

## PROPHETS AND PAGANS

# On the Erotic and the Ethical

Mordechai (Marc) Gafni

**T**he Temple of the ancient Israelites is the original Hebrew expression of pagan consciousness. Now—as we will see later in this essay—the difference between Temple and pagan consciousness is very crucial. But it is a difference that is only important because of their profound similarity. Both the Temple and the pagan cults shared an intoxication with the feminine Goddess, symbol of sacred eros.

The relationship with the Goddess was not a hobby for the Israelites like modern religious affiliation often tends to be. It was an all-consuming desire to be on the inside, to feel the infinite fullness of reality in every moment and in every encounter—it was an attempt to fully experience eros. Because the ancients were so aware of the depth of reality, to live without being able to access the infinite in this erotic way was enormously painful. (For an example, read the story of the idolatrous King Menashe, as retold in the Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin 92A.)

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The prophets of the Temple period opposed paganism with all of their ethical fire and passion. For them, it was inconceivable that the ecstatic and primal Temple experience, religiously powerful and important as it might be, should become primary. When eros overrode ethos, the prophet exploded in divine rage. In moments of clash, the prophet taught that the ethical always needed to trump the erotic.

Modern Judaism has developed from the ethical teachings of the prophets. In the process, however, we have overlooked the erotic, present in the pagan consciousness of the Temple service. We have forgotten the Goddess, a vital presence in the life of ancient Israel. Hebrew liturgy reflects the virtually inconsolable longing of the Hebrew spirit for the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. This longing is not a dream of proprietorship over this or that hill in Jerusalem. Indeed, ownership and holiness are mutually exclusive. Instead, it is a yearning to reclaim sacred eros as part of the fabric of our lives. And, in the way of the circle, our longing for eros is also a longing for ethos. All ethical breakdown emerges from a dearth of eros. When we are overwhelmed by an erotic vacuum, ethics collapse.

Both the vitality and metaphysics of a pagan eros were understood by Israeli mystic Abraham Kook to be essential to the reclaiming of a religious sensibility which reflected



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both the depth and need of modernity. It is in large part for this pagan sensibility that we yearn when we speak of the dream of a re-built Temple.

To find our way back to eros and the feminine, we must yearn back and forward to the Hebrew mystical tradition, whose masters kept these ideas alive in the form of esoteric tradition, practice and lore.

### *Eros*

In the kabbalistic tradition, as in Plato, the erotic is not a mere synonym for the sexual, but an expression of inner passion which sexuality models but does not begin to exhaust. In Hebrew myth and mysticism, eros has four faces. The first face of eros is being fully present on the inside, traversing the chasm that separates subject and object. To use the imagery of the Zohar, the magnum opus of Hebrew mysticism, eros is to be in the flow of "the river which swells forth from Eden," the fountain of life; when I am not in the flow of my own life, I am not living naturally. The opposite of eros is alienation, the feeling that you are an outsider with no safe place to call home.

Kabbalah scholar Yehuda Libes suggests that the word "zohar" is roughly synonymous with the Greek word "eros." The authors of the Zohar were not dry medieval scholastics; they were rather men of great passion and depth who believed that by entering the inside of the moment, the text, or the relationship, they could recreate and heal the world. Eros is aroused whenever we move so deeply into what we do, who we are with, or where we are, that its interiority stirs our heart and imagination. Shechinah, the Hebrew mystical term for the indwelling feminine presence of God, is no less than the erotic merged with the Holy. Shechinah is the radically profound experience of being on the inside.

The second face of eros is the "fullness of presence." This is not a distinct and different quality from the first but flows naturally and even overlaps with the erotic quality of being on the inside. And yet it is not quite the same. Of course, being on the inside requires the fullness of presence. But we can experience full presence even when we have not merged with the moment or crossed over to the inside. Full presence is about showing up. You can show up and be fully present in a conversation without necessarily losing yourself in the encounter's flow. Full presence at work can mean that you derive joy, satisfaction, and self worth from your vocation. It means you feel full and not empty.

To live erotically is to be fully present to each other's richness, complexity, and ultimate grandeur. It is to fully wait for the other to appear. The Shechinah, say the mystics, is presence waiting for us to be present. She is eros, standing outside of our window, waiting. Waiting for us to run out and behold, with wonder, her face.

The third face of eros is desire. Eros is the yearning force of being. I yearn, therefore I am. As long as I am on the outside, I can ignore my deepest desires and stifle my longing.

When I am on the inside, however, when I am fully present, I am able to access my yearning. For the Hebrew mystic, unlike his Buddhist or Greek cousins, desire and longing are sacred. To be cut off from the eros of yearning is to be left in the cold of non-existence. To yearn is to be aflame.

Depression is at its core the depression of desire. When we lose touch with our authentic desire, we become listless and apathetic. There is wonderful eros in desire. It is what connects us most powerfully with our own pulsating aliveness. Longing is a vital strand in the textured fabric of the erotic. It is of the essence of the Holy of Holies.

The fourth face of eros is the interconnectivity of being. Longing, desire, and tears remind us of the fourth strand in the erotic weave. They whisper to us that we are all interconnected. No human stands alone. The word "religion" traces its source to the Latin root *ligare* which, as we can hear in the word "ligament," is about connectivity. Religion's goal is to *re-ligare*—to reconnect us. Religion's original intention was to take us to that inside place where we could indeed experience the essential interconnectivity of all reality. All of existence is one great quilt of being and we are all patches in its magnificent intertextured pattern.

