

Sparks

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Rosh Yeshiva, Orayta*

From His-tory to Her-story

Is G-d male or female?

One day my son Ananiel and my two daughters, Leyadya and Ne'ema, burst into my study. They had obviously been fighting over something and were very upset. I could see that I was chosen to be the lucky arbitrator to resolve another case of sibling rivalry. They shouted at each other, "You go, you ask Daddy." "No, no! You go, you go." Finally Ananiel, who was age five at that time, took the challenge and said, "O.K., O.K. Daddy, isn't it true that G-d is a boy?" Ne'ema and Leyadya, ages eight and nine, had tears in their eyes. I could hear them silently pleading with me, "Please no, please no. Tell us it's not true. It's bad enough our brother is a boy. Surely, G-d is really a girl." I said to them, "G-d is not a boy and G-d is not a girl. G-d is beyond that. We may talk about G-d as if He is a boy. But we really don't mean it literally." They all looked at me in shock and confusion. There was this awkward silence, and then suddenly my son blurted out, "You're wrong! He's a boy." And he stomped out of the room.

Unfortunately, many adults actually believe that G-d is male. And it seems from a first glance at the Book of Genesis that the Torah would agree. Throughout G-d is referred to as "He." Although in much of Jewish tradition we find G-d described as a father and king, there are references to G-d also as a "She," as mother or queen.

However, those of us who are in the know understand that all this is holy poetry. Anything we say about G-d cannot be taken literally.

According to Kabbalah, G-d is beyond descriptions that use neat and easy logical categories of either/or.

Let's now explore what are the masculine and feminine aspects of G-d.

Most people think that G-d is infinite. But that is incorrect. The infinite is that which goes on and on in space. However, G-d created space and is therefore not bound to the laws and limitation of space. If we describe G-d as *infinite*, what we really mean is that G-d is spaceless. *Infinite* is the opposite of *finite*, while *spaceless* means "free from the limitations of space." The One who is spaceless is free to be both beyond space and within space simultaneously. Therefore, G-d is beyond this finite world and yet G-d completely inheres every inch of the earth.

Most people think that G-d is eternal. But that is incorrect. Eternity would be that which goes on and on in time. But G-d created time and is therefore not confined to the limitations of time. If we describe G-d as eternal, what we really mean is that G-d is timeless. The eternal is the opposite of the temporal, while *timeless* means "free of the limitations of time." The One who is timeless is free to be both beyond time and within time at the same time. Therefore, G-d is both beyond time and yet within every moment, completely filling it with His entire presence.

And when we say that G-d is One, we really mean that G-d is non-dual. One is limited; it is the opposite of many. But non-duality is free of the confines of one or many. Non-duality is free to be beyond the many and within the many. Therefore, G-d is beyond you, me, and everyone else in this world, and yet also within us.

Therefore, according to Kabbalah, G-d is free to be both beyond time and within each moment, beyond space and within every inch, beyond multiplicity and within billions of finite human beings. G-d is free to be manifest as one hundred percent transcendent and yet also one hundred percent immanent.

Of course, this is a contradiction and is not logical. However, we have to always be reminded that all this is from our limited point of view. From G-d's perspective there are not two aspects to the Divine. It is only when we describe the divine truth with our limited language that we need to speak in this paradoxical way. As one sage put it, Kabbalah is not the path to paradise but to paradox.

Metaphorically, we would say that there are two faces to the one G-d — the face of transcendence and the face of immanence. Kabbalah explains that the face of divine transcendence is identified with the power of masculinity and is referred to as "The Holy One, Blessed Be He." The face of divine immanence is identified with the power of femininity and is referred to as the *Shechinah* — "The Divine Presence" or "The Indwelling Spirit."

Therefore, G-d is not male or female. G-d is beyond the either/or. The manifestation of G-d as *outside* of time, space, and finite beings is described as masculine. The manifestation of G-d as *within* time, space, and finite beings is described as feminine.

HIS-TORY OR HER-STORY

People often say, "If there is really a G-d, why doesn't He do miracles anymore? I would believe in G-d if I saw the sea split or some other supernatural event."

