The Reason a Woman Is Obligated: Women's Ritual Efficacy in Medieval Kabbalah

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Abstract

The short fragment prompting this study is a kabbalistic inquiry into three of the positive commandments in which women are especially obligated—the so-called commandments of Hannah. When accounting for these commandments in kabbalistic terms, the fragment endorses the ritual efficacy of Jewish women. It does this in a manner analogous to descriptions of commandments performed by men, in which the practitioner is vested with the power of unifying the divinity and, as a result, drawing down its influence. The sizeable literature on the commandments produced by medieval kabbalists abounds with such descriptions, from which scholars have long sourced information concerning the practices of medieval men performing "Jewish mysticism." The fragment on the commandments of Hannah urges a reassessment of how the literature of medieval kabbalah constructs women's ritual efficacy. After gauging that text's provenance and surveying a host of comparable traditions from authoritative texts, the study proceeds to ask: Do the rationales of the three commandments of Hannah presuppose the application—by women—of esoteric knowledge during ritual performances? The article also highlights the lack of correspondence between (a) the occasional affirmations of women's sacramental efficacy in the texts and (b) the negative consensus concerning the social-historical representation of female practitioners of kabbalah. Without attempting to overturn this consensus, the study aims to recover a phenomenology

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of commandments performed specifically by women, which is shown to be a rare, albeit representative, feature of medieval kabbalah.

Keywords

kabbalah, ritual, women, commandments, Hannah

ה' ממית ומחיה
In Memoriam Chana Esther Greenspan (née Yeverovitch; 1924–2019)

Introduction

The short text prompting this study is a kabbalistic inquiry into three of the positive commandments in which women are especially obligated according to Jewish law. Tradition knows these precepts as the commandments of Hannah (*miṣvot Ḥannah*). They are so-called because of their association with the biblical prophetess (b. Berakhot 31b), and because their acronym spells her name: ***ḥ**allah* (the dough-offering), ***n**iddah* (menstrual purity), and ***h**adlaqat ha-ner* (kindling the light of Sabbath [and Holy Days]). When accounting for these commandments in kabbalistic terms, the text does something that is perhaps unexpected on the basis of a scholarly consensus that finds "virtually no evidence for female Jewish mystics."[1] Specifically, the text resorts to esoteric wisdom to explain the sacramental obligations of Jewish women. It does this in a manner analogous to rationales of commandments for which a male practitioner is posited, where the practitioner is vested with the power of unifying the divinity and, as a result, coaxing its influence into the world. The sizeable literature on the commandments produced by medieval kabbalists (*ṭa'ame ha-miṣvot*) abounds with such descriptions,[2] from which scholars have long sourced information concerning the practices of medieval men performing "Jewish mysticism." The short text on the commandments of Hannah urges a new assessment of how the classical texts of medieval kabbalah construct women's ritual efficacy. The present study locates teachings within a number of established texts that resonate with the provisionally outside voice of the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text. After gauging that text's provenance and surveying a host

[1] Judith R. Baskin, "Jewish Traditions about Women and Gender Roles: From Rabbinic Teachings to Medieval Practice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Gender in Medieval Europe* (ed. Judith Bennett and Ruth Karras; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) 46. See also Daniel Abrams, *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature: Embodied Forms of Love and Sexuality in the Divine Feminine* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2004) 187–91 (appendix B; Hebrew) on a historical figure named "Esther" involved as "a participant . . . in the rabbinic and kabbalistic culture of her time and place in the fifteenth century" (190). For an overview, see Hava Tirosh-Samuelson, "Gender in Jewish Mysticism," in *Jewish Mysticism and Kabbalah: New Insights and Scholarship* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn; New York: New York University Press, 2011) 191–230.

[2] Marc Herman and Jeremy Phillip Brown, "The Commandments as a Discursive Nexus of Medieval Judaism," in *Accounting for the Commandments in Medieval Judaism: Studies in Law, Philosophy, Pietism, and Kabbalah* (ed. Jeremy Phillip Brown and Marc Herman; Leiden: Brill, 2021) 19–21.

of comparable traditions, the study proceeds to ask: Do the rationales of the three commandments of Hannah presuppose the application—by women—of esoteric knowledge during ritual performances?

From the outset, I highlight the lack of correspondence between (a) the occasional affirmations of women's sacramental efficacy in the texts and (b) the negative consensus concerning the social-historical representation of female practitioners of kabbalah. It is not the goal of this article to overturn said consensus, which is basically reliable. However, it is worth considering that the negative consensus may be only as reliable as the social history of kabbalah in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries is documentable. The goal, rather, is to recover an emic phenomenology of commandments performed specifically by women, which is shown to be a rare albeit representative feature of the discourse. Insofar as this study concerns evidence of a primarily textual nature, there is no reason for the negative social-historical consensus to obstruct the work at hand. On the contrary, this study cautions against limiting (a) the range of interpretive outcomes for a diverse textual archive rich in phenomenological information to (b) a negative social-historical outlook informed by a lack of positive documentation from an archive already ill-equipped to furnish sociological data.

Generally speaking, scholars have broached the question of women's efficacy in medieval kabbalah with either dogmatically negative or prematurely positive answers.[3] In an uncommonly egalitarian assessment of the question, Moshe Idel

[3] Talya Fishman, "A Kabbalistic Perspective on Gender-Specific Commandments: On the Interplay of Symbols and Society," *AJSR* 17.2 (1992) 199–245, esp. 204 (on "theurgic operations" constituting "the male mystic as an activist," see there, 235). For the view that medieval texts posit a cooperative degree of theurgical agency for women as partners in fulfilling the commandment to procreate, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) 95 n. 126, 123; to support this view, Idel adduced (123) a text dating from the early fourteenth cent. (composed by Recanati allegedly on the basis of an earlier statement by Joseph of Hamadan): "when the woman adheres to her spouse and does not receive from someone else, she gives power to the *shekhinah*, while [the latter] receives from the pipe of the righteous [i.e., *yesod*]—but not the undrawn water from the other place" (Recanati, *Perush Reqanaṭi* [ed. Amnon Gross; 2 vols.; Jerusalem, 2003] 2:58; Moshe Idel, "Beloved and the Concubine: The Woman in Jewish Mysticism," in *Blessed that I Was Made a Woman?: The Woman in Judaism from the Bible to the Present* [ed. David Ariel et al.; Tel Aviv: Sifre Ḥamad, 1999] 146–47, 150 (Hebrew); and Moshe Idel, *The Privileged Divine Feminine in Kabbalah* [Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019] 182 n. 834). See also Abrams, *Female Body*, 110–11, 167–70, 172–73, 179–80; idem, "A Woman's Intention of Thought to Metatron: The Secret of 'When She Brings Forth Seed [First]' (Text, Translation and Commentary)," *Kabbalah* 52 (2022) 7–45. See Charles Mopsik, *Sex of the Soul: The Vicissitudes of Sexual Difference in Kabbalah* (ed. by Daniel Abrams; Los Angeles: Cherub, 2005) esp. 163 n. 21, claiming that the "Secret of the Marriage of David and Bathsheba" text fails to establish "theurgic power stemming from sexual union." See Jeremy Cohen, *Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It: The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019) 196–218, and esp. 207 n. 136 for the assertion that the Zohar "cares little about the spiritual perfection of women," but nonetheless highlights the duty of women to procreate, per Zohar = (Pseudo-) Simeon bar Yoḥai, *Sefer ha-Zohar* (ed. Reuven Margaliot; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1964) 1:71a–b. Some have asked if the Pseudo-Naḥmanidean *Iggeret ha-Qodesh* affords women "theurgical agency" in the act of intercourse; see, e.g., Charles Mopsik, *Lettre sur la sainteté. Le secret de la relation entre l'homme*

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promoted the idea that "feminine theurgy" was a broad-based phenomenon;[4] he claimed that "theurgy should be understood in many cases in theosophical Kabbalah as related to the ritual activities of both men and women."[5] The interpretive contention that scholars should be more capacious in applying non-gender-specific statements about the human capacity for ritual efficacy to women is indeed alluring. However, this approach requires scrutiny on the basis of several factors. It has, first of all, to come to grips with medieval kabbalah's well-documented penchant for androcentrism and gynophobia.[6] Second, it must account for the fact that

et la femme dans la cabbale (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1986); Moshe Idel, "Sexual Metaphors and Praxis in the Kabbalah," in *The Jewish Family: Metaphor and Memory* (ed. David Kraemer; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 197–224; David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992) 101–20; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) 95–96; Abrams, *Female Body*, 9, 107–10, 162, 165, 173; Avraham Grossman, *He Shall Rule over You: Medieval Jewish Sages on Women* (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar, 2010) 292–97 (Hebrew). Initially, the attribution of a contemplative role to women in the epistle is contingent upon prelapsarian conditions, viz. the archetypal intercourse of Adam and Eve before their sin, when both male and female engaged in intellection and sublime intentions. After their sin, however, the text focuses on the male partner as the subject of the imaginative and intellectual intentions in the sexual act. The text assigns to the postlapsarian woman the imaginative role of meditating on the ideal beauty of Rabbi Yoḥanan during the sexual act (this assures that the fruit of the union will possess a beautiful male form); even so, it is not stated or implied that she draws down divine influence as a function of fulfilling the commandment of procreation (cf. Cohen, *Be Fertile*, 215). On the topic of Torah study within the marital partnership, see Abrams, *Female Body*, 173–76, 181–86 (appendix A); Michal Oron, "*Sefer Ezrat Ha-Shem*: A Theological Debate between a Man and a Woman in the Fourteenth Century," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 12.1 (1996) 177–99 (Hebrew). On women's putative lack of efficacy in *niddah*, see Sharon Koren, *Forsaken: The Menstruant in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2011) 12; and Shifra Asulin, "The Flaw and Its Correction: Impurity, The Moon and the *Shekhinah*—A Broad Inquiry into *Zohar* 3:79 (*Aharei Mot*)," *Kabbalah* 22 (2010) 193–251 (Hebrew).

