

The Union of Opposites in the Kabbalah

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Abstract

The union of opposites in the Kabbalah (the Tree of Life) and in alchemy is discussed. The kabbalistic tree of life represents the dynamic aspect of the divine being and, psychologically, of the Self. The symbolic, archetypal aspect of sexuality is shown as a *mysterium coniunctionis*. The Song of Songs, the biblical erotic poem, is added as an amplification of the masculine-feminine union.

Keywords

Kabbalah, Sephiroth, alchemy, coniunctio.

Whereas Christian culture elaborated the idea of the union of opposites within the framework of alchemy, the Kabbalah formulated its ideas within the system of the Sephiroth, which Jung (1963a) defined as “a highly differentiated coniunctio symbol” (para. 652). The union takes place within the Tree of Life. It represents divine powers with branches made up of the ten Sephiroth, which could be defined as non-figurative archetypal constellations. They can be seen as stages, aspects, attributes, hypostases, principles, emanations, names, lights, and powers (energies).

Modern individuals have trouble accepting the existence of a reality that cannot be formulated in rational terms. The urge to know where we come from and where we are going to is the basis of human development. Lurking in this desire to know is hubris—the belief that, in time, we will surely find the answers to the secrets of creation. In hubris, human beings lose the numinous sense of a reality that exists beyond intellectual knowledge. The Tree of Life represents this dynamic aspect of the divine being or, in psychological terms, the Self. The right side of the tree is male, the left, female. The central column represents the union (*zivug*). Each Sephirah represents a branch and their common root is unknown and unknowable.

Concerning parallels between alchemy and Kabbalah, Jung (1959) states: “The coniunctio oppositorum engaged the speculations of the alchemists in the form of the ‘Chymical Wedding,’ and those of the cabalists in the form of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* or God and the *Shekhinah*, not to speak of the Marriage of the Lamb” (p. 425).

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The original unity is divided into two, based on the names of the two Sephiroth, “Benevolence” and “Restraint” (*Hesed* and *Din*), which are to be found at all levels of the Tree of Life and express the simultaneous presence and the opposition of female and male energy.

The Ten Sephiroth

The ten Sephiroth constitute a unity in diversity, and represent the emanation of the one God (*En-Sof*). The first and highest of the ten Sephiroth is *Keter*. It is also called *Ain* [Nothingness], referring to that which cannot be known. Scholem (1946) describes *Keter* as “the abyss which becomes visible in the gaps of existence” (p. 217). According to Kaplan (1990),

Keter is the interface between the Infinite, the “*En-Sof*,” and the creation. It is completely hidden and incomprehensible and partakes of the very quality of infinity that makes it impossible to speak about *En-Sof* itself. Like a crown that rests on top of the head, it is not part of the “body.” Indeed, it is for this very reason that *Keter* is sometimes not included among the ten Sephiroth. (p. 51)

Keter can rarely be experienced, only in deep mystical submersion. In the individuation process, as described by Jung, it is the *experience* of the Self.

Although Kabbalah emphasizes the feminine element more strongly than normative Judaism, it still retains the image of the father God as creator. The ten Sephiroth of the Tree of Life appear below in schematic form (Scholem, 1946, p. 214):



Da`at is a complementary Sephirah that was included in the Tree at the end of the thirteenth century. It was positioned in an intermediate space between *Hokhmah*

(the right side) and *Binah* (the left side), almost a product of the tension between them and functioning as a kind of harmonizing agent. Rather than a distinct, separate Sefirah, *Da`at* represents the external aspect of *Keter* (Scholem, 1946, p. 107).

In the parallel with the human body, *Da`at* occupies the middle position between the two parts of the brain. Being in the middle, it unites the opposites and bridges the paradox. Together, *Hokhmah*, *Binah*, and *Da`at* make up the mental base underlying all creative expression. The basic ability to communicate and construct an intelligent relationship with the outside world is the specific function of *Da`at*, the “quasi-Sefirah.”

Knowledge, then, is equivalent to the complete union of opposites. The only way for man and woman to love each other, not only physically but also spiritually, is to remove all the barriers that separate them. In essence, a man and a woman in love can reach closeness as no two other human beings can. Possibly, this is why the Torah resorts to the concept of *da`at* (knowledge), especially for Adam and Eve (Kaplan, 1990, pp. 52, 53). The Bible uses the word “to know” for intercourse: the man knows the woman and the woman knows the man (Genesis 4:1 and Genesis 19:8).

The union of male and female opposites is a topic that Jung (1963a, passim) discusses extensively as the mystery of union, *mysterium coniunctionis*, which involves a spiritual meaning latent in the secret of creation as a whole. As in nature children are conceived through sexual union, so the integration of the contrasexual part (animus and anima) in the individuation process is sometimes experienced as a sexual union. Often, however, sexuality is linked only to lust and physical pleasure and experienced unconsciously, without much awareness of its symbolic meaning. But from a deeper perspective, sexuality is an archetypal activity that involves a spiritual dimension, even if the participants are not necessarily aware of it during the experience.

