

Hillel Zeitlin and Neo-Hasidic Readings of the *Zohar*

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The genesis of this paper lies in two places. One is the work I have been doing, for the past year or so, on Hillel Zeitlin, translating selected writings into English and preparing a collection for publication.¹ Zeitlin's work, particularly his 1910 essay *Ha-Hasidut*² had a decisive influence on me when I read it at about age twenty. Since nothing other than one or two prayers of Zeitlin has ever appeared in English, I promised long ago that I would edit such a volume, and I am now engaged in fulfilling that promise. The other is Joel Hecker's very interesting review of the Matt translation and my *Guide to the Zohar*.³ These two are connected by a notion of Neo-Hasidism, including my claim that Zeitlin is the real founder of Neo-Hasidic thought, and that means an important spiritual ancestor of my own, and Hecker's claim that both Matt's and my readings of the *Zohar* are in fact Neo-Hasidic.⁴

As I read the Hecker piece, which at first glance shocked and even annoyed me, I came to understand that by 'Neo-Hasidic' he meant 'experientially based', that is to say that I (I'll leave Matt aside here; he can well represent himself) understand much of the *Zohar*, especially the whole world of sefirotic language, to reflect the inner experience of the authors, or to serve as an attempt to articulate the reality of such a realm of essentially trans-verbal experience. To say it more broadly, I emphasize the *mystical* side of the *Zohar*, as distinct, shall we say, from the metaphysical, historical, and ideational.

¹ Forthcoming from Paulist Press in the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series.

² Republished as *Yesodot ha-Hasidut* in the posthumous collection *Be-Fardes ha-Hasidut vaha-Kabbalah*. Jerusalem 1960.

Joel Hecker 'New-Ancient Words and New-Ancient Worlds', *Hebrew Studies* 47 (2006), pp. 403-431.

The term Neo-Hasidism was first coined in literary circles in the early twentieth century and applied to the writings of Y. L. Peretz and M. Y. Berdyczewski. On this see Nicham Ross, *A Love-Hate Relationship with Tradition: Neo-Hasidic Writing at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*. Doctoral Dissertation, Ben Gurion University, 2004 [Hebrew].

Though I surely do not deny the influence of medieval cosmology, broader cultural influences, or the Midrashic imagination on the *Zohar* and on Kabbalistic symbolism as a whole,⁵ I am especially interested in the ways in which a world of religious experience seems to peer forth from between the words and letters of the text. In this context I might claim that this is not Neo-Hasidism as much as it is psychology of religion, that William James rather than Hillel Zeitlin stands behind my readings. That was why my first reaction to Hecker's description was to be taken aback. But after spending a couple of months this year translating Zeitlin's wonderful essay *Be-Hevyon ha-Neshamah*, his 1913 response to reading James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*, I realized that these approaches are not easily divided from one another. The Neo-Hasidic claim, which I share with Zeitlin, that every person (not just every Jew; this differentiates Neo- from classical Hasidism) is potentially capable of profound religious experience, and the Jamesian description of such experiences in *Varieties* partake of related assumptions. Update them both with some of the more serious religious and intellectual reflections to come out of the psychedelics-influenced culture of the 1960's (ranging from Baba Ram Dass and even such notorious folks as Leary and Castaneda to Norman O. Brown and R. D. Laing), and you will see a good bit of whence my understandings of the *Zohar* emerge.⁶ Of course this is not an exclusive approach; otherwise it too, like any single tool, could become reductionist. I combine it with a great deal that I have learned from Scholem, Liebes, and many others. But it is largely what is distinctive in my own readings of the *Zohar* text, reflected in the *Guide* and elsewhere.

A lot of the picture has to do with what students of religious experience, especially as reflected through the post-psychedelic lens, call *re-entry*. The mind has been through an experience of individual identity loss. This may be the result of *unio mystica*, the individual self absorbed in the infinitely greater cosmic Self, the 'drop in the ocean' to which Moshe Idel points us in some Jewish sources,⁷ or it may be more like a disintegration of self in awe or terror,

As clearly evidenced by my *Keter: The Crown of God in Early Jewish Mysticism*, Princeton 1997 and 'Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs', *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 26 (2002), pp. 1-52.

While I now look upon my early essays on psychedelics and Kabbalah as juvenilia, I by no means repudiate the essential insights expressed there, some of which echo through all my later theological and personal writings.

Kabbalah: New Perspectives, New Haven 1988, 67-70.

or in passion that reaches beyond love, before the *mysterium*. In any case, as the experience begins to fade, the mind needs to re-enter, to fit itself back into the brain, as it were, and to re-adjust itself to ordinary consciousness, the world of *qatnut ha-mohin* (in the Hasidic sense) where we live most of our lives. This re-entry process may take some time, but time itself is part of the issue here. It may take some hours that seem like eternities, but also pass *ke-heref 'ayin*. In the course of re-entry, the self may experience itself as being re-born, personality re-emerging stage by stage out of transcendent nothingness, re-establishing its footing on terra firma. Of such moments one says *Barukh roqa' ha-areṣ 'al ha-mayyim*. In the course of re-entry, the spiritual voyager may also re-discover 'God', who as a personal figure has been lost, just as the mystic him or herself has been lost, in the course of the inward journey toward Nothingness.

I am suggesting that the very heart of Zoharic religious language, the account of *'olam ha-sefirot*, is on one level a series of descriptions of this experience, projected onto God. The ever-repeating story of the emergence of the divine persona from the Nothingness of *Eyn Sof*, through the mysterious chamber of *ayin* and the union of *hokhmah* and *binah*, until the person of God takes shape in the seven lower *sefirot*, is, from this point of view, a projected account of mystical re-entry and the reconstitution of the human self, including both polarities of right/left and male/female, on return from an experience of inner self-transcendence. The Kabbalist, dimly aware of this, assumes that he is reaching in the depths of his own experience some repetition of the great cosmic process. He understands this emergence of selfhood to take place primarily in God; it is merely reflected in our meditative lives as God-seeking Kabbalists, since we are in His image in the most realized way. The psychologist of religion will see these things reversed, the tale of God's emergence an infinitely magnified – and hence possibly grandiose – projection of human religious experience. But no matter: the mystic has always understood that the hall of mirrors can be read from either end. Saying that last sentence is the moment, of course, when I go from James to Zeitlin, when a psychology of mysticism allows itself to be read also as a mystical theology.

