

Between
Jerusalem
and
Benares

Comparative Studies
in Judaism
and Hinduism

Edited by
Hananya Goodman

Between Jerusalem and Benares

Comparative Studies in Judaism and Hinduism

HANANYA GOODMAN, EDITOR

"What I like best about this book is simply that it exists."

—Daniel Gold, Cornell University

This book stands at the crossroads between Jerusalem and Benares and opens a long awaited conversation between two ancient religious traditions. It represents the first serious attempt by a group of eminent scholars of Judaic and Indian studies to take seriously the cross-cultural resonances among the Judaic and Hindu traditions.

The essays in the first part of the volume explore the historical connections and influences between the two traditions, including evidence of borrowed elements and the adaptation of Jewish Indian communities to Hindu culture. The essays in the second part focus primarily on resonances between particular conceptual complexes and practices in the two traditions, including comparative analyses of representations of Veda and Torah, legal formulations of *dharma* and *halakhah*, and conceptions of union with the Divine in Hindu Tantra and Kabbalah.

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Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
Preface	xi
<i>David Shulman</i>	
1. Introduction: Judaism and Hinduism: Cultural Resonances	1
<i>Hananya Goodman</i>	
2. The Love and Hate of Hinduism in the Work of Jewish Scholars	15
<i>Wendy Doniger</i>	

PART ONE

Historical Encounters

3. Lexical Borrowings in Biblical Hebrew from Indian Languages as Carriers of Ideas and Technical Concepts	25
<i>Chaim Rabin</i>	
4. Abraham and the Upanishads	33
<i>David Flusser</i>	
5. Between Jews and Greeks: The Indian Model	41
<i>Francis Schmidt</i>	
6. A Hindu Response to the Written Torah	55
<i>D. Dennis Hudson</i>	
7. Yom Kippur: The Festival of Closing the Doors	85
<i>Shalva Weil</i>	

PART TWO

Cultural Resonances

8. Veda and Torah: The Word Embodied in Scripture <i>Barbara A. Holdrege</i>	103
9. From <i>Dharma</i> to Law <i>Bernard S. Jackson</i>	181
10. Union and Unity in Hindu Tantrism <i>Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam</i>	195
11. Union and Unity in Kabbalah <i>Charles Mopsik</i>	223
12. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook and Sri Aurobindo: Towards a Comparison <i>Margaret Chatterjee</i>	243
Contributors	267
Notes	269
Index	339

To my mother, Rita Goodman, and

To the memory of my father, Arnold Goodman, *zichrono levracha*, whose religion was caring about others.

The last conversation I had with my father took place en route to a meeting of the National Conference of Christians and Jews, where he was to be honored for his contribution to interfaith dialogue. He inclined toward me and shared with me the theme of his acceptance speech:

“From what time may one recite the *Shema* in the morning?

From the time that one can distinguish his friend at a distance of four cubits.”

Talmud *Brachot* 9b

At the other end of the day, after the bedtime recitation of the *Shema*, my children, Moshe and Meira, say:

“HaShem give me some good dreams.

Always protect me.

Protect Adina.

Protect Jakie.

Protect the angels.

Protect all the people.

Protect the world.

I love you.

Goodnight.

Amen.”

Union and Unity in the Kabbala

Charles Mopsik

(translated from the French by Sunthar Visuvalingam)

The Proclamation of the Divine Unity and the Male/Female Couple

It would be difficult to find anything more conclusive than the oft repeated Jewish declaration of faith, the proclamation of the divine unity: "Hear Israel, YHVH our God, YHVH is one" (Deuteronomy 6.4). The latter, according to the kabbalists, relates to the union of masculine and feminine entities. It is man's duty to realize this union for, according to the Jewish esotericists, the role of man is to perfect the divine unity through his action whose theurgic bearing is constantly underlined. Unlike a magician who operates from a distance and thus acts from without, man functions here quite evidently as a mediator within the very heart of the divine world. Through the ritual or the appropriate words, it is ultimately God himself who realizes his own unity in the human act of unification. In man and through his mediation, God performs the rite of his own unification. Man is thus not invested with a power over a God who would be external to him. It is because the divine passes through him, because he is a phase of emanation or stage of existence, that he is capable of acting as God, of consolidating his unity, in reuniting the male and female poles. Some illustrations will suffice to give an idea of the meaning of this union according to the

kabbalists. The first is a text of R. Moses de Léon, Castilian theologian of the thirteenth century, to whom we owe at least a part of the literature of the Zohar: "The secret of the Shema Israel: the Bride returns to her Bridegroom in order that they unite in a real unity."¹

It is interesting to note that numerous kabbalists, including R. Moses de Léon (and the Zohar), have detailed the *kavanot*, intentions that must be kept in mind while enunciating the *Shema*; these have the aim of affirming the unity that underlies the totality of the ten *sefirot* which, as R. Isaac of Acco explains, "are all united in the En Sof (the Infinite)."² But it is clear that this unity of the *sefirot* can be epitomized in the union of masculine and feminine. R. Joseph of Hamadan clearly equates the divine unity with the reunion of the male and female poles:

For this reason we are in exile: because the holy King is not embracing the Queen, being in a back-to-back position. When the House of the sanctuary was standing, when the holy King and the Queen were embracing face to face, their face was turned towards the West, because the body of the holy King was united to the Queen. That is why R. Eliezer says: When the Temple was standing, the Holy One, blessed be his name, was One; now, it may be said, at the present time, he is not One, as it is said: "YHVH will be king over the whole earth, on that day YHVH will be one and his name one" (Zachariah 14.9). See how many secrets of secrets are hidden in this verse, for the sacred Body is called YHVH, whereas the Small Face, the Queen, bears the name of Lord (Adonay). If the sacred Body has its face turned towards the East and shows the back to the Queen, the "moon" suffers damage, that is why it is written "will be" [one] in the future, when the face of each will turn towards the other and the sacred Body will unite with the Queen, glorifying and uniting in the splendor of the Queen like a flame in the embers, he will be One, as it is written: "Hear Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH is One" (Deut. 6.4). Blessed be the name of the glory of his royalty forever.³