Eros is what allows us to move past the feeling of isolation and separation and experience ourselves as part of the quilt. To sunder our connection to eros is therefore to sin. Sin is but the illusion of separation. Sin is not evil; it is merely tragic. Not only do we lose the source of life's greatest pleasure, but we would undermine the building blocks of connection without which the world would ultimately collapse.

### *The Merging of Male and Female*

One of the most obvious yet profound qualities that the sexual models for the erotic is the merging of the feminine and the masculine. The drive towards union between the female and the male is the essential underlying force that powers the universe. Although it is often expressed in the merging of man and woman, it is by no means limited to that expression. For the Hebrew mystics, the sexual union of man and woman both models and participates in the more primal union of Shechinah (the Divine Feminine) and Tiferet (the Divine Masculine). Whether understood as Yin and Yang, as in Taoist thought, or Shiva and Shakti in Hindu mythology, masculine and feminine are different faces of the greater union, the force of divinity that courses through the cosmos and beyond. The kabbalistic archetype of the integrated male-female are the two cherubs, one male and one female, present in the Holy of Holies in the ancient Temple. Described in the Book of Kings and unpacked in the Babylonian Talmud, these golden cherubs were twined in sexual embrace. For the kabbalists, their integration is the highest erotic expression of a healed world.

What is the difference between masculine and feminine?

The core cosmic intuition of Hebrew mystic Isaac Luria, later developed by mystics Isaac Chaver and Abraham Kook,



offers a deceptively simple paradigm. Men are lines, “yosher” or “kav” and women are circles, “iggulim.” Or, more accurately, line is a masculine image and circle is a feminine expression. Every man and woman is a unique interpenetration of line and circle.

Let us look at the nature of a circle. Circles are characterized by suppleness, intimacy, egalitarian sensibility, connection, and communication. The feminine circle is defined by relatedness. It surrounds, embraces and envelopes. It is a symbol of intimacy, loyalty, and a capacity to forgive and renew. The circle moves round and round, in a constant flow of re-newal, re-mem-bering, and re-cognition. It always comes home again

Already it is clear to us that a circle is naturally erotic. In a circle, everyone can see each other. In Luria’s language, everyone is face to face. There is intimacy in circle.

The masculine line is far more rigid than the circle. Judgment and distinction are natural line functions. With a line, there is a clear hierarchy. One is either higher on the line or lower. If people are moving in the same direction on a line, then they will not be face to face. Instead, they will be face-to-back or back-to-face. A line signals a clear lack of intimacy. A line is forward moving, goal-oriented, directed, and focused. It spends a lot more time looking ahead than looking around. The line’s natural movement is to thrust forward.

Luria writes, “Every world of world and every detail of detail in every world of world is made up of these two principles, circles and lines.” Lines and circles in various permutations and balances are the DNA of spiritual reality. It is the unique blending of their energies that gives contour, character, and depth to every unit of reality. It is a blending in which neither the circle nor the line ever disappears. Each is fully absorbed in the bliss of merging with other while never losing its own integrity.

Does the union of masculine and feminine mean that, after total integration, gender will dissolve as an issue? That a kind of transvestite existentialism is the kabbalistic dream of an evolved world? Well, yes ... and absolutely not.

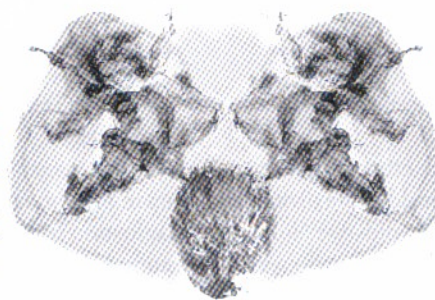
There is a core paradigm in Hebrew mystical sources and many other traditions which provides a clear reality map for the integration of circle and line. It is a trinity of stages.

**Simple** (Before enlightenment: chop wood, carry water)

**Complex** (Enlightenment)

**Simple** (After enlightenment: chop wood, carry water)

The linchpin of the idea is that the third stage and the first, although externally similar, are really worlds apart. For stage three deeply integrates the new consciousness of stage two. So while the simplicity of stage one might be naïve, superficial, and even irresponsible, the simplicity of stage three is deep, wise, and responsible. In the reality map of eros, level one is



the natural eros of the circle. Level two is the line, which occasionally opposes and even overrides certain circle manifestations. Level three is the return to a higher eros, where circle and line interpenetrate, yielding a sensual symphony of flowing spirit and precise form, unimaginable in

the initial erotic offering of level one.

Lines and circles, the masculine and the feminine, are cosmic principles whose roots are in our souls. Neither New Age spirituality (circle) or the old religious Orthodoxies (lines) alone have within them the power to heal our souls and our planet. It is only a deeper erotic vision unpacked from both, the paradox of holding lines and circles together as one that can heal us.

