

The Evolving Feminine: And Enlightened View from Kabbala¹ Sarah (Susan) Schneider

Women and Judaism is a subject oft-discussed in the *yeshivot* and learning institutions of the religious world. One hears many statements, spoken with apparent certainty, that Judaism says “this” about women, or Judaism says “that” about women. And yet, upon inspection, many of the most common assertions are flawed and misleading. They rarely present the whole truth, and often (innocently) include beliefs that contradict the more scholarly (and authoritative) tradition. Out of the vast body of diverse sources, only those statements that support the current pattern of gender relations are regularly pulled out for discussion. They are woven together, with blinding skill, into a seamless tapestry of truths, traditions, and normative behaviors that explain and maintain the status quo.

And yet, dispersed throughout these teachings one finds a sprinkling of sources that seem to be saying something different, that appear to contradict the prevailing assumptions. They are raised...one here, one there, in isolated contexts...but there is no mention of any systematic attempt to explore them more deeply. A question arises: “What kind of picture might emerge if all of these non-conformist statements about women would be gathered together and examined as an alternative perspective unto themselves?”

This question gets answered in an amazing essay by the Ari (R. Isaac Luria) describing what he calls, “The Seven Stages of Feminine Development.”² In that text he describes a stepwise path of growth that moves from diminishment toward fullness of stature which he presents as the universal pattern of feminine development.³ Each step does not proceed smoothly from the one before. Rather *woman* first develops a kind of false equality, collapses again quite suddenly, and starts a new push toward growth and full stature which she eventually attains at the end of her effort. These seven stages comprise a single moon cycle. They apply on all scales, from the span of an individual woman’s life to the history of creation (for the entire period of existence from the beginning of time to its end is but a single circuit of the kabbalistic “moon”). [slide #1],

The discussion must begin by defining terms: The conventions of gender in kabbala echo the physical differences between men and women. To bestow is masculine, to receive is feminine.

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² R. Isaac Luria, *Aytz Chaim (Tree of Life)*, *heichal nukva, shaar miut hayareach*, Chapter 1. For the exact Hebrew text as well as the author’s annotated translation, please see *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine*, p. 53-98.

³ Kabbala uses the terms “masculine” and “feminine” as well as *man* and *woman* in ways that are by no means meant to be understood as equivalent with literal men and women. *Man* and *woman* are kabbalistic archetypes of male and female; *man* and “masculine” refer to the persona that gives, whereas *woman* and “feminine” to the persona that receives. In this paper when the words *man* and *woman* are used as kabbalistic archetypes they will appear in italics. See Chapter 1, “Preliminaries” in *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine* by Sarah Schneider, especially p. 17-35, for a more-in-depth discussion. . (This book can be purchased from the author’s website: <http://www.asmallvoice.org/>).

And yet, our present universe is the eighth in a sequence that kabbala calls the *Rectified World*.⁴ Its distinguishing feature is its holographic structure—which means that every piece contains aspects of every other piece inside itself.⁵ Every good contains a trace of evil and every evil a trace of good. Every Jew contains aspects of non-Jews, and every non-Jew contains a spark of Jew. And, what is relevant here, every man contains a shadow woman inside himself and every woman a shadow man. This is called the Principle of Interinclusion and each individual reflects the combination of traits that is his or her soul's unique truth.

Focusing on the gender scale, a whole continuum of possibilities exists for combining male and female elements. We find men and women who have all the stereotyped traits of their gender, and others who display many features that are more typical of the opposite sex. Wherever a person falls on this continuum, one fact remains: there is no man that does not include feminine elements inside himself, and vice versa for women.

This is also true, but to a much lesser degree with kabbalistic archetypes (*called partzufim*). In the kabbalistic model the interincluded aspects of the opposite sex get projected outward as a separate individual, and become a personality unto themselves. Then, in the kabbalistic odyssey, these two *partzufim* (that had originally been one) rediscover each other and unite in marital union.

The feminine archetype (as opposed to human being) will be indicated by the term, *woman*, in italics; the masculine archetype by the term, *man*.

It follows that when kabbala discusses the *partzuf woman*, its list of descriptors does not simply generalize to individual women, for the *partzuf* is a pure archetype and women are complex entities.⁶ The kabbalistic portrait of *woman* refers equally to the feminine parts of real women and the feminine parts of men. This is an extremely important qualification, for many popular writings irresponsibly assert that women should think, feel, and behave in one way or another based on kabbalistic “proofs.” And since everything is masculine in relation to what is below and feminine in relation to what is above, the term *woman* also applies to the entirety of creation in relation to HaShem, its Creator.