This question comes from a "male" orientation to G-d. G-d, the Miracle Worker, is part of His-story but not so much part of Her-story. In the past, G-d did miracles in order to prevent some terrible tragedy from happening. G-d overruled the laws of nature to keep the story going — otherwise, it would have ended. But this type of intervention is not the ideal way that G-d wants to act. G-d prefers not to do miracles. He only does them when there is no other way to keep the story going or to show His control of nature.

Why is G-d reluctant to do miracles? Because the story of our life is Her-story. The star of the show is the evolving manifestation of G-d's spirit within humanity. Miracles actually stifle the growth of the expression of the *Shechinah* from within us. The light of divine immanence must shine through our choices, our commitments, and our hard work.

This explains the bizarre behavior of the Israelites who wrestled with the significance of their identity in the desert for forty years. The desert was a miraculous place for the Israelites. They enjoyed a daily portion of manna, the heavenly bread that fell daily from the sky. They also drank water that flowed abundantly from a rock. For forty years the Israelites sojourned in a miraculous desert where everything was upside down. Generally wheat comes from the ground and water from the skies, but for forty years it was just the opposite.

In the desert the Israelites lived in a divine womb, like a fetus whose needs are completely cared for. And yet with all these comforts they complained and rebelled over and over again. Why?

Because under these miraculous conditions, their inner stature was dwarfed. It was like you and I living under the shadow of our parents. There is a spirit within us that is restless and demands to be established and expressed. This spirit is the manifestation of the Divine within us that must evolve and emerge. This is why the miraculous desert was not the destination of the Israelites. It was only part of their process and journey.

Their original destination was the Promised Land. The funny thing, though, is that when they were about to get there, they started to have second thoughts. They sent in a group of spies to check it out. This group returned after a quick look and told the people that the Promised Land consumes its inhabitants. In other words, it was a place that demands a lot of work. The people wondered, "Why should we leave the comfortable womb of G-d that encompasses us with daily miracles? Why leave this wonderful desert and go to a land that demands so much human effort and hard work? What is so promising about the Promise Land?"

This was their dilemma: On the one hand, the divine spirit within them wanted to become manifest through their choices, determined efforts, and hard work. Therefore, they resented all the freebies in the desert. But then again, it was also very nice to have it all miraculously handed to them on a silver platter and to bask in the light of G-d. Why should they soil themselves with the labors of this physical world when they could stay in bliss and enjoy the supernatural desert? Why leave the spiritual life of the desert and go to work?

Essentially, this story captures the real identity crisis of all of humanity: "Is G-d within us or beyond us?" Are we part of His-story, witnessing how G-d from above snaps His fingers, abrogates the laws of nature, and does miracles? Or are we part of Her-story, serving as a vehicle for the manifestation of the aspect of G-d within, seeking to be expressed through our struggles, our choices, and our efforts?

Once again the answer is yes and yes.

The forty years in the desert was a time for the revelation of the face of G-d's transcendence, showing that G-d is the Power who is above and beyond the laws and limitations of nature. During that time the Israelites developed a profound belief in divine transcendence — G-d was manifest as the Holy One, Blessed Be He. And they understood that they were not G-d. But then the time came for the manifestation of the face of divine immanence — that aspect of G-d which is expressed from within humanity.

These are the two faces of the one and only G-d.

The problem with the miraculous life in the desert was that the light of divine transcendence eclipsed the light of divine immanence. But the danger in the Promised Land was that the light of divine immanence could eclipse the light of divine transcendence. In the Promised Land, the Israelites could come to think that all their success was really their own and had nothing to do with G-d.

The dilemma of the Israelites just before they entered into the Promised Land sheds light on our own dilemma today. Every day we witness amazing advancements in science and technology. We, too, are creators of worlds. We seem to be ascending to the stature of gods. Will we let this power go to our heads and fool us into thinking that we are gods and do as we please? Or do we humbly accept these powers as gifts from G-d, signs of the growing light of the Divine within?

Do we delude ourselves and think that life is *our* story, or do we rise to the ultimate realization that it is all really His/Her story and that our joy is to serve?

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