

LUMINAL DARKNESS

Imaginal Gleanings
from Zoharic Literature

ELLIOT R. WOLFSON

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to the memory
of my father,
listening beyond

there is
always more
but never more
than when
there is less

Contents

Foreword	ix
Introduction	xiii
1. Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics	1
2. Light through Darkness: The Ideal of Human Perfection in the Zohar	29
3. Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: <i>Peshaṭ</i> and <i>Sod</i> in Zoharic Hermeneutics	56
4. Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature	111
5. Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynization	144
6. Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the Zohar	185
7. Fore/giveness on the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response	228
8. Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah	258
Index	295

Foreword

As these essays amply reveal, there are many ways into the elaborate thought and writing of Elliot R. Wolfson. Those readers familiar with Wolfson's corpus will recognize in this collection of essays many of the themes that have structured Wolfson's thought from the late 1980s, when he first began to publish. Here we can catch, as if in the peripheral corners of the mind's many eyes, shimmering glimpses of those philosophically coded *sefirot* that have given such a complicated, if still quite definite, shape to the imaginal body in which, and out of which, Wolfson thinks, feels, intuits, creates, teaches, and writes. They are all here: the logical and rhetorical structures of esotericism that irresistibly force a revelation out of every occultation and another subsequent concealing out of every revealing; the deep structural unity of eroticism and asceticism and the ethically ambiguous psychosexual patterns of repression, symbolic transformation, and sublimation that charge them with sacred meaning; the essentially hermeneutical nature of kabbalistic mysticism whereby the divine is revealed and experienced in and as the act of interpretation; the complicated gender dynamics of kabbalistic symbolism with its ocular phallocentrism, male androgynes, ontological erasures of the feminine, gender transformations, and homoerotic communities and theologies; the rich, not to mention terribly honest, appropriation of "the evil inclination" within both the mystical paths of the medieval kabbalists and the hermeneut's ethical struggle with these same traditions; and the unmistakable poetic nature of the scholar's creative process and scholarly writing.

What binds all of these intellectual structures together? Is there some deeper unity to the many *sefirot* that give shape and form to Elliot R. Wolfson's thought? I will not foolishly venture any definite answer here, but I would like to suggest, as a means of introducing his work as represented in this volume, that Wolfson's writing can

fruitfully be approached, if never quite fully grasped, as both radically *embodied* and profoundly *dialectical*, the latter which some may want to translate as “paradoxical.” A word about each of these patterns may be in order here.

The twentieth-century study of mysticism was a varied and rich affair, but more often than not, it was also a more or less disembodied one. Many scholars and innumerable popular writers wrote a great deal about oneness, common cores, and perennial philosophies (remarkably variously conceived), about historical contexts and epistemological issues, about the structuring roles of language and doctrine, about the ambiguous legacies of mystical ethics, and about the roles of violence, psychopathology, and trauma in inducing mystical states of consciousness.

These are all very important issues, and I do not want to dismiss them here, but I do want to suggest that something was lost, or never quite found, in that century-long discussion, something that has always and everywhere (my own sexual perennialism begins to show itself) grounded and given shape to mystical literature – the human body. Readers can read such important and ideologically diverse writers as Evelyn Underhill, William Stace, Huston Smith, Fritjhof Schuon, Steven Katz, and Robert K.C. Forman and never quite realize that writers whom we now call “mystics” had and still have physiologies, genders, sexualities, sexual organs, sexual orientations, erotic fantasies, and sexual desires and fears. Some of the early and later psychologists of religion (Sigmund Freud, James Leuba, and Sudhir Kakar come immediately to mind) are real exceptions to this general neglect, but they stand out by virtue of their insistence on that which most others sought to deny, or at least benignly ignore, namely, the indubitable fact of embodiment.

What makes the written corpus of Elliot R. Wolfson so remarkable is that even as it rivals, if not surpasses, the philosophical sophistication of any other writer on mysticism in the past century, it also dramatically affirms both the presence and structuring power of such basic things as penises and vaginas. Indeed, much of his thought is structured, like the kabbalistic literature itself, around these very sexual organs and their elaborate transformations in the male mystical imagination of the kabbalistic world. As much as one may want to do so, one cannot escape the phallus in the writing of Elliot R. Wolfson. It is there in the highest reaches of the kabbalistic

Godhead, and so it is there in Wolfson's writing on these imaginal conceptions of the Godhead.