Now the Ari's writings are among the most complex and technical teachings in the entire Oral Tradition. There are universes of implication to each sentence. This present discussion will focus on four points that provide a meaningful introduction to his ideas about the feminine archetype.

- 1) His first premise is that the “feminine” wherever she be found, [slide #2] whether as male in relation to female, *woman* in relation to *man*, creation in relation to HaShem...the feminine is always in motion. She is always pushing her envelope. [slide #3] That means that statements that seemed obviously true at one stage of her development will simply not apply and

⁴ R. Isaac Luria, *Aytz Chaim (Tree of Life)*, Shar HaClalim, 1:1.

⁵ A holographic system is one where every sub-part contains information about the whole and every other sub-part within itself. Consequently, in a holographic system, it is possible to reconstruct the entire structure from any insolated component.

⁶ The composite sum total of women is a kind of archetype unto itself (called Eve), and on this scale, meaningful parallels *do* hold.

might even be false at other stages of her development. The feminine, by definition, at least by the Ari's definition, is always changing growing, evolving. There is no escaping that fact and, according to the Ari, this is a good thing. It is how things are supposed to be. So while in some things (perhaps even most things) it might be possible to understand what it means to be a good Jewish woman by looking at the previous generations, in other respects that simply doesn't work. They lived in one stage of the feminine life cycle while this generation embodies another. Just like what is healthy and appropriate for a child is not necessarily appropriate for a teen or an adult.

- 2) The second amazing implication of his teachings [slide #4], actually explicitly stated by him, is that *woman's* perfected ideal, her messianic achievement, is to stand equal and opposite to *man*, in the Ari's own words: פנים לפנים שווה לגמרי (face to face, and completely equal). This is an astounding statement. One might expect to find it in a feminist manifesto, but to read it in a sixteenth century kabbalistic tome by Judaism's master kabbalistic, is quite another matter. The Ari's vision of *woman's* ideal is quite unconventional by even today's traditional norms.
- 3) And yet, though equality is the goal, *woman's* path from here to there is not at all direct. This is by design, and not by accident. [slide #5] Her true and consummate equality can only be achieved by a previous act of diminishment. The moon must wane before it waxes. Like a spring compressed and released, the feminine's diminishment sets in motion a chain of events that culminates in her joyful, shared, equality.
- 4) The fourth extremely relevant aspect of the Ari's teaching is that in *woman's* later stages of growth (which would likely translate into the current era) she comes into her מוחין, a kabbalistic term meaning brains and intellectual maturity. Thus, in the Ari's model, part of what is supposed to happen as one stage in the evolving relationship of *man* and *woman* is that their disparities of intellect begin to diminish and eventually disappear altogether. Not that they come to think exactly alike, this may or may not be so (though it seems unlikely), but that their strength and sophistication of intellect begin to equalize.

An example of how this can be seen is the fact that today in the United States, as well as in many countries around the world, there are more women entering undergraduate and graduate university programs than men,⁷ and in certain fields such as medicine and

⁷ A *New York Times* article from July 9, 2006 states: "... the college landscape is changing. Women now make up fifty-eight percent of those enrolled in two- and four-year colleges and are, over all, the majority in graduate schools and professional schools too.

Most institutions of higher learning, except engineering schools, now have a female edge, with many small liberal arts colleges and huge public universities alike hovering near the 60-40 ratio. Even Harvard, long a male bastion, has begun to tilt toward women. 'The class we just admitted will be 52 percent female,' said William Fitzsimmons, Harvard's dean of admissions."

law, the numbers of women are beginning to dominate. In addition, women are often extremely successful because they bring a different type of intellect to the job. Women lawyers, for example, have an approach to legal questions that is often different, and at times more effective than the traditional “male” approach. It seems clear that within the Jewish world, the virtual revolution in women’s education and learning opportunities reflects this same trend.

The Ari’s teachings present a perspective on Women and Judaism that is not generally known because it draws from the most esoteric layer of the Jewish Tradition. His text provides an extremely authoritative frame that can hold the myriad teachings about women in Judaism, both the traditional and the radical, the status quo and its feminist critique. Just as his vision predicted all the shifting of gender roles that are observably occurring, so it predicted the more classic roles with their disparities of stature that characterize the other stages of *woman’s* developmental journey.

