shekhinah*.<sup>99</sup> In Karo's diary, Moses is a figure which looms prominently as a model of imitation.<sup>100</sup> However, while classical Kabbalistic sources deal with Moses, or with the unidentified righteous men, who may have an intercourse with the divine woman, without referring to the possibility that the author of those discussions may also enjoy such an experience, here the implication is that some form of strong erotic relations may be the patrimony of an author who does use the voice of the divine in order to encourage himself to claim such an experience.

A question may be asked in this context: what is the phenomenological status of Nahmanides', Karo's, and as we shall see below also of Cordovero's, influential claims as to the presence of the *Shekhinah* upon the perfecti? Is this a hovering of the divine upon a body, whose soul cleaves on high? Is this an embodiment, temporal as it may be, which is not a mixture between the divine and the human? Or is it a case of what some scholars claim to be an incarnation of the divine within the human body? In my opinion, in Karo's diary much more than anything else an example of possession, which means that the divine power takes over the vocal apparatus of the Kabbalist, then instructs, encourages and in many cases it castigates him. In fact in both Nahmanides and Karo we made speak about an exchange between the human and the divine realms: while the mystic concentrates his mental activities on the divine, the divine is dwelling for a short while during the night, within the human body, or more precisely the mouth. This speech of the *Shekhinah* by means of the mouth of the mystic has been described by her as prophecy.<sup>101</sup> However, it should be pointed out that Karo was not addressed by the revealing power as a prophet, despite the numerous affinities to Moses, neither was he functioning in such a manner in his society. Unlike Abraham Abulafia, who openly boasted as to his prophetic role, and wrote prophetic books intended to be read in the synagogue as part of the Jewish rituals, or

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<sup>99</sup> For the erotic relationship of the Kabbalist to the *Shekhinah* as a supernal wife in the *Zohar* see Liebes, "Zohar and Eros," *Alpayyim*, vol. 9 (1994), pp. 100-102 (Hebrew).

<sup>100</sup> See, e.g. Elijor, "R. Joseph Karo," pp. 680 n. 22, 683 n. 28, and Altshuler, "Prophecy and Maggidism," pp. 90-94.

<sup>101</sup> *MM*, p. 298, Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 55-56, Idel, "Inquiries into the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 220-221, and Altshuler, "Maggidism and Prophecy," p. 94.

other medieval figures that were designated by others as prophets, Karo's statements were part of a diary that was practically unknown for two generations after the death of the author. His contemporaries in Safed, Cordovero, R. Yehudah Halewwah, and R. 'Ovadiyah Hamon, who were interested in phenomena close to maggidism, never mentioned Karo's experiences as maggidism, or even refer to his experiences at all.

The revelations he received were in their vast majority, issues concerning his own fears, wishful thinking and aspirations, the fate of his sons, but with little concern for the wider Jewish society. They were much more promises than prophecies. From some points of view their topic fits a mother's would care for her son. Though active as a legal authority, whose influence on Jewish society was extraordinarily broad, as a mystic, the situation is quite different. The edited, perhaps purged version of his diary, has been printed only two generations after Karo's death, most of its content is most plausibly lost.<sup>102</sup>

The issue of possession by a feminine power should be seen in a broader context: it is in Safed, in Karo's lifetime that claims about possessions of women by negative powers first appear in a written form.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, in one instance, Karo himself acted as an exorcist, as we learn from a contemporary testimony.<sup>104</sup> The phenomenological similarity between the two forms of possession, which emerge at the same time in the written evidence, is significant, despite obvious differences between them.<sup>105</sup>

Given the preponderance of these expressions of the *Shekhinah*/Mishnah/Matronita', we may assume that Karo imagined that he was embraced by the feminine power, just as his "army"

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<sup>102</sup> See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 36-37, and Idel, *ibidem*, pp. 225-226 n. 210.

<sup>103</sup> See Idel, "Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 229-230, in a text preserved by R. Yehudah Hallewah. On this figure see my "R. Yehudah Hallewah and His *Zafenat Pa'aneah*," *Shalem*, vol. 4 (1984), pp. 119-134 (Hebrew).

<sup>104</sup> See Idel, "Inquiries in the Doctrine of *Sefer ha-Meshiv*," pp. 224-225, and J. H. Chajes, *Between Worlds: Dybbuks, Exorcists, and Early Modern Judaism*, (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2003), pp. 36-37, 68-69.

