

## The Female Component to High Holidays Repentance for All

by Ruth Kara-Ivanov Kaniel\*

The Zohar, that classic mystical text from the thirteenth century, describes the High Holidays as a developmental process of female empowerment which culminates in Yom Kippur.

According to the Zohar, the place we return to when we repent is our supreme mother, the Sefhira, and we receive understanding from the Tree of the Ten sephirot.

Returning to our mother means to be gathered to the mother's womb, a sort of death in order to be reborn, a self-nullification for gaining a new life.

This inversion has to do with the complex relationship between a mother and her children: she gives them life, and they establish her motherly essence; she gives them life, and they mark the beginning of her end, as "one generation passes and other generation comes." Children return to their mother to understand their origin, and thus reveal their future.

Thanks to these paradoxical relationships between the generations, the mother has the power to heal, to sweeten, and to explain every question and shattering in our lives.

"Returning to the mother" is not always an absolute, unequivocal, and affixed teshuva. It is a teshuva that is coming into being, the same way that the world to come is coming into being, and the status of which is always (a world) "to come."

According to "Shaarei Orah" by Rabbi Joseph ben Abraham Gikatilla, "the world to come" is also another name of the Sefhira – "Understanding." "Understanding" is constantly giving birth to souls and thanks to her, we are renewed and recreated every day, especially at the beginning of the year, at Rosh Hashana.

At Rosh Hashana, the new moon is revealed. The year begins with coverage and concealment, due to a cloud that covers the sun. In the Kabbalah, the sun is the male. The moon, which is usually identified as the Shechina, and is also the lowest sephira, called Malchut, is the female, which gets her light from him. When the sun is not shining, the Shechina is hidden as well, and our world is in darkness. How can the light of Genesis be lit? The Zohar says:

Thus, בכסה (ba-keseh), on the covering, with a ה (heh), for the moon itkaseya, is covered. And how does everything shine? Through teshuva and the sound of the shofar, as it is written: Happy the people who know the blast. Then, O YHVH, they will walk in the light of Your presence (Psalms 89:16).

Come and see: On this day the moon is covered and does not shine until the tenth day, when Israel turns back in complete teshuva and Supernal Mother returns, illumining Her. On this day, Mother embarks on Her journey and joy prevails everywhere.

Thus it is written, הוא הכיפורים יום (Yom ha-kippurim hu), it is the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 23:27). Yom ha-kippurim hu, it is the Day of Atonements – the verse should read כפורים ימים (yamim kippurim), Days of Atonements; why Yom ha-kippurim, the Day of Atonements? Well, because two radiances shine as one, Upper Lamp illumining Lower Lamp. This day, She shines from the upper light, not from light of the

sun; so it is written בנסתה ליום חגנו (ba-keseh le-yom haggenu), on the covering until our festival day.

The Zohar emphasizes that the only way to cleave the cloud is with the sound of shofar and teshuva – both mental and super-natural ways to reach the supreme source and attract new life out of it. The Zohar teaches, symbolically, that this task is assigned to man on every New Year: to cleave the cloud with repentance, to cancel the decree by the voice of the shofar.

Only then, after the 10 days of repentance, will the light illumine Yom ha-Kippurim. It is a double light: that of the supernal mother (Understanding) which illumines her daughter (Shechina), and the two will reunite into one. That is why this day is called "Yom ha-Kippurim" - the day of two feminine lights illumining together, without the aid of any masculine light from the outside.

According to another commentary in the Zohar, unlike at Rosh Hashana, when the masculine God appears, exposing and lifting his left hand in a gesture of sentence and vengeance, on Yom ha-Kippurim we realize that this same hand is meant to support Shechina and lift her from the dust, as is written in the first part of Song of Songs: "Let his left hand be under my head" (2:6). On this day Shechina, the female hero, appears as a bride, and we all are her bridesmaids, accompanying her to "Mother river" of the sephira (Understanding) to immerse in it and clean her from our sins.

Finally, after being atoned, the dance of sephirot culminates in Sukkot, and the celestial couple is united. The second part of the verse - "and his right hand embrace me" - is implemented, and light and happiness fill the world.

These commentaries clearly create a new concept of "Days of Awe," and emphasize the female grounds a man enters upon repenting and "making teshuva." At Rosh Hashana and Yom ha-Kippurim, we pray facing Shechina and Understanding, and their light envelops and shields us after the cloud is cleaved.

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