

## *Striving for a Healthy Jewish Spirituality:*

### *Qabala, Sexuality, and Geula*

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As a people, we are finding our bearings, coming back to ourselves. Many are striving for a more authentic Judaism. Some focus on one aspect of the picture, some focus on another, but a common denominator pulsates through their aspirations and endeavors: a desire for a more complete, authentic Jewish life. In this article we will focus on one issue, Jewish sexuality, but it is the nature of things that one element of the picture can shed light on the others, and touches upon fundamental points which involve them all.

Because of its great influence on Jewish sexuality, we will be shedding a spotlight on the effects of mysticism, especially Qabala. To be sure, much of value can be extracted from Qabalistic works, but it is the author's claim that **certain Qabalistic doctrines, and especially their mass application, have had destructive effects on the Jewish people, both in terms of the Jewish people's ability to further their basic aspirations, and in terms of the psychological health of many Jews and their ability to act as productive members of society.**

If we are to negotiate a healthy Jewish spirituality, with all the manifold elements this entails, we must be prepared to "sift the chaff from the wheat". But even before we do this, we must take an honest look at ourselves. We must be willing to take stock, with care and intellectually honesty, and evaluate "where we are holding" and how we came to this point.

Driving this endeavor is the fact that in order to truly actualize our potential as a people, we must first realize that the various streams of Jewish thought which developed over the many centuries of exile are not adequate to blaze our trail forward. The tools of these streams of thought cannot fit the situation and needs of the Jewish people today, and certainly not tomorrow. Thus what is needed is **an entirely fresh appraisal of the Tora, to delve into the Tora without being encumbered by the lenses which have been tainted by the galuth, the exile.** To do this, we must shed many preconceptions which have solidified over the centuries, like layers of sediment crusted around a basic structure, hardened in such a way as to often obscure the shape of the form beneath, rendering it all but unrecognizable. What must be done is to crack through these layers and to the best of our ability reveal the form beneath.

On the other hand, the streams of thought which developed over the centuries of galuth need and should not be rejected entirely. It is neither healthy nor desirable to slavishly and uncritically opt for a return to "how it was". Certain kernels of thought from these streams can be extracted and melded into a greater, more comprehensive system. After all, we are not the people of a thousand years ago, or five hundred

years ago, or even a hundred years ago. Our psychological and cultural selves are very much a function of the world as it is today, and this follows seamlessly in time from previous moments and epochs. Just as one will surely allow for scientific advances over a broad swath of generations, so one should allow for novelties of Jewish thought over a broad swath of generations. Just as in various generations, each with its own psychological and historical contours, beautiful works of literature were produced which rose above the narrow confines of the contexts which fueled and produced them, how much more so can ideas in Jewish thought illuminate through many generations, perhaps all generations. **What must be done is not a summary rejection of galuth-influenced thought, but its upgrading and integration into a higher reality of Tora and Judaism.** To do this, we need to take an honest, unencumbered look at these streams of thought.

### **Qabalistic Influences**

Regarding Qabalistic thought, it is hard to overstate the influence of Qabala on the modern religious Jew. Many doctrines which have their root in Qabala have so worked their way into mainstream Jewish thought, so fused themselves into the mainstream Jewish religious psyche, as to be all but unrecognizable except to one who is looking with the proper tools. Many Qabalistic ideas have been accepted into the mainstream in such a way as they are generally and unquestioningly understood to represent normative Judaism, when upon critical scrutiny this is not the case or not the whole story at all.

To a large extent, what Qabala did was provide a comprehensive theological framework to prop up modes of thought which are not organically Jewish in their origin—that is, they are not essential and integral aspects of Tora, but rather accommodations to the exilic reality. It is important to remember that **the situation of the Jewish people has been far from normative for not just fifteen hundred or two thousand years, but rather two thousand five hundred years or more.** If we understand the normative vision of the Tora to be the Jewish nation dwelling in its Land, with a Temple, with a central judicial authority, with proper Tora-mandated government with the Davidic line at its helm, with sages and prophets in the Land, with all laws of the Tora active and functioning, we must admit that this has not been the reality since the times of the first Temple. During the entire second Temple period, a majority of the nation did not dwell in its Land. There were no longer any prophets walking the land. The Temple stood, but many expressions of the Divine presence were absent, as our Sages tell us. The Davidic line continued—in Babylon. In a sense, **one can view the entire second Temple period as a precursor for the two thousand years of exile that followed,** especially in that the developments of the Oral Tradition carried out by the Men of the Great Assembly and the generations which ensued provided the basic structures and institutions which laid the foundations for the Judaism of the exile.