<sup>105</sup> See Moshe Idel, "Jewish Magic from the Renaissance Period to Early Hasidism," in eds. Jacob Neusner and alia, *Religion, Science, and Magic, In Concert and in Conflict*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alia, (Oxford University Press, New York, 1989), p. 108, Yoram Bilu, "Dybbuk and Maggid: Two Cultural Patterns of Altered Consciousness in Judaism," *AJS Review*, vol. 21,2 (1996), pp. 341-366, and Chajes, *ibidem*, pp. 28-29.

or “retinue” is surrounding the retinue of the *Shekhinah*.<sup>106</sup> Provided this type of imagery as significant for the feelings of Karo, he is standing apart from the clichés used by other Kabbalists, who do not mention that this is an issue that concerns them personally, or formulated this views in more general or objective terms, as we shall see in the case of Cordovero. For Karo, the kisses and the embracing were addressed to him personally, and he conceived himself as exceptional from this point of view.<sup>107</sup> Moreover, the promises of the revealing powers as to the spiritual attainment of a death at an *auto-da-fé*, reminiscent of that of his hero, the former Marrano Shlomo Molkho, that Karo will merit to undergo after his arrival to the Holy Land<sup>108</sup>, show that not widespread clichés were operating in his mind, but rather a drive to outstanding achievements, unparalleled by what we know from the writings of his contemporaries. It should be pointed out that the *Shekhinah*, mentions in the revelation of the night of Shavu‘ot that for years she was thrown away and “embracing dung”<sup>109</sup> – *hoveqet ’ashppatot* - so that her embracing Karo later on is for sure to be conceived of as a much more elevated situation.

The discussion of erotic devotion and of sexual eroticism directed to a supernal feminine figure fits the special place a feminine hypostasis plays in Karo’s theosophy. As Werblowsky has pointed out, Karo believed in an intermediary realm between the divine *Shekhinah* and the angelic world, a realm that has been described also by obviously feminine terms.<sup>110</sup> In addition to these double feminine hypostases, the extra-divine *Shekhinah*, and the intra-divine *Malkhut*, found at the lower extremity of the divine world, Karo also posits a higher divine power, *Binah*, conceived also as Mother.<sup>111</sup>

Thus, I would say that in Karo’s diary the supernal feminine powers play a more important role than ever in Jewish mysticism, if we judge them by both statistical proportion and by the important role they play in a relatively not extensive book. Though part of a wider

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<sup>106</sup> In all those cases the term *Hayalot* is used. This vision of the feminine power are coming with her girls that constitute her retinue is found already in the Zohar, and it reverberates in many discussions in *MM*.

<sup>107</sup> Compare Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, p. 268.

<sup>108</sup> This combination of martyrdom by *auto-da-fé*, with a stay in parts of the Ottoman Empire is something like a contradiction in terms.

<sup>109</sup> See the text as printed in *Maggid Meisharim*, ed. (Jerusalem, 1960), p. 18.

<sup>110</sup> *Joseph Karo*, pp. 206-233.

<sup>111</sup> See, e.g., *MM*, pp. 213, 217-218, 224, 274-275.

spectrum of revelations, the feminine power plays nevertheless an essential role. If my interpretation is correct, the feminine power's approach to Karo is quite erotic, and he conceives himself also the mode of her revelation, not only its recipient.

### 7. *R. Moses Cordovero and the Feminine Divine Power*

By highlighting the feminine and sometime even the erotic aspects of most of the revealing hypostases, and distinguishing them from the angelic and masculine sources of revelation, it is possible to integrate Karo's treatments in a much wider context that is the apotheosis of the feminine divine power in Kabbalah, which received a special impetus in Safedian Kabbalah. His student<sup>112</sup>, R. Moses Cordovero, championed a variety of elaborated discussions of the role of the feminine hypostases in his voluminous Kabbalistic writings.<sup>113</sup> He probably follows some tendencies found earlier, which assume the presence of the feminine divine power at least in the first *sefirah*. Perhaps the most explicit Cordoverian passage to this effect is found in his commentary on the *Zohar*, *'Or Yaqar*, where he says "it is necessary that within *Keter* there are male and female...the *Hokhmah* within the *Keter* is male, and the *Binah* within the *Keter* is female."<sup>114</sup> Later on in the same book we read that "since the male and

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<sup>112</sup> On the relations between the two Kabbalists see Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri*, pp. 187-229.

