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*The Zohar:
Jewish Mysticism
in Medieval Spain*

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The Zohar, the central work of Spanish-Jewish mysticism in the Middle Ages, is the product of an entirely distinctive literary and esoteric tradition. While the writings of the Kabbalists, as the Jewish mystics are called, were often composed in temporal and geographical proximity to those of Christian and Muslim mystics, they are essentially a product of the unique and separate religious teachings that the Jews carried into medieval Europe. Both the Kabbalah's enemies among later Jews and its devotees among Renaissance Christians and later occultists tried to separate Kabbalah from Judaism, seeing it as essentially Christian rather than Jewish in spirit, or viewing it as an "alien growth" on the historic body of Judaism. Nothing, as we shall see, could be further from the truth.¹

Before approaching the Zohar, we shall have to look briefly at the origins of the Kabbalah and the cultural setting in which it originated. From there we shall move to questions of authorship and structure in the Zohar, and finally to the esoteric content of the book itself.

It was in that area of southern France called Provence, culturally akin in the High Middle Ages to northern Spain, that the speculations which led to the Zohar, the culmination of a hundred-year development, first appeared. The Provençal Jewish community in the twelfth century was one of great cultural wealth, forming something of a bridge between the spiritual legacy of Jewish creativity in Spain

in Muslim times and the rather separate world of Jewry in the Ashkenazic or Franco-Rheinish area. Here were the great works of Jewish philosophy, including those of Maimonides, translated into Hebrew, so that a Jewry not conversant with the Arabic original could appreciate them. Provence was a great center of creativity in *halakhah*, religious law, and the ongoing legal discussion of the Talmud which is ever at the forefront of literary activity among medieval Jews. Traditional homiletics were also cultivated, and important works of Midrash, or homiletic commentary on the Bible, were edited in Provence. But other studies were encouraged as well in this rather "enlightened" atmosphere: biblical exegesis, theology, and poetry all flourished among Provençal Jewry.

A } In this cultural area there appears, toward the latter part of the twelfth century, a tradition of esoteric theosophical speculation, or speculation on the inner life of the Deity, known in later literature as Kabbalah. The origins of this literary movement are obscure and are still much debated. We do not yet know how much of the tradition was native to Provence and how much was imported from elsewhere (either from pietistic circles in the Rhineland or directly across the Mediterranean from the Near East.) Nor have scholars ceased debating whether there is some connection between the origins of Kabbalah and the Albigensian movement in Provence of the time.² For our purposes, however, we shall trace the beginning of Kabbalah to the appearance in Provence of a document that without a doubt can be called the first kabbalistic text, and is indeed one of the strangest and most fascinating documents in the long history of Hebrew literature. This slim volume is known as *Sefer ha-Bahir*, awkwardly renderable as *The Book of Clarity*. We first find reference to it in Provençal works of the late twelfth century, and from that time forward it has a continuous history as a major shaper of Jewish mystical ideas.³ The Bahir takes the form of ancient rabbinic Midrash, expounding on biblical phrases, tying one verse of Scripture to another, and constructing units of its own thought around what it offers as Scriptural exegesis. Like the old Midrash, it makes frequent use of parables, showing special fondness for those that involve stories about kings and their courts, in which God is inevitably compared to "a king of flesh and blood." In form, then, the Bahir is quite traditional. But as soon as we open its pages to look at the content, we find ourselves confounded:

Whence do we know that Abraham had a daughter? From the verse: "The Lord blessed Abraham with all" (Gen. 24:1). And it is written: "All is called by My name: I created, formed, and made it for My glory" (Is. 43:7). Was this

blessing his daughter or was it perhaps his mother? It was his daughter. To what may this be compared? To a king who had a faithful and perfect servant: he tested him in various ways, and the servant passed all the tests. Said the king: What shall I do for this servant, or what can I give him? I can only hand him over to my elder brother, who may advise him, guard him, and honor him. The servant went to the brother and learned his ways. The elder brother loved him greatly, and called him 'beloved': "The seed of Abraham my beloved" (Is. 41:8). He too said: What can I give him? What can I do for him? I have a beautiful vessel which I have fashioned, containing the most precious pearls, the treasures of kings. I shall give it to him, and he will attain his place. This is the meaning of "God blessed Abraham with all." ⁴

What is the meaning of the verse: "From the west I shall gather you" (Is. 43:5)? From that attribute which leans ever toward the west. Why is it called 'west' (*Maarav*)? Because there are the seed is mixed (*mitarev*). To what may this be compared? To a king's son who had a beautiful and modest bride in his chamber. He continually would take the wealth of his father's house and bring it to her. She took everything and hid it, mixing it all together. After some time, he wanted to see what he had collected and gathered. This is the meaning of "From the west I shall gather you". And what is it? His father's house, as the verse earlier states: "I shall bring your seed from the east". This teaches that he brings from the east and sows in the west. Later he gathers in that which he has sown. ⁵

The reader familiar with Midrash (as was the intended audience of the Bahir) will immediately notice something out of the ordinary here. The text simply does not work as Midrash. Questions are asked but not answered, or answered in such ways as only to call forth more questions. An image is proposed (that of the king), which always refers to God, and then suddenly that king turns out to have an older brother. Abraham's daughter, well known from earlier Midrash, here might be his mother. What sort of questions are these, and what sort of answers? The scholar is almost tempted to emend the text!

If one comes to the Bahir, on the other hand, with some familiarity with the methods of mystical teachers, particularly in the Orient, the text seems not quite so bizarre. Despite its title, the purpose of the book is precisely to mystify rather than to make anything "clear"

in the ordinary sense. The reader is being taught to recognize how much there is that he does not know, how filled Scripture is with seemingly impenetrable mystery. "You think you know the meaning of this verse?" says the Bahir to its reader. "But here is an interpretation to throw you on your ear and to show you that you understand nothing of it at all." Everything in the Torah, be it a tale told of Abraham, a verse of prophecy, or an obscure point of law, hints at some reality beyond that which you can attain by the ordinary dialectic of Talmudic training.

As we read on in the Bahir, it becomes clear that the author (we speak of him in the singular only informally; the text is undoubtedly the product of several layers of compilation) is not merely advocating obscurantism for its own sake. He has in mind a notion, often expressed only in the vaguest terms, of what it is that lies beyond the many hints and mysteries of the Scriptural word. To say it briefly, the Bahir and all Kabbalists after it claim that the true subject of Scripture is God himself, that revelation is essentially an act of self-disclosure by God. Because the majority of people would not be able to bear the great light that comes with knowing God, however, divinity is revealed in the Torah in hidden form. Scripture is strewn with hints as to the true nature of "that which is above" and the mysterious process within divinity that led to the creation of this world. Only in the exoteric, public sense is revelation primarily a matter of divine *will*, teaching the commandments man is to follow in order to lead the good life. The inner, esoteric revelation is rather one of divine *truth*, a network of secrets about the innermost workings of God's universe.

A careful reading of the Bahir also shows it to document a religious vision not found anywhere in prior Jewish sources. Its language, to be sure, is good rabbinic/medieval Hebrew. It is written wholly from within the rabbinic world, showing complete familiarity with a wide range of earlier sources. Frequent reference is found in the Bahir to "the blessed Holy One," a standard rabbinic way of speaking about God. But it also becomes clear that this "Holy One" is not alone in the divine universe. There seem to be many potencies, all of them bearing some degree of divine description, and standing in relationship of some sort to another. Of course outright polytheism is out of the question here (though the Kabbalah has been accused of this too); what we seem to discover in the Bahir are various elements or stages of divine life, figures within the Godhead that interact with one another. No Neoplatonic flow from rung to rung is yet to be seen here; that will be added to Kabbalah only in the succeeding century. Here these entities seem to relate in a freer, more mythlike, and more complex manner. Most of the Bahir text leaves them quite

undefined in order of relationship, and skips continually back from one to another. There is one passage, however, undoubtedly determinative for later Kabbalah, that enumerates the potencies as ten, setting them out as parallel to the ten utterances ("Let there be . . .") by which God supposedly created the world. We quote the first half of this passage:

What are the ten utterances? The first is the sublime crown, blessed are His name and His people. And who are His people? Israel, as Scripture says: "Know that the Lord is God; it is He who has made us and not [consonantly: L'] we ourselves" (Ps. 100:3). Read rather "We belong to Aleph [L']—to recognize and know the One of Ones, united in all His names.

The second: wisdom, as it is written: "The Lord acquired me at the beginning of His way, before His deeds of old" (Prov. 8:22). And there is no beginning but wisdom, as Scripture says: "The beginning of wisdom: the fear of the Lord" (Ps. 110:11).

The third: the quarry of the Torah, the treasury of wisdom, hewn out by the spirit of God. This teaches that God hewed out all the letters of the Torah, engraving them with the spirit, casting His forms within it. Thus it is written: "There is no rock [*zur*] our God" (I Sam. 2:2). Read rather: "There is no artisan [*zayyar*] like our God".

This is the third. What is the fourth? The fourth is the righteousness of God, His mercies and kindnesses with the entire world. This is the right hand of God.

What is the fifth? The fifth is the great fire of God, of which it is said: "Let me see no more of this great fire, lest I die" (Deut. 18:16). This is the left hand of God. What is it? They are the holy beasts and seraphim on left and right; they are the exalted and beautiful ones unto the heights, of which Scripture says: "the higher ones above them" (Ecc. 5:7) and. "Their rings were high and dreadful; the rings of the four were full of eyes round about" (Ez. 1:18). Around it are angels, around them, bowing and prostrating before them, proclaiming: "The Lord, He is God! The Lord, He is God!"⁶

One gets the impression here—though not for certain—that "God himself" is to be identified with the first of these figures, and that the others belong to him in some secondary way. This impression is not consistent throughout the Bahir, however: the passage in which the king refers to his "elder brother," for example, seems to indicate something different.