This simultaneous insistence on both the philosophical sophistication and the sexual dimensions of kabbalistic mystical thought is intimately related to what is perhaps an even deeper structure of Wolfson's thought – its dialectical nature. Like other successful creative thinkers, Wolfson is capable of holding in his mind's eye what other thinkers would resist or unconsciously ignore as incompatible opposites. Medieval Judaism and American modernity; the "tradition" of kabbalah and postmodern philosophy; the sexual body and the human spirit; ontological truth and the religious imagination; revelation and occultation; good and evil; left and right – none of these are true opposites for Wolfson. They are all dialectical poles to think with and intuit through to a deeper level of understanding. If anything, these poles are exaggerated, not to ultimately affirm one or the other ("modernity is bad," "the true mystic knows no sexual desire," "mysticism and evil are mutually exclusive terms," etc.), but to force a deeper insight into that which grounds them both. For the modern or postmodern interpreter of mysticism, the fruits of such a *coincidentia oppositorum* are rich indeed. We can think about anything here, and in our own (post)modern terms. Continental and feminist philosophy, hermeneutics, psychoanalytic theory, and contemporary ethical reflection thus enter a vigorous dialogue with texts that are both bizarrely other and yet somehow strangely familiar to us. We need not look away from the graphic sexual nature of mystical experience, from the consistent ethical violations of antinomian traditions, or from the disturbing gender implications of androcentric systems of thought. We can embrace it all in the dialectics of encounter, honesty, and mutual criticism.

Both other and familiar – that is the dialectical nature of any kind of comparative thought, be it comparison traditionally conceived in the history of religions, where two different historical traditions or figures are juxtaposed and compared, or here, in a more subtle fashion, where a medieval mystical tradition is understood through the figures and categories of contemporary critical theory. In both cases, a fusion of horizons is effected and something genuinely new, a tertium or third, appears in the middle, in what we might call the hermeneutical union of the two. This, quite frankly, is what I find to be the most remarkable aspect of Wolfson's work – its

uncanny ability to spark comparative and theoretical insights in readers who come from entirely different disciplines or practices. I work, for example, primarily with Christian materials and on early modern Indian Tantric traditions, mostly in Bengal, and yet I am continuously overwhelmed when I read Wolfson's work on medieval kabbalah with the task of scribbling thoughts to myself in the margins of the pages. Ideas come too quickly and in such abundance that it becomes difficult to read. The content and the context are clearly Jewish and medieval, but the ideas transcend both content and context to embrace what we can accurately call a developing theoretical and comparative vision. Elliot R. Wolfson "gets it." He knows. And he can communicate, somehow, this gnosis to his attentive and properly prepared readers.

"On the path two become three." This is what Wolfson penned to me in a copy of his *Abraham Abulafia*. I took it then as a gnomic epigram that encapsulates the essentially dialectical nature of his thought, the mystery of comparison and hermeneutical practice, and the potential profundity of human friendship and deep communication. The reader of these essays is free to take it differently. That too is part of the mystery of comparison and reading; the "two become three."

Jeffrey J. Kripal

Introduction

As I sit to write this brief introduction to the essays I have called *Luminal Darkness: Imaginal Gleanings from Zoharic Literature*, three books that I have been working on, more or less, since 1995 – though the seeds obviously were planted long ago through arduous plowing of the fields of classical and medieval rabbinic literature, including, especially, kabbalistic texts, and works of general philosophy, particularly, hermeneutics and phenomenology – are making their way into the world. The books in order of birth – gestation has proven to be concomitant, thus rendering the books comparable to triplets in the womb – are *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Fordham University Press, 2005); *Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (University of California Press, 2006); and *Venturing Beyond – Law and Morality in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Oxford University Press, 2006).

The essays gathered in this book span a period from 1986 to 1999, formative years in my development as scholar, thinker, and writer. Since the time these studies were researched, composed, and published, the field of zoharic studies has continued to evolve. A critical turn, as experts in the discipline well know, was the publication of Yehuda Liebes's essay – delivered originally as the inaugural address of the fourth international conference on Jewish mysticism sponsored by the Scholem Centre for Kabbalah Research in the Jewish and National University Library, Jerusalem, sometime in February 1988, as I recall – on how the zoharic compilation came to be, shifting the focus thereby from single to group authorship. There is little question of the importance of this moment in the history of the academic study of zoharic literature. That achievement stands, and likely will continue to stand, and for this we remain indebted.

Without diminishing this contribution, two observations of a critical nature come to mind. First, as I have pointed out in one of the essays included in this collection, published in 1998 but written in 1995, as revolutionary as Liebes and other scholars in the discipline have presented his thesis, it builds on previous scholarship. I have no intent here of providing a thorough survey of the scholarly discussion of this topic to legitimate my claim – this could be the work of a student seeking a dissertation topic – but let me say in general terms that other scholars have ruminated over the possibility that the Zohar is an anthology whose literary components evolved over a period of time and consequently incorporate a variety of voices that, for lack of a better term, might be considered members of a “zoharic circle.” Indeed, this very term – as well as the cognate mentioned above “zoharic literature” – is to be found in works of scholars before Liebes, though some in the field consider these to be innovations of Liebes. It is acknowledged unreservedly that the latter has carried the supposition of a circle further than previous scholars, boldly challenging Scholem’s thesis that Moses de Léon is the sole author of the bulk of zoharic literature. This cannot be denied.

