

Androgyny and Equality in the Theosophico-Theurgical Kabbalah

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Introduction

Androgyny may have more than one meaning. On the one hand, it may point to the anatomical coexistence of two sorts of sexual organs in an individual body. This is an observable fact and its most well-known expression is found in the famous myth from Plato's *Symposium* (para.189). Alternatively, in other texts this concept may point to a state understood by some scholars to be an allegory, a form of spiritual perfection. This interpretation is found in the writings of Jacob Boehme, Nicolai A. Berdiaev and, more recently, C.G. Jung, Mircea Eliade and Elemire Zola. Needless to say, Romantic literature is replete with an idealization of this theme. According to some texts, it is a matter of a special structure of souls, some form of primeval spiritual twinning, a view related somehow to Plato's myth, but applied this time to the soul, rather than the body. In other cases, which we will examine in the following pages, androgyny is related to the state of explicit coexistence of male and female qualities in the same entity, but in a special manner, namely as equal components.

Biblical Hebrew does not have a special term for androgyny. The Greek *androgynos* has been borrowed in Rabbinic Hebrew in order to explain the meaning of the Genesis 1:26 descriptions of the creation of Adam and Eve. Though the Hebrew terms used in the biblical Hebrew in this context are perfectly clear, *zakhar u-neqevah*, the precise mode of the creation of Eve from Adam, is much less so. Resorting to a Greek term may therefore point to an attempt to clarify something that is obscure, according to some Rabbis, in the biblical account. Rabbis also adopted another Greek term: *du-partzufin*, an Aramaicized form of the two words *du*, two, and *partzuf*, from the Greek *prosofon*, namely face. The two-faced Adam was different from the androgynous Adam as the former dealt with facial duality, while the latter dealt basically with sexual duality. For certain, I do not intend to assume that by resorting to *du-partzufin* no sexual identity is involved, but that, semantically speaking, the emphasis has been put elsewhere.

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The adoption of the different terms reflects two different emphases on the dual nature of the first man: he was either double-faced or bisexual. While the first category was part of a concrete though extremely rare reality, *du-partzufin* is much more part of a mythical account of the past. This is the reason why in Halakic literature *androgynos* is the only term employed in order to point to a human person whose identity is not clear and thus represents an inferior mode of being; while in the Kabbalistic literature, *du-partzufin* prevails, both statistically and conceptually.

I shall address these two concepts by resorting to the term *androgyny*, since in both cases the implication is the presence of male and female elements. It should be noted too that in Rabbinic literature the two Greek terms have been used to refer solely to corporeal structures, not for modes of activity or for spiritual entities.

Early Kabbalah in Languedoc and Catalonia

Concepts related to androgyny have been addressed at some length recently in the scholarship of Kabbalah. I shall try not to repeat those issues already addressed by scholars and also reduce any overlap in their discussions to a strict minimum, and concentrate on variants of the issue found in the history of theosophico-theurgical Kabbalah.

I shall refer first and foremost to explicit instances in which the term *du-partzufin* occurs, and attempt to explicate its meaning. I shall try to avoid drawing conclusions from androgynous views derived from the bringing together of different texts in order to conclude that a certain Kabbalist envisaged the importance of this theme. Rather, I concentrate upon instances in which the relevant terminology is used by the Kabbalists, before asserting that one Kabbalist or another addressed this issue. Otherwise, there is the danger that an imposed 'androgynous' view becomes the topic of additional speculations, before being certain that a Kabbalist was indeed concerned with this issue. I would say, in general terms, that only a few Kabbalists belonging to this main school did not address androgyny in one form or another, but not all of them emphasized the aspect that concerns us here, the equality between male and female.

The concept of equality together with that of *du-partzufin* is found in one of the very first documents of the main Kabbalistic school I designate as the theosophico-theurgical one. In a short and dense passage attributed in manuscripts to R. Abraham ben David of Posquieres, a late 12th-century rabbinic figure and Kabbalist, the rabbinic understanding of the creation of Adam and Eve has been addressed explicitly:

Adam and Eve were created *du-partzufin*, so that the woman should be obedient to her husband, her life depending upon him, lest he go his [own] way, while she go her [own] way; rather, there should be affinity and friendship between them, and they shall not separate from one another, and peace will rest upon them and calmness in their houses. Likewise it is as concerns 'the doers of truth' [*Po'alei ha-'Emmet* – sun and moon] 'whose actions are truth'. The secret of *du-partzufin* refers to two matters: first, it is well-known that two opposites were emanated, one of them being stern judgment, and its counterpart, complete

mercy. And were they not emanated [*ve-illu lo' ne'etzlu*] [as] *du-partzufin*, and [if] each were to work out its actions [separately] according to its characteristic, it would be possible to see [them] as if they are two powers acting [separately], without any connection with its partner and without its assistance. But now, since they were created *du-partzufin*, their actions are performed in cooperation and in an equal manner [*be-shawweh*] and in a total uni[s]ion, without any separation. Furthermore, unless they would be created [in the manner of] *du-partzufin*, no perfect union would emerge from them and the attribute of judgment would not converge with [that of] mercy, neither would the attribute of mercy converge with [that of] judgment. But now, since they were created as *du-partzufin*, each of them may approach his partner and unite with him, and his desire is to willingly unite with his partner.

This is a sort of theo-cosmic interpretation of the concept of *du-partzufin*. The first human couple is understood to reflect much higher levels of existence: astronomical, namely sun and moon, and theosophical, the two divine attributes. The expression *bi-yhud gamur*, like the preceding phrase dealing with equality, characterizes a certain type of activity, not an ontological restructuring of the two divine attributes. I would say that its meaning is more plausibly 'unison' than 'union'. This passage did not have a great impact on the subsequent Kabbalistic literature, not because the topic has been neglected but because another interpretation of this issue has been accepted in a more influential Kabbalistic school. It is in the circle of R. Moshe ben Nahman, Nahmanides that a similar theo-cosmic interpretation has been offered, again associated with the theme of equality. In a *collectanea* of Kabbalistic traditions stemming from his school it is written that 'God created a subtle creature in [the manner of] *du-partzufin*, [possessing] an equal power [*be-koah shawweh*] and they are 'Ateret [and] Tiferet' (Ms. Oxford-Bodleiana 1610, folios 90b–91a). The subtle creature is not the human Adam but a divine power that incorporated two entities that had an equal power, namely two sefirot. However, while in the quote attributed to Rabad it is plausible that those powers are the sefirot of *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, here it is explicit that those powers are the couple of feminine and masculine divine attributes. The expression 'equal power' seems to qualify the term *du-partzufin*: they were not just two powers within one body but two powers that are equal. The resort to the word *koah*, power, is interesting since it may point both to an entity and to a form of operation. The latter meaning is obvious in another passage that reflects Nahmanides' Kabbalah. In R. Isaac of Acre's *Me'irat 'Einayyim* we read that:

The Kabbalistic tradition of Sasporta: 'Know that they were *du-partzufin*, and when they were operating equally there was a fear that provided that their rule was equal, lest the people will err and say that there are two powers [in heaven], God forbid.' But the opinion of the sage was that it is possible to say that *du-partzufin* is from the perspective that in the sun the power of the moon was comprised, and also that this power of the moon has been consonant then to the sun, and was not mixed to the sun, but was distinguishable . . . in any case it is possible to say that the power of the moon is consonant in the sun at that moment, and was exercising also the act of mercy, as it seems to be from the Kabbalah of Sasporta. (R. Isaac of Acre, *Meirat 'Einayyim*, ed. A. Goldreich, pp. 8–9)

The Kabbalist quoted by R. Isaac, 'Sasporta' (who is either Nahmanides himself or

someone very close to his thought), offers an explanation for the distinction made between the two powers that were initially equal: it is the fear of a theological misunderstanding that necessitated the diminution of one of the two powers. Earlier in the same book of R. Isaac we read that:

This is the reason that *Tiferet* and *'Atarah* are called *du-partzufin* since at the beginning they were emanated from *Teshuvah* [as] *du-partzufin*, and they receive [from there] in an equal manner [*be-shawweh*] but the sins of Israel caused that they are in exile, and this is the reason that it is necessary to bring atonement, and this is the meaning of the Prosecution. This is the secret meaning I received: Know that the *Teshuvah* is the king of the kings of kings. How it is: *Teshuvah* is king, kings are the arms of the world [namely *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, [second] kings are *du-partzufin*, that is two kings that serve and use one crown, which is the *Teshuvah*, that is the Holy One, blessed be He. When the *'Atarah* stood and accused and said to *Teshuvah*: 'it is impossible that two kings will use the same crown, because you know that the *du-partzufin* were equal, since during the six days of creation the light of one was like the light of another, since *Tiferet* was the first day and *'Atarah* is the second one'. (*Me'irat Einayyim*, pp. 7–8)