*It is only a deeper  
erotic vision that  
can heal us.*

We need to fully embrace the truth of the line, then roundly challenge it with circle consciousness, only to re-embrace the line from a more supple and rounded place. Similarly, we need to rejoice in the circle, only to bisect it with the power of the line and then re-turn again to the circle. This is the trinity paradigm in which level two rejects

level one, only to be transcended and absorbed by level three, which is always an evolved version of level one. Circle, line, circle. Line, circle, line.

We begin in the middle—in the glory of the circle.

### *The Power of the Circle*

Phallic line consciousness has proved impotent for so many of us. It has not given birth to the reality for which we dreamed. We have competed, failed, and succeeded. Yet we have found the process debilitating and the prize woefully insufficient. Even if we’ve “gotten” what we were always supposed to want, we have realized that it isn’t enough.

On the most personal level, the rat race of line consciousness has failed us. The radical focus on our place in the hierarchy has exhausted us. For many years we have ignored Lily Tomlin’s truism: “Even if you finish first, you are still a rat.”

On the global level, line consciousness has failed us as well. We live on the edge of unprecedented ecological disaster. The imbalanced Genesis Chapter One ethics of “fill the earth and conquer” is not innocent in this. The ecological disaster is driven by corporations who take advantage of the core emptiness in the heart of the West, by feeding it with an obscene overabundance of goods and foods. Corporations driven by line consciousness form the crux of our world’s economy. These corporations are sadly driven by basically only one desire: that of accumulating maximal power through maximal profit. Unhappily, the natural result of this posture is a virtual rape of the environment for the sake of climbing higher on the line’s ladder. Tragically, it is the line consciousness of probably not more than 10,000



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people (nice people) that is having this devastating impact on the world's environment.

The driving force behind the corporate ethos is fear of emptiness. When we lose the sense of the world being divine and full of meaning, we risk falling into the void—we “lose touch” with our own essential self-worth and value. So we learn a void-dance, doing everything we can to deny the lurking emptiness. In order to stifle those voices we work hard at producing and climbing in the line world. Somehow, the eros of productivity and competition give our lives a veneer of meaning, at least until a crisis when our vulnerability is exposed and we plummet into the void.

It is only by raising a new generation on the eros of the circle that we can hope to truly effect a transformation in the world. Only by unpacking and internalizing our erotic experiences of interconnectivity, interiority, and the fullness of being can we move towards healing and change. This is the call of circle consciousness. This is the ethos of redeemed paganism. This is Temple consciousness.

### *Temple Consciousness*

The Jerusalem Temple is the place where the Shechinah dwells between the cherubs. The Shechinah is known in the kabbalistic sources as the great feminine. She is mother, daughter, and lover. She is the force that allows the human being to feel at home in the world. The Temple is the place of eros; it is the experience of being on the inside.

The biblical story is based on the line. In this account, the world is God's place. God's relationship to world is that of father, king, or even husband. In biblical myth, God creates world outside of Himself, even as he dwells in world. For the pagan and the Temple mystic, however, the world is not God's place; instead, God is the place of the world. To be in Temple consciousness is to be *in God*. Eros pure and simple.

This shift in consciousness is hidden within the folds of biblical myth text. The central biblical term which describes Temple consciousness is “*lifnei hashem*,” usually translated as “before God,” (as in “standing before God”). A closer reading, however, yields the hidden eros in the term. The word “*lifnei*” derives from the Hebrew word “*pnimi*” meaning “inside,” the first face of eros.

This same Hebrew word for “inside,” and “before” has a third meaning as well. The third meaning is “face,” “*panim*.” Face is the place where my insides are revealed. There are forty-five muscles in the face, most of them unnecessary for the biological functioning of the face. Their major purpose is to express emotional depth and nuance. They are the muscles of the soul. When I say, “I need to speak face to face,” I am in erotic need of an inside conversation.

All three English words, “face,” “inside,” and “before,” share the same Hebrew root. The essence then of the biblical Temple phrase “*lifnei Hashem*,” before God, is not a commandment to appear “before God” in the magistrate sense. It is an invitation to enter *the inside of God's face*.

To be on the inside of God is precisely the vision of the pagan circle.

It was paganism which understood well the primal human need to feel at home in the world. The erotic pagan imagination was able to uncover divinity in every nook and cranny of existence. For the pagan, there was an understanding that the Goddess is “on every hill and under every tree.” For the pagan, the hills were literally alive with the sound of music. Nature is the music of divinity undressed to the human ear. Every hill, brook, tree, and blade of grass was invested with its own divine muse.

In the ancient world the tree in particular, in all of its lush sensuality, was a primary manifestation of the erotic Goddess. The central symbol of much of the ancient pagan cult in biblical Canaan was the Ashera tree, symbol of the Goddess Ashera incarnate. Unadulterated paganism is the eros of level one circle consciousness.

It is clear from the biblical record itself that Ashera worship was the norm in ancient Judah and Israel. Occasionally, someone would intervene. King Josiah attempted the most radical reform, after finding a new book—very possibly the book of Deuteronomy—that explicitly prohibited having an Ashera tree in the precincts of the Temple. The discovery of this “new book” is the greatest indication that there were many Ashera trees in the temple. New texts only emerge to outlaw popular practice. Josiah's goal was to fully obliterate the Ashera goddess' presence. Only a few years after his death, however, the Ashera was back in the Temple once more.