One notable scholar has raised doubts in print about the thesis of Liebes—Charles Mopsik of Paris. His essay invoked a response on the part of Liebes and a counter-response, which have contributed to the discussion and clarification of the issues. Additionally, serious work on the compositional and redactional evolution of zoharic literature has been undertaken by a number of scholars, most prominently, Ronit Meroz, Boaz Huss, Daniel Abrams, and Pinchas Giller. I will not undertake an analysis of the important contributions of these scholars, but let me simply say that they have moved the discourse along to the next phase. It matters little whether we can ever – being led by philological and textual tools of historical scholarship – ascertain an answer to the question “How was the Zohar Written?” – the title of Liebes’s seminal lecture. The crucial point is that the question has been articulated, and as such, has reframed the picture, demanding a refocusing of interpretative vision.

In these essays, one will discern a shift in my own thinking, reflective of the more general consensus as it has been changing over time. In the early studies, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics” (1986), “Light Through Darkness: The Ideal

of Human Perfection in the Zohar” (1988), and “Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics” (1993), I was operating with a sense of a unified textual whole (excluding, of course, *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, following Scholem’s suggestion), as if there were a literary consistency that justified referring to it, and its author, in the singular. The other essays, “Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature” (1993), “Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and Ritual of Androgynisation” (1997), “Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in Zohar” (1998), “Fore/giveness on the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response” (1998), “Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah” (1999), all derive from what I would call now a middle period – writings from the third period have yet to appear. The middle period is marked by leaning in the direction of a group, of seeing the zoharic work as a lattice woven from different textual threads that wind round the spool of several centuries, reaching a crescendo in the sixteenth century as the links between Palestine, especially Jerusalem and Safed, and kabbalists in Italy helped secure the publication of the first printed editions of the Zohar.

In this period, I assume, one can discern organizing patterns in spite of the obvious multiple voices. In more recent work, I have tended to refer to “zoharic homilies,” a term that I use to convey the sense of literary discreteness, leaving open the question of the authorship of these homilies. Being occupied with other matters, philosophic and hermeneutic, I have not focused on the textual issue, that is, the manner by which the fabric of the gathering of these homilies has been woven together to create the semblance of a garment. The curious thing, however, is that one can discern different voices speaking from within the weave of the fabric, and this does not disrupt the possibility of discerning iteration that renews itself indefinitely, a unifying factor that allows for difference, to think the other without assimilating the other to the same, achieving indifference, in the Levinasian sense.

To be perfectly candid, there are formulations in the early essays that I would alter now, but they have been allowed to stand as they are not, I trust, entirely irredeemable. On the contrary, the hermeneutical belief briefly laid out in the conclusion of the previous paragraph provides a way to redeem these studies, as it were, to

render their exegetical claims still relevant. If we can imagine a principle of anthologizing that unifies through multiplicity, indifferent to difference, then we can continue to presume it legitimate to speak or write of a distinctive viewpoint that may be classified as zoharic kabbalah. I am no longer comfortable speaking of “the Zohar,” but I would maintain that it is possible to think of this as a discrete literary-historical phenomenon, though we will have to expand the imaginal boundaries of each of these classifications. The matter of locating this temporally and spatially is a huge undertaking that would require separate phenomenological/hermeneutical studies. As it happens, many of the pertinent issues, especially as regards the former, are discussed in the trilogy of books I have written. I might even consider now working on another volume on the temporal spatialization and spatial temporalization that may be elicited from zoharic homilies. Perhaps one day I will produce such a work, though, in some respects, this collection can profitably be characterized in those very terms.

If I were to isolate a current running through the different studies, it would be the search to resolve the ontological problem of identity and difference, a philosophic matter that has demanded much attention in various contemporary intellectual currents, to wit, literary criticism, gender studies, post-colonial theory, social anthropology, just to name a few examples. Indeed, it is possible to say, with no exaggeration intended, that there has been a quest at the heart of my work to understand the other, to heed and discern the alterity of alterity. Thus, I have sought to comprehend configurations of the other without and the other within, the two main foci of my work on gender and the Jewish–Christian interface in kabbalistic sources. What has inspired the quest for me has been the discernment on the part of kabbalists that the ultimate being-becoming becoming being – nameless one known through the ineffable name, *yhwh* – transcends oppositional binaries, for, in the one that is beyond the difference of being one or the other, light is dark, black is white, night is day, male is female, Adam is Edom.