<sup>113</sup> This major Kabbalist has been treated recently in more than one monograph. See Joseph ben-Shlomo, *The Mystical Theology of Moses Cordovero* (Mossad Bialik, Jerusalem, 1965) (Hebrew), Bracha Sack, *The Kabbalah of Rabbi Moses Cordovero*, (Ben Gurion University Press, Jerusalem and Beer Sheva 1995), (Hebrew), the numerous discussions of Cordovero's views in Abrams, *The Female Body of God*, especially pp. 78-80, the important essays on Cordovero, included in Bracha Sack, ed., *R. Moshe Cordovero, Ma'ayan 'Ein Ya'aqov*, (Ben Gurion University Press, Beer Sheva, 2009), especially those of Melila Hellner-Eshed, Lea Morris, and Shifra Asulin; and Zohar Raviv, *Fathoming the Heights, Ascending the Depth – Decoding the Dogma within the Enigma, Life, Writings and Speculative Piety*, (Ph. D. Thesis, University of Minnesota, 2007). For the discussion of the feminine elements in Cordovero see especially Reuven Kimelman, *The Mystical Meaning of Lekhah Dodi and Kabbalat Shabbat*, (Cherub Press, Los Angeles, Magnes Press, Jerusalem, 2003), pp. 59-61, 177-178 (Hebrew), Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 80-81, 84-85, "Jewish Mysticism among the Arab/Moslem Countries," pp. 31-34. For the *Shekhinah* in Cordovero see the essay of Shifra Asulin, in Sack, *R. Moshe Cordovero*, pp. 61-97 and the important study by Melila Hellner-Eshed, "Domestic Troubles: Family Myths in Moshe Cordovero's Book *'Eilima*," in *Te'uda, New Developments in Zohar Studies*, ed., Ronit Meroz, vol. XXI-XXII (2007), pp. 419-448 (Hebrew)

<sup>114</sup> *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 22, (Jerusalem, 1992), p. 66. Let me point out that according to Cordovero, there are many or even infinite aspects within the domain of *Keter*, an issue that complicates the exclusion of the feminine from this zone. See *ibidem*, pp. 2, 36, 66, 139, 153, and vol. 21, pp. 27, 164-165. For another opinion about *Keter* and the presence of feminine elements see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being, Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham University Press, New York, 2005), pp. 179-180.

female<sup>115</sup> are found out of the male and female within the essence of *Keter*, they [the former] copulate in order to emanate male and female that are *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*."<sup>116</sup> Such statements are not exceptional and will be dealt with separately in a separate study. It may be pointed out already now that the feminine powers in his theosophy can be described as dynamic and interstitial, and sometimes portrayed as equal to the masculine ones. Here, however, I would like to elaborate below on the vision of the male human body as the locus for the dwelling of the *Shekhinah*, when expressed using an erotic imagery, a view that is reminiscent of Karo's understanding of the relationship with the *Shekhinah* as dealt with above. In his popular Kabbalistic booklet *Tomer Devorah*, written in Safed in Karo's lifetime, Cordovero writes:

Whoever wants to have intercourse with the Daughter of the King, so that She will not depart from him forever, should first embellish himself by many ornaments and nice garments, which are the performances of all the commandments,<sup>117</sup> as mentioned above. And after he had prepared himself in such a manner, he should intend to receive Her onto him while he is preoccupied with the Torah and bears the yoke of the commandments according to the secret of the intention of the unification, always. And he should perform three things and then She immediately marries him and does not separate Herself from him, with the condition that he purifies himself and sanctifies himself. [b] And after he is pure and holy he should intend to perform for Her food, garments and sex, which are the three things that a man is obliged to [do] to his wife. The first one is to cause the descent of the influx from the right [side], which is Her food. The second is to cover Her *vis-à-vis* the side of judgment, so that the external powers will not rule over Her, and this is by all the things related to the side of evil urge, that should not be involved in his performance of the commandments, for the reason of the body or in order to be praised, and so on, that the evil urge is found in that commandment, [since] She flees away from him as She is naked. This is the reason why Her nakedness should be covered and hidden, so that it will not always rule over Her. How are all his deeds [performed] for the sake of heaven? [It is by performing them] without the part of the evil urge. And also the phylacteries and the *tzitzit* are

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<sup>115</sup> Namely the *sefirot* of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, which are emanated from their correspondent couple, as seen in the text quoted in the previous footnote.

<sup>116</sup> 'Or *Yaqar*, vol. 22, p. 67: ואחר שנמצאים זכר ונקבה מזכר ונקבה שבעצם הכתר, הם מזדווגים להאציל הזכר והנקבה שהם תפארת ומלכות. For the preexistence of the *Shekhinah* to the emanation of the *sefirot*, as she was emanated directly from 'Ein-Sof see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 196-197, idem, *Kabbalah & Eros*, pp. 209.

