



FEMALE IMAGING OF THE TORAH: FROM LITERARY METAPHOR TO RELIGIOUS SYMBOL

I

It is widely acknowledged that one of the more overtly innovative features of kabbalistic symbolism is its ready utilization of masculine and feminine images to depict aspects of the divine reality. It is the purpose of this study to trace the trajectory of one of the central motifs, the feminine personification of the Torah, from classical midrashic sources to kabbalistic texts. We are dealing not with one image but rather a cluster of images whose formation spans a wide historical range. While it is undeniably true that literary images in religious texts often reflect the social and cultural milieu that, at least in part, helped foster these images, it is also equally true that the evolution of ideas within "traditional" Jewish sources proceeds along an internal axis, with older texts influencing subsequent formulations and generating significant, though at times subtle, semantic transformations.

One may reasonably conjecture that the rabbinic depiction of the Torah in images related to a female personification reflects an older idea found in Jewish sources, both of Palestinian and of Alexandrian provenance, concerning the feminine Sophia or Wisdom.¹ Insofar as the identification of Torah as *Hokhmah*, or Sophia, first made explicitly in literary form in the books of Baruch and Ben Sira,² became widespread in the classical rabbinic sources,³ it seems reasonable to suggest that such a conception may underlie the feminine characterization of the Torah. Yet, it seems to me that there is an essential difference between the older speculation on Sophia in the Wisdom and apocalyptic literature and the feminine characterization of Torah

in the rabbinic texts. In the latter, unlike the former, it is clear that in most cases the feminine images are meant figuratively and are thus almost always expressed within a parabolic context as literary metaphors. I do not mean to suggest that the Torah was not personified by the rabbis; indeed, for the rabbis the Torah did assume a personality of its own, culminating in the conception of the Torah as the pre-existent entity that served as the instrument with which God created the world.⁴ Moreover, one occasionally discovers in the rabbinic sources vestiges of an obvious mythical conception of Torah as a feminine entity. Thus, for example, in one aggadic statement attributed to R. Joshua ben Levi, Moses is portrayed as describing the Torah as the "hidden treasure" (*hemdah genuzah*) with which God takes delight each day.⁵ It is reasonable to assume that this expression, *mishta 'ashe' a bah*, "to take delight with her," derived from Proverbs 8:30, suggests a sexual connotation.⁶ Underlying this remark is a mythic conception of the female Torah that is involved in an erotic relationship with God.

Although there is a resonance of such mythical depictions in other sources, particularly in liturgical poems, in the majority of rabbinic writings the female images of the Torah are metaphorical in their nuance. In one striking example in the Palestinian Talmud, the following tradition is recorded: "What is [the practice] regarding standing before the Torah-scroll? R. Hīlqiah [in the name of] R. Simeon said in the name of R. Eleazar: Before her son you stand, how much more so before the Torah herself!"⁷ Insofar as the sage is here referred to as "her son,"⁸ it is reasonable to assume that the Torah is being characterized metaphorically as a female, specifically, a mother figure. In the parallel version of this passage in the Babylonian Talmud the feminine image is removed, although the basic meaning is left intact: "What is [the practice] regarding standing before the Torah-scroll? R. Hīlqiah, R. Simeon, and R. Eleazar said: It is an argument *a fortiori*, if we stand before those who study it, how much more so [is it required to stand] before it!"⁹

The figurative characterization of the sage as the son of Torah gives way in the second passage to the more straightforward characterization "those who study it." The second passage in no way alters the meaning of the first passage, but simply renders it in a less metaphorical way. The implied image of the Torah as the mother is obviated by the fact that the one who studies the Torah is not described as the son of Torah. Although other examples could be adduced, suffice it here to conclude from the example that I have given that the figurative depiction of the Torah in feminine terms in no way implies some mythical entity. Indeed, it is correct, following the locution of R. Meyer, to speak in general of a suppression in classical rabbinic thought of

the mythological character of the hypostatized *Hokhmah* in favor of a "nomistic rationalism."¹⁰ In the course of time, however, the literary tropes did yield in Jewish texts a decidedly mystical and mythical conception of Torah as the divine feminine. One can speak, therefore, of a remythologization of the Torah that results from a literary transference of the images from the realm of metaphor to that of symbol.¹¹

II

There are several distinct feminine images of the Torah in the body of classical rabbinic literature. I would like to mention here three of the more salient images: daughter of God, or sometimes expressed as the daughter of the king, the bride, and the mother.¹² With respect to all three the relevant talmudic and midrashic contexts make it clear that we are dealing with figurative expressions, that is, metaphorical characterizations of the Torah, rather than any hypostatic element. In the case of the former, the daughter of God or the king, it is necessary to make a further distinction: this image occurs either in the context of a wedding motif¹³ (to be discussed more fully below) or outside that specific context.¹⁴ Moreover, in the case of the bride, it is also possible to make several distinctions: the Torah is characterized respectively as the bride of Israel, God, or even Moses.

The feminine characterization of the Torah as a bride of Israel is connected in several sources, both in the Babylonian Talmud and other collections of scriptural exegeses, with the midrashic reading of the word "heritage," *morashah*, in the expression describing the Torah, "heritage of the congregation of Jacob" (Deut. 33:4), as *me'orasah*, "betrothed."¹⁵ In *Sifre Deuteronomy*, for example, one reads as follows: "Another interpretation [of 'a heritage of the congregation of Jacob,' *morashah qehillat ya'aqov*]: Do not read heritage (*morashah*) but betrothed (*me'orasah*). This teaches that the Torah is betrothed to Israel and [is to be considered] a married woman [that is forbidden] in relation to the nations of the world."¹⁶ The above aggadic notion is even applied in one talmudic context to a legal discussion concerning the position enunciated by R. Yoḥanan that a non-Jew engaged in Torah is deserving of corporal punishment. According to the one who reads the expression *morashah*, heritage, as *me'orasah*, the betrothed, the non-Jew who is involved with Torah is to be treated like the individual who has relations with a woman who is betrothed to another man, and such an individual receives the punishment of stoning.¹⁷ In still another talmudic context this midrashic reading of Deuteronomy 33:4 serves as a basis for the following homiletical interpretation:

"R. Hiyya taught: Whoever is involved in Torah before an ignoramus it is as if he had sexual relations with his bride right in front of him, as it says, 'Moses commanded the Torah to us, as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob.' Do not read heritage (*morashah*) but rather betrothed (*me'orasah*)."¹⁸ Whatever the subsequent usages made of this older midrashic reading, the root idea here is the aggadic notion that the Torah is compared to a woman betrothed to the congregation of Jacob, the Jewish people.¹⁹

This feminine characterization of the Torah is also connected in some texts to the metaphorical depiction of the Sinaitic theophany as a wedding day.²⁰ In one of the earliest collections of homiletical midrashim, *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, the image is clearly stated: " 'In the third month' (Exod. 19:1). The third month came. [This may be compared] to a king who betrothed a woman, and set a time [for the marriage]. When the time arrived they said, 'It is time to enter the [marriage] canopy.' Similarly, when the time arrived for the Torah to be given, they said, 'It is time for the Torah to be given to Israel.' "²¹ In this midrashic comment the event at Sinai is again compared to a wedding; the giving of the Torah is thus likened to entering the marriage canopy. But here, unlike some other early sources,²² the bridegroom is not God but Israel, and correspondingly the bride is not Israel but the Torah itself. The Sinaitic revelation is thus the wedding of the Jewish people, the groom, to the Torah, the bride. That this interpretation is correct is borne out by a later version of this passage in the thirteenth-century Yemenite collection, *Midrash ha-Gadol*, which reads as follows:

"In the third month" (Exod. 19:1). The third month came. [This may be compared] to a king who betrothed a woman, and set a time [for the marriage]. When the time arrived they said: "It is time for the woman to enter the [marriage] canopy." Similarly, when the time arrived for the Torah to be given, they said, "It is time for the Torah to be given to Israel."²³