**When the revolts against Roman rule failed, the striving for national self-determination and expression progressively withdrew from the national consciousness into deep-freeze and dream-stuff.** What had once been more a matter of propriety, a “temporary measure”, became more and more entrenched; **an attitude of existential passivity and withdrawal from the world**

**of realpolitik morphed from a short-term mechanism of survival into a central feature of the Jewish mainstream outlook and approach to national affairs.** Withdrawal from the physical-material reality, inexorably leading to an inability to act within that reality to further the goals of the Jewish people, became more and more entrenched in the Jewish psyche so as to become the dominant approach.

But the reality of exile cut a much broader swath. **Material abandonment affected almost all the aspects of Jewish life and endeavor in the exile.** Thus was the spotlight focused on the spiritual, and the material became more and more understood as containing value only inasmuch as it furthers spiritual pursuits. This amounted to a national act of sublimation with far-reaching effects. The Jewish people, already possessed of a certain naïve streak, retreated from the realm of history and lived very much an ahistorical existence. The significant acts of nations were something that happened in a parallel world, and the agenda for Jewish communities and individuals was survival of self and of Tora. Concomitantly, the most fundamental of Jewish aspirations were sublimated to the spiritual as well, and were functionally removed from the realm of history. While true that we do find in the literature of the Sages a school of thought which placed the redemption on a supernatural plane, this can be seen as an expression of a far from ideal reality, a proto-exilic state; as the centuries of exile progressed, this strain became the dominant one, and then almost the only one.

Thus we find a dissonance between the intense yearning for redemption of the Jewish people and an understanding of how it would ever come about. The perceived resolution of this mystery was **the sublimation of the material to the spiritual. It became an article of faith that we were to effect the redemption by way of spiritual acts.** What the Qabala did was to provide a sweeping theological and cosmological backdrop for this spiritualization of Jewish consciousness, endeavor, and redemption.

The danger, however, is manifold: since Qabala was commonly understood to be the very pinnacle of Tora endeavor, a kind of advanced calculus in relation to algebra, this framework and backdrop assumed a position of unassailability, its tenets beyond question. In other words, the abandonment of the material, a symptom of the exile, took on a new theological and cosmological identity, claiming to be the only true expression of Tora.

### **Qabala: A Synopsis**

How did Qabala do this? To understand this, we must provide a condensed synopsis of the Qabalistic worldview, in particular the worldview produced by the Zohar and the works of the Ari, which undoubtedly, for better or worse, came to be considered together the core canon of Qabala. A prime characteristic of this system is the spiritualization of reality, including physical reality, through conceptual and metaphorical models. At this point, we will provide a basic introduction to the Ari's system, adapted

from something which the author of this article wrote a number of years ago, in an earlier “incarnation”, so to speak:

Almost from the very beginning, one finds the Ari using a word virtually unheard of in earlier Qabalistic works: parsuf. This word is the key to the system of the Ari, and central to why the Ari's Kabbalah was so revolutionary. All the earlier works speak of the ten sefiroth. The Bahir, one of the earliest Qabalistic works, explains that they're called sefiroth because they express (lesaper) Hashem's glory. But in order to do this, Hashem's glory must be contained, constricted. It is the sefiroth themselves which both contain the Infinite light, and serve as a sort of interface for the Infinite to relate to Creation. The sefiroth allow Hashem's glory to be expressed.

Now, there are ten sefiroth. The upper three (Kether, Hochmah, and Binah), are of a different nature than the lower seven (Hesed, Gevurah, Tifereth, Nesah, Hod, Yesod, Malchuth) and are called Mohin (mentalities or mental forces); the lower seven are called Midoth (attributes). The upper three are the "head"; they represent the basic axioms of creation, whereas the lower seven represent various stages of bringing a project to fruition.

