
Faces of the Shekhinah: Thirteen Archetypes of the Priestess from Jewish Tradition

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Since the fall of the Second Temple, Jews have identified their primary religious authorities as teachers, interpreters, and lawmakers: that is to say, as rabbis. Rabbi is a title I hold, and it is a powerful title, connecting me to my ancestors who wrote the Talmud and created the fruitful interpretive strategy called midrash. While there have on occasion been women prophets, scholars and mystics throughout Jewish history, women have held the title “rabbi” only recently (except for a few rare exceptions such as Ceti, a “rabbess” of Zaragoza, Spain in the Middle Ages). I am proud and grateful to have received the title rabbi, and I am dedicated to the task of creative interpretation that the title implies. Yet I have often felt there is something missing. How does this title connect me to my female ancestors, who were spiritual practitioners and ritual experts? Does the title “rabbi” in fact erase this female lineage by implying that to be a spiritual leader one must be adopted into a male line of religious leadership?

Yet the practice of female spiritual leadership is ancient, and common to many cultures. Often, these women have been called “priestess” (or that equivalent in the languages of the ancients.) The first named poet in history is Enheduanna, priestess of Inanna. Priestesses are often, though not exclusively, associated with goddesses, and part of their function is to

embody the feminine face of Deity (whether that means separate goddesses or feminine aspects of a unified divinity). They may come from relatively egalitarian traditions or from relatively patriarchal traditions, but in either case, they embody the connection of women with the Divine. They stand next to their male counterparts, in many cases doing similar work, but maintaining their unique identity as females in search of spirit.

It inspires me that as a woman ritualist, I come from a line much longer than the thirty-odd years of the female rabbinate. I have always been drawn to images of the Divine feminine, even while in the heady masculine environment of rabbinical school. Yet only recently have I allowed myself to know that as I conduct the business of spiritual celebration, mourning, healing, and growth, I stand in the line of the priestesses as well as of the rabbis. This realization has led me on a path of discovery, a path full of spiritual surprise.

THE WAY OF THE PRIESTESS IN JEWISH TRADITION

Ostensibly, Judaism has not had a great deal to do with goddesses, and yet Jewish sages and mystics invented (or, more likely, harvested from ancient syncretic Hebrew practice) the Shekhinah, a tangible and feminine figure of divinity embodied in the earth and the human community. She was both the same as God (God in the most tangible form) and different from God (a loving spouse of God who would argue with Her husband about the safety of Her children). She was said to dwell in the holy shrine of the people, but also within the substance of the whole world. The sage Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin describes the Tabernacle, Her dwelling place, as follows: “As a cave by the sea: when the waves enter it, it fills with water, but the sea is not diminished. So it was with the Tent of Meeting: the Shekhinah filled it with Her glory, but the world in no way lacked Her presence.” (Numbers

Rabbah 12:4) The Holy of Holies, the central Temple shrine, embodied Her, and later She was embodied in the Torah. She was called the Tree of Life, as the goddess Asherah had been long before. Yet the lovers and keepers of the Shekhinah were always men: priests of the Temple, Sages of the Torah, and mystics who imagined themselves as the companions of the Shekhinah.

Modern Jewish feminists and shamans have expanded and changed this concept of the Shekhinah to reflect a non-dual and non-hierarchical model of God and gender. A great deal has been written about the reclamation of the Divine feminine in a Jewish context (Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess* and Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb's *She Who Dwells Within* are good places to learn about the Goddess in Judaic tradition). This re-shaping provides an opening for a model of female spirituality that embodies the Shekhinah, just as ancient priestesses embodied the Divine feminine in other traditions.

In contemporary times, work has also been done to imagine what the role of a priestess might be or have been in Jewish life: Savina Teubal hypothesizes biblical priestess-matriarchs in her book *Sarah the Priestess*. In her book *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogue*, Bernadette Brooten writes of the occasional elusive inscriptions on Jewish tombstones of the Roman period, such as "Maria, *hiereia*" (that is, Maria the priestess). Women in the Jewish Renewal movement have invented the title "*eishet chazon*" (woman of vision) in recognition of women's spiritual achievement. And Deborah Greniman writes of claiming the term *kohenet* (the female term for priest in Hebrew). But what would be the function of a *kohenet*? The term is used in the Talmud solely to mean "the wife or daughter of a priest" (and it is still used that way today among Yemenite Jews). Could there be a place for a priestess in Jewish ritual?