<sup>117</sup> In *Tomer Devorah* the version is *Tiqunei ha-Middot*, and I choose the version of Azulai: *Tiqunei ha-Mitzvot*.

guarding Her greatly, so that the external powers will not rule over Her, and he should be accustomed with [to] them. The third [obligation] is to unite Her with the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*, during the time of pronouncing *Qeriyat Shema*, by establishing fixed times to [study] Torah. And when he will establish fixed times to everything he should intend by it to the sexual needs of the *Shekhinah*, the sexual needs of the Daughter of the King.<sup>118</sup>

First and foremost, the passage recommends the above form of Halakhic behavior to everyone, thus creating a more democratic vision of the union of a human with the *Shekhinah* than ever beforehand in Kabbalistic literature. The Kabbalist's intention concerns the attainment of a permanent sexual relation with the divine feminine power, and this is the reason why he is requested to perform the three actions that are identical, terminologically speaking, to what he is obliged to do in relation to his human wife.<sup>119</sup> However, while the three obligations toward the human wife also concern her own material wellbeing, the contact with the *Shekhinah* is established by the more complex range of religious deeds, and aims to some form of spiritual experience described as intercourse. The permanent presence of the *Shekhinah* over the mystic is conceived of as an erotic experience, which the Kabbalist would like to keep, and it is conditioned by his performance. The three biblical obligations of the husband to his wife became therefore the paradigmatic understanding of these Kabbalists of a wider range of commandments. This strong affinity between commandments and *Shekhinah* is a major indicator of the central status of the later, more than purely theosophical statements to this effect. The Kabbalist resorts to the verb *le-hizdavveg*, which means to have a sexual rapport with the *Shekhinah*. This experience is described as available to everyone who purifies himself and performs the commandments, not just the paragons of Jewish culture, such as Moses, as it is the case in the Zoharic literature. What is the picture that we may elicit from the above passage as well from other instances in Cordovero's books? Is this a bodily experience, a spiritual one, or a combination of the two? What may be the specific meaning of the presence of a feminine divine

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<sup>118</sup> *Tomer Devorah*, chapter 9. See also *The Palm Tree of Deborah*, trans. L. Jacobs (Sepher-Hermon Press, New York, 1960), p. 177, as copied in Abraham Azulai, *Hesed le-'Avraham*, (Lemberg, 1863), fol. 54a. On this passage see M. Idel, "On the Performing Body in Theosophical-Theurgical Kabbalah: Some Preliminary Remarks," *The Jewish Body: Corporeality, Society, and Identity, in the Renaissance and Early Modern Period*, eds. Maria Diemling – Giuseppe Veltri (Brill, Leiden, 2009), pp. 260-261.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. Exodus 21:10.



power onto the Kabbalist? The Hebrew term that refers to the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* is “he should intend to receive Her onto him while he is preoccupied with the Torah.” Therefore the last passage deals with the descent of the divine feminine upon the Kabbalist while he studies the Torah.<sup>120</sup> However, this situation of reception of the supernal female by the human male is supposed to qualify the verb *le-hizdavveg*, and must reflect strong erotic and thus corporeal connotations, reminiscent of the attitude of Karo.

Let me turn now to some few parallels found in the body as the dwelling place of the *Shekhinah*:

in accordance to the amount of the intention [of the pious man in his prayer] if he intended to cause the influx from one rank to another, in accordance to the ranks of the ladder<sup>121</sup>, and will adhere to his creator by his knowledge concerning the performance of the commandments, his soul will ascend and be elevated from one degree to another, from one generator to another and from one cause to another, until an abundance of influx will emanate upon him and he will be the place of the seat and the dwelling for that influx, and from there it will be distributed to the world, as it is written in the *Zohar*...and in accordance to those words he will become the dwelling of the *Shekhinah*, because the influx comes by his means, so the righteous is instead of the great pipeline, the foundation of the world, and this is the reason why he merits that the *Shekhinah* adheres to him.<sup>122</sup>

An interesting parallel to such a view is found in Cordovero’s *Commentary on the Zohar*:

And despite the fact that the *Shekhinah* is found upon all the people of Israel, the *Shekhinah* is essentially dwelling upon him,<sup>123</sup> and from there she spreads to the entire world. And the reason is that he is a righteous, and despite the fact that the entire world [namely all the people] are unifying the [divine] unity, it is his unification that excels over all. This is the reason why the *Shekhinah* will adhere to him in her [very] essence,

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<sup>120</sup> See also Sack, *Sha’arei ha-Kabbalah*, p. 265.