This view of Torah as the bride informed the midrashic reading attested in several sources of another key verse, Exodus 31:18, "When He finished speaking with him on Mt. Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God." The word *ke-khalloto*, "when He finished," was read in accord with its masoretic defective spelling (without the *waw*) as *ke-khallato*, "as his bride."²⁴ This reading, then, confirmed the idea that the Torah was given to Israel—through Moses—as a bride. From this were generated, in turn, several homiletical interpretations that compare the

scholar himself, or the words of Torah that proceed from his mouth, to a bride.²⁵ This reading, moreover, served as the basis for the following passage in the medieval collection of moral precepts, *ʿOrhot Hayyim*, spuriously attributed to R. Eliezer ben Hyrcanus²⁶: “Whoever rejoices with the groom it is as if he received the Torah from Sinai, as it says, ‘When He finished (*ke-khalloto*) [speaking with him on Mt. Sinai], He gave Moses etc.’ It is written, ‘as his bride’ (*ke-khallato*). The day in which the Torah was given was certainly like the day when the bride enters her bridal canopy.”²⁷ To be sure, the connection between the Sinaitic revelation and an actual wedding underlies earlier teachings, such as the view attributed to R. Joshua ben Levi that one who gladdens the groom with the five voices of joy merits the Torah that was given in five voices.²⁸ But in the passage from *ʿOrhot Hayyim* this connection is predicated specifically on the notion that the event at Sinai was itself a wedding between Israel, the groom, and Torah, the bride.

A still further stage in this metaphorical depiction may be gathered from those midrashic passages in which the Torah is parabolically compared to the king’s daughter who is given over in marriage to Israel. Thus in *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, whose final stage of redaction is set in the ninth century but which undoubtedly contains earlier material, we find the following parable:

Another explanation: “The thing is very close to you” (Deut. 30:14). R. Samuel ben Nahman said, To what may this be compared? To a princess whom no one knew. The king had a friend who would come to the king all the time, and the princess stood before him. The king said to him: See how much I cherish you, for no one knows my daughter, and she stands before you. Similarly, the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: See how much I cherish you, for no creature in My [celestial] palace knows the Torah, and I have given it to you.²⁹

The metaphorical depiction of the Sinaitic revelation as a marriage and the Torah as the king’s daughter is highlighted even more in a passage in *Numbers Rabbah*. The relevant remark occurs in the part of the midrash that, although based on much earlier materials, was apparently compiled in the twelfth century in the school of Moses ha-Darshan, an eleventh-century scholar and aggadist of Narbonne: “To what may this be compared? To a king who married off his daughter and gave her a great wedding celebration . . . Thus did the Holy One, blessed be He, do when He gave the Torah to Israel. . . . This was naught but a wedding celebration.”³⁰ In this text we see again that the

event at Sinai is compared to a wedding, *qidushin*: the bride is the Torah, which is characterized as well as the daughter of the king, that is, God, and the groom is Israel.

A crucial stage in the literary process occurs when the parabolic image of the Torah as bride is subsumed under the image of the king's daughter without any obvious link to the wedding motif. Such a description of the Torah as the king's daughter, *bat melekh*, is to be found in Eleazar Qallir's *silluq* for the Torah reading of the pericope *Sheqalim*. The entire *silluq* is a hymn for the measurements or dimensions of the Torah, indeed in terms often characteristic of the ancient Jewish esoteric *shi'ur qomah* speculation,³¹ but in one place in particular it states that "the measure of the king's daughter (*middat bat melekh*)³² is superior in all, elevated in length, width, depth and height, for there is a limit to every end, but her word expands forever without end."³³ It is fairly obvious that the king's daughter is the Torah whose infinite worth and meaning is here depicted in spatial terms. While it is clear that the image of the king's daughter here has no explicit connection to the metaphorical or parabolic description of the Sinaitic revelation as a wedding, it is not yet obvious that the Torah has assumed a hypostatic status.

Another example of the feminine characterization of the Torah removed from the nuptial context may be gathered from the well-known passage attributed to the second century Tanna, R. Simeon bar Yoḥai, in the *Tanḥuma*,³ a Babylonian-Geonic recension of the Yelammedenu midrash stemming from the seventh century, in which the Torah is compared parabolically to a king's daughter who is set within seven palaces. The king reportedly says: "Whoever enters against³⁴ my daughter, it is as if he enters against me." The meaning of the parable is immediately rendered in the continuation of the midrash: "The Holy One, blessed be He, says: If a man desecrates my daughter, it is as if he desecrates Me. If a person enters the synagogue and desecrates My Torah, it is as if he rose and desecrated My glory."³⁵ That this statement may be drawing upon the language of ancient Jewish mystical speculation is supported from the description of the Torah as the princess hidden within seven palaces or *hekhlot*. I am also inclined to believe that the reference to the divine glory at the end of the passage is related to the use of this *terminus technicus* in *merkavah* literature to refer to the anthropomorphic manifestation of the divine. It is thus significant that a link is made between the glory and the Torah.³⁶ That is, the Torah in the synagogue hidden within the ark is meant to conjure up the image of the *kavod* hidden behind the various palaces in the celestial realm. Hence, the one who rises against the Torah is comparable to one who rises against the *kavod*.³⁷ Be that

as it may, the essential point for the purposes of this analysis is that here the feminine characterization of Torah as God's daughter is affirmed without any conspicuous connection to the Sinaitic theophany or to the wedding imagery.

In still another passage from a work entitled *Midrash 'Alfa' Betot*, one finds an alternative depiction of the wedding motif. Before proceeding to an analysis of the relevant passage, it is necessary to make a preliminary observation about this source. The provenance and subsequent literary history of this text are somewhat obscure. Solomon Wertheimer, who published the text on the basis of only one manuscript, conjectured that this text presumably was a part of the mystically oriented midrash *'Otiyyot de-Rabbi 'Aqiva'*,³⁸ a view that has recently been criticized.³⁹ Admittedly, the lack of a fuller picture regarding the history of this text makes citation from it somewhat suspect, especially in the context of trying to present the development of a motif. Still, it can be argued from the language of the text that it indeed draws heavily from the *merkavah* sources and thus represents an important stage in the literary transmission of Jewish mysticism in Palestine during the seventh and eighth centuries.⁴⁰ Even if it cannot be shown conclusively which medieval mystic in particular had this text and was influenced by it, the text itself stands as testimony to a link in the chain of Jewish mystical speculation. At some point some Jewish mystic conceived the Torah in this way, and the conceptual and phenomenological relationship that this view has to other ideas in kabbalistic documents can easily be demonstrated.

In the text of *Midrash 'Alfa' Betot* there is a striking passage that offers a graphic description of the Torah as the royal bride, again without any overt connection to the Sinaitic revelation:

Another explanation: "Behold it was very good" (Gen. 1:21). The meaning of good is Torah, as it says, "For I give you good instruction, do not forsake My Torah" (Prov. 4:2). This teaches that in that very moment the Torah came from her bridal chamber (*hadre hupatah*),⁴¹ adorned (*mitqashetet*) in all kinds of jewels and in all kinds of royal ornaments. And she stands and dances before the Holy One, blessed be He, and gladdens the heart of the *Shekhinah*. She opens her mouth in wisdom and her tongue with understanding, and praises the name of God with all kinds of praise and all kinds of song.⁴²

In this passage we come across two significant elements: first, the Torah is said to emerge from her bridal chamber adorned with jewels and royal ornaments. The only other reference that I am familiar with

in the *Hekhalot* corpus to such a motif is to be found in the *Re'uyot Yehezqel* where it is stated that within the fourth of the seven heavens, 'arafel, is found the "[bridal] canopy of the Torah," *hupatah shel Torah*.⁴³ The assumption of an actual *hupah* for the Torah, albeit in the celestial realm, is based on an earlier figurative description of the Torah as the bride in her bridal canopy. Thus, for example, the following exegetical comment is found in the Palestinian Talmud: "It is written, 'Let the bridegroom come out of his chamber, the bride from her canopy' (Joel 2:16). 'Let the bridegroom come out of his chamber' refers to the ark, 'the bride from her canopy' refers to the Torah."⁴⁴ In the *Midrash 'Alfa' Betot*, as in the *Re'uyot Yehezqel*, the *hupah* is not merely a figure of speech; it refers to an entity that actually exists in the cosmological scheme.

