

Chapter Ten

Gender and Indeterminacy in Jewish Mystical Imagery

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Indeterminacy, a concept developed by physicist Niels Bohr, and further elaborated by philosopher Karen Barad, tells us that there are no fixed, pre-existent separate entities, but rather entities arise out of the phenomena of which they are part. If we accept, as recent physics research has shown, that quantum ontology functions at all scales,¹ we can expect gender (and other social variables) to be susceptible to indeterminacy as well. Gendered beings arise out of a relational matrix involving a multitude of changing forces (social, cultural, economic, ecological, physical and more), and this process is visibly at play throughout Jewish sacred text and mystical traditions.

Transgender, genderqueer, and intersex people have raised awareness that gender and sex are not binary systems. Inspired by feminist and queer theory, we no longer need to associate women with body and emotions, and men with mind and logic, nor overlay other binaries onto gender identities. Not only gender, but binaries of all sorts are reified in much popular spiritual imagery—the transcendent divine is associated with the male aspect of divinity, up above the female/immanent aspect. The male is imagined as giver, the female as receiver, in an intra-divine heterosexual coupling. But Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) contains multifold diverse images for the divine interplay that go beyond the stereotypical missionary position.

This chapter reads Hebrew Scriptures and Jewish mystical texts with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Barad's theory of agential realism, and Bohr's concept of indeterminacy, exploring queer and genderqueer images and paradigms within the Jewish textual tradition, and examining how aspects of the divine flow shift gender, gender role, and orientation in a rich interplay to create life, nourish the world, and bring redemption.

APPROACHES TO COMPLICATING THE GENDER BINARY

Spatial Reversal

A variety of approaches within Jewish mysticism complicate the stereotypical binaries of gendered imagery. One approach is exemplified in much Chasidic writing. The 18th century Chasidic book *Toldot Ya'acov Yosef*, states “Thus man becomes sanctified to be a chariot for the Shekhina, in body and soul, as (he was) at the Revelation at Mount Sinai . . . This is the true wedding ceremony, and understand it.”² Here, there is a spatial reversal, and the male is on the bottom. The pair that is focused on is the immanent divine and the (presumably male) person engaged in prayer or study. The male religious practitioner becomes the passive receiver, and a female aspect of the divine, the active giver of influx. This is a powerful archetype that has influenced, and been influenced by, how Jews see Jewish men.³ What it means to be male, then, is not just one half of a duality, where male=top, but rather there is an acknowledgment that individuals have more valences to who they are, and how they participate in the dance of giving and receiving.

The Jewish image of man as receiver is rooted in much earlier tradition—For example, the medieval Midrashic⁴ collection *Exodus Rabbah* (45:3) teaches:

You find sometimes, ‘And Adonai spoke to Moses,’ and, ‘And Adonai said to Moses’; so also you find, ‘And Moses said to Adonai,’ and also ‘And Moses spoke to Adonai.’ It can be compared to a cave situated by the seashore into which the sea once penetrated, and having filled it, never departed, but was always flowing in and out of it.

Here, Moses, the Torah’s greatest teacher and prophet, is being described as a cave, a vessel, filled with divine presence, male human imagined as the passive receiver penetrated and filled with divine flow.

Disconnecting ‘Male’ from Men and ‘Female’ from Women

A second approach to altering the gender binary involves pointing out that *actual* men are not just “male” and *actual* women not just “female.” This sort of view is expressed by contemporary author Sarah Schneider, in her book, *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine*. She writes “Everything is feminine in relation to its above and masculine in relation to its below. There is no person who is absolutely and exclusively male

or female, for there is no escaping this network of relations with its shifting hierarchies and gender roles that vary from one context to the next.”⁵

This perspective addresses the problem of societal inequalities that place men on top, and women on the bottom, by pointing out that who is in the “male” position and who the “female” is not dependent on the plumbing of the individual, but rather shifts and varies. Perspectives like Schneider’s open up our understanding of gender in many ways, as well as being helpful for some people who experience themselves as gender fluid. But there is still a perpetuation of stereotypes of what “male” and “female” mean. It does nothing to trouble the problematic equations of male equals top/active/giver and female equals bottom/passive/receiver, nor the essentialist and binary approach to gender itself that is the norm, nor does it question the assumption that all interactions involve a male and a female participant.

Inseparability of Sex and Gender

A third approach is to claim that a binary approach is necessary, due to the biological sex differences between men and women.⁶ Often, there is a distinction made between sex and gender, where gender is taken to be cultural, and sex biological. But Judith Butler argues that sex is actually inseparable from gender. She writes:

Sexual difference . . . is never simply a function of material differences, which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices. Further, to claim that sexual differences are indissociable from discursive demarcations is not the same as claiming that discourse causes sexual difference. The category of “sex” is, from the start, normative; it is what Foucault has called a “regulatory ideal.” In this sense, then, “sex” not only functions as a norm, but is part of a regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs, that is, whose regulatory force is made clear as a kind of productive power, the power to produce—demarcate, circulate, differentiate—the bodies it controls. Thus, “sex” is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices. In other words, “sex” is an ideal construct which is forcibly materialized through time. It is not a simple fact or static condition of a body, but a process whereby regulatory norms materialize “sex” and achieve this materialization through a forcible reiteration of those norms.⁷

Butler teaches that sex cannot be taken as a given, as some essential inherent determined and determining binary. Rather, it is “part of the regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs.”⁸ This chapter will question the regulatory practices that compel conformity as it explores the multiple

valences of gendered imagery in Kabbalah and Jewish sacred text that conceptualize divine creative flow.

