



# **CIRCLE, ARROW, SPIRAL**

**EXPLORING GENDER IN JUDAISM**

**MIRIAM KOSMAN**





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# Approbations

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# Introduction

THE UNIVERSE IS EXPANDING. STARS ARE EXPLODING. PARTICLES fly away from each other. Babies separate from their mothers' wombs, children leave their parents, friends struggle to understand each other and really relate. People fight and make up and fight again, or never talk in the first place, because their differences are too vast. This universe of physicality is one of separateness and aloneness, as each of us hurtles towards our lonely death, with no one else along.<sup>[b]</sup>

And yet, the soul yearns for connection. The rule of heaven is oneness and unity<sup>[c]</sup> — the pulling together of many parts into one harmonious unit.

Like bees to honey, our souls are drawn to the one mysterious relationship that hints at the oneness of the World to Come. Two totally distinct and separate people join together — “*v'hayu l'basar echad* — and they shall become one flesh.”<sup>1</sup>

Distinct and separate not only because they, like all humans, each have their own bodies, feelings, and thoughts, but distinct and separate because one is a man and one is a woman — their very biological essence expresses their disparity.

And yet they achieve unity. Not only on a physical level, but on a human level; not only on a human level,<sup>2</sup> but on a halachic level.<sup>[d]</sup> This oneness hints mysteriously of otherworldliness, of something beyond the here and now.<sup>[e]</sup>

Indeed, the Torah tell us that the first human being, created in the Divine image, was androgynous, a creation that had both a

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1. Genesis 2:24.

2. Animals do not achieve the spiritual state implied in “*v'hayu lebasar echad*” despite their mating (see Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 58a).

male and female component. The classic medieval commentator Rashi, quoting the Midrash, tells us that God originally created man and woman as one, and then later divided them into two separate people — a man called Adam and a woman called Eve.<sup>3</sup>

Why would God originally create us as one, if we were then going to be separated into two separate beings? Perhaps because that original unity would continue to agitate under the surface even after we became two separate beings and would imbue our separate existence as man and woman with a primal yearning to once again return to that oneness.<sup>[f]</sup>

Indeed, this underlying yearning for oneness between two separate beings who have spent their lives apart is probably the root reason for the pain and frustration that often surrounds the male/female dynamic. On some soul level, we expect and yearn for the closeness that is etched into our primordial memory. Even when things are going well, even when we are good friends or good partners, there is always an underlying desire for greater depth of understanding, for more closeness; we yearn to recreate that oneness in our own reality.

But all too often, even as we sense that the honey is there, our intimate relationships don't lead to the sweetness and exhilaration of oneness. Sometimes they even lead to the smashing of the deepest

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3. Genesis 1:27. According to this Midrashic understanding, Man and Woman were one creature, attached back to back; in this rendering, the word *tzela*, usually translated as rib, would mean “side” (as in *tzela hamishkan*, the side of the Tabernacle). This original androgynous creature was called “HaAdam — The Man” (as opposed to another word in Genesis, *Adam*, which refers to the man named Adam). A hint to this is found in one of the blessings that we say at the marriage ceremony, under the chuppah: “Blessed are You, God, Lord of the Universe, for creating ‘HaAdam.’” Interestingly, this blessing is said in the present — not “Blessed are You, God, who *created* HaAdam” long ago in the Garden of Eden, but “Blessed are You who *creates* HaAdam,” since the wedding ceremony is the beginning of the reunion of the male and female. Why woman was separated from man and not vice versa, why he retained the name of the original androgynous being and she became the “other” in the story, will be explained at length below.

and the most fragile of human desires. The desire for closeness and intimacy is certainly there, but often the yawning gap seems so vast as to be unbridgeable.