[4] Idel, *The Privileged Divine Feminine*, 16, 182–83, and 213.

[5] Ibid., 16.

[6] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1946) 37; rather than diagnosing "the exclusively masculine character of Kabbalism" as symptomatic of the marginalization of women from the cultures of rabbinic learning in general, Scholem attributed it to female-negative ideation basic to kabbalah. On Scholem's diagnosis, see Ada Rapoport-Albert, "On Women in Hasidism: S. A. Horodecky and the Maid of Ludmir Tradition," in *Jewish History: Essays in Honor of Chimen Abramsky* (ed. Ada Rapoport-Albert and Steven Zipperstein; London: Peter Halban, 1988) 506–8 (495–525); Idel, "Beloved and the Concubine, 141–57; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 81; Lawrence Fine, *Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) 369 n. 32; David Biale, *Gershom Scholem: Master of the Kabbalah* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018) 137–38. Elliot R. Wolfson's copious work on kabbalistic constructions of gender and sexuality built upon Scholem's foundational assumption of male exclusivity to articulate the view that theosophical constructions of gender and sexuality reflect the androcentric social structures that their male authors viewed as normative; in his "Woman—The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and Identity* (ed. Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn; New York: New York University Press, 1994) 169: "there is an essential homology between the structure of the myth of divine unity predicated on the transcendence

kabbalah inherits from ancient rabbinic jurisprudence a gendered delineation of obligation according to which women's obligations are substantially fewer than and sometimes different from those of men.[7] In particular, it cannot ignore statements in the medieval kabbalistic texts that challenge the efficacy of women in the case of time-bound positive commandments.[8] On the other hand, the three commandments of Hannah should be the primary focus for assessing the question, whereas previous scholarship has largely ignored them, concentrating instead on the intentional consciousness of women during procreative intercourse. Finally, the texts bear the burden of proof. Demonstration requires express evidence of women's efficacy from the archive, even though scholars do well to avoid an absolute degree of textual positivism. Assessments to date base themselves on maximal interpretations of minimal evidence. In sum, scholarship has not sufficiently articulated either the extent or the parameters of the phenomenon. The work of examining the textual evidence, to which I now turn, will help to exert greater control.

Provenance

The anonymous text motivating this study belongs to the genre of kabbalistic *sodot*, or "secrets," a genre that scholars have linked to various figures (especially the Castilian writers Moses ben Shem Ṭov de León of Guadalajara, Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla of Medinaceli, and Joseph Angelet).[9] The *sodot* are focused

of sexual opposites, on the one hand, and the structure of social relationships, on the other. That is, just as in the former case the female is subordinated to the male, so too in the latter." This hermeneutic is reinforced by the correlation of (a) male dominant and/or male exclusive social patterns with (b) the adoption of phallomorphic imagery to express the transcendence of gender dimorphism within the Godhead; see, e.g., Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); idem, *Circle in the Square*; idem, *Language, Eros, Being*; also see the essays collected in idem, *Luminal Darkness: Gleanings from Zoharic Literature* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).

[7] E.g., Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious: Jewish Women in Medieval Europe* (trans. Jonathan Chipman; Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2012) 25–27.

[8] *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (Mantua, 1558) 136b; based on the earlier assertion of Jacob bar Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim* (ed. Georges Vajda; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1969) 178; Haviva Pedaya, *Naḥmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003) 251–52 (Hebrew). Also, cf. Ṭodros ben Joseph ha-Levi Abulafia, *Oṣar ha-Kavod* (Satmar, 1926) 14a; Recanati, *Perush*, 1:84 (on Exod 20:8). Note the gloss on the aforecited passage in the 1458 supercommentary to Recanati in MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 786, folio 168b; this gloss not only offers an alternate rationale for the exemption of women from time-bound commandments and their positive obligation in non-time-bound commandments, but, using a kabbalistic rationale, contends, against m. Berakhot 3:3, that women are obligated to recite the *shema*.

[9] On this genre, see Jochanan Wijnhoven, "Sefer ha-Mishkal: Text and Study" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1964) 6–25; Alexander Altmann, "Li-she'elat ba'aluto shel Sefer Ṭa'ame ha-Miṣvot ha-meyuḥas le-R. Yiṣḥak ibn Farḥi," *Kiryat Sefer* 40 (1965) 258–59; Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2010) 198–223; idem, "The Secret of the Upper and Lower Waters: An Unknown Work from Early Castilian Kabbalah," in *And This Is for Yehuda: Studies Presented to Our Friend, Professor Yehuda Liebes on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth*

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disquisitions on various topoi of kabbalistic knowledge, which did not typically circulate as "authored" texts. The earliest version of the secret in question comes from a miscellaneous codex copied in the early fifteenth century,[10] written in a Provençal or Spanish script.[11] The copyist, whose name may have been Joseph,[12] produced the codex for private study in the early spring of 1437 (Adar, 5197).[13] As a rich source of kabbalistic and philosophical material, the codex has been examined by several scholars, including Georges Vajda.[14] Most of the material collected here dates to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The latter includes texts linked to the so-called *'Iyyun* circle (*Ma'ayan Ḥokhmah*, 229a–240a), a famous text ascribed to Azriel of Gerona (*Sha'ar ha-Sho'el*, 130a–133b), Abraham Axelrod of Cologne (*Keter Shem Ṭov*, 241a–245b),[15] *Perush ha-Otiyyot* ascribed to Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen (143a–157a),[16] an early fragment by de León as well as a unique version of "Secret of Shema Israel" by the same author (260a–261a; 226a–b),[17] material from the anonymous *Zaqen* text (*Sha'ar ha-Zaqen*, 227b–228a),[18] Joseph Ibn Waqar

Birthday (ed. Maren Niehoff et al.; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2012) 311–25 (Hebrew); idem, "Divine Yearning for *Shekhinah*—'The Secret of the Exodus from Egypt': R. Moses de León's *Questions and Answers* from Unpublished Manuscripts and Their Zoharic Parallels," *Kabbalah* 32 (2014) 7–34; Avishai Bar-Asher, "Kabbalah and Minhag: Geonic Responsa and the Kabbalist Polemic on Minhagim in the Zohar and Related Texts," *Tarbiz* 84.1-2 (2015) esp. 202–9 (Hebrew); idem, "The Earliest *Sefer ha-Zohar* in Jerusalem: Early Manuscripts of Zoharic Texts and an Unknown Fragment from *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*[?]," *Tarbiz* 84.4 (2016) 581–82 (Hebrew); Leore Sachs-Shmueli, Iris Felix, and Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, "R. Joseph Angelet's *Twenty-Four Secrets* (Introduction, Study and Edition)," *Kabbalah* 50 (2021) 193–320 (Hebrew).

[10] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 226a.

[11] Hermann Zotenberg, *Catalogues des manuscrits hébreux et samaritains de la Bibliothèque impériale* (Paris: Impériale, 1866) 136–37.

[12] Note the scribe's pointing, which highlights "Joseph" on MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 228b.

[13] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 240a.

[14] Georges Vajda, "Notices des manuscrits hébreux conservés à la BnF. Notices manuscrits originales de. Hébreu 669–999," Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des Manuscrits, Hébreu 1487, boite 1, chemise 15, Hébreu 800–809, fols. 250–252 concern the collection of secrets containing the *Ḥannah* text; for Vajda's notes on the related collection of secrets in MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 843, see "Notices," boite 1, chemise 19, Hébreu 840–841, 843–849, fols. 345–346.

[15] Abraham Jellinek, *Auswahl Kabbalistischer Mystik* (Leipzig, 1859) 1:30–35; Gershom Scholem, *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah and of Abraham Abulafia* (ed. Joseph Ben-Shlomo; Jerusalem: Akademon, 1968) 89–90, 95, 97 (Hebrew).

[16] Gershom Scholem, *Qabbalot R. Ya'aqov ve-R. Yiṣḥaq Bene R. Ya'aqov* (Jerusalem: Ha-Madpis, 1927) 10.

[17] Avishai Bar-Asher, "*Sefer ha-Ne'elam*, New Parts of *Sefer Or Zarua* and Clarifications regarding the Early Writings of R. Moses de León: Studies and Critical Editions," *Tarbiz* 83 (2015) 253–54, 249 n. 282 (Hebrew).

[18] Elliot R. Wolfson, "The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets," *Kabbalah* 19 (2009) 143–278. See also Moshe Idel, "On 'The Book of the Elderly Man,'" *Tarbiz* 88.2 (2022) 221–330 (Hebrew), stressing the eclectic character of the text, which includes, inter alia, teachings in the Naḥmanidean tradition.

(*Sefer Haskamat ha-Filosofim ve-ha-Istagninim ve-ha-Mequbbalim*, 178a–195a),[19] Menaḥem ben Benjamin Recanati (*Perush Birkat ha-Mazon*, 174a–177b), *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (229a–240a), Moses ben Joshua of Narbonne (*Commentary to Lamentations*, 282a–306b),[20] and so forth. It is also noteworthy that this codex contains Hebrew writings by the anonymous author of the late strata of the Zohar (*Ra'ya Mehemna* and *Tiqqune ha-Zohar*, 85a–121a).[21] Due to the fact that most of the datable material predates the middle of the fourteenth century, and in light of formal as well as ideational attributes of the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text, it is unlikely that our text is any younger. It belongs to a collection of secrets steeped in the tradition of Naḥmanidean kabbalah, and, more specifically, usages and motifs attested in the writings of Shem Ṭov ben Abraham Ibn Gaon, the supercommentary on Naḥmanides printed in the name of Meir ben Solomon Abi Sahula,[22] as well as *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*—these texts are well represented in the codices preserving the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text. I located four near identical attestations of the text in nonidentical collections of secrets, all apparently copied in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[23]

[19] Joseph ben Abraham Ibn Waqar, *The Principles of the Qabbalah* (ed. Paul Fenton; Los Angeles: Cherub, 2004).