The evocation of the words of R. Eliezer refers to the Midrash on Lamentations 3 *in fine*, where it is written: "R. Eliezer says: When then will the name of those be eliminated from the world, and when will astrolatry and its worshippers be eradicated from the world and the Holy blessed-be-he be unique in the world? Thus it is written: 'YHVH will be king over the whole earth and his name one' (Zachariah 14.9)." The divine unity is conceived as the union of the King and the Queen, but this union is not a nontemporal constant, for it is related to history.

The cause of Israel's exile is none other than the back-to-back position or disunity of the male and female aspects of the divine. In the same way, the eschatological vision of the Redemption depends on the suprahistorical event of the reunion of these masculine and feminine dimensions when they turn to face each other again. In the Indian domain, it is never a question of a collective, and even less national, utility of the acts of unification realized by the mystics.

The place, both terrestrial and celestial, where this union was accomplished was the Temple of Jerusalem, in which the embrace of the cherubim signified both the union of Israel and its God and the union within the God's divinity of the male and female aspects. The Talmudic story which underlies this conception is found in Yoma 54b: "When the Israelites accomplished the pilgrimage, [the priests] withdrew the curtain and showed them the cherubim embracing each other. They told them: See, your love before God is like the love of the male and the female." In another passage of the Talmud (Baba Bathra 99a), the position of the cherubim with regard to each other depends on the conduct of Israel: their faces are turned towards each other if Israel accomplishes the will of God; otherwise their heads are turned away. These old stories are the framework on which R. Joseph of Hamadan embroiders his theosophical and hiero-historical canvas. While the kabbalist is apparently not troubled by making the unity of God historically relative, conceiving it as related to human becoming, at the risk of seriously endangering his transcendence, other kabbalists, very few it is true—have adopted a more prudent procedure. Thus, the author of the *Tikkunei ha Zohar* carefully distinguishes what he calls the "associative (relational) one" from the "one without a second":

As to the Cause beyond all causes, there is no second to which it could refer, it is unique, anterior to all, without associate. It is with regard to it that it is written: "See now that I am he, and that there is no Elohim with me" (Deut. 32:39), from whom he may take counsel, having neither second nor associate, not entering into the numerical series. There exists a "one" which is associative like the male and the female, of which it is said: "For he called them one" (Isaiah 51:2). Whereas He is one beyond number, without associate⁴.

This work takes over an expression of philosophical origin, the "Cause of all causes," in order to designate the *Ein-Sof* as the transcendental God, as opposed to the associative one of the male and the female which characterizes the unity of the *sefirot* standing in couples. Beyond the sefirotic world, which for our author is the realm of the

divinity's action, is found the One without a second, which is not constituted by the union of two entities, masculine and feminine. This is of a wholly different kind. In a passage of this work preserved in the *Tikkunim Hadashim*, the Shekhinah is described as that through which all the *sefirot*, and even the Cause of all causes, may be known:

Intelligent ones (*maskilim*) are those who have the intelligence which allows them to know the Master of the world, the Cause of all causes, from within the *Shekhinah*. . . . On the side of the ten *sefirot* she is a limit . . . but on the side of the Cause of all causes above which there is nothing, she has no limit nor boundary on that side, no power is above her nor outside of her, she has neither dimension nor measure. Moreover, on the side of the central Column she has an associate and a companion, like male and female, she is the *Dalet* and her associate is the *Ah* (brother), together they are *Ehad* (One), whereas on the side of the Cause of all causes she is One without association.⁵

For the author of these lines, the Shekhinah is the mirror in which the totality of the divine world shows through. In fact, she is identified in turn with each of the superior entities, including God in his transcendence. At this level she is neutral and loses all character of differentiation; not only is she no longer united with a masculine partner, but her femininity is totally dissolved. The "philosophical" option of the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* obliges its author as it were to return to more common theological considerations. No doubt even other kabbalists had perceived the danger inherent in a conception of the One as a union of two—moreover, sexually differentiated—terms but, unlike the author of the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*, they have chosen to maintain this interiority of the One haunted by the couple against wind and tide. A kabbalist like R. Moses de Léon, whose "dualistic" interpretation of the Shema we have just cited, forcefully affirms in the same work:

"God is one and unique, without any change . . . and although the *sefirot* are upright and straight mirrors, they are one without any separation."⁶ The conjuration of dualism or of the "materializing" understanding of the entities of emanation is a common enough practice which is found in the introduction of numerous kabbalistic works, whose authors rid themselves in this way of anxiety and all scruples in order to go on and elaborate without hindrance their conception of the plural One. As this idea of the divine unity clashed starkly with so many theological prejudices, of which our kabbalists were perfectly aware, we are impressed with their courage in affirming their conceptions, going against the canons of their epoch as they did. A good

example is that of the anonymous author of the book entitled precisely *Sefer ha-Yihud* (Book of Unity), written towards the end of the thirteenth century. His conception of the divine Unity and of its proclamation is presented in a very interesting manner. He declares that "the veritable Yihud is neither affirmative nor negative," meaning it is neither an apophatic nor a kataphatic theology, which would be capable of giving meaning to the divine unity. The signification of the latter "is very very profound and it is esoteric in the Torah: the veritable Yihud consists in knitting the One in such a way that no cut nor separation appears in the heart of man at the moment of uniting."⁷

