



Keter–Malchut

Sarah Yehudit Schneider – Purim 2019/5779

Based on R. YYYY Safrin of Komara's Commentary on Esther called *Ketem Ofier* (4:1 – 5:4)

Mordecai charges Esther to go before the king, and plead for her people...[Esther warns that] “Anyone entering the king’s sanctum uninvited incurs death unless the king extends his golden scepter and grants them life.”

Esther confides that she has not been called by the king for thirty days [implying that she’s likely to receive an invite soon] ...Mordecai responds: ...”Don’t think you can escape this decree in the king’s palace...Deliverance will come to the Jews from elsewhere and you and your father’s house will perish. Who knows whether it’s not for this very reason that you were crowned queen?” Esther replies: “Go and gather all the Jews present in Shushan and fast for me—neither eat nor drink for three days, night and day; I and my maidens will fast as well. And then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I die, I die.” Mordecai ... did according to all that Esther commanded him. [Esther 4:8-17]¹

ענין ידוע ומפורסם לכל משכיל, שהשיחה בין מרדכי ואסתר הוא למטה, ורומז למעלה למעלה...שהיה ויכוח ביניהם על מה הוא הדרך הנכון לבטל את גזרת המן להשמיד את ישראל, ולבסוף הודה מרדכי לדברי אסתר...¹

Every learned person knows that this conversation between Mordecai and Esther, although it concerned worldly matters, it also encodes a debate about which kabbalistic strategy they should employ to annul Haman’s genocidal decree...In the end, Mordecai defers to Esther on all points. [Komarna Rebbe]²

R. Safrin reads this dialogue between Esther and Mordecai as a coded debate about how to quash Haman’s murderous plan. They are communicating through the language of symbols. Mordecai proposes moderation [conveyed by his donning of sackcloth and stopping short of “the king’s gate”].³ Esther vetoes that plan and suggests another [by sending her messenger, whose name is *Hatach*, a rearrangement of the letters of the holy name that Moshe used to invoke the lights that killed the Egyptians that were abusing Israelite slaves].⁴ Our best hope, she asserts, is to work on the inner planes and flood the kingdom with *or chadash*—producing an invisible downpour of holy light that will subvert evil and accelerate its demise. Mordecai agrees and directs Esther to perform *yichudim*—deep kabbalistic meditations—to accomplish the task [when he urges her to confront the “King”].⁵ Esther objects because the people have not yet repented for indulging in the king’s *traif* banquet [by mentioning “30 days” she hints to the “30 *tikunim* of *malchut*” that still require teshuva].⁶ Consequently, the holy lights released from *yichudim* are likely to harm *them* as well as Haman.

Esther suggests an alternative plan.⁷ “Let all the people fast for three days, fusing into their higher-order unity called *Kenesset Yisrael* with all the grace and power that entails. Their fast will be the outer stimulus for an authentic atonement awakened within. And you, Mordecai, must join in this teshuva

by identifying a transgression of your own and repenting for real.⁸ Only by sharing can you uplift them. And, since you insist on immediate action, our three-day fast will include *Layl Seder* overriding the mitzvah of matzah and maror. The message is blunt: if the people cease, the Torah has no point.⁹ I will also fast, and spend those days in meditative prayer. And then I will visit the king uninvited, and if I die...I die.

In accepting this mission, Esther agreed to perform a kabbalistic ritual that had backfired on the most illustrious *tsaddikim* and *chakhamim* before her.¹⁰ Her holy errand was to navigate through the PaRDeS, enter the [King of] King’s inner sanctum uninvited and subdue the forces of evil. Adam, Noah, Nadav and Avihu, the entire DorDeah and King Solomon had all attempted similar missions and failed. [Leshem, HDOH 2:4:20:4/5].

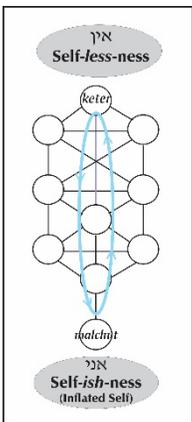
Esther needed a plan. How could she succeed when her predecessors had not. Mordecai and Esther each proposed a strategy, both of which were based on a kabbalistic paradigm called *keter–malchut* (*keter* being the highest of the ten sefirot and *malchut* being the lowest). The word *keter* (crown) only appears three times in the whole Tanakh and all three are in the Book of Esther and always in the

phrase “*keter-malchut*” which hints to a powerful kabbalistic practice, called *yichudim*.

Esther and Mordecai grappled with the same problem, employed the same paradigm yet arrived at different conclusions. To explain their divergence we must explore the mystery of *yichudim*?