[20] Maurice Hayoun, *La philosophie et la théologie de Moïse de Narbonne (1300–1362)* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1989) 65–69, 223–24.

[21] Moshe Idel, introduction to *The Hebrew Writings of the Author of Tiqqunei Zohar and Ra'aya Mehemna* (ed. Ephraim Gottlieb; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2013) 25 and 35 (Hebrew).

[22] Meir Abi Sahula, *Be'ur le-Ferush ha-Ramban 'al ha-Torah* (Warsaw, 1875).

[23] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806 (1437), 200a–228b; Zotenberg, *Catalogues*, 136–37 (§.806, 11°: "Plusieurs fragments et notes cabalistiques sur différents sujets, dont les plus considérables traitent de la bénédiction de la lune, du nom de Dieu, des dix sephiroth . . . , des patriarches, des תפילין, du temple, de la bénédiction de prêtres, de quelques prières, de la création, des sacrifices, etc."). The unedited notes of Georges Vajda (see above, n. 14) call this collection "Fragments et mots kabbalistiques divers." MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 843 (prior to 1462); the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text is on fol. 78a, where it follows a kabbalistic rationale explaining, on the basis of the female gender of supplication (*teḥinnah*), why it is that supplications (*teḥinnot*) should be performed only by day; the juxtaposition of this rationale to the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text is noteworthy in light of the scholarly interest in *teḥinnot* dating from a significantly later period linked specifically to the three precepts of Hannah (e.g., MS Philadelphia, CAJS Rar Ms 529, and the Yiddish *tkhines* printed in the seventeenth and eighteenth cents.; on the latter, see Morris M. Faierstein, "The Earliest Published Yiddish *Tehinnot* (1590–1609)," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 91 [2020] 155–206). Zotenberg, *Catalogues*, 146 (§.843, 15°) suggested that the author of an excursus preceding the collection of secrets in the codex named Joseph ben Ḥayyim could be its author: "Considérations sur l'ubiquité de Dieu, etc., par R. Joseph, fils de Ḥayyim. . . . Elle est suivie de quelques explications de préceptes rituels, probablement par le même auteur." Vajda's notes endorse this attribution of the "Dissertation kabbalistique par Joseph b. Ḥayyim" and describe the collection of secrets following the initial treatise thus: "Explications kabbalistiques de divers rites et préceptes (ordinairement introduits par le mot טעם, plus rarement ענין) [lettré par le même auteur depuis 15?]." Neither Zotenberg nor Vajda noted any connection between this group of secrets and the collection in Paris 806. MS Milan, Ambrosiana, P 47 sup., fols. 30a–33b (where the *teḥinnah* rationale likewise precedes the *Ḥannah* text). For a description of the codex in general dating it to the sixteenth cent., see, Aldo Luzzatto and Luisa Mortara Ottolenghi, *Hebraica Ambrosiana* (Milan: Il Polifilo, 1972) §.30 ("Miscellany of Cabbalistic Works"), 58–63, esp. 63. For the cluster

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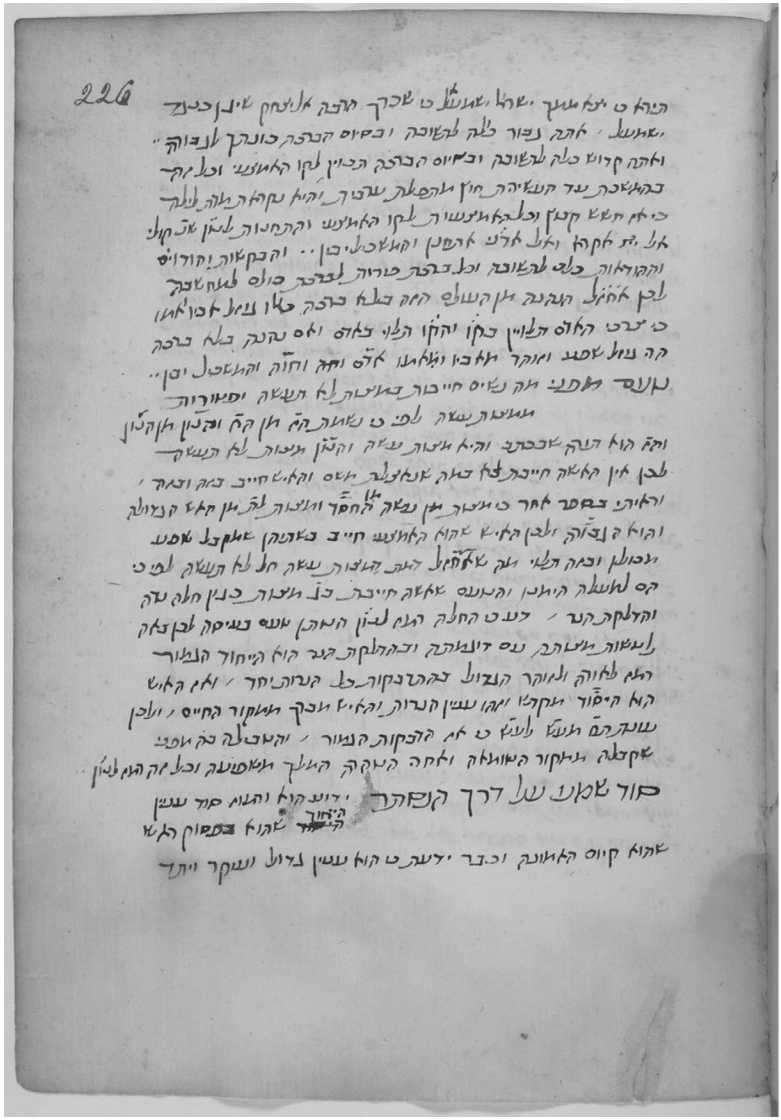

MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 226a (copied 1437). Public domain.

of rationales specifically, see 60. MS Milan, Ambrosiana, &.31 sup., fol. 41b; for a description of the 16th-cent. codex, see Carolo [=Carlo] Bernheimer, *Codices hebraici Bybliothecae ambrosianae* (Florence: Leo S. Olschki, 1933) §.57, 55–62, esp. 61–62; the description of the collection of rationales on 60 (25°–26°) does not correspond to the sequence of the rationales and their foliation in the codex; the collection contains rationales found elsewhere in MS Milan, Ambrosiana, P.12

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The Miṣvot Ḥannah Text

Our text begins by iterating familiar kabbalistic strategies for explaining why women are obligated in negative commandments but exempt from (most time-bound) positive commandments. According to the text, the souls of men derive from male divine attributes, as do the Written Torah and the positive commandments. On the other hand, the souls of women and the prohibitions alike emanate from the same female power of divinity (= *malkhut*). Their shared source in the divine world founds the affinity between women and the prohibitions. The unstated assumption that the male attribute of *tif'eret* is united with the female *malkhut* might explain why men are obligated in both positive and negative commandments.[24]

The text then offers another strategy for rationalizing the gendered distribution of obligation. The author says: "I saw in another book that positive commandments are from *ḥesed* and negative ones from the great fire, which is *gevurah*. And therefore the man, who is the mediator [of those opposing attributes], is obligated in both of them, since he receives abundance (*shefa'*) through all of them."[25] The idea introduced here that the positive commandments are rooted in *ḥesed* can be attributed to Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, who may be the author of the referenced "other book."[26] According to this second idea, when observing both positive and negative commandments, the human male embodies the masculinity of *tif'eret*, in channeling the androgynous confluence of the male *ḥesed*, on the right hand, and the female *gevurah*, on the left. This teaching provides an alternative rationale for the full obligation of men but adds nothing to explain the comparatively limited duties of women.

At this point, the text proceeds to the pivotal subject of "the reason that women are obligated in three commandments, namely, *ḥallah*, *niddah*, and *hadlaqat haner*," that is, the commandments of Hannah.[27] In general, the medieval kabbalistic works on the commandments do not thematize the *miṣvot* of Hannah as a unique

sup., fols. 137b–138b; on which, see Bernheimer, §.53, 10°, 49; and Scholem, "Review of *Codices hebraici Bybliothecae ambrosianae* by Carlo Bernheimer," *Kiryat Sefer* 11.2 (1934) 185–86 (Hebrew).

[24] Compare Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Ḥakhamah* (Basel, 1608) §.54 (appendix), which maintains, on the basis of kabbalistic reasoning, that women are not obligated in any[!] of the positive commandments: "All of the positive commandment are from *zakhor*, that is *tif'eret*, and it is from the right side, and drawn forth from *ḥesed*. And the negative commandments are from *shamor*, that is the female (lit., the *nun*), and it is from the left. And she is drawn from the attribute of strict judgment, that is *paḥad*, and women are drawn from the female (the *nun*). Thus women are obligated in all of the negative commandments, since [both] women and the negative commandments are emanated from a single source, that is the female. And thus they are not obligated in the positive commandments at all[!], since they are not emanated from a single source."

[25] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 226a.

[26] Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, *Perush Shir ha-Shirim*, in *Kitve ha-Ramban* 2:496–97. Alternately, the idea that the positive commandments are rooted in *tif'eret* may be ascribed to Naḥmanides (ad Exod 20:8).

[27] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 226a.