The most essential structural building block of this reading is the understanding of all the *Zohar's* vaunted vertical language, composed in a medieval universe redolent with hierarchy, on an internal rather than vertical axis, a move that will be familiar to those who have read any of my own theological writings. The journey from *malkhut* to *binah*, or from *ze'ir* to *'atiqa*, is not a journey 'up' into heavenly realms but rather a turning inward,

the mind entering into successively deeper and more recondite chambers of consciousness, *hedrey ha-lev*, as Rav Hai calls them,⁸ until one reaches the inner 'place' where the individual ceases to know itself and joins with the underlying stratum of selfhood that unites it with all being. This is the inner realm described by Dov Baer of Miedzyrzec as *qadmut ha-sekhel*, which Sigmund Hurwitz long ago suggested be identified with the Jungian Unconscious.⁹ Once this internalization of the system is absorbed, all the rest will follow.

What I have done here, you might say, is to undercut or reverse Scholem's presentation of Zoharic Kabbalah and Hasidism in *Major Trends* and elsewhere. Scholem presented the sefirotic Kabbalist largely as a metaphysician or theosophist, influenced most definitively by the speculative universe of medieval Jewish philosophy and the inadequacies that he, the Kabbalist, found within it. In quest of a more profound vision of the cosmos than that which philosophy could express in its stilted and formalized linguistic artifice, while also seeking to defend and protect *sodot ha-Torah* from being dismissed or explained away, the Kabbalists wrought their creative masterpiece, the symbolic edifice of the *sefirot*. While this symbol system indeed had psychological implications, its primary locus was in the metaphysical realm, serving as an account of Creation, origins, and the workings of the universe. Hasidism, a popular revivalist movement largely feeding on the collapse of the by then over-extended and highly abstruse network of Kabbalistic symbols, adapts them for description of human emotional states and personality types, matters comprehensible and of concern to the enthusiastic popular following it hoped to develop.

What I am claiming is that the psychological realm is crucial, perhaps even primary, from the beginning, and was in the background of its projection onto the metaphysical sphere. *The 'workshop', if you will, where symbols are forged, is that of human inner experience.* The building blocks of symbolic creativity, including *aggadot*, snippets of Biblical and liturgical language, pictures from nature, and all the rest, come together into symbolic coherence only because they collectively succeed in describing something that 'rings true' to human experience.

As quoted in the *'Arukh*, referring to *merkavah* 'voyages'. See B. M. Levin, *Oṣar ha-Ge'onim, Hagigah*; Responsa p. 14.

Sigmund Hurwitz, 'Psychological Aspects of Early Hasidic Literature', *Timeless Documents of the Soul*, ed. J. Hillman. Evanston 1968, pp. 151-239.

Of course this reversal is not entirely new on my part. Indeed much of it has been laid out, especially by Moshe Idel, over the years; he deserves full credit for pushing us beyond Scholem's view of the Kabbalist as metaphysician and opening respectable scholarship to the domain of religious experience. Idel has continued to push us in this direction of thinking in experiential categories, while still dwarfing us all in his knowledge of text. In seeking to emphasize the importance of Abulafian Kabbalah, however, where reports of religious experience are direct rather than encrypted in symbolism and metaphysical projections, sometimes the experiential roots of the sefirotic school get played down for the sake of contrast. Extensive and rich contributions to the experiential basis of symbolic expression in Kabbalah are also found in the writings of our colleague Elliot Wolfson. I am grateful especially for his appreciation of the subtle interrelationship of hermeneutic and inner experience. I am not seeking to claim *hiddush* here. On the contrary, I seek rather *'atiquat* and am glad of the contributions of others to areas where I have been thinking and teaching for many years, but have been slow to write.

The above 'confessional', if you will, confirms the appropriateness of the label that Hecker has affixed to me as a reader of the *Zohar*, one I wear quite proudly. It does not yet, however, identify me with Zeitlin or his understanding of the *Zohar*, to which I shall now turn my attention.

I begin with a few biographical notes, though I will keep these very brief, presuming that the major outlines are known or accessible elsewhere.¹⁰ Hillel Zeitlin was born in 1871 in Korma, a Belorussian town, to a moderately enlightened HaBaD family. His early upbringing seems to have been typical for the era, his mother representing in his life a strong pull toward traditional piety. In a brief autobiographical essay published in 1928, Zeitlin recalls a period of intense religious fervor that seized him at age 13, one that seems to indicate an early sign of attraction to mysticism.

Shortly after I left Recica (where he was studying with a *HaBaD* teacher), I found myself consumed by ecstasy. Half a year later, when I was about 13, I was truly submerged in infinity (*shaqu'a be-eyn sof*). No one knew what was happening to me, because I was by nature a retiring and lonely type, but I still remember in hidden joy that time when I was able almost to see 'the power of the Maker within

¹⁰ The most important full-length biography of Zeitlin is Shraga Bar-Sella, *Between the Storm and the Quiet: The Life and Works of Hillel Zeitlin*, Tel Aviv 1999 [Hebrew]. Most impressive work on Zeitlin has been undertaken by Jonatan Meir in an array of articles, several of which will be quoted below.

the made'. Peering through the physical nature of things, I constantly saw 'the divine power flowing through them in each moment, without which they are nothing at all'. I found myself in a state of ecstasy that I had not known previously, nor have I since.¹¹