The Lovers as Receivers, Together

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, z"l in his essay Sameach T'samach,⁹ on sacred sexuality, presents an interesting approach. He writes (in Hebrew, my translation): ““When a female surrounds a male”¹⁰ there is not any recognizable separation between the giver of the flow and the receiver, because each one says that s/he is receiving the joy of the bestowal of love from the other.” Shachter-Shalomi then goes on to cite the Song of Songs: “O! That you were like a brother to me, nursing at my mother’s breasts! If I should find you outside, I would kiss you; and none would despise me.” (8:1) He comments, “nursing—together with me—the breasts of my mother.” The image he develops here is a creative approach. He attributes agency to the female—instead of being a passive recipient of penetration, the female is said to “surround” the male, in an active way. (Here, he cites Jeremiah, so this image of female agency is rooted in the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, itself). In addition, instead of one partner being above and sending flow to the other, both partners are below, receiving the flow together from the supernal source, the divine Mother, *Binah Ila’a*, the supernal *Binah* (uppermost matriarch of the sefirotic Tree of Life). We will return to this image later.¹¹

Queer Intra-Divine Coupling

Another approach to queering the gendered imagery of kabbalah shifts the focus away from solely heterosexual relations. This was explored at least as early as 13th century Spain, by Joseph Gikatilla, in his book, *Sha’arei Orah, Gates of Light*. He wrote:

The Holy Blessed One, for the sake of His compassion and His loving-kindness, prepared one day in the year for Israel to purify themselves . . . and called it Yom Kippur [in Hebrew, *Yom HaKippurim*, which has a plural ending], in plural language because these two sefirot unify on that day: the sefirah of *Binah* [the supernal mother] and the sefirah of *Malchut* [the daughter, or the lower mother] . . . And when these two sefirot join together to reverse by their merit the dross of Israel, to purify them, the day is called *Yom HaKippurim* . . . As these two sefirot attune, each facing the other, in the secret of the Supernal Mother and the Lower Mother, they occupy themselves on this day with the purification of Israel, therefore [presumably heterosexual] sex is forbidden on Yom Kippur, although it is permitted on Shabbat and festivals . . . ¹²

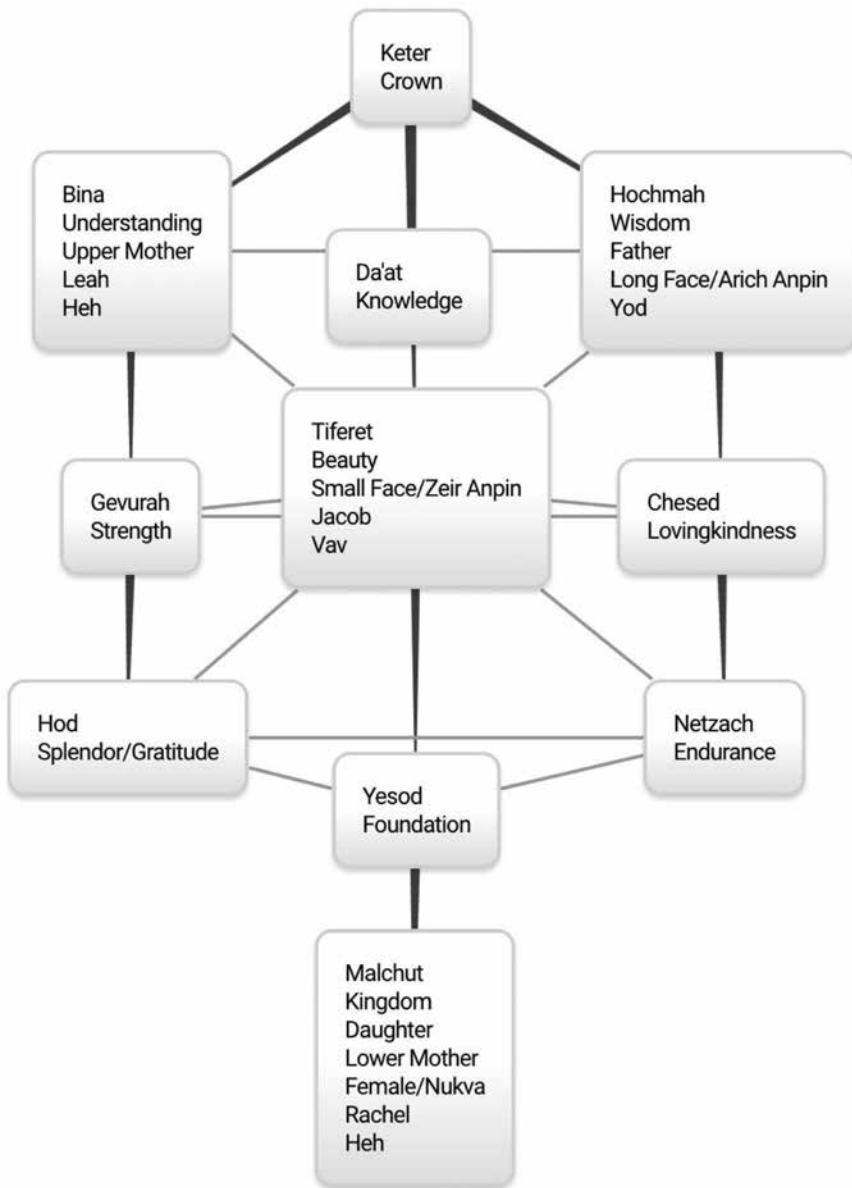


Figure 10.1. Tree of Life diagram, based on Lurianic Kabbalah, including terms used in this article.
Diagram by the author.