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topic for theosophical speculation.[28] In other words, I am not aware of any other text dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that treats this specific grouping of three positive commandments as a springboard for kabbalistic inquiry. Even so, the three receive individual treatment here and there, and I will discuss those rationales below. Often, as Sharon Koren showed,[29] the kabbalistic rationales of *niddah* eclipse the agency of women altogether. The exceptions to this generalization are nonetheless significant.

Even though these three commandments extend to women a measure of positive legal agency, classical discussions thereof are couched in morbid terms of female culpability.[30] Rather than distinguishing these commandments in terms of female privilege, their earliest treatment in the Mishnah understands their violation to bring the punishment of death in childbirth: "For three transgressions do women die in childbirth: for heedlessness of the laws of the menstruant, the dough-offering, and the lighting of the lamp."[31] A tradition in the Babylonian Talmud terms these precepts "tests of death" (*bidqe mita*),[32] a lemma which a medieval commentator explains in this way: "that the woman is examined (*nivdeqet*) in these in times of danger; if she is found [wanting] in one of them she shall die."[33] Another dictum terms them *divqe mita*, "things which cling to death."[34] An old Palestinian tradition represents these commandments as means for women to make vicarious atonement for the evils brought against Adam by Eve in Eden, measure-for-measure.[35]

> And why was the precept of menstruation given to her? Because she shed the blood of Adam [by causing death], therefore was the precept of menstruation given to her. And why was the precept of dough (*ḥallah*) given to

[28] B. Berakhot 31b.

[29] See above, n. 3. See also Judith R. Baskin, "Male Piety, Female Bodies: Men, Women, and Ritual Immersion in Medieval Ashkenaz," *Jewish Law Association Studies* 17 (2007) 11–30; and eadem, "Women and Ritual Immersion in Medieval Ashkenaz: The Sexual Politics of Piety," in *Judaism in Practice: From the Middle Ages through the Early Modern Period* (ed. Lawrence Fine; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 131–42.

[30] M. Shabbat 2:6; Genesis Rabbah, 17:8; p. Shabbat 2:6, 5b; b. Berakhot 31b; b. Shabbat 31b–32a. Judith R. Baskin, "The Separation of Women in Rabbinic Judaism," in *Women, Religion and Social Change* (ed. Yvonne Y. Haddad and Ellison B. Findly; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985) 7–8; eadem, *Midrashic Women: Formations of the Feminine in Rabbinic Literature* (Hanover, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2002) 70–73; Judith Wegner, *Chattel or Person? The Status of Women in the Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 155; Ross Kraemer, *Her Share of the Blessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 100; Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) 89–94; Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity: Rabbinic and Christian Reconstructions of Biblical Gender* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000) 29–39; and Evyatar Marienberg, *Niddah. Lorsque les juifs conceptualisent la menstruation* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2003) 43–72.

[31] M. Shabbat 2:6; b. Shabbat 32a; b. Berakhot 31b.

[32] Judith R. Baskin, "Rabbinic Reflections on the Barren Wife," *HTR* 82.1 (1989) 113 n. 31; eadem, *Midrashic Women*, 80.

[33] Rashi on b. Berakhot 31b.

[34] B. Berakhot 31b.

[35] Genesis Rabbah, 17:8.

> her? Because she corrupted Adam, who was the dough of the world (*ḥallato shel 'olam*),[36] therefore was the precept of dough given to her. And why was the precept of the Sabbath lights given to her? Because she extinguished the soul of Adam, therefore was the precept of the Sabbath lights given to her.[37]

One scholar distinguished these accusations as "the only examples of such misogynistic diatribe in all of the classical rabbinic literature."[38] Even so, a postclassical homily contained in *Midrash Tanḥuma* magnifies the charges against Eve by expanding their exegetical basis.[39]

It is claimed that the guilt originally imputed to women by the Mishnah waned in medieval discussions of these commandments,[40] but this claim does not track with the Iberian kabbalists of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in whose writings the midrashic avowal of female guilt is well attested. Writing in Aragon (ca. 1300), Baḥya ben Asher Ibn Ḥalawa of Zaragoza adopted the mythology of female evil to explain why scripture commands women to bring a sin-offering after giving birth to a child.[41] To justify that obligation, Baḥya described the commandments of Hannah as having the intended purpose of expiating the "primordial sin" (*ha-ḥeṭ ha-qadmoni*) of the first woman. Below, we will see a Castilian teaching stemming from a slightly earlier period (1280s–1290s) that takes a similar approach when explaining one of the three commandments (kindling the Sabbath light).[42] Additionally, a Castilian teaching from the first half of the fourteenth century adopts a comparable strategy when rationalizing the dough-offering.[43]

In light of the strong mythology of female evil pervading medieval kabbalah—what Gershom Scholem called, "an inherent tendency to lay stress on the demonic nature of woman and the feminine element of the cosmos"[44]—it is perhaps unexpected that the fragment invokes the commandments of Hannah without mythologizing female guilt, or reference to mortal consequences for laxity in their observance. Instead, the text describes a set of women's rituals—the sacred

[36] On Adam as the *ḥallah* of the world, cf. Genesis Rabbah, 14:1, and y. Shabbat 2:6 (5b), where Adam is called "the pure dough of the world (*ḥallah ṭahorah shel 'olam*)."

[37] Adapted from *The Midrash Rabbah* (ed. H. Freeman and Maurice Simon; 5 vols.; London: Soncino Press, 1961) 1:139 (17:8).

[38] Boyarin, *Carnal Israel*, 90–91 n. 23.

[39] *Midrash Tanḥuma* (ed. Solomon Buber; 2 vols; Vilna: Romm, 1885; repr., New York: H. Horowitz) 2:27 (pagination to Leviticus; Meṣora § 17); *Midrash Tanhuma-Yelammedenu* (trans. Samuel A. Berman; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1995) 39–40.

[40] Elisheva Baumgarten, *Mothers and Children: Jewish Family Life in Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004) 40.

[41] Baḥya ben Asher, *Be'ur 'al ha-Torah* (ed. Charles B. Chavel; 3 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1966) 2:474 (on Lev 12:7).

[42] Zohar 1:48b; translation from *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (trans. Daniel Matt et al.; 12 vols.; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004–2017) 1:266.

[43] Pinchas Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993) 91; Biti Roi, *Love of Shekhina: Mysticism and Poetics in Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2017) 52–53 (Hebrew).

[44] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 37.

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province of female practitioners—that both recapitulate the patterns of the divine world below and produce the transmission of divine substance, that is, the bestowal of blessing, and influence.

> The reason a woman is obligated in three [positive] commandments, which are *ḥallah*, *niddah*, and kindling of [the Sabbath] light. Know that *ḥallah* alludes to the [supernal] female [lit., *nun*, i.e., *neqevah*] that gives flavor to the dough (*noten ṭa'am ba-'issah*), thus she [the woman] comes to perform her commandment according to her [supernal] pattern (*dugmatah*). And with the kindling of [the Sabbath] light, it is the perfect unification (*ha-yiḥud ha-gamur*). It alludes to the light and the great radiance (*remez la-orah u-le-zohar ha-gadol*) of igniting all of the flames as one. And the man, who is the foundation (*yesod*), recites the *qiddush*. And that is the matter of the [Sabbath] lights, and the man bestows blessing from the source of life [i.e., *yesod*]. And thus the conjugal duty of scholars is on the Sabbath eve, for then is a perfect cleaving (*ha-devequt ha-gamur*). And the ritual immersion is because she [the woman] had received from the source of impurity; but after her purification, the king bestows influence upon her, and all of this alludes to the female.[45]

Ritual Efficacy of Women

The discussion of *ḥallah* recounts the sanctioned preparation of a sacramental food obtaining its divine taste directly from *malkhut*, which corresponds symbolically to the portion of the dough that is separated.[46] Among the medieval kabbalistic rationales of *ḥallah* reviewed below, this one is not unique in its emphasis on the female practitioner.[47] The association of the *separated* dough with *malkhut* appears elsewhere as well, in particular, where it is identified as the "first" existent (*reshit*) within the world of *separate* entities.[48] Also attested elsewhere is the notion that the separated portion, identified with one of the female powers of divinity, gives flavor to the remaining dough.[49]

The kindling of Sabbath light receives the fullest account of the three commandments. Here, the woman's efficacy is entwined with that of her husband. This may be seen from the heteroerotic dynamic of coordinating the woman's actions with those of her male partner. The aim of this ritual coordination of female and male is described as "the perfect union" and, alternately, "the perfect cleaving."

[45] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 226a; see appendix.

[46] On the phenomenology of taste, see Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); though it does not treat *ḥallah*, see s.v. "bread," "manna," and "*maẓah*."

[47] Before alluding to any kabbalistic explanation, Baḥya ben Asher states that women generally perform *ḥallah*, but he makes no mention of a female practitioner when discussing its esoteric rationale: *Be'ur*, 3:94–95 (on Num 15:20). The extensive rationale of separating the dough-offering in Joseph of Hamadan, however, sustains its focus on the female subject of the commandment.

[48] Recanati, *Perush*, 1:1 (on Gen 1:1), and 2:54 (on Num 25:15); discussed below.

[49] *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah* (Przemysl, 1883) 18b; discussed below.

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In the first instance, the woman's act of kindling light bespeaks her arousal of spouse, mirroring the supernal arousal of *tif'eret* by *malkhut*. In response, the woman's husband gushes forth with blessing, reciting the sanctification for Sabbath Eve. In so doing, he channels the seminal outpouring of *yesod*, the supernal phallus, i.e., "source of life." Though unstated, this rationale anticipates the conjugal union to transpire later in the evening.[50] Below are adduced related affirmations of women's ritual efficacy in performing *hadlaqat ha-ner* appearing both in de León's 1287 *Sefer ha-Rimmon* and in the Zohar.