In terms of Hachgacha (Divine Providence), the sefiroth represent different aspects of Hashem relating to the world, directing it and bringing sustenance to all created beings.

So, what distinguishes a sefirah from a parsuf? In a sense they are interchangeable, but there is a difference in focus. A sefirah is a part, whereas a parsuf is a whole. Take the sefirah Hesed. It contains within itself all the sefiroth (Hesed of Hesed, Gevurah of Hesed, etc.). But in relation to the others it is just a part, in this case the "right arm." Once we speak of a parsuf, on the other hand, we are referring to a complete entity. For this reason the Ari and later Qabalists speak of a parsuf (and not a sefirah) as containing 613 limbs and sinews.

Thus a parsuf represents a coherent, unified interface for Hashem's Hashgacha.

The Ari speaks of five basic parsufim, paralleling the letters of Hashem's name (including the tip of the yud). The sephirah Kether becomes the parsuf Arich Anpin, Hochmah becomes Abbah, Binah becomes Ima, the six Sephirot from Hesed to Yesod become Zeir Anpin, and Malchuth become Nuqvah.

Specifically, it is after the "shattering of the vessels" of the original ten sefirot, after these vessels and their respective lights are reconstructed, that the Ari talks of parsufim. In this primordial event, which preceded the six days of creation, the original sefiroth shattered and fell from the world of Asiluth to the lower levels of existence—Beriyah, Yesirah, and Assiyah (where most of our conscious experience takes place). Only some of these original vessel-fragments were uplifted when the world was created, and the rest awaited mankind to help return them to their proper place.

### **The Impact of Qabala and Asceticism on Life**

Admittedly, there may be much beauty and truth in this appraisal of reality. But for our purposes here we must now ask: how is this Qabalistic system applied, within the Qabala itself, to understand our roles and how we relate to the cosmos to further our national goals? In short, the Qabala of the Ari and those who followed in his footsteps posits that all levels of reality include at their core completed, rectified parsufim, as well as fragments of higher-level parsufim which fell to that level. The further “down” we get, the greater the ratio of un-rectified fragments of parsufim to healthy, integrated, whole reality. In the physical world, all is essentially comprised of these fragments of parsufim which must be fused and integrated into full parsufim as part of the overall cosmological redemptive process. In other words, physical reality exists in what is called in the works of the Ari the world of “Tohu”, which consists of parsufim fragments existing on one place or another on the conveyor belt carrying these fragments from an existential mire in which they cannot be redeemed at all, to an intermediate realm, which characterizes much of the physical world, in which the potential of their uplift and integration is activated.

It is regarding this conveyor belt that our endeavors are of benefit. Our role is to relate to those fragments of parsufim which have reached the part of the conveyor belt which carries potentially rectifiable reality, and through Tora and misswoth, send them “upwards” to become part of a whole parsuf, thus facilitating the process of cosmic rectification. In the outlook of this system, this conveyor belt is constantly in motion, fueled by our Avodath Hashem , bringing sparks or parsufim fragments from a realm in which they are “bound”—that is, unredeemable (the qelipoth), to the realm in which they are potentially redeemable (qelipath nogah). In this intermediate realm, we, through our Avodath Hashem can actually interface with these sparks and facilitate their integration into their proper parsuf.

It is important to emphasize that the entire theoretical, descriptive system in the writings of the Ari can be seen as a backdrop for the kavanoth—the detailed mental intentions which accompany misswoth, in particular tefillah and berachoth. Much of the writings of the Ari deal with the kavanoth, and as such the theoretical system can be seen as a sort of mathematics which is applied by the engineering of the kavanoth.

In the Qabala of the Ari, the most efficacious way to facilitate the redemption of the Jewish people is therefore engaging in misswoth, especially tefillah, with the kavanoth. The cosmic redemptive machine is always at work, fueled by the Jewish peoples’ Adovath Hashem, but a Jew who does the kavanoth is bringing into play a far more powerful engine. The kavanoth, and their twin redemptive mechanism, yihudim, are seen in the Qabalistic world as the very pinnacle of Jewish endeavor.