→ “MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM” ←

The original androgynous being that was created in the Divine image was both male and female; when it was divided into two, he took part and she took part. What makes things more interesting is that the concept of male and female encompasses much more than relationships between man and woman. The Talmud tells us:

Everything that God created, He created as male and female, since all creation is in pairs.<sup>4</sup>

This concept is reflected in the Hebrew language, where no word is neuter; each word has either a male or a female essence. Indeed, the metaphor of the male/female relationship has many different layers in Jewish thought, with perhaps the most powerful one being the parable of male and female to the relationship between God and the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup> Clearly, from a Judaic perspective, the concept of male and female is much bigger than how a particular couple relates in their everyday life.

This book is about trying to understand these two forces. What does it actually mean to be female? What does it actually mean to be male? What really differentiates them from each other? We are all products of these two forces and go on to reproduce them in our own lives. How do these two forces impact on our lives and our marriages, but more, on our relationship to God and the universe? How much *should* they influence our lives? What drives each force? What do they need from each other?

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4. Talmud, *Bava Batra* 74b.

5. The classic example of this in the Bible is Song of Songs.

→ A STRUGGLE WITH IDENTITY ←

Vast sociological changes have influenced the role and status of women in the past century. Yet, with all the advances, lurking beneath the surface of these changes is a constant thread of pain, expressed sometimes as anger, sometimes as sadness, sometimes swept under the carpet (especially when life is basically good), sometimes difficult to ignore. Many women and men struggle with their identity, their role, their status, and how these mesh with their ideals and most importantly with their current reality.

Is equality a Jewish value? Judaism often finds itself with its back against the wall and a pistol to its head about women's issues. It is interesting that the very religion that has championed the underdog for thousands of years is being held up as hopelessly chauvinistic and patriarchal — for some, Judaism's approach to women seems impossible to reconcile with the modern psyche.

Indeed, the value of equality resonates deeply within the human soul, but do Torah sources validate the angst of the woman searching for equality? Is it true that the halachic structure negates the ideal of equality between men and women? And is equality even achievable in this world? With all the inroads of feminism, we remain in a world defined more by its misery than by its fulfillment.

Our human experience is always a real-time metaphor of what is happening on a cosmic level. The centrality of the male/female relationship in our life, as well as woman's conflicted relationship with equality, has deep roots in the creation of the universe and is, in fact, a parable within a parable within a parable; our human experience is mirrored in the physical world, which in itself mirrors the complexity of the eternal dance between man and God that lies at the root of Creation.

Perhaps society's obsession with the male/female relationship is an expression of this intuitive awareness; there is something much deeper here than finding a way for spouses to communicate so we can function better. Certainly, social and political struggles

for equality for women often draw on a sense of justice that finds its basis in the belief in a Just God.<sup>6</sup> If, indeed, our prosaic little relationships are a microcosm of a macro-reality — if the attraction between male and female and the struggle between them is the structure upon which our world is built — then through getting this dynamic right in our own little lives we can impact the greater cosmic reality in all its many parallels.



This book seeks to explore three levels. First, reality in its ideal sense — the way things were meant to be; second, reality in its compromised, sociological sense — the way things actually are; and third, and most importantly, a path to the perfection of the hoped-for and long-awaited future. It is both practical and esoteric, grounded solidly in the stuff of our relationships today, while at the same time speaking of messianic vision. It is a book that does not gloss over the painful reality of the struggle for unity and equality, but shows how those same struggles, approached with a deeper awareness, give us direction for achieving our goals.

This is a book about who we are as human beings, as men and women, and as Jews.

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6. “One major component of the moral modality... is the powerful egalitarian element. Part of what makes a code moral, in our eyes, is the fact that it judges us *equally* as *equal* human persons. This quality, too, is much more extraordinary and problematic than we customarily suppose.... Again one could propose that this idea of equality, which was foreign even to the Greeks, in which we are not just a member of this or that tribe, but are instead a member of the ‘family of humankind,’ is directly tied to the conception of a single and moral God; one could suggest that the conception of equality which morality presupposes originated only in the conviction that we are all equal in His eyes and are all equally His children” (Robert C. Solomon, Introduction to *Reading Nietzsche*, ed. Robert C. Solomon and Kathleen M. Higgins [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], 8).