Yet, even the matter of utter simplicity is more complex, for, as I argue at length in the chapter in *Language, Eros, Being* entitled “Differentiating (In) Difference: Heresy, Gender, and Kabbalah Study,” there are at least two ways to account for the coincidence of opposites in Ein-Sof and/or the first of the sefirotic emanations,

Keter, either as an identity that effaces or as a mirroring that upholds difference. The moral demands of the day clearly privilege the latter; what is needed above all else is a way of thinking that acknowledges sameness, or belonging-together, as Heidegger would have put it, which fosters, rather than undermines, difference, a genuine sense of indifference that affirms the identity of the non-identical and thereby moves beyond the dialectical identity of identity and non-identity. The theoretical value of applying feminist theory to the critical study of zoharic literature, and kabbalah more generally, is that it compels one to scrutinize repeatedly the question of difference. Indifference to this question, which unfortunately is evident on the part of a number of scholars who work on this matter, runs the peril of mistaking the same for the different, the consequence of which would be masking the different as the same. In my work, I have sought to walk the path between mistaking the same as different and masking the different as same, envisioning the task to behold the same difference that begets what is differently the same. As the ancient voice of wisdom describing the way in the *Dao de jing* put it,

dao
 engenders one,
 one two,
 two three,
 and three,
 the myriad things.

Elliot R. Wolfson

1 Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics

Although there has been much in modern scholarship written about the historical and theosophical background of the Zohar,¹ scholars have paid little attention to the literary structure of the work and its relationship to the thematic content contained therein. There is, as far as I know, not one in-depth study of such a kind.²

This essay will attempt to unfold one recurrent theme that serves as the literary thread connecting the zoharic treatment of Exodus 1–20, that is, the biblical account of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt, their subsequent exodus, and, finally, the Sinaitic revelation.³ I will suggest that there is a common theme that the Zohar (exegetically) discovers within the biblical text. This theme, in turn, lies at the core of the zoharic understanding of the theological categories of exile, redemption, and revelation.

Introduction: The “Left” and the “Right”

As is well known to scholars in the field of Jewish mysticism, among the sources that exerted an influence upon the author of the Zohar are to be counted kabbalistic texts that derived from a “gnostic” school of kabbalah which emerged in the second half of the thirteenth century in Castile.⁴ One of the salient features of this school was the positing of a demonic realm morphologically paralleling the realm of the divine:⁵ as there are ten holy emanations (*sefirot*), so there are ten “emanations of the left.”⁶ In the words of one of the members of this circle, Moses of Burgos: “There is a left [side] corresponding to the right, intended to perfect the right, to punish and chastise with ‘chastisements of love’ those who walk in a bad way in order to purify

them.”⁷ To be sure, as Scholem has already pointed out, this dualism was never presented as absolute, for in order for a text to be accepted within the framework of normative Judaism, the dualistic tendency had to be mitigated.⁸ Accordingly, these kabbalists struggled over the question “Whence arose the demonic, or left, side?”⁹ While they differed on the exact moment within the emanative process that would account for the emergence of the left side, all agreed that at some moment this in fact occurred. The demonic side was thus accorded a “quasi” independence, said to have emerged from either the third *sefirah*, *Binah* (Understanding), or the fifth, *Gevurah* (Strength), or *Din* (Judgment).¹⁰ In either case, according to these kabbalists, the “emanations of the left” have their origin in and are sustained by the left side of the divine realm itself. That is to say, therefore, that the demonic has a root within the divine.

This gnostic theme is developed repeatedly in the Zohar; indeed, it forms one of the essentially characteristic doctrines of the work.¹¹ Like the kabbalists of the Castilian circle, the author of the Zohar posits a demonic realm, called by him *Siṭra Aḥra*, the “Other Side,” which structurally parallels the divine realm:¹² both realms are constituted by ten powers.¹³ Furthermore, the demonic realm, which vis-à-vis the divine is considered to be the left, is itself constituted, as is the divine, by a left and right side, that is, by a masculine and feminine dimension:¹⁴ in mythological terms, just as there is male (= *Tif'eret*) and female (= *Malkhut*) within the sefirotic world, so there is Samael and Lilith in the demonic world.¹⁵ Moreover, just as the upper *sefirot* are arranged by means of three lines, that is, the right side, or grace (*hesed*), the left side, or rigor (*gevurah*), and the median, or mercy (*raḥamim*), so the lower *sefirot* are bound together by three knots.¹⁶ Just as there is a complicated structure of palaces (*heikhalot*) below the holy *sefirot*, so there is a corresponding structure below the demonic *sefirot*.¹⁷ Finally, both realms can exert an influence upon and be influenced by human events. The human being stands in a reciprocal relationship to both realms, and it is the intention that directs the channel of energy from below which ultimately distinguishes one’s attachment to the divine or to the demonic. “According to the intention that one has in this world, so the spirit from above is drawn upon him ... If his will intends towards the upper holy matter, then that thing is drawn upon him from above to below. If his will is to cleave to the Other Side, and he intends it, then that thing is drawn

upon him from above to below.”¹⁸ The close affinity of theurgy and magic reflects the structural parallelism of the two realms.