The second point of especial interest in the above passage is that the Torah is depicted as dancing before the Holy One, blessed be He, and gladdening the heart of the divine Presence—significantly, *Shekhinah* is not used interchangeably with the Holy One, blessed be He, but is rather an independent entity, although its exact gender is difficult to ascertain. In several other places in this text the *Shekhinah* is described, together with the throne itself, the glory, and the angels, as standing before God,⁴⁵ thereby substantiating the impression that the Presence is not identical with the Holy One, blessed be He. One text, in particular, is noteworthy, for it says that the *Shekhinah* was on the throne of glory from the right side and Moses from the left.⁴⁶ Again, it is not clear if this implies an apotheosis of the figure of Moses. In any event, the role of the Torah in the passage cited above is similar to that of the celestial beasts in the *merkavah* texts; that is, the Torah is described as uttering praise and song before God. Even the image of dancing before God—which, I presume, has a sexual connotation⁴⁷—has a parallel in the *merkavah* corpus.⁴⁸ Hence, the feminine characterization of the Torah is here abstracted from the particular setting of the Sinaitic theophany. That is, the metaphorical depiction of Torah as the bride is removed from the specific context of a parabolic description of the historical revelation. Moreover, it seems to me that in this text the Torah has already assumed a hypostatic character. We are not simply dealing with the figurative expression of a personified Torah, but with an actual hypostasis of the Torah as a feminine person who emerges from her bridal chamber. This is consistent with the decidedly hypostatic characterization of the *kavod*, *Shekhinah*, and *kisse' ha-kavod* found in other parts of this text.

In the continuation of the aforementioned passage in *Midrash 'Alfa' Betot* one finds that the Torah, personified as the daughter of God, is characterized more specifically as the bride of Moses:

Another explanation: "Behold it was very good" (Gen. 1:21). The word "good" refers to Moses, as it says, "and she saw how good he was" (Exod. 2:2). This teaches that in that very time the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed to the Torah the throne of glory, and He brought forth all the souls of the righteous.⁴⁹ . . . And He brought forth the souls of Israel. . . . Afterwards He brought forth the soul of Moses from underneath His throne for he would in the future explain the Torah in seventy languages.⁵⁰ God showed him to the Torah and said, "My daughter, take joy and be delighted by this Moses, My servant, for he will be your groom and husband. He will be the one to receive you in the future and to explicate your words to the sixty myriad Israelites."⁵¹

This comment is an elucidation of a verse in Genesis, suggesting therefore that the setting here is the event of creation. The Sinaitic revelation is only alluded to as a future reference. It is significant that Moses is called the groom of the Torah, for he will be the one to receive the Torah at Sinai and explicate it to the Israelite people. Unlike earlier sources, the wedding at Sinai is not between God and Israel, or Israel and the Torah, but rather Moses and the Torah. The same aggadic tradition is preserved in a comment of Judah ben Barzillai, citing some older source (*nush'a' de-rishonim*). According to the legend mentioned by this authority, at the birth of Abraham God was said to have had the following conversation with the Torah: "He said to her, 'My daughter, come and we will marry you to Abraham, My beloved.' She said to Him: 'No, [I will not marry] until the humble one [i.e., Moses] comes.'"⁵² In the continuation of the text we read that God then requested of the *Sefer Yeşirah* to wed Abraham and, unlike the Torah, it agreed. The purpose of the legend is thus to explain the special connection of *Sefer Yeşirah* to Abraham as established in the most pervasive traditional attribution of the text. What is of immediate interest for us is the view that Moses would be the one to marry the Torah, the latter personified specifically as the daughter of God. As will be seen later in this analysis, the motif of Moses' being wed to the Torah plays a significant role in the more developed kabbalistic symbolism.

III

The image of the hypostatic crowned Torah served as a basis for the development of one of the key symbols in the incipient kabbalah. Thus, in a critical passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, a foundational text in

medieval Jewish mysticism, one reads the following depiction of Torah as the king's daughter:

Whenever a person studies Torah for its own sake, the Torah above (*torah shel ma'alah*) unites with the Holy One, blessed be He. . . . And what is the Torah of which you speak? It is the bride that is adorned and crowned (*mequshetet u-me'uteret*), and is comprised⁵³ in all the commandments (*mukhlet be-khol ha-miṣwot*), and it is the treasure of the Torah (*ʾoṣar ha-torah*). And she is the one engaged to the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, "Moses commanded the Torah to us, as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob" (Deut. 33:4). Do not read heritage (*morashah*) but rather betrothed (*me'orasah*). How is this possible? When Israel are involved with the Torah for its own sake she is the one engaged to the Holy One, blessed be He, and when she is the one engaged to the Holy One, blessed be He, she is the heritage of Israel.⁵⁴

Here the midrashic image of the Torah as the betrothed of Israel has been transposed into the divine sphere. That is, the Torah below has its reflection in the Torah above, which is joined to the masculine potency of the divine, the Holy One, blessed be He, by means of the study of Torah in the mundane sphere.⁵⁵ Furthermore, this supernal Torah, the feminine potency of the divine, is described as the bride that is adorned and crowned and which comprises all the commandments. It is on account of the latter that the supernal Torah is called the *ʾoṣar ha-torah*.⁵⁶ A similar expression is employed in yet another passage in which the treasure of the Torah, *ʾoṣarah shel torah*, is identified as the fear of God, *yir'at yhwh*, based on the verse, "the fear of God was his treasure" (Isa. 33:6). From that context, moreover, it is clear that the fear of God, or the treasure of Torah, refers to the last of the divine potencies as it is presented as the last item in a series of seven cognitive-emotive states that are symbolic referents of God's attributes, that is, wisdom (*hokhmah*), understanding (*binah*), counsel (*ʿeṣah*), which corresponds to the attribute of bestowing kindness (*gemilat ḥasadim*), strength (*gevurah*),⁵⁷ identified also as the attribute of judgment (*middat ha-din*), knowledge (*da'at*) or the attribute of truth (*ʾemet*), and the fear of God (*yir'at yhwh*), which is described as the treasure of Torah (*ʾoṣarah shel ha-torah*).⁵⁸ It is fairly obvious, then, that the treasure of the Torah is a technical reference to one of the divine attributes in the same way as the other items in the list; in particular, the attribute to which this phrase refers is the *Shekhinah*, the seventh and last potency enumerated in this series.⁵⁹ In the *Bahir*,

therefore, one is clearly transferred from the realm of metaphor to that of symbol. That is, in the relevant passages the king's daughter is no longer merely a literary expression used in a metaphorical context; it is rather a living symbol that names one of the divine potencies.⁶⁰

Still other passages in the *Bahir* indicate that the Torah is characterized as a feminine personification. Thus, in one of the opening passages one finds the following complicated sequence: the Torah begins with the letter *bet* of the word *bere'shit*, which stands for blessing (*berakhah*), for the Torah is called "blessing," but blessing in turn is identified as the beginning (*re'shit*), which is nothing but wisdom (*hokhmah*).⁶¹ It is further specified there that this is, employing the imagery of 1 Kings 5:26, the wisdom that God gave to Solomon,⁶² an event parabolically depicted as the king giving over his daughter⁶³ in marriage to his son.⁶⁴ In another passage, which ostensibly sets out to explain the function of the *bet* at the end of the word *zahav*, "gold," a similar parable is offered:

This may be compared to a king who had a good, pleasant, beautiful and perfect daughter. He married her to a prince, and he dressed her, crowned and adorned her, and gave her to him for much money. Is it possible for the king to sit outside his house [without being with his daughter]? No! But can he sit all day and be with her constantly? No! What does he do? He places a window between himself and her, and whenever the daughter needs the father or the father the daughter, they join together by means of the window.⁶⁵