No one could deny the people their goddess. A careful reading of the biblical sources reveals that of the 370 years which Solomon's temple stood in Jerusalem, for at least 236 of those years—two-thirds of the time—the statue of Ashera was present in the Temple. Her worship was not some underground cult, but part of what was understood to be the legitimate Hebrew spirit itself.

Ashera, who began as a foreign interloper, became, in Raphael Patai's phrase, a beloved “Hebrew Goddess.” She was worshipped openly and with great joy as part of the official religion by kings, the court, the priesthood and most of the people. She was opposed only by a few prophets crying against her and even then only at relatively long intervals. Indeed, the erotic passion for the Goddess was so essential to the people's spirit that when the great reformer Elijah challenged the pagan god Baal, Ashera's son, he pointedly avoided challenging Ashera. The text in Kings tell of 400 prophets of Ashera and 450 prophets of Baal who eat at the table of the Queen Jezebel, wife of Ahab. Elijah challenges the prophets of Baal but somehow doesn't touch the prophets of Ashera. The Ashera has become too much of a Hebrew Goddess to be challenged even by Elijah.

The pagan Goddess was not viewed by Solomon or the people as a compromise of the Hebrew spirit. On the contrary, she was experienced as an organic deepening of the

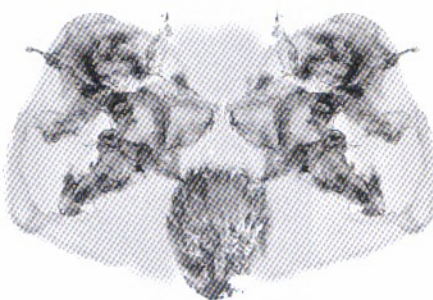


Hebrew spirit. In the pagan world, as we have noted, the Goddess erotically merged with her male counterpart. *Hieros gamos*—the marriage the God and Goddess. Ashera has divine intercourse with El, notably the very name of the Hebrew god! Her daughter, Astarte, copulates with Baal, her brother. This marriage of the gods—symbolizing the mythical merging of the primal masculine and feminine—brings blessing and joy to the world.

The Hebrew version of this *Heiros Gamos*—marriage of divine principles—was personified in the union of the biblical male God with the Goddess Ashera. We know from relatively recent archaeological excavations that many people served the Biblical male God image and the Ashera together. One of the most fascinating finds is that of Kuntillat Ajrud in the northeastern Sinai desert. Two storage jars were found, and one of them carried the inscription (in anthropologist Raphael Patai's translation) "Amarayhu says to my Lord ... may you be blessed by Yah-weh and his Ashera."

There is evidence that the worship of Ashera extended even into the Holy of Holies. Patai supports our intuition that the two cherubs intertwined in sexual union in the Holy of Holies are an evolved expression of the Hebrew-pagan marriage between the biblical Yah-weh and pagan Ashera. That is to say, the spirit of biblical text, which rejected some of the essential dimensions of paganism, nevertheless accepted the core feminine erotic principle that powered paganism and recognized the essential need to integrate it with the masculine principle. So Ashera was transmuted into the female cherub in erotic union with the male cherub. While the prophets rejected the Ashera they embraced the cherubs. Indeed, biblical prophecy taught that the space between the sexually entwined cherubs was the source of prophecy.

The erotic and pagan nature of the female cherub was clearly apparent to the wisdom masters of Babylon. They understood that the cherubs were the Hebrew embrace of the sacred moment in paganism and thought it essential to the Hebrew spirit. In a post-Temple world where survival depended on the Law, the wisdom masters were not willing or able to openly embrace the pagan moment in Temple consciousness. So, in a classical literary device, they placed in the mouths of foreign interlopers their profound perception of the cherubs as purified expressions of the pagan archetype. The Babylonian Talmud in Yoma 54b tells us that when the Temple was conquered and Nebuchadnezzar's army sees the cherubs, the Jewish religion was immediately cheapened in their eyes. "Said Reish Lakish: When the foreigners entered the temple and saw the cherubs sexually intertwined they took them out to the market place. Israel whose blessing is blessing and curse is curse—is this what they were engaged in?" A parallel text in the Midrash (Lamentations Raba, 9) is more explicit in relating the cherubs to paganism. The



Babylonians were sure that the Cherubs were pagan Gods and the Jews had laid claim to a more pure faith: "Ammonites and Moabites entered the holy of holies and found the two cherubs. They ... paraded them around the streets of Jerusalem ... did you not say that this

nation does not worship idols? See what we have found. What they were serving."

The cherubs atop the ark went underground after the destruction of the Temples. However, they re-appear in public consciousness centuries later as the masculine and feminine expression of the divine in the kabbalistic books of the Bahir, the Zohar, and in virtually every subsequent kabbalistic text. This divine pair are called Malchut and Tiferet, Shechinah and Tiferet, and a host of other appellations. They reach their apex in kabbalistic consciousness in the mystical works of Isaac Luria and his one-time teacher, Moses Cordovero. In Isaac Luria's graphic and daring vision, the world is *not* formed by a forward-thrusting male movement which creates outside of itself. Quite the contrary—Divinity creates within itself a sacred void in the form of a circle. This is the creation not of the masculine God but of the Goddess, of the Shechinah! This is the Great Circle of Creation.