The reader will also notice by now the strong attraction of the Bahir to *symbolic* speech. This remains true of the Zohar and throughout the Kabbalah: God is best to be approached by way of symbols. Here the mystics take their stand against the long and highly developed tradition of rational philosophy among medieval Jews, especially in Spain, claiming that discursive reasoning and the language that embraces it can never reach beyond those bonds of ordinary human intellect that keep us from true knowledge of the divine world. Knowledge of God requires a breaking out of our limited ways of thinking, a reaching beyond into a level of reality (and consciousness) where ordinary language cannot accompany us. Symbols, with their pictorial richness and seemingly endless depth, with their willingness to breach contradiction (e.g. "God's fire is water"; "true being is nothingness," etc.) and their ability to penetrate arcane levels of our individual minds and our collective human memory, can alone remain of language as we use it to express these divine mysteries which, in their essence, are ever beyond words. One may define the most basic spiritual endeavor of Kabbalah, from its very beginnings, as symbol making. The thought it produces, particularly in such a work as the Bahir, is a symbolic narration of events and processes that exist in a realm higher than and prior to ours, events that without these symbols would remain utterly beyond the grasp of language. To say it in a word, kabbalistic thought is essential mythic.⁷

For several generations in the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, these new mystic/mythic ways of thinking were preserved in closely guarded esoteric circles. One family, that of Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières, himself a major legal authority, had a leading role in the transmission of these "secrets," as they were called. Members of this group are depicted, however, not merely as transmitters of literary sources. Several members of the circle are said to have had "revelation of Elijah," meaning that Elijah the Prophet had come to them while in a supersensory state and had revealed some new portion of the secret lore. The student of medieval Judaism knows, moreover, that the reference to Elijah serves to legitimate a claim to divine revelation, one which formally was not supposed to occur since the canon was sealed and "prophecy was taken from the prophets and given to children and fools." The early Kabbalists in fact made a dual truth-claim for their esoteric readings of Scripture and their boldly new speculative ideas: they claimed both that they were ancient, the secret wisdom passed down by countless generations, only now given to public reading, and also that they were new, freshly revealed by heavenly voices to the sages of immediately preceding generations.⁸

The teachings of this circle, aside from the Bahir itself, were largely centered around the act of mystical prayer. We find among the Provence mystics detailed instructions for *kawwanah* or inner direction in prayer. Here *kawwanah* does not simply mean "intentionality," as in the earlier rabbinic sources, nor does it refer to a general air of serious intensity in worship; rather, it indicates a series of very specific steps in which the text of the liturgy is related to a series of meditations on those same ten potencies, or *sefirot*, that we have seen in the Bahir. The words of prayer, either individually or in phrases, become a series of guideposts by means of which the worshipper is to rise in contemplative ascent through the higher realms. Here we have the aspect of practice that was missing from the Bahir itself; what appeared as a gnostic tradition, offering esoteric knowledge about the inner divine world, is interpreted here as a contemplative tradition; one in which the devotee may *participate* as he successively directs his prayers to ever higher realms within God.

Unlike the Bahir itself, some of these sources speak of a "cause of causes" or "root of roots," a hidden Godhead that lies beyond the active mythic world of divinity that is manifest in the *sefirot*. Here we see emerging for the first time a dichotomy that is to be universally accepted by later Kabbalists: the hidden God, beyond all knowing, address, and even naming, and the revealed God, the one-amid-ten of the sefirotic universe. From the viewpoint of the historian, what we also see here is the integration of the Bahir's radically different gnostic teaching into a theological mindset more familiar to medieval Jewry. The hidden God and his potencies are now *structurally* parallel (though surely not identical) either to the hidden Neoplatonic God and the intelligences emanating from him or the Aristotelian deity who is one with all his attributes.

We have yet to traverse, albeit briefly, two more steps before we are ready to speak of the Zohar itself. It was in the opening years of the thirteenth century that the doctrines of Kabbalah, still kept as closely guarded secrets, began to cross the Pyrenees and attract followers in Catalonia or northeastern Spain. This region, already long under Christian domination, contained a large and well-educated Jewish community that was linked by close ties, cultural as well as socio-economic, to the Jews of Provence. In the town of Gerona there developed a circle of kabbalistic devotees, including a number of writers who were most important for the later history of the movement. It is from this circle that the earliest major kabbalistic books, aside from the Bahir, have come down to us. The range of their subject-matter and forms typifies the writings of Jewish mystics for many centuries to come: we have commentaries on the prayer-book, a commentary on the Song of Songs, explanations of the

Talmudic legends, a polemical work against the writings of a philosopher, and a commentary on the Torah which, while by no means exclusively or even chiefly kabbalistic, contains frequent references to explanations of Scripture "according to the way of Truth." This last work, the Torah commentary of Moses Nahmanides, was an important departure in the history of Kabbalah. Nahmanides (1194-1270) was perhaps the best known and most widely revered Jewish intellectual of the thirteenth century. Respected as a conservative in theological matters (he sided with the opponents to Maimonides' philosophy), he was a widely accepted authority in Jewish legal circles, author of numerous *responsa* (legal opinions in response to queries) and commentaries on various tractates of the Talmud. The fact that a man of his stature had become a central figure in the Gerona mystical circle, and that he was willing to refer (albeit in a somewhat veiled manner) to kabbalistic secrets in a volume intended for popular distribution, clearly did much to pave the way for the acceptance of this new way of thinking.

In the Gerona school, the influence of religious philosophy has become more pronounced, and it is clear that Kabbalah has taken on a Neoplatonic hue. This first means that emanation, the flow of the sefirot out of the hidden self of God beyond, the infinite and unknowable, is now taken to be the most essential kabbalistic mystery. True, the identification of certain rites and terms with individual potencies in the supernal realm, the way of the Bahir in revealing secrets, continues in Gerona. This especially characterizes the Torah commentary of Nahmanides. But one has a sense in the longer works of this circle that a *system* has now developed out of the Bahir's more random symbolic identifications. The ordered flow of the *sefirot*, each from one another and ultimately all from the primal One, is now taken for granted. The relationship of these potencies, especially the uppermost ones, to their source in the hidden Godhead, remains perhaps intentionally vague in this literature, a point we shall discuss further when outlining the Zohar's version of this system.

Neoplatonism has also had a major impact on the psychology of the Kabbalah, its doctrine of the soul. The mystics of Gerona accepted the general medieval understanding of a sharp distinction between soul and body, the latter being merely the outer shell that contains the true person as manifest in the soul. They also learned from the philosophers the tripartite division of the soul, a notion which they combined with ancient rabbinic speculations and adapted for their own purposes. The essential point they sought to establish is that the soul has its origins in God and that the human being, body as well as soul, bears the stamp of its divine source. The ten *sefirot*, the essential building-blocks of all reality, make up the structure of

the soul as well; because of this it is by turning inward, by self-knowledge at its most profound level, that a person can come to know God. This turn inward, the necessary first step in any contemplative system, also implies a rejection of things external except insofar as they are a manifestation of God's glory. The inward journey upon which one then embarks leads from the lower levels of self into a discovery of the true soul (*neshamah*), its likeness to the divine world and its endless longing to be returned to its source. "To use the Neoplatonic formula, the process of creation involves the departure of all from the One and its return to the One, and the crucial turning-point in this cycle takes place within man, at the moment he begins to develop an awareness of his true essence and yearns to retrace the path from the multiplicity of his nature to the Oneness from which he originated."¹⁰

Paralleling the tendency toward a more philosophic Kabbalah in Gerona, there emerged in the same or a slightly later period another circle, the one with which the Zohar's author is most closely identified. This group, sometimes referred to by modern scholars as the "gnostic" circle, seems to have reacted, perhaps predictably, against the growing philosophical influences on Kabbalah, and sought a more direct linkage with the mythic world first so darkly hinted at in the Bahir. Their works, rather than explaining or commenting in order to make a difficult text more accessible, prefer to follow the Bahir tradition by expanding and creating the myth. Here, in the works of such figures as Moses of Burgos or Todros Abulafia of Toledo (the latter an important political leader of the Castilian community), the fantastic elaboration of a mystical cosmos is the center of kabbalistic activity. Angels, principalities, and especially demons filled the imagination of these writers; it was this school that first elaborated the notion of an "other side" opposing divinity, containing ten demonic *sefirot* of its own parallel to those in God, an idea that was to have great importance in the later history of the Kabbalah. The free-flowing mythic creativity of these Kabbalists clearly prepared the way for the Zohar, a work of inspired mystical-mythic imagination if ever there was one.¹¹

The Zohar is a voluminous work, usually printed in three thick volumes along with various addenda. It is without question the apex of kabbalistic thought, a point agreed upon by traditional mystics and contemporary historians. For Jewish mystics the work attained a sort of canonical status, the only work after the Talmud of which this may be said. Pious Jews from the fifteenth century onward—including many, especially of Near Eastern origin, even today—would rank it alongside the Bible and the Talmud as a source of

unimpeachable religious truth. The famous Hasidic master, Rabbi Pinhas of Korzec (1728-91) thanked God for having created him in the period when the Zohar was already known, "for the Zohar kept me a Jew."¹² Legend has it that Rabbi Pinhas' son, who owned a printing house in Slavuta, prepared for the publication of the Zohar edition by having the printing presses dipped in a ritual bath so that they, profane vessels that they are, might be fit to print so holy a text. The enchanting character of this work, whose title is perhaps best rendered as "The Book of Enlightenment," has fascinated readers Jewish and Christian, devotee and skeptic, for many hundreds of years.