How striking! Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish year, is the day on which the two mothers of the Tree of Life engage together. Here, the entities that are unifying are imagined as female, so whatever energy flows between them need not place one of them on one end of a gender polarity and the other on the “opposite” end. However, as will become clear later, they also are not the “same” gender. In any case, the joining together of these two female aspects accomplishes the goal of purifying the people during of the holiest time of the year. This is a truly lovely take on the erotic dynamics of Kabbalah.

COUPLING WITHIN PHENOMENA

Rachel and Leah

Among the deepest and most evocative teachings about gender in Jewish sacred texts are those involving the dynamics of the biblical matriarchs Rachel and Leah, two of the most central ancestors of the Jewish people. We will explore their story through some layers of text, approaching it as a phenomenon. We start in the middle of the story, in Genesis 30:14–24. In this passage, the sisters Rachel and Leah, who are both married to Jacob, bargain with each other for the mandrakes that were found by Leah’s son Reuben. The mandrakes are valued as an aid to fertility. In the trade they arrange, Leah gets to spend the night with Jacob, who prefers Rachel. Rachel, who has been infertile, gets the mandrakes. Leah, after her night with Jacob, conceives and gives birth to Issachar. Rachel then conceives and gives birth to Joseph. Who, then, is responsible for each of these children’s formation? Reuben? Rachel? Leah? Rachel and Leah together? Jacob? God? The mandrakes themselves?¹³ The *phenomenon* that brings each of these children to birth extends far beyond the male-female duos whose egg and sperm were involved.

Phenomena from a Physics Perspective

When I use the term *phenomenon*, I am referring specifically to the definitions of the term used by physicist Niels Bohr, and developed by philosopher, physicist and queer theorist Karen Barad, in their theory “agential realism.”¹⁴ Getting a clear sense of this concept takes us now on a detour into the philosophy of physics. Barad defines phenomena like this: “Phenomena are entanglements of spacetime-mattering, not in the colloquial sense of a connection or intertwining of individual entities, but rather in the technical sense of “quantum entanglements,” which are the (ontological) inseparability of agentially intra-acting “components.”¹⁵

An example Barad uses to illustrate these concepts is that of measurement of the position and momentum of a particle.¹⁶ Quantum physics brings to our attention the problem that it is impossible to measure both of these variables at the same time, because the measurement of *position* requires an apparatus with fixed parts (for example, a photographic plate supported by a fixed platform, which doesn't move while a photon hits the plate, whereas measuring *momentum* requires an apparatus with movable parts—a platform which moves as the photon hits it, thus enabling it to measure momentum. Barad explains that Bohr concludes that on this basis “there is no unambiguous way to differentiate between the ‘object’ and the ‘agencies of observation.’”¹⁷ In the case of a position measurement, the photon is part of the agencies of measurement, whereas in the case of the measurement of momentum, the photon is the object of measurement. Therefore,

*The boundary between the “object of observation” and the “agencies of observation” is indeterminate in the absence of a specific physical arrangement of the apparatus. What constitutes the object of observation and what constitutes the agencies of observation are determinable only on the condition that the measurement apparatus is specified. The apparatus enacts a cut delineating the object from the agencies of observation. Clearly, then . . . observations do not refer to properties of observation-independent objects (since they don't preexist as such).*¹⁸

Barad thus explains the notion of phenomena (emphasis mine):

Since individually determinate entities do not exist, measurements do not entail an interaction between separate entities; rather, determinate entities emerge from their intra-action. I introduce the term “intra-action” in recognition of their ontological inseparability, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which relies on a metaphysics of individualism (in particular, the prior existence of separately determinate entities). *A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an “object” and the “measuring agencies”; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them. Crucially, then, we should understand phenomena not as objects-in-themselves, or as perceived objects (in the Kantian or phenomenological sense), but as specific intra-actions.*¹⁹

Understanding the arising of children in the mandrake story as intra-actions within a phenomenon makes it clear that there are no inherently determinate pre-existing entities, such as an individual named Rachel, or Leah, or Jacob, or their children, but rather these “individuals,” and the rest of the phenomenon of which they are a part, arise out of their intra-actions, which include the entire apparatus of which they are a part.

And there is no determinate end to the boundaries of an apparatus. Barad illustrates this by telling the story of the 1922 Stern-Gerlach experiment, which attempted to prove space quantization (the fact that electrons only inhabit specific orbits, and can't be in between those locations).²⁰ Their measurement apparatus used beams of silver atoms to make marks on a photographic plate. Their labors seemed to be showing nothing, until Gerlach handed the photographic plate to Stern, and as he breathed on it, the image they were seeking emerged. Stern was an assistant professor with a low salary, so he smoked cheap cigars, which contained a lot of sulfur. The sulfur combined with the silver to make the image visible. Barad explains:

Apparatuses are not static laboratory setups but a dynamic set of open-ended practices, iteratively refined and reconfigured . . . a cigar is among the significant materials that are relevant to the operation and success of the experiment . . . Not any cigar will do. Indeed, the cigar is a 'condensation'—a 'nodal point' as it were—of the workings of other apparatuses, including class, nationalism, economics, and gender, all of which are a part of this Stern-Gerlach apparatus . . . in this case, material practices that contributed to the production of gendered individuals also contributed to the materialization of this particular scientific result . . . : 'objects' and 'subjects' are coproduced through specific kinds of material-discursive practices. Stern's gendered and classed performance of masculinity (e.g., through his cigar smoking) mattered . . . This example not only illustrates the dynamic nature of scientific practices and the lack of a determinate outside boundary to the apparatus but also clearly suggests that humans enter not as fully formed, preexisting subjects but as subjects intra-actively co-constituted through the material-discursive practices that they engage in.²¹

