

**Kabbalah/Yoga**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores positive religious views of spirituality as embodied, active, and physical, through examination of performance in kabbalah and hatha yoga. Several Zohar passages on prayer movement are presented to explore how traditional prayer movements were interpreted. This examination includes rabbinic and Zohar commentary as well as comparison to hatha yoga texts and practices. Importantly, underlying concepts of initiating justice through ritual motion are examined.

Like some forms of yoga, some practices of kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) entail symbolic physical movement. Often an overlooked aspect of the tradition, it is mentioned in many of the best known texts of kabbalah. In a similar vein, the physical, ritual-like quality of hatha yoga is often dismissed as the surface level of the tradition. While technically correct, the result tends to be avoidance of the physical practice itself. Both groups understood intentional, specific physical performance to be essential, since these actions initiated important spiritual transformations in self and society.

Since practices of the Zohar are largely active, engaging the body in specific movements for prayer and meditation, they may be compared with hatha yoga. Such comparisons in particular reveal similarities between concepts of *sefirot* and *chakras*, energy centers that relate to the body. Overall, the two traditions transmit an understanding of the body as vital for living justly, so that all physical performance may be a means of creating a better world. In such a conception of life, sex is not only positive but holy.

While kabbalah and yoga are both offshoot traditions incorporated back into these official religions, the extremely positive view of the body they offer may prove helpful in dealing with the roots of wide-ranging modern issues such as obesity, sexual assault, and pornography. Yet it is the performance aspects of both that may prove especially valuable, as they teach how to re-pattern one's actions toward justice. Ritual and sexual actions may then actually change the world into a better place. In this article, I examine these traditions' views on the body, their understanding of ritual, sex, and spirituality, and finally discuss their underlying ethics.

**1. Basic Points of Comparison: Body Perceptions**

Hatha yoga's beginnings are attributed to Goraksha Natha, who lived in the late tenth to the eleventh century. Hatha yoga scriptures were written in the

thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, with a date of 1350 for the *Hatha-Yoga Pradipika*, perhaps its most important text (Feurstein, 385-386; 450-451). In comparison, the *Zohar* was published in the late thirteenth century.

It is possible that a similar understanding of human anatomy produced parallel results between basic theories of the body in these two spiritually focused practices. Through Arab scholars' investigation of human anatomy, knowledge about physiology spread both East and West. Noting this, Rabbi Mark Verman comments that in this time period there was great interest in the physical and spiritual significance of the spine (81). Both the *sefirot* of kabbalah and the *chakras* of hatha yoga are identified with this inner core of the body, along with theological metaphors of divine presence.

For the Zohar kabbalists, the *sefirot* were actually understood as divine energies that flowed down to earth and sustained it, yet identified with parts of the body – the head and brain with *keter* (crown), *binah* (understanding) and *chochmat* (wisdom); the heart, and right and left arms with *tiferet* (beauty), *gevurah* (strength), *hesed* (mercy) form the second triad; the pelvic center and legs with *yesod* (foundation), *nitzach* (victory), *hod* (glory) form the third triad; and *malchut* (earth).

Despite this identification, Isaiah Tishby points out that in the Zohar the body is degraded to a mere shell, and that it is the soul that is important. But Eliot Wolfson states that for the Zohar kabbalist, embodied action is perceived as a means to change the universe. The kabbalists understood that the divine feminine *Shekinah* is in exile on earth and that performance of the commandments might allow her to rejoin with the heavenly realm. Without the body, such actions could not be achieved, so deliberate physical movements for prayer were considered essential.

Hatha yoga's understanding of the *chakras* seems quite parallel to the *sefirot*, but is much more explicit in understanding them as wheels of energy existing in the body. Unlike earlier forms of yoga, hatha does not consider the body an impediment to spiritual development. Rather, it is an integral part of the process of seeking liberation. In yoga terminology, *prakriti* (matter) does not prevent you from finding *purusha* (true self or soul). The *Kula-Arvana Tantra* (9:41) expresses this philosophy, emphasizing that knowledge of the body is also means of ending ignorance of God: "The body is the abode of God, O Goddess...the psyche (*jiva*) is God *Sada-Shiva*. One should abandon the offering -remains of ignorance; one should worship with the thought 'I am He.'" Feurstein explains this quotation as one that reveals that "enlightenment" is possible "here and now" in a "divine or immortal body." This subtle body is achieved through "the state of balance...in the body" (390).

The physical body is enlightened through the practice of hatha yoga. The names of the seven tantric chakras engaged to achieve this subtle body are *muladhara* (at the base of the spine), *svadhishtana* (area of the "genitals") *manipura* (abdomen or navel), *anahata* (heart level), *vissuda* (throat), *ajna* (space between the eyes) and (top of the head) (Feurstein 354). If one opens the channels of the chakras, releasing latent energy in the spine – *kundalini*-one frees the soul for a state of true understanding and mystic unity. As with the

kabbalah idea of *sefirot*, *chakras* are considered male and female, and identified with one side of the body. They exist in the body, but also outside the body.