In Luria's vision, all of being is within the womb of the Goddess. Life is born not by expelling the baby, but by making room for offspring within the Goddess' eternal womb. Nature is not outside of the Goddess but instead is a daughter expression of the divine. Luria's teacher, Moses Cordovero, was even clearer about the identity of this Goddess. In a passing comment in one of his works he says explicitly, "*Malchut* (Shechinah) is *Ashera*." Cordovero's statement emerges from a powerful and radical passage in the Zohar (Vol. 1, 49A) which suggests that the altar in the Temple itself was an Ashera tree!! The deep intention of the Zohar is not that this was an actual Ashera tree. Rather the Zohar is teaching that the Temple was deeply connected to the primal power of the sacred Ashera Goddess.

So we have come full circle. The Canaanite pagan Ashera has been reclaimed as a Hebrew Goddess. Primal circle consciousness has been rewoven into the rich fabric of a resurgent Hebrew myth.

### *Sod HaYichud*

If the circle is so wonderful, why not live in circle consciousness and just jettison the jagged and cutting line once and for all? Why not simply return to the Goddess?

The answer is that the circle alone is not sufficient. Indeed, followers of both the biblical line and the mystical path have been quick to point out that the circle not integrated by the line not only lacks integrity, but is a primary ontological cause of evil. Master Nachman of Bratzlav writes that the source of evil in the world is the primal *chahal reik*, the empty void. The

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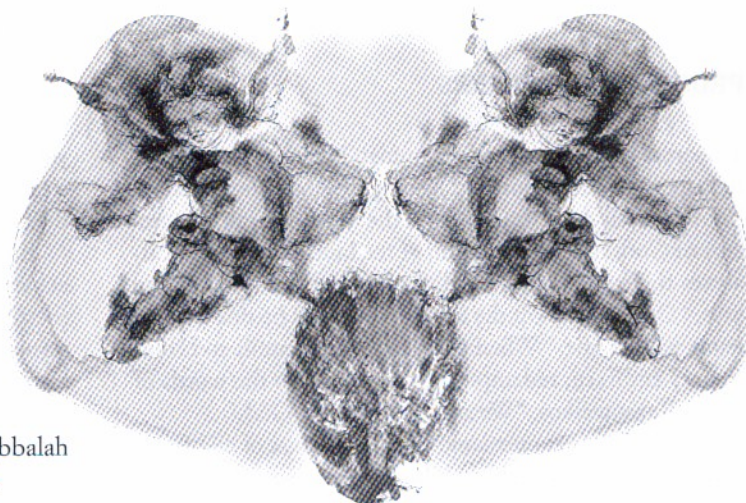
*chalal reik* is a circle image drawn from Lurianic Kabbalah which has not yet been penetrated by the *kav*, the line.

We are used to viewing the source of evil as being somehow external to man. Both capitalists and communists of the last century insisted that market conditions and economic opportunity were the prime cause for evil. Others blame evil on parents, schools, television violence or handguns. Many varieties of religion have long spoken about a Satan or tempter force that moves men to "the dark side." The common denominator is the location of evil somewhere outside the human being. If that is true, then we only have to fix that external system and everything will be okay. Economic reform, social engineering, gun control, parent education, school reform, are all potential messiahs.

While all those may be good things, the core premise of Hebrew myth is that none of them will prevent evil. Biblical mysticism has an entirely different view of the human being. Evil comes from the failure to integrate the feminine circle and masculine line. This is called in Kabbalah *Sod HaYichud*, the secret of the union. More accurately it means the secret of the integration which is no more and no less than the secret of the cherubs. This is our life's work: to achieve full eros through the deep integration of our circles and lines. Or to say it differently, we need to move from the eros of the first level circle, which is pre-line, to the eros of the third level circle, which is transline. To confuse the two would be to fall prey to the pre/trans fallacy which so often marks contemporary New Age philosophies. To know how to move to third level circle eros we must expose the shadow of the first level pagan circle from the perspective of the prophetic line.

### *The Closed Circle and History*

Intellectual historian Yehezkel Kaufman is correct in reminding us that the opposition to paganism—the opposition to pure circle consciousness—may well be the singularly most important theme of the entire Hebrew biblical project. The prophets exposed the two great shadows of pagan circle thinking. The first shadow stems precisely from its circle nature! The pagan myth believed as an absolute given of reality in the great wheel of Being. Mircea Eliade's great work *The Myth of Eternal Return* is probably the best modern statement of this powerful cyclical motif which is shot through all pagan reality maps. The problem with the cycle, however, as Buddha already pointed out, is that it is a trap. The circle is by very definition not open, but closed. There is no way out. It is to



this circle consciousness that the wisdom masters referred when they said, "Until the Exodus no slave had ever succeeded in leaving Egypt." In the pagan circle consciousness of Egypt, no one could ever leave his or her place. You were born into your circle and destined to go round and round within it.

In contrast to the stasis of the circle, the line of evolution—beginning with the gradual unfolding of creation from simple to complex in the Genesis creation story—is essential to the biblical spirit. Biblical myth in the story of the Exodus introduces line consciousness into the mind and heart stream of the world. It is the creation of the very ideas of history, progress, and therefore hope. Love desires growth, healing, and transformation. For the circle to exist without being bisected by the line would be the greatest failure of love.