This is a seminal passage, which had an impact on latter Kabbalists. It is presumably based on a tradition that R. Isaac inherited from an anonymous source, reflecting Nahmanides' views, and this passage constitutes a major source for the dissemination of the earlier tradition. The gist of the passage is the correspondence between the three levels: human, cosmic and theosophical. R. Isaac's passage is quite explicit on this matter: all is the same matter, despite the discrepancy between the spiritual and corporeal. By this means, the tradition attributes to the feminine powers the guilt for the lower status of the females despite the fact that they were created equal to the males. It is the woman's will towards power that is conceived as responsible for the worsening of her situation. Elsewhere, R. Isaac insists on the initial equality writings that 'at the beginning they [the two luminaries] were equal [*shawwim*] . . . as they were created *du-partzufin*, back to back, no one has any priority to the other, this being the reason why Adam and Eve were equal [*shawwim*]' (R. Isaac of Acre, '*Otzar Hayyim*, Ms. Moscow-Ginsburg 775, fol. 95b).

In Nahmanides' school, the term *du-partzufin* becomes shorthand for the couple of *sefirot*: *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. Tens of times the term occurs in order to point to this theosophical structure. A view similar to the last passage quoted from *Me'irat Einayyim* is found in an even more influential commentary on the Pentateuch, authored by R. Menahem Recanati, an early 14th-century Kabbalist active in Italy. He mentions the occurrence of the term 'great in the context of the luminaries', and then writes:

At the beginning of their emanation He called them equally great, because the two of them were sucking as one, in an equal manner, the light of the moon and the light of the sun. (*Commentary on the Torah* [Jerusalem, 1961], fol. 6c)

The image of sucking may point to the understanding of the source, presumably the third *sefirah* as mother, who gave birth to a couple of equal children.

Platonic reverberations

In the late 12th century in the town of Lunel, the famous translator from Arabic, Yehudah ibn Tibbon, translated an important Jewish philosophical treatise, R. Sa'adyah Gaon's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, in which a theory reminiscent of Plato's *Symposium* is found. Though he does not accept the theory, Sa'adyah was instrumental in disseminating it in Jewish literature:

They maintained that God has created the spirits of His creatures in the form of round spheres, which were thereupon divided by Him into halves, each half being put into a different person. Therefore does it come about that, when a soul finds the part complementing it, it becomes irresistibly drawn to it. From this point they proceed further yet, making a duty of man's surrendering himself to his passions. (*The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt [Yale University Press, 1976], Gate X, ch. 7, p. 374)

Another version of this view, now presented in a favorable light, is found in an ethical compendium, which incorporates philosophical dicta, translated into Hebrew from Arabic, under the name of *Mussarei ha-Philosophim*:

They asked Batlemius [Ptolemeus] about the issue of desire [*Hesheq*] and he said that the Creator, elevated be He, has created every soul as a sphere, in the form of a globe, and He divided it into two parts and He put in every body one half. And the desire emerges when a body encounters the other body, where the second part is found, because of the[ir] primordial friendship. (Ed. A. Loewenthal [Frankfurt am Main, 1896], pp. 38–9)

A follower of the school of Kabbalah of R. Isaac Sagi Nahor (Rabad's son), the Catalan Kabbalist R. Jacob ben Sheshet quotes this view positively. His citation represents a viable link between the Arabic and Jewish philosophical treatments and the Kabbalistic ones. In his influential moralistic writing he asserts that:

The Holy One, blessed be he, has made the soul as a globe and He divided it into two parts, and put one of the parts in one body, and the second one in another body. And when they will unite to each other the primordial love will be stirred. (*Sefer ha-'Emunah ve-ha-Bitahon*, ch. 24)

In all these versions, the initial entity discussed by the authors is the soul, not the body, as in the Platonic original. While Plato dealt with both the corporeal intercourse and the emotional attraction between individuals his myth accounts only for the corporeal creation and the reason for the dissection of bodies, ignoring the division of souls. The two latter versions quoted earlier allude to the existence of a primordial spiritual relationship, the primordial love or friendship, which is re-emerging via the bodily encounter. Eros pre-exists the encounter, but it is the very moment of the encounter that constitutes the trigger, namely the stirring or the awakening of the ancient love. I assume that we have here a medieval version of Plato's theory of erotic-spiritual anamnesis. In the medieval Kabbalistic versions the bodily dissection mentioned in the Platonic myth is missing, and so also is the reconstruction of this dissection.