By a few years later, however, after working for some years as a wandering *melammed*, Zeitlin was living in Homel, part of a circle of young writers and intellectuals around Sender Baum that included Uri Zvi Genessin and Yosef Hayyim Brenner among others. These were all young men who had left the world of tradition behind, although Brenner in a later memoir describes Zeitlin of those days as still wandering about the house wrapped in a *tallit*, though apparently unable to pray.¹²

A personality drawn to extreme pessimism, young Zeitlin was much influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Of these he says, in that same brief memoir:

In going deeply into Schopenhauer and Hartmann I learned to distinguish between their atheistic, European outer selves and the mysterious Indian within them. I saw, through the outward radical irreligion of Friedrich Nietzsche to the man who sought God in this world almost to the point of madness. For that recognition I am grateful to the most original Jew I have met in my lifetime - Lev Shestov.^{13 14}

Within this literary circle, he seems to have been the one most drawn to contemporary Western philosophy. His first work published in book form was a sympathetic account of Baruch Spinoza, published in 1900, followed by essays on Nietzsche and some quasi-poetic invocations of pessimistic philosophy. But by 1910 he had turned to Hasidism as the chief focus of his literary interest; in that year he published three short books on the subject in Hebrew (one of them contained the essay on Hasidic thought to which I have referred above), as well as a collection of essays in Yiddish. Perhaps tellingly,

one of those essays is titled *A Rakhmones af'n alten Got!* In this period Zeitlin can not yet be called a *ba'al teshuvah*; it seems unlikely that he had returned to religious observance, but he was giving full vent to his own passionate religious longings, felt especially in *Be-Hevyon ha-Neshamah*, really an attempt at his own phenomenology of religion, based on Jewish sources. As I have mentioned elsewhere,¹⁵ this work served as a major source of inspiration to my own teacher Abraham Joshua Heschel. Several of the key opening chapters of Heschel's *God in Search of Man* may be read as poetic expansions of and reflections on Zeitlin's categories of description.

The experience of living in Warsaw through the First World War, a conflict he utterly opposed and by which he was quite horrified, was traumatic for Zeitlin. During this period his more intense religious feelings were reawakened, and it was out of the nexus of the war years and their terrible aftermath for East European Jewry that Zeitlin, rejecting much of modernity and the horrors it had wrought, made the passage back to a life of full religious observance and claimed back even the style of dress of the old-world Jew.

Zeitlin's *teshuvah*, if one may call it that, was never total from an intellectual point of view. Throughout the interwar years, he made his living primarily as a journalist, including the writing of frequent historical pieces, intellectual reflections, and reminiscences on various matters Kabbalistic and Hasidic for publication in Warsaw's major secular Yiddish dailies, *Heynt* and *Der Moment*. It should be recalled that most of these papers' readers were themselves just one generation removed from Hasidism. Although secular in self-identification, many apparently enjoyed reading well-informed pieces about the Jewish world from which they had come, and which was still quite alive around them. In writing on these matters, however, Zeitlin remains faithful to his modern, western self. He will often compare a Hasidic tale to something in Tolstoy or Dostoevsky, a mystical formulation in Jewish sources to something he has read of Ramakrishna, and so forth. In his collection of prayer/poems, published in Hebrew in *Ha-Tequfah* in 1923 and three years later in Yiddish as *Gezangn tsum Eyn Sof*, alongside the *Zohar*, the BeSHT, and Rabbi Nahman he includes prayers of such *gedoelim* as Saint Augustine and Simeon the New Theologian. Indeed he had read and been influenced by Martin Buber's *Ekstatische Konfessionen*, which had done the same in German some years previously. Both Buber and Zeitlin, the two founding figures of

¹⁵ 'Three Warsaw Mystics', *Qolot Rabbim: The Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer Memorial Volume*, ed. R. Elijor and J. Dan. Jerusalem 1996, v. 2, p. 33.

¹¹ Hillel Zeitlin, 'Qışsur Toldotai', *Sifran Shel Yehidim: Ketavim Mequbbasim*, Jerusalem 1980, pp. 1-2.

¹² Y. H. Brenner, 'Al Hillel Zeitlin: Min ha-'Izzavon', *Mibi-Fenim* 4:28 (1967) 334-343. On the relationship of Zeitlin and Brenner see Jonatan Meir, 'Longing of Souls for the Shekhina: Relations between Rabbi Kook, Zeitlin, and Brenner', *The Path of the Spirit: The Eliezer Schweid Jubilee Volume*, Jerusalem 2005, pp. 771-818.

¹³ Russian-Jewish religious philosopher (1866-1938) who inhabited a middle ground between Judaism and Orthodox Christianity.

¹⁴ Zeitlin, 'Qışsur Toldotai', p. 3.

Neo-Hasidism, accept a notion of spirituality that transcends the borders between religions and their respective symbolic languages.

It is no surprise, therefore, that Zeitlin was not welcomed with open arms by the dominant Hasidic group in Warsaw, the court of Ger (Gora Kalwarya). In fact he had some pretty harsh words for present-day Hasidism,¹⁶ and he was never a man to keep his opinions to himself. Socially as well, Zeitlin seems to have chosen to live mostly among Warsaw's secular intelligentsia, where he was a rare figure in being religiously observant and utterly unique in his appearance and manner of dress. His son Elkhonon wrote a memoir, *In a Literarishn Shtub*, about life in his father's house, published posthumously after the war.¹⁷ (Elkhonon died of illness in the ghetto in 1942; his grave can be seen in the very front row of the huge Warsaw Jewish cemetery.) The book portrays Zeitlin living in the world of Hebrew and Yiddish literati, making almost no mention of rebbes or even rabbis frequenting the Zeitlins' home.

Zeitlin's major writings on Kabbalah appeared in *Ha-Teqifah* in 1919/20. First published was *Qadmut ha-Mistorin be-Yisra'el*, an inquiry into the origins of mysticism in Judaism and a review of the historical treatment of Jewish mysticism until his day. Later that same year came *Mafteah le-Sefer ha-Zohar*, an essay on the *Zohar's* antiquity and authorship, followed by four chapters that offered a poetic and evocative recapitulation of some key Zoharic themes: the human body, the soul, 'worlds', and divinity. All of these were reprinted, with mostly stylistic changes, in *Be-Fardes ha-Hasidut ve-ha-Kabbalah*.

