



INTRADIVINE ROMANCE: THE SONG OF SONGS IN THE ZOHAR

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The Zohar is the great medieval Jewish compendium of mysticism, myth, and esoteric teaching. It may be considered the greatest work of Jewish literary imagination in the Middle Ages. Surely it constitutes one of the most important bodies of religious texts of all times and places. It is also a lush garden of sacred eros, filled to overflowing with luxurious plantings of love between master and disciples, among the mystical companions themselves, between the souls of Israel and the *shekhinah*, God's lovely bride, but most of all between the male and female elements that together make up the Godhead. Revered and canonized by generations of faithful devotees, the secret universe described by the Zohar's authors serves as the basis of Kabbalistic faith, both within the boundaries of Judaism and beyond it, down to our own day, one that has seen a significant revival of interest in Kabbalah and its teachings.

Written in a lofty combination of Aramaic and Hebrew, the Zohar was first made public around 1300. As the contemporary reader of the original encounters it, the Zohar is a three-volume work constituting some seventeen hundred folio pages, ordered in the form of a commentary on the Torah. The first volume covers Genesis, the second Exodus, and the third completes the remaining three books of the Pentateuch. In addition to these volumes is Zohar Ḥadash (the New Zohar), a collection of materials omitted from the earliest mid-sixteenth-century Zohar editions, but later culled from manuscript sources. Here we find partial commentaries on Ruth, Lamentations, and the Song of Songs.

For our purposes, it is interesting to note that the chief speaker and purported author of the Zohar, Rabbi Simeon ben Yoḥai, was a leading disciple of Rabbi Akiva, the earliest figure associated with the allegorical

reading of the Song of Songs. The third-century Mishnah records Akiva as denying that there ever had been controversy as to whether the Canticle was to be included within the Biblical canon, since "all the Scriptures are holy but the Song of Songs is the Holy of Holies." The Zohar, composed a millennium later than Akiva's work, stands fully within that tradition. One might say that it was written under the spell of the Song of Songs, for the Canticle is quoted and commented upon with great frequency within its pages and is present everywhere in allusion and echo.

In the Jewish exegetical context, interpretation of the Song of Songs is one of the chief ways through which individuals and generations expressed their relationship with the loving God. Despite its being repeatedly tamed in the name of historical and collectivist allegory (the nation of Israel as beloved, etc.), the tremendous passion of the book has remained available to those over the ages who sought to convey such intense love in religious devotion. The Canticle itself, we might say, became the "locked garden" of which it speaks, opening itself to those whose hearts longed to dwell by its streams and to be intoxicated by the spices of its perfumed gardens. Ultimately the Song of Songs comes to represent not merely a single text, but a wide-ranging network of religio-erotic metaphors. The influence of the Canticle on the Zohar and on the Kabbalistic tradition as a whole is not limited to specific comments on that work or quotations from it, although these, too, abound in the Zohar's pages. It extends into the echoes and allusions mentioned above, into the entire metaphor of sacred courtship and marriage as used to describe the relationship between God and the holy community of his faithful.

The Zohar represents the apogee of a process that had been developing for a hundred years or more before its writing. I refer to the emergence in writing of Kabbalistic secrets and the attempt to interpret various aspects of Jewish Scripture and tradition in accord with the symbolism contained within them. Among the very first works of Kabbalistic exegesis were commentaries on the Song of Songs, including one by Rabbi Ezra of Gerona (now available in English translation), a lost commentary by Rabbi Moses of Burgos, and, contemporaneous with the Zohar, a commentary by Rabbi Isaac Ibn Sahula of Guadalajara.