Our universe has a pulse and it originates at the highest echelon, with the Holy *One*’s vibration between *ayin* and *ani*—NoThing (אין) and I-Am (אני) ¹¹ or, more concisely, *ani* (אני). When HaShem enters His *ayin* pole, there is nothing but G-d and creation dissolves into non-existence. When HaShem contracts back into His I-Center (אני) and assumes His persona, that we call, G-d (אלקים), ¹² creation recovers and reengages with its Maker. In each instant, creation dissolves and reconstitutes, again and again.

This *ani-ayin* pulse pervades the universe and plays itself out on the human scale as well. We all vacillate between self-assertion and self-surrender sometimes in more and sometimes in less functional ways.



Kabbala maps these two polarities onto the sefirotic Tree of Life: Our selflessness (our *ayin* pole) associates with the sefira of *Keter*, which represents the most exalted (superconscious) level of soul. ¹³ Our self-ish-ness (or *ani* pole) associates with *malchut* the lowest sefira, farthest from the crown and sullied by its contact with the dross of shattered worlds, as kabbala

interprets the verse from Proverbs: “Her feet stick down into death.” [Mishley 4:5] When reality collapsed, *malchut* (the lowest of the sefirot) fell out of the realms of *kedusha*, into the shadowlands (called *kliptot*) where death, delusion and impurity reign.

From this perspective a spiritual path starts in *malchut* and aims toward *keter*. Our work is to reduce *ani* (ego) and cultivate *ayin* (self-transcendence or, more concisely, NoSelf). This is how kabbala views the matter.

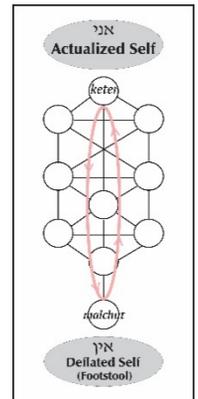
Yet this model is not as universal as it purports for (upon closer inspection) it reflects a particular I-

center—the rabbinic I-center—that is (traditionally) male. Consequently, it conveys the masculine archetype’s experience of the *ani*—*ayin* polarity, where a toughened ego needs to be softened, dissolved and universalized.

A reminder that we are dealing with archetypes here, not people. Archetypes are pure tones, whereas people are complex and holographic. Kabbala calls these archetypes *partzufim*. They are the pure elements that mix and match to produce our messy *real* world with its multifaceted, rainbow reality. It’s called the Rectified World *because* of its holographic structure wherein every piece contains aspects of every other piece inside itself. ¹⁴ In the Rectified World every good contains a trace of evil and every evil a trace of good. Every man contains a shadow woman and every woman a shadow man. This feature of Interinclusion means that every person combines a spectrum of traits in varied proportions that produce his or her unique soul-print. And yet, it is still generally true that, men will tend toward the masculine archetype and women toward the feminine.

And so, now, exploring the feminine archetype’s experience of the *ani* – *ayin* polarity—*her* path of *tikun* is actually the opposite of *his*. Kabbala ascribes moonlike properties to the *Shekhina*—God’s feminine expression—as *malchut*:

Just as the moon has no light of her own, only what she receives from the sun, so does the *Shekhina* have no light of her own, but what she receives from her mate, HKBH.



Consequently the *Shekhina* in *malchut* manifests as *ayin*—NoThing—for when she is there then, like the moon, she has no light of her own. ¹⁵ In *malchut* she is the footstool. Yet, says the Leshem She has another (hidden) side to Her, which is actually Her truest self and the polar opposite of Her moonlike dependence. ¹⁶ Secretly, the *Shekhina* is the crown; she is the wellsprings of bounty that births everything into existence. Whatever any *mashpia* (anywhere in the universe) has to give to its

dependents, it draws it all from Her. The Shekhina manifests below (in *malchut*) as the utterly dependent NoThing, but secretly, the very charity she seeks from her benefactor (meaning HKBH), is nothing but what She, Herself, has supplied to that benefactor in Her *keter* mode. The Leshem brings a verse from Isaiah that expresses the Shekhina's secret life.