With regard to questions of text and tradition history, from our contemporary point of view Zeitlin must be seen as mostly an apologist for traditional viewpoints and a naysayer to critical approaches. *Qadmut ha-Mistorin* makes for fascinating reading, however, because it offers a review of the very latest in scholarship on Kabbalah just four years before Scholem began his career with his first major publication, his German translation of *Sefer ha-Bahir*. While there is no need to review the specifics here, it is noteworthy that certain key issues remain constant, despite a ninety-year gap and the tremendous outpouring of scholarship throughout that period, especially in more recent years. In reviewing various theories on Kabbalah's origin, Zeitlin is already discussing whether it is legitimate to date the existence of Kabbalah as a secret oral tradition to some centuries prior to the

publication, or even writing, of the first Kabbalistic texts. He tries to imagine that Kabbalistic ideas are quite early, going well back into the rabbinic period, a conversation that has certainly been reopened around the writings of Moshe Idel. Zeitlin also goes farther, attempting to link early Jewish esotericism back to the prophets, preferring internal Jewish sources over any thought of outside influence.

In seeking these earlier origins, Zeitlin is quite happy to quote in positive terms the views of the great Russian Jewish historian Avraham Eliyahu Harkavy (1835-1919), the translator of Graetz' *History of the Jews* into Hebrew, who added significant notes of his own. Harkavy suggests a Babylonian and Geonic period origin for much of Jewish esotericism, including the roots of theoretical as well as practical Kabbalah. This material passed to Europe, both Provence and Ashkenaz, through a Mediterranean/Italian link and was preserved orally within closed family circles for several generations prior to its more-or-less simultaneous publication, though in highly differentiated forms, in both regions. This of course is an account strikingly similar to much of what is still taught today.

Regarding the *Zohar* itself, I would say that we do not have much to learn from Zeitlin's attempts to defend the view that Rabbi Moshe De Leon was indeed copying or adapting from much older written sources. He quotes the entire Isaac of Acre testimony and spends much time discussing it, but he winds up offering little that is new.

Zeitlin's greatest strength, I would say, is in his evocative appreciation of the poetics of the *Zohar*, a topic that has come back to the fore in our day and is given fullest expression in the writings of Melila Hellner-Eshed. He describes the *Zohar* unselfconsciously as a *po'emah elohit*.¹⁸ With some apology for the excesses of 1920 Hebrew literary style, I quote part of Zeitlin's introduction to his *Mafteah le-Sefer ha-Zohar*:

What is the *Zohar*? An exalted divine soul, come down to earth from the highest world, to be revealed to humanity in millions of lights and shadows, colors and hues...

The *Zohar* was revealed to the people Israel and to all of humankind in a great flow of images, symbols, and tales. It contains flashes of speech, thoughts sharp as spears, rising to the heavens and reaching down into the deep, the glory of the stars and the speech of lofty mountains, the language of ancient trees and profound forests of mystery...

¹⁸ p. 107.

¹⁶ See his comments, for example, in '*Ha-Hasidut shele-'Atid la-Vo*', *Sifran shel Yehidim*. Warsaw 1928, 50-56.

¹⁷ Buenos Aires 1946.

The *Zohar* is a mixture of the deepest truth and figments of fantasy; it contains both straight and crooked lines, upright paths and paths that confound; clear, wholesome, and appropriate pictures alongside strange and bizarre ones. In it you will find the strength of a lion and the softness of a child, the crashing sound of great waterfalls and the whisper of a spring, dark holes and secret caverns. It is sometimes brief, clear, and sharp with worldly wisdom, yet it also contains lengthy discussions that go on forever, entering into one another and becoming mixed together like a long and complicated dream...

In its content and richness the *Zohar* is all divine. But its outward form is sometimes cloudy and confusing. One who seeks to reveal heavenly matters here on earth will necessarily speak as though through a cloud.¹⁹

Despite this language of revelation, Zeitlin certainly understands the *Zohar* as a document authored by humans, whether early or late. He refers to 'its author or authors'. In speaking of the *Zohar* as 'heavenly', he is here making a poetic rather than a literal claim, one that all of us who devote ourselves to *Zohar* study somehow understand. Indeed, he knows us well. The introduction goes on to say:

The orchard (*pardes*) of the *Zohar* is open to all, but only a few will be able to taste of the Tree of Life that is within it. They are a small elite, a highly select group. They are members of the *hevraya*, those who 'turn darkness to light and bitter to sweet'. Where ordinary mortals see only structure and form, the *Zohar* person hears but a solitary divine song, a melody that reaches from eternity to eternity²⁰

Zeitlin is here the first to characterize modern readers and scholars of the *Zohar* as the *hevraya*, those who continue in the tradition of R. Shim'on and his disciples as described in the *Zohar's* pages, a characterization with which we are all familiar and to varying degrees comfortable today. He recognizes the *ish ha-zohar* as a particular religious/intellectual type.²¹ He does not describe him here, but elements of the figure intended here are found throughout Zeitlin's religious writings and of course also represent the author himself.

When he goes beyond historical apologetics and tries to describe the actual content of the *Zohar*, Zeitlin begins with a commentary on *Patah Eliyahu*,

¹⁹ *Ha-Tequfah* 6 (1919), pp. 314-15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

²¹ The only other place I have seen Zeitlin use this phrase '*ish ha-zohar*' is as a complimentary description of Ernst Mueller, author of a German translation of selected *Zohar* passages. Quoted by J. Meir in 'Zeitlin's *Zohar*: The History of a Translation and Commentary Project', *Kabbalah* 10 (2004), p. 148.

actually a passage from the *Tiqquney Zohar*²² which he recognizes as the work of a different, later, author. He does so presumably because this text will be familiar to many of his readers as a part of the Hasidic liturgy.²³ Zeitlin uses it to teach the *sefirot* and to raise the familiar philosophical issues around them. His chief guides in understanding these matters are Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim* and Sheftel Horowitz' *Shefa' Tal*; he refers to both quite frequently. Sometimes he will explain a matter according to the system of *HaBaD*, but then he is quite clear in telling the reader that he is entering into a specific and different realm of discourse. In general it is fair to say that Zeitlin as a reader of the *Zohar* is interested in *peshat*,²⁴ in trying to understand the text in a simple and direct way. He uses the Cordoveran material as a tool in this quest.