Kabbalah represents a radical departure from any previously known version of Judaism, especially in the realm of theology. While Kabbalists remained loyal followers of normative Jewish praxis as defined by *halakha*, the theological meaning system that undergirded their Judaism was entirely reconstructed. The image of God that first appears in *Sefer*

ha-Bahir, to be elaborated by several generations of Kabbalists until it achieved its highest poetic expression in the *Zohar*, is a God of multiple mythic potencies, obscure entities called *sefirot*. These elude precise definition, but are described through a remarkable web of images, parables, and scriptural allusions. Together, these entities constitute the divine realm; “God” is the collective aggregate of these potencies and their inner relationship. The dynamic interplay among these forces is the essential story of Kabbalah, the true inner meaning, as far as its devotees are concerned, both of the Torah and of life itself.

The *sefirot* constitute the subject of nearly all Kabbalistic discourse, including that of the *Zohar*. They exist in neither time nor space. They represent an inner divine reality that is prior to these ways of dividing existence, although both are derived from it. The word *sefirah* as “number” represents a high level of metaphysical abstraction. The existence of *sefirot* indicates a certain multiplicity or multifacetedness within the divine unity, a tentative “many” within the absolute One. This means that the oneness of God has a dynamic side; it is a oneness that is not simple and undifferentiated, but teeming with energy, life, and passion. There are even tensions and forces that pull in opposite directions within this unity, so that *yihud ha-shem*, understood previously as the *proclamation* of God’s oneness, now comes to mean *effecting* the unity of God, bringing the *sefirot* together in harmony, so that a single energy may flow through them and unite them.

The *sefirot* are described by multiple layerings of symbol terms, which collectively constitute the secret language of Kabbalah. I have argued elsewhere that from a functional point of view, the *sefirot* are, in fact, nuggets of symbolic association. By far the richest network of such associations is that connected with the tenth and final *sefirah*. As *malkhut* (“kingdom”) it represents the realm over which the King (the sixth *sefirah*, *tif’eret*, or the “blessed Holy One” of rabbinic tradition) has dominion, sustaining and protecting it as the true king takes responsibility for his kingdom. At the same time, it is this final *sefirah* that is charged with the rule of the lower world; the blessed Holy One’s *malkhut* is the lower world’s ruler.

The last *sefirah* is also called the *shekhinah*, an ancient rabbinic term for the indwelling divine presence. In the medieval Jewish imagination, this appellation for God had been transformed into a winged divine being, hovering over the community of Israel and protecting it from harm. The *shekhinah* was also said to dwell in Israel’s midst, to follow the people into exile, and to participate in their suffering. In the latest

phases of midrashic literature, there begins to appear a distinction between God and his *shekḥinah*, partly a reflection of medieval philosophical attempts to assign the biblical anthropomorphisms to a being lesser than the Creator. The Kabbalists identify this *shekḥinah* as the bride, spouse, or divine consort of the blessed Holy One. She is the tenth *sefirah*, therefore a part of God included within the divine ten-in-one unity. But she is tragically exiled, distanced from her divine spouse. Sometimes she is seen to be either seduced or taken captive by the evil hosts of *sitra aḥra*—the “other,” evil side of being. Then God and the righteous below must join forces in order to liberate her. The great drama of religious life, according to the Kabbalists, is the protection of the *shekḥinah* from the forces of evil and joining her to the holy bridegroom who ever awaits her. Here one can see how medieval Jews adapted the values of chivalry—the rescue of the maiden from the clutches of evil—to fit their own spiritual context.

In the midrashic tradition, the *shekḥinah* identifies with the sufferings of the community of Israel and dwells in its midst. Nevertheless, there is a clear distinction maintained between the two. The *shekḥinah* is the presence of God; *keneset yisraʾel* is the collective body of the Jewish people. Sometimes this community of Israel is indeed depicted as a hypostatic entity, standing in God’s presence and engaging in dialogue with him. But this partner in dialogue is always other than God, representing his earthly beloved. In what is surely their most daring symbolic move, the Kabbalists combined these two figures, blurring the once obvious distinction between the human community of Israel and their divine protector. They claim that the *shekḥinah* is the community of Israel; *keneset yisraʾel* becomes another term for the tenth *sefirah*. Poised precisely at the border between the divine and the lower worlds, she is at once the this-worldly presentiment of God and a heavenly embodiment of Israel, her faithful people below.