# BOOK 1







## PART I

# THE TWO FORCES

When God divided the original human being, created in the Divine image, into two separate beings, man and woman, each walked away with a different Divine aspect inside them. This chapter will begin the process of understanding these two different forces that were personified in the original male and female and that animate all of creation.



## CHAPTER 1

# The Circle, the Arrow, and the Spiral

**T**HERE ARE TWO BASIC FEATURES OF FUNCTIONING IN OUR world. One is a drive to strive, achieve, succeed, conquer obstacles in our path—a desire to take the given situation and change it and improve it—and the other is a drive for harmony, for completion, for wholeness, for peace, and for reveling in the moment. These traits are very often in conflict with each other—and taken to an extreme, either one can create distortion and an imbalanced life.

We can run around frantically trying to produce, like gerbils on an exercise wheel, or we can sit and revel in the moment and become static and unproductive.

Both extremes lead to a life out of balance, yet each—the striving for excellence and the desire for wholeness—is an aspect of our *tzelem Elokim*, our Divine image.

In God, both these forces exist in perfection without any distortion. God is Excellent in His Wholeness and Complete in His Excellence. We humans have to strive mightily to find a balance between these two forces, so that neither of these traits comes at the expense of the other.

### → THE WEST: FULL SPEED AHEAD ←

The Western world exemplifies the attribute of progressing and excelling. In the West, we place all our eggs in the basket of progress.

We advance, we change, we do, we accomplish, we influence, we impact, we conquer new frontiers, and then we look for the next challenge.

Be the best that you can be! Strive onward! Be assertive! Use your talents! Change the status quo! Invent something new! Put your best foot forward! Our favorite words are *best*, *most*, and *first*.

You want to be a lawyer? Shoot for the 4.0 GPA. Only Ivy League will do. Make partner in a Manhattan law firm. Take on the most difficult cases. Let your yacht be the longest in the marina near your summer home. Yet, while we may earn the million dollars, we may never remember to ask the million-dollar question: What will this striving for excellence cost us in terms of wholeness, harmony, and mental health? If I am the best lawyer, will I ever have time to listen music? Talk to a friend? Read a book? Visit my parents? Spend time with my spouse and children? Those questions are ignored in the mad rush to the peak of the mountain.

We view ourselves in a compartmentalized fashion — if we succeed in a particular area, we feel like a success, even if as human beings we might be undeveloped. If someone excels in a particular area, we adulate him even if in every other area he is unremarkable, or worse. He is a world-class author, actor, musician, or sports star, but is usually drunk, is a horrible husband and father, and is impossible to work with? We can still stand up and applaud.

We become so focused on progress, we are in such a mad rush towards our success, that our eyes are always trained towards the future and the present slips away before it has even arrived.

### ⇒ AND THE EAST — WHOLE BUT STATIC ←

The second force is represented by Eastern culture. If the Western world is focused on the future, Eastern thought, by contrast, lives in the present. Eastern religions focus on not striving, not wanting,

and not grasping.<sup>1</sup> If the Western man lives in constant conflict between his desires and not being able to get what he wants, the Eastern man resolves the problem by not desiring. Eastern philosophy sees the root of suffering as the grasping, desiring, wanting of man.

It is desire that...feters people. The Buddha had desired enlightenment and had sought it through asceticism and knowledge, but it had eluded him. When he had ceased to desire [and sat under the *Bodhi*, tree] he found enlightenment.<sup>2</sup>

The problem around which many Eastern religions revolve is how a person can get off the wheel of life and cease the suffering that comes with being alive. The ability to accept what is, to live in the present, to be at one with the good that is right now, is the path to wholeness. If the Western man is defined by *wanting*, the Eastern man is defined by *wanting not to want*. In fact, the sought-for nirvana of the East, in a literal sense, means “extinguished” or “put out like a candle.” The goal here is not some future state of bliss or pleasure, but the extinguishing of desire — “a renouncement of all attachments.”<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, while the West has as its cultural heroes people

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1. “When someone seeks,” said Siddhartha, “it can easily happen that his eyes only see the thing he is seeking and that he is incapable of finding anything, incapable of taking anything in, because he is always only thinking about what he is seeking, because he has an object, a goal, because he is possessed by this goal. Seeking means having a goal, but finding means being free, open, having no goal. Perhaps you, venerable one, are indeed a seeker, for in striving after your goal, there is much you fail to see that is right before your eyes” (Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Sherab Chodzin Kohn [Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2000], 108).