Jung (1954) sheds light on symbolic aspects of sexuality: “Parallel to the conscious Man-Woman relationship, there is a relationship of anima to animus and vice versa” (paras. 422–424), and further on refers to “the archetype of the crossed marriage which I call the ‘marriage quaternity’” (para. 425). Sexuality thus symbolizes the union of the feminine and masculine principles and, as a mystical, numinous experience, must also be approached in symbolic terms.

The Love Relationship in the Song of Songs

This erotic poem deals with the mystery of the male-female relationship. It describes romantic love and passion, a mutual song of love between man and woman whose images stir the deepest layers of the soul. The partners describe each other through beautiful metaphors, comparing the loved one to marvellous mountains, rare cities, beautiful flowers, and gentle animals. The metaphors denote the symbolic level of the relationship, pointing to a reality beyond the partners’ conscious relationship that hints at the divine, at another realm and an unspeakable mystery. The mystery of love is a fascinating secret, an impenetrable enigma that no psychological interpretation can possibly “explain.” The poem is moving because of its mythical and mystical character, an experience that belongs in the realm of feeling and hints at the beyond, turning love into a mystical experience.

In the poem, the two protagonists are equals. Their names, Shulammite and Shlomoh, derive from the Hebrew root *sh-l-m* that denotes both peace and wholeness. The dual nature of their names, simultaneously private and transpersonal, turns them into a quintessential embodiment of the man-woman relationship. The Shulammite enchants Shlomoh, who describes her beauty in strikingly rich and poetic terms through metaphors borrowed from nature that allude to earth-linked, symbolic, and archetypal aspects. The lover is carried away by the collective unconscious into the realm of the animus and anima union. Regardless of the reading one chooses, the Song of Songs shows that the union of man and woman can be an experience of the paradox of the Self, that is, the conjunction of opposites. The result of this experience is the sense of Oneness, a feeling of peace with oneself and with the world.

The Partzufim Doctrine: Countenances or Archetypal Images

About four hundred years ago in Safed, Isaac Luria introduced a new system to describe processes within the Godhead that involve *Partzufim*, or, psychologically speaking, archetypal images in human form. Whereas the ten Sephiroth, the older system of godly emanation, had represented abstract concepts, the five *Partzufim* are personalized. The interaction between them is mythical and thus closer to psychological understanding. The concept appears in the Zohar. Scholem (1946) notes that anthropomorphic thought wins here its greatest victory in the history of Jewish mysticism and “these symbols reflect highly developed mystical meditations...almost impenetrable to rational thought...this symbolism is of a somewhat crude texture” (pp. 269–273). For Scholem, the symbols of “Mother,” “Father,” “Son,” and “Daughter” in the *Partzufim* myth are crude by comparison to the abstract concept of divine emanation in the Sephirot.

There are five major *Partzufim*. *Keter* (1) is now *Arikh Anpin*, “the Long Suffering,” representing pure mercy and divine love. (In the Zohar, *Arikh Anpin* is also called *Attika Kadisha*, the Holy Ancient One.) This is the highest sefirah. *Arikh Anpin* also means slow to anger, namely, patient (from the Aramaic root *Anaf* and the Hebrew root *Af*, meaning anger). He is also a grandfather, as is *Keter Hokhmah* (2) and *Binah* (3) become the *Partzufim* of father and mother, *Abba* and *Ima*. They are separated, but joined in an eternal union (*zivug*). *Ze`ir Anpin* (4) comprises the six lower Sephiroth and means the short face or the short nose, the impatient, as opposed to *Arikh Anpin*. He is the son. *Nukvah* (5) (the feminine) is *Malkhut*, the tenth sefirah. She is both the daughter and the son’s consort.

Following is a diagram of the *Partzufim* scheme:



Psychologically, the *Partzuf* Father and the *Partzuf* Mother are the primal archetypal images of the "Great Father" and the "Great Mother." The *Partzuf* Daughter and the *Partzuf* Son correspond to the transformative character of the archetypes. The Grandfather would correspond to the creative principle or energy.

Evidence of the Kabbalah's ascription of greater weight to feminine elements is the naming of *Partzufim* (2) and (3) "Father" and "Mother" and *Partzufim* (4) and (5) "Son" and "Daughter." This increased emphasis on the feminine, which meets the needs of modern consciousness, is also manifest in the new and definite stress on the feminine aspect of the Godhead. Kaplan (1990) deals with the relationship of feminine and masculine figures in the *Partzufim* system:

We will now analyze the relationship between *Abba* and *Ima* (father and mother) and *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Nukva* (son and daughter). A cursory examination of the *Ets Hayyim* or the *Idrot* shows that many of the symbolism are highly sexual. The connection between *Abba* and *Ima* is referred to as *Zivug*, which literally means sexual union or attachment: this is a symbolism that we will find throughout the discussion of the *Partzufim*. (p. 105)

He then states: "As the Ari describes it, there is an entire process by which *Ze'ir Anpin* is born. It starts with a Kiss between *Abba* and *Ima*, which then develops into a *Zivug*. We understand of course that these relationships have a very deep symbolic meaning. The Song of Songs, for instance, begins with the verse 'Let him kiss me with the kisses of His lips'" (ibid.).