In the text at hand, the brief discussion of menstrual purity strikes a different tone than the sources analyzed by Koren.[51] Those rationales concerned the prohibition against approaching a menstruant that is incumbent upon men. In this anonymous text, on the other hand, the focus is squarely on the obligation of the woman to immerse herself at the proper time. Accordingly, this action does not merely break the woman's attachment to the powers of impurity. The woman's immersion stimulates the outpouring of divine abundance upon her.[52]

The short text both thematizes and affirms the sacramental potency of ritual action performed by women. It does so in a way that is fully at home within the kabbalistic discourse on the commandments of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.[53] The text yields a more comprehensive and sympathetic picture than do contemporaneous rationales of one or another of the three commandments of Hannah. To be sure, the efficacy the text ascribes to women is bounded by the domestic domain in which the sanctioned actions transpire. But here, it is not the case that kabbalah "deprives women of various opportunities codified in mainstream rabbinic legislation."[54]

[50] On this aspect of kabbalistic sexuality, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 307–32; and Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York, 1989) 101–21, 289–96.

[51] On female agency in removing impurity when preparing for immersion, see below.

[52] On the menstrual cycle as determining the cyclical separation and return of the Holy Spirit in the *Didascalia Apostolorum*, see Fonrobert, *Menstrual Purity*, 174–79.

[53] On the "theosophical-theurgical" typology, see Moshe Idel, "Defining Kabbalah: The Kabbalah of the Divine Names," in *Mystics of the Book: Themes, Topics, and Typologies* (ed. Robert Herrera; New York: Peter Lang, 1993) 97–122; and idem, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) xii, xviii–xix. On both the utility and limitations of this category, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 74 (also 204). See also idem, "Structure, Innovation, and Diremptive Temporality: The Use of Models to Study Continuity and Discontinuity in Kabbalistic Tradition," *Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies* 18 (2007) 143–67; Hartley Lachter, *Kabbalistic Revolution: Reimagining Judaism in Medieval Spain* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014) s.v. "theurgy"; Jeremy Phillip Brown and Avishai Bar-Asher, "The Enduring Female: Differentiating Moses de León's Early Androgynology," *JSQ* 27 (2020) 7 n. 20; Jeremy Phillip Brown, "Espousal of the Impoverished Bride in Early Franciscan Hagiography and the Kabbalah of Gerona," *HR* 61 (2022) 279–305, esp. 293–94, 298–99; Herman and Brown, "Commandments as a Discursive Nexus," 19–21.

[54] Fishman, "A Kabbalistic Perspective," 204.

Outside Voice or Hermeneutical Fulcrum?

In response to the scholarly proposition to read the kabbalistic rationales of the commandments more equitably, a categorical proposition that risks, among the hazards noted above, imputing female efficacy where it is not borne out by the texts, I propose a more inductive method. Let us work to accumulate express evidence from kabbalistic rationales for the traditionally female obligations of *ḥallah*, *niddah*, and *hadlaqat ha-ner*. I will survey representative discussions from major works to ascertain whether the evidence already presented amounts to an altogether "outside voice," or, on the other hand, whether it helps to interpret authoritative texts of the period in a new light.

A. Dough-Offering

The kabbalistic discussions of the dough-offering hang on the scriptural language of the commandment: "Of the first of your dough (*reshit arisotekhem*) you shall set apart a cake for a gift (*terumah*)."[55] One feature shared by the various accounts is that *ḥallah* corresponds to one of the female powers of the divinity (*binah*, *din*, or *malkhut*), a factor that cannot be understood apart from the association of the commandment with female practitioners.[56] Speculation also hinges on the cosmogonically suggestive term *reshit* (first) from the commandment to set apart "the first of your dough," which calls to mind the account of creation (*ma'aseh **bereshit***).[57] Writing in Gerona during the third quarter of the thirteenth century, Naḥmanides is the earliest proponent of kabbalah to assign the dough-offering to this field of speculation.[58] On his basis, Baḥya ben Asher read the language of *reshit* as an indication that *ḥallah*, which alludes to "Assembly of Israel" (i.e., *malkhut*), is drawn from the primordial point of *ḥokhmah* (wisdom), the *sefirah* conventionally called *reshit* (first).[59] Menaḥem ben Benjamin Recanati, writing in Italy in the early fourteenth century, followed Naḥmanides in reading the priestly portion of dough as a symbol for the female "Assembly of Israel" (i.e., *malkhut*), viewing it as the

[55] Numbers 15:20.

[56] In addition to the sources adduced immediately below, see *Sefer Me'irat Einayim by R. Isaac of Acre: A Critical Edition* (ed. Amos Goldreich; Jerusalem: Akademon, 1981) 12.

[57] For the correspondence of *ḥallah* to *ḥokhmah* on account of the language of *reshit*, note the anonymous "secret" printed in the appendix of Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Nefesh ha-Ḥakhamah* (Basel, 1608) §.32; also there, §.12, note the related identification of *ḥallah* with "the secret of the concentric point" (*sod ha-nequdah ha-emṣa'it*). For the idea that the woman's removal of the *ḥallah* from the center of the dough is analogous to God's method in taking the *materia prima* for Adam's creation from the navel of the earth (= the site of the Jerusalem Temple), see Joseph of Hamadan, *Sefer Ṭa'ame ha-Miṣvot* = Menachem Meier, "A Critical Edition of the 'Sefer Ta'amey Ha-Mizwoth' Attributed to Isaac Ibn Farhi: Section I" (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 1974) 263. On the midrashic sources of the later account, see Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (7 vols.; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955) 5:73 n. 16.

[58] Naḥmanides, *Perush ha-Ramban 'al ha-Torah* (ed. Charles B. Chavel; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1962) 1:11 (on Gen 1:1).

[59] Baḥya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 3:95 (on Num 15:20).

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"first" existent in the world of separate entities (*reshit le-'olam ha-nifradim*),[60] at the threshold between divine and mundane worlds. This is based upon the older Naḥmanidean premise that separating the dough-offering alludes to the teaching that the tenth *sefirah* separates (*yafrish*) from the supernal powers.[61]

In describing the ritual procedure, Recanati explained that "when placing it in the oven burning with blazing fire, it is required to separate *ḥallah* from it [the dough], so that the attribute of harsh judgment will not [predominate]."[62] That is, the separation of the dough effects an intra-divine process of refinement,[63] which removes the attribute of harsh judgment (*din*) and beatifies the world:[64] "From this the blessing will emanate in the world, as it says,[65] 'you shall also give unto the priest the first of your dough, to cause a blessing to rest on your house.'"[66] Note that the male author did not explicate women as the agents of this process. Though probably implied, it is not distinguished.

Another tradition about *ḥallah*, one attested in the eclectic *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah* (early fifteenth century), is that the dough-offering corresponds not to *malkhut* but to the female attribute *binah*.[67] This tradition identifies the mass of dough with the seven knowable attributes of the Godhead, whereas the separated portion calls to mind the epistemic separation of *binah*, which lies beyond the threshold of Israel's apprehension. Though the *ḥallah*, that is, *binah*, gives a subtle flavor to the rest of the dough, i.e., the lower attributes, it exceeds the power of the lower attributes, which are revealed to Israel, to contain all of what *binah* bestows.[68] Thus, the didactic aim of this rite is to "make known that the rung of *binah*, called *ḥallah*, is concealed." Though this rationale alludes to the transmisson of substance from the upper strata to the lower strata of the divinity, it does not establish sacramentality as clearly as the accounts of Recanati, and Joseph of Hamadan.

Joseph of Hamadan, whom scholars have provisionally located in late thirteenth-century Castile, provided the most extensive rationale of *ḥallah* in the medieval *ṭa'ame ha-miṣvot*.[69] Joseph is clear that the rite requires female practitioners. His account begins with a word of admonition, by invoking the mishnaic tradition concerning the bitter punishment of women who neglect the commandments of Hannah. Stressing the weighty responsibility women possess in performing the dough-offering, the text has God advise the practitioner that every time "you"

[60] Recanati, *Perush*, 1:1 (on Gen 1:1), and 2:54 (on Num 15:20); also *Shushan Sodot* (Korets, 1784), 43a.

[61] Naḥmanides, *Perush ha-Ramban,* 1:11 (on Gen 1:1). See n. 43 on *ḥallaḥ* in the *Tiqqunim*.

[62] Recanati, *Perush*, 2:54.

[63] Referring to the diasporic practice of burning the separated dough.

[64] Recanati, *Perush*, 2:54.

[65] Ezekiel 44:30.

[66] Recanati, *Perush*, 2:54.

[67] *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*, 18b-c.

[68] Ibid., 25d, on the relationship between Israel and the lower attributes.

[69] *Sefer Ṭa'ame ha-Miṣvot*, 263–268 (commandment no. 63); Jerusalem, National Library of Israel, MS 8° 3925, fols. 83a–85a.

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separate the dough-offering, it is "as if you have made peace between Me and Israel, my son." But the text goes on to reprove any women lax in this commandment (explicitly addressing a female): "But now, if you have not separated *ḥallah*, it is as if you had caused exile to Me and my son, until the end of all generations. And [it is] as if you had murdered them [Israel]; it is better that you should die and my son should not die (*mutav she-tamuti at ve-lo yamutu beni*)."[70] This violent admonition—based as it is on the rabbinic notion that the precepts of Hannah constitute "tests of death"[71]—is plain in isolating women from the greater community of Israel. When read in terms of Joseph's kabbalah, the admonition excludes women from its author's divinized conception of Israel as God's progeny.[72]

And yet, after warning his female(!) reader against neglecting *ḥallah*, Joseph went on to offer a rationale for its observance—a phenomenologically rich account of the inverse power that women wield to catalyze salutary processes within the divine world.