In this regard it is interesting to compare him to his younger contemporary and fellow-Warsaw Jew R. Yehudah Ashlag (1886-1955).²⁵ Coming from a Polish Hasidic background and also very much exposed to some currents of modern thought, Ashlag set out to become a Kabbalist in the traditional sense of that term, which Zeitlin did not. Immigrating to Jerusalem in 1920, Ashlag sought out the remnants of the old Sephardic Kabbalistic community and settled in quite close to them. His *Sulam* consistently interprets the *Zohar* through a Lurianic lens (as one would expect of a latter-day Kabbalist), something Zeitlin refused to do. In this sense Zeitlin must be seen as closer to his other contemporary, Rav Kook, who understands himself as a contemporary mystic and seeker building on the insights of the *Zohar*, indeed

²² Jerusalem 1948, 17a.

²³ *Patah Eliyahu* is recited on Friday afternoon prior to *minḥah*, along with Psalm 107 and *Yedid Nefesh*. In most true Sephardic liturgies, it is recited daily, prior to *birkhot ha-shahar*.

²⁴ As noted by Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer in '*Darko shel Hillel Zeitlin el ha-Mistiḡah ha-Yehudir*', *Kivvunim* 3 (1979) 89; cited by J. Meir, 'Zeitlin's *Zohar*', n. 69.

²⁵ Considerable scholarship on Ashlag has emerged within the last decade. See especially Jonathan Garb, *The Chosen Will Become Herds: Studies in Twentieth Century Kabbalah*, Jerusalem 2005 [Hebrew] and Jonatan Meir, 'New Discoveries Concerning R. Judah Leib Ashlag', *Kabbalah* 20 (2004), 345-368 [Hebrew]. A full comparison of Zeitlin and Ashlag has been undertaken by Meir in his 'Wrestling with the Esoteric: Hillel Zeitlin, Yehudah Ashlag, and Kabbalah in the Land of Israel', *Judaism, Topics, Fragments, Faces, Identities: Jubilee Volume in Honor of Rivka Horowitz*, ed. H. Pedaya and E. Meir, Beer-Sheva 2007, pp. 585-648 [Hebrew].

subtly integrating aspects of Western thought into his own mystical teachings, but not claiming the mantle of Kabbalist.²⁶

Yet Zeitlin is also not a critical scholar. Scholem dismissed him, correctly from his own point of view, as a romantic apologist for Kabbalah.²⁷ What Zeitlin strives to be, of course, is an *Ish ha-Zohar*. This means being neither Kabbalist nor historical critic. It has mostly to do with the loving, reverential reading of the *Zohar* and an aesthetic/spiritual appreciation of the text as a *po'emah elohit*. Zeitlin's program was the creation of a new Jewish spiritual elite, the heart of which would be an intimate *hevraya* who shared his appreciation of the *Zohar*, to whom he even addressed several short essays written in an imitation of the *Zohar's* Aramaic.²⁸

Once beyond all the introductions, including that of Elijah, Zeitlin turns first to the human body, quoting an array of *Zohar* passages that describe the outer and inner limbs. He takes a special interest in the inner organs, the passages that depict heart and liver as seats of good and evil. At one point he abandons the *Zohar* text itself and quotes directly from Cordovero and Shefl Horowitz. His point seems to be that we need to approach an understanding of Zoharic symbolism from 'below' (or 'without', as I would say), proceeding from body to soul to worlds to God. It is interesting to note that Tishby/Lachover's *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, although partly inspired by Zeitlin's effort,²⁹ went in the opposite direction, following the approach of Scholem: *Zohar* as metaphysics, beginning from above.

The point, for Zeitlin, is expressed quite clearly:

The lower human is created in the image (*selem*) of the supernal, spiritual, heavenly Human, whose inner garment is that of the supreme chariot and hosts of angels, and whose outer garment is the curtains of heaven. So too the lower human: his inner, divine essence is the soul (*neshamah*), his inner garment, bones and sinews (parallel to the chariots and hosts in the upper world), his outer garment, flesh (the most coarse and vulgar stuff, therefore drawn to *sitra aħra*, to

²⁶ On Zeitlin and Kook see J. Meir, 'Longing of Souls'.

²⁷ On Scholem and Zeitlin's views of one another, see the sources collected by J. Meir in 'Zeitlin's *Zohar*', n. 68.

²⁸ *Sifran shel Yehidim*, pp. 8-16.

²⁹ J. Meir, 'Zeitlin's *Zohar*', 155. My impression is that the connection is more significant than Meir indicates. Lachover and Zeitlin had been neighbors in Warsaw before Lachover's *'aliyah*, and the relationship was quite close. This matter requires further investigation into Lachover's papers, to which I do not have access.

all that is far from spirit and the holy). His outermost garment is skin (corresponding to the curtains of heaven).³⁰

Please note that although Zeitlin still uses such vertical terms as '*elyon* and *tahton*', he is essentially depicting a system of successively internal levels of being, both in the 'heavenly' and human realms.

Turning from body to soul, Zeitlin begins with the tripartite division, trying to offer a more-or-less systematic presentation of this material which is one of the most inconsistent areas in the *Zohar's* varied presentations. Here Zeitlin first seems influenced by his background in *HaBaD*, offering the *nefesh behamit* as the *Zohar's* outer or lower *levush* to the tripartite soul and serving as the soul's link to the material universe of the body.