I am the first [in *keter*] and I am the last [in *malchut*]....
[Isaiah 44:6]

The feminine's teshuva journey is thus the polar opposite of her male counterpart. Whereas the masculine strives for ego-transcendence (the rectified *ayin* that is his *keter*)...the feminine cultivates holy selfhood (the rectified *ani* that is hers). In brief:

Rectified *ayin* is when the ego becomes perfectly transparent. It is the path of prophesy that/and requires its practitioners to face (and even embrace) the ego-deaths that dissolve the individualisms that inevitably personalize, and thereby alter, the transmission. This (masculine) path from *ani* to *ayin* is about learning to die. As Rabenu Bechaya teaches:

“You want eternal life?! Then you must die [in each breath], in order not to die.” Meaning that you must die to all that is subject to death and, in so doing, you will come to identify with the eternal component of your being that transcends death. [Rabenu Bechaya-Shaari *teshuva* 2:17, as brought by R. Dessler, Michtav M'Eliyahu 2:15.]¹⁷

Rectified *ani* is the striving for authentic self. Our job is to actualize our full potential by negotiating all the contrary tugs arising from within and without, incorporating them in right measure, and all the while staying true to our self—a Self that is constantly changing, evolving, deepening and shedding old ways. *Ani Tefila* (I Am prayer).¹⁸ This path of *ani* is about refining and aligning will so that our natural prayer and preference is to do what we're designed to do (which is all that Hashem asks of us). The fruit of this labor is our fully actualized (and individuated) soul-spark that endures eternally as our “portion in the world to come.” This (feminine) path from *ayin* to *ani* is about learning to choose life (in the most profound sense of

that word). It is no wonder that Chava (Eve) is called “אם כל חי” (mother of all life).¹⁹

Now let's view Mordecai's and Esther's respective visions of *yichud* through this *ani-ayin* lens.

Mordecai's plan (says R. Safrin) was for Esther, to “raise *ani* to *ayin*” which is the solitary (masculine) path of ego-death and *yichud*. The “*tsaddik*” ascends with his/her toolkit of kabbalistic formulae and clears out the channels so the lights begin to flow again. But (says the Leshem), on a national level, the only people who have succeeded in such a mission are those that were invited (nay, commanded) to do so by HaShem.²⁰ The others, who acted on their own (albeit, pure) initiative, crashed and burned. Esther was also not invited so it made no sense for her to follow a precedent of failure. Esther devised a different scheme, and Mordecai concurred. She would apply the feminine version of *keter-malchut* and hope for the best.

- 1) She merged the entire nation (or at least the Jews of Shushan) into a single unified entity, greater than the sum of its parts, which could hold the profusion of lights she hoped to invoke through her mission. *It's a kabbalistic prerequisite to malchut's yichud, that she collect all the scattered pieces of herself and first become whole. In proportion to her “wholeness” is her capacity for yichud.*²¹
- 2) She directed the people (including Mordecai) to join her in a three-day fast of teshuva and soul-searching. *The entire nation entered malchut's “footstool consciousness,” confessing their wrongdoing, expressing remorse, and admitting their dependency on HaShem.*
- 3) Now, with Esther enmeshed with her people (*malchut* to *malchut*), she spent the next days gathering her power, accessing her *keter*, and consolidating her rectified *ani*. Esther's crown (or soul-root) is actually higher than the king's to whom she will direct her plea. On the outer planes, she is dependent on him; but on the inner planes, he is dependent on her. Yet that mere fact is not enough. Esther had to absorb its truth into the heart, bones, cells and spaces of her being. Similarly with the *Shekhina* and HKBH. *When the Shekhina accesses her keter, says R. Safrin, which resides in the highest reaches of the Unknowable Head, she is the crown to her “husband”*

(HKBH) and mashpia to Him. And with that leverage she can and will and does overturn the decree.²²

- 4) “Esther donned royalty [literally, *malchut*]” [Esther 5:1]. She stepped into the Shekhina’s shoes. At the end of those three days, bedecked in crown (*keter*) and royal robes (*malchut*), Esther became more archetype than person. *She embraced her rectified ani (with all the power it conferred), and bound herself (with humility, fasting and teshuva) to her frightened and repentant people (ayin). Esther thus embodied the feminine paradigm (and pulse) of keter–malchut.*
- 5) Esther risked her life, literally. Her *yichud*, was not of the ivory tower sort, where a kabbalist sits in his room, safely ensconced, working on the inner planes. Esther’s *yichud* was embodied. She, physically, entered the earthly kings’ chamber uninvited (and against the law) while simultaneously breaching the heavenly King’s sanctum, equally unbidden. R. Safrin explains that her assumption of *physical risk (mesirut nefesh)* was critical to the success of her mission.²³ *Mesirut nefesh is the ultimate expression of malchut’s feminine, vulnerable, ayin mode.*
- 6) The king extends his golden scepter and invites Esther to state her request. In that moment Esther speaks the only sentence in the whole

megilla where HaShem’s name-of-mercy appears, spelled correctly, as the first letter of four sequential words. (...יְבוּא הַמֶּלֶךְ וְהַמֶּן הַיּוֹם...).²⁴ In so doing she toppled Haman’s evil empire and secured her people’s good fortune.

“To the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor” [Megilla 8:16].