It is not possible to translate the latter expression simply by the habitual "attestation of divine unity," as one would do in the context of the exoteric Yihud. For our kabbalist, the veritable Yihud, the esoteric Union, may be accomplished in three ways: through the study of the Book, through the observance of the commandments and finally through the ritual reading of the Shema morning and evening. The three modalities are detailed as follows. Study consists in joining the written Torah to the oral Torah—the Bible with its traditional commentary—and these two Torahs are a reflection (*dugma*) of the Double-Face. The written Torah reflects the masculine face, the *setrah Tiferet* whereas the oral Torah reflects the feminine face, the *setrah Malkhut*. "The one has need of the other and the form of the two is Man—thus, he "who studies the two Torahs by uniting them together makes them Two Faces,"⁸ constituting the sefirotic structure in the image of the Man on high. The accomplishment of the commandments consists likewise in reuniting *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, and our author illustrates his propositions by explaining the theosophical significance and the theurgic function of wearing the *tefillin*. Finally, the third form of the Yihud is the classic reading of the Shema, which aims at uniting the "two cherubim," *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*.

It seems that the order in which the explanation of the three varieties of Yihud is given indicates an order of preference or of value: the Yihud "realized" through study is first in importance whereas that which is effectuated through the ritual prayer occupies the last place. In every case it has of course to do with the same Yihud, of the same union of masculine and feminine dimensions through three different means. But as the kabbalists say, it is in the "heart of the man" who undertakes what must be called a unification that the latter manifests. This idea is comparable to that of the esoteric *tawhīd* in Sufi and Ismailian Islam, which Henri Corbin describes in opposition to the exoteric *tawhīd*: "The theological *tawhīd* poses and presupposes God as being ever and already in being, *Ens supremum*. Now, the word

Yihud is a causative; it means to make one, to cause to become one, to unify."¹⁰

In fact, in Hebrew also, the word *yihud* is a causative. The clearly theurgic meaning attributed to it by the kabbalists should not make us forget what the anonymous author of the *Sefer ha-Yihud* recalls from the beginning: the success of the act of unification through which the one comes into being depends on the unity of its emanations realized in the "heart of man." As attested by the following examples, it is not the position of "retreat" of the author of the *Tikkunei ha-Zohar* which subsequently prevailed. R. Moses Cordovero, who elaborates a detailed commentary on the recitation of the Shema, summarizes the meaning upon which the worshipper must meditate as he enunciates the word "One": "The *Malkhut* unites with *Tiferet*."¹¹ R. Mattathias Delacroux, a Polish kabbalist of the sixteenth century, affirms in the same vein: "The reading of the Shema relates to the secret of the union [effectuated] with the mouth and the concentration of the heart, for one reunites the young Bride with the young Groom, as also his best men, by saying: 'YHVH our God, YHVH is one.'"¹² A Moroccan kabbalist of the sixteenth century, R. Joseph Ibn Teboul, who was one of the disciples of R. Isaac Luria, further specifies: "Such is the secret of the unification of the Shema Israel: unite the Bridegroom and the Bride. . . . [W]hen one unites them, the Bridegroom gives the consecrations (*qiddushin*) to the Bride. . . . This is indeed 'sanctifying the Name': consecrate [in marriage] the *Malkhut* called 'name.'"¹³

Still among the successors of Isaac Luria must be mentioned R. Israel Saroug who describes at length the accompanying procedure of the recitation of the Shema with diverse meditations which begin in this way:

Secret of the Union of the recitation of the Shema: first one must meditate in order to ready the *Zair Anpin* (the Male) and his Female, to adorn her so as to raise them higher so that they are the coupling feminine waters Father and Mother, by devoting our soul to the sanctification of the Name when we meditate on the One. . . . In this way: by [pronouncing] the word "Hear" the name of seventy [letters] must be meditated upon; explanation: the *Malkhut* is a point and we construct it as the secret of a configuration. . . . by [pronouncing] the word One, the rising of the *Zair Anpin* and of his Female, who have been adorned at the same time that we devote our soul to the sanctification of the Name, must be meditated upon. . . . and when they mount they become the feminine waters for the coupling

of the Father and the Mother. This coupling consists in meditating on the embrace of YHVH and of "I will be."¹⁴ (Commentary attributed to R. Israel Saroug, published in *Totillah le Moshe*, commentary on the prayer of R. Moses Cordovero, Prezmysl, 1891, 69b-70a, 70b).

In the Lurianic doctrine, the "feminine waters" designate the action exercised by a lower level on a higher level. Through uniting and preparing *Tiferet* and *Malkhut* (the Male and the Female), we allow them to rise and rejoin *Hokhmah* and *Binah* (Father and Mother), and thereby to contribute to their coupling. The recitation of the Shema acts in view of the union not only of the inferior sefirotic couple constituted by *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, but also in order to conjoin *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, at the summit of the sefirotic structure. It is thus not a question of attesting the divine Unity, but of contributing thereto by uniting through the rite its male and female components.