## 2. Performing: The body, ritual, and sexuality

For hatha yoga, specific body positions (*asana*) and sequences of positions release the *kundalini* energy in the body. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* states this metaphorically:

As the chief of the snakes is the support of the earth with all the mountains and forests on it, so all the Tantras (Yoga practices) rest on the *Kundalini*.  
...When the sleeping *Kundalini* awakens by favour of a guru, then all the lotuses [*chakras*] and all the knots are pierced through. (Sihh 3.2).

This is achieved through “various postures and different Kumbhakas [breath retentions], when the great power ... awakens” and the life force “becomes absorbed in” a meditative state (4.10). Though the directions for prayer in the Zohar are not as elaborate as for *asana* in the yoga text, the motions for prayer do have a similar immediate goal – preparation for meditation. A prime example is from the *Raya Mehemnah* (Zohar 3: 821). It is based on a passage from the Talmud in which the rabbis determine that one must involve the spine in prayer (*B. Berachot* 28b). The Zohar passage considers the custom of shaking a palm branch (*lulav*) for the harvest festival of *Sukkot*, saying it “is like the spinal chord that contains eighteen vertebra...” In this interpretation, like the *lulav*, the body's spine is also correlated with the name of God (Verman, 83).

The *Tikkunei Zohar*, written after the Zohar but now included with the main text, provides even more specifics, stating when and how often to bow. This was because “the letters” of the word for bowing (*baruch*) “alludes to the various *Sefirot*,” and it was important to unify them (Verman, 82-83):

... bow four times during the *Amidah*, twice during the initial three [blessings] and twice during the latter three. This corresponds to the four letters of [God's name]...They also straighten up four times, corresponding to its four letters... One must bend the eighteen vertebrae each time, corresponding the eighteen benedictions, which are included in the eighteen worlds...The spine is a *lulav*, for if it is split, it becomes defective...(18:37a).

Another example of prayer performance comes from the introduction to the Zohar: one was to prostrate before entering the sanctuary for prayer (Matt, 2004, vol. 1, 74-75). This is justified by quoting Psalm 5:8: “I will bow down to you” (*ishtchah* from the Hebrew *shachah*). Additionally, full prostration for prayer is discussed as part of the central *Amidah* standing prayer. Tishby notes that the action is 1) a sign of respect for the *Shekhinah* 2) a motion signifying rebirth, and 3) a symbolic death. Prostration is also for modesty, as there is an imagined intercourse of the *Shekhinah* with the Divine presence (Zohar 2.129a; PDZ, 381-82). Finally, the movement “involves the renewal of the soul, a kind of rebirth, by

making it participate in the insemination of new souls” (382). The Zohar explains that “...at the time she [the *Shekhinah*] receives souls and spirits through the pleasure of a single union, a man devotes his own heart and will to this and offers his own soul in union .....”( Zohar 2.200b ; PDZ, 382). Here, the desire of humans is positive, as the attachment is to the *feminine* presence of God on earth. The metaphors employed also affirm sex as positive and necessary for communion with God’s presence (Biale, 102).

Tishby’s discussion of the *Shema* prayer provides a glimpse of what leads into the *Amidah*, involving the body, bowing, and visualization. For this prayer, the middle *sefirot* are associated with “two arms of the male” and the upper *sefirot* with the head and heart, so the unification within the body is of head and heart. Similar to hatha yoga and its conception of joining *shiva* and *shakti* male and female energies, Tishby notes that “the unification of divine names is regarded as a preparation for intercourse.” The “upper *sefirot*, which represent the head, the home of the brain” are “thought to be the source of semen” (PDZ, 384- 386). Yet another unification technique for the *Shema* involves the center of the body with the head male, earth female, and heart central. The Zohar states this cryptically:

One at the top, the place of the beginning, whence paths extend to all sides; one in the middle, the mystery where Moses included himself among Abraham and Isaac, one is the measure of King David; there is a single method of restoration for them all.” (PDZ, 384).

Tishby’s considers the stillness and inward focus of prostration. Rather than simply intensifying ordinary prayer, such techniques are actually extraordinary in meaning. Though not as extreme as yoga *asana*, the Zohar prayer movements are dramatic, with a presumed significant effect on the individual practitioner. One does not perform such actions in everyday life, for they have significant meaning and will change the ordinary world. They must be done intentionally, with specific motions such as prostration. Prostration in prayer is often symbolically rich in meaning.