Esther actually achieved what the four who entered PaRDeS (also without an invite) were trying to do.²⁵ Only R. Akiva survived that attempted *yichud* unscathed. But whereas he only managed to save his own skin,²⁶ Esther actually came out with the goods. There was no offence taken by her intrusion, rather she was invited to state her request. And at the end of her *yichud*, she actually did change history, redeem her people, and vanquish the scourge of Amalek in her day.

This crisis-solving dialogue between Esther and Mordecai is an exquisite example of what is possible when the masculine and feminine I-centers meet in mutual deference. The Talmud calls Megillat Esther the dawn of a new age and a new providence.²⁷

כי בא מועד!

...Let there soon be heard in the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the sound of joy and the sound of gladness, the voice of the groom and the voice of the bride...²⁸

להראות את-אסתר ולהגיד לה ולצוות עליה לבוא אל-המלך להתסנן-לו ולקבש מלפניו על-עמה: ט יבוא הַתֵּן וַיִּגַּד לְאַסְתֵּר אֶת דְּבָרֵי מַרְדֳּכָי: י ותאמר אסתר להתך ותצוה אל-מרדכי: יא כל-עבד המלך ועם-מדינות המלך יודעים אשר כל-איש ואשה אשר יבוא אל-המלך אל-החצר הפנימית אשר לא-יקרא אחת דתו להמית לבד מאשר יושיט-לו המלך את-שרביט הזהב וסויה ואני לא נקראתי לבוא אל-המלך זה שלושים יום: יב ויגידו למרדכי את דברי אסתר: יג ויאמר מרדכי להשיב אל-אסתר אל-תדמי בנפשך להמלט בית-המלך מכל-היהודים: יד כי אם-הגרש תהרשי בעת הזאת רוח והצלה יעמוד ליהודים ממקום אחר ואת ובית-אביך תאבדו ומי יודע אם-לעת קזאת הגעת למלכות: טו ותאמר אסתר להשיב אל-מרדכי: טז לך פנוס את-כל-היהודים הנמצאים בשושן וצומו עלי ואל-תאכלו ואל-תשטו שלשת ימים לילה ניום גם-אני ונערתי אצום בן ובן אבא אל-המלך אשר לא-קדחתי וקאשר אבדתי אבדתי: יז ויעבר מרדכי ועש ככל אשר-צוהה עליו אסתר:

כתם אופיר מבואר ומפורש (כ"יא) – פתח השער: דרכי ביטול הגזרה: כמה דרכים בביטול הגזרה, וסכנת עליה ביחודים. כתם אופיר מבואר ומפורש 4: 4

³ 4:1-3. כ"יא
⁴ 4:5. כ"יא
⁵ 4:8. כ"יא
⁶ 4:11. כ"יא
⁷ 4:15-17. כ"יא
⁸ 4:17. כ"יא
⁹ 4:16. כ"יא

¹⁰ Leshem, HDOH 2:4:20:4/5

¹¹ If you spell *anochi* out in full, with the *vav* that is contracted and instead appears as the *cholem* above the *nun* (which is the only way the word appears in the Tanach). But if you add the *vav* in full (אנוכי), then *anochi* spells, *ani* (I am)

26 (אני כ"יו) (ie the gematria of the Tetragrammaton). And it also spells אלהים (אנוכי = 87 = 86 + 1 = kollel (ie, 86 + 1 = 87).

¹² Leshem, Haddamot v'Shearim (HVS) 4:5.

¹³ HVS 7:5.

¹⁴ This is a teaching that R. Isaac Luria (the *Ari*) states repeatedly throughout his work. To site just one instance: *Aytz Chaim, Heichal Nukba, Shaar Miyut HaYareach*, chapter 1.

¹⁵ 'ספר הדעייה דרוש מיעוט הירח סימנים ט' יו

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ אם רצונך שלא תמות, מות עד שלא תמות...פירוש שימית את תאוותי לכל ענינים הגשמיים כשהם לעצמם, ולא יראה בהם שום חשיבות ושום תועלת אלא במדה שהם משמשים לתכלות היחידה—העולם הבא.

¹⁸ Psalms 109:4.

¹⁹ Gen. 3:20.

²⁰ HDOH 2:4:20, 21

²¹ *Daat elokim*, 144; 4:11. כ"יא

²² כתם אופיר מבואר ומפורש (כ"יא) 4: 11, הערות רכ"ד

²³ 5:2.. כ"יא

²⁴ Megilat Esther 5:4.

²⁵ TB Chagiga 14b.

²⁶ HDOH 2:4:22.

²⁷ TB Yoma 29a.

²⁸ From the 7th marriage blessings, which quotes from Yirmiyahu 7:35 (and others). See *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine*, Chapter 8, for R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi’s extensive (and radical) commentary on these words.