In the next paragraph we are given additional information to help us identify the *bet* at the end of the word *zahav*: it is the wisdom with which God will build the house.⁶⁶ Hence, the king's daughter, all dressed, adorned, and crowned for her wedding to the prince, is divine wisdom. That the further identification with Torah is here implied may be gathered from the fact that the parable is largely based on a midrashic passage in *Exodus Rabbah* that deals specifically with the Torah⁶⁷:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: "I sold you My Torah, I was sold with it, as it were." . . . This may be compared to a king who had an only daughter. One of the kings came and took her; he desired to go to his land and to take her as a wife. The king said to him: "My daughter whom I have given you is an only child; I cannot separate from her, yet I also cannot tell you not to take her for she is your wife. But do me this favor: in whatever place that you

go, make a bed-chamber for me so that I may live near you for I cannot leave my daughter." Thus the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: "I gave you My Torah. I cannot separate from it, yet I cannot tell you not to take it. In every place that you go make for Me a house so that I may dwell within it, as it says, 'And make for Me a tabernacle' (Exod. 25:8)."⁶⁸

The bahiric parable is clearly based on the midrashic one, with some significant differences. In the case of the standard midrash, the king's daughter is identified as the Torah given by God to Israel. God's request of Israel to build a tabernacle is understood midrashically in terms of his need to be close to the Torah, which is now in the possession of the Jews. In the *Bahir*, by contrast, the Torah is not mentioned explicitly, though it is implied by the identification of the king's daughter with *Hokhmah*. In this case, moreover, there is mention of an actual joining of father and daughter, and not merely the desire to be in proximity to one another.

To be sure, the feminine personification of the Torah is not the only one to be found in the *Bahir*. In one passage, for instance, Torah is identified with the divine attribute of *Hesed*, lovingkindness,⁶⁹ though in this case, as in some of the passages where Torah is linked with the feminine *Hokhmah*, the image of water plays a central role.⁷⁰ In still another passage mention is made of the "true Torah," *torat 'emet*, which is said to be within the divine attribute of Israel.⁷¹ From the next paragraph we learn that the activity of this *torat 'emet* is within the *Maḥshavah*, "divine thought"; moreover, it is itself one of the ten logoi that establishes all the rest.⁷² Although the meaning of this passage is not altogether clear, it strikes me that the *torat 'emet* is another name for divine thought, the uppermost attribute that establishes the other nine, and which is particularly evident within the attribute of Israel, that is, the attribute that in subsequent kabbalistic texts was most frequently identified with the sixth emanation, *Tif'eret*. In the list of the ten logoi, the third of these is identified as the quarry of Torah, *meḥašev ha-torah*, or the treasure of wisdom, *'oṣar ha-ḥokhmah* (reminiscent of the expression *'oṣar ha-torah* used in a previous context), for God is said to have hewn the letters of the Torah within this attribute.⁷³ Finally, the most important alternative conception of the Torah is offered in an elaborate reworking of an earlier aggadic idea concerning the primordial light that was hidden by God for the benefit of the righteous in the world-to-come.⁷⁴ According to the *Bahir*, God took a portion from that primordial light, comprised within it the thirty-two paths of wisdom, and then gave it to people of this world.

This light is named the "treasure of the Oral Torah," *ʿoṣarah shel torah she-beʿal peh*. "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If they observe this attribute in this world, for this attribute is considered part of this world, and it is the Oral Torah, they will merit life of the world-to-come, which is the good hidden for the righteous."⁷⁵ From this it follows that the Oral Torah represents a fragment from the primordial divine light that is operative in the mundane realm. The means to attain the full light in the spiritual realm is to observe the commandments of the Torah as mediated through the rabbinic oral tradition. The precise relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah is addressed in a subsequent passage. Interpreting Proverbs 6:23, "For the commandment (*miṣwah*) is a lamp, the Torah a light," the *Bahir* establishes that "commandment" corresponds to the Oral Torah and "Torah" to Scripture.⁷⁶ Admittedly, the Written Torah is a much greater light, but the candle of the Oral Torah is necessary to elucidate the meaning of Scripture. This relationship is illuminated by means of a parable: even though it is broad daylight outside, it is sometimes necessary to use a candle in order to see what is hidden in a room in a house.⁷⁷

According to the kabbalistic interpretation of this critical bahiric text that evolved in thirteenth-century Spain, the light or the Written Torah was said to symbolize the masculine potency, usually identified as the sixth emanation, *Tifʿeret*, whereas the Oral Torah or the lamp was said to symbolize the feminine potency, the *Shekhinah*.⁷⁸ To be sure, the depiction of the Oral Torah in terms that are applicable to the feminine Presence has a basis in the *Bahir* itself. Notwithstanding this fact, it is evident that such a conception contradicts the other major image found in the *Bahir* according to which the Torah in a generic sense, and not specifically the Oral Torah, was characterized as the feminine potency of God. It is possible that we are dealing with two distinct stages in the literary composition of the *Bahir*. Perhaps at an earlier stage the Torah was simply described in a way that developed organically out of older midrashic sources, whereas at a later stage there developed the unique kabbalistic conception of the dual Torah as corresponding symbolically to the two attributes of God. Support for my conjecture may be found in the subtle shift in terminology from *ʿoṣar ha-torah*, the "treasure of Torah," to *ʿoṣar shel torah she-beʿal peh*, the "treasure of the Oral Torah." That is, in the first passage (§ 196) where Torah is generally described as a feminine potency, it is referred to as the "treasure of Torah," whereas in the second passage (§ 147) where the masculine-feminine duality is introduced, the feminine aspect of Torah is referred to as the "treasure of the Oral Torah." It is, however, difficult to ascertain with any certainty if and when this change may have occurred. What is crucial, however, is that while the

correlation of the dual Torah to the male-female polarity within the divine became the norm in kabbalistic documents in thirteenth-century Spain, it can nevertheless be shown that the older mythical-aggadic image did not entirely disappear.

IV

One finds in subsequent kabbalistic texts traces of the identification of the Torah with the feminine potency, particularly the *Shekhinah*.⁷⁹ It is significant that a kabbalistic reworking of this motif is found in a relatively early text, Judah ben Yaqar's *Perush ha-Tefillot we-ha-Berakhot*. In the context of commenting on the Friday evening prayer, "You shall sanctify the seventh day," *'atah qidashta 'et yom ha-shevi'i*, which ben Yaqar interprets in terms of *qiddushin*, a wedding service,⁸⁰ he cites the midrashic text from *Deuteronomy Rabbah* mentioned above,⁸¹ in which Moses is described as the scribe who writes the marriage contract (the Torah), Israel is the bride, and God is the groom. Ben Yaqar then cites from the continuation of the same source a comment attributed to Resh Laqish to the effect that the illumination of Moses' face mentioned in Exodus 34:29 could be explained by the fact that in the process of writing the Torah, which was written with black fire on parchment of white fire,⁸² Moses wiped the quill with which he was writing in his hair. According to ben Yaqar, the import of this statement is "to say that Moses too betrothed the Torah and she was his bride and portion."⁸³ Do we have here a cryptic reference to the Torah as the feminine persona of the divine, the *Shekhinah*, who is wedded to Moses, the biblical figure who symbolizes the masculine potency of God? Support for this interpretation may be gathered from a second comment of ben Yaqar on this midrashic passage: " 'A crown of splendor (*kelil tif'eret*) You placed on his [Moses'] head' . . . a crown of splendor, as it says in *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, he was writing when he was above [i.e., on Mt. Sinai], and he would wipe the quill in his hair and illuminate his face."⁸⁴ In the first passage this state of illumination was explained by reference to the idea that Moses was betrothed to the Torah; in the second passage the same idea is expressed by the idea that Moses is crowned by a crown of splendor. The image of Moses' being crowned is equivalent to that of his being wedded to Torah.⁸⁵ Moreover, as it can be ascertained from another passage in ben Yaqar, the *Shekhinah* is characterized as the "crown on the head of the king" (*'atarah be-rosh ha-melekh*),⁸⁶ that is, the crown on the head of *Tif'eret*. It seems to me, therefore, that Moses stands symbolically for *Tif'eret*, and the crown on

his head, as well as the Torah to which he is wedded, for the *Shekhinah*.