<sup>121</sup> The image of ladder and chain recurs many times in Cordovero’s writings. See e.g., Idel, *Enchanted Chains*, pp. 182-186.

<sup>122</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, XXXII:1; part II, fol. 78c. See also Abraham Azulai, *Commentary on Massekhet ’Avot*, (rpr. Jerusalem, 1986), fol. 3a.

<sup>123</sup> Namely the righteous Kabbalist.

while her branches are upon all.<sup>124</sup> And he is the well of the blessings upon the world...and he is the chariot for the *Shekhinah*<sup>125</sup> ... He causes the existence of the *Yesod* and *Tiferet* in the [lower] world, bound with the *Shekhinah*. And this is the reason why the *Shekhinah* adheres to him, as she is pursuing [*rodefet*]<sup>126</sup> for *Yesod* and *Tiferet* and does not find them but with him.<sup>127</sup>

The theme of the Kabbalist's body as the chariot to the *Shekhinah* reflects a Midrashic view, according to which the forefathers have been described as such, and it parallels the reception of the *Shekhinah* by the Kabbalist who performs the three obligations in the passage mentioned above.

In his commentary on the *Zohar*, Cordovero also forged the view that this book, ostensibly the most important book of Kabbalah, was composed in order to assist the *Shekhinah* in her exilic vicissitudes. The composition of the book of the *Zohar* is imagined as the result of the initiative of the ancient Kabbalists to help the *Shekhinah*. This approach is best represented by the following passage, found in Cordovero's *'Or Yaqar*, his voluminous commentary on the *Zohar*, a passage which has been copied and thus disseminated in a widely read treatise of Cordovero's follower, R. Abraham Azulai:

Whoever performs a commandment nowadays, he prepares something that sustains the Shekhinah [*semekh la-Shekhinah*], and draws to her a little bit of influx...and he has notwithstanding a retribution for his toil...and the proof for it is the daughter of the king when she sits in the palace of her father and one of her servants performs for her an act of worship, she will certainly pay attention to him but not so much would she be outside the palace in trouble in exile. And if the servant would give her even a small thing, like a piece of moist grass to help her, recovering it will be more important in her eyes than whatever she had when she was governing.<sup>128</sup> Know that the main intention

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<sup>124</sup> Compare a similar statement referring this time to the king, in *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 17, fol. 23a.

<sup>125</sup> The Hebrew phrase is *Merkavah la-Shekhinah*. In fact, Cordovero speaks elsewhere in the commentary on the *Zohar* about the human righteous also as becoming the chariot for the *sefirah* of *Yesod*. See *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 4, (Jerusalem, 1963), pp.1-2, 4-5.

<sup>126</sup> This is just one more example for the more active aspect of the *Shekhinah*. On this issue see also Jonathan Garb, "Gender and Power in Kabbalah," *Kabbalah*, vol. 13 (2005), pp. 79-109.

<sup>127</sup> *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 12, (Jerusalem, 1983), pp. 192-193, see also Sack, *The Kabbalah of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero*, 53, 218-219.

<sup>128</sup> This means that in the ideal situation, the *Shekhinah* is the ruling power on this world.

of Rashby<sup>129</sup>, blessed be his memory, when he composed the book of the *Zohar* was for this reason, since the *Shekhinah* was in exile without any influx, without anyone to sustain and help her [*'ozet lah*].<sup>130</sup> And he wanted to do something to sustain her [*semekh*]<sup>131</sup>, and to unite her with her husband, [creating] a little union by [means of] the composition of the book of the *Zohar*, by what he and his companions are dealing with the secrets of the Torah, which is causing the union of the Holy One, blessed be He, and His *Shekhinah* by means of [the *sefirah* of] *Yesod*, which is *Raz* [secret] and it [amounts] in gematria 'Or [Light]<sup>132 133</sup>.

Cordovero and Azulai share the view that the composition of the most important Kabbalistic book, in fact tantamount to Kabbalah itself, was intended to help the *Shekhinah*. In this discussion the assistance takes two forms: one is related directly and solely with the *Shekhinah*, and has to do with her situation in herself: to sustain her in the plight of the exile. The other one is addressing - by then already a classical - task of the commandment to induce the sexual union of the *Shekhinah* with God. The first one operates by drawing supernal influx down onto the divine feminine power, the latter by causing the ascent of the feminine power in order to

<sup>129</sup>The phrase "intention of Rashby" is an expression that is characteristic of Cordovero. He is thus less concerned with the intention of the Torah but with what has been disclosed by the innovations of bar Yohai. The disclosure of the hidden intention of a Kabbalistic book becomes the main Kabbalistic activity in some important circles in Safed.