> Know that the *ḥallah* alludes to the attribute of *malkhut*, which is the bride "Assembly of Israel," perfected in all perfections, and thus it is the commandment of women (*ha-miṣvah ba-nashim*) that comes from the attribute of the bride. And it is the tenth *sefirah* and it was given to the priest, to the attribute of *ṣaddiq* (i.e., *yesod*). And the *ḥallah* is the secret of the final *heh* of the unique name [viz. the Tetragrammaton], and the priest is the *vav* [. . .] . And every time the *ḥallah* is given, it causes a union of the *vav*—which is the bridegroom, the King, Lord of Hosts—with the bride, with *malkhut*, which is the final *heh* [. . .] . And the good oil pours out upon the bride, "Assembly of Israel." And abundance and blessings come to the world of souls, to the world of angels, and to the mundane world. And the entire world is blessed by it.[73]

In two further instances, Joseph's rationale for the dough-offering repeats the claim that the ritual causes the consummation of the divine marriage, reprising the seminal imagery of the divine bride's anointing.

B. Kindling the Sabbath Light

Since the homiletical stratum of the Zohar contains an explanation of this commandment that establishes the sacramental efficacy of women, there is no need to detain the reader with more peripheral accounts of kindling the Sabbath light.[74] Given the prominence of this text, one wonders why it has not garnered

[70] Ibid., 264; National Library of Israel, MS 8° 3925, fol. 83b; per the text, neglecting *hafrashat ḥallah* is tantamount to destroying the world.

[71] See above, n. 33.

[72] On this conception, see Leore Sachs-Shmueli, "*The Rationale of the Negative Commandments* by R. Joseph Hamadan: A Critical Edition and Study of Taboo in the Time of the Composition of the Zohar" (2 vols.; PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2018) 2:81 (no. 23), 157 (no. 43), 225 (no. 58), 252 (no. 66), and 371 (no. 111; Hebrew); and Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism* (London: Continuum, 2007) 377–506.

[73] *Sefer Ṭa'ame ha-Miṣvot*, 265; National Library of Israel, MS 8° 3925, fol. 84a.

[74] E.g., Shem Ṭov ben Abraham Ibn Gaon, *Keter Shem Ṭov = Sefer 'Ammude ha-Qabbalah* (2

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more attention.[75] The passage begins by recalling the midrashic doctrine that the precept was given to women as a means to expiate the primordial sin of Eve. In keeping with the Zohar's representation of its protagonists as members of the circle of Simeon bar Yoḥai,[76] our text attributes this doctrine to the ancients: "Kindling the lamp of Sabbath has been entrusted to the women of the holy people.[77] The companions have said that she [Eve] extinguished the lamp of the world [i.e., Adam] and darkened it." Noting this precedent for representing women's obligation as a consequence of Eve's sin, Rabbi Simeon suggests an alternative.

> This is fine, but here is the mystery of the matter: The canopy of peace is the consort of the world, and souls constituting the supernal lamp abide within her. So the consort [i.e., the woman] should kindle, for linked to her site, she performs the act. A woman should kindle the Sabbath lamp in joy to attain supernal honor and merit, to be worthy of holy sons who will become lamps of the world in Torah and reverence, spreading peace through the world. She also provides her husband a long life; so she should be careful.[78]

While the goal of the rite is bound up with the good things that will result for her husband, it is clearly the woman who sets the process into motion. As seen in the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text, the female kindling of Sabbath lights initiates the erotic sequence culminating in the act of intercourse later the same evening. This consideration helps to clarify the text's language about the souls constituting the supernal lamp, and the procreation of sons of Torah learning.[79]

Sefer ha-Rimmon contains a close Hebrew parallel to this Aramaic passage from the Zohar. The Hebrew text underscores the idea, alluded to above, that the female

vols.; Jerusalem: Nezer Shraga, 2001) 1:60; *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, 185a–b (cf. 107b); *Shushan Sodot*, 78a–79a. An early tradition from Catalonia describes the concatenation of divine powers in terms of the kindling of one light from another; see *Commentary on the Talmudic Aggadoth by Rabbi Azriel of Gerona* (ed. Isaiah Tishby; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982) 112, and 117–18 (Hebrew). On this motif in Joseph Angelet, see Iris Felix and Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel, "'Fire that Bears Fire': The Literary Development of the Zohar and the Flourish of Zoharic Exegesis at the Beginning of the Fourteenth Century; Menahem Recanati and Joseph Angelet," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 24 (2015) 186–87 (Hebrew). Cf. Y. Tzvi Langermann, "A Judeo-Arabic Candle-Lighting Prayer," *JQR* 92 (2001) 133–35.

[75] Ginsburg qualified this ritual as "the province of women," in his *Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah*, 171. Eitan Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 146–47; and Jay R. Berkowitz, *Rites and Passages: The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Culture in France, 1650–1860* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004) 66–67.

[76] On the Zohar vis-à-vis ancient midrash, see, e.g., Oded Yisrael, *Temple Portals: Studies in Aggadah and Midrash in the Zohar* (trans. Liat Keren; Berlin: de Gruyter; Jerusalem: and Magnes, 2016).

[77] On the female obligation to kindle the Sabbath light, compare Zohar 2:166a, where the obligation is contrasted with women's exemption from Torah study. It is rather men, according to this passage, who study Torah, and in so doing, adorn the commandment (of *hadlaqat ha-ner*) in which women are obligated, rather than vice versa.

[78] Zohar 1:48b; translation from *The Zohar* (trans. Matt), 1:266.

[79] Cf. Baḥya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 2:167 (on Exod 19:3). On the engenderment of sons specifically, see Abrams, *Female Body*, 104 n. 191, 173, 180.

obligation of kindling the Sabbath light is related to her duty to foster domestic peace (*shelom bayit*), which is glossed erotically.[80]

> And the light, which is patterned after the soul, is kindled in the house. The sages taught that the obligation of domestic peace (*shelom bayit*) was enjoined upon a woman. And so for this reason the kindling of the lamp was enjoined upon a woman.[81] And thus, it follows that the matter of kindling the lamp corresponds to a known matter, namely, the proper joy given to the canopy of peace.[82]

As in the *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text, and the passage from the Zohar, the obligation of women to kindle the Sabbath light is coordinated with their cooperative role in fulfilling the commandment of procreation on Sabbath Eve.

C. Menstrual Purity

As noted, Koren examined the rationales of *niddah*, stressing their failure to express female efficacy. There remains, however, a case to be made for a tradition, also attested in the Zohar, concerning the efficacy of women paring their fingernails and trimming their hair in preparation for ritual immersion.[83] In one iteration of this tradition, such preparations aim to pacify the angelic powers of defilement by paying them a ransom.[84] In another iteration, these preparations have the goal of restoring harmony to the divinity. When the text instructs women to pay a ransom of impurity in the form of nail parings and hair trimmings to the "other side," it counsels them to do so following the pattern of the new moon offering. Accordingly, the Israelites offer a goat, a symbol of impure forces, at the start of the lunar cycle, to distract the moon's sinister captor so that she, *malkhut*, may return to her husband, *tif'eret*.

> Just as on the first of the month, when the moon is purified to approach her husband, one portion must be given to the other side from its own kind, so similarly, a woman must give one portion of that kind when she is purified to approach her husband. What is her portion? Her fingernails with their filth and a little from the ends of her hair, wrapping them together—and then that evil side will not follow her to harm her, but will separate from her in every direction. What should she do with those hair and nail clippings? After wrapping them together, she must place them where no one passes by, or in deep holes in her yard, concealing them there.[85]

[80] B. Shabbat 23b. On the connection between domestic peace, the Sabbath light, and the unification of male and female *sefirot*, see Ṭodros Abulafia, *'Oṣar ha-Kavod*, 20b.

[81] The phrase "was enjoined upon a woman," is absent in some witnesses.

[82] Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Rimmon* = Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de León's Sefer Ha-Rimmon* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) 119. See Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah*, 171.

[83] See Koren, *Forsaken*, 120.

[84] See Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in Classical Kabbalah*, 224–27.

[85] Zohar 3:248b (cf. 1:190b); translation adapted from *The Zohar* (trans. Matt), 9:626; both this text and a closely related text by Moses de León ("Secret of the Fingernails") attribute this motif to the Book of Enoch. Avishai Bar-Asher, "'Samael and His Female Counterpart': R. Moses de León's

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This passage provides the "impure" woman with explicit instructions for the removal and disposal of fingernails and hair:[86] to prepare for immersion in a manner that exerts influence over those evil forces conspiring against her reunion with her husband, and, correspondingly, the union of *tif'eret* and *malkhut*. Female efficacy notwithstanding, a central concern of this text is the protection of the male, for whom the ritually impure body of the menstruant is a source of defilement.

Another passage from the Zohar underscores the sacramental function of these ritualized preparations: "When a woman wants to be purified, she must cut the hair that grew during the days of impurity and cut her nails and all the filth within them. [. . .] The filth of nails arouses another filth, and so they require burial. And whoever eliminates them completely stimulates, as it were, *ḥesed* (mercy) in the world."[87] The text states that the woman's actions—notably, actions carried out in a state of ritual *impurity*—result in a gracious outpouring of mercy into the world.

On the one hand, it is evident that the discursive constructions of women's efficacy go far beyond their cooperative function in fulfilling the commandment of procreation (a commandment in which she is not traditionally obligated).[88] On the other hand, there are clear ambivalences in how these texts represent women's ritual efficacy. In addition to the traditional limits of women's positive obligations and the discourse of mythological evil surrounding the commandments of Hannah (two elements kabbalah carries forward from the older rabbinic sources), it is possible to list two further ambivalences in the rationales: a reticence to distinguish Jewish women as practitioners—several accounts downplay the subjectivity of women who ostensibly wield divine influence through ritual action; and a tendency to construct women's rituals in a manner that sexualizes their practitioners as a function of male desire, and/or the male obligation to procreate. To the degree that these accounts affirm the sacramental efficacy of Jewish women, they also exhibit tendencies that strain against their affirmations. The rare *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text does indeed leverage these accounts hermeneutically, but their comparison also reveals discrepancies.