The Zohar began to make its appearance in Castile during the closing decades of the thirteenth century. We speak of it in this indirect way, for it was precisely in that most appropriate manner that the work first came to be known, mere bits and fragments revealed while the rest was kept secret. A number of kabbalistic authors in that generation, including Joseph Gikatilla and Bahya ben Asher, the famous Bible commentator of Barcelona, seem to have been close to the source of these writings, but not to have betrayed their secret. As larger portions of the book became available, it was referred to not at all as one of the writings of contemporary Spanish Kabbalists, but rather as "the Midrash of Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai," the ancient and presumably long-hidden work of a famous second-century teacher. Rabbi Simeon lived in the Holy Land during the period of Roman persecution; according to later legend, surely treated as history in the Middle Ages, he and his son dwelt for thirteen years in a cave, where they lived a life of unblemished asceticism and conversed with one another on mystical matters. When in 1305 the travelling Kabbalist Isaac of Acre finally traced the Zohar manuscripts to their source and disseminator, Rabbi Moses De Leon, he was indeed told that they were copied from the works of that ancient sage.¹³

As though to buttress the claim of antiquity, the Zohar is composed not in Hebrew, the sole literary language of Jews in Christian Spain, but in Aramaic, the language spoken in the land of Israel during the early rabbinic period. In the Middle Ages this language was known only poorly, preserved insofar as was needed for comprehending the Talmud and other literary sources of late antiquity. To one who reads the original, the work is surely a linguistic marvel; its sonorous Aramaic tones lend to it a quality of arcane majesty, of a truth always veiled by being presented in a tongue just not quite fully comprehended, this all the more so because the Zohar is replete with words not to be found in any other Aramaic document, many

of these forming the essential technical terms needed for a comprehension of the text's most basic meaning.¹⁴

Despite the relatively concise form in which it is published, it is difficult to think of the Zohar as a single book; it gives the appearance of a vast literary corpus, the complete reading of which would take years of careful study. There is no continuous narrative or single form that embraces the entirety of the work. A breakdown of the Zohar into its parts shows that it is comprised of some twenty-two literary units, each of these entirely unique as to length, content, and style. Perhaps half of the total Zohar corpus is contained in the main body of the work, the so-called Zohar on the Torah. As the name indicates, the text is organized (though rather loosely so) as a series of comments and homilies following the order of the Torah, divided in accord with the divisions of Scripture for weekly reading in the synagogue. Rather than offering real commentary, the Zohar will use the biblical verse as a point of departure, finding constant occasion in Scripture to expostulate upon its own theosophical system. We take as an example some passages from the Zohar's account of the birth of Moses and the tale of his discovery by Pharaoh's daughter.

A MAN WENT FORTH FROM THE HOUSE OF LEVI AND TOOK A DAUGHTER OF LEVI (Exodus 2:1). Rabbi Yose began: "My beloved has gone down into his garden, into the bed of spices" (Canticles 6:2). "His garden" is the Community of Israel, for she is the "bed of spices", wreathed from all sides, containing the fragrant aromas of the World-to-Come. In the hour when the blessed Holy One goes down into his garden, all the souls of the righteous are crowned and give off their aroma. Of this the Scripture says: "The aroma of your oils is of all the spices" (Canticles 4:10). These are the souls of the righteous and Rabbi Isaac has said that all such souls ever present and ever to be present in this world exist in the earthly Garden of Eden, in the very form and image that they have in this world. This secret has been transmitted to the wise

"A man went forth from the house of Levi"—this is Gabriel, of whom it is said: "The man Gabriel, whom I had seen in a vision" (Daniel 9:21). "From the house of Levi"—this is the Community of Israel, coming from the left side. He "took a daughter of Levi"—this is the soul, as it is taught: in the hour when the body of a righteous person is born in this world, the blessed Holy One calls upon Gabriel to take that soul from the garden and bring it down into the newborn body; he is then given the task of guarding that soul as well.

But if you should say that the angel who guards the souls of the righteous is called "night" [following a tradition of the Talmud], and wonder why we have called him Gabriel, the answer is thus. He comes from the left side, and anyone who comes from that side will bear this name.

"A man went"—this refers to Amram. He "took a daughter of Levi"—this is Jochebed. A heavenly voice came forth and told him to join himself to her. The hour of Israel's redemption had drawn near, and it was to take place through the child born of them. The blessed Holy One helped him, for we have learned that the divine presence (*shekhinah*) hovered over their bed. Both of them desired to cleave as one to the *shekhinah*, and for that reason the *shekhinah* never departed from the son they were to bear. Thus Scripture says: "Sanctify yourselves and you shall be holy" (Leviticus 11:44). When a person sanctifies himself below, the blessed Holy One makes him holy from above. Just as their desire was to cleave to the *shekhinah*, so did the *shekhinah* attach itself to the one whom they brought forth by their act

HIS SISTER STOOD FROM AFAR (Exodus 2:4). Whose sister? The sister of the One who calls the Community of Israel "my sister", as in "Open for me, my sister, my beloved" (Canticles 5:2). "From afar", as it is said: "From afar the Lord appears to me" (Jeremiah 31:3). What does this mean? That the righteous, before they come down into this world, are known to all above. Surely this is true of Moses. It also means that the souls of the righteous are drawn from a high place, as we have learned. The soul has a father and a mother, just as the body has father and mother on earth. Everything both above and below comes about through male and female. This is the secret of "Let earth bring forth a living soul" (Genesis 1:24). "Earth" here is the Community of Israel: the "living soul" is that of Adam, as has been taught.¹⁵

A well-known event of the biblical narrative has been transformed here in several ways. First it is supplied with a poetic or romantic introduction, typically drawing upon the erotic imagery of the Song of Songs. But this introduction also serves to change the essential locus of the event itself. Rather than a bit of history, we have an event replete with symbolic mystery. Levi and Jochebed, Moses' parents, are here taken as symbols for the bridegroom and bride (or garden) of the Canticle, reminding the reader that the true mystery of conception takes place above, that the human soul is born of a union within the divine realm.

From the realm of the *sefirot*, the soul is handed over to the angel Gabriel for protection and safe conduct into the lower world. The angels represent an intermediary world for the Zohar, linking the mysterious universe of inner divinity to the human world below. Only after Gabriel has the soul readied for entry into the body may the narrative turn (beginning of the third paragraph, as we have divided it here) to the realm in which Moses' parents join together to conceive a child. Here the account is essentially moralistic, and serves to remind the reader of the great rewards to be obtained by those who keep their minds turned to holy thoughts during the time of intercourse.

The advent of Moses' sister in the narrative gives the Zohar one more chance to return the scene to the upper realms. "Sister," like "bride" is a favorite term for the *shekhinah*, the last and most essentially feminine of the *sefirot*, which is also called here "The Community of Israel."

The biblical story, then, has served as an occasion to reflect upon the inner divine universe, source of the human soul and the true locus of all events, from the birth of a child to the redemption of Israel, that befall mankind. The lower world and its history are but a reflection of that which goes on above in the hidden inner life of God. The narrative of Israel's sacred history has, in the truest sense, been reread as myth.

Interwoven with this mythical Midrash, as it may be called, is a series of narratives, intended to provide a "natural" setting in which the various discourses of Rabbi Simeon and his companions are offered. The rabbis will be walking along the road, staying at an inn, or meeting some mysterious stranger; the tale is one of mystical wanderers ever in search of someone who can offer them a new bit of illumination. The companions will chance upon a great tree or a wise child; their inspiration may come from either the natural order or the human world, but always it will lead them back to "the world of truth," the inner universe of divine contemplation. Some of these encounters blossom forth into longer narratives, containing all sorts of fantastic tales that somehow come to be interwoven with the esoteric subject at hand. In a passage shortly following on that we have just quoted, still concerned with the origins of the soul, the following encounter takes place:

Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Abba were going from Tiberias to Sepphoris. While they were on their way, a certain Jew met up with them and joined them. . . .

[The stranger told them the following tale:] One day I was walking in the wilderness, and I saw a rare and precious tree.

Beneath it was a cave. As I approached it, aromas of all sorts wafted from the cave. I took courage and went in, going down some steps until I came to a place of tall trees that gave off fragrant spices and aromas, more than I could bear. There I saw a certain man with a sceptre in his hand. He was seated at another entrance, but when he saw me he stood up in astonishment. "What are you doing here, and who are you?" he asked me. I was very much afraid, but I said "Sir, I am one of the companions [Kabbalists]. Thus-and-so did I see in the wilderness, and I entered the cave and came down here." He said to me "Since you are one of the companions, take this bundle of writings and give it to those who know the secret of the souls of the righteous. He struck me with his sceptre and I fell asleep. In my sleep I saw great crowds of people following the path to that place. But that man struck them with his sceptre and said: "Take the path of the trees!" As they were walking they were lifted up into the air and began to fly, I know not where. I heard a sound of many people and did not know what it was. I awoke and saw nothing, and was quite afraid. Then I saw that man and he asked me if I had seen anything. I told him what I had seen in my sleep, and he said, "The spirits of the righteous pass by this path on their way to Eden. The sound you heard was of those who are in Eden, bedecked in the form they take in this world, rejoicing at those spirits of the righteous who have just arrived. Just as the body is composed of a mixture of the four elements and takes on form in this world, the spirit too is formed in the garden by the four winds that blow there; it is they who clothe it in its bodily form. Without these winds, which make up the air of the garden, the spirit would remain unadorned and would have no form at all. These four winds are tied together as one; it is from the wind [or spirit] that the spirit gets its form, just as the body is formed by the four elements below. That is why "From the four winds come, O spirit!" (Ezekiel 37:9): from the four winds of Eden by which the spirit is formed. Now take this bundle of writings and go on your way to deliver it to the companions."

Rabbi Eleazar and the companions came forward and kissed him on his head. Said Rabbi Eleazar: "Blessed is the merciful One who has sent you here. Surely this is the proper interpretation, and it was God Himself who put that verse into my mouth." ¹⁶

He gave them the bundle of writings. Rabbi Eleazar took it and opened it, but a flame burst forth and surrounded him.

He saw whatever he saw in it, and it flew out of his hands. Rabbi Eleazar wept and said "Who can stand in the treasure-house of the King! 'O Lord, who can reside in Your tent; who can dwell in Your holy mountain' (Ps. 15:1). Blessed is this path and this hour when I came upon you!"¹⁷

Other sections of the Zohar are composed in an entirely different, much more concise style. Here, in the so-called *matnitin* (Hebrew *mishnayot*), or *tosefta* (addenda) we find a terseness that imitates the legal codex rather than the expansive manner of fanciful homiletic works. In a few carefully chosen words, replete with the boldest of images, some secret is let out, offered with no explanation, and left to puzzle the reader. In such passages we cannot but have recourse to one of the later commentaries on the Zohar, hoping that its author was able to make sense of a passage that, however fascinating and glorious, seems to remain quite beyond comprehension.