The Ancient Sources

This esoteric conception of the divine unity is not an invention of R. Moses de Leon and it comes from earlier sources. In an ancient tradition reported by R. Eleazer of Worms, which Moshe Idel cites and analyzes in his *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*,¹⁵ the Creator and the Shekhinah are depicted as husband and wife, and the prayers of Israel are perceived as means for raising this Shekhinah to its divine husband. It may be supposed that a similar goal was attributed to the proclamation of the Unity. Besides, an author contemporary to the first kabbalists but who had no relations with them, R. Elhanan ben Yakar of London, also conceives the divine unity as the union of two entities, as he indicates in his commentary on the creation of the world:

After the completion of the whole work of creation, when the day of Sabbath came, the Breath of the living God placed his Shekhinah on the Glory, then the Breath and the Glory united together, and they did not separate so that YHVH could be One, as the body and the soul of life [are united] in man, then the two names YHVH and Elohim found their harmony, when the whole work was finished with the consecration of the day of Sabbath.¹⁶

In order to understand this passage correctly, it must first be considered as an exegesis of Genesis 2.4, where for the first time in the narrative God is designated by two juxtaposed names, YHVH

Elohim—a peculiarity that has since long attracted the attention of rabbinical commentators. The latter observe that this double denomination intervenes during the announcement of the completion of creation: "Elohim blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, for therein he rested from all the work that Elohim had created by making it; such was the genesis of heaven and earth when they were created, on the day when YHVH Elohim made the earth and heaven" (Gen. 2.3-4). Thus in the midrash Genesis Rabbah, an anonymous master comments: "He mentions a complete Name with regard to a complete world" (13.3). Now each of these names corresponds, according to the ancient tradition (see already Genesis Rabbah 12.15), to a divine attribute: YHVH corresponds to the attribute of Mercy (*midat ha-rahamin*), Elohim to the attribute of Judgement (*midat ha-din*). The mention of these two linked names in the verse thus signifies the union of two divine aspects in a kind of *coincidentia oppositorum*. The divinity manifests itself in its plenitude when the creative action comes to an end and the sabbath begins. In the text cited earlier of R. Elhanan, these names designate two degrees of manifestation called Breath of the living God and Glory. When their union is realized, "YHVH is one." The divine unity is a union of two of these powers—in this case the divine Breath and the Glory.

But no explicit mention is made of the masculine and feminine dimensions, even if it may always be considered that since the divine names YHVH and Elohim refer to two attributes, they are for this very reason capable of being apprehended as masculine and feminine principles. A grammatical element can confirm this supposition. The Hebrew verb translated as "found their harmony" in the phrase, "The two names YHVH and Elohim found their harmony," is *nit'omemyu*. This verb is formed from the substantive *te'om*, which signifies "twin." The meaning of the proposition cited earlier is that these two divine names become united like twins. A couple formed by twins connotes the figure of the ideal male-female couple in rabbinical literature. In this way the expression "my perfect" (*tamati*) in the Song of Songs, which qualifies the beloved woman should be read "*teyumati*," that is, "my twin," according to the midrash Cantique Rabbah (5.2). Each of the children of Jacob had his own twin for a companion, according to *Pirkei of Rabbi Eliezer* (chap. 36).

The text of R. Elhanan ben Yakar may be compared to an interesting development which we owe to the kabbalist Joseph Gikatila (thirteenth century), who writes, after having cited the sentence of Genesis Rabbah:

When the work of the commencement was finished, [the Scripture] begins to mention YHVH Elohim with regard to the plenitude of the world. Know and believe that the secret of the [divine] Unity in its entirety is the secret of YHVH Elohim, and the sign thereof is: "Hear Israel YHVH our God, YHVH is one" (Deut. 6.4). It is in this way that you should know that wherever you find in the Torah YHVH Elohim, which is the complete Name, all things found in the [biblical] section where YHVH Elohim is mentioned, have been accomplished by all the attributes in their totality, by the attribute of judgment and the attribute of mercy . . . everything in full perfection, with mercy and judgment . . . As a function of this principle the Torah has said: "The Rock, perfect is its action" (Deut. 32.4), of which the explanation is: the Rock which decrees the verdict does not act with violence, does not decide the sentence with cruelty, but "perfect is its action," for the word "perfect" (*tamim*) is the secret of two things, it is as if he had said: "twins" (*teumim*), but it is a polite way of saying for two things on high the expression *tamim* (perfect) and for two things below the expression *teumim* (twins) . . . below twins, on high perfect, because below they appear as two things, a thing and its contrary, as the advocate and the prosecutor, but on high everything is in a single direction, the advocate and the prosecutor have the same finality.¹⁷

The divine unity is presented as the union of its two attributes, perceived as contrary poles forming a couple of twins which constitute "on high" a perfect unity and which coincide and converge despite their apparent opposition in the lower world. The two attributes, which are also two divine names, are manifested for the first time in their plenitude at the close of the narrative of creation. It is their reunion which is the object of the ritual recitation of the Shema. The divine bi-unity is seen through the two opposed attributes which coincide in God himself, and this representation, which depends on very ancient Jewish conceptions, forms a general framework where the motif of the divine unity conceived as the union of masculine and feminine dimensions fits in quite naturally. In fact, the conception of the unity of the male and female principles must not be seen as a late kabbalistic elaboration from the couple of the divine attributes; on the contrary, the motif of the union of attributes merely translates a substratum of primitive thought into a more theological language. As

Mircea Eliade says, "all the attributes coexist in the divinity, and one should expect to see, in a more or less manifest form, that the two sexes likewise coincide therein. The divine androgyny is none other than the archaic formula of the divine bi-unity: mythical and religious thought, even before expressing this concept of divine bi-unity in metaphysical (*esse—non esse*) or theological (manifested—nonmanifested) terms, has begun to express it in biological terms (bisexuality)." In the hands of the kabbalists, the rabbinical and other theological material will regress to the primordial, symbolical stage; the more abstract constructions will be reduced to the first degree of religious thought. This operation is all the more surprising in that it integrates notions taken over from philosophy—albeit from a Neoplatonism that is already disposed to this return to mythical roots.

The first properly kabbalistic explanation of the reading of the Shema has been transmitted to us by R. Acher ben Saul of Lunel, a Provençal rabbi of the twelfth century, in his *Sefer ha-Minhagot*: "One recites the Shema Israel. Explanation: each of the Israelites says to himself and his neighbor: Accept that 'YHVH our God,' who is the glory resting on the cherubim, 'YHVH is one,' it is the supreme Crown. . . . Some say that this refers to the *Tiferet Israel*, therein is a great secret."¹⁹

It is clear that it is the recognition of the unity of two entities which is considered to be the aim and the significance of the proclamation of the Shema. It is not impossible that the "glory resting on the cherubim" here designates a feminine entity, whereas the Crown—or more surely *Tiferet*—refers to a masculine dimension.