2. Lewis M. Hopfe and Mark R. Woodward, *Religions of the World* (Prentice Hall, New Jersey: 2007), 126.

3. Ibid., 128. “Let him not desire to live, let him not desire to die...by the destruction of love and hatred... he becomes fit for immortality” (*Laws of the Manu: The Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 25, trans. G. Buhler [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons: 1882–1902], 204–10).

who have fought great wars — in reality or figuratively — as scientists, innovators, or leaders — in the East, it is the ascetic and not the warrior who is upheld as the cultural hero.

An apocryphal story has Alexander the Great coming to India and meeting up with some naked Jain philosophers. Alexander was fascinated by them, but they only stamped their feet in response to all his questions. When he inquired about this strange behavior, he was told, “King Alexander, every man can possess only as much of the earth’s surface as this we are standing on. You are but human like the rest of us, save that you are always busy and up to no good, traveling so many miles from your home, a nuisance to yourself and to others. Ah well! You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of the earth as will suffice to bury you.”<sup>4</sup>

Even the idea of the caste system — a system of social stratification in India — is about total acceptance of the present — a willingness to accept circumstances as unchangeable. Contrast the projectile of the black man in America — from slave to President of the United States in a short two hundred years — with the submissive acceptance of the “untouchable caste” in India.<sup>5</sup>

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4. Hopfe, *Religions of the World*, 116.

5. “The caste system dominates every aspect of life in traditional Hindu society. One enters a caste by being born to parents of that caste. One’s caste dictates diet, vocation, place of residence and choice of mate.... Caste hierarchy is based on concepts of purity and pollution.... Many Brahmins, who are the highest caste, refrain from any contact with pollution. The lowest caste, who are often referred to as the untouchables, [have] the lowest wages, the worst living conditions, and little hope of improvement...” (Adrian C. Mayer, *Caste and Kinship in Central India* [University of California Press, Berkeley: 1960], 24–52).

⇒ I AM NOT GOING ANYWHERE ⇐

This ability — to stop striving in order to be — has powerful ramifications, and not just in the East. Rachel Naomi Remen, in her book *Kitchen Table Wisdom*,<sup>6</sup> tells how many years ago, while she was on the staff at Stanford University, she was invited to a day-long master's class, along with a group of traditional psychologists and physicians, with the psychologist Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanist psychology.

Rogers coined the term “unconditional positive regard” to reflect his therapeutic stance, which emphasized receiving the patient without judgment. This approach does not focus on fixing, changing, or perfecting the patient, but on being present with the patient and “receiving” him completely.

Remen describes how Rogers began to explain his approach and how his words met with resistance, because, as Remen describes it, she was “young and proud of being an expert, sought after for my opinions and judgments. From what I could gather, ‘unconditional positive regard’ came down to sitting in silence and accepting everything the patient said without judgment or interpretation. I could not imagine how this could prove helpful.”

Eventually, Rogers called for a volunteer from the audience, so that he could demonstrate his approach.