<sup>130</sup> This seems to be an inversion of the role played by the woman in the account of Genesis, where she was born as a help to her husband. See the previous footnote.

<sup>131</sup> As to the seminal phrase *Semekh la-Shekhinah*: The term *semekh* occurs twice before this passage. Compare also the view of Cordovero that *semekh* is the term for expressing the male help to the female, while *'ezer* designates the help of the female to the male. Cf. *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 42, and *ibidem*, vol. 2 (Jerusalem, 1963), p. 59. It should be pointed out that Cordovero, and following him Azulai, are very fond of the expressions related to *semekh* and *sa'ad*, and use them together from time to time.

<sup>132</sup> 'Or, light, which stands for Splendor, *Zohar*, and *Raz* amount to 207. This nexus is found also in another from the same book to be discussed at the end of this section. This nexus is found elsewhere in Cordovero. See Boaz Huss, "*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives in the Book of Splendor Between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, vol. 7 (1998), p. 289.

<sup>133</sup> Azulai, *Hesed le-Avraham* (Lemberg, 1863), fol. 6c:

ו"ל כי העושה מצוה בעת הזאת הוא עושה סמך אל השכינה ומושיך לה שפע קצת כמו זיעה בעלמא, ועכ"ז יש לו שכר טוב בעמלו וע"ז נאמר שישו אתה משוב וגו' כי הוא עושה לה סמך, ואדרבה שכרו יותר גדול והעד ע"ז בת מלך בהיותה יושבת בהיכל אביה המלך, וא' מעבדיה יעשה לה איזה עבודה ודאי תשים לו שכר אבל לא שכר כ"כ כמו שאם תהי' חוץ להיכל המלך בדוחק בגלות, ואם העבד יתן אז אפילו דבר קל כמו עשב לח להבריא נפשה הוא חשוב בעיניה מכל אילי נביות אשר היה בשעת הממשלה ודע כי עיקר כוונת הרשב"י ע"ה בחבור ספר הזוהר היה לזה, להיות השכינה בגלות באפס שפע באין תומך ובאין עוזר לה, ורצה לעשות לה סמך ליחודה בבעלה יחוד מועט ע"י החיבור הזוהר, במה שהיה הוא וחביריו עוסקים בסודות התורה, שזהו גורם לייחוד קב"ה ושכינתיה ע"י היסוד שהוא סוד ר"ז בגימטריא או"ר.

For the source see *'Or Yaqar*, (Jerusalem, 1970), vol. 5, p. 219, Sack, *Be-Sha'arei ha-Kabbalah shel Cordovero*, p. 266 and Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, pp. 335-336. See also the Cordoverian sources adduced in Huss, "*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text," pp. 291-292 and Cordovero's *'Or Yaqar*, on *Tiqunei Zohar*, vol. II, fol. 99b.

conjoin with the male counterpart. The composition of the *Zohar* is presented in a more general framework that deals with the meaning of the performance of the commandments. The act of composition is part of the comprehensive theurgical effort directed to help, according to this passage and some other ones, the well-being of the exiled *Shekhinah*. We may discern here the triad of Father/King, daughter/Mother, and sons/servants, and the various affinities between them, but here the focus upon the feminine element is quite evident. According to this passage the rationale for the performance of the commandments is the sustenance of the *Shekhinah*, while, on the other hand, the situation of the divine male is not even mentioned in this context.

The discrepancy between the ways in which the feminine factor is described in the various parts of the passage is evident: she is in the very same context the *Shekhinah*, the daughter of the King, and also His consort. Part of this inconsistency has to do with the difference between the parable and its meaning. However, this inconsistency is part of a tradition stemming from Midrashic sources in which the same feminine entity is portrayed as fulfilling different functions in rapport to the male.<sup>134</sup> The parable assumes the personalization of the *Shekhinah* as an entity participating in the exile of her sons, the Jews. It is the state of deprivation of the divine Queen, now remote from Her earlier exalted status in the palace of Her father, that serves as the core of the parable: the earlier harmonious situation before the divine exile renders the humans marginal. I assume that the role of the Kabbalists for sustaining the Queen is conceived of as marginal when she is served by her servants while in the palace, namely the *Shekhinah* as served by her entourage, probably angels, while in her proper place. On the other hand, the poverty of the feminine power in exile creates a new situation, when the most humble of the human deeds is capable of alleviating the plight of the *Shekhinah*.

