

“All Around Us Is Shekhinah”
Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker
Beacon UU Congregation
December 8, 2019

It's nearly Hanukkah (well, on the 22nd actually), so how about a “classic” (wink) Bible story from Hebrew Scripture to kick things off, hmm? As the story goes, Adam was walking around the Garden of Eden feeling very lonely, so God asked him: "What is wrong with you?" Adam said he didn't have anyone to talk to. God said he was going to give him a companion and it would be a woman.”

“He said this person will cook for you and wash your clothes, she will always agree with every decision you make. She will bear you children and never ask you to get up in the middle of the night to take care of them. She will not nag you, and will always be the first to admit she was wrong when you've had a disagreement.”

“She will never have a headache, and will freely give you love and compassion whenever needed.” Adam asked: "What would a woman like this cost me??" God said an "arm and a leg." Adam said "What can I get for a just a rib???"

Ok, so this is not a bona fide Bible story (it's more Borscht Belt shtick), but it makes its point. For a rib, Adam got Eve, and she turned out to be more than he (and God) bargained for - the merger of spirit, mind, and flesh creating life. I wonder what he had to fork over for Lilith? Lilith – who's she? Have you heard of her? She's Adam's mythical first wife from Jewish legend.

Apparently, she was created as Adam's equal, simultaneously from the same dust, and she took their equality literally. She wouldn't defer to him and when God tried to play marriage counselor, Lilith wouldn't listen to him either. As a result, she was banished and Eve was created.

Sadly, for the most part, the women of Jewish Biblical history (all cis-gender) bear little resemblance to Lilith. They are either members of the devoted tribe of Genesis help mates – the good girls - Rachel, Sarah, Rebecca, and the like; or they are bad girls who appear in the guise of the clever seductress, temptress, culpable rape victim, or conniving wife – Tamar, Delilah, Jezebel, Esther.

In every case, and even in the most noble of circumstances, their stories hinge on a hetero-normative relationship with a man, and sexual manipulation is often at the center of their schemes. And we wonder where modern day misogyny originates?

Take the saga of Judith, who is associated with Hanukkah. While not historically connected to the story of the Maccabees warriors, the Book of Judith shares the theme of Jewish faith and courage overcoming a larger force.

The Rabbis who included Judith in their Hanukkah narrative could not have imagined a time when the story of Judith's bravery in the face of enormous danger would cease to be part of the legacy of the Jewish people passed down

from one generation to the next. And, yet, like so many other Jewish women, Judith has been virtually written out of the Hanukkah narrative as we know it, in favor of honoring the men in the story. Who was she? Why should we remember her?

In the second century B.C.E., as the powerful Assyrian army invaded the Near East, the town of Bethulia was besieged by the cruel and domineering Holofernes, the Assyrian emperor Nebuchadnezzar's top general. If Bethulia fell, the whole country would come under Assyrian control.

Discouraged, the city's elders agreed to surrender if they were not rescued within a few days. Judith, a young widow and most unlikely savior, challenged them to take responsibility for the survival of their famine-stricken community. Accompanied only by her maid, she set out for the enemy camp.

(Wait for it -- Here comes the seductress trope)

Smitten with her beauty (a Biblical 10, no doubt) , Holofernes invited her to a banquet. When he fell asleep in a drunken stupor, they were left alone in his tent. After praying for God's help, Judith took his sword and decapitated him. With the Assyrian army thrown into confusion, she urged the Macabees to launch a surprise attack and they emerged victorious.

Gosh – Judith seems pretty important to leave out of the tale, doesn't she? Yes, she has her own "book" in the non-canonical Apocrypha. But, trust me, she never came up in all my years at Beth Shalom Sunday school...ditto for Lilith.

We see the noble bad girl theme over and over again in Hebrew Scripture – a canon created in a world where orthodox men pray each morning, "Thank you God for not making me a woman (or a Greek or a slave, by the way).

In her insightful book, Adam and Eve and the Serpent, the feminist scholar Elaine Pagels, underscores the usefulness of this concept of Eve as a temptress (and the progenitor of original sin) for justifying religious subjugation of females. She asks: "After all, how could you trust folks who were innately evil and depraved to know how to behave or govern themselves? They needed higher authorities (men) to tell them what to do and how to do it."