O sublime beloveds, masters of intellect, look, O renowned rulers! Who among you has eyes to see, come with the power of that sight and know this: In the hour when there arose in the mystery of mysteries the will to come forth, three colors were joined together as one: white, red, and green. These three colors were interwoven, coupling with one another. The spade below receives its color from these, and all of them are seen in it. This is a sight to behold, the wondrous appearance of bdellium. As she is stricken within, the three colors appear surrounding her from without. The color goes forth, rising and descending. Guardians fuming with smoke (?) are present within her. The colors, joined as one, carry her upward by day and come down at night. A burning candle is seen at night, but it is hidden during the day in two hundred and forty eight worlds, all of them coming down from above for her sake, hidden below within the three hundred and sixty-five limbs. He who goes forth to seek her will break these hidden "wings" and "shells"; then will he open the gates. The one who merits to see will see with mind and intellect, like one seeing from behind a wall, except for the sublime and faithful prophet Moses, who saw with his very eyes that which is above and remains unknown. . . .¹⁸

Similar in style to these *matnitin* are the most esoteric portions of the Zohar, the Book of Concealment and the Greater and Lesser Assemblies, the sections of the work that have exercised the greatest fascination on the non-Jewish occultist traditions of the West ever

since they were first "discovered" by believing humanist scholars in the Renaissance.

The question of the Zohar's true authorship has been debated almost since the work was first presented to the world. At first it was language, variety, and the sheer immensity of the work that pointed to ancient origin, at least for some part of the Zohar literature. The seemingly natural tales of the rabbis and their peregrinations around the Holy Land, the many parallels between zoharic and other midrashic sources, echoes of a spiritual allegory reminiscent of Philo's or of a Gnosticism that sounded like that of late antiquity, were all used at one time or another to support these claims. On the other side were those who suspected from the very beginning that the Zohar was the work of Moses De Leon's own hand, and that the ancient manuscript from which he was said to have copied was but another figment of his imagination. Some sought out base motives in this "forgery," while others considered it a legitimate case of pseudepigrapha, much like the attribution of the first-century apocalyptic works to Enoch, Abraham, or Moses. Such ascription allows the author to express his vision boldly, with limited fear of censorship or condemnation, since the text is to be offered to the public as the writings of an ancient and venerable sage, one whose teachings are surely beyond reproach, and must in fact occasion the re-interpretation of "later" works which do not agree with it.

In our own generation the question of authorship has finally been resolved by the painstaking historical and philological research of Gershom Scholem.¹⁹ Scholem has argued on literary-historical grounds that the ideas of the Zohar are dependent upon the century of kabbalistic development that had preceded it, and not the other way around, as some defenders of the text's antiquity had argued. He has shown that the author was well-read in medieval Jewish philosophy, that the terminology of the book is much influenced by the literary Hebrew of the thirteenth century, and here and there, indeed, even by the Spanish that was the spoken language of Castilian Jewry. He has further shown that the author's supposed familiarity with Palestinian geography is a sham and, most convincingly, that the Aramaic in which the Zohar is written is a totally artificial language: that it corresponds to no dialect ever spoken, but is rather a hodge-podge of the Aramaic preserved in those literary sources that would have been most read by a medieval Jew in search of recovering that language. Finally, he has demonstrated a regular pattern of syntactical error in the usage of Aramaic verbs—a pattern that corresponds to the distinctive verb forms to be found in Moses De Leon's long-known Hebrew treatises. Scholem has shown that these literary and linguistic patterns are found diffused throughout the work, with the

exception of two sections that he demonstrates to be slightly later imitations of the Zohar by another hand. Critical opinion is virtually unanimous in accepting Scholem's conclusions, excepting those within the Orthodox Jewish community who still consider such views to be heretical.

But the problem of the Zohar's authorship, and especially of the relationship between Moses De Leon and Simeon ben Yohai, is not yet fully solved. True, the entire Zohar was composed by one man, an individual of breathtaking imaginative scope who was surely one of the great religious authors of the Middle Ages. But *how* did he write the Zohar, and what did *he* believe was the relationship between his writing and his claim that the book was authored by Rabbi Simeon? Many a passage in the Zohar is written with such an extra measure of spiritual intensity and transcendent enthusiasm that one could reasonably believe the author had felt himself possessed by a spirit other than his own as he was writing it. Could De Leon have felt that Rabbi Simeon was speaking *through* him, that he was the mere vessel the ancient sage had chosen for the revelation of his secrets? Here we will do well to remember that the Kabbalists were believers in reincarnation, an idea that plays a major role in the Zohar itself. Could the author have seen himself as Rabbi Simeon *redivivus*? Did he believe that the soul of that earlier teacher had been reborn in him and was now seeking to reveal ancient truths that had long been preserved in silence? It is to these questions that the current generation of scholars, with their keen interest in mystical psychology, will surely turn. Here the author of the Zohar will have to be studied not only in his own cultural context, but also in tandem with such figures as Jacob Boehme or William Blake, masters of a poetic imagination so extraordinary that any attempt to account for it, either by the author himself or by his readers, seems to lead beyond theories of poetics and towards some form of prophecy or revelation.

What then do we know of Rabbi Moses De Leon, surely the greatest figure in the history of Jewish mysticism until the sixteenth century? Given his prominence, we know surprisingly little. He was born around 1240, probably in the town of Leon, lived most of his adult life in Guadalajara, and in his last years moved to Avila, all of these being towns in north-central Spain, an area containing an ancient and highly cultured Jewish community. He was a man of very considerable erudition in rabbinic literature (particularly Midrash) as well as in the esoteric sources. On the other hand, he was no great master of *halakhic* (legal) literature. In contrast to Nahmanides, De Leon was a man wholly given to the kabbalistic enterprise; all of his writings that we possess are of a mystical nature. We also

know that De Leon had at least dabbled in philosophical literature; there is extant a manuscript copy of Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* written expressly for him in 1264. De Leon died in Arevalo in 1305.

It appears that the Zohar's author saw himself as belonging to a general movement of orthodox reaction to the rationalist rereading of Judaism that had been taking place under the influence of Aristotelian philosophy, particularly as typified by readers of the *Guide*. Philosophy had brought about a certain cynicism in matters of faith and was leading, so some claimed, even to a laxity in religious practice. Many were the voices raised in the thirteenth century against these evils, and De Leon counted himself among them; this partially accounts for his willingness to reveal so much of the "ancient" secret lore. In one of his Hebrew writings we hear him say:

Concerning this matter there are hidden mysteries and secret things which are unknown to men. You will now see that I am revealing deep and secret mysteries which the holy sages regarded as sacred and hidden, profound matters which properly speaking are not fit for revelation so that they may not become a target for the wit of every idle person. These holy men of old have pondered all their lives over these things and have hidden them, and did not reveal them to every one, and now I have come to reveal them. Therefore keep them to yourself, unless it be that you encounter one who fears God and keeps His Commandments and the Torah. . . . I looked at the ways of the children of the world and saw how in all that concerns these [theological] matters, they are enmeshed in foreign ideas and false, extraneous [or heretical] notions. One generation passes away and another generation comes, but the errors and falsehoods abide forever. And no one sees and no one hears and no one awakens, for they are all asleep, for a deep sleep from God has fallen upon them, so that they do not question and do not read and do not search out. And when I saw all this, I found myself constrained to write and to conceal and to ponder, in order to reveal it to all thinking men, and to make known all these things with which the holy sages of old concerned themselves all their lives.²⁰

Such are the very bare essentials of Moses De Leon's life, including most of what is known to us. While it is fair to say that of his external life we know very little, there is available in his writings a tremendous wealth of material that would help us draw a picture of his inner life. This too is a task that stands before the scholar,

but is one that can be appreciated only as we turn, finally, to the actual contents of the Book of Enlightenment.

The Zohar must be viewed as a great compendium of all the kabbalistic thought that had come before it, reworked and integrated into the author's own all-embracing poetic imagination. Ideas contained in bare hints or clumsy expressions in the generations before him now spring forth, full-blown as it were, as a part of the ancient wisdom. This is true of the Zohar's notion of God, especially of its views on the origin and power of evil, as well as its speculations on man, his soul, and the religious world of Judaism. It is to these that we shall now successively turn our attention.

It may be said that God is the essential subject of all the zoharic writings. Whether ostensibly searching out one of the commandments, commenting on a seemingly non-theological verse of Scripture, or taking note of the mere "ways of the world," the Zohar is ever seeking out that which it calls "the secret of faith," the inner life of God in the world of the *sefirot*. The pattern of the *sefirot*, their infinitely complex relations with one another and their influence on all that happens in the world are a source of boundless fascination to the author's mind. It is time now for us to examine these ten manifestations so that we may understand this most basic key to kabbalistic thinking.

Of God as *eyn sof*, the boundless, undefined and indescribable One existing before and beyond the *sefirot*, the Zohar has relatively little to say. This ultimate reality exists always and remains unperturbed and inaccessible, beyond prayer and seemingly even beyond contemplation; there are but occasional hints to the contrary. Certainly *eyn sof* is not to be thought of in *personal* terms; this hidden Godhead is the source of all being, but not Father, not King, not Lord of the universe. Within the mysterious depths of "the endless" there takes place an inner stirring, a movement toward the establishment of an Archimidean point, one that will stand to define the very beginning, the primal unit out of which are to evolve all of space and time. This inward process, the first awakening of direction or will within the infinite, is identified by the Kabbalist as the first *sefirah*. Surely not yet defined as a "thing," for it precedes even that point which is to come about through it, one may nevertheless say that this rippling in the ocean of infinity bears within it, at least as the impulse to create bears the creature, all that is ever to come about in the world. This manifestation of primal will within the hidden Godhead is referred to by Kabbalists, for reasons that will be clear later, as *keter*, the crown. Because it is the catalyst of all being, but not yet a thing in itself, it is also called, in the paradoxical language of

which the Zohar is so fond, "Nothing," or sometimes "the primal Nothing." This "air that cannot be grasped," to use another favorite kabbalistic term for it, lies wholly within *eyn sof*. Since it exists before and beyond time, it might be argued that *keter* is eternally present as an aspect of *eyn sof*, that within the infinite which is potentially turned toward creation. Kabbalistic history is filled with ongoing debate as to the nature of *keter* and its relationship to *eyn sof*, a debate in some ways reminiscent of the arguments about the eternity of the Second Person in early Christianity. This seems to be the Zohar's position: *keter* is eternally present within *eyn sof*, but is not to be identified with it.²¹

The primal point brought about through this movement of will is called "beginning"; it is the starting point of both emanation and creation; of the divine world and the world below. Everything that is ever to be already exists in that infinitesimal point as it emerges within God; as the first defined Being, however vague that definition, it becomes the source of all further being. The most widespread name for this point is *hokhmah* (wisdom), a usage often tied to an old midrashic reading of Genesis 1:1 as "In wisdom God created the heaven and the earth." It is in speaking of these primal movements of the first *sefirot* that the Zohar's language is most obscure and mystifying. Typical is this famous passage, which opens the Zohar's rendition of the story of creation:

IN THE BEGINNING. As the will of the King began to come forth, He engraved signs in the uppermost pure light. Within the most hidden recesses a flame of darkness issued, from the mysterious *eyn sof*, a mist within formlessness, ringed about, neither white nor black nor red nor green, of no color at all. Only when measured did it bring forth light-giving colors. From deep within the flame there flowed a spring, out of which the colors were drawn below, hidden in the mysterious concealment of *eyn sof*.