But then his discussion turns more interesting. Some passages in the *Zohar*, he tells us, differ from this essentialist and harmonistic link-by-link approach, instead seeing the different parts of the soul as having disparate divine origins. This can be understood, he suggests, either following the *HaBaD* (essentially Cordoveran) method, or as understood by psychology of religion, rooted in Indian teaching, and by contemporary theosophy. He tells us that he is especially influenced by someone identified only as Chatterji, based on a series of lectures originally given in Brussels in 1898. This turns out to be the book *The Hindu Realism: Being an Introduction to the Metaphysics of the Naya-Vaisheshika System of Philosophy* by Jagadish Chandra Chatterji.³¹ Chatterji, author of several books on Indian philosophy, was perhaps the best-known academic presenter of Indian thought in his day and was later the founder of The International School of Vedic and Allied Research. He was associated with John Dewey and many others who were positively disposed toward Indian philosophy at the turn of the 20th century. In the opening pages of *The Hindu Realism*, Chatterji says the following:

It seems to a Hindu that Western students of his Philosophy start generally with the following pre-suppositions, which are apparently assumed as established facts: 1) Man can never know Metaphysical Truths by *direct experience*, in the same way, for instance, as he can know sense objects. And, therefore, Metaphysical Truths can, at best, be but matters of *speculation* and mere *inferences*, or only based on *faith*...

³⁰ *Ha-Tequfah* 7 (1920) 276.

³¹ Allahabad 1912.

As against these, the Hindu preconceptions are: 1) Man can know Metaphysical Truths *by direct experience*, and not merely by speculation, by inference, or by faith. 2) There *have been* men in the past who have thus known the whole truth of our nature and existence, as well as that of the Universe as a whole...³²

Following Chatterji, Zeitlin takes his reader on a quest for the innermost essence of the human self. He begins with biology, noting the constant death and replacement of all cells in the material world, indicating the passing and ever-changing character of material existence. He then turns progressively inward, going through human feelings, beliefs, knowledge, and will, showing how none of these has utter constancy. Having transcended the individual ego-self, he gets to the supreme will (*ha-raṣon ha-'elyon*) that operates within us. This too, he says, is not totally constant. Seeking the absolute good, it needs to find the appropriate expression of that good in varying choices to be made through the ongoing course of each human life. He seems to mean that even the divine will, insofar as it is directed toward us, must change its object in response to our inconstancy. But then there is a sublime Self, the bearer of this will, the 'I' that stands behind it, 'the one that knows our entire inner world and attests to it. This is eternity within us'.³³

In this manner the microcosm – the person – corresponds to the macrocosm, with all the richness and divinity that is within it. The physical body corresponds to the physical world. Our physical lives and their bearer – the astral body – correspond to the cosmic ether. The totality of all our feelings and the subject of those feelings, the astral body, corresponds to the astral universe. The totality of all our thoughts, along with their lower bearer, the lower mind, are subject to bodily life, to the outer world, to conclusions derived only from external categories and experiences (the lower *Manas*). Our upper mind is subject to the inner rules of the soul, the innermost world, things grasped without the intermediacy of the outer world or the outer senses, but rather by way of inner intuitive revelation (the higher *Manas*). This corresponds to the intelligible universe. The purified sublime will within us corresponds to the universe of the good (*Buddhi*). The supreme Self within us corresponds to the universal Self, the revelation of divinity, the supreme universal soul (*Atma*).

All these matters are upheld and certified by the Indian sages not only through philosophical-psychological analysis, but by means of unique experiments and multiple exercises conducted over the course of many years, as well as by unique

³² *The Hindu Realism*, p.6. Emphases and capitalizations in the original.

³³ *Ha-Tequfah* 7, p. 296.

educational methods in which a teacher leads and raises one from each rung to the next. A disciple spends years and years at it, until he comes to perceive the astral universe not only in an intellectual-philosophical way, as a mere abstraction, but in a real inner seeing. Then he is able to go forth to that astral universe, a kind of anticipation (*repeṭiṣia*) of death, an ability to leave parts of the body behind, even the inner ethereal body, and to dwell in the realm of the spirits. These are no longer abstracted from sensations, but rather cling to them. Thus one is separated from the body and yet still attached to it by the most delicate of threads. In this way the disciple retains the power to return to his body. After this he knows how to 'go forth' to the realm of the spiritual, the sublime, the good. Afterwards he reaches the rung of *Nirvana*, attachment of the supreme Self within him to the universal Self, the very highest state of ecstasy, where there are no more outer senses, no feelings, no intellect, even no sublime goodness, naught but the divine itself, the cleaving of the *Atma*, the highest human soul, to *Brahma*, the *Eyn Sof*.

When the disciple returns from the astral world to his body, he narrates, describes, depicts all that he saw there. When he returns to his body from the realm of intellect, he lays out and explains what he had grasped there as well as he is able. When he returns from the realm of the good, he awakens and calls others to goodness as he struggles to offer a taste of all its pleasantness. When he returns to his body from the supreme 'I', he can say nothing, this state being entirely beyond words and language. There is no description or depiction adequate to it, no thought that can grasp it.³⁴

Zeitlin then goes on to offer some more specific correspondences between the two systems: the astral body is *ṣelem*, the world of intellect is *nefesh*, the world of the good or Buddhi is *ruah*, and *Atma* is *neshamah*. There are also three hidden rungs within *Atma*; these are *neshamah*, *ḥayyah*, and *yehidah*. Here, I must say, Zeitlin's account becomes more predictable and less interesting.