A similar kabbalistic usage of this aggadic motif may be found in the writings of one of ben Yaqar's more celebrated students, Naḥmanides (1194–1270). Thus, for example, Naḥmanides returns to this theme in his comments on the very first word of the Pentateuch.⁸⁷ After establishing that the opening word of Scripture, *bere'shit*, refers simultaneously to the emanation of the upper Wisdom, or the "Wisdom of Elohim," symbolized by the heave offering (*terumah*) that is utterly beyond human comprehension, and to the last of the ten emanations, the lower Wisdom, the "Wisdom of Solomon," that is, the *Shekhinah*, symbolized by the *ma'aser*, which is a measure that can be comprehended, Naḥmanides turns his attention to the rabbinic reading that interprets *re'shit* as a reference to Israel:

And Israel, who are called the "beginning" (*re'shit*), refers to the Community of Israel (*keneset yisra'el*), who is compared in Song of Songs to the bride, and which Scripture calls [by the names] daughter, sister and mother.⁸⁸ . . . And thus [the verse] "he saw the beginning for himself" (Deut. 32:21)⁸⁹ is spoken with reference to Moses. It is held [by the rabbis]⁹⁰ that Moses contemplated [the divine] within a speculum that shines, "and he saw the beginning for himself," and thus he merited the Torah. It is all one intention.⁹¹

For Naḥmanides, then, Moses beheld the vision of the *Shekhinah*—the "beginning" (*re'shit*) alluded to in Deuteronomy 33:21—through the upper masculine attribute, the speculum that shines, and as a result he merited the Torah.

That the Torah corresponds symbolically to the *Shekhinah* may be gathered from a second comment of Naḥmanides:

"And this is the offering," *we-zo't ha-terumah* (Exod. 25:3). By way of [kabbalistic] truth this is like [the verse] "And the Lord gave wisdom to Solomon" (1 Kings 5: 26). . . . And in *Exodus Rabbah* [it says]: "And this is the offering that you shall take from them" [this refers to] the Community of Israel (*keneset yisra'el*), which is the offering (*terumah*). . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: I have sold you My Torah and, as it were, I have been sold with her, as it says, "Bring Me an offering" (Exod. 25:2), for the offering is to Me and I am with her.⁹²

In this case, in contrast to the one mentioned above, the word *terumah*

itself is given the same symbolic valence as *zoʿt*. Now, insofar as it is clear from other contexts in Naḥmanides' writing that the word *zoʿt*, the feminine form of the demonstrative pronoun, refers to the *Shekhinah*,⁹³ we may further infer that in this case *terumah* refers to *Shekhinah*. Moreover, utilizing the midrashic comment from *Exodus Rabbah* already mentioned above, Naḥmanides is able to equate *terumah* and Torah; yet, inasmuch as *terumah* is synonymous with *zoʿt*, and *zoʿt* stands for *Shekhinah*, it follows that Torah likewise stands for the *Shekhinah*. This interpretation is corroborated by another brief comment of Naḥmanides: "The word *zoʿt* alludes to the blessing, which is the Torah, and it is the covenant, as it is written, 'This is my covenant' (*zoʿt beriti*) (Isa. 59:21)."⁹⁴ Hence, *Shekhinah* equals blessing, which equals the Torah and the covenant.

The symbolic nexus that I have described above is preserved as well in the following kabbalistic interpretation of Baḥya ben Asher on the midrashic reading of Deuteronomy 33:4, "do not read heritage (*morashah*) but betrothed (*meʿorasah*)":

By way of kabbalistic explanation (*ʿal derekh ha-qabbalah*) they had to interpret in this way, for this Torah (*zoʿt ha-torah*) is betrothed to Jacob, and she is called Rachel. In a time of anger the *Shekhinah* disappears, "Rachel cries over her children, she refuses to be comforted for her children, who are gone" (Jer. 31:14). And in a time of favor Rachel is the wife of Jacob, and this is clear.⁹⁵

According to the kabbalistic interpretation of the midrashic passage, Torah is the *Shekhinah* or Rachel, who is betrothed to *Tifʿeret* symbolized by the figure of Jacob. In times of distress the two are separated and Rachel weeps over her children, but in times of mercy they are united in matrimony. Following the tradition of Judah ben Yaqar and Naḥmanides, Baḥya likewise affirms that the Torah is the feminine Presence.

It is, however, in the classical kabbalistic text of this period, the *Zohar*, that the image of the Torah as a woman not only resurfaces but is again elevated to a position of supreme importance. Indeed, one finds that some of the more powerful passages describing Torah in a mystical vein in the *Zohar* draw heavily from the feminine image of the Torah. Specifically, the feminine personification of the Torah is utilized by the author of the *Zohar* to describe the hermeneutical relationship between mystic exegete and Scripture. Thus, for example, in one passage we read the following explanation attributed to R. Isaac for why the Torah begins with the letter *bet*, which is opened on one side and closed on the three other sides: "When a person comes to be

united with the Torah, she is open to receive him and to join him. But when a person closes his eyes from her and goes another way, she is closed from another side."⁹⁶ In this context, then, it is clear that the author of the *Zohar* upholds the possibility of an individual's uniting with the Torah; indeed, in the continuation of the text, this unification is referred to as joining the Torah face-to-face (*le'ithabber bah ba-'oraita' 'anpin be-'anpin*), an idiom employed in the *Zohar* to connote an intimate sexual union.⁹⁷ The Torah is open and closed, depending on the actions and the efforts of the given person. Underlying this suggestive remark is the older feminine personification of the Torah. What is implied in this passage is elaborated upon in greater detail in the famous zoharic parable in which the Torah is likened to a beautiful princess secluded in her palace.⁹⁸ From a small opening within her palace the princess reveals herself to her lover, the mystic exegete, showing her face only to him and then immediately concealing it lest others see her. These stages of disclosure correspond metaphorically to the various layers of meaning embedded in the scriptural text. In the final stage, the Torah reveals itself face-to-face with the mystic (*'itgali'at le-gabe 'anpin be-'anpin*) and communicates to him all of its inner secrets and esoteric truths. In the moment that the Torah reveals all its secrets to the mystic, the latter is called *ba'al Torah*⁹⁹ or *ma'are de-veta'* ("master of the house"),¹⁰⁰ two expressions that allude to the fact that the mystic has united with the Torah or *Shekhinah* in a sexual embrace. I have elsewhere dealt at length with the erotic nature of reading that is here suggested.¹⁰¹ What is critical for this analysis is the obvious characterization of the Torah as a feminine persona. Kabbalistic exegesis is a process of denuding the Torah akin to the disrobing of the princess by her lover.¹⁰² This is stated explicitly by Moses de León (c. 1240–1305), assumed by most modern scholars to be the author of the bulk of the *Zohar*, in his *Mishkan ha-'Edut* (1293):

Our holy Torah is a perfect Torah, "all the glory of the royal princess is inward" (Ps. 45:14). But because of our great and evil sins today, "her dress is embroidered with golden mountings" (ibid.). . . . Thus God, blessed be He, laid a "covering of dolphin skin over it" (Num. 4:6) with the visible things [of this world]. And who can see and contemplate the great and awesome light hidden in the Torah except for the supernal and holy ancient ones. They entered her sanctuary, and the great light was revealed to them. . . . They removed the mask from her.¹⁰³