In biblical myth consciousness the story of the Exodus is the story of the *second* great escape from the tyranny of the circle. The *first* great escape is the story of the first Hebrew, Abraham. In fact, it is precisely Abraham's ability to make the great escape from the circle that makes him the first Hebrew, for the very word "Hebrew" (*Ivri*) means the "one who crossed over." The line consciousness of Abraham introduces to the world the notion of journey. The clear implication, against virtually all of pagan thought, is that you can actually go someplace. Line consciousness is history. The idea of a plot, suspense, and ultimate resolution introduced by the Hebrews and so engrained in us today was unknown to the circle consciousness of the pagan.

In Hebrew, there is no word for "history"; instead, the word is *zachor*—remember. Not accidentally, *zachor* in Hebrew has a second meaning: the masculine. His-story is a function of line consciousness, the masculine thrusting-forward property of the spirit. It is biblical mysticism that gives birth to the notion of *tikkun olam*, "the world's fixing"—which a very close reading of Isaac Luria's works reveals to mean the evolving and healing of all consciousness—human and divine. It is only when the journey to God is over that the journey in God begins.

What we are talking about is much more than the evolution of humankind. It was the kabbalists who introduced the idea of an evolving divine consciousness. The unfolding of divine consciousness is not a purely intra-divine process.



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The great privilege of being a human being is that we participate in the evolution and healing of God. The Zohar, in Vol 1 Genesis 4A, even imagines the human being as a creator of God. It is the evolution of the human spirit that catalyzes the evolution of God. As biblical mystic Zecharia says, "On that day [in the future] God will be one and his name will be one." When God and man meet in an evolutionary embrace, redemption is achieved. In the words of Nikos Kazantzakis, "We are the saviors of God."

This is the great messianic idea, the climax of all history and evolution. "Messiah" in biblical mysticism is more than a person. It is a destination which we arrive at after the long and often arduous journey. It is the hope and the vision of a better tomorrow. It is the possibility of possibility.

Until this shaft of the line cut across human consciousness, human existence was fundamentally determined. All that happened was thought to be revealed in the astrological wisdom of the stars in their heavenly cycles, or in the guts of animals when you killed them. The key was that there was "nothing new under the sun."

The freedom implied in line consciousness means not only that a slave people can throw off the shackles of the oppressor. It also means that each of us can throw off the shackles of our own personal taskmasters. There is no greater slave master than the idea that yesterday determines today. This is precisely the shadow of circle consciousness. The line sets us free. It pierces the circular bubble, shattering the "realities" that want to hold us back and keep us down.

### God and Nature

We now come to the second great shadow of pagan circle consciousness. The pagan insisted that divinity was in trees and in all of nature. But the essential biblical idea is that God is *also beyond* nature. God is the creator of nature and therefore not trapped within it. Biblical myth therefore opens with the Genesis story, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." The powerful and revolutionary implication is that *God is not merely nature*. Unlike the Greek, Roman, pagan, or Buddhist pantheons, biblical myth insists on a God who is both within and infinitely beyond the circle, radically immanent as well as transcendent.

When we say that God is infinitely beyond trees, we are also saying that if you can connect to God, God can free you from the ensnaring web of nature. The notion that a human being is created in the image of God means for the Hebrew mystic that a person has it within them to reach beyond the natural to the moral.

The reason this is so critical is because in biblical consciousness, the loving God's primary demand is ethical behavior. The single most important expression of love—and the most important principle of Hebrew ethics—is how we treat each other, not how we think about each other. Sixteenth-century master Aron of Barcelona wrote, "A person is formed by their actions." Treat a person lovingly and

you will love them in the end. Love a person passionately and treat them unethically and you will be alienated from them in the end. Paradoxically, there is no eros without ethics.

Ethical behavior always requires that we be able to act against our primal instinctive natures. We must be able to step out of the level one pagan circle and become response-able for actions, able to respond to and control our instinctive nature. *If we were part of nature, then clearly we could not be expected to ever control or direct our nature*. We are both part of nature, and parting from nature. It is only because of this paradox that we are capable of self-control. Of course, it is *giving up* control which is essential in the classic frameworks of circle consciousness. Sex and emotionally vulnerable relationships are two good examples. Giving up control, however, is only possible in the context of a safe environment created by people who can be trusted to exercise self-control. The circle integrates with the line to foster the integrity of higher eros, a level three circle.

Circle consciousness claims that people are naturally the best that they can be. The problem, argues the circle, is not goodness but alienation, and in circle consciousness the greatest evil is to be cut off, distant, disenchanted, out of the circle. Line consciousness disagrees with the circle and says that people are potentially good but not naturally good. In biblical myth people are born innocent, but they are not born good. The most important act of love, according to the Hebrew gospel, is to develop a training system for goodness. For biblical myth the belief that people are naturally the best that they can be is not only wrong but destructive. If people were naturally good, then evil would be the result of some set of external forces. Here we return to the idea of Sod HaYichud, the secret of union. Biblical myth, then as now, says no to this thinking. Hebrew gospel teaches that only the control and refinement of our internal nature, the integration of line with circle, can bring the good.