The identification of the *shekḥinah* and *keneset yisraʾel* enabled the Kabbalists to annex the entire midrashic tradition regarding the relationship of God and Israel and to declare it their own. Particularly, the rabbis’ reading of the Song of Songs as a love dialogue between God and Israel makes it the key text for understanding the inner unity of God as the love between male and female. The implication for Jewish faith of this dramatic shift cannot be overstated. The essential relationship that Judaism comes to depict is now an inner divine one. The eros here is not the love and union between God and Israel or God and the soul, but between male and female forces within God. The earthly community of Israel remain God’s partner and beloved people, but now he and they (the

Kabbalists in particular) share in the task of restoring cosmic oneness, of bringing the divine male and female face to face with one another. Through this union, lights might shine throughout the universe, and the waters of life might flow through it to nourish and sustain all the worlds below.

As the female partner within the divine, the tenth *sefirah*—the *shekḥinah*—is described through a host of symbols that is derived both from the natural world and from the legacy of Judaism. The symbols are classically associated with femininity. The tenth *sefirah* is the moon, dark on her own, but receiving and giving off the light of the sun. She is the sea, into whom all waters flow; the earth, longing to be fructified by the rain that falls from heaven. She is the heavenly Jerusalem, into whom the King will enter; she is the throne upon which he is seated, the Temple or Tabernacle, dwelling place of his glory. She is the Ark of the Covenant, a symbol that takes on particularly sexual association since “covenant” (*brit*) in Judaism is especially associated with the act of circumcision. The tenth *sefirah* is a passive-receptive female with regard to the *sefirot* above her, receiving their energies and being fulfilled by their presence within her. But she is a ruler, the source of life, and font of all blessing for the worlds below, including the human soul. The Kabbalist sees himself as a devotee of the *shekḥinah*. This does not mean that she may ever be worshipped apart from the divine unity. Indeed, this separation of the *shekḥinah* from the forces above was the terrible sin of Adam that brought about exile from Eden. Nonetheless, it is only through her that humans have access to the mysteries that lie beyond. All prayer is channeled through her, seeking to energize her and raise her up in order to effect the sefirotic unity. The primary function of the religious life, with all its duties and obligations, is to rouse the *shekḥinah* into a state of love.

All realms outside the divine proceed from the *shekḥinah*. She is surrounded most immediately by a host of non-material beings. Sometimes these are depicted as angels; they are the maidens who attend the bride at the marriage canopy. These figures inhabit and rule over many different realms or “palaces” of light and joy. Such a picture seems tailor-made for exegesis of the Song of Songs: Daughters of Jerusalem, queens and concubines, and all the rest of the Canticle’s host provide perfect scriptural settings for a Judaism in which the *hieros gamos*, the mystical/erotic union of the divine male and female, takes such a central role.

As will be obvious by now, there is a strong erotic element in Kabbalah and especially in the Zohar. The frank and uncensored use of bold sexual language for talking about the inner life of God is a major part of the

Zohar's legacy, found throughout the later mystical tradition. Such phrases as "to arouse the feminine waters" or "to serve God with a living limb" have become so much a part of the conventional language of later Kabbalah that one almost forgets how shocking it is that the act of worship is being described in terms of female arousal or male erection. How did it happen that such unbridled eroticism was permitted to enter the domain of the sacred? How, especially, could this have happened in an era and within a devotional circle that was at the same time so very conservative, even extreme, in its views of sexual temptation or transgression?