Moreover, the author of the Zohar, like his Castilian predecessors, was concerned with the problem of the origin of evil and the etiological relation of the divine to the demonic. While there are various approaches to this problem in the Zohar, these may be subsumed under two basic categories, the one mythological in nature, and the other philosophical. The former, which we may call the cathartic view, posits that evil results as a by-product of the process of elimination of waste from Divine Thought, a process that occurs during the very first stages of activity, indeed prior to the emanation of the sefirotic world from *Hokhmah* downward.¹⁹ Before the process of emanation could unfold, it was necessary for God to rid Himself of the unbalanced forces of judgment, referred to mythically as “the primordial kings of Edom who died”²⁰ or as “the worlds created and destroyed.”²¹ According to the second category, which we may call the emanative view, the demonic realm as a separate force is viewed as a link in the continuous chain of being. Here too, there is no uniformity of opinion in the Zohar, for the root of evil is said to be in one of three gradations: *Binah*,²² *Gevurah*,²³ or *Malkhut*.²⁴ The common denominator of these views, however, is that the demonic left side has its root in the left side of the divine. Furthermore, it is an imbalance in the sefirotic world, a breaking of the harmony between right and left, which ultimately eventuates in the coming-to-be of an “autonomous” left realm.²⁵ Hence, while the demonic structurally parallels the divine, the former is ontologically posterior to the latter.²⁶ In the course of our analysis it will become clear how this question has a bearing upon the thematic under discussion.

Exile

The biblical narrative of Israel’s sojourn in Egypt and their subsequent exodus represents one of the many exegetical bases upon which the author of the Zohar develops the gnostic drama. Egypt, according to the symbolic map of the Zohar, represents the demonic left side.²⁷ This symbolic correlation is based in the first instance upon a close textual reading of the scriptural account of the first three divine manifestations of power in Egypt. The preliminary

miracle performed by Aaron before Pharaoh, the casting down of the rod which was then transformed into a serpent (see Exod. 7:9 ff.) and the first two plagues, the turning of the waters into blood and the spreading forth of the frogs (Exod. 7:19–22, 8:1–3), it will be recalled, are matched by the magicians of Egypt.²⁸ It is clear from the Bible, then, that the spiritual power of Egypt was that of magic. This factor was already elaborated upon by the rabbis of the Talmud. Thus, in one place we read, “Ten measures of magic descended upon the world; nine were taken by Egypt.”²⁹

The intrinsic relationship of Egypt to magic was developed at length by the author of the Zohar.³⁰ The old aggadic theme, however, is transformed by the theosophic symbolism of the kabbalah. That is, Egypt’s special relation to magic underscores Egypt as the seat of demonic power, for, according to the Zohar, magic is the force of the demonic, the *Siṭra Aḥra*, which corresponds to the divine.³¹ Indeed, the ten lower *sefirot* are called specifically the “ten crowns of magic [of] impurity below.”³² In another place we read that all the magicians (*ḥarashim*) of the world are called *neḥashim* because “all types of magic of the world are bound to and emerge from that primordial serpent [*naḥash qadmoni*] which is the spirit of impurity.”³³

Employing this symbolic correspondence between Egypt and the demonic, the author of the Zohar interprets the verse “And Abram went down to Egypt” (Gen. 12:10): “This verse hints at wisdom and the levels down below, to the depths of which Abraham descended. He knew them but did not become attached.”³⁴ The descent of Abraham to Egypt thus symbolizes, as one writer put it, “his exploration of *Siṭra Aḥra*, ‘the Other Side.’”³⁵ In yet another place, the Zohar writes that when Joseph came to Egypt, “he learned their wisdom concerning the lower crowns.”³⁶ Or again, elaborating upon a saying of the rabbis in the Talmud (see above), the author of the Zohar writes, “It is taught: Ten types of wisdom descended upon the world, and all were absorbed by Egypt except for one, which spread out in the world. And all of these were types of magic, and from them Egypt knew magic [better] than the rest of the world.”³⁷