There is, however, a second critical reason why the line-driven ethical prophet does not experience God as being exclusively in nature. If God were in nature and not beyond Nature, then Nature would be our source of ethics. It is clear though that, for all of her splendor in reflecting a pale cast of divine beauty, nature is amoral. The law of nature is nearly always that the strong kill the weak. Social services, hospitals, help for the disabled are all profoundly "unnatural," at least according to the law of nature in the non-human world. In fact, the hospital is a direct corollary of line and not (first level) circle consciousness. The morality of the line insists that those higher on the line—that is to say stronger and with more means—take care of those lower on the line. This is the faith and God experience of the prophets.

### The Prophet & the Pagan

Let's frame the clash between circle and line in the most striking possible terms.

The prophet, the hero of the Hebrew bible, represents



ethics, the line. The pagan, hero of the ancient world into which biblical thought was born, represents eros, the circle. The clash between the prophet and the pagan—the circle and the line—is in the end the clash between the erotic and the ethical. (That is to say, between first level circle eros and second level line ethics.)

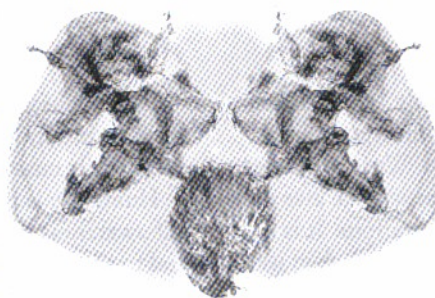
Having said that, I want to make a radical claim—which, as is often the case, is patently obvious once you see it. On the essential interpretation of reality, the prophet actually was closer to circle consciousness than to line consciousness. *The difference was that the pagan was a first stage circle archetype and the prophet a third stage circle archetype.*

The prophet's line expression is a necessary corrective response to the pagan consciousness that dominated the world at the time. The prophet saw his role to be overturning a pagan ethic which was bound up with so much cruelty. For example, built into the pagan ritual are demands for parents to burn their children as a sacrifice to the gods. "They have set their pagan abominations in my house ... to burn their sons and daughters in fire." (Jeremiah 7:30, 31) The burning of children was not the exception in pagan worship. Rather it was the model of the pagan idea that erotic abandonment to the God must, by its very definition, overrun all intuitive human ethical boundaries.

In the picture of the prophet as a social reformer, it is, however, too easy to lose sight that, at core, he was an erotic mystic. The prophet is actually the archetype of the feminine. The "most beautiful among women," according to King Solomon, are the prophets. The phrase is drawn from Canticles, King Solomon's love song to the erotic Shechinah, whose deep essence is modeled, but never exhausted, by the sexual.

Yes, the prophet insisted that nature was not all of God, yet he experienced with all his being that God was all of nature. Even as he decried the pagan claim that identified God with the Ashera tree, he knew and rejoiced in the truth that God was fully present and accessible "on every hill and under every tree." God was not only reflected in nature as the external creator. God was fully present in nature—in the words of the later mystics, *mamash*, meaning literally—"actually," for real, not just in metaphor or symbol. The words of later Hebrew mystics capture accurately prophetic consciousness. Schneur Zalman of Liadi writes that "Trees and stones are *mamash* divine." Nachman of Bratzlav told his disciples that "Every blade of grass has its own (divine) song."

It is critical to understand that God is paradoxically within and beyond. Dennis Prager, generally a brilliant polemicist for the core intuitions of biblical religion, dismisses any possibility of a mainstream Jewish position which embraces pantheism in his "Is God in Trees." However the overwhelming majority of classical Jewish thinkers in the past 500 years have categorically refused to



choose between pantheism and monotheism. To give but one example, Abraham Kook consistently and intentionally embraces a paradoxical dialectic between pantheism and monotheism throughout his writings, so much so that in his letters he refuses to term

Judaism as monotheistic (Orot Hakodesh Vol. 3 pp. 399).

The goal of the prophet is integration. The erotic and ethical, the line and circle, must merge. This is the secret of the cherubs and the model of the sexual.

What the prophet and the pagan respectively incarnate, however, is made manifest when the erotic and the ethical clash. An oft-quoted line from Jung, modern heir to the pagan myth tradition, is the best summation I have ever heard of the pagan position: "I'd rather be whole than good." For the pagan, the alienation from divinity is so palpable and painful that it must be overcome at all costs, even if ethics are the price. This is where the balanced scales start precariously to slip. It was Jung who was sadly seduced by the pagan Goddess Ashera into a flirtation with Nazism, that menacing shadow of eros which horrifically darkened our world just a few short decades ago.

The prophet always responds, "I'd like to be whole. Indeed I yearn to be whole. But if I have to choose, I'd rather be good than whole." It is for this reason that the prophet is the great critic of the pagan consciousness intrinsic to the Temple experience. The erotic fulfillment of the Temple experience was all too often a replacement for the kind of direct ethical action which could heal the world. It is the widow and the orphan, the vulnerable and the dispossessed, who must be the primary concern of the homo religious, according to the prophets. Thus Isaiah declaims:

I do not want your multitude of sacrifices  
I delight not in the blood of bullocks or goats or rams.  
Do not come to seek my face ...  
as you trample my courts of justice ...  
your hands are full of blood ...  
wash yourselves, make yourselves clean ...  
cease your evil doings ... seek fair judgment,  
argue the case of the widow and the orphan ...  
Zion will be redeemed  
by justice and ... integrity.