In consideration of the *sefirot*, the body would symbolize the *malkhut* or *Shekhinah* level. Given the words of the Zohar, and the association of parts of the body with the *sefirot*, this makes a great deal of sense. It is a humble position, and in yoga it would be called *balasana*- the child’s pose- for it’s fetus-like look. Not surprisingly, in yoga, such a pose is considered restorative. The central metaphor of this behavior was one of *kavvanah* (intention), symbolized in the phrase “worship of the Heart.” While the concept of worship of the heart was important in medieval Jewish thought, it received particular attention from the zoharists. The word they used for *kavvanah* was the Aramaic *re’utah*, which implies will or desire. In practice, this meant that one was to include the body in ritual, rather than thoughts alone. For “correct intention of both mind and body cause the radiance of the *Shekhinah* to descend upon them.” Furthermore, it was important to sense the “internal parts” of the body in prayer, rather than just the “outer” body. As a part of prayer, the body may then be viewed as a “sacrifice, set

on flame by the fires of the heart “(PDZ 343-356). As a result, “good will suffuses all the body organs...and they attract the radiance of the *Shekhinah* to dwell on them...”(360-361). In hatha yoga, as part of Tantric tradition, similar metaphors come into play. Yogis refer to the fires built in the physical body through breathing and *asana* practice, which burn away what they call the ethereal body. This allows for the individual yogi to join with the Universal, cosmic body. Additionally, the yogic concept of the subtle body included six layers to overcome, to attain a celestial body (See Feursteing, 390; White). This is not unlike the ascent of the kabbalah soul through the *sefirot*.

### 3. Performing for Justice

Catherine Bell reminds us that ritual happens in and through the ritual body, and it is important to pay attention to the practice of ritual. Moshe Idel comments that this is true for the kabbalists, and it is important to give more attention to their actual practices rather than simply the written texts (2005, 221-227). Words, of course, are still important to Jewish rituals. Yet the zoharists understand their ritual performance to have had universal implications. Viewed as ritual for meditation, yoga might be seen as a similar type of performance, for yogis also understand their actions affect the world. Examining the stated focus, implied meanings, and, importantly, the intentions of these two practices as ritual may allow for an understanding of major metaphors employed by both (see Grimes, 1982, 43; Langer, 2).

The specific metaphors enlisted in the zohar and hatha yoga are body-based, if not sexual, with the major symbolism of bowing in ritual most likely one of transformation. In hatha yoga, the purpose for the use of this specific motion is clearly for transformation to an enlightened body, capable of achieving *samhadi*, a temporary state of equilibrium and unity. It occurs through the body, which transforms to include a subtle and superior state. Wolfson suggests that the transformation in the Zohar view of prayer is to an angelic body. Just as the purpose of hatha *asana* was to affirm the gross physical body as a vehicle to realizing an enlightened body, it appears the kabbalist prayer motions were envisioned as a means of developing a higher corporeal state. The zoharists did sometimes express disdain for the physical body, but, according to Wolfson, this is a reflection of medieval rather than rabbinic thought. So the zoharist response was to consider how the physical body might be transformed to a state of higher being. Flesh then is not simply flesh, but truly a reflection of God.

Wolfson relates that the kabbalists understood the body as a means of enacting Torah. Understood as “limb strengthens limb” the implications were that human actions affect God, and in the process the human body is also transformed. Therefore, ritual actions become important to zoharists, understanding that their performance “fortifies the divine attributes, which are imaginably envisioned as bodily limbs...”(490; 492). Ritual performance was important as “an instrument through which the physical body is conjoined to and transformed in light of the imaginal body of God” (490; 492). It then “becomes the perfect vehicle to execute the will of the soul and soul becomes the perfect

guide in directing the will of the body. ..." Wolfson calls this the "transformed angelic body" (492-493).

#### 4. Tantric Yoga and the Subtle Body

The angelic body of the kabbalist may be quite fairly compared with the subtle body of the yogi. Even the erotic implications are present in both tantric-inspired hatha yoga and kabbalah. As Idel reaffirms, the similarities are striking. He attributes this to the need for the body to translate an imagined reality. The story of hatha yoga, though, also suggests the reason that the zoharists intensified, if not changed, Jewish ritual activity. In hatha yoga manipulation of the body leads to spiritual development, yet the human body is a microcosm of the universe, and connected to the whole. The motions and positions of the body in yoga practice might refine it to overcome death, but also to change the world – physically moving it to a higher plane of existence. According to David Gordon White, the yoga body was the alchemical body, capable of transforming physical reality, falling into a state of *samhadi*, and thereby transforming the world. By allowing for the entrance of the divine into the self, the greater Self enters the world. *Siva* or *Visnu* ultimately "awakens – pours himself out into mundane being...it is nothing other than the *pralaya*, the universal restoration of all mundane existence in the primal and primordial essence that is the Absolute God" (221).