A few salient points emerge from this. First, we see that in this view, the entire physical world is seen as a kind of prop for a Jew’s Avodath Hashem, in particular tefillah. Relating to the physical world has significance primarily insofar as it furthers the objective of this divine conveyor belt, this redemptive machine-in-motion. To act directly upon physical reality, in a real-world, proactive sense, to further the

goals of the Jewish people is not part of this program, or at least pales in comparison with the truly efficacious tools we have to better our lot: Tora and misswoth, especially tefilla with the kavanoth.

What we have here is an almost completely contained, hermetically sealed system which is both an expression of and, worse, enshrines exactly the sort of physical withdrawal and abandonment which developed in the galuth and leads to national and individual dysfunction.

One of the tenets of the Qabala is the idea of qelipoth, that is, the shell that surrounds the fruit. Holiness (the parsuf fragment or spark) is the fruit, and the qelipa is the husk, the shell, that it is encased in. According to the Ari, the primordial sefiroth shattered, and their fragments fell into qelipoth, a metaphor referring to an unredeemable state. Afterwards, some of these sparks were uplifted and rectified, and others remained unredeemed. It is our job, through our Avodath Hashem , to facilitate uplifting the sparks trapped in the qelipoth. As we have already said, once a spark exists within the realm of qelipath nogah, which basically is part of the overall realm of the qelipoth but interfaces with the realms of holiness directly, the potential to release the sparks contained therein is activated.

In a greater sense, the qelipoth, and by extension the sparks that are trapped within them, are basically a metaphor for the reality and dynamics of evil. What this means is that we are always dealing with qelipoth; we are always dealing with the realm of evil. Furthermore, in much of Qabalistic literature, the qelipoth are personified and expressed as possessing malignant intent and volition. What this translates into is a worldview in which one is ever vigilant of the qelipoth, this personified realm of evil. The qelipoth are ever present to ensnare us. Moreover, the sustenance of the qelipoth comes indirectly from the sparks they hold hostage, and our Avodath Hashem can empower these sparks, thus actually giving power to the qelipoth themselves. Thus the light engendered by our Avodath Hashem, depending on our spiritual state and level of our consciousness, can get swallowed up by the qelipoth. Accordingly, unless we have attained a high level of purity and asceticism, our Avodath Hashem can actually empower the realm of evil!

This leads to a highly paranoid mental state. Even perfectly permitted actions are seen as rife with unseen dangers lurking around the corner. One must always be on guard. The natural outgrowth of this concept is a marked drive towards asceticism and stringency. Normal day to day reality becomes a minefield. Life and people become tense.

### **Some Halachic Facts**

**One of the areas affected by the material withdrawal of the galuth and bolstered by the application of Qabalistic principles in a most pronounced and detrimental way is sexuality.**

The Talmud (TB Nedarim 20a) has a most fascinating discussion, which we will quote word for word:

R' Yohanan ben Dahavai said, "four things did the ministering angels tell me: why are people lame? Because [their parents at the time of conception] overturn their table. Why are people mute? Because they kiss that place. Why are people deaf? Because they converse at the time of

relations. Why are people blind? Because they gaze upon that place....” R’ Yohanan said, “these are the words of Yohanan ben Dahavai but the Sages said that the halacha is not like Yohanan ben Dahavai; rather, everything a man wishes to do with his wife, he may do. This can be likened to meat which comes from the butcher: if he wants to eat it salted he may, if he wants to eat it cooked he may, if he wants to eat it well boiled, he may; it’s the same thing as with fish from a fisherman”.

**Thus the undisputed halacha is that a man and his wife may have relations any way they wish and there is nothing wrong with it at all.** One finds this in the Mishneh Tora of the Rambam (Issure Biah 21:9), in the Tur (Even Ha’ezer 25), and in the Rama’s addendum to the Shulhan Aruch.

Furthermore, if one looks at the Tosafoth commentary on Tractate Yevamoth (TB 34b), one finds the opinion of the RI (Rabi Yisshaq of Dampierres), that a man may even have relations with his wife “derech evarim”—literally “by way of limbs”, that is, not actually entering her. There, the RI says that this is not considered emitting seed in vain (zera levatala) because this is not his intent, he is together with his wife and he doesn’t engage in this all the time. This is also the view of Rosh (see Y’vamoth, end of Chapter 3, in Vilna edition in BaH).