The proclamation of the Shema is followed by a formula which must be enunciated in a low voice. An *aggadah* of the Talmud (Pessahim 56a) has been interpreted by the kabbalists as expressing the sorrow of the Shekhinah: she saw that the Israelites proclaimed the unity of the Bridegroom and mentioned her only in an allusive manner, that is through the letter *Dalet* of the word *Ehad* (One)—a letter signifying, moreover, "indigence." The version given by R. Isaac ben Jacob Hacohen is perhaps the oldest. But there exist numerous more or less similar versions in the same tradition: R. Josua Ibn Chouaib²⁰ and R. Isaac d'Acco²¹ have taken up and reworked the story of the episode; the same is true with Rabbenu Behaye, whose analysis is worth examining:

Because Moses has not explicitly evoked the dimension of the *Malkhut*, and although allusion is made to her in the letter *Dalet*, [the sages] have told a strong parable: "A daughter of the king sniffed the odor of a spicy dish. If she declared this it would be a shame on her, if she did not say it she would suffer

for it. What did her servants do? They brought it to her discreetly (*behachai*)" (Pessahim 56a). . . . Clarification of the parable: the daughter of the king who sniffed the spicy dish is the Shekhinah which feels the praise of the tribes and the unity they proclaim of the great Name, if she had pronounced through her mouth the following praise: just as He is unique, She also is unique, that would have been shameful for her; if she had not said it, She would have suffered when Her own glory would not have been united to His own Glory, it is in this way that the Israelites who are the servants of the Shekhinah came to say "Blessed is the name of the glory of his royalty" discreetly, which is the lower unity.²²

The first part of the formulation of the Unity pronounced aloud corresponds to the union on high, that of the upper *sefirot*, the second part said in a low voice (except on Yom Kippur) corresponds to the lower union, where the feminine dimension is evoked in full. These examples attest that the divine Unity has been apprehended as the plenitude of the union of at least two entities, of which one is masculine, the other feminine.

Copulation as a Mystical Experience

We have devoted a separate study to this important question in relation to a brief epistle which we owe to the Spanish Kabbala of the thirteenth century, the *Lettre sur la saintete*, which partly deals with rites of union and procreation. One of the first kabbalists, R. Yehuda ben Yakar, who composed a vast commentary on prayer and benedictions, already gives conjugal copulation the status of a symbolic imitation of the relation between the divine Bridegroom and the Community of Israel. He mentions this with regard to the benediction to be recited before coitus—a ritual coitus—a practice described in the book *Halakhot G'dolot* (at the beginning of "The rules on the marriage contracts"), but fallen into disuse and rejected by a majority of ruling authorities. Here is a version of the text in question:

There are newlyweds who say the following benediction before coitus: "[Blessed art thou Lord our God, king of the world], who has planted a walnut-tree in the garden of Eden," as a function [of the verse] "I have descended into the garden of the walnut-tree" (Song of Songs 6.11), said by the Holy One, blessed-be-he, the Bridegroom, to Israel, the Bride, and for many reasons the new bride has been compared to the walnut-tree.²³

This first trace of the importance given by kabbalists to coupling as a ritual act is indicative of their perception of its symbolic significance. Many writings go into great detail on this question; we will only partially cite here a piece that is particularly rich and exhaustive in order to demonstrate how kabbalistic conceptions of the sexual union on high were transformed into meditational motifs which were to be dwelt upon during sexual intercourse. In the text we are about to read—from a work of Rabbi Moses Cordovero (1522–1570)—the bodies of the partners, down to each limb and organ, represent a parallel structure constituting the different attributes of the divine world of emanation:

On the subject of the meditation in the course of the [sexual] act, it should be known that the male comprises 248 organs, so too in [the *sefirah*] *Tiferet* is the secret of the 248 organs on high. They comprise the first three [*sefirot*] at the level of the head, and as many aspects (*behinot*) as the number of organs. The same at the level of the arms, [which represent the *sefirot*] *Hessed* and *Gevurah* and as many aspects as the number of organs. And in the trunk: *Tiferet* and as many aspects as the number of organs. So too in [the *sefirot*] *Netsah*, *Hod*, *Yessod* [which correspond] to the sides, to the foundation [i.e., the penis] and to the feet, in which the organs are as many aspects. This is the case likewise of the secret of the female: she has 248 organs. . . . When the male and the female below conjoin, they meditate on the liaison and the union of the Male and the Female on high: 248 [organs] joined to 248 [organs], as really the attachment of flesh to flesh. One will thus meditate on the secret of the superior union. Here is its mystery and the meditation required with regard to it: first one will wash one's hands at midnight or during the hours that follow and will purify one's consciousness and void the spirit of all evil thought; one could also meditate on the repenting of one's faults and prolong one's prayer according to one's force. Then [the man] will gladden his wife with speech relating to the commitment [of sexual union], at the same time he will bring his awareness closer to the sacred. He will conduct his meditation to the best, according to his force. Then he will undertake to meditate on the secret of the embrace: he is at the level of [the *sefirah*] *Tiferet*, she is at the level of [the *sefirah*] *Malkhut*; the man will thus embrace the head of the woman with his left arm which he will place beneath, meditating on the mystery of