The question becomes: What are the roots of the Ari’s model, and how were his teachings developed through time by other rabbinic writings? The section of the Ari’s writings where this text appears is called מעוט הירח (Diminishment of the Moon), and this term becomes the code word for the whole body of teachings on *woman* and her evolving journey through time.

With this as a starting point, it is possible to find the earliest source if this idea in the Torah itself. Genesis 1:16 states: “G-d creates two great lights” (יעש אלקים את שני המאורות (הגדולים). [slide #6].

And yet the same posuk goes on to describe an apparently contradictory state of affairs when it now states:

... את המאור הגדול לממשלת היום ואת המאור הקטן לממשלת הלילה. (The great (or big) light to rule by day and the small light to rule by night).

First there are two great lights, then suddenly, only one remains great while the other has become small.

And yet the same verse goes on to describe an apparently contradictory state of affairs when it subsequently states: “The great (or big) light to rule by day and the small light to rule by night” (את המאור הגדול לממשלת היום ואת המאור הקטן לממשלת הלילה). First there are two great lights, then suddenly, only one remains great while the other has become small.

An explanation of this contradiction appears in Gemara (*Chullin 60b*), in an *aggadah*, a Midrashic story, brought by Rabbi Shimon ben Pazzi. This parable becomes the channel for all the profound (and quite revolutionary) teachings about women that appear in chassidic and kabbalistic texts. They all build from the Ari, who bases himself on this *Aggadah*. The entire 346 page volume called, *Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine*, (that is the basis of this presentation), is about one verse in the Torah, Bereshit 1:14, which R. Shimon ben

Pazzi cracks open, and all the source-based discussion of gender in Jewish literature is built from that Talmudic passage.

Rabbi Shimon ben Pazzi explains the contradiction in the verse from Genesis by describing a conversation between the moon and *HaKadosh Boruch Hu*, the Holy One, Blessed be He. Originally the sun (always equated with *man*) and the moon (always equated with *woman*) were created equal in size: שני המאורות הגדולים. The moon complains to the Holy One that it is not possible for two kings to rule under one crown. The Holy One agrees and directs her to diminish herself. The moon, protests, and a negotiation ensues. She is not convinced. G-d insists that she diminish, but the Midrash ends with a perplexing passage where G-d asks that a sin-offering be brought for Himself (for *HaKadosh Boruch Hu*) for His, so to speak, “wrongdoing” in forcing the moon to grow small.

There is much to say about this Midrash in light of the Ari’s teachings, but this paper will focus on one small point.⁸

The *Midrash* presents a two-stage process. First the sun and moon are equal. Then the moon diminishes in size. So where does the Ari base his idea about the moon’s reattained equality? He presents three phases: initial equality, the moon’s diminishment, and then her return to greatness where two kings really do indeed succeed in sharing a single crown.

There are several levels of answering this question, but only one will be brought here. The יהי רצון (May it be Your will) that appears in the Jewish prayer book⁹ as part of the prayers said for the monthly sanctifying of the moon [קידוש לבנה] includes a reference to this idea. It brings a verse from Isaiah 30:26 which prophesies that the light of the moon will become like the light of the sun, and so the prayer reads [slide #7]:

May it be Your will, G-d...that You fill the
flaw of the moon that there be no
diminution in it. May the light of the moon
be like the light of the sun and like the light
of the seven days of creation, as it was
before it was diminished, as the Torah says:
“The two great luminaries...”

ויהי רצון...למלואת פגימת הלבנה, ולא יהיה בה
שום מעוט, ויהי אור הלבנה כאור החמה, וכאור
שבעת ימי בראשית כמו שהיתה קודם מעוטה
שנאמר: את שני המאורות הגדולים.

This prayer, said every month, provides a normative basis for the Ari’s interpretation of Rabbi Shimon ben Pazzi’s *agaddah*. It expresses the prayer and the vision that the moon (and all things feminine) will move out of her diminishment into fullness of stature with the sun.

This absolute equality that the Ari presents as the final stage of feminine development is a welcomed transformation. It’s a win-win state of affairs. *Man* seeks union with *woman* and will not be fully satisfied until that union is consummated on every level, which can only

⁸ See Chapter 9 of Kabbalistic Writings on the Nature of Masculine and Feminine for an in-depth explanation.