This idea is similar to the kabbalist refrain of "as above, so below." In their view, the structure of the universe is what Idel calls the "great chain of being" or the "enchanted chain" (2005, 74-75). He finds this to be a common image in what he calls psycho-spiritual practices such as yoga and kabbalah. The understanding for the kabbalists, at least, was that human action was part of a bi-polar flow. Divine energy flowing down from above enlightened humans. Human physical response resulted in a flow of energy upward, affecting the divine sphere.

#### 5. Body and Performance

Perhaps more similar in the two systems are the reasons they were created with such a pronounced stress on physical performance. In Vedic and earlier yoga tradition, there is a strong bias against the physical world. In medieval Judaism, there was also a bias against the body, despite rabbinic affirmation of humans as the image of God.

On Indian views of the body prior to *tantric* yoga, Feurstein simply states that the Vedic texts contain a strong, historic bias against the physical (506; 586). In contrast, in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, Maimonides' view of the human body is fairly positive. Nevertheless, he does devalue prayer movements and gesture, and determines that imagined realities are inventions and "no test for the reality of a thing" (130-131). The practice of the Zohar kabbalists and the hatha yogis seem a medieval response to such negative conceptions of the body and the value of human actions. While the late medieval world included considerable disdain for human bodies in both India and Europe, it was still a period rich in sensuous liturgical drama that combined music, dance, and poetry (see Kirstein; Shiloah;

Taylor). According to Doug Adams, such ritual activity in medieval times was opposite the idea of intellectual meditation, which requires withdrawal from the world. In contrast, ritual performance activities draw people together (38-39). Meditation and prayer need not be a matter of withdrawal from the world. They may be communal, involving action, gestures, and motions that facilitate meditation. Such embodied ritual preparation may itself mark the stillness that follows it in meditation, when the body and thought rest. This is yet another aspect of the bipolar reality of being. Furthermore, as it was communal, the movement of the ritual body was also a means of connection to the larger world.

It was also understood that the body's movement had the potential, at least symbolically, to activate the "potencies, found in [hu]man, nature, and the divinity" (Idel, 2005, 75). While this occurred during ritual, the effects were lasting. By reprogramming the body symbolically, the actions of the individual would also change outside the ritual setting. Furthermore, the effect was not only on the individual, but also transformative of the community, since divine energy was released by symbolic activity.

### **Conclusions: Ritual Transformation and Embodiment**

We live in a physical world that is not removed from spiritual reality. This idea was hardly new to either the zoharists or the hatha yogis. Jewish ritual established itself on the basis of motion, with many blessings requiring actions, gestures, and motions. Yoga's background in Pantanjali's *Sankhya*-based *Yoga Sutras* also recognizes that the body and mind are not separate, are part of the world, and that physical control of the body was beneficial in overcoming the barriers of mind and matter. What was particular to both the Zohar's interpretation of Jewish ritual and hatha yoga, though, was that the body was essential for individual and community transformation. It was through and with the body that the transformation occurred. Additionally, for the sake of community, intentional physical performance of specific movements initiated important spiritual changes in the individual and in the world.

Wolfson's re-evaluation of the understanding of the body in the Zohar is quite helpful in seeing that ritual performance was perceived as a means of channeling divine energy into the world. Use and emphasis on movement into specific prayer and meditation positions might even be described as the yoga *asana* of kabbalah. The Zohar's approach was not simply to reaffirm rabbinic dictates for prayer, but to add to the meaning of specific actions and motions. When performed with deliberate and focused intention, they allow for entrance into meditative prayer. In turn, this transforms the individual. As in yoga, while human physiology might be affected, the stress is on recognizing the body as spiritual.

Meaningful ritual inherently involves bodies in movement. The very nature of symbolic movement instills in a community the need and desire to take action – to move and change. Hatha yoga recognized such power of movement, and used it to develop positions that created the enlightened body, capable of serving the community. A similar process occurred in the zoharist understanding of prayer positions, with the image of the spine as the enchanted chain apparently

a major shared metaphor for both yoga and kabbalah. It allowed these traditions to assign great value to human movement and specific, symbolic positions. Quite literally, if you transform your body, you change the world.

Yoga's subtle body and the Zohar's angelic body inform us that it was not physical being alone that was important, but active engagement of the body that initiated change on many levels. The movement of prayer, with its specific positions allowed one to live in a transformed and renewed state, and in a transformed world. The underlying ethic of the transformation stressed a repatterning of movement, which allowed for divine justice to enter the world via the individual. The implications of this insight are many, but at very least is a reminder of why the body is of great spiritual worth.

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**Online Resources:**

Aramaic text: [www.sup.org/Zohar](http://www.sup.org/Zohar)

On-line edition in Aramaic and English:  
[www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php/p=Zohar](http://www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php/p=Zohar),

Hatha Yoga Texts: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/hin/yoga/index.htm>