So in the phenomenon of Rachel, Leah and Jacob's family, one might explore the extent of the apparatus of which they are a part. One might want to explore questions of "class, nationalism, economics, and gender." And clearly, this web of connection that produced children is not a simple binary process. One need not imagine the process of creation—divine, human, or any other—as something involving solely two determinately individual, determinately sexed beings—in this case, Jacob and Rachel or Jacob and Leah. It is clear that Rachel and Leah (as well as the mandrakes) were more in control of the reproductive activity of the family than Jacob was, so the common kabbalistic image for creative flow involving Jacob/*Tiferet* giving,²² and Rachel/*Malchut* receiving, is clearly simplistic. But even more—understanding the mandrake story as a phenomenon, all the entities that appear to be separate "individuals" can be seen as "iteratively refined and reconfigured," arising through a process of being "intra-actively co-constituted through the material-discursive practices that they engage in." This expansion of awareness of relationality

opens up new ways of looking at what it means to be part of the process of creating life.

Rachel and Leah as the Phenomenon of Breasts

In Jewish sacred traditions, Rachel and Leah are often imagined as the two breasts,²³ flowing nourishment and blessing into the world. They are associated with the upper and lower Mother *partzufim* of the Tree of Life, and we will discuss their kabbalistic unification shortly. But of note here is that the word for mandrakes, *dudaim*, is taken in midrashic tradition as related to the root for breast, *dad*. The mandrakes, then, are a reminder that the two sisters are part of one phenomenon—the two breasts may appear separate, and they certainly are distinguishable, but they are nonetheless clearly part of the larger apparatus of a body. As such, what occurs between them is intra-action, out of which their identities arise.²⁴

As Ellen Davina Haskell has explored so beautifully in her book, *Suckling At My Mother's Breasts*,²⁵ the image of breasts and breastfeeding is used in Jewish tradition to evoke the giving of everflow (*shefa*) and blessing to the world. The flow of milk is also identified with the transmission of Torah and Jewish identity.²⁶ One of the most central Hebrew prayers, the *Aleinu*, contains the phrase “to repair the world with the kingdom of *Shaddai*.” a name for the divine that is often translated into English as ‘Almighty.’ It is etymologically related to a word for mountain, but homiletically and homologically refers to *shaddayim*, another word for breasts.²⁷ A Lurianic²⁸ prayerbook suggests that this prayer phrase is referring to Rachel and Leah.²⁹ That is, to repair the world with the kingdom of *Shaddai* means to repair the world with the divine Name that implies breasts, and evokes the aspects of Rachel and Leah. World repair happens by means of the power of the Mother, whose breasts remind us that those entities that appear separate are actually part of a larger phenomenon. The flow of blessing into the world comes from the two female *partzufim*, the Upper and Lower Mothers, Binah and Malchut, Leah and Rachel. That is, the givers of flow are both female.³⁰

The Indeterminacy of Rachel and Leah

Now we return to the Torah story of Rachel and Leah. Genesis 29:16–28 describes what happened before they were married to Jacob. Jacob loved Rachel, but Rachel’s father, Lavan, tricked Jacob, into marrying Rachel’s older sister, Leah, instead. After they spend their wedding night together, Jacob discovers the switch, and arranges to marry Rachel as well. A variety of Midrashim³¹ attempt to solve the problem of why Jacob took so long to figure

out what was happening, and explore what was going on between Rachel and Leah. *Genesis Rabbah* 70:19 tells it like this: “The whole of that night he called her ‘Rachel,’ and she answered him. In the morning, however, ‘behold it was Leah.’³² That is, Leah replies as if she were Rachel, not herself.

Lamentations Rabbah, Prologue 24, relates that at the time of the destruction of the Temple, and the beginning of the Babylonian exile, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, as well as Moses, were brought before the Holy Blessed One. Each made an argument justifying why God should have compassion on the children of Israel, based on his own meritorious acts, but none convinced the Holy One. Finally, Rachel burst forth, and gave an argument that convinced the One to say “For your sake, Rachel I will restore Israel.” Here is part of what the Midrash tells us Rachel said:

Sovereign of the Universe . . . my father planned to substitute another for me to wed my husband for the sake of my sister. It was very hard for me, because the plot was known to me and I disclosed it to my husband; and I gave him a sign whereby he could distinguish between me and my sister, so that my father should not be able to make the substitution. After that I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame. In the evening they substituted my sister for me with my husband, and I delivered over to my sister all the signs that I had arranged with my husband so that he should think that she was Rachel. More than that, I went beneath the bed upon which he lay with my sister; and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I made all the replies in order that he should not recognize my sister’s voice. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame . . .³³

Whereas in *Genesis Rabbah*, Leah spoke as if she were Rachel, here *Lamentations Rabbah* explains that Rachel replied as if she were Leah, who was herself pretending to be Rachel. In these stories, the two sisters’ identities are what quantum physics would call indeterminate. By indeterminate, I don’t mean uncertain.³⁴ According to some perspectives, there are measurements that are uncertain, because they can’t be fully measured. This is the view that 20th century physicist Werner Heisenberg expressed in his famous uncertainty principle—the idea that, for example, one can’t measure the position and momentum of a particle simultaneously, because when one of these things is measured, the observer disturbs the other variable, thus making it impossible to know both at the same time. But returning to what we discussed earlier, Niels Bohr had a different understanding of what the measurement problem entailed: As Barad explains it, for Bohr “observations do not refer to properties of observation-independent objects (since they don’t preexist as such).” That is, the qualities of position and momentum are not uncertain, in that one is disturbed in measuring the other, but rather they are indeterminate—not that one doesn’t know the full measurement of something, but that

the thing *has no* pre-existing determinate measurement to know.³⁵ The same idea that holds for the position and momentum of a particle also holds for determining whether an entity is a particle or a wave.³⁶ That is, not only the properties of something (i.e. an entity's position or momentum), but its very nature—whether it is a particle or a wave—is inherently indeterminate in the absence of a particular apparatus. Barad concludes:

*So the very nature of the entity—its ontology—changes (or rather becomes differently determinate) depending on the experimental apparatus used to determine its nature. For Bohr . . . the objective referent for concepts, like “wave” and “particle,” is not a determinately bounded object with inherent characteristics . . . but rather what he called a *phenomenon*—the entanglement/inseparability of “object” and “apparatus” (which do not preexist the experiment but rather emerge from it).³⁷*

It is Rachel's willingness to let go of her individual identity, her “nature,” to not be her “self,” or to let Leah be her, or to let the two of them be indeterminate, to be clearly part of the same phenomenon, that led to redemption.³⁸ What would the world be like if actions arose from awareness of “ongoing iteratively intra-active reconfiguring” within larger phenomena, rather than from imagining the world as made up of determinately separate small individuals? Perhaps that is redemption.

GENDER INDETERMINACY

As with any aspect of identity, or any measurable quality, gender can also be seen as inherently indeterminate. Gendering beings arise through iterative intra-actions, enacting specific agential cuts. Butler writes that: “. . . gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being . . . the ‘I’ neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within the matrix of gender relations themselves.”³⁹ Barad explains: “Gendering, Butler argues, is a temporal process that operates through the reiteration of norms. In other words, Butler is saying that gender is not an inherent feature of individuals, some core essence that is variously expressed through acts, gestures, and enactments, but an iterated doing through which subjects come into being.”⁴⁰

Gender and Other Indeterminacies of Leah and Rachel

The arising of identity and gender out of relational matrices can be seen at play throughout Jewish mystical texts. The Zohar comments on Genesis

29:31,⁴¹ “And Adonai saw that Leah was hated,” by using a verse from Psalm 113 (Ps 113:9): “He settles *aqeret habayit*, the barren woman in her home, as a joyous mother of children” saying, “He settles *aqeret habayit*—Rachel, *iqqara deveita*, essence of the house. As a joyous mother of children—Leah.” There is a lovely Hebrew/Aramaic play on words with the root *ayin quf resh*, taking *aqeret* “infertile woman” according to the plain meaning, and understanding it to mean another word that shares the same root—*iqqara*, “essence,” thus establishing first of all that whatever associations one might have with infertility, it does not mean that an infertile woman is not essential. The Zohar goes on to say that this verse means that God is transforming Rachel, *aqeret habayit*, the infertile or essential one of the household, into Leah, *em habanim s'meicha*, a happy mother of children. The text goes on to associate Rachel and Leah, respectively, with sabbatical year (*Shmitta*) and Jubilee (*Yovel*), revealed lower world, and concealed higher worlds, *Attah/You* and *Hu/He*, and implicitly, *Binah* and *Malchut*. Divine power shifts Rachel into the place of Leah. Not that Rachel becomes completely undifferentiable from Leah, but that they are clearly seen to be part of the same phenomenon, with boundaries that are ontologically indeterminate. And similarly, the indeterminacy of Rachel and Leah is overlaid with all the other levels of association listed by the Zohar—the seven year sabbatical and the fifty year Jubilee cycle; revealed and concealed worlds; You (second person) and He (third person); what might be imagined as inherently and determinately separate entities are shown to have indeterminate boundaries, identities that arise out of their intra-action within the phenomena of which they are part.

Another interesting implication of this Zohar passage is the association of Leah with the Hebrew name “*Hu*,” the English word “he.” Zohar I 154b examines an oddity of language in Genesis 30:16. In the English, it reads: “And Jacob came from the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, You must come in to me; for I have hired you with my son’s mandrakes. And he lay with her that night.” But the phrase “that night” in Hebrew is unusual—rather than the usual way to say “that night,” “*balaila hahu*,” it reads “*balaila hu*,” leaving out the prefix “*ha*” on “*hu*” which would have made the word meaning “that,” so that the plain meaning instead is “in the night—he.” The Zohar’s implication is that, (similar to the surprise Jacob felt on their wedding night, in Genesis 29:25), suddenly in the night—*balaila—hu!*—he! During their night together, Jacob somehow experienced Leah as “he.” The Zohar goes on to associate *Hu* with *Binah*, and explain that the reason Jacob hated Leah is that, just as *Binah* is the mother of *Tiferet*, which is associated with Jacob, Leah seemed like a mother to Jacob, so therefore she was not appealing to him as a partner. But the passage also may imply that what didn’t work for Jacob was the maleness of Leah/*Binah*.⁴²

The Zohar adds “how can you say ‘that Leah was hated’? . . . Jubilee is always a concealed world, none of whose matters are revealed; so all its actions were concealed from Jacob . . . All was concealed from Jacob, for the higher world is completely unrevealed . . . Jacob, aspiring, did not cleave to the concealed, rather to the revealed.”⁴³ The implication is that Jacob didn’t relate to Leah because he didn’t understand her—she was at too high a level for him. In the relation between Jacob and Leah the stereotypical gender dynamic is turned upside down.