The turn to Eastern parallels to shed light on Kabbalistic/Hasidic categories of experience is not a surprising move for Zeitlin. As his biographer S. Bar-Sela has shown,³⁵ Zeitlin had developed more than a passing interest in Eastern religious philosophy already in the first decade of the twentieth century, a period when there was much discussion of it in circles of the Russian Orthodox revival, including those close to both Tolstoy and Shestov. Zeitlin read these materials avidly; it is likely that they had a good deal to do with easing the path

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 297

³⁵ Bar-Sela, *Between the Storm*, p. 27-28 and *passim*.

of his return to Judaism.³⁶ But far from claiming Indian influence on Kabbalah, as Scholem might at this point hint, Zeitlin sees these as two entirely different systems pointing to the same truth. Judaism too has its exercises and disciplines; these are the *mišvot*, when practiced with a full understanding of their intent. The forms of Judaism, in other words, are to be understood as spiritual exercises leading to the devotee's progression toward deeper states and experiences of consciousness. In making this claim, Zeitlin stands fully within the traditions of intellectualist Kabbalah.

My point here is that by turning to Chatterji and to India, Zeitlin is seeking to place the metaphysical abstractions of Kabbalah regarding the soul into a clearly experiential framework. Think, by contrast, of Tishby's approach in his exceptionally long and thorough introduction to the soul in *Mishnat ha-Zohar*. We are there taken on a long tour through Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic psychology, mainly the various theories on parts of the soul and their origins, with only the slightest reference to categories of experience. In the course of this attempt, Zeitlin even comes upon the notion of re-entry, with which I began this discussion. The Indian sources, concerned as they are with creating a theosophy that corresponds to the experience of practitioners, are very much aware of this event in the life of the devotee.

Yet Zeitlin's application of this experience-based reading of material is significantly more conservative than my own. He applies it chiefly to levels of the soul. These are, after all, categories for describing the human being and the human's relationship to the divine. In claiming that the inner divine process of self-manifestation, and with it the language of sefirotic symbolism, is at its root a projection of the experiential, I recognize that I am going much farther down the path that Zeitlin has opened up before me.

A very thorough treatment of Zeitlin's attempted translation and commentary to the *Zohar*, already cited, has been undertaken by Jonatan Meir. I do not need to repeat his conclusions here. Suffice it only to say that this project placed Zeitlin squarely in the ambiguous position that may be said to have characterized his life as a whole. The project was suggested to Zeitlin in 1922 by Simon Rawidowicz, then editor of the new publishing house 'Ayanot in Berlin. Rawidowicz saw this enterprise as a part of cultural Zionism, making

³⁶ There is some historical importance to this point. It means that exposure to models of Eastern thought lies at the very origin-point of Neo-Hasidic thought, in Zeitlin as well as Buber, and is not something extraneous or newly discovered at the turn of the twenty-first century. This theme is deserving of fuller treatment.

all the sources of Judaism accessible in attractive format to the new Hebrew readership, an undertaking largely inspired by Hayyim Nahman Bialik, whose *Sefer ha-Aggadah* stood at the center of this broad cultural oeuvre. Zeitlin enthusiastically accepted the assignment, but as one that for him had far deeper-ranging implications. This would be a tool in creating the new Hasidism, the revival of Jewish religiosity, that by then was becoming the core of his mission, later to be defined in even more starkly messianic terms. As Meir reports, the project did not come to fruition, mostly due to the financial collapse of 'Ayanot in the depression of 1925. After the outbreak of the Second World War, Rawidowicz, by then living in England, included Zeitlin's rendition of the *Haqdamat Sefer ha-Zohar* (which he had retained in his files from the 'Ayanot days) in the first volume of his literary annual *Metsudah*, not yet knowing of Zeitlin's fate. How much more of the *Zohar* Zeitlin had completed is not fully known.³⁷ The Yiddish writer Leib Rokhman in 1946 reported that Zeitlin had hidden it underground in the ghetto before he died on the road to Treblinka in September of 1942. If so, it remains buried there, along with so much more.

For a textual example of what we might call, thanks to Hecker and Zeitlin, a reading of the *Zohar* through the Neo-Hasidic eye, I choose some very familiar lines from the *Haqdamah*. Such a reading, I should summarize, is one that looks *inward* rather than *upward*, seeing a significant part of the text's *Vorlage* in psychological rather than metaphysical terms, centering especially on the experience of the rebirth or new emergence of the self in the course of return from a state of mystical self-transcendence. *Zohar* 1:1b contains a well-known homily on Lamentations 2:13, concluding *ki gadol ka-yam shivrekh; mi yirpa' lakh* ('You are breached as wide as the sea; who can heal you?'). The 'you' of this sentence is Jerusalem, understood by the Kabbalist as a symbol-term for *shekhinah*, the tenth *sefirah*, also regularly symbolized as the sea. The *shever* is the breach in Jerusalem's wall, but also represents *shekhinah*'s brokenness in her exilic state. It is not going too far to say that this is also the brokenhearted state of *keneset yisra'el*, both as *shekhinah* and as embodied by the Jewish people in exile. *Mi* ('who?') represents *binah*, in concert with the prior homily on Isaiah 40:25, *mi bara' eleh*. The fact that *mi* and *yam* are numerically equal and are in fact graphic mirror-reversals of one another was surely also noticed by the author of this *derashah*. The point is that *binah* has not entered into

³⁷ J. Meir, 'Zeitlin's *Zohar*', n. 131.

exile and therefore she is available to redeem; indeed redemption from exile, including the exodus from Egypt, is usually attributed to *binah*.

But now view this text on an internal, psychological axis, rather than as a piece of hierarchical metaphysics or as just a clever bit of homiletics. You, the hearer of the *derashah*, Israel, are in exile. Your heart, the vulnerable inner part of your conscious self, is in great and seemingly unhealable distress. *Mi yirpa' lakh?* Whence can your redemption come? There is a deeper part of you, the homilist is teaching, a part that resides on the far inward side of the persona you know, that remains whole and unaffected by all your afflictions. This mysterious 'who?', the womb of your existence, is also the source of your healing. You may be broken, body and outer soul, but *mi, binah*, the Mother-source within, is one to whom you can turn. She can still send forth her healing rays and make you whole. As broken as you are, the *Zohar* is saying, whether in historical or personal *galut*, you have deeper inner resources. There is a place within you that has never been exiled, never been broken. It is by going in deeper, reaching in to that place, that your healing will come about. This too of course is why redemption, including Israel's redemption from Egypt, is by the hand of *binah*, a part of the self so deep that it has never undergone separation or exile. Redemption is a reaching forth from that unbroken inner place.