Egypt, therefore, epitomized the place of impurity. “R. Yose said: All the streets of Egypt were filled with idolatry; and, moreover, in every house were to be found implements by which they [the Egyptians] were bound to those lower crowns below and which

aroused a spirit of impurity amongst them.”³⁸ Contained here is the mystical explanation for Moses’ command to the Israelites, “And take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin” (Exod. 12:22), namely, “in order to remove the spirit of impurity from amongst them.”³⁹

On the symbolic level, therefore, Israel’s being in Egypt represented their being under the force of the demonic: they were bound by “the knots of magic.”⁴⁰ Pharaoh, king of Egypt, symbolized in turn the dominating power of this demonic side.⁴¹ The Zohar, accordingly, elaborates upon a metaphor employed in Ezekiel 29:3, “Behold, I am against thee, Pharaoh, king of Egypt, the great crocodile that crouches in the midst of his streams.”⁴² The “great crocodile” names the demonic force, and “his streams” are “the gradations that emanate from him.”⁴³ The knowledge of this “great crocodile” is alluded to as well in the verse “Go in to Pharaoh” (Exod. 10:1). The esoteric meaning of God’s injunction to Moses, “Go in to Pharaoh,” is that God implored Moses to plumb the inner depths of the divine secrets concerning the demonic side. The Holy One, blessed be He, “must do battle” against this “great crocodile” and “not against another.”⁴⁴ Moses, therefore, was granted “the mystery of the wisdom of the great crocodile that crouches in the midst of his streams,” a wisdom that is granted only “to the just who know the secrets of their master.”⁴⁵ It was necessary for Moses to attain such knowledge, for at that time the people of Israel were under the dominion of the “great crocodile,” the chief power of evil, embodied in the person of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

Redemption

Israel’s exilic state corresponds to an exilic state within the divine realm, namely, the domination of the *Shekhinah* by Samael.⁴⁶ Alternatively expressed, the historical exile signifies a separation above between the *Shekhinah* and the Holy One (*Malkhut* and *Tif’eret*).⁴⁷ The redemptive process, as we shall see, is characterized in the Zohar by two stages that, respectively, correspond to the twofold characterization of exile as (1) the subservience of the holy (the right) to the unholy (the left),⁴⁸ and (2) the separation of male and female, right and left, within the divine.⁴⁹

The first stage in the redemptive process is the overthrowing of the yoke of Satanic (i.e. Egyptian) rule. Such a power could be overthrown, however, only by the very means through which it governs. In order for God to redeem Israel, therefore, it was necessary for Him to use the tactics of the left against the forces of the left, to fight fire with fire. Thus, the author of the Zohar interprets the verse “I compare thee, my love, to a mare among Pharaoh’s cavalry” (Song of Songs 1:9):

Come and see: There are chariots of the left in the mystery of the Other Side and chariots of the right in the mystery of the supernal Holiness. The ones are parallel to the others; the ones of mercy and the others of judgment. And when the Holy One, blessed be He, carried out judgment in Egypt, every judgment that He did was in the very likeness of those chariots [on the left] and in the likeness of that very side. Just as that side kills and removes souls, so the Holy One acted in that very way, as it is written, “And the Lord killed every firstborn” (Exod. 13:15).⁵⁰

Nowhere was this more apparent, according to the Zohar, than in the plague of the killing of the firstborn; this event symbolized the wiping out of the demonic power of judgment by means of divine judgment. The Zohar thus interprets the verse “And the Lord will pass through to smite Egypt” (Exod. 12:23): “He will pass through the strict lines of judgment of the [lower] crowns, which are bound to the other crowns above, and He will loosen them from their place. And He will pass over his ways in order to act with judgment to protect Israel.”⁵¹ That God “will pass over” means that God will pass through the domain of the lower crowns, the demonic realm, in order to execute judgment upon them and thereby protect Israel.

Specifically, according to the Zohar, the divine attribute employed by God in carrying out this act of judgment was the tenth *sefirah*, *Shekhinah*, commonly called the “lesser” or “weaker” attribute of judgment,⁵² or “the lower Court.”⁵³ This is alluded to in Exodus 12:29, “And the Lord smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt”: “And the Lord” (*wa-yhw*), according to a midrashic comment, refers to the Holy One and His Court, which, in kabbalistic terms, symbolize *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*.⁵⁴ The Zohar’s point, therefore, is that the killing of the firstborn (chief power of the

demonic) was achieved by means of God acting through “His Court,” that is, *Shekhinah*. This is further brought out in another passage interpreting the same verse. Here, as elsewhere in the Zohar, *Shekhinah* is called by the name “Night”:⁵⁵ “And judgment was carried out on all of them when they all entered their homes ... and the Night carried out judgment on them all in that time.”⁵⁶ This too is the underlying intent of the Zohar’s comment that the “essence of the redemption of Israel was in the night.”⁵⁷ Yet this attribute lies in between the right and left sides of the divine, and therefore has the capacity to act with mercy or with judgment.⁵⁸ At the moment of the killing of the firstborn, the *Shekhinah* turned with mercy toward the Israelites, thus expressing Her dual nature.⁵⁹