Kisses are part of the foreplay to the sexual union that may induce pregnancy. The kiss is a symbol of love, as Kaplan (1990) further states: "To the Kabbalists, a kiss symbolizes the meeting of minds, whereas a *zivug* represents the melting of bodies, of total essence" (p. 105).

The kiss is a meeting of lips, mouths, and tongues, alluding to the meeting of heads, minds, and souls. The melting of the bodies represents the total essence, namely, mystical oneness in the orgasm. The numinosity of the experience is explained by the analogy between the human and the divine copulation (between *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Nukva*). Kaplan then develops the relationship in the divine sphere:

Abba and *Ima* come together and *Ima* becomes pregnant with *Ze'ir Anpin*; she carries him, gives birth to him and nurses him. She then becomes pregnant a second time, the second pregnancy being not a physical but rather a mental pregnancy which develops *Ze'ir Anpin's Mochin*, his personality, and *Nukva de Ze'ir Anpin*, who is his sister. (pp. 105–106)

The passage refers to both a physical and a mental pregnancy. The former brought forth the son, and the latter is a mental addition that is also the sister, his anima, his soul. At the subjective level, a man must integrate his feminine side in order to become a spiritual being. Furthermore:

Ze'ir Anpin and *Nukva* are thus brother and sister but their relationship culminates in their becoming bride and groom as well.

This is the concept of *Ahoti Kalah*, “my sister, my bride” that we find throughout the Song of Songs. It represents the highest level of *zivug* (attachment) that can exist between a man and a woman, because among other things, *Ze`ir Anpin* and *Nukva* are paradigmatic human beings. (Kaplan, 1990, p. 105)

In this section, brother and sister become bride and groom, a clear indication of incest. Incest takes place in the collective unconscious (Jung, 1959, paras. 20–42), in the union (*zivug*) of the masculine and feminine archetypal images (animus and anima). An incest dream is of foremost significance: it shows the tendency of the psyche to integrate the contrasexual part, turning the union of masculine and feminine into a new whole. Incest at an early stage of development is interpreted reductively: the masculine ego is bound to the mother, which hinders him from developing into a mature human being.

The only difference is that on the level of *Atsilut* [the domain of the Sephirot and the Partsufim] the *Zivug* of *Ahoti Kalah* is permitted, while for human beings it is strictly forbidden. Thus, in *Derekh Mitsvotekha* from the Tsemah Tsedek (Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, 1789–1866), we find that the reason the Torah prohibits this brother-sister relationship is because it is so holy that human beings dare not do it. (Kaplan, 1990, p. 106)

The incest prohibition or barrier is now explained. *Atsilut* is one aspect of the collective unconscious. At its deepest level, the Song of Songs portrays incest between brother and sister. Incest is prohibited between human beings because of anthropological and psychological reasons. Symbolically, however, incest represents the union of opposites. It is a feeling of joy. It is a numinous experience conveying the feeling of being on the road to individuation:

According to the Kabbalah, therefore, when Abraham and Isaac both called their wives “sister,” they meant it in the sense of *Ahoti Kalah* (my sister, my bride). They were indicating that their relationships with their wives, Sarah and Rebecca, were exact counterparts to that of *Ze`ir Anpin* and *Nukva*. They were really telling a spiritual truth rather than a physical one. (Kaplan, 1990, p. 106)

This explains the incestuous relationship between the patriarch Abraham and the matriarch Sarah, who were actually half-brother and sister, whereas for Isaac, calling his wife Rebecca his “sister” is a deeply symbolical figure of speech.

Afterword

Love and sex circumambulate the symbolic aspect of the male/female opposites, and Jung devoted an entire book—*Mysterium Coniunctionis*—to this problem. Theologians, philosophers, and artists have expressed the archetypal dimension of love and sex in their works.

I tried to show how love and sex come to the fore in the biblical Song of Songs, which poetically describes the deeper meaning of the male-female union, the mysterious polarity that Jung (1963b) could hardly find words to describe:

I falter before the task of finding the language which might adequately express the incalculable paradoxes of love...Eros is a cosmogonos, a creator and father mother of all higher consciousness... "God is love"; the words affirm the complexio oppositorum of the Godhead...I have again and again faced the mystery of love, and have never been able to explain what it is. (p. 353)

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