According to this, the type of spilling of seed forbidden Biblically is, as the Rambam says (Issure Biah 21:18), “threshing inside and winnowing outside”—the deliberate spilling of seed in a scenario in which it need not have been wasted, exactly paralleling the act of Er and Onan (which serves as a paradigm for this act), and perhaps masturbation, although masturbation is probably forbidden derabanan (Rabbinically). Rambam permits intercourse “by way of limbs” (21:9), and thus agrees with the opinion of RI. (As an important note: in all early editions, and in all manuscripts of Rambam’s Mishneh Tora, including the authoritative Yemenite manuscripts, Rambam’s statement that one may engage in intercourse with one’s wife “by way of limbs” is not qualified by the exhortation that this is only on condition that one not spill seed in vain, as one finds in the famously inaccurate Vilna edition. Rather, it is clear that Rambam indeed agrees with RI, and that “by way of limbs” is not considered spilling seed in vain [my thanks to R’ Saruq Eshel for pointing this out to me]. It would only be problematic if one systematically refrained from performing the misswa of P’ru U’rvu (procreation.))

Upon reading the sources, one immediately notes that although Rambam and Tur formulate the basic halacha as explained above, they nevertheless, almost in the same breath, extol the virtues of holding to a more lofty, ascetic approach to sexual relations. One gets the distinct impression that the basic halacha is being stated as a concession to human weakness, but one who desires holiness surely would act in a different manner. Especially conspicuous is the fact that the Shulhan Aruch actually omits this halacha entirely; from the gestalt of halachoth which are brought and omitted **in the Shulhan Aruch, an entirely different picture emerges** regarding what can be considered proper conduct in this area. Why did R’ Yosef Karo omit this halacha? The answer, most likely, lies in an ascetic, pietistic drive which, if present in the codes of Rambam and in the Tur, becomes more pronounced in the chronologically later

halachic system of the Shulhan Aruch. Furthermore, although it has been argued that mysticism played little or no role in R' Qaro's halachic compilation, at the same time the very halachic methodology on which it is ostensibly based, relying as it does (at least in theory) on a formula (two out of three among the Rosh, Rif, and Rambam) to generate the halacha, can be characterized as a new "operating system", one not characterized by rational inquiry into the sources. In other words, even if the Shulhan Aruch was not overtly mystically driven, in a more subtle, covert way, it was nevertheless informed by a system which was quite "mystical" in nature. With such a backdrop in place, we find that many stringencies which were developed and practiced in various communities but not mentioned by the early Rishonim and certainly not in the works of Hazal, made their way into the Shulhan Aruch.

Thus we find that Rambam and Tur do not seem entirely comfortable with the approach the Talmud clearly establishes as the halacha. We clearly discern an ascetic drive which morphed and evolved as the galuth progressed. Obviously, we cannot simplistically "blame" the Qabala for this. For one thing, this drive can be found also in places and times not influenced by the Qabala. Furthermore, the Qabala has also notoriously been used to justify flagrant sexual promiscuity and forbidden acts, as in the movements of Shabetai Sevi and the Frankists. **Indeed, the degree to which an ascetic approach to sexuality is inherent in the Qabala itself is debatable.** There are statements in the Zohar which may be construed as stemming from a more full-blooded approach to sexuality, such as those which enjoin man and wife to be unclothed, flesh on flesh, during sexual relations. Also, the Qabalistic system of the parsufim, based on the Zohar and fleshed out in the writings on the Ari, involve much sexual symbolism and metaphor; it's actually not going too far to say that according to this Qabalistic system, sexual union is a basic dynamic which fuels all of reality. Male and female, light and vessel, ziwug (mating, union), Mayim Nuqvin (the female waters, the arousal from below, the fuel generated by the uplifted sparks/parsufim fragments), Mayim Duchrin (the male waters, the corresponding arousal from above by which these fragments are incorporated into a parsuf)—all these are part and parcel of the basic fuel of the cosmic machine. In other words, **the Qabala of the Zohar and Ari is fundamentally sexual in nature.** And yet, it is not hard to imagine that the idea that sexual union on earth is seen as a derivative of this central cosmic dynamic, reaching up to God Himself, can fill one with a certain feeling of apprehension about sexual relations. The feeling of having one's fingers on the Divine nerve center of creation could understandably be a source of fear and trembling, making something harrowing out of the sexual act. Many Qabalistic principles, as already stated above, lead naturally to being applied in a manner which militates for greater asceticism.