The intimacy with the noble daughter of the King is possible when she is away from her palace. The composition of the most important book of Kabbalah, the *Zohar* is therefore, an act conditioned and inspired by the special plight of the *Shekhinah* in exile. Cordovero's bold attribution of the emergence of the *Zohar*, in a way of Kabbalah in general, to the need to

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<sup>134</sup> See Arthur Green, "Bride, Spouse, Daughter: Images of the Feminine in Classical Jewish Sources," *On Being a Jewish Feminist*, ed. S. Heschel, (Schocken Books, New York, 1983), pp. 248-260.

contribute to a feminine divine power, is not totally unexpected. It reflects several more modest beginnings but what is more interesting is the emergence of a cult of the *Shekhinah* that is hardly found in an explicit manner earlier Kabbalistic sources. This cult should be understood as part of the emphasis placed on the coupling of male and female powers, and of ditheistic views whose origins are much earlier in Jewish texts.<sup>135</sup> Moreover, Cordovero himself is elaborating on an earlier Kabbalistic view that assumes that there was a situation of equality between the male and female elements in the sefirotic system.<sup>136</sup> This cult assumed different forms, the most widespread of which argues that the feminine divine power - *Shekhinah*, *Malkhut*, *'Atarah*, *Knisset Yisrael* - should be sexually united with the masculine divine power, *Tiferet*.<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the famous Zoharic story about the beautiful maiden mentioned above attributes to a feminine power a paramount role in introducing the secrets belonging to this esoteric lore by the male Kabbalist.

It should be pointed out that Cordovero resorts several times to the verb *RDF*, which means "to pursue", in the context of the *Shekhinah*. One such example has been cited above. The divine power is described in quite active terms, as pursuing the human righteous, serving sometimes as a substitute for the supernal male powers, in order to have some form of sexual encounter with them.<sup>138</sup> This is quite a strong verb and it designates the activist nature of the feminine in relation to the male. Therefore, the ascent of the feminine is not just a matter of the

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<sup>135</sup> See Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, pp. 25-32.

<sup>136</sup> See Idel, *idem*, pp. 63-65 and the pertinent footnotes, and "Androgyny and Equality in the Theosophical-Theurgical Kabbalah," *Diogenes*, vol. 52 (2005), pp. 35-36. This topic will be dealt with in detail in a separate study dedicated to Cordovero and Luria's views of *du-partuzfim*.

<sup>137</sup> See Idel, *Kabbalah & Eros*, pp. 104-152. For a different understanding of this topic, see Elliot R. Wolfson's many studies, especially his *Circle in the Square*. For another approach see Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature*.

<sup>138</sup> See, e.g., *'Or Yaqar*, *Tiqqunei Zohar*, vol. 4, pp. 233, 284, or *'Or Yaqar*, vol. 12, pp. 192-193, translated in Idel, *Ben*, pp. 443-444, and several times in *Pardes Rimmonim*. See e.g., Gate XVI, ch. 6, Gate XXII, ch. 3 and in Cordovero's passage quoted in Abraham Azulai, *'Or ha-Hammah*, (Przemyslany, 1896), vol. III, part 2, fol. 122a as well as the passage adduced by Sack, *The Kabbalah of R. Moshe Cordovero*, p. 53. See also Abrams, *The Female Body of God*, p. 7. It should be mentioned that Cordovero, as quoted in Azulai, *'Or ha-Hammah*, vol. III, part 1, fol. 57b, where such a view occurs too, seems to rely on a Zoharic passage to this effect that I cannot locate for the time being.

number of discussions about such a supernal power, but also of the more actively role than ever, that it is attributed to it.

#### 8. *The Divine Feminine and Some Rituals in Safed*

In such an atmosphere, replete as it is with discussions about the role of the feminine divine powers, it is easier to understand why R. Abraham Berukhin, a disciple of R. Isaac Luria, experiences two different kinds of visions of the *Shekhinah* besides the Wailing Wall<sup>139</sup>, or why a certain Safedian woman was conceived of as possessing an angelic mentor that revealed itself to her.<sup>140</sup> Also R. Hayyim Vital's vision of a beautiful woman in a dream, whom he addresses by the term Mother, is pertinent in this context.<sup>141</sup> Also the numerous discussions of the equality of the divine male and female powers, recurring in Cordovero many times, and reverberating in R. Isaac Luria's views, though certainly not new, are much more conspicuous in Safedian Kabbalah.<sup>142</sup> The ascent of the various roles played by the *Shekhinah* is to be seen, in my opinion, also as part of the ascent of the importance of the *Zohar* in Safed.<sup>143</sup>

Against this background it is also easier to understand a common denominator of two different rituals performed by Safedian Kabbalists.<sup>144</sup> The earliest one known in Safed is the so-called exile-wanderings, or *gerushim*, which consist in the roaming or the peregrinations of Kabbalists in the fields around Safed, as part of the imitation of the plight of the *Shekhinah* that is found in exile. Cordovero dedicated to this topic a booklet, where he describes his and Alqabetz's roaming, together with other Kabbalists, done also in order to attain some form of

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<sup>139</sup> See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, pp. 192-193 and Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>140</sup> See Lawrence Fine, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos, Isaac Luria and his Kabbalistic Fellowship*, (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2003), pp. 120-122.