Use of erotic language to describe the relationship between God and Israel was well known already in Biblical times, as witnessed by several of the prophets, especially Hosea. In the rabbinic imagination, the chief vehicle for this all-important metaphor was the Song of Songs, read allegorically as the love and marriage between God and the community of Israel. This collectivist reading of the Canticle dominates the midrashic tradition. Its importance was underscored, moreover, by the fact that the church, from the time of Origen, adopted a parallel interpretation in which Christ and *ecclesia* were the lover and beloved of the Song. This Christian allegory was an important tool of supersessionist theology, with the church now claiming to be the maiden chosen for divine delight. The Jews, whose rejection by God seemed so obviously confirmed by their historical plight, had every reason to hold fast to the faith that God was their true lover, the one to whom they cried out even in his seeming absence: "On my bed at night I sought him whom my soul loves," knowing in faith that "here he stands behind our wall, peering through the lattice-work, gazing through the windows."

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, there was a great shift in the reading of the Song of Songs from a collectivist to an individualist allegory. The Canticle now came to be seen as a song between God and the soul, a reflection of the new emphasis on individual quest and personal pilgrimage in the religious life of the era. In Christianity, this was the development of an old tradition, and it especially flourished at the hands of Bernard of Clairvaux and other Cistercians. The Jews were slow to follow this trend and the few attempts at it were not great successes. The individual Jewish reader (typically a noncelibate male) did not easily see himself as the bride or female beloved of God.

Instead, the Jews developed another reading, one that was to reshape Jewish devotional life in a basic way. If the male Jewish reader could not wax passionate about the erotic relationship between himself and the

essentially male figure of God, what was needed was a female presence, inserted between these two males, with whom both could have that passionate relationship. This is exactly what the Kabbalah did in placing the female *shekḥinah* at the end of the sefirotic chart or as the gatekeeper between the upper and lower worlds. The inner unity of the Godhead was now seen, as we have already noted, primarily in erotic terms, with the union of “the blessed Holy One and His *shekḥinah*” being the central focus of all devotional life. But Israel, too, as the devoted children, servants, and bridal attendants of the *shekḥinah*, served as “awakeners of her desire to unite with the Holy King.” They did this by cultivating their own love for the divine bride in their devoted lives of Torah study and in performance of the commandments, including that of holy union with their own wives, an earthly representation of the union above.

Where did the Jews get this idea of a female intermediary between themselves and God above? It seems all too obvious that this is a Jewish adaptation of the cult of the Virgin Mary, very much revived in the Western church of the twelfth century, especially in France and Spain, where Kabbalah also first emerged. Marian piety permeated the culture of Western Europe in this age: The dedication of cathedrals to the Virgin, roadside shrines, passion dramas, music and art of all forms glorified her role. The Jews were surely witness to this and must have found themselves of two minds about it. On the one hand, it confirmed their worst impressions of Christianity as pagan, idolatrous, and polytheistic. But there was also something beautiful and tender about the spirituality associated with it that could not be ignored. The Jews, whose culture knew no glorification of virginity or celibacy, adapted the female channel of worship to suit their own needs. The notion that there is a divine (or quasi-divine) female presence poised at the entranceway to the divine realm, one who loves her children, suffers with them, and accepts their prayers to be brought up before the throne of God, is shared by the Marian and Kabbalistic traditions. Clearly the latter, which developed in the century following the great Marian revival, is influenced by the former.

Once the female aspect of divinity was in place, without the Christian insistence on virginity, otherwise repressed erotic energies could find expression in the spiritual life and strivings of the Kabbalist. In practice, the Zohar’s authors represent an especially strict halakhic viewpoint on all sexual matters, one that continued in Kabbalistic circles for many centuries. But the gates were thrown wide open to the rarified, only lightly masked, erotic fantasy to fuel the intensity of religious passion.

The Kabbalist's self-image as *tzadik*, the "guardian of the covenant," was at the same time an image of male potency. His task was to direct the aroused power of his *kavvanah*, or spiritual intention, toward the *shekhi-nah*, thus stirring the female waters within her so that she arouses the *tzadik* above (the ninth *sefirah*) to couple with her, filling her with the flow of energy from beyond in the form of his male waters, the lights from above as divine semen. As she is filled, the fluid within her in turn overflows to the lower world, and the earthly *tzadik* receives that blessing. Here the paradigm is of a fully coital expression of sexual union, seemingly closer in some ways to the religion of South India than to the virginal, celibate piety of Christian monks.