It is clear that the relation between Leah and Jacob, or *Binah* and *Tiferet* in the language of Zohar, (or *Ima* and *Zeir Anpin* in Lurianic language), is one of active female and passive male. Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, in *HaSulam*, his Lurianic commentary on Zohar, comments on Zohar I 154a:

A happy mother of children: The Jubilee, which is Binah; all happiness, and all joy in all the worlds . . . are dependent on her, because the female (nukva) of Zeir Anpin has nothing on her own, only what Zeir Anpin receives from Binah, and directs the flow of toward her, and then she directs the flow to all the worlds. Behold, **all happiness that is in all the worlds . . . comes from Binah.**⁴⁴

So, why would one think on some essential level that the male is giver and the female receiver? It is necessary to rethink the whole system of gendered associations.

SHIFTING THE CENTRAL PAIR TO THE MOTHER AND HER CHILDREN

Another approach to the dynamics of creation and creating is evident in texts that focus on the relation of the Mother and her children. Zohar II 104b-105a⁴⁵, associates *Mi*, ‘who,’ with *Binah*, and *elleh*, ‘these’ with the twelve tribes of Israel. In this passage, *elleh* exists to spread the Name *Mi*, which in turn will encompass Israel in the divine name *Elohim*, the letters of which are formed by the joining together of the *Mi* and the *Elleh*. (*Elohim* is the name of God used in the Genesis creation story). But, this joining is threatened. As the text explains it:

For in exile, *mi*, Who, has withdrawn above—Mother, as it were, away from children and the children have fallen. And the name that was complete—that supernal, primordial, grand name—has fallen. For this we pray and sanctify in synagogue, that this name may be restored as it was: ‘May His great name be enhanced and sanctified!’ Who is ‘His name’? That ‘great’ one, first of all. For it has no structure without us: *Mi*, who, is never built up without *Elleh*, these. So,

at that time, *Mi elleh*, Who (are) these, that fly like a cloud? The whole world will see that supernal name has been restored to perfection.⁴⁶

This text is advocating for a focus on the unification of the name *Elohim*, by unifying the *mi* and the *elleh*, mother Binah and her children. This will lead to the world being whole, redeemed, and “fragrant” as the Zohar puts it. The text explains that the highest and most spiritually powerful response in Jewish liturgy—*yehei shmei rabbah mevorach*—May His great name be blessed—is referring to this process. Lurianic kabbalah often includes *kavvanot*, intentions to be said before engaging in a holy act, that state that the act is being done with the intention of unifying the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*⁴⁷ and the *Shechinah*,⁴⁸ but this Zohar asserts the centrality of the unification of the Mother and her children.⁴⁹

THE FLUIDITY OF IDENTITY AS IT ARISES OUT OF TEXT

Throughout the Zohar, (and other Jewish mystical texts to a lesser degree), associations of words, sefirot, concepts, and genders shift between passages, and even within them. For example, Zohar I: 2a at one point associates *Elleh* with Leah, as the words are anagrams of each other, and also associates *Elleh/Leah* with *Binah*, associating *Mi* with *Hochmah*, but in another part of the same passage, it associates *Mi* with *Binah*, *Elleh* with the lower six sefirot, and *Mah* with Malchut. In that same passage, Malchut borrows Binah’s male garments and then appears as *Elohim*, the combination of Binah and the lower six sefirot. What are seen as individual entities, and what are not, what is entangled with what, and in what ways, has to do with the phenomena and apparatuses involved—”the entanglement—the ontological inseparability—of intra-acting agencies.”⁵⁰

THE INDETERMINACY OF INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Lurianic kabbalah goes into more detail about the structure of the relationship between Rachel/*Malchut* and Leah/*Binah*, or in Lurianic terms, *Nukva* (Female) and *Ima* (Mother). 18th century kabbalist R. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto explains that according to Lurianic tradition,⁵¹ Leah is the back of *Ima*, and the inner aspect of *Nukva*, Rachel is the front of *Ima* and the outer aspect of *Nukva*.⁵² In the texts we have already discussed, it was clear that Rachel and Leah have indeterminate boundaries and identities, and at times it appears that they can become one another; if so, it seems that Luzzatto could have been describing the shape of a Klein bottle. A Klein bottle is a topological

structure in which the inside becomes the outside, becomes the inside. Similar to the more familiar Mobius strip, a surface with one continuous side formed by joining the ends of a rectangular strip after twisting one end 180°, a Klein bottle is a closed surface with only one side, formed by passing one end of a tube through the side of the tube and joining it to the other end. It is possible to make a close approximation of a Klein bottle out of two Mobius strips zipped together along their edge. One could imagine *Binah* and *Malchut* as a pair of Mobius strips, each one with Leah on one side and Rachel on the other, becoming the other as one follows the strip around, and then when *Binah* and *Malchut* are zipped together, unified, so to speak, the result is a Klein bottle that could describe the structure Luzzatto draws. That is, if *Malchut* and *Binah*, daughter and Mother, or two sisters, Rachel and Leah, are unified—that is, seen as part of the same apparatus or phenomenon—the result is a Klein bottle. Again, the dynamic has shifted from *Zeir Anpin*⁵³ giving to *Nukva* as the primary focus, where the goal is the unification of the Holy Blessed One and Shekhina. The influx from *Zeir Anpin*, which comes from *Ima*, could be seen as being for the sake of unification, or perhaps interplay, of the two female aspects, *Ima/Binah/Leah* and *Nukva/Malchut/Rachel*. The sisters, who are also mother and daughter, front and back, inner and outer, in an endlessly shifting dynamic, are the central pair.

