



## A “HIGH WATER MARK” OF ASSAGIOLI’S RELIGIOUS LIFE

Since 2014 I have had the opportunity to spend many hours in collaboration with Gruppo alle Fonti, helping to catalog Roberto Assagioli’s archives as well as compiling and editing Assagioli’s book *Freedom in Jail*. It is difficult to describe how meaningful this time has been for me personally and spiritually. As a volunteer, not only do you spend hours handling Assagioli’s notes, letters, documents and manuscripts, but you also work, sleep and share meals with other volunteers, together in the same spaces where he and his family once lived. The space and its energy seems to envelop you. Time either creeps by slowly or flows easily along with one’s discoveries.

And there is always a discovery. Some delightful, others thought-provoking. Occasionally there is a new breath of understanding. Other times you fall down Alice’s rabbit hole, into a Wonderland of your imagination. The discovered manuscript peaks your curiosity, driving you deeper into the vast realm of psychosynthesis and the life of Roberto Assagioli.

This article is about one such discovery. A discovery that arrived as a gift.

After intense days of work at Casa Assagioli, I often spend my last two hours exploring my own interests. Many times I ask for interior guidance. What is it I need to discovery? What direction do I need to take? One autumn morning I stood alone in what was once the small waiting room for Assagioli’s patients and visitors. Its walls are now lined with shelves full of bulky folders, waiting to be organized, scanned and cataloged. Which box do I need to open? My intuition told me to take the box labeled “Judaism”. There was no rational reason for me to explore this box’s contents. I am not Jewish nor do I have any special interest in this particular topic. But I took it, opened it, and started to read from its large stack of papers. It was not long before I found this typewritten note (in English):

*A considerable minority of those who had remained in Italy survived after many vicissitudes. I will tell you briefly my own story because it was more or less typical. In 1940 I was put into jail in Rome being accused of internationalism and pacifism. In order not to infect others with my pernicious doctrines, I was put into a separate cell. For this I was and am very grateful because it gave me the opportunity of creating a “spiritual retreat”, of having a period of intense prayer, and of performing a series of psycho-spiritual exercises of concentration, meditation and contemplation...*

How wonderful! I thought. An intimate reflection by Assagioli which is uncommonly rare to find. Of course, I am familiar with this story due to my involvement with his book *Freedom in Jail*. However, the note continued and quickly offered a surprise ...

*I must say in all humility that God blessed me; he granted me the experience of the Shechinah, of His divine living presence. It was a high water mark in my religious life. This experience was so strong and vital that when, after a month, through the active intervention of very influential friends, I was released, at first I almost regretted it!*

While in prison Assagioli had an experience of *Shechinah*! That’s why the note is in the box on Judaism. Briefly, *Shechinah* (also spelled *Shekhina*, *Shekhinah*, *Shechina*, or *Schechina*) is a transliteration of the Aramaic שְׁכִינָה, a Talmudic term describing the manifestation of God’s presence on earth. The word literally means ‘dwelling’ or ‘presence’. But more on this later... For now, let’s return to the note.

*Then I was kept under the strict supervision of the police, who often came at night to see if I was at home and not engaged in secret revolutionary plotting. But in 1943 the persecution became more severe, and informed me [sic], in time, I took refuge in the Apennine mountains above Arezzo (between Florence and Rome). There I had a second beautiful spiritual experience which completed the previous one, the experience of*

*human brotherhood in action. First the humble peasants of the zone hid, protected and nourished me, with deep kindness. Then a definite group was gradually formed, composed of Italian partisans, some English and American soldiers who had escaped from concentration camps, two Austrian Jews, a Slav, and a gallant English parachutist, who had come down behind the German lines. We shared all we had, food, clothing, information, mental and spiritual gifts, in a truly brotherly way. It was a wonderful experience of the nobility of human nature at its best. (Roberto Assagioli)*

Such a beautiful testimony! And very interesting that Assagioli's experience of *Shechinah*, or God's presence in the world, occurred in two different stages – beginning when he was completely alone in his prison cell, and then nearly three years later while he was living in exile with others. In Assagioli's "Letter to Friends" dated September 1944, he humorously describes the conditions he underwent while in exile – leaking roofs, sleeping in barns, waking up to the sounds of English and German machine gunfire, and "a rich assortment of exceptional lively and resourceful local insects."<sup>1</sup> However, he does not mention his experience of *Shechinah*, despite it being a "high water mark" of his religious life.