It seems reasonable to suggest, moreover, that this feminine per-

sonification of the Torah underlies an oft-repeated theme in the zoharic corpus to the effect that the *Shekhinah*, the feminine presence of God, is immanent in a place where a mystic sage is studying or interpreting the Torah.¹⁰⁴ While the link between Torah study and the dwelling of the *Shekhinah* is clearly affirmed in earlier rabbinic sources,¹⁰⁵ there are two significant differences between the claims of the *Zohar* and those of the classical texts. First, the position of the rabbis is not that study of Torah is a means to bring the divine Presence, but rather that as a natural consequence of fulfilling God's will the *Shekhinah* will be present. In the case of the *Zohar*, by contrast, it is evident that Torah study becomes one of several means to attain the desired result of *devequt*, "cleaving to the divine"; consequently, Torah study is transformed into a decidedly mystical praxis. Second, in the *Zohar* the erotic nature of the unification between the sage and the *Shekhinah* as a result of Torah study is stressed in a way entirely foreign to the classical literature. Of the many examples that could be cited to demonstrate the point, I will mention but one: "Come and see: All those engaged in the [study of] Torah cleave to Holy One, blessed be He, and are crowned in the crowns of Torah . . . how much more so those who are engaged in the [study of] Torah also during the night . . . for they are joined to the *Shekhinah* and they are united as one."¹⁰⁶ Torah study is here upheld as a means for anyone to cleave to God, but the mystics who study Torah during the night are singled out as the ones who are actually united with the *Shekhinah*, a position well attested in many passages in the voluminous corpus of the *Zohar*. That the cleaving to *Shekhinah* as a result of studying Torah is indeed based on a feminine characterization of Torah, as I have suggested, can be supported by the following zoharic passage: "He who is engaged in the [study of] Torah it is as if he were engaged in the palace of the Holy One, blessed be He, for the supernal palace of the Holy One, blessed be He, is the Torah."¹⁰⁷ The meaning of this statement can only be ascertained by noting that the palace of the Holy One, blessed be He, is a standard symbol in the zoharic kabbalah for the *Shekhinah*. Hence, to be occupied with the study of Torah is to be occupied with the *Shekhinah*, for the latter, the supernal palace, is the Torah.

It is of interest to note in passing the following comment on this passage by the kabbalist Ḥayyim Joseph David Azulai (1724–1806):

It is possible that the Oral Torah corresponds to *Malkhut*, which is called *hekhal* (palace). . . . And this is [the meaning of] what is written, "Whoever is engaged in Torah," for the word engaged (*ʾishtaddeḥ*) for the most part connotes that one is occupied in detailed study (*she-ʿoseq be-ʿiyyun*)

of the Oral Torah, and by means of this study one causes the unity of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the *Shekhinah*. Therefore one is "engaged in the palace of the Holy One, blessed be He," to unify her with her beloved.¹⁰⁸

This eighteenth-century kabbalist is compelled to explain the zoharic identification of the palace with the Torah as a reference to the Oral Torah for, on the one hand, it is clear that *palace* refers to *Shekhinah* and, on the other hand, the accepted kabbalistic symbolism is such that *Shekhinah* is the Oral Torah. I have cited Azulai's comment, for it is instructive of the way that a traditional commentator on the *Zohar* is forced to interpret a given text in light of the standard symbolic reference, thereby obscuring the original meaning of the text. In fact, it seems to me that the intent of the author of the *Zohar* is to stress that by means of the kabbalistic study of the Written Torah, one is intimately engaged with the *Shekhinah*, for indeed the *Shekhinah*, or the supernal palace, is the Torah. In this passage, then, the *Zohar* is reverting to the older kabbalistic symbolism that is found in *Sefer ha-Bahir*.

Still other kabbalistic texts indicate that the feminine characterization of Torah played a critical role. Thus, for example, the anonymous author of *Tiqqune Zohar* on several occasions employs this imagery in his kabbalistic discourses. I cite here one striking example of this phenomenon:

The word *bereshit*, this is the Torah (*'oraita'*), concerning which it says, "The Lord created me at the beginning (*re'shit*) of His course" (Prov. 8: 22). And this is the lower *Shekhinah* [the tenth *sefirah*], which is the beginning for the created entities [below the divine realm]. . . . When she takes from *Keter* [the first *sefirah*] she is called "crown of splendor" (*'aṣeret tif'eret*), a crown (*'aṣarah*) on the head of every righteous person (*ṣaddiq*),¹⁰⁹ the crown of the Torah scroll (*taga' de-sefer torah*), and on account of her it is written, "He who makes [theurgic] use of the crown (*dishtammash be-taga'*) perishes."¹¹⁰ When she takes from *Ḥokmah*, which is the beginning (*re'shit*), she is called by his name. When she takes from *Binah* she is called by the name *Tevunah*. When she takes from *Ḥesed* she is called the Written Torah, which was given from the right . . . and when she takes from *Gevurah* she is called Oral Torah. . . . And the *Shekhinah* is the Torah of truth (*torat 'emet*), as it is written, "A proper teaching was in his mouth," *torat 'emet hayetah be-fihu* (Mal. 2:6).¹¹¹

The author of this text, in conformity with what was by then standard kabbalistic symbolism, depicts the last of the divine emanations, the *Shekhinah*, in multiple ways, depending ultimately on the attribute from which she is said to receive the divine influx. In the moment she receives this influx from the right side, or the attribute of Lovingkindness, the *Shekhinah* is identified as the Written Torah, whereas in the moment she receives from the left side, or the attribute of Judgment, she is identified as the Oral Torah.¹¹² Hence, in this context, the dual Torah represents two aspects of the *Shekhinah*. Yet, in the beginning and in the end of the passage it is emphasized in a more generic way that the *Shekhinah* is the Torah, or the Torah of truth. Moreover, it is stated that *Shekhinah* is the crown of the Torah, a symbolic image repeated frequently in this book.¹¹³ Utilizing an older kabbalistic symbol, *‘aṭarah* (crown), for the *Shekhinah*,¹¹⁴ the author of *Tiqqune Zohar* identifies this crown by several well-established images from the normative Jewish world. That is, the *Shekhinah* is the crown of the Torah, which is also identified with the eschatological crown on the head of the righteous, and, in still other contexts, the crown of Torah is identified with the corona of the *membrum virile* disclosed as part of the circumcision ritual.¹¹⁵ In one passage in the *Ra‘aya’ Mehemna’* section of the *Zohar*, assumed to have been written by the author of the *Tiqqunim*, the symbolism of the Torah crown is linked specifically to an existing ritual on Simḥat Torah: the Jews crown the Torah, for the Torah “alludes to *Tif’eret*” and the “crown of splendor” on the scroll symbolizes the *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁶ This clearly represents an effort to preserve something of the older symbolism while still affirming the more widely accepted position. That is, the scroll now symbolizes the masculine potency, and the crown, the feminine. Underlying the origin of the crowning ritual was a decidedly feminine characterization of the Torah scroll, but in the case of the kabbalistic explanation the gender of the symbolism has shifted in accord with a new theosophic system. Indeed, the Torah scroll assumes a decidedly phallic character in kabbalistic documents,¹¹⁷ and even the crown should be seen in light of that symbolism. That is, the crown on the Torah scroll symbolically corresponds to the corona of the penis, and both ultimately indicate that the feminine potency is itself ontically part of the male.