⁹ This *nusach*, wording, is found in both Ashkenaz and Sefard prayer books, and appears as a supplementary prayer in some Sephardi prayer books.

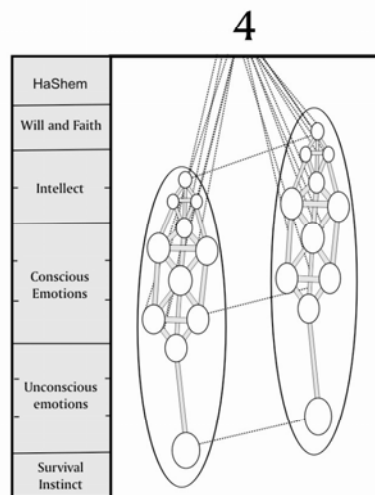
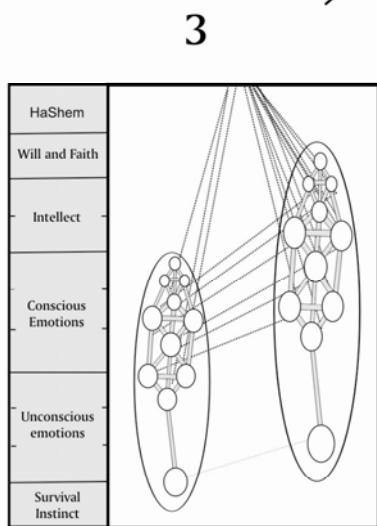
happen when they meet from the crown of their heads to the soles of their feet, and that can only happen when their statures are equal. Short of that, there are always parts of each that remain unmet, and their union stays incomplete.

Only when *woman* regains her fullness of stature do they finally meet in full and joyous union. Only as equals do *man* and *woman* truly match. This perfect marriage has been the universal (though perhaps unconscious) yearning of humanity for six thousand years, and from its consummation flow all the promised blessings of the World to Come.

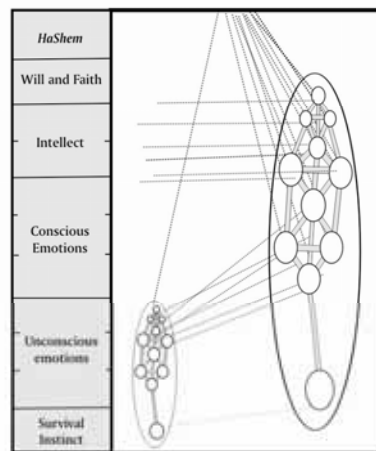
And so, according to the Ari, this shifting of gender relations is not supposed to be a war, but a mutually welcomed and shared project. *Man's* role is to build *woman* up by generously providing her with the resources of lights and strengths that she needs to develop herself (and particularly in this generation, her intellect). The whole point, again according to the Ari, is for her to become independent from *man* in this regard. Now, in her unperfected state, their relationship is mediated by need. This is one of the major glues that binds them together. While this is appropriate and essential at certain phases of their relationship, in the seventh stage, *woman* no longer needs *man* to pull down her lights for her. She has her own independent access to the flow of consciousness and bounty. The fear is that she will go on her own separate way, leaving him behind if she doesn't need him anymore. The, truth (or vision) according to the Ari, is the opposite. Only without need are they finally free to unite from a place of pure love and mutual desire, love that is not contaminated by the ulterior motives of need. This is the Jewish vision of how *man* and *woman* will relate when they have healed themselves and fixed the world. Its perfected ideal has never been in the history of the universe. From their holy and newly consummated marriage will flow all the promised sweetness of Messianic times.¹⁰

¹⁰ Published in: *B'Or HaTorah: Science, the Arts and Problems of Modern life in the Light of Torah: #18*, 2008 (Shamir: Jerusalem, Israel). p. 135-146.