Some will undoubtedly find such a reading quite natural and obvious; others will surely find it forced, psychologizing a passage that is really about mystical or theosophic faith. But it belongs to this 'Neo-Hasidic' approach, one that seeks out psychological meaning behind the symbolic language of Kabbalah. Now we turn to another brief passage from the same web of *derashot* in the *Zohar's* opening pages.

When the Concealed of all Concealed verged on being revealed, it produced at first a single point, which ascended to become thought. Within, it drew all drawing, graved all engravings, carving within the concealed holy lamp a graving of one hidden design, holy of holies, a deep structure emerging from thought called *Mi, Who*, origin of structure. Existent and non-existent, deep and hidden, called by no name but *Who*.

Seeking to be revealed, to be named, it garbed itself in a splendid, radiant garment and created 'eLeH, these. 'eLeH attained the name; these letters joined with those, culminating in the name 'elohim. Until it created 'eLeH it did not attain the name

'elohim. Based on this mystery, those who sinned with the Golden Calf said "'eLeH, These are you gods, O Israel (Ex. 23:8).'³⁸

Once again, we must get beyond the intriguing cleverness of the *Zohar's* presentation. What is the author revealing about his own consciousness? The divine Self, according to this text, comprises an unanswerable question and a series of images. To meet or think you know God as 'eLeH, without the *MI*, is the very root of idolatry, losing the mystery, missing the whole point. *Qışuş ba-neti'ot*, one might say. The collectivity of 'eLeH is taken traditionally to represent the seven lower *sefirot*, the multiple 'faces' or masks of God. 'ELEH might be understood to include all the faces we can imagine God putting on through any or all of the seven *middot*, embracing the full variety of divine personhood but extending into the non-personal as well. In short, 'eLeH comprises the totality of all we can imagine God to be. Take any or all of these for God, says the *Zohar*, and you are worshipping an idol. (This is a judgment, not incidentally, that condemns most of popular religion, east and west.) Transcendent mystery, represented by the eternal, unanswered question, is missing; without this there is no 'elohim. To seek out this mystery is to go deeper (rather than 'higher'), to turn toward an inwardness that surpasses all the faces, individually and collectively, entering 'the depths of the well'.

A modern echo of this view can be heard in Paul Tillich's famous distinction between God and 'God'.³⁹ Most of the faithful confuse these, taking some image of God for God and thus making it into an idol. Of course Tillich mostly has Christians in mind, but the argument applies to Jews as well. I am reminded of David Frischmann's poem *Elilim*,⁴⁰ in which he says that we Jews did exactly as the Midrash says of Abraham: we smashed all the idols but the largest one and then attributed their destruction to Him. In insisting that *MI* be joined to 'eLeH to make up 'God', the *Zohar* insists on a deity that points beyond all the masks, leading into the place of pure unanswered question.

But the Neo-Hasidic reading would go a step farther. Is this description of God in fact a reflection also of an understanding of the human self, perhaps even a homiletically framed account of an inward journey? Of course analogies between God and the soul are very old in Jewish sources⁴¹ and the Zoharic authorship is well aware of these. But in this case the text itself proceeds (1:3b-

³⁸ *Zohar* 1:2a; Matt translation, transliteration altered.

³⁹ *The Courage to Be*, New York 1952.

⁴⁰ *Kol Kitvey David Frischmann u-Mivhar Targumav*, Warsaw 1928, pp. 142-148.

⁴¹ BT. Berakhot 10a.

4a) to spell it out. Commenting on Genesis 2:4, the *Zohar* follows an old tradition⁴² in reading *be-hibbare'am* as an acronym for *be-Avraham*. But then the patriarch's name is subjected to the same fracturing as *'elohim*. *Avraham* consists of *'eVeR*, meaning a limb, but usually the phallus, and *MaH*, literally 'What?' but taken here as a reference to *shekhinah*. The divine presence within the human self also represents mystery, embodied in an unanswerable question. Only as these two words are joined does one get *Avraham*, and only then can Creation generate its intended offspring in the proper way.

Once again, we must get beyond the intriguing cleverness of the *Zohar's* presentation. In proposing this analogy between the word for God and the name of the first fully righteous human, the *Zohar* is making it quite clear that the emergence of God as *'elohim* and the emergence of man as *Avraham* are two parallel and interdependent events, two aspects of the same inner process of the congealing of deeper mystery (*MI* or *MaH*) around a more superficial or perceptible core. Indeed the hall of mirrors can be seen from either end. Or perhaps there is no hall of mirrors at all here, but just two ways of saying the same thing. To meet or think you know God as *'eLeH*, without the *MI*, is the very root of idolatry, losing the mystery, missing the whole point, *qisus beneti'ot*. To think you know a man without *MaH*, without *shekhinah's* mystery that dwells within him, is equally a cutting off of roots. It is not to know him at all, but to reduce him to a mere *'eVeR*.

Is this a Neo-Hasidic reading, claiming that personhood, both divine and human, is incomplete without recourse to deeper, transpersonal levels of being that lie hidden within the self? Or is it simply *peshat*, bringing out a psychological insight of the *Zohar* itself that any good reader or teacher of the text should recognize? To raise this question takes us back to Hecker's claim. Are these passages in the *Haqdamah*, and many like them throughout the *Zohar*, essentially metaphysical in meaning, homilies around a symbolic structure borrowed and adapted from the world of Jewish philosophy and other accrued symbols? Or do they represent a symbolic universe that points to the psychological states, including mystical experiences, that may underlie the *Zohar's* theosophy and peer through its pages?

⁴² Bereshit Rabbah 12:9.

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