But the immediate influence that helped to stir these new energies within Judaism was indeed Christianity. If we look again at the Kabbalistic chart, especially at the elements highlighted within it by the Castilian Kabbalah, we may see a further parallel to the Christian structures of faith that so characterized this era. *Tif'eret*, or the blessed Holy One, stands at the center; this is the essential figure of the male deity, the God of the Bible and Jewish tradition. He is flanked on the right and left by *hesed* and *din*, compassion and judgment. This triad of *sefirot* is completed by *malkhut*, or the *shekhi-nah*, at the lower end of the Kabbalistic chart. Together, these four constitute a whole, represented by such symbols as the four directions, the four species of Sukkot, the three patriarchs plus King David, and so forth. These are all Jewish symbols of great antiquity. But if we look at this chart *structurally*, we cannot help but notice that it constitutes a trinity, with "God the Father" at the center, flanked by two others, with the female "below" them serving as intermediary between heaven and earth, bearer of prayers to God above and birth chamber of divine blessing as it flows into the world. Because of the Second Commandment, forbidding graven images, Jews were held back from any concrete expression of these structures beyond the occasional diagram and chart. But imagine what such Kabbalistic images might have looked like in stained glass. There we would have found something very close to the image world of medieval Christianity.

It should be emphasized that these tremendous importations of spiritual structures were carried out in a subtle and highly creative way, so that the connections were far from obvious, perhaps even to the Kabbalists themselves. Anything more than this would have labeled them heretics and enemies of Judaism, precisely the opposite of their goal, which was to strengthen Judaism in the face of its all-powerful and dangerous rival. It was in part because they were themselves so affected by the

attractiveness of Christianity that the authors of the Zohar set out to create a Judaism of renewed mythic power and old/new symbolic forms. Far from being crypto-Christians (as they were thought by the Christian Kabbalists of the Renaissance), they are seeking to create a more compelling Jewish myth, one that would fortify Jews in resisting Christianity.

One example of the Jewish challenge to Christianity is the marriage relationship posited between God and the *shekḥinah*, or the Holy Spirit. By contrast to Jewish life, the culture of Christian Spain was highly monastic. The thirteenth century, when the Zohar was written, marks the great heyday of both Dominican and Franciscan spirituality. In addition to influencing the religious life of the surrounding culture, these orders played a great role in socioeconomic life. Judaism, of course, had no tradition of monasticism or of glorified celibacy. Jewish pietists who shared in some of the other-worldly and ascetic values of the monkish life must have been impressed by the great monastic establishments, however. In sharp contrast to the Christian glorification of celibacy, the Zohar insists (albeit with meager support from earlier Jewish sources) that an unmarried man is merely half a person: The *shekḥinah* does not dwell apart from the wholeness of male/female union. When a man is away from his wife, the Zohar tells us—whether he is traveling on the road, busy studying Torah with his companions, or kept from her because of menstrual impurity—the *shekḥinah* joins to him, becoming his female spiritual companion. She does so, however, only because he has an earthly female partner to whom he will return. Anyone who lacks a wife cannot expect to be joined to the presence of God. In thirteenth-century Castile, this insistence on the spiritual necessity of marriage can best be understood as a frontal attack on Christian monasticism. Abstinence from marriage, claims the Zohar, does not free one for devotion to God, as the monks would have it; indeed, celibacy makes it *impossible* for one to experience the presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Zohar thus draws marital life into the framework of the celestial romance. Marriage saves a man from the fate of being “half a body” and grants man and woman entrance into the secret of God’s nuptial embrace, earthly husband and wife assuming the roles of *tif’eret* and *malkhut*. Just as the divine male mediates between the Upper and Lower Mothers, gathering the blessing of *binah*, the third *sefirah* or “Upper Mother,” and sowing it into the fertile and receptive field of *malkhut*, so, too, does the husband stand between two female presences, the *shekḥinah* and his wife. For the Kabbalist, conjugal intercourse must be conducted in the light of the intradivine romance. When husband and wife focus