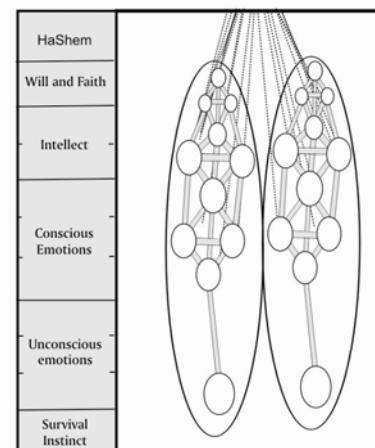
Five levels of Quantitative Development



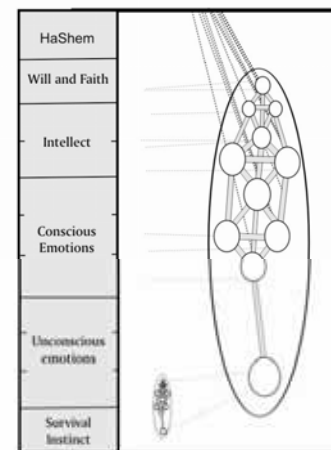
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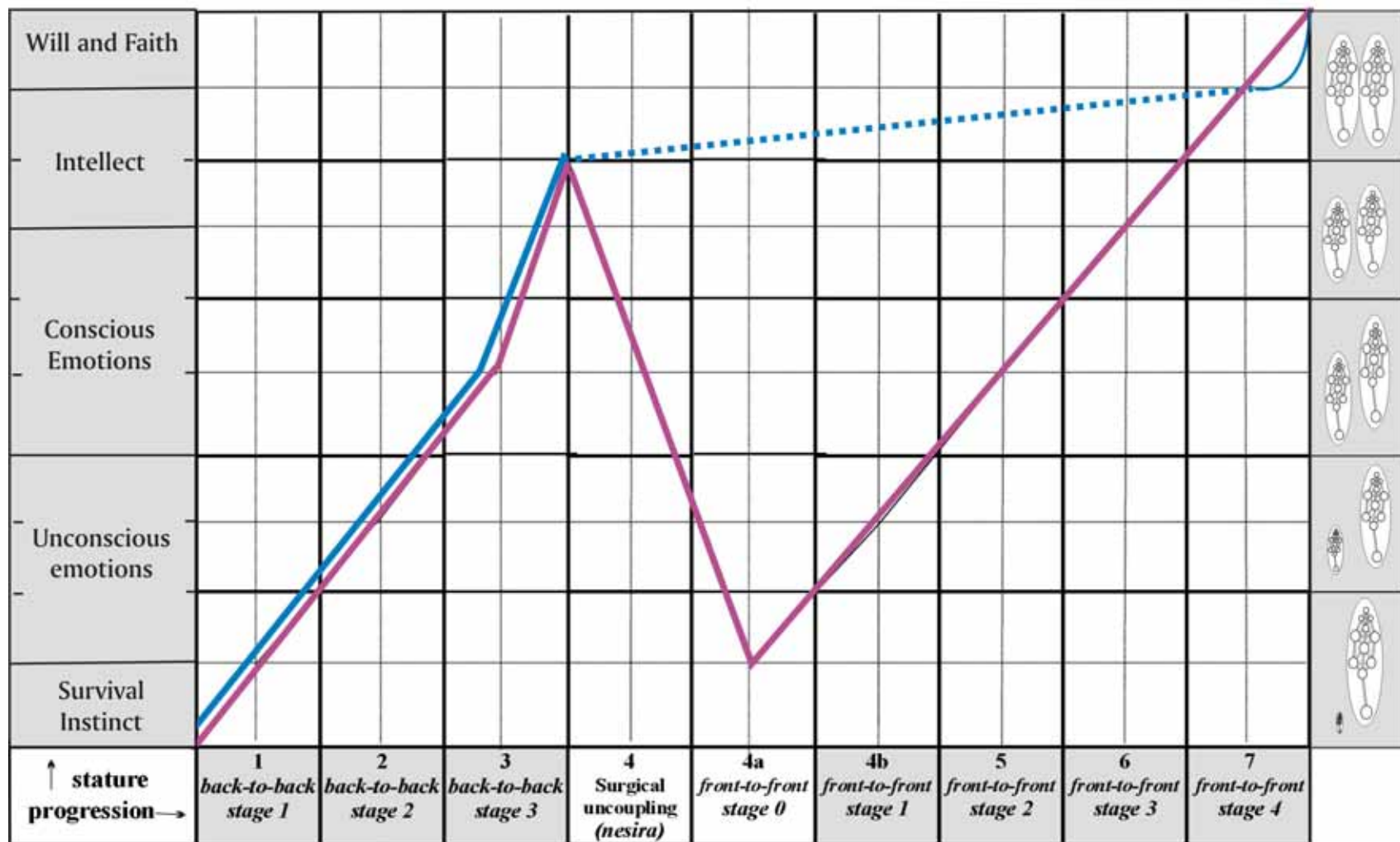
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1