Two years ago, Holly Taya Shere (a Jewish woman who became a pagan priestess and later returned to Judaism) and I (an earth-loving rabbi with a talmudic mind and intense Goddess leanings) met and began to create a program called Kohenet. Our hope was to find out some answers to these questions. The program, still in its infancy, has twenty dedicated and talented women who have committed to two years of study and practice. A number of respected teachers— Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb, Rabbi Leah Novick, Rabbi Hanna Tiferet Siegel, Rabbi Geela Rayzel Raphael, Dr. Alicia Ostriker, Rabbi Melissa Weintraub, Dr. Deborah Grenn, and Shoshana Jedwab—have become part of our faculty. Each of these women imagines the priestesshood differently. My own formulation is that a priestess honors sacred time, space, and soul through the *mitzvot* (holy obligations) of Judaism and through sacred service to the self, the community, the earth (which is the body of the Shekhinah in many mystical texts), and the Divine. The Jewish priestess is not only the hands of the Shekhinah, doing sacred work according to her own understandings and gifts, but she has a practice of sacred be-ing, of becoming both Shekhinah and the one who encounters Shekhinah.

Holly and I, agreeing on this, sought to discover archetypes that represented biblical foremothers, modern ritual and communal acts, and faces of the Shekhinah. We did this, at my suggestion, by using the conceptual structure of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, a book of Jewish mysticism so old that no one is sure when it was written. The book, which describes how the Hebrew alphabet reflects the structure of creation, speaks of three letters of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*), known as the three mothers, which represent air, water, and fire—each of which exists in the spatial, temporal, and spiritual dimensions. Holly and I began with these nine mothers, and combed the tradition for resources, eventually identifying nine archetypes that spoke to us. Later, sensing gaps, we added the three

mothers of the journey itself, making twelve, and a thirteenth, final archetype: the Weaver, the one who binds all things together.

The thirteen archetypes, explained below, are for us a template of how to be the Divine Presence in the world. These facets of being honor women, though they often translate equally well into archetypes for men. They are a good ritual list: a useful set of ideas, though not exhaustive. There are, of course, archetypes and images we did not include. Yet these seem to be the ones that stand out most clearly for me, at least at this moment in space, time, and soul.

MOTHERS OF THE WORLD/MOTHERS OF SPACE

These three women hold an honored place in their communities and thus can be said to be keepers of space.

Na'arah: The Maiden

The Maiden embodies focused intention and joyful radiance. She appears as Rebecca, the zealous and kind girl in Genesis who draws water for a stranger and his camels, and later becomes the wife of Isaac. She is Miriam, the young prophetess who watches over her baby brother Moses in a basket on the Nile. She appears as the maidens who dance at the sacred shrine of Shiloh to celebrate the harvest. She is the daughters mentioned in the book of Numbers who dare to bring their case before Moses and ask for an inheritance of land. She brings the gifts of action, commitment, and courage, and embraces joy, movement, dance, and fellowship. She is the springtime, when the Exodus from Egypt happened and the Hebrews were reborn.

Eim: The Mother

The Mother is the embodiment of love and nurturing. In the Bible, the Mother appears as Leah, the abundantly fertile matriarch; as Hagar, who searches for water for her son; and as Yocheved, who hides her child from Pharaoh. The Mother appears as Pharaoh's daughter, who has compassion on a child not hers, and as Hannah, who prays to give birth. The Mother is Naamah, Noah's wife, who shepherds animals and people onto the Ark. She appears in the manna that falls on Israel and in the sea that parts to free the people from Egypt. In mystical lore, she appears as the Divine Mother of the world. She brings gifts of sustenance, loving community, compassionate listening, and good parenting. She is the summer, when the sun warms the earth.