It broke through and yet did not break through the ether surrounding it. It was not knowable at all until, by force of its breaking through, one hidden sublime point gave forth light. Beyond that point nothing is known. Therefore it is called "Beginning"—the first utterance of all.²²

The imagery of this passage, particularly that of the "flame of darkness" and the "spring," sets the tone for much that is to follow in the volume. It is in images of light and water, flashing sparks, deep wells, springs, flowing rivers, and shining stars that the Zohar most likes to talk about its secrets. In fact the conventional names given by Kabbalists to the *sefirot* (*keter*, *hokhmah*, etc.) are used rather

rarely by its author, who seems to have the poet's instinctive sense that symbols freeze when they become conventionalized. The language of paradox is also very much to the Zohar's liking; only in this, it seems, can ordinary human speech be sufficiently stretched and distressed that it might be applied to a realm so utterly beyond the domain of language. The "flame of darkness" (Is it shining against the background of brilliant divine light?) is the instrument by which the *sefirot* are to be formed; like the workman's torch as it hews them out of an airy quarry, giving to each some measure of distance from the others in such a way that all, while remaining within God, can form a unity of One-in-ten, but not be completely absorbed into one another or swallowed back into *eyn sof*.

The spring which emerges from the flame is the third *sefirah*. From it will bubble forth, in an unending creative stream, the seven remaining *sefirot* and all the "lower worlds." In the passage below this same *sefirah* is referred to as a "palace." As soon as the first point (*ḥokhmah*) is defined, it is surrounded by a great light; the light that rings the primal point, also depicted as the chamber or palace in which that light comes to dwell, is the next stage of emanation. It is the crucial moment in the emergence of the divine self; this third rung is most frequently described in terms that are *maternal*, as the womb out of which the seven children are to be born, and as the loving one to whom all will return and be set aright at the end of time.

In fact, as we examine the symbols of this next passage, we will see that the relationship between *ḥokhmah* and *binah* (literally: "understanding," as this third *sefirah* is often called) has been described here in erotic terms. The light of *ḥokhmah* is also its "seed," entering into *binah* in an explosion of light that certainly also bears the marks of sexual climax.

In the most hidden concealment a mark was made—unseen, not revealed. That mark was made and not made; neither persons of intellect nor those whose eyes are open can grasp it. Yet it is the existence of all. That mark is so tiny it cannot be seen or discovered; it exists through the will and gives life to all, taking what it does from that which has no marks or even will in it, from that which remains deeply hidden. The mark longed to cover itself, so it made a certain palace in which it might hide. It brought that palace out from within its own self, stretching it forth vastly in all directions. It decorated the palace in splendid draperies, and opened fifty gates which lead into it. Inside the palace that mark kept itself recondite and hidden. But once it was hidden there, as

soon as it entered, the palace filled up with light: From that light are poured forth other lights, sparks flying through the gates and giving life to all. . . .²³

As *binah* is womb or mother, *hokhmah* turns out here to be father and progenitor, the indeed hidden source whence all birth is to come. This primal pair, existing in eternal and undisturbed union, are the first stations in the boundless flow of divine energy that emerges beyond them, first as the seven lower *sefirot*, aspects of the divine *persona*, and then as *shefa'*, the flowing bounty of divine presence that brings life to all the worlds below.

The earliest Kabbalists were fascinated with questions of the divine name, and mystic lore assigned each of the names or terms for God in the Bible to one of the *sefirot*. This allowed for a rather easy key to kabbalistic exegesis, whereby the name of God employed in a verse would tell the reader which *sefirah* was its secret subject. In this context the name *elohim*, the generic term for "god" in Hebrew, was attached to *binah*. Since this is the word used in the opening verse of Genesis, the Zohar offers a radical new twist to that verse: "God" is now object rather than subject of the verse; Genesis 1:1 is here taken to mean: Through *hokhmah* He (or It, a hidden subject) created "God"! Such an understanding, utterly opposed of course to the plain meaning of Scripture, is precisely the sort of reading that would have been considered arch-heresy by the early rabbis, positing as it does a realm higher than that of "God." In the kabbalistic apologetic, of course, it is always emphasized that *eyn sof* and all the *sefirot* are one, and therefore that no such charge is appropriate. In fact, however, the personal God of rabbinic Judaism has been reduced by several notches, assigned in the Zohar to a combination of several *sefirot* below *binah*, as we shall see presently.

Here we must interrupt our outline of the *sefirot* to deal with a question that by now may be troubling the reader. What has all this to do with *mysticism*? If by that term we mean a religion that turns on inner experience, building on the heart's strivings toward unification with the One, the question is indeed legitimate, though we have not yet seen the end of the sefirotic system. The point is that we find very little in kabbalistic literature that speaks directly and *confessionally* of religious experience. "The Kabbalists, however, are no friends of mystical autobiography. They aim at describing the realm of divinity and the other objects of the contemplation in an impersonal way . . . they glory in objective description and are deeply adverse to letting their own personalities intrude into the picture."²⁴ In a larger sense, however, we may say that the Zohar is precisely mystical in origin. The descriptions offered are not the

result of speculation in the casual sense, but rather a mirroring onto the cosmos of stages and states that the adept has known in his own inner life. The language of Kabbalah is cosmological. Hence, as our experiences are structured by the language system within which we work, the Kabbalist envisions his inner reality' as the unfolding of universal life out of the Godhead; his chief preoccupation is the cosmos, not 'merely' his own soul. In our day, when mystical cosmology seems so distant and our shared language is rather that of psychology and inner experience, we might speak of these primal stages of emergence out of the depth in terms of the mystic himself rather than in terms of God or the cosmos. "Having been sunk completely into the unity of all things," we might say, "beyond all separation and self-consciousness, the mystic feels stirring within him that first impulse toward a reawakening of individual consciousness. That impulse, transforming him and not transforming him, taking him from the oneness of God and yet leaving him wholly within God, brings him in an eternal instant to utter silently the words: I am. This is his new birth, his first beginning."

Thus might a Kabbalist of our own period express what the Zohar says in the passages quoted. The difference between these two remains great, as vast as the difference between any two mystical texts composed in divergent religious contexts. But it is essential for the reader to understand that the choice of cosmological language does not mean that the Zohar is any less "truly mystical" for it. The task of the sensitive reader is in part (and cautiously!) to translate the Zohar's projected metaphysic back into those terms of inner enlightenment and successive states of transformed consciousness in which he can best comprehend it. The kabbalistic authors, cautious for their own reasons, do not do this for us.

Out of the womb of the Great Mother within God, or out of the spring that flows atop the deep well, if you prefer, there are born (issue forth), six children (streams), each of them having a particular function and character, and all of them uniting once again in the last of the ten *sefirot*, the bride (sea or garden). This last potency too is part of God, flowing from *hokhmah* as the end is the fulfillment of the beginning. But in relation to the six above her she occupies a passive role, that of bride receiving the affections of her beloved (the six combined as one), as sea taking into herself the multiple streams of water, or as moon receiving the reflected light of the sun, then giving it to her children, those who dwell in the lower worlds.

The six *sefirot* that intervene between mother and bride are often taken as a single figure, a "male" potency that stands between the female who is his origin and the one who is his mate. It is this figure with whom the rabbinic person-God is identified, Father of

all the lower creatures, to be sure, but "son" when viewed from the perspective of that which stands above:

Rabbi Simeon lifted up his hands and rejoiced. He said: This is the time to reveal—a full revelation is now required! It is taught: In the hour when the holy Ancient One, the hidden of all hidden, sought to be established [i.e. revealed]. It arranged all as male and female. Having been joined together, male and female no longer exist except in further configurations of male/female. *Ḥokhmah*, containing all, came forth shining in male/female form as it emerged from the holy Ancient One: since *ḥokhmah*, as it spread forth, brought out *binah* from within itself, it is in male/female form. *Ḥokhmah* is father, *binah* is mother: *ḥokhmah* and *binah* are equally balanced, male and female. Because of them everything exists as male/female; otherwise none would exist.²⁴

This beginning is father of all, father of all the patriarchs; they are joined to one another and give light to one another. When they are joined they have offspring, and faith [the sefirotic world] spreads forth. In the narrative of Rav Yeva's school it is taught: What is *binah*? When *yod* and *heh* [the first two letters of God's name, *ḥokhmah* and *binah*] are joined together, she becomes pregnant and gives birth to *ben* [literally: "son"].²⁵

Therefore is she called *binah*, the son of *yod heh*, the fulfillment of all. The two of them join together with the son between them in their form. Total fulfillment: father, mother, son, daughter. These words were given to be revealed only to the saints above, those who have come in and gone out, who know the ways of God and do not turn aside right or left. Of them it is said: "The ways of the Lord are straight. The righteous shall walk in them, but sinners shall stumble in them" (Hos. 14:10).²⁶

These six figures taken as a unit are also identified with the six days of the week, flowing into the Sabbath, and the six directions of space (the four compass points, up and down). Taken individually they form two triads, the lower chiefly a reflection of the higher. This upper triad is often symbolized by the three patriarchs, Abraham personifying the love of God, Isaac the fear of God, and Jacob embodying peace, or the resolution of these two religious attitudes into one. Abraham, placed on the right side of the sefirotic diagrams (more on these below), signifies the right hand of God, the boundless and freely given love God has for his world. Isaac, the left side,

stands for justice, the limitations God has to place on that love in order to be an effective ruler. This tension between the "aspect of mercy" and "aspect of justice" within God is part of the Kabbalists' legacy from older rabbinic Judaism. Here that tension is taken to an extreme, and the demonic is said to arise from the impulse within God to act as Judge. Only as these two forces are synthesized in Jacob, the sefirotic rung most often identified with "the blessed Holy One" or the God of rabbinic Judaism, is this tension resolved; the struggle between these two poles within God is a frequent theme of concern in the Zohar. The right and left sides of God, or *hesed* and *din* as they are conventionally called, each has a lower manifestation, bringing its particular power to bear in God's conduct of the universe. The lower form of "Jacob" (*tiferet* or glory in the conventional terminology) is the ninth *sefirah*. This element is designated variously as Joseph, as the great "pillar," the "sign of the holy covenant," or simply "the righteous." All of these names may in one way or another be shown to refer to male potency; this *yesod* is seen as the "foundation" of the sefirotic universe. All the powers of the upper sefirot are concentrated together in it for their great flow into the tenth *sefirah*, bride or sea, moon or garden, to which we have referred above.

