

## Commentary on L'cha Dodi

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### *L'Kha Dodi*

“Your God will rejoice over you as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride.” In this sixteenth century poem, which has become one of the most popular pieces of Jewish liturgy, the Sabbath becomes an active participant in the divine drama, a feminine expression of the divine will manifesting in our lives. Such, of course, was the intention of the kabbalist who wrote this poem, Shlomo Alkabetz, who was intoxicated, as were his mystic companion in Safed, with the notion of God as a multitude of divine selves, acting upon the world in various ways. The Self closest to our own experience is the Shechinah, God’s feminine dimension, here associated with the Sabbath as a bride. Although God is also depicted in masculine form—as a bridegroom—the mystic tone of the poem suggests that we, as the people Israel, are guests at a heavenly wedding, witnessing the union of two aspects of divine holiness.

Women are also present at this wedding, either at the synagogue on Friday night or at home where many Sabbath hymns likewise adopt this metaphor. Yet until now, it was believed that Jewish men alone could fathom the deeper kabbalistic secrets only hinted at in poems such as *L'cha dodi*. Women, traditionally seen as more bound to the world of materiality and intellectually incapable of understanding esoteric mysteries, were to be excluded from mystic study and practice. However, it has recently come to light that between 1648 and 1720, many editions of Jewish prayerbooks throughout the Ashkenazi world were printed with a Yiddish supplement intended specifically for women, and that this supplement is infused with kabbalistic

content. Known as *Seyder Tkhines* and of anonymous authorship, this collection of Yiddish prayers expressed the widespread belief that the coming of Messiah was at hand, if only Jewish men and women would turn to God in prayer and devotion. This inclusive outlook was short-lived, however. Following the devastating conversion of the false messiah Shabbetai Zevi in 1666 and the scandal of religious heresies in its wake, Jewish messianic hopes evaporated, and by 1720, *Seyder Tkhines*, disappeared from the standard *siddur*, as did the acceptance of Jewish women as valued spiritual partners in hastening redemption.

Following is a stanza from a prayer included in *Seyder Tkhines*, to be recited by a Jewish woman after lighting the Shabbat candles.

You have singled out  
The Sabbath for rest,  
So we may honor it  
And rejoice in it,  
And illuminate it  
With candle light,  
To serve You joyfully today  
On Your holy Sabbath,  
Which we are bound to honor  
And keep in all things,  
Like a king his queen  
Or a bridegroom his bride,  
Because in the words of our sages:

The Sabbath is queen and bride.

Note that the speaker in this prayer, like those who recite *L'cha dodi*, identifies herself with king and bridegroom, as she welcomes in the Sabbath. Although she is not formally leading the congregation in prayer, she sees herself as empowered to welcome in the Sabbath on behalf of the people Israel. [Passage from *Seyder Tkhines: The Forgotten Book of Common Prayer for Jewish Women*, Devra Kay. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2004, p. 256]

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