For Isaiah, the ecstatic pagan service of the Temple, with its blood sacrifices, has led Israelites to forget the ethical imperative to feed the hungry and clothe the poor. Isaiah refuses to allow eros to trump ethos.

### *Rebuilding Temple Consciousness*

**I**n my spiritual community of Bayit Chadash in the hills around Israel's Sea of Galilee, we are committed to reclaiming the spark of sacred paganism. We return to the pagan when we practice deep ecology, because for the



## PROPHETS AND PAGANS

pagan "Love your mother" means not only your human biological mother, but mother earth who nurtures you, balances you, and grounds you in her embrace. We reclaim the pagan in meditation, ecstatic service and passionate love of the Shechinah in all of her myriad manifestations. It is in large part for this pagan sensibility that we yearn when we speak of the dream of a re-built Temple.

The Temple in its ideal state was supposed to manifest the third stage circle moment in Hebrew consciousness. What the prophets realized, however, was that the people had not incorporated second stage line consciousness. The erotic was overrunning the ethical. In principle, however, the Temple was meant to be a balance between line and circle, erotic and ethical.

Only a short distance from the seat of eros—the holy of holies with her sexually intertwined cherubs—was the *lishkat hagazit*, the room of hewn stone. This was the Chamber of Justice whose passionate concern was the ethical—the creation of a just society. On the face of it, its sensibilities seem far removed from the erotic motifs of the sensual and the sacred that permeated the Temple's aura. What, after all, do ethics and eros have to do with each other?

The answer is—everything. In the short run we can train people through behaviorist ritual, social engineering, and a good deal of guilt to behave ethically. However, in the final analysis, non-erotic ethics will always collapse under the weight of contracts and contacts it cannot fulfill. The Room of Hewn Stone must necessarily be housed in the eroticized temple in order for its ethics to truly thrive.

*In the end all ethical failure is a violation of eros—your own or someone else's.* Ethics without eros cannot hold. Ethics which are not rooted in eros ultimately fall ... apart. We yearn for eros. By exiling God from nature and secularizing the sexual, we condemn ourselves to emptiness and vacuity. Ethical collapse always occurs when we are overwhelmed by our emptiness. *The failure of ethics is always rooted in a failure of eros.* When we talk only about a God giving rules that run counter to our nature, the rules cannot hold. The eros of our nature will always overrun them. But if we come to understand that ethics is an erotic expression of our deeper divinity, we are truly moved to the ethical. For at that point we realize that the ethical is an expression of our deepest selves, a response to the call of our own voice. Ethics, to be compelling and powerful, must be an expression of our erotic divine nature and not a contradiction to it. So when the prophets insist that God and the God within us is beyond nature, and can therefore act ethically against nature, they are referring only to our first nature, not to our deeper second nature. *Our deeper nature is God.*

At the same time that ethics cannot live without eros, eros cannot live without ethics. The erotic dies without the ethical. The circle cannot survive without the line.

Circle consciousness rejects the non-bi-sected circle not only as ethically flawed but as ontologically inadequate and existentially unsatisfying.

Humanity is life become aware of itself. It is this very self-awareness that moves us from the harmony of the natural to the tension of the confronted. We are at once part of nature, subject to her laws, even as we are free, confronting, controlling, and healing nature. The human being is the only creature in nature whose very existence poses a problem to itself. It is a problem from which we

cannot escape. Living our merely natural circle life is both impossible and boring to us. It is this sense of boredom, even ennui, which makes us feel alienated, evicted from paradise. We are moved both by reason and soul to struggle endlessly not only with questions of the *techné*, of how and what, but also with the mysterious why and ultimately we long to see the Who!

The divinity of humanity—that which makes us not only within but also beyond nature—is precisely what assures that nature alone will not ful-fill. Line consciousness suggests that a non-accomplished person can never be satisfied. We require for our psychic-spiritual wholeness the pursuit of a goal. Meditation is insufficient for bliss. But not just any goal will do.

The goal must be an ethical one; an ambition that promises the greater good. Without such an objective, we ultimately get lost in our ennui and overwhelmed by our emptiness. The circle is incapable of captivating us by herself.

Eros always needs to in-corporate ethics. What this points to is that the good is not only an ethical need, it is an erotic need as well. At the same time, all ethical collapse is caused by un-ful-filled eros.

The modern mystic who understood this best was Abraham Kook.

Morality not guided by the sacred is not deep,  
and does not enter into the inwardness of the soul; ...  
Such a weak morality  
does not have the power to guide ...  
the polis, the human community,  
to penetrate to the depth of the soul  
and to transform the heart  
of universal man and of individual man  
from stone to flesh.  
There is no alternative plan for humanity  
other than that it be guided by the erotic morality....

It is the same Kook who refused to term Judaism a monotheistic religion, believing as he did that strains of purified pagan pantheism were essential to the essence of Hebrew religion. The prophet in us needs to reclaim holy paganism. The pagan within must be open to hearing the call of the prophet. When the prophet and pagan meet, the Temple of the heart will be rebuilt. □