their consciousness and desire upon the celestial union, their lovemaking is a dramatic enactment of cosmic realities. Human intercourse is grounded in a divine event and functions as its terrestrial expression. Such a union of earthly male and female, it is promised, will bring about the birth of pure and holy children.

Although verses from the Canticle are quoted with great regularity throughout the pages of the Zohar, there are two sections within the text where the treatment is most concentrated. One of these has already been mentioned: the so-called Zohar to the Song of Songs in Zohar *Ḥadash*, which has never been translated into English. Ranging over some thirty tightly printed pages in the current edition, it in fact contains homilies to the first ten verses of Canticles 1, with the greatest attention given to the first two verses. The other section, smaller, but of great importance, appears in Zohar 2:143a–145b in the midst of the portion *Terumah*, containing prescriptions for the building of the wilderness Tabernacle. The tabernacle is the prototype for the Jerusalem Temple, erected by Solomon, purported author of the Song of Songs. The figures of Moses and Solomon are seen as parallel to one another: the greatest of prophets and the wisest of men. Each was the author of a famous song, Moses's at the Red Sea and Solomon's Canticle, and each directed the building of a dwelling-place for the *sheḳhinah* on earth.

The ascription of bridal imagery to both Tabernacle and Temple has roots in ancient Judaism. The clever misreading of *kelot* ("completed"), spelled defectively, in Numbers 7:1, "On the day when Moses completed ["bride"] erecting the tabernacle" to refer to *kalat Moshe*, the Tabernacle or Torah as Moses's bride, is well known. The Song of Songs itself, according to traditions ascribed to various second-century authorities, records a conversation between God, Israel, and the angels during the lifetime of Moses. According to some, this took place in the Tabernacle or "tent of meeting" described in Exodus. Solomon only recorded and perhaps gave final poetic form to a dialogue that had taken place much earlier. But the Zohar prefers a divergent rabbinic opinion, one claiming that "the day the Song was given" was in fact the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple. At this moment in human history, there was utter convergence between the worlds above and below, when God as *sh'olomo*, the king of peace, and the earthly *sh'olomo*, Solomon, the king, could both be acclaimed as speakers of the Song.

Despite earlier rabbinic approbation for this view, it presents the Zohar's author with difficulty. He seems to be placing Solomon on a higher rung than Moses, the one who is clearly "lord of all prophets" and whose

encounter with God was never equaled. Elsewhere in the Zohar, as throughout Jewish literature, it is Moses who most embodies the sublime vision. The Zohar is sensitive to this unspoken criticism. In terms of prophecy, the author admits, Moses indeed knew no equal. But when it comes to the poetic muse, matters are somewhat different. Moses's song—that of the sea—was still concerned with matters of this world; he was thanking God for Israel's deliverance from a very real enemy and singing in praise of his miraculous deeds. As we read in Zohar 2:144b–145a:

But King David and his son Solomon spoke a different kind of Song. David sought to arrange the maidens and to adorn them along with the Queen, to show Queen and maidens in all their beauty. This is his concern in the psalms and praises; it was they, Queen and maidens, that he was seeking to adorn. When Solomon arrived he found the Queen adorned and her maidens decked out in beauty. He then sought to bring her to the Bridegroom and to bring Him under the canopy together with His Bride. He spoke words of love between them so that they be joined as one, so that the two of them form a single one in the wholeness of their love.