Between Sacramental Efficacy and Knowledge of Secrets

The historical distribution of medieval *ṭa'ame ha-miṣvot* with express concern for women's efficacy is negatively disproportionate, even marginal, when compared statistically to the overwhelming majority of non-gender-specific rationales, or rationales applying specifically to men. But neither this quantitative consideration

Lost Commentary on Ecclesiastes," *Tarbiz* 80 (2012) 539–66, esp. 555–59 (Hebrew); idem, *Journeys of the Soul: Concepts and Imageries of Paradise in Medieval Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2019) 300–2 (Hebrew). Zohar 3:79a; translation adapted from *The Zohar* (trans. Matt), 7:542.

[86] On the efficacy of hair-covering by women, see, e.g., *Zohar*, 2:125b–126a.

[87] Zohar 3:79a; translation adapted from *The Zohar* (trans. Matt), 7:542.

[88] On procreation as a specifically male obligation, see Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 119–26; on the inclusion of women in this positive obligation, see Zohar 1:71a–b and above, n. 2; contrast this inclusion of women in this traditionally male obligation to the Castilian text adduced above in n. 24 arguing on theosophical grounds for the exemption of women from *all* positive obligations.

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nor the qualitative androcentrism and gynophobia observed throughout contradict the datum that the male-authored archive affirms the sacramental efficacy of women. One interpretive difficulty, however, is that none of the rationales establish in any explicit manner the deployment of *kavvanah*, that is, theosophical intentionality, by female practitioners. Does the ritual efficacy of women, then, presuppose their use of esoteric knowledge of the *sefirot*?

When framing the question of female agency in kabbalistic sexuality, Idel established the "theosophical-theurgical" construction of procreative intercourse in terms that stress the constitutive function of intentional consciousness (*kavvanah*). Accordingly, he qualified intercourse as "an act whose actual performance acquires a certain theosophical and theurgical meaning, provided that it is done when accompanied by knowledge of the supernal divine map and a mystical intention toward its true goal."[89] According to this criterion, scholars may deem women efficacious where the texts corroborate their knowledge of the *sefirot* and their conscious meditation thereon.[90] Should this test for assessing women's efficacy be applied beyond the case of intercourse to the performance of other commandments by women, and especially to those of Hannah?

On the one hand, one may object that this test assumes a double standard. This is because many medieval rationales of the commandments, accounts from which scholars have adduced male "theurgy" without controversy, do not routinely explicate the theosophical intention of the posited actor. In such cases, either (1) the intentional use of esoteric knowledge is implied, or (2) the sacramental effects of ritual action inhere in the mechanics of its performance—*ex opere operato*—with or without intensive concentration on the divine world. If this is true for textual evidence concerning male "theurgy," the absence of overtly female *kavvanot* in the medieval rationales of the commandments need not detain our inquiry.

On the other hand, evidence for women's *kavvanah* in kabbalistic sources is not as deficient as consensus would suggest.[91] Consider the compelling, albeit unstudied, characterization of Hannah as an exemplar of efficacious prayer in medieval kabbalah.[92] This topic is not hidden away in a rare manuscript but, to the

[89] Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 94.

[90] Ibid., 247–48.

[91] This consensus is informed by ignorance of medieval ascriptions of *kavvanah* to women, and likewise by negative pronouncements by kabbalists concerning women's knowledge, e.g., Baḥya's judgment that "their knowledge is not settled like [that of] men"; *Be'ur*, 2:167 (ad Exod 19:3). However, compare statements in Baḥya's commentary concerning, e.g., the prophetic vocation of women and their power to transmit great principles (*'iqqarim gedolim*) to Israel concerning the world to come, resurrection of the dead (which is attributed to Hannah), and the esoteric topic of transmigration (*'inyan ha-gilgul*); ibid., 2:135 (ad Exod 15:20). The earliest statements of female intentionality in accounts of "theurgy" reported by Idel date only to the early modern period; Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 247–50 (cf. Avraham Grossman, *He Shall Rule Over You*, 292–97; on Baḥya's attitudes toward women, see there, 354–68). On *kavvanah*, see Abrams, "A Woman's Intention."

[92] On another biblical exemplar, see Leore Sachs-Shmueli, "The Image of the Prophetess Miriam as a Feminine Model in Zoharic Literature," *Kabbalah* 33 (2015) 183–210.

contrary, appears in the Zohar, Baḥya, Recanati, and most extensively, in the mature theosophical writings of Joseph Gikatilla (turn-of-the-fourteenth-century Castile).

As is well known, Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orah* is a major theosophical work of medieval Castilian kabbalah that seeks to render prayer more efficacious by promoting technical knowledge of the divine names and the *sefirot* to which they correspond; "when you have arrived at knowledge of this matter," boasts its introduction, "then God will answer when you call."[93] Since this book concerns the efficacy of prayer, it is not surprising that its author saw fit to invest particular significance in the figure of Hannah, whom the ancient sages already characterized as an exemplary supplicant.[94] A brief reading of Gikatilla's exegesis shows that the author did not mince words in ascribing secret knowledge of prayer to the prophetess. To the contrary, he enhanced the rabbinic characterization of Hannah by applying to her the terminology of *kavvanah* according to its theosophical acceptation among the kabbalists of Castile.

> One should pray with great fervor and weep, if he wants his prayers to be accepted; thus his prayers will not return empty-handed. So it is written in regard to Hannah: "She was bitter and she prayed to God, crying and weeping" (I Sam 1:10). Know that this righteous woman (*otah ha-ṣaddeqet*) knew all of the gates of the heavenly halls (*kol sha'are hekhalot*) and all her deeds were directed toward entering the chambers of the chariot (*ve-khol ma'asehah hayu be-khavvanah yedu'ah lehikkanes le-ḥadre merkavah*).[95]

Gikatilla taught that "this righteous woman" (*otah ha-ṣaddeqet*) initially directed her intention in prayer through the mediation of lower gradations (*neṣaḥ* and *hod*)[96] to the *sefirah binah*, the attribute upon which supplications for children depend.[97] Baḥya also reported the tradition that Hannah directed her *kavvanah* to *binah*: "this attribute (i.e., *binah*) is the place of children (*meqom banim*); there Hannah stood in her prayer intention (*sham 'amdah Ḥannah be-khavvanat ha-tefillah*) when asking for children."[98] Per Gikatilla, however, her intention was to ascend

[93] Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah* (ed. Joseph Ben-Shlomo; 2 vols.; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1996) 1:45; idem, *Gates of Light* (trans. Avi Weinstein; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1994) 3. On prayer in Gikatilla, see Charles Mopsik, *Les grands textes de la cabale. Les rites qui font Dieu* (Lagrasse: Verdier, 1993) 153–57; Elke Morlok, *Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla's Hermeneutics* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011) 232–34; and Lachter, *Kabbalistic Revolution*, 130–58.

[94] For rabbinic lore concerning Hannah, see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 6:215 n. 6–218 n. 15; Dvora Weisberg, "Men Imagining Women Imagining God: Gender Issues in Classic Midrash," in *Agendas for the Study of Midrash in the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Marc Lee Raphael; Williamsburg, VA: College of William and Mary, 1999) 63–83; Baskin, "Rabbinic Reflections on the Barren Wife," 101–14; idem, *Midrashic Women*, 79–80, 106, 124–25, 131–36, 149.

[95] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah*, 1:141; idem, *Gates of Light*, 109–10.

[96] See below, n. 199, concerning the testicular symbolism of these gradations.

[97] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah*, 1:162; idem, *Gates of Light*, 134; cf. idem, *Sha'are Ṣedeq* (Krakow: Fischer & Deutscher, 1881) 17a.

[98] Baḥya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 3:388 (on Deut 22:7); see also 1:313 (on Gen 38:5).

further to the uppermost *keter* from which the merciful blessing of children enters the uterine attribute of *binah*.

Thus, the text goes on to explain that Hannah eventually rose in her prayer intention beyond *binah* to the place of *keter*: "Hannah directed her prayers (*ve-Ḥannah be-hitkavvenah bi-tefillatah*) further and further upward until they reached the place known as *mazzal* (i.e., *keter*) and this is the essence of what is written, 'and she was embittered and she prayed on YHVH (*'al* YHVH)' (I Sam 1:10)."[99] The divine acme to which Hannah ascended, per Gikatilla, was none other than the highest *sefirah*, which, according to an esoteric tradition possessed by the author, is identical to both *en sof* and the domain of God's thirteen attributes of mercy.[100] Both the zoharic corpus and Recanati also contain traditions coordinating Hannah's prayer with the highest reaches of divinity;[101] one such tradition characterizes Hannah (alongside Deborah) as capable of praising the Blessed Holy One in such a manner that no man was theretofore proficient.[102] The ultimate aim of Hannah's prayer is indicated by the scriptural assertion that Hannah "prayed on YHVH (*'al* YHVH)," which Gikatilla took to indicate that she directed her prayer "*above* YHVH." Because the theonym *ehyeh* (corresponding to *keter*) abides above YHVH (i.e., *tif'eret*), the phrase "above YHVH" alludes to the *sefirah keter*.[103] Accordingly, Hannah directed her prayer to this most remote aspect of the divinity that oversees matters concerning reproduction, length of life, livelihood, and changes to the natural order.[104] In this respect, "it is the secret of the thirteen attributes of mercy in the *sefirah* of [the divine name] *ehyeh*, which is the secret of *keter*."[105]

In an earlier composition, Gikatilla recounted a similar teaching, according to which it was not merely Hannah's embittered affect that rendered her prayer efficacious but her certain knowledge of arcane prayer techniques.[106] Hannah's use of such technical knowledge facilitated the heights of her ascent in *kavvanah*. As above, this text describes the prayer's ultimate ascent to *keter*. But it reached that place only after Hannah initially directed it to the phallic attribute of *yesod*, through

[99] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah*, 1:163; idem, *Gates of Light*, 134–35.