And this sexist paradigm persists, especially in Israel, where orthodoxy rules even though the majority of the population is secular. For 30 years, the organization called Women of the Wall (*Neshot Hakotel*, in Hebrew) has continued to fight for religious freedom and women's rights at the Western Wall (or the Kotel) – the only remaining wall of the second temple. Their central mission is to achieve the social and legal recognition of their right, as women, to wear prayer shawls, pray, and read from the Torah collectively and out loud in this holiest of places.

Each year, Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz, Administrator of the Western Wall and Holy Places, organizes the official Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony there. Rabinowitz invites ONLY men to have the honor of lighting and blessing the candles- and the ceremony is held in the men's section. Women are completely excluded from this state-sponsored event and relegated to a "woman's section" of the Wall.

This year, Women of the Wall is once again asking Israel's leaders to refuse to participate in this event and to demand women's inclusion in the official Hanukkah candle-lighting ceremony at the Kotel.

Ironically, these same orthodox men, especially the Hasidim and Haradim who are devoted to a life of Torah study, have burned gallons of midnight oil interpreting, defining, and ultimately, venerating the female divine presence known as the Shekhinah. But there is a catch – in traditional Jewish understanding, she is a bride, too - with a twist. Who knew?

The Shekhinah may have arisen from Biblical roots but her status gathered strength through the Middle Ages as 16th century Talmud scholars invested her devotional and theological importance. The word itself - Shekhinah derives its root from the verb shakan, to dwell or abide, a word often used in Hebrew Scripture to denote the abiding presence of God in sacred places.

According to legend, The Shekhinah was betrothed to the Holy One and his power/his very divinity was incomplete without her. A radical thought really, when you consider it. But she was exiled or lost in the wilderness, and this exile mirrored the Babylonian exile and the diaspora, and is also seen as a result of human failings.

In response, pious Jews – and perhaps by implication, humanity as whole, must find her, prepare the royal wedding feast and present the adorned Shekhinah to the waiting bridegroom. Meanwhile, The Shekhinah served as a divine (but personalized) mother/daughter, a source of inspiration, and even a reminder of moral behavior.

It was said that “through the Shekhinah God fills the world as the soul fills the body.” A side note here, and one I like very much – in Hebrew and most other ancient languages, “soul” is a feminine noun. Rabbis accorded The Shekhinah the highest honors of their culture, despite the irony that women were not even permitted to study such things in and not surprisingly, The Shekhinah always holds a lower status than the Holy One....still somewhat of a sexualized helpmate in the end.

My first introduction to The Shekhinah came, not at Beth Shalom, but years later, at Harvard Divinity School, when I heard the Debbie Friedman song “Angel’s Blessing,” performed during a student led worship service. You’ve heard it sung this morning as our musical interlude. I was utterly captivated by the song and its message..”All around us is Shekhinah” (*V'all roshi shekhinah*) And I wanted to know more about this powerful bride/goddess within my own tradition.

I studied her and the archangels, too, and both were worked into the design of this stole...my first, and the one I received upon ordination. I wanted the word “shekhinah” inscribed in Hebrew upon this symbol of called ministry to honor my roots and to pay tribute to the female presence of the divine that surrounds us – a presence and energy I have sought to harness in my work and life.

In the Friedman song, the four archangels – Michael, Uriel, Gabriel, and Raphael – are the highest ranking of the lot of seraphim and cherubim and such -

are all male, and they are powerful bearers of strength, vision, healing, faithfulness. And, did you notice that none of them is “betrothed” to the shekhinah? Nor, is she trying to seduce them! She is all *around* them and us. She is a presence in which they *abide* (“shakan”) and she abides with them and with us. They/we are partners in a cosmic dance.

Friedman provides an accessible portal to explore the post-modern Jewish feminist reimagining of The Shekhinah as an inspiration and touchstone we might relate to as UUs in these dark and troubling times.