The exile, as we have noted, was a state in which the demonic dominated over the divine; redemption is the restoration of power to its proper domain, namely, the realm of the upper *sefirot*. Such a restoration, however, entailed a twofold process. The first stage was the subjugation of the demonic left by the divine left, which resulted in the freeing of the Community of Israel (= *Shekhinah*) from under the dominion of Pharaoh (= *Siṭra Aḥra*). It is this transformation from the unholy to the holy that, according to the Zohar, is the mystical intent of the twin commandments to remove all leaven before Passover and to eat unleavened bread during the seven days of Passover. That is to say, the leaven symbolizes the evil inclination, the “Other Side,” foreign gods and idolatry, which must be obliterated, whereas the unleavened bread symbolizes the first gradation in the realm of holiness, that is, *Shekhinah*, the dominion of the Holy One.⁶⁰

The second stage involved the beginning of the process of reunification of the left and right within the divine sphere, a unification that was torn asunder by the exilic state. This stage is implicit in the biblical narrative as well. The night on which God smote the Egyptian firstborn is referred to in Scripture as *leil shimmurim*, that is, “the night of watchfulness” (Exod. 12:42). Commenting on this verse, the Zohar notes, inter alia, that the word for “watchfulness,” *shimmurim*, is in the plural, whereas the word for “night,” *leil*, is in the singular.⁶¹ The plural form, we are told, alludes to the secret of unification between male and female, right and left,⁶² which was destined to take place on that very night. The night, *leil*, is the feminine without her masculine counterpart; when the feminine is joined together with the masculine, then *leil* becomes *laylah*.⁶³ Thus,

the verse continues: “this is the Lord’s watch-night,” *hu ha-laylah ha-zeh la-yhwh shimmurim*. The night of redemption is a night wherein the two are united, and hence the form *laylah* is used. This marks the beginning of the second stage in the redemptive process.

This mystery, according to the Zohar, is alluded to as well in Exodus 13:21, “And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; that they may go by day and night.” Nahmanides had already interpreted the verse in terms of kabbalistic symbolism: the word *wa-yhwh*, “and the Lord,” as the rabbis had said,⁶⁴ always refers to the Lord and His Court, which, understood theosophically, symbolize *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. Hence the verse comes to tell us, comments Nahmanides, that “the Holy One, blessed be He, went with them by day and His Court by night,”⁶⁵ that is to say, the attribute of mercy governed them by day, whereas the attribute of judgment governed them by night.⁶⁶ While both attributes were thus operative in the redemption from Egypt, the two were not perfectly united, for each had its allotted time. Yet, contained here is also an allusion to the future redemption in which “the attribute of His Court [i.e. judgment] will ascend to [be united with] mercy.”⁶⁷ This is the secret of the word *wa-yhwh*: the Holy One and His Court will be united as one, and redemption will be complete.

The author of the Zohar clearly develops the interpretation of Nahmanides, but he does not accept the latter’s distinction between the redemption from Egypt and the future redemption.

“And the Lord went before them by day.” The Holy One, blessed be He, and His Court. R. Isaac said: It has been taught: The *Shekhinah* travels with the Patriarchs.⁶⁸ “He goes before them by day,” that [refers to] Abraham. “In a pillar of cloud,” that [refers to] Isaac. “To lead them the way,” that [refers to] Jacob. “And by night in a pillar of fire to show them the way,” that [refers to] King David ... And it is written, “And the Lord went, etc., that they may go by day and by night.” Now why did they go by day and by night? ... So that the highest perfection [lit. the perfection of all] should be found amongst them, for there is no perfection without day and night.⁶⁹

The “highest perfection,” *sheleimuta de-khola*, is found only where there is “day” (masculine potency of the divine) and “night” (feminine potency) united as one. There is here an echo of one of the theosophic principles that the Zohar establishes in connection with the creation account. In response to the question “Why does the Bible record with respect to each day, ‘And it was evening and it was morning?’” the author of the Zohar writes, “To teach that there is no day without night, nor night without day, and they should not be separated.”⁷⁰ In the event of redemption, as in that of creation, we find a unification of day and night, masculine and feminine, the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*.