A Single Moon Cycle



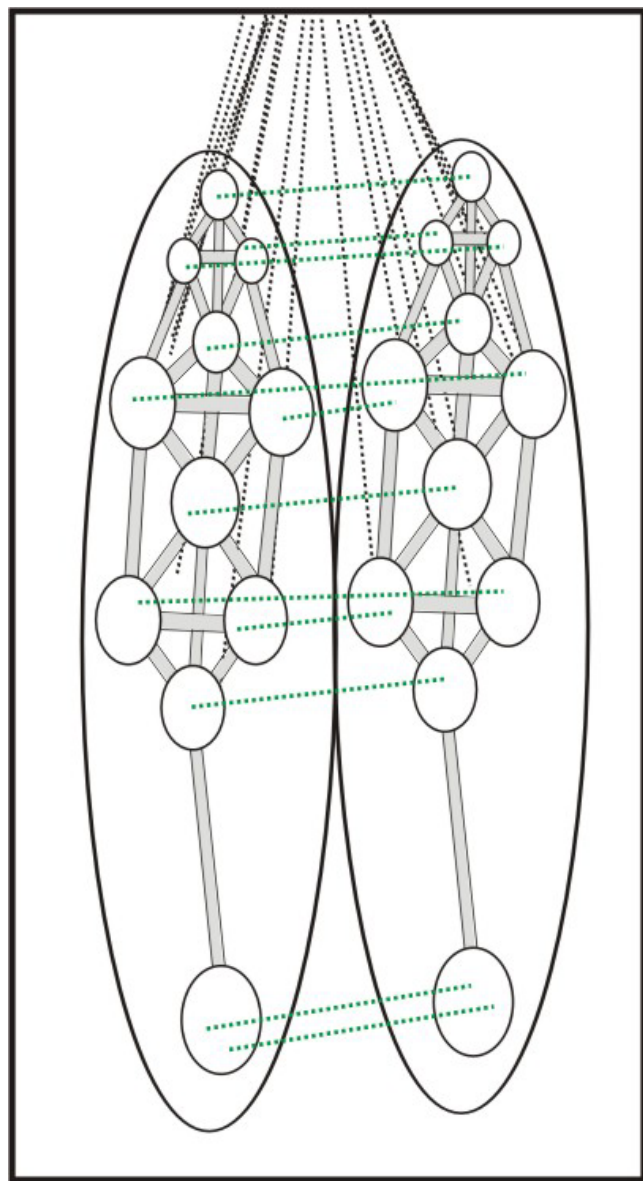
Moon

- ♦ feminine (מקבל)
- ♦ *woman* (נוקבא)
- ♦ creation
- ♦ females
- ♦ emotions
- ♦ **anima** (inner feminine)

Sun

- ♦ masculine (משפיע)
- ♦ man (ז"א)
- ♦ HaShem
- ♦ males
- ♦ intellect
- ♦ **animus** (inner masculine)