Regardless of whether the Qabala itself militates for or against asceticism, it provided inviolable theological foundations for already operating galuth-based trends. Thus it should come as no surprise that in his introduction to the "Ess Hayim", R' Haim Vital brings a list of practices incumbent upon those who wish to embark upon the Qabalistic path, and one of the criteria is not enjoying the sexual act. We find that in general, broad terms, wherever Qabalistic influence is pronounced, as is the case with the Jewish world today, sexual asceticism has become very entrenched.

### **The Ascetic Drive**

What fuels this ascetic drive? Very likely, one of the prime ingredients is a desire for control over one's environment, something of course lacking in the galuth reality. The ascetic feels that he is indeed exercising his freedom of choice in the arena in which he is free and able to operate. Every act of abstention is a positive application of will, an empowering act. Furthermore, asceticism can give one a sense of superiority and moral satisfaction amidst a bleak, immoral world. It is possibly these factors which, among others, inspired the "Haside Ashkenaz", a mystically driven, highly ascetic movement in Germany of the Middle Ages. *Most significantly, it is exactly this desire for control and self-affirmation which the Qabala of the Ari can satisfy, as one who is involved in Qabala and fulfills the kawanoth is (according to the axioms of the system) applying his freedom of choice to further the redemption.*

The main problem with asceticism, however, is that it is not something for the masses. Axiomatically, the Tora is broad enough to include all sorts of personalities. Tora is the basic instruction manual for how the Jewish people, the Jewish nation, ought to run its affairs, and as such must have room for all the various personality profiles. And the inescapable fact is that some people are ascetically inclined. Some people, in their quest for personal holiness and purity, feel naturally drawn to an ascetic mode of living. And this is fine and healthy—for them. They are built for such an ascetic approach and the ascetic approach sits well with them. But, such people are a minority of the overall population, probably a very small minority. **For the vast majority of people, such an ascetic approach is unhealthy, and leads to all sorts of psychological quirks and pernicious effects born from sexual repression.** For them, an ascetic approach is like pushing down a spring; the energy which is exerted in keeping it down must find expression, and as a rule it does so in unhealthy ways.

### **Seminal Emissions**

Regarding spilling seed, even inadvertently, the Qabala has deeply affected Jewish consciousness and attitudes, with arguably pernicious consequences. **The Talmud (TY Yoma 8:1) mentions that on one Yom Kipur Rabi Yose ben Halafta (or Halpotha) was seen immersing privately because of a seminal emission.** This account is brought to prove that it's permitted to immerse for an inadvertent emission that occurred during the night of Yom Kipur (since marital relations are forbidden on that night). As the Talmud says, Rabi Yose did not have relations with his wife before Yom Kipur and simply forget to immerse. What is significant for us here is that the Talmud mentions this account in passing and the fact that one of the greatest of the Tanaim had a seminal emission at night is not regarded as something strange, shameful, or spiritually catastrophic. Rather, it's spoken of as a normal occurrence.

This stands in marked contrast to what the **Zohar** has to say about seminal emissions, **characterizing even the inadvertent spilling of seed as a spiritual calamity of major proportions.** In short, the Zohar and other subsequent Qabalistic works expound at length on how the act of spilling seed draws down souls, but since these souls are bereft of a proper vessel, they are "swallowed up" by the qelipoth and

become demonic forces which plague their creator. These demonic forces siphon off the vital energy of the man who brought them into being, as they are dependent upon him for their very sustenance, yet they hate him with a malignant hatred for he has caused them to exist in such a horrific state. Thus one who spills seed provides a most powerful battery for the “other side” (sitra ahara) and causes the Shechina, the personified Divine Presence, great pain and suffering.

