

## ***Lekhah Dodi ve-Kabbalat Shabbat: Ha-Mashma`ut ha-Mistit (The Mystical Meaning of Lekhah Dodi and Kabbalat Shabbat )*** by Reuven Kimelman

Reviewed by Tsvi Blanchard

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# ***Lekhhah Dodi ve-Kabbalat Shabbat: Ha-Mashma`ut ha-Mistit* (The Mystical Meaning of *Lekhhah Dodi* and *Kabbalat Shabbat*) by Reuven Kimelman (Hebrew University, Magnes Press, 2003)**

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Most of us have wondered “What exactly *is* the meaning of the Shabbat evening liturgical poem *Lekhhah Dodi*?” After all, we sing it virtually every Friday night of the year. We probably want more than a translation as an answer. We want an explication, that is, an exposition and explanation of the text. But, whose explanation of the poem do we want? The one we might have expected from the author, Shlomo Alkabetz? The one we might have received from his contemporaries? From succeeding generations of interpreters? Or are we seeking a way of understanding *Lekhhah Dodi* that will enhance our own religious experience?

If we generally prefer the best construction of the author’s meaning, then Reuven Kimelman’s book on *Lekhhah Dodi* has the appropriate answer for us. Written in academic Hebrew, it offers us a careful, thorough and nuanced explanation of the poem that fits how the author himself, and his immediate circle, would probably have understood it. His conclusion: the meaning of *Lekhhah Dodi* can only be grasped through its kabbalistic references as they would have been understood in the Safed of the 1550’s, especially by those following Moses Cordovero. Although Kimelman is considered a scholar of rabbinic Judaism, this book shows that he is quite capable of working comfortably with a wide variety of Jewish mystical sources. Indeed, the book draws on an impressive list of sources from all genres of Jewish literature.

What are the central kabbalistic themes that the book finds in *Lekhhah Dodi*? Taken as a whole, the poem is “a lyric of redemption.” It points toward an era that is “wholly Sabbatical.” The poem’s richly associative language suggests a time of *tiqqun*, of fixing the sin of Adam; it alludes to an era that is an expanded utopian restoration of the cosmos to its initial paradisiacal state. Its metaphors reveal to us the joyful redeeming of evil and the return of all Christianity and Islam to the true worship of God. In this messianic era, holiness lovingly contains all reality—space, time, humanity and the realm of the *sefirot* (the dynamic emanations of the divine that continually create and recreate the cosmos and its structure).

The poem’s language is profoundly symbolic and associative on multiple levels; it points toward and even makes accessible a reality that transcends the sensory realm and its limited either-or logic. The coronation of the Sabbath as queen becomes the consummation of the sacred marriage between the masculine and the feminine. On the human level, man and woman unite, that is, they have sexual intercourse with the proper sacred intention. (Or, is it really as Elliot Wolfson has taught us, that the male “adept” unifies what he understands to be masculine and feminine parts of himself?) On the transcendent plane, the *sefirah* of *tiḥeret* (male) joins with the *sefirah* of *malḥbut* (female) and then both unite with the higher female *sefirah* of *binah*.

In this mirroring of above and below an intersection of the human and the divine occurs. Israel is married to the *shekhinah* (*malkhut*). On all levels, redemption comes through unification.

After reading the book, how will readers who are not personally at home with the mystical language of kabalistic symbolism understand *Lekhab Dodi*? Psychologically oriented readers might note that analytically the poem presents us with the familiar male-oriented family romance. The hero of the drama, the younger male (*tiferet*) must ultimately unite with the older female (*binah*, the supernal mother). In order to do this, he must first successfully unite with a younger female (*shekhinah*). And no surprise, the older male, (*hokhma*—the supernal father) who generated this with the older female is out of the picture.

However, most readers—who are uncomfortable with, or even skeptical about, depth-analytical

language—will be no any better off for having connected a particular set of analytic images to the poem’s kabbalistic ones.

Unfortunately, for readers without mystical, spiritual or “kabbalistic” *experience*, this book does not give real meaning to the literary images of *Lekhab Dodi*. By reading Kimelman’s book, they will learn only how a particular set of literary tropes were connected. They will be like high school geometry students who have learned a proof by heart without understanding it, or merely have memorized the *Cliff Notes* on *Macbeth*. Such are the limits of Jewish intellectual history, even of Kimelman’s fine work. We become the guardians of a history of religious ideas and language that, in truth, we don’t really understand. Although we might be able to say how the poem’s author would have explained it, we remain unable to give real life to the author’s language. In a very important sense, we still have no real idea of what *Lekhab Dodi* is about.