the [*sefirah*] *Gevurah* taking hold of the [*sefirah*] *Malkhut*, in the joyful mode in view of coupling and not in the mode of rigor (*din*). Then with his right he will embrace the head from above, in order to include love in the right and the left. After which he will meditate on the union of the four faces, the two faces [of the face] of the female with the two faces [of the face] of the male, which are the four letters [of the divine name] YHVH. The four arms are the four wings which are the name *Adonay* [Lord] and allude to the union (*yihud*) of the name YAHDONHY [the letters YHVH interlaced with the letters ADONY]. He will bear in mind that the secret of the head against the head [implies] that the first three *sefirot* which are in him [unite] with the first three *sefirot* which are in her [*Keter*, *Hokhmah*, *Binah* of the Male reunite with their homologue in the Female]. He will think that the arms, which are the [*sefirot*] *Hessed* and *Gevurah* which are in him [unite with the *sefirot*] *Hessed* and *Gevurah* [that is, the arms] which are in her. He [will then be aware] that body in body, that is to say the six extremities [the six lower *sefirot* which are in him rejoin] the six extremities [which are in her], that the two thighs, i.e. [the *sefirot*] *Netsah* and *Hod*, the penis, i.e. [the *sefirah*] *Yessod*, [rejoin] the two thighs which are in her. The secret of the Alliance is [the letter] *Yod* which links the secret of [the letter] *Dalet* (d) [to the word] *Ehad* (One), that is to say of the Brother (*ah*) with the Sister (*ahot*), which gives *Ehad* (One), and the trunk of the *Yod* found in [the letter] *Dalet* links the Brother (*ah*)—the nine upper *sefirot*—to [the *sefirah*] *Malkhut* [the Sister]. It is in this way that the man will cause *Yessod* to penetrate into the heart of the domain of *Dalet*, in order to complete it, for [the woman] does not possess the sign of the alliance. The male completes her and this member is half included in her and half included in him: male and female unite in such a manner that in the *Shiur Koma* which is in him there are ten [*sefirot*] and in that which is in her there are ten. This is the secret of: "Ten, ten, the bowl, following the *shekel* of the sanctuary" (Num. 7.86). The ten belonging to her are oriented from below upwards in the field of the reparation (*tikkun*) of the body, and the ten belonging to him are oriented from on high downwards in the field of the reparation of the body. He will meditate, during the seven kisses, on the secret of the union of the breaths, which constitute the interiority of the *sefirot*. . . . The seven kisses are the seven *sefirot*

which link and unite to the first three [*sefirot*], for they form the mouth of the head, i.e. the [*sefirah*] *Malkhut*, which is in the first three [*sefirot*]. Then he will meditate on the union of the eyes and the nose, those of one in those of the other. In his movement [of penetration] the man will meditate on the secret of the phase during which the [*sefirah*] *Yessod* gathers the semen and the light from the [*sefirah*] *Hokhmah* on high, it is on the latter that he will meditate with all his awareness in order that the *Hokhmah* sheds itself from the brain of the *Arieh* [*Anpin*] to the brain of the *Zeir* [*Anpin*], and from there towards the [*sefirah*] *Binah*, in accordance with the secret of the head ornaments, and from there, through the central column [the *sefirah* *Tiferet*], towards the two eggs of the male [the *sefirot* *Netsah* and *Hod*], which cook and prepare [the luminous semen] then give it to [the *sefirah*] *Yessod*, through which it passes and emerges from the secret of the *Yod* of the [divine] Name, the [*sefirah* *Hokhmah*] being the *Yod* of the name YHVH, in the direction of the *Yod* of the name *Adonay*, which is a drop including the ten [*sefirot*]. This happens at the moment of the donation of the drop coming from him to her, namely: "a tenth part of an ephah of fine flour" (Lev. 5.11), without any waste, and it is "kneaded in oil" (Lev. 2.5) in conformity with the secret of the "crushing" (Ex. 29.40 etc.) effectuated by the *Yessod*, as we have explained in regard to the movement [of penetration]. Then [the drop] is shed in the [*sefirah*] *Malkhut*.²⁴

The first part of the text poses a general principle: the totality of the organs of the human body, numbered at 248 by the old agadic tradition, corresponds, in detail, to the components of the structure of the divinity. Two *sefirot*, *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*, are considered to be containing in themselves the totality of the *sefirot*. The couple formed by them encompasses the rest of the *sefirot* as if the latter were only parts within a whole comprising two poles, one of them corresponding to the masculine partner of the human couple, the other to the feminine partner. Each member of the body of one or the other corresponds to a sefirotic element present in the *sefirah* *Tiferet* (for the male) and in the *sefirah* *Malkhut* (for the female). The reunion of each particular organ with its homologue in the partner's body during sexual union theurgically assures the reunion of their superior parallels. The conjugal relation follows a progression in the course of which the union becomes more and more complete, in close correspondence with the