In this did Solomon rise high in praises, above all other humans. Moses was wedded to the Queen in this world below, so that there be a whole union among the lower creatures. Solomon brought about the complete union of the Queen above, first bringing the Bridegroom under the canopy and only afterwards joyously inviting both of them into the Temple he had built.

Blessed are David and Solomon his son for having brought about the union above. From the day God had said to the moon: "Go and diminish yourself! (Hullin 60b)" she had not been fully coupled with the sun until King Solomon came forth.

Moses the prophet still needs to bring the *shekhinah* into the lower world. He has a people to worry about, a people wandering the wilderness, who need assurance that God is indeed in their midst. The prophet's concern is his flock. Solomon, the mystic hierophant, can afford to be utterly selfless; it is not of his own love that he speaks, or even the love of earthly Israel for her God. He is the attendant, or better, the officiant, at the union of divine bridegroom and bride. He offers his song as an epithalamium, a gift to the sacred couple, intending nothing more or less than to fill all the universe with his freely given words of love.

The spiritualized reconstruction of the ancient Temple and the veneration of Temple-centered piety may also have to do with the Zohar's attempt to compete with the grand edifices and elaborate, incense-filled ritual drama offered by the religion of the surrounding culture. The great Temple to the *shekhinah's* presence on earth, the reader is reminded, was not the latest cathedral erected in Castile of the Reconquista, but the only true Temple, that of the holy city. In another key passage (*Zohar Hadash* 62d–63a), the Song of Songs is identified with the underground channels or furrows (called *shittim*) that run under the Temple Mount, into which flowed the sacrificial blood and the wine of libations. These *shittim*, according to old Jewish lore, date back to creation itself. In this spirit, the Zohar reads the opening word of Genesis, *bereshit* as *bara shit*, "He created the channel." But now the underground channels are uplifted and identified with the inner divine channels, the *sefirot*. As such, they are both singular and plural, *shit* and *shittim*. Alas, the channels are closed off in our day because of the curled snake, identified with the evil urge or the demonic forces, that now sits atop them. One day, however, God will remove that coiled figure. Now, suddenly, the Zohar switches from cosmogony to graphology: When the curved, snakelike line on the left side of the latter *tav* in *shit* and *shittim* is removed, the letter becomes a *resh*, and the words reveal themselves as *Shir ha-shirim*, the Song of Songs.

Alongside the glorious memory of Temple piety, the Song of Songs is often related by the Zohar to its own favorite act of contemporary religious practice, the study and interpretation of Torah. The Zohar stands within the long tradition of Jewish devotion to sacred study as a religious act. The Torah itself commands its faithful to "contemplate it day and night," traditionally taken to mean that the study and elaboration of the Torah is ideally the full-time obligation of the entire community of male Israelites. This community viewed the Torah as an object of love, and an eros of Torah study is depicted in many passages in the rabbinic *aggadah*. Based on ancient images of feminine wisdom, the Torah was described as the daughter and delight of God and as Israel's bride. Study of the Torah, especially the elaboration of its law, was described by the sages as courtship and sometimes even as the shy, scholarly bridegroom's act of love, the consummation of this sacred marriage. The midrash on the Song of Songs, compiled in the seventh or eighth century, devotes a large part of its exegesis to discussion of the revelation at Sinai and the delights of both God and the sages in the study of the Torah.

The Zohar is well aware of these precedents and expands upon them. The Kabbalists' literary imagination links the gardens of eros in the Song

of Songs, the *pardes* or “orchard” of mystical speculation itself, with the mystical Garden of Eden, into which God wanders each night “to take delight in the souls of the righteous.” The description of Paradise in Genesis—“a river goes forth from Eden to water the garden, whence it divides into four streams”—and certain key verses of the Canticle—“a spring amid the gardens, a well of living waters, flowing from Lebanon”—are quoted endlessly to invoke the sense that to engage in mystical exegesis is to dwell in the shade of God’s garden. Even more: The reader comes to understand that all of these gardens are but reflections of the true inner divine garden, the world of the *sefirot*, which in the tradition that runs from *Sefer ha-Bahir* to the *Zohar* is described as lush with trees, springs, and ponds of water.