Rabbi Hiyya opened by saying: "A song of ascents, to Solomon. If the Lord build not a house, in vain have its builders worked on it; if the Lord guard not a city, in vain does the watchman stand" (Ps. 127:1). Come and see. At the time when it arose in God's will to create the world, He brought forth a mist from the darkened spark. It shone forth in the darkness, remained above and went below. That darkness was lighted with a hundred paths, lanes narrow but great, and the house of the world was made.²⁷

That house is at the very center of all; it has many chambers and entrances all about it, holy sublime places. There the birds of heaven nest, each according to its kind. From the midst of the house there comes forth a great and mighty tree, having many branches and abundant fruit; there is food for all in it. That tree rises to the clouds of heaven and is hidden between three great mountains. It comes forth and rises from behind these mountains, goes upward and comes down. The house is watered by it, and it hides within itself sublime treasures which are not known. Thus is the house built and completed. That tree is revealed during the

day but hidden at night; the house rules at night but is hidden in the daytime.²⁸

Our understanding of the last sefirah will be enhanced if we look briefly at some of the names by which it is called in the kabbalistic sources. As *malkhut*, it is the *kingdom* of God, that over which the King has dominion and in which he takes pleasure, sustaining and protecting her as the true king takes responsibility for the sustenance of his kingdom. At the same time it is this potency that is charged with the rule of the lower worlds; the biblical personage with whom it is associated is David (surprising, given its usual femininity), the symbol of kingship. While *malkhut* receives the flow of all the upper *sefirot*, it is usually held that she has some special affinity for the left, the side of *din* or judgment. In this way she is called "the aspect of gentle judgment," though several Zohar passages paint her in portraits of seemingly ruthless vengeance in the punishment of the wicked. A most complicated picture of femininity appears in the Zohar, ranging from the most highly romanticized to the most bizarre and frighteningly demonic.

The last *sefirah* is also called by the term *shekhinah*, an ancient rabbinic term for speaking of the divine presence in the world. It appears that in later midrashic literature, well before the Zohar, this figure of speech has already become hypostatized as a winged angel-like being, though the attribution of feminine character to it is an innovation of the Kabbalah.²⁹ This symbol considerably alters our view of the Kabbalists' theology. Insofar as she is *malkhut*, ruler of the world, the system is quite theistic, i.e. God and his created universe remain quite distinct from one another. But *shekhinah* had always been a term for the indwelling presence, that which filled the Temple, which spoke to Moses, and so forth. If the *shekhinah* is in the world, however, (or the world in the *shekhinah*?) the Zohar seems to veer closer to pantheism, a religious tendency common to mystics throughout the world. In fact it is impossible to define the Zohar as either theistic or pantheistic: though its God seems to relate to the world in an essentially theistic manner, we are never sure, either with regard to *eyn sof* or in connection with the *shekhinah*, quite what it means to say that the world is "outside" God. It is clear, however, that the *shekhinah* is to be found in this world, and that such was God's intent in creation: the *shekhinah* would continue the life-giving flow of emanation onward from the sefirotic world, down through realms of palaces and angels, countless realms of heavenly light, and into the natural and human orders. Originally centered in Eden, the *shekhinah* followed man into his life as a mortal, and took up residence amid the patriarchs and the people of Israel.

When they went down into Egypt, the *shekhinah* was with them, and thus she accompanies Israel in all their exiles, the earthly state of the people bearing witness to the *shekhinah's* own condition as a hapless wanderer through history, her fate subject to the vicissitudes of human virtue or misdeed. Only with the final redemption and the rebuilt Temple will she again take up residence in Jerusalem, linking the world to God in joy and harmony as it was when the smoke of the holy altar rose and reached to heaven. Nonetheless, something of the *shekhinah* still abides, however mournfully, in her sacred home, for the rabbis long before the Zohar had taught that "the *shekhinah* has never departed from the Western Wall."

Another name given to this rung of divinity will again complicate our picture of the relationship between God, *shekhinah*, and world. She is called, very frequently in the Zohar, by the name *keneset yisra'el*, Community of Israel. That term, always reserved in rabbinic writings for the Jewish people itself, is now chiefly applied to *malkhut*, and the people Israel are *keneset yisra'el* only as her beloved children. Accompanying the redefinition of this term in the early Kabbalah is a new reading of the Midrash on the Song of Songs, long a basic document of Jewish devotional life as well as theological self-understanding. The old midrashic sources had always read the Song as a dialogue of love between God and the people Israel, his chosen bride whom he had brought forth as a poor slave-girl from Egypt and wed as his beloved at Mount Sinai. The liturgical poetry of earlier ages is replete with echoes of this reading. While many sources had sought to "purify" this love poem of its original erotic context, allowing in it only references to matters of history and law, there existed also in ancient esoteric reading of the Song, one highly anthropomorphic in its view of God and shocking to many a later reader.³⁰ Now the Kabbalists, following certain developments in medieval philosophical exegesis, elevate the Canticle to an entirely new plane. The love of which King Solomon speaks in fact takes place wholly within the divine world. Rather than God and his people calling out in affection to one another, we now find male and female, bridegroom and bride, *within* God as the subjects of the Song. Israel the folk are now relegated, along with the angels, to the status of "daughters of Jerusalem," those who witness the great romance, or even facilitate it by their hymns and praises, but are not quite part of the heavenly embrace. Using the full force of its mythic imagination, the Zohar depicts the Canticle in cosmic terms, "heaven" calling to "earth" or deep to deep, the words of the Song betokening the ultimate profundities of the love and eternal longing that exist within God, of which human longing is but a pale shadow.

Here the Zohar contrasts the Song of Songs with the Song of Moses at the Sea and the Psalms of David:

Come and see. The song that Moses sang does refer to higher matters, not to things below. But he did not offer song like King Solomon; there was never a human being who rose so high in song as Solomon. Moses ascended in song and praise, giving thanks to the supreme King for having saved Israel, and for performing miracles and wonders for them in Egypt and at the sea. But King David and his son Solomon spoke another sort of song. David worked at preparing the maidens, adorning them for the Queen so that She and Her maidens might appear in beauty. It was this that he was striving for in his songs and praises, until finally he had prepared and adorned them all, Queen and maidens. When Solomon came he found the Queen fully adorned and her maidens beautifully arrayed. He sought to bring her to the Bridegroom, and brought the Bridegroom to the wedding canopy along with His Queen. He then spoke words of love between them so that they be joined as one, that both of them be as one whole, in love fulfilled. In this Solomon rose in sublime praise above all others. . . . There had been no man, since the creation of Adam, who had brought about love and affection through words of coupling above, until King Solomon. First he brought about their union above, then he invited the two of them together into the house that he had prepared for them.³¹

The Zohar's views on the question of evil and its origins are hardly less innovative than its view of God. Here too we are dealing with a mythic universe, a fantasy life richly nourished by the speculations of those Castilian Kabbalists who had preceded the author, and also more generally by the fascination that the forbidden demonic universe held for many a medieval mind.

Given the rather narrow range of possibilities open to Western theology in confronting the problem of evil and the sufferings of the righteous, the Zohar opts for a limited dualism. Content neither to deny the reality of evil, as Neoplatonism generally had, nor to ascribe evil to God himself, thus compromising his goodness and justice, the Kabbalists spoke of a real and active cosmic force of evil in the world, but one given vital support only by the moral and ritual defilement of human sin.

The cosmic powers of evil are not totally unknown to Jewish thought before the Kabbalah. Particularly in popular religion, demons

and evil spirits are attested to in a great many sources, the formal theology of Judaism notwithstanding. The figure of Satan, known from but meager references in the Bible (the tale of Job and a single prophetic verse), lives on in rabbinic literature and already there is associated, as accuser, with the "evil urge" within each person that tempts humans into sin. The female aspect of the demonic world, headed by Lilith, also has roots that reach back into Babylonian antiquity. All these earlier sources are drawn upon by the Zohar, which both augments their ranks and systematizes them in a way that had never been done previously.

Since there is nothing in the world that does not ultimately have its roots in *eyn sof*, a myth of the origins of evil was essential to any explanation. Evil does not have its root in God, according to the Zohar, but is a negative by-product of the process of emanation. The dominant form this myth takes has to do with the necessary tension that exists as the fourth and fifth *sefirot*, *hesed* and *din*, emerge from *binah*. *Din*, the force of divine rigor or judgment, resents being tied to *hesed*, the unmitigated flow of love. In the very moment of its emanation it broke forth from the sefirotic system, saying, in the words of the Zohar "I shall rule!" The measuring rod of the *sefirot*, the flame of darkness, used the power of *eyn sof* to quickly force *din* back into line, but in that moment of escape some portion of its power was released that could not be retrieved. That portion of *din*, now turned against God, began its own sefirotic emanation in mocking imitation of the divine world. It too has ten emanated rungs, and in the union of Samāel and Lilith it represents the cosmic acting out of illicit sexuality.³²

The moral lessons to be learned from this choice of myth are especially interesting. The Zohar sees evil as originating in justice itself, when that justice is not tempered with compassionate loving-kindness. The force of *din* within God has a legitimate role, punishing the wicked and setting out to limit the indiscriminate love-flow of *hesed*, which itself can be destructive if not held in proper balance. But once *din* has escaped the demands of love, it is no longer to be trusted. It then becomes a perversion of God's justice, one that would use his punishing powers to wreak destruction without cause. It is also interesting to note that images of the feminine and of sexual union are fully as prominent here as they are in discussions of the divine world. The Zohar represents an extreme case of the generally bipolar view of sexuality among medieval Jews: the same human drive represents the most sublime of mysteries and the most debased of sins.