Gevirah: The Matriarch

Gevirah is a Hebrew word for mistress, matriarch, or queen mother, and it also means "the powerful one." The *gevirah* or Matriarch is the embodiment of strength and power. She appears as Sarah, who bears a child, Isaac, at ninety and then fights for his inheritance. She comes to us as the Queen of Sheba, who tells riddles to King Solomon, and as the queen mother Maacah mentioned in the Book of Kings, who honors the Goddess in spite of a state law to the contrary. The Matriarch is Esther, the queen who uses her royal authority to save her people, and Vashti, who refuses a cruel king's request. She also appears as Judith, who fights for her people. The Matriarch calls forth the gift of leadership, persistence, and fierceness on behalf of justice. The Book of Proverbs says of her; "Strength and glory are her clothing, and she laughs on the last day." She is the autumn and winter, when the harvest is brought in and the people honor the power of the land.

MOTHERS OF THE CIRCLE OF LIFE/MOTHERS OF TIME

These three women help others through passages in time.

Mekonenet: The Mourning Woman

Jeremiah, as he mourns for his exiled people, asks that the mourning women be called to come and weep. The word *mekonenet* means “one who laments” but can also mean “one who makes a nest.” The *mekonenet* represents sorrow, but can also guide us to rebirth. She embodies the pain of change. She appears as Rachel weeping for her exiled children, as the wife of Pinchas, who dies in childbirth, and as the grieving Mother Zion. She also appears in Ezekiel as the women weeping for the god Tammuz, who has gone down into the underworld. She brings the gifts of comforting the bereaved, burying the dead, and healing the mourners, and with the gift of facing cataclysmic change. She acknowledges the power of destruction, and the power of healing and comfort.

Chachamah: The Wise Woman

We are told in the Book of Proverbs: “The wise woman builds her house.” The *chachamah*, the female sage, is a guide through human existence, teaching us to build our lives well. She embodies the path of understanding and balance. She appears in the wise women who spin the wool for the Tabernacle, and in the wise woman who advises David not to exile his son. She is Serach, the granddaughter of Jacob, who holds all the secrets of the Israelite tribes and tells Moses where Joseph is buried. She is Wisdom Herself. The Wise Woman brings the gifts of teaching, memory, and storytelling, and with wisdom of all kinds. She is linked to the tides, to the

menstrual cycle, and to other cycles of nature. She is a preserver of life, wisdom, and the future.

Meyaledet: The Midwife

Meyaledet means “she who brings to birth.” The midwife is connected to air, the first breath of a new human being, and she embodies the birthing process. We find her in Shifrah and Puah, the midwives of Egypt who saved the Hebrew children, and in the midwives who helped Rachel and Tamar to deliver. We also find her in the Holy One who led Israel through the birth canal of the sea. Her gifts are midwifery, gardening, healing, mentoring, and creating new projects of any type. She is linked to growth, trees, animals, and everything that springs from the earth. She is the power of endless creation.

MOTHERS OF THE SACRED RITE/MOTHERS OF SOUL

These three women transmit knowledge of the spirit to others.

Neviah: The Prophetess

The *neviyah* is the “one who is sent.” She represents the breath of the Divine and embodies inspiration, prophecy, and ecstatic experience. She appears in Miriam the prophet, who dances and drums by the shore of the Sea of Reeds, and in Deborah, the woman who leads the people and sings of her victories. She is in the Levitical women drummers who danced in Temple processions. Her gifts are music, drumming, poetry, dreaming, ecstatic practice, visioning, and the ability to speak out and be heard. She

experiences angelic guides and Divine visions, and seeks truth on behalf of her people. She represents revelation.

Tzovah: The Temple Keeper

The *tzovah*, or “one of many hosts of women,” once served at the entrance to the *mishkan*. In the Torah, we learn that the priests used the mirrors of these *tzovot* to make the priestly basin for handwashing. The *tzovot* are associated with water, with divination, with sexuality, and with the affirmation of the self. In *midrash*, they are the Hebrew slave women in Egypt who seduce their tired husbands with games and mirrors. We see the archetype of the *tzovah* in Eve, who chooses the fruit of knowledge, and Lilith, who flies away from Eden. We also find her in Ruth, the stranger who lies down with her lover on a threshing floor. We know her in the women who bake bread and pour out wine for the Queen of Heaven. The *tzovah* embodies the life-spirit. Her gifts are self-awareness, the keeping of the body and the keeping of sacred space, and the performance of ritual and ceremony. She brings the sacred into earthly reality. She represents holiness.