Pointing out the emergence of the Kabbalistic views on equality from Platonic speculations is important beyond an exercise in tracing sources. Finding the origins in Plato's geometrical image of the sphere and its division into two equal parts may help in understanding that some aspects of Kabbalistic thought on the topic of androgyny stem not just from imposing a certain ideal theosophy of equality on the biblical story of creation, not from a simple projection of a social situation onto theosophical speculation. The Platonic sources that nourished these Kabbalistic discussions contributed their mythical narrative to Kabbalistic myths, in which a marginal geometrical theme has been moved by Kabbalists to a much more central place in their exegetical and theosophical speculations. Interestingly enough, the surfacing in Hebrew of a certain spiritualized version of Plato's myth of the globe that is divided, and its profound impact on Kabbalah, represents an interesting parallel to the arrival of pagan eroticism in 12th-century Western Europe, according to the thesis of Denis de Rougement.

Castilian Kabbalistic views of the late 13th century

An important repercussion of the vision of the spherical image of the male–female soul is found in a late 13th-century Kabbalist, R. Joseph Gikatilla and in the book of the *Zohar*.

In one of his smaller treatises, Gikatilla asserts that when a man is born, his soul and the soul of his spouse descend together to this world. The basic assumption is that the souls of a couple are created as 'one unit' since in the supernal world there is no 'half-form'. Indeed, Gikatilla resorts to the classical Greek terminology found in the Midrash, *androgynos* and *du-partzufin*, in order to describe the corporeal creation of the first couple and convey the continuous creation of the souls of any couple, though later on the more corporeal understanding of the Midrash is also adduced. However, as Ch. Mopsik has pointed out correctly, the soul of the male will gain, or regain, the original female-soul only if he is righteous, which means that it may happen only if he will be able to perform rituals that will unify the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. Therefore, the metaphysical affinity does not create an absolute predestination but opens up the possibility of regaining the genuine half-soul as a result of religious meritorious acts. Re-establishing the original spiritual affinity requires a righteous way of life. The metaphysics of the twin-souls does not dictate someone's behavior; his behavior is derived from non-metaphysical sources, and as a retribution his soul will encounter his original half. The spiritual metaphysics of the divided spiritual sphere serves only as an opportunity to explain the attainment of a plenitude of erotic experience. In another important discussion in his *Sha'arei 'Orah*, each and every entity is conceived of as androgynous, a term which he interprets in this context as possessing two faces, one active and influential, the other passive and recipient.

A similar attitude toward the simultaneous emergence of the male and female souls is found in the book of the *Zohar* and among its numerous followers. It seems that theosophical Kabbalah, interested in shapes, did so in order to reflect modes of acting. I wonder if the reconstruction of a static image of the anthropomorphic

androgynous divine, of an *imago dei*, was ever a main objective of Kabbalists, or of Midrashic texts. The primary emphasis in most of the Kabbalistic writings resorts to the theme of the androgyne in order to highlight the importance of a way of a coordinated action rather than portray a mode of a transcendental type of existence.

Sefer ha-Peliy'ah and R. Meir ibn Gabbai, 15th to 16th centuries

Drawing upon views in the Nahmanidean school as presented above, an anonymous Kabbalist writing at the end of the 14th or early 15th century in the Byzantine empire elaborated upon what I propose to call the theo-cosmic interpretation of androgyny, adding details as part of his presentation of the equality-theme. In *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*, a view adumbrated earlier refers to the creation of the two great luminaries:

At the beginning of their emanation the light of the moon was like to the light of the sun because they were equal and were sucking in an identical manner . . . and afterwards the light of the moon has been called 'small' . . . because the moon which was like the sun said to the [sefirah of] *Binah*: 'It is sufficient that one will operate, why should two kings use the same crown.' The *Binah* said: 'Go and diminish yourself.' What is the meaning of diminution? That she does not come to the king as at the beginning but by means of the median line. You should understand that she does not have a light of her own but one that comes by means of the median line that is *Tiferet*. Is there a greater diminution than that? But in the future the light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and two kings will use one crown, and God and the divine name will become one because and the sun and moon will conjoin in a perfect union. (*Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*)