First, I chose the poem that we heard earlier, “Friday Afternoon: The Rabbi’s Wife,” because Enid Shomer captures, in a modern way, the I-thou, male-female dance that mirrors the union of the Bride and Holy One. “Inside the yeshiva, he’s busy naming things,” she writes, “while I, like Eve, watch the smallest movements of the world – grass bending as if it aches, a bird that carries lust in its beak.” Beautiful.

Preparing for today, I also read the work of feminist Rabbi Leah Novick, who has notably, crafted a theology in which the Shekhinah is the first universal awareness of the divinity in all beings that elicits the tenderness, respect, love and caring that we associate with the Divine Mother and unconditional love.

Reb Novick then expands this theological thread to encompass the widespread experience of the holiness of all the earth – the Gaia (another traditionally female symbol) – which, if followed, would make it impossible for us to pollute, destroy or exploit this planet or others.

Such a movement towards Shekhinah/Gaia consciousness, she reminds us, will require unity across all identities (gender, religion, race, politics, and species) In fact, if we had this consciousness it would foster respect and love for the beauty of difference.

Novick asks: “Whose work is it to spread these idea about Shekhinah that would lead to better treatment of women, to greater peace amongst all people, to better stewardship of the planet? The Jewish people? Women? Jewish women?”

I can imagine you’ve guessed the answer: It is the work of all of us, surrounded as we are by Shekhinah in this great interconnected web of sentient beings.

While writing this sermon and feeling deep despair over the violence and inhumanity in our world, I wondered if Shekhinah had given up and abandoned us or if she pounding on a great global window trying desperately to get back in? I believe (or at the very least, hold hope) that it is the latter.

As the NY Daily News bravely proclaimed from its front page the day after one of our incessant insane mass shootings: “God is NOT going to fix this.” Dipping into an inspiration well of Shekhinah consciousness may spur us towards compassionate and intelligent action; move us in the right direction, enable us to continue lighting candles against the darkness.

The Rabbi Tzvi Freeman supports this idea in her essay, “Who Is Shekhinah and what does she want with my life?” She tells us that “Like the

Shekhinah, our soul is not here for its own sake, but to redeem the portion of this world to which we are assigned.”

We can borrow from the two-part process found within the Jewish framework. The first is *Birur* – sorting out the good from the bad, the desirable from the waste, such as a smith separates pure metal from dross. So, too, writes Freeman, “ we struggle to discard the bad, the ugly, and the deceptions that entice us, seeking value wherever it can be found.”

Birur can only be performed when wisdom is the master – a wisdom that enables us to see beyond the mud to recognize the treasure there, embrace it and distinguish it from its caked-on dark shell.”

The second step in the process is *Tikkun* – when the divine spark is connected to its proper place and we begin repairing what is torn and broken, surrounded, held and inspired by the Shekhinah presence.

“To do this requires something that is of the world and yet beyond it. It requires a kind of voluntary captivity so we can do the job from the inside. Monique Sternin, an international social activist, was such an inside worker.

She arrived in New Zealand to help the aboriginals and a native woman told her: “If you are here to help me, I do not need your help, and it will not help anyways. But if you are *here because your destiny is tied to mine*, then we can work together to repair this.” That is a deeply evolved process of *tikkun*.

My Hanukkah season wish is that all of us, regardless of gender identity, will be liberated through the freeing of religious symbols from the confining boxes of stereotype and shame we’ve bumped up against for millennia.

We can reshape the meaning of Genesis as the story of human striving, moral freedom and personal responsibility. We can sanctify the blood, rather than demonize it. We can challenge the use of damning and limiting Scriptural-based paradigms of women, especially in the public arena...like the ones bandied about as Congress votes to defund Planned Parenthood or take dominion over women’s reproductive choices.

In the quiet of the garden or in the bustle of the town square, we can dwell in the abiding presence of Shekhinah and hear her speaking to us, encouraging us to lift our faces to the sun and join together for good.

“I found God in myself and loved her fiercely. I have lived for thousands of years as someone I never was,” she laments. “I have survived and so must you. Be who you are and be proud.”

Tikkun Olum – repair the world. I am with you and around you. V’all roshi shekhinah...now and always.

Shalom and Blessed be.

© 2019 Rev. Robin Landerman Zucker. May be quoted with proper attribution to author and sources.