Ba’alat Ov: The Spirit Walker

To be a *ba’alat ov*, or the keeper of a spirit, was a forbidden practice in ancient Israel. Yet in the Bible, the Witch of Endor, a *ba’alat ov*, raises Samuel from the dead so that he may speak to King Saul. The *ba’alat ov* embodies the ability to connect to hidden realities. She represents the underworld deep within the earth. The *ba’alat ov* connects us to our ancestors and to other spirit-beings. We see her in the enchantresses and sorceresses the prophets condemn, and in the mother of Abaye, a Talmudic woman who is an amulet-

maker and charmer. Her gifts are spirit-journeying and the making of incantations, amulets, and other spirit-charms. She also offers spiritual protection and the ability to guard the sacred circle of the self. She represents the hidden world of the spirit.

MOVING BETWEEN SPACE, TIME, AND SOUL: MOTHERS OF THE JOURNEY

These three women are in motion, driven by powerful impulses. They are willing to accept change.

Doresbet: The Seeker

The Seeker's task is to move from her fixed place so that she may learn. In Genesis, we learn that Rebecca the matriarch goes to seek the Divine Presence so that she may learn why her pregnancy is so painful. By seeking, she receives the knowledge she needs to go on. The Seeker is a questioner, always asking why things are the way they are. The Seeker is a listener, desiring to hear the truth of others. And the Seeker is a peacemaker, seeking ways for human beings to hear one another into speech. She is both deeply rooted in her own experience, and a midwife to the truths of others. Her gifts are questioning and listening, traveling, learning from others, and dialogue work.

Leitzanit: The Fool

Between the inexorable march of time and the inner truths of the soul, we find the laughing one. When Sarah is told she will become pregnant at the age of ninety, she lets out a laugh so resonant that the Holy One takes note of it. Sarah's laugh contains joy and heartbreak, anger and relief. So too, the

fool, jester, or sacred clown uses laughter to help us confront life's difficult truths. She makes fun of accepted truisms and says what no one else dares to say. She is our shadow, weaving together light and darkness. She is both a midwife who changes us, and a priestess who brings us new vision. Her gifts are humor, cleverness, boldness, honesty, and deep compassion. She is the laughter that brings truth to the surface.

Obevet: The Lover

The woman of the Song of Songs calls out to her beloved out of deep passion and a desire to share of herself: "Let us go out to the fields!" The Lover, like the Shulamite of the Bible, reaches out of herself with desire and knowing, giving both body and soul. She is both innocent and wise, seizing her moment with zest and openness. Her beloved may be a human being, a song, the world, the Divine, or her own soul. She pursues her love without fear. She is grounded in her personal experience, yet she also embodies the cosmic love of the universe. Her gifts are openness, presence, and the quality of being awake and alive. She is passion, emotion, and the reconciliation of opposites through union.

SPACE, TIME, AND SOUL: THE MOTHER OF THE WEB OF ALL

Oreget: The Weaver

The *oreget*, we are told in the Book of Kings, weaves in the Temple to honor the Divine feminine. What she weaves are *batim* or "houses"—tapestries, garments, or maybe worlds. Like the Fates, the *oreget* weaves space, time, and soul together. She embodies the knowledge of the connectedness of all things, and she is the earth, solid and firm yet multiple. It is she who

integrates and connects the many threads of the world. She grasps the whole in its sacred multiplicity and binds it together, adding each new thread with care and love. We see her in the women who spun the goats' hair for the Tabernacle, and in the storytellers and scribes of our people who wove together tales and traditions. Her gifts are the weaving of legends, interpretations, rituals and traditions, as well as weaving, sewing, writing, interpretation, and all the creative arts. She watches over all activities that bring disparate elements into a whole.