There can be no question that in post-zoharic kabbalistic literature the dominant symbolic association was that of the Written Torah with *Tif’eret* and the Oral Torah with *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁸ In that sense, the Torah scroll, the mundane correlate to the supernal Written Torah, was understood in decidedly masculine terminology. Thus, for example, Moses Cordovero (1522–1570) explains the rituals surrounding

the taking out of the Torah from the ark in the synagogue in terms of the following symbolism:

The [mystical] intention in the taking out of the Torah scroll. The reason for this commandment is that the cantor, who corresponds to *Yesod*, goes up from the table, the aspect of *Malkhut*, in the center point of the synagogue, and he goes up to *Binah* . . . to draw forth the secret of the Torah scroll from the supernal ark, i.e., *Tif'eret* from *Binah* in the secret of the ark wherein is the Torah. *Yesod*, the cantor, goes up from the central aspect in *Malkhut* to *Binah*, the ark, to take out from there the Torah scroll, which is *Tif'eret*, to draw it forth to *Malkhut*, the center point.¹¹⁹

According to Cordovero, then, the taking out of the Torah from the ark symbolically re-enacts the dynamic process in the sefirotic realm whereby the masculine potency of *Tif'eret* emerges from the supernal palace, *Binah*, in order to unite with the lower, feminine potency, *Shekhinah*. The Torah scroll therefore corresponds to the masculine rather than the feminine aspect of God.¹²⁰

In the more complicated symbolism of the Lurianic kabbalah one can still see very clearly that the Torah scroll is a symbol for a masculine attribute of the divine. Hayyim Vital (1543–1620) thus writes that the “Torah scroll is the *Yesod de-’Abba*’, which is called the Written Torah, the form of the scroll is like an extended *waw*.”¹²¹ Utilizing this symbolism the eminent disciple of Isaac Luria (1534–1572) thus explained the taking out of the Torah from the ark and the subsequent opening of the scroll as follows:

The opening of the ark is performed at first, and this is the matter of *Ze’eir ’Anpin* itself, which breaks forth to emit the *Yesod de-’Abba*’, which is within it, to go out from its body. And the opening of the Torah scroll itself is done afterwards, and this is the secret of the breaking forth of *Yesod de-’Abba*’, which is called the Torah scroll, and the [forces of] mercy and judgment that are within it are revealed, and they are called the Written Torah.¹²²

Alternatively, Vital offers the following explanation, which he also heard from his teacher, Isaac Luria, and which he considers to be the better one:

The first breaking forth is that of *Yesod de-’Imma*’ and all the [forces of] mercy within it, which spread forth in *Ze’eir ’Anpin*, and they clothe and surround the *Yesod de-’Abba*’, which is within them. By means of this breaking forth of

Yesod de-³Imma³, the light of *Yesod de-³Abba³* goes forth, from outside *Yesod de-³Imma³*, to the body of *Ze⁶eir³Anpin*. And this breaking forth is the matter of the opening of the ark to take out the Torah scroll, for the ark is the *Yesod de-³Imma³*, within which is the Torah scroll, which is the *Yesod de-³Abba³*. Afterwards comes a second breaking forth, which is that of the *Yesod di-Ze⁶eir³Anpin* itself, for the light of the *Yesod de-³Abba³* goes out. . . . And this breaking forth is the matter of opening the case of the Torah scroll itself, so that the illumination of the Torah, and all that is written within it, will be revealed on the outside to the congregation. Afterwards, when the Torah is read, then the light that is within it goes outside, for this is the Torah itself, which is called light.¹²³

The Torah scroll thus symbolizes the aspect of God referred to by the technical expression *Yesod de-³Abba³*, the foundation of the divine countenance (*paršuf*) called by the name Father. The ark in which the scroll is kept symbolizes the aspect of divinity referred to as the *Yesod de-³Imma³*, the foundation of the divine Mother. When the ark is opened, then the light of *Yesod de-³Imma³* emerges and shines upon the body of *Ze⁶eir³Anpin*, the divine son. With the opening of the case of the Torah scroll the light of *Yesod de-³Abba³* breaks forth and shines upon the whole congregation. The process of illumination is completed when the portion of the Torah is read, for through the public reading the light that is hidden within the letters of the scroll is released.¹²⁴ Vital similarly explains the theurgical significance of "Torah-study for its own sake" in terms of a process of illumination of the masculine upon the feminine; that is, *torah lishmah* is rendered as *torah le-shem he³*, which means that through study of Torah the light is released from *Yesod de-³Abba³*, the Torah, and shines upon *Binah*, symbolized by the letter *he³*.¹²⁵ Although the symbolism developed by Vital is significantly more complex than that of Cordovero, both sixteenth-century Safedian kabbalists share the view that the Torah scroll itself symbolizes a masculine aspect of divinity. This, I submit, can be taken as a standard viewpoint in the vast majority of kabbalistic writings.

Only in one very important body of mystical literature does the feminine personification of the Torah reappear to play an instrumental role. I have in mind some of the texts that emerged from the disciples of Israel ben Eliezer, the Ba⁶al Shem Ṭov (c. 1700–1760), so-called founder of modern Hasidism in eighteenth-century Poland. In a striking passage from the very first published Hasidic text, the *Toledot*

Ya'aqov Yosef of Jacob Joseph of Polonnoye (d. 1782), we again encounter the feminine image of Torah. In this case as well the main concern is the presentation of the Hasidic idea of the study of Torah as a vehicle for mystical union, *devequt*, between the individual and God.¹²⁶

A person cleaves to the form of the letters of the Torah, which is the bride, and the cleaving of his essence to the inner essence of the letters of the Torah is the true mating (*ha-ziwwug ha-ʾamiti*), "naked without garment"¹²⁷ or [any] face, [without] advantage or reward, but rather for its own sake, to love her so as to cleave to her. This is the essence and purpose of everything.¹²⁸

Study of Torah thus involves a technique of cleaving to the letters of the Torah, which serves, in turn, as a means for one to unite with the divine, for, according to the standard kabbalistic symbolism adopted by the Hasidic writers as well, the Torah is identical with God in His manifest form.¹²⁹ The person who studies Torah for its own sake—which here assumes the meaning of studying Torah for the sake of cleaving to its letters¹³⁰—acquires knowledge, *yedi'ah*, which, as Jacob Joseph further explains, has a decidedly sexual nuance: "The expression knowledge here is like the [usage in the verse] 'And Adam knew (*wa-yeda*) Eve' for he cleaves to God and to His Torah, [a state] which is called knowledge, like the knowledge and communion of physical unification (*ziwwug ha-gashmi*)." Torah study is therefore a form of sexual unification with the divine feminine or the Torah, which is the bride.¹³¹

The erotically charged significance of the symbol of the feminine Torah is underscored in the following tradition of Dov Baer, the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz (1704–1772) reported by his disciple, Uziel Meisels:

I have heard from the mouth of my teacher and my master, the genius and the pious, Dov Baer, may the memory of the righteous and saintly one be for a blessing, his soul is in Paradise, with regard to the dictum [on the verse] "When Moses charged us with the Torah as the heritage [of the congregation of Jacob]" (Deut. 33:4), "Do not read heritage (*morashah*) but betrothed (*me'orasah*)." [The intent here is] to bring the thing close to the matter (*leqarev ha-davar ʾel ha-ʾinyan*), for in the way of the world it is not appropriate for a person who is not honorable to hold on to a princess and to dance with her in a wedding hall. It is not appropriate for such a person to come close to her and certainly not

to hold on to her and to dance with her. By contrast, when the princess enters into marriage it is customary that the bond is loosened and even the most despised person is permitted to dance with her. So it is with respect to the matter under deliberation: our holy Torah is the princess of the King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. Accordingly, it would have been appropriate that whoever wanted should not draw close to her. Nevertheless, it was permitted to us for the Torah is compared to water, and just as water is ownerless so too she is ownerless. . . . In relation to us she is like the princess on the day of her wedding when she is betrothed. This is alluded to in the sweetness of his language, "Do not read heritage but betrothed," that is, in relation to us the Torah is [in the status of] the wedding day when permission is granted to all to dance with her, for we have also been given [permission] to be occupied in Torah.¹³²

The view espoused by Jacob Joseph and the Maggid of Miedzyrzecz is reiterated in the *Degel Maḥaneh ʿEfrayim* of Moses Ḥayyim Ephraim of Sudlikov (c. 1737–1800), the grandson of the Baʿal Shem Ṭov. In the case of this author, the zoharic parable of the Torah as a maiden is used as a basis to characterize the intellectual study and practical fulfillment of Torah as a moment of unification between man and God akin to the sexual unification between husband and wife:

The Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, and Israel are all one.¹³³ For the human person (ʿadam) is the Holy One, blessed He, by virtue of the fact that the Tetragrammaton when written out fully equals forty-five, the numerical equivalence of the [word] ʿadam. The Torah contains 248 positive commandments and 365 negative commandments, and from there is drawn forth the human person below in the aspect of 248 limbs and 365 inner parts. When a person is occupied with Torah for its own sake . . . he brings his limbs close to their source. . . . He and the Torah become one in unity and perfect oneness (*we-naʿaseh huʿ we-ha-torah ʿeḥad be-yiḥud we-ʾaḥdut gamur*) like the unification of a man and his wife, as it is in the *Sabbaʾ Mishpaṭim* [i.e., the section of *Zohar* containing the parable of the princess]. . . . He becomes one unity with the Torah (*we-naʿaseh ʿim ha-torah be-yiḥudaʾ ḥadaʾ*). "From my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:26)—if with respect to physical unification [it says] "And they will be of one flesh" (Gen. 2:24),

a fortiori with respect to spiritual matters he becomes a perfect unity with the Torah (*she-na'aseh 'ahdut gamur mamash hu' 'im ha-torah*).¹³⁴

According to this Hasidic text, then, by being involved in the Torah one mystically unites with the Torah. This merging is likened to the sexual embrace of a man with his wife. Just as the two become one on the physical level, so on the spiritual level the individual unites with, actually becomes one with, the feminine Torah.

As a final example of the female characterization of Torah in the voluminous Hasidic corpus, I will cite one comment of Menahem Naḥum of Chernobyl (1730–1797). Commenting on Exodus 31:18, “When He finished speaking with him on Mt. Sinai, He gave Moses the two tablets of the pact, stone tablets inscribed with the finger of God,” the rebbe from Chernobyl brought together the midrashic reading of this verse, noted above, and that of Deuteronomy 33:4, “Moses commanded the Torah to us, as the heritage of the congregation of Jacob,” also noted above, two of the main loci for the rabbinic notion of the feminine Torah:

By means of the Torah the groom and bride are united, the Community of Israel [*Shekhinah*] and the Holy One, blessed be He [*Tif'eret*]. . . . The unification of the groom and bride is always something novel for they have never been united before. Thus must a person unite the Holy One, blessed be He [with the *Shekhinah*] every day anew. . . . And this is [the import of the midrashic teaching of Deut. 33:4] “do not read heritage (*morashah*) but betrothed (*me'orasah*).” For the Torah is not called heritage but rather betrothed, which is the aspect of the bride, so that the unity will always be new like a bride at her wedding.¹³⁵

The midrashic reading of the word *ke-khalloto* in Exodus 31:18 as *ke-khallato* is here transformed by the Hasidic master in terms of the older kabbalistic symbolism. That is, the Torah is the bride, and by studying Torah one assists in the unification of male and female, the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*.

The Hasidic writers thereby retrieved the older image of the Torah as the bride in their characterization of the ideal of cleaving to God through the Torah. It seems that the ideas and imagery expressed in earlier sources of an aggadic and mystical nature enabled the Hasidic masters to foster once again the feminization of the Torah. This process, in my opinion, attests to the centrality of this motif in Jewish spirituality. Although the alternative kabbalistic model that equated

the Written Torah with the masculine potency and the Oral Torah with the feminine is found in the theoretical literature of the Hasidim, it was primarily the image of the Torah as the bride that was revitalized in Hasidic thought.

Let me conclude with a brief analysis of a story by Shmuel Yosef Agnon (1888–1970), *Ḥaggadat ha-Sofer* (the “Tale of the Scribe”), which highlights the deep sexual implications of the feminine image of Torah in Judaism. Moving in an almost full circle from the Geonic origins of crowning the scroll on Simḥat Torah based on the aggadic depiction of Torah as the bride,¹³⁶ we arrive at Agnon’s description of the scene inside the synagogue on the night of Simḥat Torah, which likewise draws largely on this very image. All the people, we are told, were dancing with enthusiasm and were cleaving to the holy Torah; when the young children saw their fathers receive the honor of carrying the Torah they would jump toward them “grasping the scroll, caressing, embracing, kissing it with their pure lips that have not tasted sin.”¹³⁷ At the seventh, and last, round of the procession around the pulpit the cantor turned to the congregation and summoned all those involved in Torah study to come forth to carry the scrolls. After several of the youth came forward, the cantor again turned to the congregation to summon the scribe, Raphael, to honor him with carrying the Torah and singing a special melody. Here the narrative continues with the description that is most relevant to our concerns:

Raphael held the scroll in his arm, walking in the lead with all the other youths following him in the procession around the pulpit. At that moment a young girl pushed her way through the legs of the dancers, leaped toward Raphael, sank her red lips into the white mantle of the Torah scroll in Raphael’s arm, and kept on kissing the scroll and caressing it with her hands.¹³⁸

In the continuation of the story we learn that the young girl described in this passage was Miriam, who later married Raphael. In the context of the tale, the description of the celebration on Simḥat Torah serves as a flashback, prompted by Raphael’s singing the very same melody, as he clutched and danced with the Torah, that he had just written for the memory of Miriam shortly after she had died at a young age. Agnon thus describes the scene of Raphael’s celebrating with the Torah scroll after Miriam’s death in terms that are meant to echo the past event of Simḥat Torah:

Raphael came toward Miriam and bowed before her with the Torah scroll in his arm. He could not see her face be-

cause she was wrapped in her wedding dress . . . Raphael is wrapped in his prayer shawl, a Torah scroll in his arm, and the scroll has the mantle of fine silk on which the name of Miriam the wife of Raphael is embroidered. The house becomes filled with many Torah scrolls, and many elders dancing. . . . They dance without motion . . . and Miriam stands in the center. . . . She approaches Raphael's scroll. She takes off her veil and covers her face with her hands. Suddenly her hands slide down, her face is uncovered, and her lips cling to the mantle of the Torah scroll in Raphael's arms.¹³⁹

The Torah scroll written for Miriam by Raphael, of course, reflects the scroll carried by Raphael on that Simḥat Torah night when they were first brought together. It was through the scroll that the fates of Raphael and Miriam were inextricably linked. Indeed, the Torah is the ritualistic object that binds together the scribe and his wife. The scroll is therefore obviously meant to be an erotic symbol; it functions as the object upon which the sexual passions of both Raphael and Miriam have been displaced. Admittedly, with respect to the gender of the scroll, there is here some equivocation, for it serves as both a masculine object for Miriam and a feminine one for Raphael. Thus Raphael is described in the Simḥat Torah scene as clutching the Torah the way he would his bride, while Miriam keeps kissing the white mantle of the Torah as if it were her groom. Similarly, in the death scene Miriam's lips are said to cling to the mantle of the Torah in Raphael's arms as if she were kissing her husband. Yet, the story ends with a description of Raphael sinking down with his scroll, and "his wife's wedding dress was spread out over him and over his scroll."¹⁴⁰ With the death of Miriam, then, the scroll fully assumes its role as the feminine persona vis-à-vis Raphael the scribe.

Underlying this latter characterization one will readily recognize the mythical motif of the feminine Torah that I have traced in midrashic and kabbalistic sources. For Agnon, however, it is the metaphorical aspect of this motif that again becomes primary, for the Torah, depicted in strikingly effeminate terms, is to be taken in a figurative sense as the object of Raphael's displaced sexual desire. That is, the Torah serves as a substitution for the earthly Miriam, whose own erotic yearnings are symbolized by the fact that her lips are sunk in, or cling to, the mantle of the scroll that is clutched by Raphael. Although Agnon is clearly drawing on the older image of the Torah as a bride, and furthermore reflects actual religious observances that are themselves rooted in that image, it is nevertheless the case that the force of

the feminine image of the Torah as a religious symbol is substantially weakened; or, to put the matter in somewhat different terms, in Agnon's story the *Shekhinah*, Miriam, and the Torah all fuse into one image. The symbol, which developed in mystical texts out of a literary metaphor in midrashic sources, has become again in the modern work of fiction a literary metaphor, but one that is intended to characterize the mundane by the sacred rather than the sacred by the mundane.