

The erotics of kabbalah or how to read naughty texts!

Remember those chapters the bible school teacher missed out?
Or the Rebbe in cheder, suddenly skipping “inappropriate” bits of the Talmud?

Well here we are again in the Zohar
And my earliest recollections were my father’s admonition NOT to read it!
That Zohar... “full of erotica!” he claimed, that man from Vienna, the very city of sin!
The city of Freud and the invention of innuendo! That man, my father!

How do we read the notion of *yichudim*? Those couplings or copulations,¹
Shall we sanitize it like Chabad (“a unification of supernal elements in (and by) one’s mystical devotions in prayer”)?

For *yichudim* literally means unification as in coupling as engaged in marital bonding between the male and female...
So by what audacious slight of pen does kabbalah project such unifications onto the divine?

We are told (Rabbi Akiva none the less!) that the book of Song of Songs is a metaphor for the holiest aspects of the divine-human relationship. An erotic poem is the only text that seems to come close to express such a love. Yet is fully described and incarnated in the fleshiness of the description of lovemaking. Despite its fleshiness it is called the “Holy of Holies” and we are repeatedly instructed to not take this literally, for how can something so holy be taken literally.

So we are trained to read allegorically. The anthropomorphic statements about God were the first to be allegorized away by our embarrassed medievalists and we are told to midrashically “misread” the texts that depict in real time the lovemaking or *yichudim* described with such graphic detail.

In a post modern reading the text once again comes to life, stripped of the theological lens we have been genetically prescribed to wear before reading. Loaded with a thousand years of rabbinic inhibition we read it afresh as young lovers might and attempt to see the divine in a new light.²

The divine seems to be wholly experienced these days within our lives and within our bodies. In a post-Holocaust world it is also seen in the horrors of man’s inhumanity to man. And with technology it is seen in the brutality of technological mass murder down to technological prolongation of life in agony.

We need a theology that might express this horror and our sacred canonical texts must therefore be mined for these deeper truths.

I always wondered, watching National Geographic and other Nature shows on TV, how cruel “mother nature” was. But now I see it differently. Maybe “she” merely represents the divine down here in this world as it wishes to be. Natural selection and the fight for survival of the fittest reflect

¹ "Yichudim" are a form of kabalistic meditation based on different permutations and combinations of the divine names and attributes of G-d. Rabbi Isaac Luria made use of these meditations as part of his liturgy.

² Frances Landy has done a superb job in his Paradoxes of Paradise: Identity and Difference in the Song of Songs. Almond Press: Sheffield, 1983

not only biology's dicta but also theology. For if we have learned nothing else, it is that mankind when left to its own devices will use force with all the technology at his disposal to destroy the "other". The Hassidic Masters have always read man well and "that which is down below is mirrored above"

Rabbi Allen Goldberg said to Reb Hershy once "Thinking of God as Other is pagan..."
Yichudim is the very inner work of resisting the notion of splitting the divine from human.
Yichudim go beyond the split of divine and human and point to the internalization of all, the All.

When the Berdichever is talking to the Eybishte who is he talking to????????? If not his Higher Self? That was his yichud, that was his constant attempt to make yichudim, form all human experience.

I am so afraid that my notion of the divine is heretical. So afraid of the label of apikorsus (labeled to often by my dear wife!). But what else can I give my children but the truth as I see it and feel it.

When I was sixteen I ventured into Keats house on Hampstead Heath and read his "Ode to Nightingale" in the original manuscript. Something resonated within my heart, it quickened and I felt what I now believe to be the divine coming through. Back then (and of course even now in my lucid moments) the voice immediately thundered through " Heresy! You have been told the truth in Rabbi Cooper's class" .

Yichudim are couplings of the divine within each of us. They are murmurings from the deep that point us to an identification with the "*cheleik elokei mimaal mamash*" that spirit within all of us that on occasion sings.

So the naughty bits we were told to skip are actually open now. At this age
In this place the text presents itself to us.

We know it
After years of literal and even midrashic reading we come back to it
Its terror and its naughtiness
Its utter disregard for Protestant Orthodoxy and Artscroll Judaism!
And we allow ourselves a deeper reading
The reading of yichudim
The reading identification
And penetration.

The metaphor is both literal and non-literal
And we live in that paradoxical space

Hoping for a moment of truth
A moment of reflection
And a feeling of the divine within.