In the Jewish tradition, at the beginning of the Talmudic era, the word *Shechinah* meant the aspect of God that dwelt among people and could be apprehended by the senses. In rabbinic literature the *Shechinah* is said to have descended on the Tabernacle and on Solomon's Temple, as well as being one of the five things lacking in the Second Temple. The glory of God that filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:34) was thought of as a bright radiance, and the *Shechinah* is sometimes similarly conceived.<sup>2</sup> A multitude of scholarly articles have been written on the word, its meaning and historical context, including research on its feminine nature, as *Shechinah* in the Aramaic language is a feminine term.

The term *Shechinah* has deep roots in Jewish scripture and is connected to the experience of God's dwelling among his chosen people. "I will dwell among the children of Israel" (1 Kings 6:13). God wishes to be present especially in the Jerusalem temple: "The Lord has chosen Zion and desired it for his dwelling place" (Psalm 132:13). The Christian scriptures continue to expound on *Shechinah* in the New Testament: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14) and "We are the temple of the living God" (2 Corinthians 6:16). Both the Jewish and Christian traditions believe *Shechinah* to be a form of divine immanence and power, capable of transforming human beings and the world through God's self-revelation within the limits of space and time. In Arabic *Sakīnah* (سكينة) means "tranquility", "peace", or "calm", and in Islam, *Sakīnah* "designates a special peace, the Peace of God." Associated with piety and moments of divine inspiration, *Sakīnah* in Islamic mysticism signifies an interior spiritual illumination.<sup>3</sup>

When you search Assagioli's online archives for the word *Shechinah* (along with all its various spellings), you find only six entries, mostly as citations to the works of Martin Buber.<sup>4</sup> Of particular interest, the word appears in an Italian translation of a German speech *Cheruth: eine Rede über Jugend und Religion* (Herut: On Youth and Religion) that Martin Buber delivered in 1918 and published in 1919 for the shell-shocked disoriented Austrian and German youth of post-World War I.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this speech was about the freedom offered to us by God. True freedom is not wildly hedonistic and limitless in scope. Rather, true inner freedom is held within certain ethical constraints and rooted in our responsibility for our continual spiritual growth, as well as our commitment to community and God.

What also peaked my interest was Assagioli's choice of the words 'high water mark' to describe his experience of *Shechinah*. This term signifies this experience was one of the highest levels or peaks of his entire religious life. Undoubtedly Assagioli experienced a revelation of joy that deeply touched him. This brief text shows that not only did Assagioli find God dwelling deep within himself as he sat alone, confined within a prison cell, but he was graced with feeling God's presence while living through a world war, amongst an international community of exiles, in a leaky barn tucked away in the Arezzo mountains.

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Catherine Ann Lombard

#### Notes

1. Roberto Assagioli. *Freedom in Jail*. Introduced, edited and annotated by Catherine Ann Lombard. Florence, Istituto di Psicosintesi, 2015, pp. 85-87.
2. Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Shekhina". Encyclopedia Britannica, February 7, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shekhina>.
3. John L. Esposito, *The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*. Oxford University Press. 2004, p. 274, ISBN 9780199757268.
4. See Assagioli's Archives, Doc. #9075, 17573, 17595, 17632, 17591, 18458. Istituto di Psicosintesi, [www.archivioassagioli.org](http://www.archivioassagioli.org)
5. Martin Buber, "*Cheruth - Discorso sui giovani e sulla religione*" a translation of "*Cheruth: eine Rede über Jugend und Religion*," 1919. Manuscript in Assagioli's Archives. Doc. #18458. Istituto di Psicosintesi, [www.archivioassagioli.org](http://www.archivioassagioli.org).

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