OPPOSITES AND THEIR USES:

After sitting with these archetypes for many months, I mapped them onto the Jewish calendar and assigned each one a month (the Maiden the month of Passover when the people is reborn, the Prophetess the month the Torah was given, the Fool the month of the Carneval-like holiday of Purim, and so forth.) This gave the calendar an added dimension, and it also taught me something new about archetypes and priestesses. Once I looked at the calendar, and saw which months were opposite which, I realized that each archetype had its opposite, as follows:

Maiden—Matriarch	Nisan—Tishrei
Midwife—Mourning Woman	Iyar—Cheshvan
Prophetess—Spirit Walker	Sivan—Kislev
Mother—Seeker	Tammuz—Tevet
Wise Woman—Lover	Av—Shevat
Temple Keeper—Fool	Elul—Adar

This gave me a wonderful set of paradigms to work with: the temple keeper or priestess, so serious about her sacred space, and the fool who

violates all boundaries; the mother who provides security and the seeker who is always facing change; the maiden in her beginning and the matriarch in her fullness; the prophetess who speaks to God as part of the sanctioned cult, and the witch or shaman who speaks to Spirit outside the protection of organized religion. I saw the complementarity of the archetypes, but also the potential conflicts between them: the wise woman, who believes in trusting her head, may not want to listen to the lover who trusts her heart, and the temple priestess may be angry at the fool. As I meditated on this, I realized the importance, in embodying an archetype of the Shekhinah/the Goddess, of not repressing Her opposite. Holly too accepted this extension of our paradigm and absorbed it into her vision of the priestess.

So, in the Kohenet program, we have instituted the custom that when we work with an archetype, we will always take a minute to honor her opposite. In my personal practice, I am learning to work with the gifts and shadows I repress as well as the parts of myself that feel comfortable and familiar. This too is the work of the priestess: to embody the whole, through careful examination of the parts.

The night before a dear friend of mine was ordained a rabbi, I took her to the ritual bath to immerse—a tradition for Jews undergoing life changes. With both our permissions, however, the ritual turned into a rite in which she became a priestess. As I prepared her for immersion, I told her that a priestess is all the Jewish women throughout time who lit Shabbat candles and recited psalms, and also all the ancient oracles and servants of the Goddess—and also a priestess is the one who walks before the people, from light into darkness, and from darkness into light. That definition has come back to me over and over again. I know that through these complementary and conflicting roles, I will be able to know the light and the darkness equally and honor both clarity and mystery as faces of the Divine.

CONCLUSION

I believe that the specific skills of guiding a ritual, making a holiday, healing the earth and providing for the needy, making sacred art for delight and inspiration, comforting the mourner and rejoicing with those who celebrate are more important than theoretical archetypes, for these actions embody the Goddess, the Shekhinah, the Holy, more clearly than mere words could ever do. Yet the archetypes enable and enrich the actions. When I am leading a prayer service for bereaved families, I invite myself to embody the *mekonenet*, the mourning woman, and let her project sensitivity and love when I cannot. When I am guiding an event and all seems tangled and confused, I become the Weaver, putting the separate strands into a pattern. And when I feel overworked as a teacher, I allow myself to become the Maiden, dancing lightly and sharing my burden with others.

I still do not know where the priestesshood will fit in to the traditions of my people. We have just begun to try to figure this out, and I doubt the matter will be settled in my lifetime. I am grateful to all the partners I have in this work and to all the *kohanot* who are yet to come. I am still walking a path of the Shekhinah's making, and even when wrong turns occur, I try to embody Her, or at least to embody myself as one who loves Her. I still love the ever-expanding Torah of the rabbis, which has made room for mystics, radical philosophers, and forest-walkers in the generations before me. I hope that, by awakening these thirteen archetypes of space, time, and soul, I have brought the world of the rabbis a little closer to the world of the priestesses.

Rabbi Jill Hammer is the director of Tel Shemesh, a website and community celebrating and creating earth-based Judaism, and the co-facilitator of Kohenet: The Hebrew Priestess Training Program. She is the author of two books: *The Jewish Book of Days: A Companion for All Seasons*, and *Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women*.

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This article is dedicated to the memory of Savina Teubal, author of *Sarah the Priestess*, who died the week Kohenet was born. May her spirit continue to guide us.