It then becomes clear that the whole process of inside and outside can be understood like this, one becoming the other. In Lurianic Kabbalah, (which describes the structure of the process of emanation of creation that started with transcendent nothingness, and chained down into the material world), there is a series of switches between the higher level being on the inside, and the lower on the outside, and the higher level being outside, and the lower level inside. The entire system is a Klein bottle, or rather, a series of Klein bottles.⁵⁴

REDEMPTION AS CONSCIOUS ACCEPTANCE OF INDETERMINACY

Joseph Gikatilla, in *Sha'arei Orah (Gates of Light)*, associates *Binah* with the divine name that is spelled *YHVH* but vocalized as *Elohim*,⁵⁵. Writing about the need to connect the upper and lower Shechinahs (that is, *Binah* and *Malchut*), Gikatilla writes:

Those therefore who know how to please their Creator know how to repair the way to the SHECHINAH, to bring her back to her place and to repair the channels that have been ruined; then the upper SHECHINAH will bestow her blessings upon the upper beings, which allows the other Spheres to fill the lower SHECHINAH, and that allows her to return to her place to bring forth blessing

to the world . . . this notion is in the verse which applies to both of them: ‘And you know on this day and you will take it to your heart that YHVH is ELOHIM in the heavens above . . .’—this is referring to the lower SHECHINAH⁵⁶ (Deuteronomy 4:39). If you would say from this that there are two separate realms, God forbid, know that they are only one—‘For YHVH, He is the ELOHIM in the heavens above and in the earth below, there is no other.’⁵⁷

Gikatilla teaches here that the two mother aspects of the divine, *Binah* and *Malchut*, or the upper and lower Shechinah, are called by two central of divine names, YHVH and Elohim—and that the book of Deuteronomy, (in a verse quoted in a prayer that is said multiple times a day), is making it clear that even though they seem like two separate entities, they are actually part of the same divine phenomenon. The realization, and enactment, that these two levels, *Binah* and *Malchut*, are only *agentially separable* is what redeems the world, because reuniting these two aspects, or recognizing they are not essentially separate, is what allows the everflow of life and blessing to pour forth into the world.

In a section following the passage from *Gates of Light* referred to earlier, (about the unification of *Binah* and *Malchut* on Yom Kippur), Gikatilla comments on Isaiah 1:18, “If your sins are like crimson, they will be bleached as the snow,” saying

The upper Sphere [that is, Binah], is called LeBaNON [same root as the word for white], and the other [Malchut] is seen to be dressed in crimson, so Israel must transform its crimson garments into white ones, and that is why it is called YOM HaKiPURIM, and this is the essence of the crimson which was bleached as an atonement in Temple ritual, for the Sphere BINAH appeared to enlighten the Sphere MaLHUT . . .⁵⁸

What brings atonement at Yom Kippur, described by tradition as scarlet thread becoming white, can be understood as *Malchut* becoming *Binah*—or, in other terms, Rachel becoming Leah. This is what brings redemption.⁵⁹

The redemptive act is Rachel’s love of Leah, and her willingness to be Leah, and let Leah be her. Becoming Leah means becoming the concealed, the genderqueer, the mother, the back, the inner, the creator, the primordial name. It means accepting indeterminacy. It means recognizing that the whole purpose of creation is what is taking place within the Creator, within Elohim, a reuniting of Rachel and Leah, a recognition that the separation between Mother and child is purely an agential cut, as are all other separations.

Not that there is no differentiation to be found—differentiation is what makes creation possible, what allows for giving and receiving, what allows for play. And most certainly, gender play is among the most joyous aspects of creation. Yet recognizing that there is no need to focus solely on one par-

ticular aspect of that play, a vertical heterosexual union, but rather a multitude of unifications can be recognized, celebrated, and enacted—those between the Mother and her children, between the two mothers, the two sisters, and many more—adds so much to the richness of life, of love, of identity, and ultimately of experience of divine presence in the world and in life.⁶⁰

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NOTES

1. Karen Barad, "TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): doi:10.1215/106142684-2843239.
2. Ya'akov Yosef of Polonoye, *Toldot Ya'akov Yosef*, quoted by Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990).
3. See the work of Daniel Boyarin, particularly *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man*.
4. The term Midrash refers to the rabbinic tradition of stories and legal interpretations based on oral traditions related to the Hebrew Bible. Some use the term only to apply to ancient and medieval rabbinic texts, while others include what might be called "modern midrash," sacred stories that are still being crafted.
5. Sarah Schneider, *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 2001), 31.
6. In addition to what is discussed here, consider the diversity of biological sex of intersex people.
7. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits Of 'Sex'* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 1–2
8. Butler here focuses on the ways in which sex is formed by discursive practices. I would argue, along with Barad, that sex and gender are co-constituted.
9. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, *Yishmrū Daat: Hasidic Teachings of the Fourth Turning* (Boulder: Albion-Andalus Books, 2013). Emphasis in the original.
10. Jeremiah 31:21
11. Sanford Drob, www.newkabbalah.com gives this definition: "The *Sefirot* (singular *Sefirah*) which are almost always conceived to be ten in number, are the building blocks of creation, the archetypes of existence, the traits of God, and the primary values of the world." Please refer to the diagram of the Tree of Life on page ___ to see some of the traditional associations of the sefirot that I will refer to in this chapter.

12. Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, (Jerusalem: הַמָּוֶל, 2004), 346–347. Translation mine. Thank you to Nathaniel Berman for pointing this text out to me many years ago

13. The Hebrew word for mandrakes, *dudaim*, shares a root with words for breasts, beloved, cauldron, and an epithet for G-d. How could they not be involved in the process?