One of the most influential Kabbalists among those expelled from Spain was R. Meir ibn Gabbai, active in the Ottoman Empire in the first third of the 16th century. He provided a summary of the Spanish Kabbalah, while incorporating only marginally the types of Kabbalistic thought written outside Spain. From this point of view he indeed reflects major views of Spanish Kabbalists as articulated in the *Zohar* and the Nahmanides' school. Through his systematic and lucid presentation of the theosophico-theurgical Kabbalah, he became immediately one of the most printed and read Kabbalists, and his views should be seen as shaping the attitudes of many later Kabbalists. In the vein of the views of Nahmanides' school and of *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*, he too emphasizes the equality of the *du-partzufin* in the theo-cosmic context:

'And the Lord made the two great luminaries', at the beginning of their emanation they were equal, *du-partzufin*, together, and this is the reason they were called 'great', the light of the moon was equal to the light of the sun, but only afterwards it has been called the small light. (*Avodat ha-Qodesh* 4: 6)

However, much more important is a discussion that occurs later on in his masterpiece, following the views found in the above passage in *Sefer ha-Peliy'ah*:

They were *du-partzufin* united together [and] illumining equally according to one pattern. And this is the reason they were called, both, great, because they were in one conjunction

and the light was arriving to them from the source [*Binah*] in an equal manner. And the fact that they both were using the same crown [points to] the supernal luminary [again *Binah*]. Then she said to the Holy One blessed be He, 'Is it possible that two kings [etc.] . . . The secret of *du-partzufin* will use the same crown, behold it is sufficient that only one will reign and operate.' She was asking for herself as she said 'I shall reign over the six extremities.' God said then: 'Go and diminish yourself' . . . and since then 'Your desire will be to your husband and he will rule over you.' And the great luminary is the Tetragrammaton, and the small luminary is *Elohim*, the end of the supernal thought. At the beginning when they were balanced [*shequlim*] she was part of the great name, its last *He'* that is inscribed in it as the fourth letter, in order to point to the union with it in an equal manner [*be-shaveh*], afterwards she diminished herself, [and] was called '*Elohim*. Nevertheless she ascends on high in all the directions, by means of the last letter *He'* of the Tetragrammaton, and then she is like greatness and [then] there is abundance below. Because of the rule over the inferior entities she is called '*Elohim*, and her kingship rules over all. (*Avodat ha-Qodesh*, 4: 6)

This passage presents three different moments in the relationship between the two aspects of *du-partzufin*: the initial one, when they were equal ontologically and operationally, the second one after the diminution of the feminine power, in the later part of creation and afterwards, and third, the ascent of the feminine within the theosophical system to a place higher than her male counterpart. Therefore, the initial stage of equality is replaced by a more dynamic situation, in which the feminine power acquires two different types of relationship with the male sefirotic hypostasis: she is sometimes inferior to him and sometimes superior. It is the latter case that ensures the abundance here below. The transition from the inferior phase to the superior one is quite explicit, and emphasized by the word 'nevertheless'. By this ascent, the feminine power retrieves her lost greatness, and it is quite plausible that she is described as reaching the rank of the fourth *sefirah* of Greatness, *Gedullah*, namely a status higher than that of the male power, *Tiferet*.

Some of those interpretations are related to the symbolism related to the letters of the Tetragrammaton: YHWH. The first consonant Y, symbolizes the second *sefirah*, *Hokhmah*, the second letter, *He'*, symbolizes the third *sefirah*, of *Binah*, the source in the above passage, the letter *Waw* stands for *Tiferet*, the male aspect and the second *He'* stands for the feminine power, *Shekhinah* or *Malkhut*. The two identical letters point to two feminine powers not only in the initial stage of creation, but also now. Therefore, according to this passage, the feminine power as the last *sefirah* has two forms of reference: it is the second letter *He'*, when she ascends on high, and she is called '*Elohim*, when she rules over the inferior entities, namely the creatures in the extra-divine world, as a queen. The two quotes describe the theo-cosmic equality of the male–female principles. However, as seen already in the passage of Rabad and some of those from Nahmanides' school, this principle was explicitly related to the creation of Adam and Eve, and this is the case also in another discussion of ibn Gabbai, where the equality between the first couple is emphasized in a remarkable manner:

'And God the Lord said that it is not good that Adam will be alone' etc. This is the last utterance that comes to deal with the creation of Eve, in accordance to an absolute

intention and wondrous providence and this is a wondrous secret. And provided the fact that there is [said] 'good' only in the case of the first [day] and this is the reason why in the second day it is not said 'good' and we have nevertheless seen that in the second day it has been said 'good' too and without it [the second] it has been said that 'it is not good that Adam is alone' see that by Adam being in that form, and he was *du-partzufin*, is not good since being one of them half a man, and half of a thing is not a thing and is not good. When she turned to him face to face this is a perfect body and one man, and the blessing and the goodness are when they are one, because both of them, when they are face to face, then they are one, and this is the [meaning of the] verse 'He created them male and female and He blessed them and called their name Adam'. It becomes evident, therefore, that each of them alone is not a man and is not perfect and by their conjunction behold they become one thing, good and perfect. (*Avodat ha-Qodesh*, 4: 11)

I would like to stress the centrality of the plural form related to perfection. Man and Woman altogether are described as perfect, not only man. The woman is not instrumental in the male's attainment of his perfection alone, but she is also perfected, like him, by the sexual encounter face to face. To be sure, ibn Gabbai sees a precise correspondence between the supernal First Adam and the mundane Adam. Therefore, theosophical discussions have been imported into the manner in which perfection has been perceived insofar as the first couple has been understood. The primeval situation, in which there was no separation between the two entities, is not conceived as perfect, contrary to the subsequent one, in which the division between them permits face-to-face intercourse. Thus, perfection does not consist in a return to a lost ideal state of being but is a later development in which two entities reach their peak. Or, to formulate it differently: it is the ordinary situation as visible in the present that is closer to perfection than the primeval one.

R. Moshe ben Jacob Cordovero (mid-16th century Safed)

Though ibn Gabbai's book discussed above represents an important exposition of mainly the Spanish forms of Kabbalah, R. Moshe ben Jacob Cordovero's magisterial *Pardes Rimmonim* comes much closer to a synthesis of the entire realm of Kabbalistic writings composed before the mid-16th century. Much more comprehensive and original than ibn Gabbai, Cordovero strove to offer a harmonious vision that takes into consideration as much as possible the available Kabbalistic views on a certain topic, by creating some form of hierarchical scheme that organizes the relationship between the different views, or by reducing the 'apparently' different views to a more complex structure that 'integrates' them. Cordovero, like ibn Gabbai, quotes his sources, and from the perusal of his book it is quite obvious that he was well acquainted with early Kabbalah especially insofar as the views regarding androgyny are concerned. Cordovero continues earlier Kabbalistic traditions, and his writings contributed dramatically to the wide dissemination of the connection between androgyny and equality.

In one of his discussions Cordovero develops a vision according to which the existence of the feminine elements is necessary both on the highest and on the mundane level. However, while on high the two *sefirot*, *Shekhinah* and *Tiferet*, are

equal and they help each other equally, *shawweh be-shawweh*, in the case of the humans woman is conceived of as helping man much more (*Pardes Rimmonim* VIII: 18; XII: 2). This discrepancy is important since it demonstrates that the theosophical system is not imposed upon the human situation. In fact, Cordovero mentions in this context the dependence of the supernal world upon the doing of human deeds. What seems characteristic of Cordovero's understanding of the earlier Kabbalistic texts is that he is not content with a parallelism between the cosmic realm on the one hand, and the human and the theosophical one on the other hand. He criticizes the stand of R. Isaac of Acre, which established a tight relationship between the different brands of narratives.

Was androgyny a widespread ideal among the Kabbalists?

Androgynos is a term that has been adopted in Rabbinic Judaism in order to point to a human of complex sexual identity. This feature entails a negative overtone, which is why Kabbalists were less prone to resort to this term in their writings. Less conspicuous are their attitudes toward *du-partzufin*. The term indeed points to an entity created by God, and as such it should have been positive. However, it is also obvious that this state of androgyny did not last too long, and God himself dissected the androgynous, or the *du-partzufin*, in order to improve Adam's plight. This fact had a tremendous impact on the appreciation of androgyny among the Kabbalists. Rabad's discussion is a relatively positive reflection on *du-partzufin*, though he does not imply the need to return to it. Even for him, the primeval situation of togetherness is instrumental, being necessary in order to maintain a stable relationship afterwards. More explicit on the precarious status of *du-partzufin* is, for example, an influential commentary on the Pentateuch, written by R. Bahia ben Asher late in the 13th century in Catalonia:

'It is not good that man is alone' – in all the [days before] it is mentioned that 'it is good' because the goodness is the existence in all the species, but insofar as the creation of man the species cannot exist by him alone, [and this is the reason why it is said] 'it is not good'. And the meaning of 'it is not good for man' is [found] in connection with *du-partzufin*. This is the meaning of what they said 'They were created *du-partzufin*.' And this [is the reason why] it is written 'male and female He created them'. And they were made by this conjunction, [as] one [unity], since nature brought the generative power into the organs of reproduction, from the male to the female, and the second face was as a help to the first one, in the act of reproduction. This is why it is written 'I shall make him a help in front of him', that it is good that it will separate from him and will conjoin to him in accordance to his/her will, and it will be as one. One is standing by himself and also has a help standing in front of him. (Commentary on Genesis 2:18)

Even more explicit is an important mid-16th century commentator on the book of the *Zohar*. R. Shimeon ibn Lavi writes how it is a great secret that everything that is emanated from its source, and expounds thus:

[it]has no power to become fruitful if it does not return face-to-face to its source, because then it will become like a female who receives from the male. However, while it does not return face-to-face it will not become fruitful. And this is the secret of *du-partzufin* that they returned face-to-face, and this paradigm is found in the case of the first Adam, who was created *du-partzufin*, and he did not generate offspring until the Holy one, blessed be He, turned them face-to-face, and this is the secret of 'I shall make him a help in the front of him'. And the secret of the return is the existence of the world. (*Ketem Paz*, I, fol. 61b)

The negative attitude toward the state of existence described as *du-partzufin* is manifest also in Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*. He mentions the 'band of the sages' – a rather sarcastic phrase – quoted by R. Isaac of Acre, who homogenized the different narratives related to Adam and Eve and to the two luminaries, saying that:

this is the contrary of the opinion that the matter of *du-partzufin* like Adam and Eve was a lower state and a deficient one, and that the union was not appropriate . . . the supernal union was from the back and was not performed face-to-face until the lower union had been performed, that the Holy one, blessed be He, dissected Eve. And behold, the lower union was for good, while the higher one was for bad. (XVIII: 1)

Thus, it seems that several major Kabbalists made explicit statements that the primeval vision of *du-partzufin* had its negative aspects. Its back-to-back structure impeded procreation, one of the most important commandments according to many theosophico-theurgical Kabbalists.

Some concluding thoughts

Most of the Kabbalists mentioned thus far were active in Provence, Catalonia, Castile, Italy and the Byzantine empire provinces, where different forms of Christianity were the dominant religion, only Safed being an exception. Nevertheless, their theosophy is relatively homogeneous and different from what is found in their Christian contemporaries, and their anthropology deeply influenced by ideas formulated in Arabic sources, which drew from Greek sources. At least insofar as this discussion contributes to the understanding of the dynamics of culture, I would say that geography and immediate circumstances are less important than a proper understanding of systemic developments, which may draw from sources which are, conceptually speaking, quite dissonant with the immediate environments.

The previous survey of the various understandings of the concept of androgyny as pointing to equality is not an exhaustive one. I chose from numerous available passages only some, which occur in what I consider to be major and influential Kabbalistic sources. If the quantitative criterion is indicative of a representative stand, this is the case with the interpretation of androgyny in the above Kabbalistic sources. No other explicit stand on this issue can compete from the point of view of its dissemination. To be sure: I do not claim that this understanding is the only meaning of androgyny in Kabbalistic literature. However, it seems evident that those quotes belong to quite an influential school, that of Nahmanides, and then they reverberated in Cordovero's even more widespread views, as well as in many other

Kabbalistic texts. I would like to point out the relative transparency of those texts. The key term for my interpretation, *shawweh* or *shawwah*, is reflecting the point I would like to make, and this point does not constitute, in my opinion, an exoteric view that may be contradicted on an esoteric level in the writings of those Kabbalists.

Did those texts betray a more comprehensive egalitarian anthropology? I assume that the answer is basically negative. Males, whose visions of perfection were androcentric, have written them. However, this said, there can be no doubt that some important cases of equality between man and woman may also be detected. Thus, I propose to see a deep incoherence in many cases in Kabbalistic anthropology. Driven by the spiritual interpretation of the spiritual globe of Neoplatonic extraction, some Kabbalists adopted views in which the symmetry between man and woman is absolute, integrating them within more comprehensive systems in which the inequality between them was taken for granted. But the complexities of these interactions must wait for another study.

Note

This study is part of a book in preparation, dealing with the status of the Feminine in Kabbalistic literature.