The existence of an independent realm of evil was theologically problematic for the early Kabbalists. Even a demonic force somewhat

un-necessary
affirmation

lesser than the divine left them open to charges of dualism. Could God abolish the demonic powers, complete with the serpents, sea-monsters, and spirits that did their bidding? If not, he would be somehow less than God, and if he could, why had he not done so? The Zohar seems to answer apologetically that the forces of evil are a weapon God uses in the punishment of the wicked; in this sense *din* and the evil side are not clearly separate, it would seem, in the author's imagination. But the real answer to this question lies elsewhere: God has chosen to abdicate his responsibility for the destruction of evil so that man be tested, so that the righteous themselves be given the task of combatting evil in the name of God. In fact the existence of an independent realm of evil creates a much more serious theological dilemma than that we have mentioned. If evil comes from *sitra aħra*, the "other side," as it is often called, and not from man himself, how is the person to be held morally accountable? How can there be punishment for human sin, or reward for righteousness, for that matter, if evil is the result not of human choice but of the influence of outside forces?

The Zohar deals with this problem by positing a delicate balance between the forces of cosmic evil and those of moral evil stemming from within the human heart. *Sitra aħra* is allowed by God to exist, but is given no share in divine power. As it was cut off from the sefirotic world, it lost its access to the life that flows from *eyn sof*, the vital force that allows for existence. It therefore exists only as dead matter, and would have no power at all were not man to arouse it by his evil deeds. Thoughts and act of sin give strength to the forces of evil, just as we shall see that good thought and deed energize the world of the *sefirot*. Once evil is aroused, it tempts man into further sin, requiring his sins for its own very sustenance. All it can do is tempt, however, for man is never released from the responsibility for his own actions. Of course the temptations offered by an old friend are more enticing, and the Zohar, a work that has significant moralistic intent, is filled with dire warnings to those who become too familiar with the forces of evil.

The question of evil has brought us to the threshold of the more general question of man, his nature, and the meaning of human life. The myth of the Zohar is a highly anthropocentric one, and while the text seems much preoccupied with God and the upper realms, it can as well be read as a guide-book for the conduct of human life, and one that places squarely on man's shoulders full responsibility not only for his moral life but for the very survival of God's universe.

The notion that human beings are created in the image of God has a long and varied career in the history of Judaism. The Bible

offers no explanation of the phrase (Genesis 1:27), but its original meaning was probably quite literal, and had as much to do with bodily form as it did with qualities of mind or spirit. The old Aramaic translation of the Bible preserves this meaning when it translates "image" (*zelem*) in that verse by the Greek loan-word *ikon*. Rabbinic sources seem divided on the question of the body's part in that likeness, a few remaining close to that literal meaning while most, possibly in fear of ascribing corporeality to God, veer toward the sense that the soul alone is in the divine form. Medieval Judaism outside the Kabbalah, with its general tendency to spiritualize the Bible far beyond what the rabbis had done, was quite unanimous in its view that soul alone was in God's image, the body serving as its temporary home, formed from dust and returning to dust. The belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of time does not seem to have mitigated this position.

Overlapping this discussion of the divine image was the question of the origin of the soul, particularly once its separateness from the body and its own inner three-part structure became the common understanding. Again, the dominant voice that emerged from rabbinic tradition, especially as refined in the Middle Ages, said that the soul was of divine origin, the body from earth. For the Zohar it was important to go beyond these claims. It insisted that the soul was not only divinely *bestowed*, but that its actual origin was in the upper world. The "home" for which it longed and which it, when unimpeded, sought to imitate, was the universe of the *sefirot*. It bears within it the stamp or "memory" of that primal union which formed it: kabbalistic learning is, in good Platonic fashion, an education to recall that which had been known to the soul eternally but forgotten in birth. The secret lore of the Kabbalist is thus seen not as alien and bizarre to the one who truly learns it, but as the hidden truth of his own soul. The highest portion of the soul is of the same "substance" as the *sefirot*. In a sort of "spiritual genetics," if you will, the Zohar therefore teaches that it too bears the sefirotic structure, that the hidden flow out of *keter*, the tensions of *hesed* and *din*, and the union of *tiferet* and *malkhut* are all replicated in each person who bears a divine soul. This aspect of the mystical psychology of the Zohar becomes especially important for later Kabbalah and is of dominant interest to Hasidism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Theories of exactly how the birth of the soul comes about, its life before it comes into the body, and the precise manner in which it is related to the *sefirot* all abound in early Kabbalah; quite a variety of these is found even within the Zohar. It is especially here that we sense the unsystematic character of the work and its role as

compendium for the many views that its author had learned, and perhaps the varied visions of these matters he encountered in his own mystical life. In what is perhaps the dominant view, human souls (like the *sefirot* themselves) are conceived in *binah*, the highest possible source. Thence they are carried into *malkhut*, which serves as a treasure-house of souls, bestowing them to newborns as bodies are conceived in the lower world.

This emphasis on the divine nature of the soul should not give us the impression, however, that the Zohar sees the handiwork of God in soul and not in body. The Kabbalists are dramatically unusual in the medieval West in finding that body as well as soul reflects the inner structure of divinity. This was clearly one of the notions in the Zohar that later occultists most favored, and as a result it is among the best-known—and most often distorted—ideas of the Kabbalah.

Among the many images used for the ten *sefirot* and the patterns of relationship in which they stand to one another is that of the human body. The upper nine *sefirot*, as they are mother, father, and offspring, or as they are well, spring, and flowing streams, or roots, trunk and branches of a great inverted tree, are also depicted as limbs of a cosmic ideal "body." This is not to say that God is corporeal, or that man is wholly divine, but rather that the form of the human body is a copy in matter of the sublime and spiritual mystery of the *sefirot*. The charts that depict the *sefirot* in this way³³ see the first three *sefirot* as constituting a head, sometimes with *keter* as crown or forehead and *hokhmah/binah* as the two eyes. *Hesed* and *din*, as already indicated, are the two "arms" of God, their actions united in *tiferet*, the trunk of the bodily form. *Nezah* and *hod* are then the two hips of the form, and as they receive the flow from above they pass it into *yesod*, the phallus and the final channel of divine energy. We should add here that this structuring in part accounts for the tremendous emphasis the Kabbalists placed upon purity and chastity in sexual matters: all sexual activity below aroused either divine or demonic energy above. From the "sign of the holy covenant" (i.e. circumcision) divinity flowed into *malkhut*, the female counterpart of this form, waiting to give the fruit of its seed to the lower world.

This view of the body and its limbs as created in the ideal holy form gives to the "image and likeness" of God a new lease on quasi-literal meaning. It also bespeaks the great ambivalence we see in the author's mind toward the human body and its passions. He was typical of his age in depicting the body as made of coarse matter, its drives and passions often at odds with the right goals of the pure soul, and as the element in man that kept him from the purity

needed to unite with his Creator. But he also had a vision of the body that transcended all this, one that saw the whole person, body and soul, as capable of *imitatio Dei*, or even of *participation* in the divine process, in an utterly uncompromised manner. This is especially to be found in certain passages dealing with sexual union, in its proper setting:

Come and see: It is written "Six days shall you labor and do all your work", and the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:9). "All your work"—those six days are devoted to human labors. Because of this the companions do not have intercourse except at that time when there is nothing to be found of human labor, but only the work of God. What is His work? Uniting with the Queen, so that holy souls will be brought forth into the world. Therefore on this night the companions are sanctified with the holiness of their Lord and direct their hearts. Good children come forth [from such a union], holy children who turn aside neither right nor left, children of King and Queen. Of these Scriptures says: "You are children of the Lord your God" (Deuteronomy 14:1); "the Lord your God" indeed [the two names indicate] these are His children, children of King and Queen. It is to this that the companions put their mind; those who know this secret cleave fast to it. That is why their children are called God's children, and it is for their sake that the world survives. When the world is being judged, God looks at these children and has mercy for their sake. Of this Scripture speaks in saying: "All with true seed" (Jeremiah 2:21)—"true seed" indeed, for "truth" is the holy and perfect seal, as it says: "Give truth unto Jacob" (Micah 7:20) and all is one. That, indeed, is the "true seed."³⁴

Here the mortal union of the companion and his wife parallels the union of the blessed Holy One and *shekhinah* above, each a priest in his Temple serving the ultimate mystery of the Godhead, souls and bodies born at once in their sublime and co-ordinated rites.

Such a vision of body and soul united in God's service, the most human of acts performed with the most divine of intent, has a particular contextual meaning within Judaism. The general tendency toward spiritualization in mysticism encountered certain limits in the Kabbalah, given the very real commitment of Judaism and its all-embracing legal system to the realm of this-worldly action. A pious Jew lives within the domain of the Torah and its commandments. These require the action of the limbs as well as commitments of

mind and heart. *Halakhah* serves as a constant reminder to the Jew that he lives bound by certain physical restraints: what he eats, what he wears, where he goes, how he speaks, and many more areas of daily life are governed by the Law. We will recall that the Zohar was much concerned with full and proper observance, and was written partly as a defense of tradition against rationalist incursions. It remains, then, for us to describe the link between the self, body and soul, and the God in whose image that self is so fully made. That link, for the Zohar, is the wondrous and infinitely mysterious world of the Torah. The inner structure held in common by the divine and human selves is also to be found in God's word, the Torah. Both the written Torah and its centuries-long accompanying tradition of oral commentary and expansion are the means God offers Israel for self-fulfillment and approach to divinity. The text itself is alive with mystery, and all the intellectual talents of the Kabbalist must be directed toward the penetration of its secrets.