hierarchy of the union between the diverse divine members comprising the *sefirot* *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. The body of the man and that of the woman are explicitly considered to be like a *Shiur Koma*, ancient expression deriving from the mysticism of the Palaces (first centuries of the Common Era), where it designated the measure of the stature of the divine body (or of the divine glory). The structure of the body of the man is the same as the structure of the *sefirah* *Tiferet*, similarly for the body of the woman with regard to the *sefirah* *Malkhut*. The right arm, to take an example, corresponds to the *sefirah* *Hessed* (goodness), *sefirah* which is here only an element, an organ of the *sefirah* *Tiferet*, taken as an entire sefirotic system: a *Shiur Koma*. It is the same with the members of the woman with respect to the *sefirah* *Malkhut*, which is here likewise a complete sefirotic structure, except for a spiritual organ: the *sefirah* *Yessod*, which corresponds to the penis. The latter is lacking in the feminine *Shiur Koma*: the sexual relation aims at fulfilling this lack. The penis engaged in the vagina is partly in the man, partly in the woman. The same is true of the *Yessod* at the higher level, partly in *Tiferet*, partly in *Malkhut*. In this way, conjugal union is a way of sharing the phallus. A good part of the text is devoted to the meditations that the partners ought engage during the amorous sports: each corporeal gesture should be imaginarily ascribed to the relations between the organs constituting the *sefirot*. The final act, ejaculation, symbolizes (in the strongest sense of the word) the passage of the seminal light, the divine influx, from the point of the *sefirah* *Yessod*, identified with the letter *Yod*, the Thought or *Hokhmah* on high, into the *sefirah* *Malkhut*. The tension which precedes the ejaculation should also be redacted or redirected to the initial passage of the spiritual semen from the brain of *Arieh Anpin*, or Long-Face (that is to say the *sefirah* *Keter*), to *Zeir Anpin*, the Small-Face (which corresponds, still following the terminology of the Zohar to which this text refers, to the *sefirah* *Tiferet*). More exactly, R. Moses Cordovero expressly indicates that it is the meditation accompanying sexual tension, which, when conducted in the correct order and brought into relation with the divine superior structures, brings about the shedding of seminal light—the influx of emanation—from the summit of the organism to its base, the *sefirah* *Malkhut*. The luminous drop shed in this way contains a particle of the spiritual substance issuing from the totality of the sefirotic body and holding within itself all the aspects of the divine being. The same applies to the seed of the parents, which is their concentrated essence.

It goes without saying that a part of the process of spermatogenesis described here depends on the conceptions of antique medicine.

But it is difficult to escape from the feeling of *déjà vu* when this text is compared to certain Tantric writings, in particular those transcribed and commented upon by Mircea Eliade.²⁵ Of course, the cultural and ethical horizon is extremely different, but very many structural homologies remain intriguing. It is not within our intentions here to try and interpret them, but it was necessary at least to point them out.

It seems to me that the most significant difference between the Tantric and the kabbalistic orientations of sexual union is in the direction given to the movement of the semen. In both traditions, the semen constitutes a luminous energy, or more precisely, in the words of Tara Michael, "the semen (*bindu*) produced in the genital organs, at the level of the *mūlādhāra-cakra*, is only a gross materialized form of the causal *bindu* or creative energy present in the superior centers of the head."²⁶ For the kabbalists, however, the aim is to concentrate this semen from the brain and all the organs of the body in order to propel it with the greatest force and determination towards the female partner, so as realize a perfect union, which would be the active symbol of the union of the male and female *sefirot* (*Tiferet* and *Malkhut*). For the Hindu Tantrics, on the contrary,

the aim is to reduce this gross form of semen to its original subtle form, to reconvert it into nectar, by drawing it in the ascending movement towards the summit of the skull, which is represented by the path of re-ascent, the *suṣāmnā*. If the *yogin* has not been able, through the *khecarī-mudrā*, to immobilize the virile energy at the highest level. In the cerebral centers, he must be capable of making this accumulated energy in the form of semen re-ascend through the *vajrolī-mudrā*. . . . Even if he is married or unites ritually with a companion in the Tantric way, the *yogin* must never let his semen escape. "The fall of the sperm is death; life is the retention of sperm" (*Śiva-Saṃhitā*, IV, 88).²⁷

Hence the application of a special practice, called *vajrolī-mudrā*, which permits the reabsorption by the penis of the sperm which has been allowed to escape.

The fusion of the masculine and feminine essence must be achieved within the body of the *yogin* and not outside, in the female womb, and "through this conjunction of opposed elements is accomplished the task of yoga which is the neutralization of the web of dualities."²⁸ Instead of the tension of corporeal and spiritual energies of the kabbalist which are oriented by him towards procreation—not only physical procreation but also the procreation or the attraction of a sanc-

tified soul—the Tantric sexual union aims, thanks to a self-mastery, at the reintegration "of the feminine principle in the masculine principle, a reintegration culminating in an experience of beatitude, of 'union without end,' which is unknown at the level of the senses."²⁹ No doubt, this radical difference in the orientation of the coupling depends on the differing worldviews. Not only with respect to the conception of the passage of time from which the *yogin* fundamentally seeks to liberate himself, whereas the kabbalist experiences time as a meaningfully oriented process, polarized by a redemptive end which is more or less near. But also with regard to their respective notions of accomplishment: for the Tantric, what is essential is the movement from below to above which permits the return to the initial state of nonseparation; for the kabbalist the essential consists in best assuring the descent of the superior light and its implantation in an inferior place such that the latter is only the receptacle necessary for the flow, within which the holy union is realized. This feminine receptacle is a vase of light, the power of reception which was never absolutely separated from the power of emission. Between the Masculine and the Feminine, there can be alienation, distance, dissociation, which can take on the traits of a separation or of an exile. But it is never a question of a substantial or ontological separation. However far the kabbalists may have gone in the affirmation of a fission in the One, of a disjunction between its structuring Masculine and the Feminine poles, never does this fission assume the form of an essential or substantial separation. It always concerns an internal exile, a divorce where the two terms move apart and are disjoined within a continuum which has its source beyond being and which is occupied and totally filled by a tension towards a redemptive future. It is this same tension which is the primary focus in the mystical ceremony of coupling described in the text of R. Moses Cordovero.

