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According to the famous French philosopher and revolutionary, the Marquis de Condorcet, we can look back to history and discern therein a number of phases, stages through which the human mind evolves. The number of these is fixed as is the succession of them; progress and human perfectibility always dominate the movement. The progress of the human mind, Condorcet wrote in the *Tableau des Progrès Historiques de l’Ésprit Humain*, is reflected invariably in the successive stages of society. We move upward and onward, ineluctably.

From that point of view, Jewish civilization can be viewed as passing through a series of stages, most of them (but not all) upward moving, toward rationality and equality, away from idolatry. These stages of Jewish life and their corresponding religious manifestations have arisen from the very beginning. They have adjusted for external affairs and domination by invaders and conquerors, especially ancient civilizations, with many impacts reflected internally in the religion. So, the religion has evolved, through stages, never remaining static. It has incorporated, *mutatis mutandis*, imports from other faiths and cultures.

In his book *The Hebrew Goddess* (Third Enlarged Edition), the anthropologist and biblical scholar Rafael Patai has revealed how the tableaux of Jewish history are reflected in various scholarly and popular religious emphases. When the Jewish people arrived in Canaan, they found that gods and goddesses were ubiquitous, widely worshipped. The Hebrews, however, brought with them the first five books of Moses, the Torah, and with it, the fundamental assertion that God is one: monotheism. These works reported how God had appeared to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses.

Confronting this Hebrew library, however, was the presence in Canaan of many popular and, from today’s perspective, somewhat primitive religious trends, most coming from nearby lands and cultures. Since the Jewish religion had never had a monolithic structure, as opposed, for example, to Roman Catholicism, there was no body for worshippers to secede from if some Jews decided to adore one of these newfound deities; thus, says Patai, from early on there were divergent faith variants.

However, and as opposed to what we might think, the exclusive nature of monotheism was introduced to the Jewish people continuously but slowly. It became the *sine qua non* of the religion as a result of the preaching of the Prophets — not, the author argues, from the much earlier encounter at Mount Sinai. It was the Prophets who turned God’s voice into a Hebrew demand for justice and mercy.
Unlike the deities of neighbors, God to the Jews grew to be depicted, and remains today, as pure spirit, a-physical, omnipresent. Even though referred to in the Hebrew language as a masculine noun, he has no body, no physical attributes, no sexual traits, and is neither male nor female. As the later Talmud maintains, God sees but cannot be seen.

In addition, God is more central to Judaism than is ritual observance, much more so than is the case in most other religions. The religion therefore calls for constant study of holy texts, for scholarship. From the period of the destruction of the Temple, and from the Babylonian exile onward, the religion evolved into an intellectual and moral one. Literacy became a central demand, as from Judea and Israel and then Babylon poured forth work after work based on the fundamental principles of Jewish monotheism. This was because, after the fall of the Temple, God was detached from perceived residency in the Temple; he was now omnipresent, accessible wherever the Torah was read and studied. So, all Jews increasingly were called upon to read, and study, the many holy texts.

Shakespeare wrote: He that hath never fed of the dainties that are bred in a book, he hath not eaten paper, as it were, he hath not drunk ink; his intellect is not replenished; he is only an animal, only sensible in the duller parts.” Or, as Lord Macaulay said, “I would rather be a poor man in a garret with books than a king who did not love reading.” And, as William Wordsworth wrote, “books are a substantial world wherein solid happiness can grow.” But the British acquaintance with books began with Beowulf, written down in about 1000 CE. If a great British civilization arose from the library beginning with Beowulf, it was nonetheless 2000 years behind the times for Judeans.

As the Jewish people were becoming increasingly literate post-exile, how, then, could this monotheistic faith handle the challenges which had been presented by various gods and goddesses encountered by the Jewish people on all sides during their various sojourns?

The answer is: editing. The rabbis and scribes after the exile to Babylon, as editors, increasingly excised much in order to keep the Biblical God ineffable, unrivaled, strictly spirit, sole. With the Temple destroyed, all idolatry was to cease. This was unusual and not easy, especially given the widespread and long-running presence of gods and goddesses in neighboring cultures. After all, the Roman god Jupiter had his origins in the Greek Zeus Pater, who himself is derived from the Sanskrit Diaus Pitar; we can trace the Virgin Mary back as far as predecessor female deities such as the Greek Athena. Archeology seems to show us today that the old Canaanite gods of others had been widely worshipped by the Hebrews until the end of the Monarchy and the destruction of the Temple, argues Patai.
Commoners and those who were illiterate and had followed the practices of neighbors were now instructed to give up such worship, to become completely monotheistic.