<sup>141</sup> See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 81.

<sup>142</sup> To this issue I dedicated a special study now in the final stages of preparation.

<sup>143</sup> See Boaz Huss, "Zoharic Communities in Safed," in *Shefa Tal: Studies in Jewish Thought and Culture in Honor of Bracha Sack*, eds, Zeev Gries, Haim Kreisel, Boaz Huss (Ben Gurion University Press, Beer Sheva, 2004), pp. 149-169 (Hebrew).

<sup>144</sup> On rituals related to the *Shekhinah* in Safed see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, pp. 139-153.

revelations.<sup>145</sup> On the other hand, the much more influential role of *Tiqqun Hatzot*, the detailed ritual of the amendment performed by the Kabbalists, intended to improve the plight of the lower and higher divine feminine powers, symbolized by Rachel and Leah respectively, is conspicuously gravitating around feminine entities.<sup>146</sup>

These two rituals should be added to that of the Vigil of Shavu'ot, already mentioned above, which had also a huge impact.<sup>147</sup> In this context, let me point out that though the voice that speaks from the mouth of Karo according to the document that became the most important testimony about the early appearance of the voice, it is the *Shekhinah* alone that has been mentioned, when the Alqabetz refers to it in his own words he resorts instead to the term *maggid*.<sup>148</sup> This change is the clue for understanding later developments or the reception of Karo: the Kabbalists judged a feminine divine manifestation as if it is an angelic masculine one, and modern scholars followed, quite uncritically, their reception. Moreover, more than any Kabbalist beforehand, Karo is concerned with the issue of having a son, which was conceived of as a *sine qua non*-condition in order to enter Paradise. The vicissitudes related to this fact, and his being married several times, may be also with more than one wife at the same time, are discussed in his diary.<sup>149</sup> Though this preoccupation with his wives and their hidden nature is indubitably part of his obsession with his post-mortem fate, it is nevertheless unparalleled in Kabbalistic literature beforehand.

One methodological remark at the very end: the resort of the category of *maggidism* in order to refer to Karo's experiences, proved to be fallacious. It betrays a theological approach, namely a vision that assumes a strong type of coherence concerning entities believed to have existed and active in the life of Karo for a long period of time, without any attempt to qualify it.

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<sup>145</sup> See his *Sefer ha-Gerushin* and the discussions of Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 51-54 and Sack, *The Kabbalah of R. Moshe Cordovero*, pp. 17-21, 219-220.

<sup>146</sup> See Idel, *Messianic Mystics*, pp. 308-320.

<sup>147</sup> Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, tr. A. Schwartz, S. Nakache, P. Peli, (SUNY Press, Albany, 1993), pp. 74-82.

<sup>148</sup> See Werblowsky, *Joseph Karo*, pp. 110, 265-266.

<sup>149</sup> See Werblowsky, *ibidem*, pp. 93-94, 112-114, 119, 245-246, Benayahu, *Yosef Behiri*, pp. 321-327, Mopsik, *Sex and the Soul*, pp. 41-49, Altshuler, "'Revealing the Secret of His Wives,'" and Idel, "The Wives and Children of R. Joseph Karo."

This tendency of scholars in Jewish mysticism is not new and in my opinion, it informed many of the studies of this field in the past and continues to do so also in the present.<sup>150</sup> Without entering first a more detailed philological analysis, and apply then a more subtle phenomenological differentiation between subcategories, generalizations will haunt scholarship also in the future, and cause a reduction of its complexity to simple though what scholars believe to constitute comprehensive theologies.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> See M. Idel, “On the Theologization of Kabbalah in Modern Scholarship,” in *Religious Apologetics – Philosophical Argumentation*, ed. Yossef Schwartz & Volkhard Krech, (Mohr Siebeck, Tuebingen, 2004), pp. 123-173.

<sup>151</sup> See, e.g., my *Ben*, pp. 60-61.