Nevertheless, Tantricism also proposes a conception of union which brings it closer in a way to the kabbalistic vision. When the plenitude of the yogic state is realized, when the breaths stirred into motion dissolve in the uncreated Source—the formless Absolute—the state of *samādhi* is achieved. The re-ascent of these subtle energies within the body of the *yogin* amounts to a re-ascent of the *śakti*, the feminine power of Śiva: "Kuṇḍalinī Śakti is brought back to śiva in the thousand-petalled lotus, the place of identity; the primordial Woman is reunited with the primordial Man, Power with Consciousness; the universe of duality is reabsorbed, and the original Unity is restored."³⁰ And to reproduce an ancient Hindu text: "This wife entering the royal path, resting at intervals in the sacred sites, embraces the supreme

Husband and releases the flow of nectar" flooding the microcosm, the body of the *yogin*.³¹ The exercises of Tantric yoga seek to imitate the model of the integral union of the god Śiva and his feminine power, called Śakti, somewhat in the manner in which, among the kabbalists, the conjugal union aims at imitating the superior model of the union of the *sefirot Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. However, the place and support of this union is in the former case the mystic's body itself, whereas in the latter case this place is the very *relation* itself and not the body or the mind of the man or of the woman, but their bonding, the in-between where they meet, a place that properly belongs neither to one nor to the other. Neither matter nor substance, but where both find their original unity which is also their final unity, not a unity of reabsorption, but a unity of expansion, the result of the inner tension towards exteriority which is metamorphosed into a supplement, into an increase of interiority. A triumphant interiority which brings about the revelation or the turning back of exteriority, which manifests its pre-ontological proximity. One feature specific to the Kabbala is to consider the feminine receptacle as already united in advance with the emitting masculine organ, for the one is destined for the other through a bond—the qiddushin or marital sacraments—which transmutes exteriority by realizing the exclusivity of the consecration of a wife. It is thus wholly essential, for the kabbalist, that the mystical rites of coupling be accomplished by a legitimate couple (who are besides not necessarily a legal couple though they tend to be taken as such), for it is the condition sine qua non for the emergence of the place of union, a place which transcends the body and the soul of either and which is situated at their point of intersection: their own private beyond, an extremity bordering on a nonexistent through which is established and passes a certain flux issuing from the Infinite.

For Cordovero, if the totality of the commandments of the Torah refer to the union of the *sefirot*, only human coupling, the first prescription enunciated in Genesis, is its perfect symbol.³² For this reason, ritual meditations are attached to it, which render life and physical love sacred. However, these spiritual practices enter into the framework of ordinary conjugal relations, unlike the Tantric rituals, which are exceptional and extraconjugal. If the masculine and feminine *sefirot* are called Brother and Sister, they have that status because at the level of the divine world their union is not an incest; but there is no question of imitating the superior model at the human level, contrary to certain Tantric conceptions which recommend this during the sacred *mithuna*. Finally, for our kabbalist, in the case where a man finds himself without his wife, on the evening of the sabbath which is the most

propitious moment for mating, "he must accomplish this union through speech."³³ In other words, he should enunciate the kabbalistic text which describes its modalities. Speech can thus substitute for the concrete sexual act, and even be its exact replica. This affirmation will serve us as a conclusion: even if it finds support in the physical reality of the conjugal act, the union is accomplished essentially at the symbolic level.

But it must never be forgotten that the kabbalists, though they belong to a small elite circle, only give a larger significance to the current practice accomplished by all in accordance with the religious prescriptions. They do not claim to inaugurate a new practice, but to provide the ultimate meaning or the fundamental truth of the ordinary rituals. The kabbalist is one who has understood the inner essence of the religious commandments; in general, he has not innovated in this regard. He has learnt to know the true and precise significance of the laws and their hidden meaning, thus giving a renewed force and a fullness, which is both more conscious and more determinate, to the practices which were already his own since his childhood.

We must also ask ourselves if, beyond the divergent verbal formulations, the meaning of unity and of the One has something in common in the two traditions. For the kabbalist, unity has its center in the history of his people and depends very largely on this history. It is a unity linked to a collective memory, whose cosmic significance is the result of the projection onto the external world of its subjective perception by a consciousness. Tantrism confronts us with the reverse of this process. Unity is first of all perceived as belonging to cosmic reality, and it is only subsequently interiorized by consciousness. It is without history in the true sense. It remains unrelated to any human drama lived through as the starting point of a collectivity and its norms. The carefully thought out conceptions of the kabbalists and the tantricists perhaps differ not so much in their intellectual options but in their modes of life and the specific directives imposed by the nature of their respective societies. It seems to me impossible, both in principle and in practice, to ignore or suspend the social and anthropological differences in order to somehow set free the concepts which could be compared. A religious concept is tied, like the skin to the flesh, to the concrete conditions of its expression. But this is not to say that their similarities are only a mirage. There is no universal logic of religion that would preside, beneath all the particular historical forms, over the development of systems of belief and of practice. There is a human fact, a human genetics, which gives all men a language, a body and identical physical needs. Starting from here, all kinds of religious elaborations and

human responses may be discerned, classified and, of course, compared. The universality of a particular conception or response is only the product of the researcher's point of view and his own presuppositions. It is never an objective fact that may be discovered within the human nature being explored. Hence, there is no science of religions which is not first of all a science of inner consciousness, to begin with, that of the researcher himself. It is simply astounding that one's consciousness could interest one's neighbor and that the examination of one's modes of thought, when confronted with the conceptions of a religion under study, is capable of enriching parallel reflections and work. To compare is a constant endeavor of reflexive thought. Between systems of thought, there can only be a living dialogue of knowing subjects; it is never a matter of an entomologist comparing the wings of butterflies.

The principal aim of a study like this should be a kind of language of translation which would permit the passage from one conceptual idiom to another. In this, the comparative scholar is only the precursor of a dialogue—for which he would have prepared the vocabulary and assured the syntax—between the religious consciousness of interlocutors in search of a common language. On this score, a long way—whose stumbling blocks should not be minimized—remains to be travelled between Jerusalem and Benares. But already the approaches brought together in this volume and our own contribution reveal the possibility of a common trajectory that responds to human questions which are often the same despite the geographical distance and differing conditions of existence.