Certain Hasidic ideas only exacerbated this already-existent trend. For example, the doctrine of converting an ordinary inclination into a lofty, spiritual one, or the idea of “bitul hayesh”, the nullification of ego-desires in the quest to achieve “God-consciousness”. **Rebbe Nahman of Breslov in particular focused much of his energies on extolling the virtues of “guarding the berith (Covenant)”**—which, first and foremost, involves not spilling seed. In his writings, spilling seed, even while asleep, is presented as a spiritually destructive occurrence of the highest magnitude. It is true that previous Qabalistic works shared this attitude, but Rebbe Nahman focused on it and made it central in a systemic way which had not been done before. And since Breslov teachings have become more mainstream, this attitude has had great, pervasive influence in the Jewish world, which has unfortunately led to great anxiety and a fetishization of sexuality. Ironically, this fetishization may very well exacerbate the very occurrence that these Qabalistic works decry!

When we take an honest historical sweeping gaze we thus find that the mass-popularization of Qabala compounded ever greater material withdrawal and influenced sexual mores in the direction of sublimation and spiritualization of the sexual act and sexuality in general.

Can we discern a parallel between this ascetic drive and Christian notions of holiness? Although the degree to which the consciousness and outlook within the Jewish world was directly influenced by **Christian conceptions of the essentially condemned nature of physicality** is debatable, the similarities are indeed striking and cannot be overlooked.

### **Authentic Jewish Spirituality and Sexuality**

In striving for a more authentic Jewish spirituality, one then must ask: what is the approach to sexuality we find in Hazal? What about sexual attitudes in Biblical times?

Regarding what we find in the literature of Hazal, the most honest appraisal is that there were multiple approaches. However, although what we find is mixed and very far from monolithic, there is an attitude of practicality and common-sense to sexuality which is quite pronounced and perhaps the dominant one. Rabi Yohanan taught (TB Sukah 52b) that the male organ, the more it is satisfied, the more it hungers, and the more it is starved, the more it is satisfied, but this does not necessarily imply an overly ascetic approach to sexuality but rather an admonition to not be obsessed by it, to keep it in check. We already mentioned the words of R' Yohanan Ben Dahavai—and there as well we find a Baraita in which a woman, Ima Shalom, explains the beauty of her children as coming from, among things, the fact that during

marital relations her husband was "as one possessed of a demon" (i.e. acting hurriedly and under duress). But, as we also mentioned, the Talmud unflinchingly rejects this as the halacha. We find in a famous account (TB Berachoth 62) that R' Kahana hid under the bed of his teacher Rav. R' Kahana heard that Rav was speaking with his wife and laughing, and then had sexual relations. He (R' Kahana) said to him, "the mouth of Abba seems as one who has never tasted the dish before". Rav responded, "You're here? Get out, it's improper". R' Kahana replied, "It is Tora, and I must learn." What is clear from this account is that Rav, a first generation Amora in Bavel and one of the greatest Sages of Israel who ever lived, was engaging in the sexual act with zest and vigor. He was having fun. This is a far cry from a Puritanical sexual ethos.

Before we engage upon a survey of sexual attitudes in Biblical times, it must be reiterated that in this as in many areas, the search for an authentic Jewish spirituality brings us necessarily to Tanach. In this discussion we are dealing not only with halachic issues but also and perhaps primarily with questions of outlook—hashqafa. The question arises: where do we look? Where do we search for signposts which guide us in this quest? When it comes to these sorts of issues, a most important factor comes into play: we of course understand Hazal to be authoritative in matters of halacha. The source of this authority is, in short, the fact that we, as did our forefathers before us, understand Hazal to be masters of Tora and therefore fitting to rely upon. This is especially acute given the absence of a properly constituted Jewish legal and justice system; to a very large degree, the traditions transmitted through Hazal act as a kind of surrogate to a more authentic system with a beth din hagadol as the central hub.

Yet, when it comes to hashqafic issues, the playing field is more fluid. We know that the Sages we refer to as Hazal did not levitate in the air so to speak, unaffected by the surrounding culture. As are all people, they were affected by cultural and aesthetic factors bound to a particular time and place. Thus it should come as no surprise that in certain matters determined by cultural modes of the time and place in which they lived, the outlook of Moshe Rabenu was different than that of King David which was different from that of Ezra Hasofer which was different from that of Rabi Yohanan ben Zakai which was different from that Rav Ashe.