Some remaining elements nonetheless survived. For example, Yahweh, after the exodus from Egypt, had taken on some aspects of the male Canaanite gods. Importantly, especially for this book, there also had been many female deities encountered in the ancient world. What happened to them? The answer is that these early figures influenced both popular thought and, in some cases, were only very gradually weaned away from organized Judaism, taking centuries to disappear.

The book begins with a discussion of the major female divinities found in ancient days in the Near East, including among the Israelites. These include the Goddess Asherah, then Astarte-Anath, then the Cherubim, then the Shekhina, then the Matronit, then Lilith, then the Sabbath. Goddesses had been in fact ubiquitous in human history, with the evidence going back to such statues as that of the Venus of Willendorf and to myths in which goddesses of almost every culture played a large role.

Asherah was recognized as an object of worship by many Jewish people for roughly six centuries. She and others lasted until the destruction of the Temple in 586 B.C.E. Objects such as statuettes representing these goddesses were brought to public display when foreign princesses (married for alliance purposes) carried them into their new homes. The author reports that of the 370 years that Solomon’s Temple stood in Jerusalem, for at least 236 years the representation of Asherah was likely in the Temple. She was generally seen as the consort of Yahweh. In addition, the goddess Astarte (Anath) was worshipped by commoners with the ceremonial presentation of cakes, perhaps, suggests the author, a precursor of the eating of the wafer in Holy Communion activities of many Christian denominations.

The cherubim — the word “cherub” comes from the Akkadian language — constituted a major exception to aniconic official Judaism, as they were male and female “graven images.” It is thought that they were representatives of the male and female aspects of God. In any event, these cherubs apparently were part of the Temple ritual, depicted in the Temple, until at least 70 CE. Perhaps they were supposed to be symbols of reason, or intermediaries between humanity and God, but they were occasionally seen in ceremonies as being locked in sexual embrace, says the author.

Unsurprisingly, Josephus, the military leader who lost a major battle against the Romans and then became a great writer of Jewish history and faith, defending his people to the Romans and others, did not want to report on these dubious depictions actually being in the Temple.

Much of the book addresses the female term “Shekhina.” This was often used throughout early and Medieval Jewish history to mean the presence of God.
Since God is seen by Jewish authors as beyond all sense perception, not present as a person, it is possible that the idea of the Shekhina arose, representing wisdom, as the more tangible, approachable wife of God, or his female side.

The term Shekhina, not found in the Bible, derives from a female noun meaning the act of dwelling. To me, I think it was used as the term “Holy Ghost” is often employed in Christianity. Given the characteristics this “presence” represents, perhaps we could say that Shekhina is to God as polytheism is to monotheism.

Over time, the Shekhina changed for many, especially common people, from a “presence” to a “substance.” It became seen as the female, personified presence of God. Where the people of Israel dwelled, the Shekhina was there with them. By the third century of the common era, the idea of the Shekhina as a discrete divine entity separate from God grew in popularity. There were obvious parallels between the Shekhina and goddesses of the ancient Near East, present everywhere. To this day it is startling to find amulets for good luck or life goals of diverse types on sale in Israeli shops, typically engraved with various mysterious symbols.

Moving on, the author also discusses the rise of the Kabbala, a term for the esoteric teaching of Judaism and for Jewish mysticism which arose as a major force in the 12th century (on foundations laid in the 7th and 8th centuries) and which lasted for centuries. There are elements common to Kabbalah and both Greek and Christian mysticism, and even historical links between them, notes the Encyclopedia Judaica. Over the centuries its greatest hold has been with the Hasidic movement and with the various Sephardic communities. The most significant work of this movement was the Zohar, written in 1286 by Moses de Leon in Castile, Spain.

Patai indicates that medieval Jewish religious development exposes the lack of a dividing line between mystical symbolism and mythical narrative. Sometimes, old polytheistic myths are transformed into mystical theological ideas and thereby fitted into the framework of the narrower, more rigidly monotheistic religion.

Jewish scholars of the Kabbala and Jewish mysticism typically do not want to draw parallels with polytheistic paganism. Judaism is monotheistic, and there are seen to be two mutually incompatible realms: to most of these scholars, mythological polytheism has been seen as lower than the supposedly a-mythological Jewish monotheism, the latter therefore a higher manifestation of the human religious spirit. But the author says that he opposes this view.