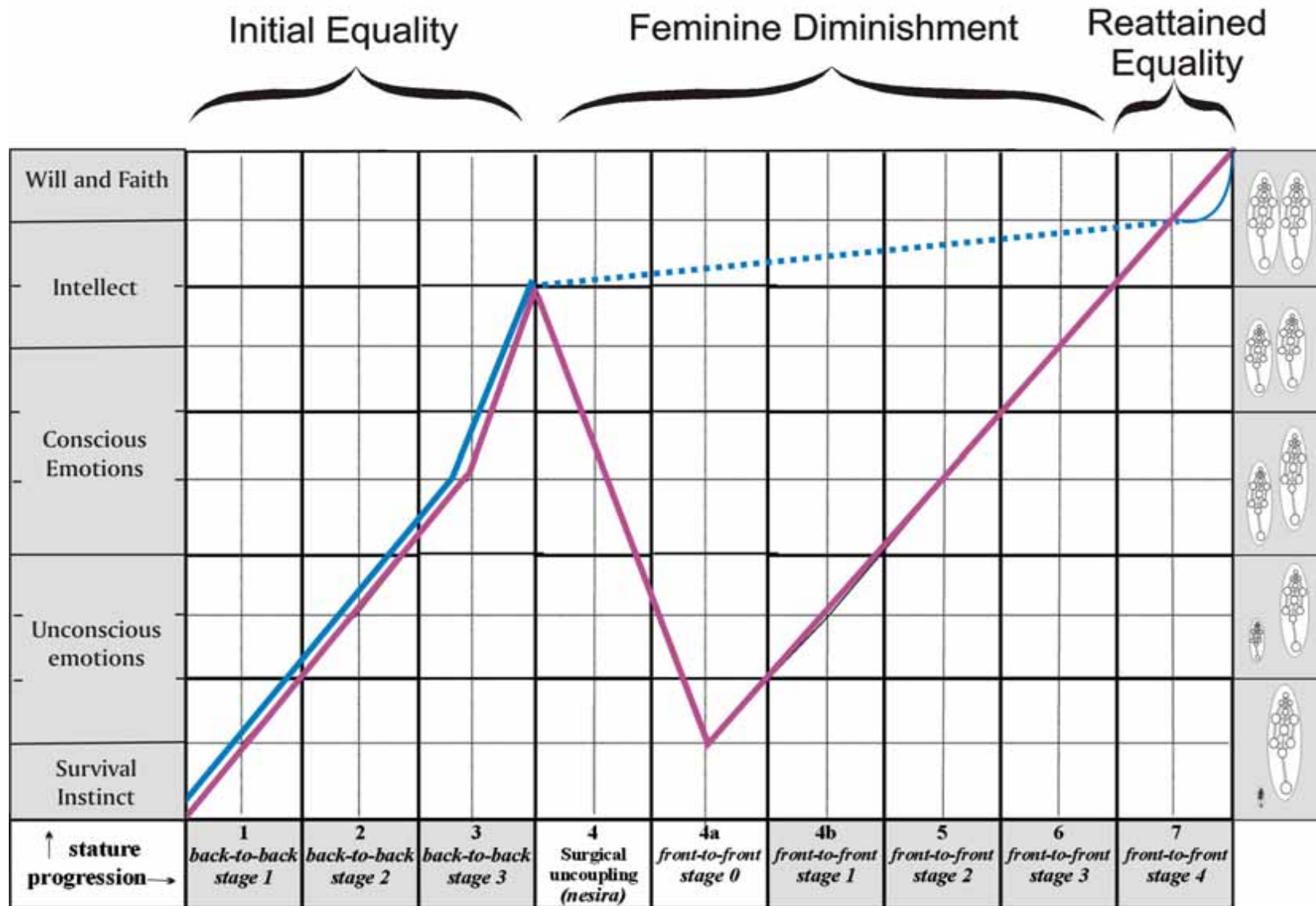
slide 4: He and she are face to face and completely equal



ותכלית גידול שלה, הוא שיהיה בה
כל הי"ס שלה,
ותהיה עם ז"א פב"פ שווה לגמרי,
וישתמשו ב' מלכים בכתר א',
שהוא מה שקטרגה הירח כנודע.

Her ultimate maturity is when she reacquires all ten of her sefirot, which means that now, she and man meet face to face, and they are completely equal. They have now become two kings who [successfully and joyfully] share a single crown. This was the original point of the moon's complaint as is known.

The Three Phases of Feminine Development On the Quantitative Scale



Genesis 1:16

וַיַּעַשׂ אֱלֹהִים אֶת שְׁנֵי הַמָּאֹת הַגְּדֹלִים אֶת
הַמָּאֹר הַגָּדֹל לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַיּוֹם
וְאֶת הַמָּאֹר הַקָּטָן לְמַמְשֶׁלֶת הַלַּיְלָה ...

And God made two great lights; **the large light to rule the day, and the small light to rule the night...**

ברכת הלבנה (Blessing of the Moon)

May it be Your will, G-d...that
You fill the flaw of the moon
that there be no diminution in
it. May the light of the moon
be like the light of the sun and
like the light of the seven days
of creation, as it was before it
was diminished, as the Torah
says: “The two great
luminaries...”

ויהי רצון...למלואת פגימת
הלבנה, ולא יהיה בה שום
מעוט, ויהי אור הלבנה
כאור החמה, וכאור שבעת
ימי בראשית כמו שהיתה
קודם מעוטה שנאמר: את
שני המאורות הגדולים.