The session that followed was profound. Rogers conducted it without saying a single word, conveying to his client, simply by the quality of his attention, a total acceptance of him exactly as he was.... In the safe climate of Rogers' total acceptance, he [the volunteer] began to shed his masks, hesitantly and then more and more easily. As each mask fell, Rogers accepted the one behind it unconditionally, until finally we glimpsed the beauty of the

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6. Rachel Naomi Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom* (New York: Berkeley Publishing Group, 1996).

doctor's naked face. I doubt that even he himself had ever seen it before. By that time many of our own faces were naked and many of us had tears in our eyes. I remember... envying this doctor [the volunteer] the opportunity to be received by someone in such a total way.<sup>7</sup>

### ⇒ I LOVE YOU JUST BECAUSE ⇐

This second force — the one that doesn't try to accomplish, progress, and excel — is closely connected to the experience of love. Focusing on the present, on the greatness that exists at that moment, means "I am here with you right now. I love *you*, not some fantasy picture of what you would be if I could change you." Love, like the second force, is an all-encompassing experience of the present — it is not *for* something, it just is — and it does not have to go anywhere to justify itself.

Perhaps this is why it seems impossible to put into words why we love someone. While we may want to explain that we love this person because he understands us, or has a good sense of humor, or did so much for us, we are also aware that there might be someone else in the world who objectively can understand us better, has a better sense of humor, and so on. These may be the reasons why we *chose* this particular person or why we may be attracted to him. But they are not reasons for love.

The best answer for why we love is really one word — *because*. I love — because I love. Giving a reason for love is so incongruous because a motive for love describes a desire to achieve something, but the experience of love is not a purposeful one. It just is.

### ⇒ MEN FROM WEST; WOMEN FROM EAST ⇐

Sociologically, historically, and in Jewish thought, the first trait — the drive for excellence, the drive to get out there, make your mark,

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7. Remen, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, 217.



conquer new vistas, excel, progress and change the world — is associated with the male. The second trait, the drive for harmony and wholeness, to be receptive to the gifts of the moment, to be, rather than do, is the female energy.

Many of us resent being pigeonholed into categories, and from our own subjective observation of the world we note that in many, if not most, ways men and women are exactly the same. In fact, it is entirely likely that some women will have much more in common with some men than they will with other women and vice versa. There are so many other axis of comparison — level and type of intelligence, interests, social standing, country of origin, familial background — that one wonders how much weight gender should play in the equation.

For this reason, the basis for calling a particular trait “male” or “female” in Jewish thought is based on the physical model — which is the only dimension in which a particular person is actually specifically male or female.<sup>[a]</sup> The mystical perspective on Judaism, known as *Kabbalah*, sees the physical world and the spiritual world as completely parallel to each other in exacting detail.<sup>8</sup> From the perspective of the inner truth of Torah, every aspect of the physical world hides within it truth of its parallel — the spiritual world. This is expressed in a much-quoted sentence from the *Zohar*, “God looked into the Torah and created the world,”<sup>9</sup> which means that every aspect of the physical world is a manifestation and expression of the spiritual world.

It is true that on every other level — psychological, social, intellectual — the lines between male and female are consistently crossed and potentially blurred and it is difficult to label any trait as

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8. The word *Kabbalah* comes from the root *kuf-beit-lamed* (in Hebrew, קבל), which means “to receive” and refers to the ability to receive wisdom from above. But *Kabbalah* also shares a root with the word *makbil* (מקביל), “parallel,” hinting at its understanding of the parallels between the physical and spiritual worlds.

9. *Zohar* 2:161a.

specifically one or the other, but the physical model remains true to the male or female essence. Therefore, we use the physical model as a metaphor for these two traits, even as we know that none of us are exclusively male or female<sup>[b]</sup> — we all switch hats many times a day. Indeed, in the sources we see that men are occasionally described as portraying aspects of the female force and women are likewise described as portraying aspects of the male force.<sup>10[c]</sup>

In the next section, we will ground the labeling of a particular trait as male or female in the physical model, even while acknowledging that the actual manifestation of each trait varies between individuals, regardless of their sex.

We hope you have enjoyed this free excerpt of Miriam Kosman's book, *Circle, Arrow, Spiral: Exploring Gender in Judaism*.

If you'd like to keep reading, you can purchase the book in print or for Kindle on [Amazon](#).

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10. See p. 297, note 9.