The *Zohar* is devoted to the full range of religious obligations that the Torah places upon the community of Israel. Still, it is fair to say that the central religious act for the *Zohar* was the study and interpretation of the Torah. Again and again, Rabbi Simeon waxes eloquent in praise of those who study the Torah, especially those who do so after midnight. They indeed take the place of the priests and Levites of old, “who stand in the house of the Lord by night.” Those who awaken nightly to study the secrets of the Torah become the earthly attendants of the divine bride, ushering her into the chamber where she will unite at dawn with her heavenly spouse. This somewhat modest depiction of the Kabbalist’s role in the *hieros gamos*—the role we have seen applied to Solomon as well—does not exclude a level of emotional/mystical experience in which the Kabbalist himself is also the lover of that bride and a full participant in, rather than merely an attendant to, the act of union.

Torah in the *Zohar* is not conceived as a text, as an object, or as material, but as a living divine presence, engaged in a mutual relationship with the person who studies her. More than that, in the *Zoharic* consciousness Torah is compared to a beloved who carries on with her lovers a mutual and dynamic courtship. The *Zohar* on the portion *Mishpatim* contains, within the literary unit known as *Saba de-Mishpatim* a description of maiden in a palace. Here the way of the Torah’s lover is compared to the way of a man with a maiden. Arousal within Torah is like an endless courting of the beloved: constant walking about the gates of her palace, an increasing passion to read her letters, the desire to see the beloved’s face, to reveal her, and to be joined with her. The beloved in the nexus of this relationship is entirely active. She sends signals of her interest to her lover, she intensifies his passionate desire for her by games

of revealing and hiding. She discloses secrets that stir his curiosity. She desires to be loved. The beloved is disclosed in an erotic progression before her lover out of a desire to reveal secrets that have been forever hidden within her. The relationship between Torah and her lover, like that of man and maiden in this parable, is dynamic, romantic, and erotic. (Melila Hellner-Eshed, *Ve-nahar yotse me-‘Eden: ‘al šefat ha-ḥavayah ha-mišit ba-Zohar* [Tel Aviv: ‘am ‘oved, 2005], 19)

Seeing the act of Torah study as the most highly praised form of devotional activity places the Zohar squarely within the Talmudic tradition and at the same time provides a setting in which to go far beyond it. Here, unlike in the rabbinic sources, the *content* of the exegesis as well as the *process* is erotic in character. The Talmudic Rabbi Akiva, the greatest hero of the rabbinic romance with the text, was inspired by his great love of the Torah to derive “heaps and heaps of laws from the crowns on each of the letters.” It was the rabbis’ intense devotion to the text and to the *process* of Torah study that was so aptly described by the erotic metaphor. But the laws derived in the course of this passionate immersion in the text might deal with heave offerings and tithes or ritual defilement and ablutions; all of these were equally to be celebrated as resulting from the embrace of the Torah. That indeed is the genius of Rabbi Akiva’s school of thought: *All* of the Torah, even the seemingly most mundane parts, belongs to the great mystical moment of Sinai, the day when God gave the Torah to Israel and proclaimed his love for her in the Song of Songs. But the authors of the Zohar crave more than this. The *content* as well as the *process* has to reveal the great secret of unity, not just the small secrets of one law or another. In the Zohar, the true subject matter that the Kabbalist finds in every verse is the *hieros gamos* itself, the eros that underlies and transforms the cosmos, the text, and the soul of the interpreter, all at once. In this sense, it may be said that Zoharic exegesis seeks to reread the entire Torah as an expanded version of Rabbi Akiva’s Holy of Holies, the Song of Songs. It succeeds in doing so to a remarkable degree.

Scrolls of Love

READING RUTH AND THE SONG OF SONGS



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