14. Thank you to Karen Barad for the many shared flights of mind in which we read these stories through one another.

15. Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Kvinder, Køn and Forskning* 12 (2012): 32.

16. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

17. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 114.

18. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 114. Emphasis in the original.

19. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 128. Emphasis mine, except for first emphasized phrase, which is in the original.

20. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 161–68.

21. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 167–68.

22. In the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, *Tiferet* (Beauty) is the sefirah that is generally associated with the *Kadosh Baruch Hu*, or Holy Blessed One, who in unifying with the lowest sphere *Malchut*, (Kingdom) associated with the female immanent presence of the divine, brings life into the world. These aspects are associated with Jacob and Rachel, and in Lurianic kabbalah with the *partzufim* of son and daughter, also called “small face” (*Zeir Anpin*) and “female” (*Nukva*). A *partzuf*, (plural *partzufim*), literally “persona” is a configuration of a sefirah or sefirot into an interface, which acts as a filter and connector of the flow of divine emanation from the infinite source to the created world. Please refer to the chart on page ___ to see how these qualities exist within a larger schema.

23. See Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, *English in Gates of Light*, The Eight Gate, the Third Sphere, pg 303, Avi Weinstein translator; Zohar II 22a and Daniel Matt fins, *Siddur Oz HaTefillah*, R. Yehudah Shaharabani on *b'Malchut Shaddai* in *Aleinu*

24. A similar image appears in the Torah’s description of the *cheruvim*, angels, on the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies (the holiest place in Jewish tradition): the two of them were to be hammered out of one piece of gold—like the breasts, a teaching that what appear to be separate entities are part of a larger phenomenon. For more on this topic, see my upcoming article.

25. Ellen Davina Haskell, *Suckling at my Mother’s Breasts: The Image of a Nursing God in Jewish Mysticism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012).

26. See Haskell, *Suckling at my Mother’s Breasts: The Image of a Nursing God in Jewish Mysticism*.

27. See David Biale, “The God with Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible,” *History of Religions* 21, no. 3 (1982): 240–256 for more on this topic.

28. Lurianic kabbalah, developed by Rabbi Isaac Luria and his followers in the 16th century, was a transformative and complex development inspired by the Zohar, which has had tremendous influence on kabbalah since then.

29. Yehudah Ben G'org'i Eliyah Shahaarabani, *'Oz ha-tefilah: Siddur Tefilat Shaḥarit: 'im leḳeṭ ḳitsur Ḳavanot ha-Ari* (Petach Tikvah: Y. Shahaarabani, 1998).

30. However, interestingly, Haskell points out many midrashim where breastfeeding is associated with the patriarchs, queering the image; one midrash imagines Mordechai breastfeeding his niece Esther, others picture Moses and Aaron, and Torah scholars in general, as breasts.

31. In addition to the pieces mentioned below, also see *Baba Batra* 123a.

32. Genesis 29:25.

33. Adapted from the Soncino Classics translation.

34. Many thanks to Karen Barad for drawing out this crucial distinction in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* and elsewhere.

35. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 114, and elsewhere.

36. See *ibid*, chapter 3 for a full discussion of this idea.

37. Barad, *Nature's Queer Performativity*, 42. Emphasis in the original.

38. Redemption is one of the most central concepts in Judaism, and can be understood to mean communal liberation from suffering.

39. Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 7.

40. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 57.

41. Zohar I 154a-b, translation Daniel Matt.

42. This is supported by a variety of texts that discuss *Binah's* maleness. For example, see Zohar I, 1b-2a.

43. Zohar I 154a-b, translation Daniel Matt.

44. R. Yehuda Ashlag, *Sefer Zohar Peirush HaSulam*, Vol 5, 65, translation mine. Bold reflects bold in the original.

45. As well as other sections of the Zohar, including I: 1–2.

46. Zohar II 105a, translation Daniel Matt.

47. The Holy Blessed One, often but not always associated with *Tiferet* and Jacob.

48. Associated with *Malchut*, and sometimes Rachel.

49. This may reverberate in the text referred to earlier by Rabbi Shachter-Shalomi, in which the lovers are children who suckle together at the breasts of the mother. In that image, the lovers are receiving flow together, and ultimately, the most primary unification is between each of the children and the mother.

50. "Intra-actions," an interview with Karen Barad, PhD by Adam Kleinman in *Mousse Magazine*, 2012, 77. This use of the term entanglement follows the technical quantum sense and is not restricted to its colloquial usage.

51. Moshe Chaim Luzzatto *Klach Pitchei Hochmah*, 138 *Openings of Wisdom*, Translated by Avraham Yehoshua Greenbaum (Jerusalem: Azamra Institute, 2005).

52. Please refer to the chart to see where these are situated on the Tree of Life.

53. The Lurianic term for the *partzuf* that includes *Tiferet*, often associated with Jacob.

54. The biggest of these Klein bottles includes the two paradigms for the structure of emanation, the *Iggulim* and the *Yosher*, but there are many others, which will be the topic of another paper.

55. Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, Beginning of The Eight Gate, The Third Sphere. In English, 28.

56. This verse from Deuteronomy is part of the same prayer for redemption mentioned earlier, the *Aleinu*, in which Lurianic commentary references Rachel and Leah.

57. Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, 303–4.

58. Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, 305.

59. There are fascinating connections between this indeterminacy, and the one involving the two goats that are sacrificed at Yom Kippur, but this is beyond the limits of this chapter.

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