Nevertheless, even if we allow for temporal cultural influences, we expect that the masters of Tora whom we refer to as Hazal also attained an authentic Jewish outlook in areas beyond the four cubits of halacha as well. Tora of course it not restricted to the halachic realm. Granted, in matters of cosmology, medicine, and other extra-halachic areas we need not treat a statement in the literature of Hazal as authoritative and unassailable, but we would be foolish to summarily discard what we find from Hazal regarding overall parameters of hashqafa. Tora is a holistic discipline which affects the entire personality, the entire human being, and therefore a true master of Tora should also espouse a highly authentic Tora-based way of looking at the world.

So, what then is the advantage in looking to Tanach? In short, the answer is that during the times of the Tanach, the Jewish people were living in a much more normative state. Historically speaking, there was

much less time for foreign importations to accrue in the Jewish psyche and lexicon. There was also much less opportunity, as the Jewish people had not yet experienced living as a powerless minority in a foreign land, among foreign peoples espousing foreign ideologies, certainly not since Egypt. It is therefore reasonable to posit that in many matters of consciousness and outlook, what we can cull from Tanach reflects a more authentic hashqafa flowing more from the internal wellsprings of the Jewish people and less from foreign accretions and baggage accrued through the experience of galuth.

The distinct impression one gets from many accounts in Tanach is that of an earthy, full-blooded, practical, and yet un-indulgent attitude towards sexuality.

As a prime example, we find that Yehuda went aside on the road to have relations with a woman he thought was a harlot. In the subsequent episode, we are left with the clear impression was that this was an entirely normal act and nothing to be ashamed of. The entire episode indicates that there certainly existed strong sexual mores and taboos, but acknowledging and satisfying desire was not one of them. There is no indication at all that sexual desire and the sexual act were sublimated or spiritualized. And there is no dissonance between this reality and the fact that Yehuda was a righteous man, a descendent of Avraham, Yisshak, and Ya'aqov, and a powerful clan leader in his own right.

Yisshaq was found by Avimelech to be “gladdening (mesaheq) his wife”, an expression which certainly does not bestow the impression that he was engaging in marital relations as a man “possessed by a demon”.

In the passage of the beautiful woman taken during battle, the Tora simply says “should you desire her” in a matter of fact way which does not betray anything shameful or untoward.

The Tora mentions that the mothers of the people of Israel were beautiful. Although later commentaries tend to direct these statements towards spiritual characteristics, “a verse cannot be uprooted from its straight-forward, plain meaning” ([TB Shabath 63a](#)), and the fact remains that the Tora extols physical beauty.

In the episode of Dawid and Bath-Sheva, the simple, straight forward meaning of the verses is that Dawid found her attractive and desired her. And nowhere is there any hint that this in and of itself is something wrong or strange.

With all this in mind, perhaps one can question to what degree healthy Jewish spirituality, the kind which at its base has the Jewish people living in a more normative, healthy state, idealizes asceticism at all. In other words, is asceticism a higher standard appropriate for a select few who wish to cleave to God more fully, who wish to live on a higher level of holiness and purity—is it a distinct “higher road”? Or is it a path appropriate for certain types of people, but one which is not as a general rule to be placed on a pedestal as a higher ideal at all.

Returning to the Land of Israel as a people gives us a base for spirituality which we simply did not have in the galuth. In the Land of Israel, Jewish spirituality has an anchor, a link to the physical world which allows for a healthy interplay between physical and spiritual. But it is more than this: the Land of Israel itself is the medium for the expression of healthy Jewish spirituality. And just as the Tora is designed principally for “geula” existence, with the Jewish people living in its Land as it should, so Jewish spirituality manifests itself in a wholesome way when the Jewish people dwell in their Land.

In this vein, we ought to promote a healthy and wholesome sexuality, one which does not glorify withdrawing from the physical but rather encourages partaking of it in a healthy way. A sexuality by which we can unabashedly appreciate what the Tora is saying when it describes the Imahoth (fore-mothers) as beautiful.

In fact, this points to a larger distinction between the Tora of galuth and the Tora of Eress Yisrael. In the galuth, much as a function of the fact that the Jewish people lived a tenuous, transient existence, far removed from their proper element, holiness became viewed as characterized by removal from the physical, by greater and more entrenched asceticism. **In the Land of Israel, Jewish spirituality can connect to the physical world as it should**, as it was meant to.

In the galuth there is a short-circuit. In the Land of Israel, the wires can be reconnected.