[100] For a related example of thirteenfold speculation concerning *keter*, see the "Secret of the Thirteen Attributes" text attributed to Gikatilla, printed in Gershom Scholem, *Kitve Yad ba-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Press 1930) 219–25.

[101] Though none are as extensive as Gikatilla's accounts; see Zohar 3:19b, 79b, 2:274b (*Tosafot*); cf. (Pseudo-) Simeon bar Yoḥai, *Zohar Ḥadash* (ed. Reuven Margaliot; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 2013) 11b, which gives Samuel's mother as an example of a woman who engaged in *kavvanah* during intercourse (and always); and Recanati, *Perush*, 1:240–41, which synthesizes teachings concerning Hannah's prayer from both the Zohar and Gikatilla (without attribution to the latter).

[102] Zohar 3:19b.

[103] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah*, 1:163; idem, *Gates of Light*, 135–36. The secret of this prepositional phrase is also alluded to in Zohar 3:19b, 2:274b (*Tosafot*); and Recanati, *Perush*, 1:240–41; cf. Baḥya ben Asher, *Be'ur*, 3:388 (on Deut 22:7), where the phrase alludes to *binah*, rather than *keter*.

[104] Cf. Recanati, *Perush*, 1:241.

[105] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Orah*, 1:163; idem, *Gates of Light*, 135–36.

[106] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Ṣedeq*, 17a.

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the conjunction of *neṣaḥ* and *hod*. Those lower gradations, in turn, are visualized as the right and left testes of the divine anthropos,[107] which are closely identified with the theonym "Lord of Hosts," the name that Hannah invoked when she began to pray (I Sam 1:11).[108] Thus, "she mentioned the place of the engenderment of all progenies, and to that place Hannah directed her intention in the ascension of her prayer to the supernal *mazzal* [*ve-'ad ezeh maqom nitkavvenah Ḥannah be-'illuy tefillatah 'ad maqom ha-mazzal ha-'elyon*], which is known by Your thirteen attributes in the palace of mercy fixed within *keter*."[109]

These phallomorphic examples of Hannah's intentionality hardly relieve scholarship of the need to account for the androcentrism rife within the archive. They do, nonetheless, succeed in demonstrating that a well-known author from Castile, a kabbalist closely associated with the network of authors cited herein, celebrated the example of at least one woman who possessed secret knowledge of the highest order (including intimate knowledge corresponding to the male anatomy of God). And Gikatilla was not alone in this respect. Still, these examples do not illustrate in any direct way that Gikatilla (or any others) attributed theosophical knowledge to the righteous women of his family and community. They do, however, challenge the consensus that the medieval archive harbors no positive evidence for women's *kavvanah*.

How do these considerations inform our reading of the rationales of the three positive commandments of Hannah? To be certain, it remains an interpretive leap to claim that the putatively male authors of the medieval rationales of the three commandments imagined female practitioners to possess esoteric knowledge of their actions. Such a leap, however, is rendered considerably less treacherous in view of the fact that Gikatilla, in good company, had no difficulty ascribing such knowledge to women.

Between Phenomenology and Social History

Using the inherited scholarly nomenclature, it would be possible to explain that, because the rationales represent women as sacramentally efficacious in a "theosophical-theurgical" manner, one may affirm that the discourse constructs women who fulfill the commandments of Hannah as "mystics." But critical interventions in the field warn against unqualified dependence on inflated terms like "mystic" and "theurgist"[110]—etic categories that I have only utilized in this

[107] See, e.g., in Zohar 2:60b, as well as 3:296a, where *neṣaḥ* and *hod* are associated with the two thighs, the two kidneys, and the two testes of the divine male, as well as the theonym "Lord of Hosts." Recanati interpreted the latter text from the *Idra Zuta* concerning the testes as referring to Hannah's invocation of God as "Lord of Hosts"; Recanati, *Perush*, 1:240. See, too, discussion of Joseph of Hamadan on this motif in Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 226–27 n. 156.

[108] For the tradition that Hannah is the first to address God by this name, see b. Berakhot, 31b.

[109] Gikatilla, *Sha'are Ṣedeq*, 17a.

[110] Boaz Huss, *Mystifying Kabbalah: Academic Scholarship, National Theology, and New Age Spirituality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 76–82; Jeremy Phillip Brown, review of

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study in reference to previous scholarship. Without, however, relying on such vocabulary, one may conclude that the medieval kabbalists constructed women's rituals in a manner that is phenomenologically comparable to their accounts of actions performed by men. Again, such constructions are not impervious to the kinds of androcentric and/or female-negative ideation to which previous scholarship has duly sensitized researchers.[111] Yet, the texts represent women as plainly efficacious in their capacity to harmonize the gendered attributes of divinity in a variety of ways—including the facilitation of hierogamy and its effects. Together with everything scholars have correctly observed and what has been iterated above about the alienation of Jewish women in medieval kabbalah, the texts convey a functional image of Jewish women exerting influence within the domain of divinity. Interpreters of the texts are left to reckon with the problem of how to contain the ambivalence between such factors, as well as the lack of correspondence between the male-authored accounts of female efficacy and what little is known, or indeed knowable, about the religious lives of medieval Jewish women.

From what little is known, it is unlikely that significant numbers of medieval Jewish women actively studied these rationales and endeavored to fulfill their obligations precisely as the texts instruct.[112] Medieval Jewish women both observed and shirked the commandments of Hannah.[113] When they did observe them, it is almost certain that the commandments occasioned diverse elements of devotion.[114] I hypothesize that medieval women availed themselves of a variety of unwritten devotions when performing them, and that these differed substantially from the highly specific models described in the kabbalistic texts. If this hypothesis has any merit, it becomes possible to view the attempts to rationalize a domain of female devotion, generally, as a campaign on the part of male authors to homogenize the variegated devotions of women in a manner that complemented the authors' social and religious aspirations. Notwithstanding the many differences in content and nuance between the texts collected here, they exhibit a generic agreement on women's capacity to interface ritually with God. This agreement is the function of a shared vision—albeit a historically tentative vision incubated by small cohorts of learned men—for a broader community animated by a sacramental phenomenology of the commandments.

Mystifying Kabbalah, by Boaz Huss, *AJSR* 46 (2022) 427–29.

[111] See above, n. 6.

[112] When describing a later period, Lawrence Fine voiced the "contention that women must have been involved in certain kabbalistic rituals in significant ways," in idem, *Physician of the Soul, Healer of the Cosmos: Isaac Luria and His Kabbalistic Fellowship* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003) 254, and 15, 120–22, 195. See also Jonathan Garb, "Gender and Power in Kabbalah: A Theoretical Investigation," *Kabbalah* 13 (2005) 79–107.

[113] Avraham Grossman, *Pious and Rebellious*, 25–27.

[114] Baskin, *Midrashic Women*, 71: "It is likely that observing these rituals provided many women with satisfying spiritual avenues for sanctification of aspects of daily life."

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Addendum

Anonymous, "The Reason a Woman Is Obligated," or *Miṣvot Ḥannah* text; MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, héb. 806, fol. 226a (copied 1437). Considering its codicological context and other attributes, MS Paris héb. 806 is likely the earliest attestation when compared with the three other witnesses: MS Paris héb. 843, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fol. 78a; MS Milan, Ambrosiana, P 47 sup., fol. 32a; and MS Milan, Ambrosiana, &.31 sup., fol. 41b. See above, n. 23.

1 טעם מפני מה נשים חייבות במצות לא תעשה ופטורות
ממצות עשה לפי כי נשמת הז' מן הח' והנו"ן מן הנו"ן
והז' הוא תורה שבכתב והיא מצות עשה והנו"ן מצות לא תעשה
לכן אין האשה חייבת אלא במה שנאצלת משם והאיש חייב בזה ובזה
5 וראיתי בספר אחר כי מצות מִּן עשה <מן> החס"ד ומצות ל"ת מן האש הגדולה
והוא הגבור"ה ולכן האיש שהוא האמצעי חייב בשתיהן שמקבל שפע
מכולן ובזה תלוי מה שאחז"ל (דמת) דמצות עשה חל <על> לא תעשה לפי כי
הם למעלה הימנו. והטעם שאשה חייבת בג' מצות כגון חלה נדה
והדלקת הנר. דע כי החלה רמז לנו"ן הנותן טעם בעיסה לכן באה
10 לעשות מצותה עם דוגמתה ובהדלקת הנר הוא הייחוד הגמור
רמז לאורה ולזוהר הגדול בהתדבקות כל הנרות יחד. ואז האיש
הוא היסו"ד מקדש וזהו עניין הנרות והאיש מברך ממקור החיים. ולכן
עונת ת"ח מע"ש לע"ש כי אז הדבקות הגמור. והטבילה בה מפני
שקבלה ממקור הטומאה ואחרי הטהרה המלך משפיעה וכל זה רמז לנו"ן

2 **הז'** הזכר; **הח'** החסד; **והנו"ן** והנקבה. 5 **מִּן** מחוק בכת"י; **עשה <מן> החס"ד** <מן> כתוב מעל השורה. 7 **שאחז"ל** שאמרו חכמים זכרונם לברכה; **(דמת)** טעות המעתיק ללא מחוק; **דמצות עשה חל <על> לא תעשה** <על> לא בכת"י פריז 806 ; הובא מן כת"י האחרים. 13 **ת"ח** תלמידי חכמים; **מע"ש לע"ש** מערב שבת לערב שבת.

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