Rabbi Simeon said: If a man looks upon the Torah as merely a book presenting narratives and everyday matters, alas for him! Such a torah, one treating with everyday concerns, and indeed a more excellent one, we too, even we, could compile. More than that, in the possession of the rulers of the world there are books of even greater merit, and these we could emulate if we wished to compile some such torah. But the Torah, in all of its words, holds supernal truths and sublime secrets.

See how precisely balanced are the upper and the lower worlds. Israel here below is balanced by the angels on high, concerning whom it stands written: "who makest thy angels into winds" (Ps. 104:4). For when the angels descend to earth they don earthly garments, else they could neither abide in the world, nor could it bear to have them. But if this is so with the angels, then how much more so it must be with the Torah: the Torah it was that created the angels and created all the worlds and through Torah are all sustained. The world could not endure the Torah if she had not garbed herself in garments of this world.

Thus the tales related in the Torah are simply her outer garments, and woe to the man who regards that outer garb as the Torah itself, for such a man will be deprived of portion in the next world. Thus David said: "Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law" (Ps. 119:18), that is to say, the things that are underneath. See now. The most visible part of a man are the clothes that he has on, and

they who lack understanding, when they look at the man, are apt not to see more in him than these clothes. In reality, however, it is the body of the man that constitutes the pride of his clothes, and his soul constitutes the pride of his body.

So it is with the Torah. Its narrations which relate to things of the world constitute the garments which clothe the body of the Torah; and that body is composed of the Torah's precepts, *gufey-torah* [bodies, major principles]. People without understanding see only the narrations, the garment; those somewhat more penetrating see also the body. But the truly wise, those who serve the most high King and stood on mount Sinai, pierce all the way through to the soul, to the true Torah which is the root principle of all. These same will in the future be vouchsafed to penetrate to the very soul of the soul of the Torah.³⁵

Like many of his medieval contemporaries (in Christianity and Islam as well as Judaism) the Zohar's author knows of a multileveled truth to be found in Scripture. It is essential to his exegesis that the literal level, including the legal meanings derived by the rabbis, remain in force, while the mystical truth of his own reading is added to the Torah's meaning. At the same time, this and other passages make no secret of the fact that it is this esoteric reading that he considers "most" true or significant; here is where the heart of the Torah lives. The Torah is the ultimate corpus of secrets, pointing in every way to the "world of truth," a well of profundity never to be fully fathomed. In addition to the ongoing commandment to constantly study that profundity, man may embody the Torah's mysteries by the kabbalistic fulfillment of the life of the commandments.

Rather little in the realm of ritual life is innovated by the Zohar. The commandments to be performed are those of the Torah, as understood by the Zohar in common with all of rabbinic Judaism; only occasionally is there a minor addition or change of custom. But the *meaning* of this life of religious action is entirely transformed. No longer are the commandments either the arbitrary will of the Creator, intended to show one's faithful discipline, or the wise and educating law of the noble Monarch. Rather they are the secrets of the universe itself, each mysteriously locked inside a particular act which the devotee is to perform, and which he only partially fulfills until he fathoms its secret meanings.

We have already seen the imitation of God as a motif in the religious life, exemplified in the Kabbalist who directs his thoughts to heaven as he fulfills "be fruitful and multiply," the first commandment to be mentioned in the Bible. We have also seen that

this is a particular kind of "imitation," one that reaches beyond the separateness of imitator and imitated and points toward the participation of man in the inner life of God, which is the fulfillment of his own inner life as well. As in this act he is able to bring forth holy souls by right deed and contemplation, so in other *mizwot* can he affect the condition of his own soul, defeat his own evil urge, cause encampments of angels to dwell about him and protect him, and in various ways save himself from those demonic powers that are all too ready to hold sway over him should he do wrong. The mythic mindset of the Zohar's author is at times also a superstitious one, if such a term can be used without pejorative intent. His universe is so peopled with flying demons and ill-intending spirits that the build-up of protection against them becomes a major motif in his religious life. At the same time, the accretion of merit for one's good deeds is not only a defense against evils; the more good the soul does, the higher the rungs of soul-life it is allowed to attain, and the closer it will come to that life of *zohar*, enlightenment, which the Zohar ever preaches: the life in which the soul adheres to God.

The goal of all religious life, for the Zohar as for other mystic works, is the return of the soul to God. The great mystery of existence is two-fold: how the world of multiplicity came out of the One, and how it may be returned there in a way of fulfillment that lies short of destruction. The Zohar has responded to (though hardly answered) the first question in speaking of *sefirot*; its response to the latter question comes in its understanding of *mizwot*, the *sefirot* as embodied in the commandments of the Torah. In giving the Torah to Israel, God has placed his own self within human access. Here, through the subtlety of symbolic language, divinity, human actions, and even the objects required for human action have become one. As the worshipper binds together the four species of plant used for the celebration of the *Sukkot* festival, he is actually drawing together, in his very hands, *hesed* and *din*, *tiferet* and *malkhut*. As the householder lifts his two loaves of bread for the Sabbath blessing, he holds in his hands the union of Jacob and Rachel, sun and moon, heaven and earth. As he holds them, so is he held by them, and the soul that contemplates the mysteries of these moments and their deeds is transported into a realm where the *sefirot* acting upon him and his acting upon them are processes not separable from one another. At the same time, the objects he has used in such rites, palm-branch and citron, loaves of bread, or whatever, are transported with him to that higher realm. Not only his soul is uplifted and transmuted, but the lower material world as well, through those symbolic objects that have achieved the transcendence of sanctification. The essential religious task becomes one of attachment and uplifting, the soul

seeking adhesion to God, but doing so through the commandments in order that the corporeal world be raised up and transmuted with it.

The emergence of the universe out of God has been a graduated, step-by-step, process. The *shekhinah*, standing at the lower end of the sefirotic world, is at the head of a myriad of palaces, thronerooms, antechambers and angelic choruses. Beneath those lie the spheres with their varying degrees of corporeality, ending in this world of coarse matter and its temptations. On the other side of this world lie as many realms of evil, "shells," mythical beasts, and demons that reach down into the mouth of the great pit. The human being, and especially the Jew who has that Torah which allows for the presence and fulfillment of his divine soul, stands at the very center of this universe. Something of him reaches down into its depths, but the roots of his soul extend to the uppermost heights. With the life of Torah as his guide, his task stands before him. He is the one who can draw the entire universe upward, raising matter to the level of spirit, spirit to the level of soul, soul to the level of *shekhinah*, reaching ever higher until his inner concentration effects that great *yihud* or union that allows the *shekhinah* herself to transcend her exile, to be united fully, through him, with God beyond, allowing the flow of divine life to abound through all the worlds, the joy of divine light to shine with undimmed brilliance. Only man can do this, for the Torah was given to him alone; his and his alone is the ecstatic task and the staggering responsibility of restoring the world to God.

Happy is the man who goes in and out, who knows to contemplate the mysteries of his Lord and to cleave to Him. By these secrets a person is able to adhere to God, to attain full wisdom, the most sublime of mysteries. When he serves God in prayer, willingly and with a direction of heart he attaches his will to God like the flame to the coal. By this he unites the lower rungs in a holy manner, crowning them with a certain one of the lesser names. Thence he proceeds to unify the higher and innermost rungs, making them all one with that highest heaven that stands above them. Even while his mouth and lips are yet moving he should direct his heart and his will higher, higher, uniting all with that mystery of mysteries, the root of all thought and desire, the mystery that dwells within *eyn sof*. Every day he should have this intent in each of his prayers. In such worship will all his days be crowned with the mystery of those supernal days.³⁶

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

The text of the Zohar to the Torah has been translated into English and published by the Soncino Press: *The Zohar*, tr. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon with introduction by J. Abelson (London, 1933) and various reprints. This translation, while quite readable in itself, is sorely lacking in reference to the Zohar's symbolic language and sefirotic structure, so that it is essentially incomprehensible without some prior preparation. An anthology of Zohar selections, edited by the late Gershom Scholem, is published by Schocken Press under the title *Zohar: The Book of Splendor* (New York, 1963). A new and larger selection, translated in poetic form and supplied with an excellent commentary, has been prepared by Daniel Matt for the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series of the Paulist Press. Also scheduled to appear, through the Litman Library in London, is Isaiah Tishby's monumental *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, itself a classic of modern Hebrew letters, in which passages from the Zohar are topically arranged and offered with lengthy introduction and commentary.

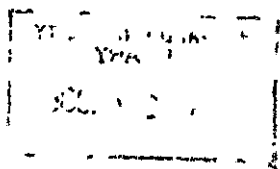
For further modern readings on the history of Kabbalah, the reader must consult the works of Gershom Scholem, the great master of contemporary scholarship in this field. His *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, rev. ed. (New York, 1965) is the basic study in the field. Less detailed and perhaps more accessible to the general reader are his volumes of collected essays *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism* (New York, 1965) and *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York, 1971). Scholem was given a chance to update his opinions on many questions in this ever-developing scholarly field by means of the articles on Kabbalah for the *Encyclopedia Judaica*. These articles have been reissued in a single volume simply entitled *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), recommended only as a complement to *Major Trends* or as a reviewing survey.

Scholem writes within a modern Western historical-academic tradition. Some will seek writings on the Kabbalah that take a more traditionally pious tone, or else a more universally mystical orientation, without distorting the original meaning of the kabbalistic sources. For the former, a rather traditional Jewish view of the mystical spirit, the reader would do well to begin with Abraham Joshua Heschel's essay, "The Mystical Element in Judaism," published in Louis Finkelstein's anthology, *The Jews* (New York, 1960), pp. 932-53. Others of Heschel's writings, though modern in cast, are much influenced by the kabbalistic/Hasidic spirit. The books by Rabbis Alexander Safran (*The Kabbalah* [New York, 1975]) and Ben Zion Bokser (*The Jewish Mystical Tradition* [New York, 1981]) are also recommended for the non-specialist. In a more contemporary vein, Leo Schaya's *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah* (London, 1971) has the Western seeker in mind, but does not falsify the Kabbalah in presenting it. *The Thirteen-Petalled-Rose* (New York, 1980) by Adin Steinsaltz, is another such responsibly written introduction in a contemporary context. The same cannot be said of a great many other works that purport to teach Kabbalah, and the reader is duly warned.

An
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of
Europe

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