Patai explains the Kabbalistic tetrad (myths of the four divinities, mostly coming from Egyptian and Mesopotamian religions) and the significant role of the feminine element in Kabbalistic thinking.
He discusses the Matronit — relatively illiterate Jews adored her — and similarities between her and other Near East goddesses such as Ianna, Ishtar, Anat, and Anahita. All were seen to possess particular qualities: chastity, promiscuity, motherliness, and bloodthirstiness.

There are many parallels between the depictions of the Virgin Mary of the Christians and the Matronit of the Jews. He notes that the Matronit, like the Virgin Mary, was held by believers to have children and yet was still a virgin. Like other female deities, including the Matronit, the Virgin Mary was a war goddess; her portrait is found on Christian shields. And they were closely related to God; thus, St. Bonaventure called Mary “the Spouse of the Eternal Father.”

Patai discusses parallels between Hinduism and Judaism in terms of the feminine aspects of deity; the Goddess Kali is one very similar to the Matronit. Note that the Song of Songs begins, “I am black and beautiful.”

Certain prayers and practices in the Kabbala, Hasidism, and other mystical tendencies related to the anthropomorphization of God into two parts — God and his Shekhina. There also arose in medieval times the figure of the “maggid,” a sayer or teller of revelations, who indulged in mysteries, with angels, heavenly forces, those who reported on dreams. Can we see a logical connection between the prevalence of such mysteries and the lack of power in the real world available to the Jews?

Patai reviews the role of Lilith, originally a female deity of Sumer in the third millennium BCE. She evolved into an evil she-devil but eventually corralled a position as a queen consort of God. She was depicted by followers as an evil female, the rival of the Shekhina.

Worshipped by the Jews of Ethiopia was the Sabbath, a virgin, a bride, a queen, and a goddess. Unlike the others Patai reviews, this female divinity was not foreign in origin. The commandment to honor the Sabbath goes back to the Ten Commandments, and those who honor the Sabbath are as if they served God, according to Commandments of the Sabbath, a Jewish book written in Ge’ez.

The framework of the book is the story of Creation, and it deals with the glory of the Sabbath. Both male and female aspects are found in the Sabbath and the Zohar sets her up as the rival of Lilith. Most Jewish services to this day include a song honoring the Sabbath, welcoming her metaphorically as a bride.

Patai says that the religion of the Jews was never without at least a hint of the feminine in its God concept. He finds that the female element has subsided in recent times and doesn’t play a role in Reform, Conservative or non-Hasidic Orthodox religious culture.
However, among the Sephardim, the Oriental Jews, and the Hasidic Ashkenazi group, the concept of the Shekhina still exists.

Moreover, great real Jewish women have been constantly praised throughout Jewish history. My own heroine is Hannah Senesh, a poet who left a safe life on a kibbutz to become a parachutist, trying to save Hungarian Jewry from the Holocaust. She was executed for her bravery by the Nazis, just before Budapest was liberated.

Perhaps the most fascinating part of the book appears at the end, when Patai discusses an unearthed fortress of Dura Europos (near the Iraq/Syria border today). Preserved in sand and earth since its destruction in 256 CE, it contains a synagogue built in 245 CE. A mural depicts a naked woman drawing a divine child, Moses, from the river; she appears to be the Persian Goddess Anahita. The author explains that at that time certain popular features were used in painting.

So, he shows us, the nude goddess turns out to be the Shekhina, the supposed divine wife of Moses who followed him from cradle to grave. A miniature temple carried out of the river by Moses is the Tabernacle, the Sanctuary where the divine female was present.

Overall, this probing book shows that monotheistic religions, like all others, draw from the environment in which the worshippers reside. Judaism evolved from a religion centered on a powerful God not unlike others in the Middle East into a universalistic faith no longer tethered to a Temple where the deity had been thought to reside. It is based on tenets laid down in a book, the Holy Scriptures. Following the Babylonian Exile, the religion increasingly emphasized analysis and discussion, charity, scholarship, human rights and upright behavior, under the rule of law. Nonetheless, ideas and images of neighboring civilizations over the millennia were respected and, on some occasions, transmuted and incorporated in popular practice, always keeping monotheism as the supreme dominating element, nonetheless.