This second stage of redemption is expressed in somewhat different, but not unrelated, terms in the climactic event of the miracle of the sea. It is in his exegesis of this portion that the author of the Zohar is able to develop most fully his theosophic understanding of redemption and to introduce his unique parlance: the containment of the left within the right.

Commenting on the verse “And Israel saw the great work [lit. the great hand, *ha-yad ha-gedolah*] which the Lord wrought against the Egyptians” (Exod. 14:31), the author of the Zohar writes, “R. Hiyya said: The Hand and all the fingers were here perfected. The Hand was perfected for it was contained within the right, for it has been taught, ‘All is contained within and depends upon the right.’⁷¹ Thus it is written, ‘Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy’ [Exod. 15:6].”⁷² The attribute by means of which the divine redeemed Israel and at the same time destroyed Egypt, as mentioned above, was the *Shekhinah*, here referred to by the expression “the great Hand.”⁷³ This is made explicit in another zoharic passage: “What is the meaning of ‘the great Hand’? That is to say, ‘hand’ [*yad*] is not less than five fingers. ‘The great’ [*ha-gedolah*] contains five other fingers; then it is called ‘great.’”⁷⁴ The “great Hand” is a composite of both hands, the term “great” (*ha-gedolah*) referring to the five fingers of the right hand,⁷⁵ and the term “hand” (*yad*) referring to the five on the left.⁷⁶ *Shekhinah*, insofar as it is the *sefirah* that comprises all ten gradations corresponding to the ten fingers,⁷⁷ is called the “great Hand.” Put differently, *Shekhinah* is called “the great Hand” because She is the hand that contains both the left and right hands as one. Concerning the latter image, we read, “Come and see: It has been said that all ten plagues that God

performed in Egypt were [wrought by] one hand, for *the left was contained in the right*. The ten fingers, contained one within another, correspond to the ten sayings by means of which the Holy One, blessed be He, is called. In the end, corresponding to them all, is the great and mighty Sea.”⁷⁸ The ten plagues were performed by ten fingers, which correspond to the ten sayings, that is, the ten *sefirot*. Yet all the plagues were wrought by the “one Hand,” that is, *Shekhinah*, for the fingers of the left (= *sefirot* aligned on the side of Rigor or Judgment) were contained in those of the right (= *sefirot* aligned on the side of Mercy or Love). Moreover, as the miracle at the sea was the culmination of the plagues – in the Zohar’s language “corresponding to them all” – so *Shekhinah*, symbolized as “the great and mighty Sea,”⁷⁹ contains within itself the whole sefirotic order.⁸⁰ This is the meaning of R. Ḥiyya’s comment, “the Hand and all the fingers were here perfected.”

The containment of the left within the right, which characterizes the state of the *Shekhinah* at the climax of the redemptive process, reflects a higher process within the divine, a process that is exegetically connected in the Zohar to the verse “Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy” (Exod. 15:6). The right hand symbolizes the divine attribute of love, whereas the left hand symbolizes the attribute of judgment. One would expect, therefore, that Scripture should describe the left hand of God as being “glorious in power” and as the one that “shatters the enemy.” For what reason is the right hand so described in the above passage? Addressing this issue, the Zohar notes,

“Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.” What is the meaning of *ne’dari*? It should be written *ne’dar!* When the left comes to unite with the right, then it is written *ne’dari* [i.e. is glorious], and *tir’ats* [i.e. shatters]. It is always like this, for *the left is found in the right and is contained therein*. R. Simeon said: It is as we have explained, for a man is found divided. What is the reason? In order that he may receive his mate, and they will make one body.⁸¹ So [it says] “Thy right hand,” that is, it is divided. What is the reason? In order to receive the left hand with it. Thus is everything: one [part] with another. Therefore, with one hand He strikes and heals, as it is written, “Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the enemy.”⁸²

The right hand of God is described as the one “glorious in power” and as the one that “shatters the enemy,” for the right hand contains within itself the left hand as well. When there is harmony in the sefirotic realm, then the left is united with, nay contained in, the right – as male united with female – and all acts, including those of the left, are carried out by the guidance of the right: “with one hand He strikes and heals.” “Come and see: From the right hand of God all light, blessings, and happiness are aroused. Within the right the left is contained, just as there is in a human being a right and left hand, and *the left is contained in the right* ... When the right is aroused the left is aroused with it, for the left is held and contained within the right.”⁸³ The removal of the right hand, by contrast, summons separation and division, the domination of the left hand of the divine, and with this comes the danger of the left resulting in an “autonomous” demonic realm: “When the right hand is found, the left is found with it, and acts of judgment do not dominate in the world ... But if the right is removed and the left is summoned, then acts of judgment are stirred up in the world and judgment rests upon all.”⁸⁴

Hence, the divine act of redemption can be viewed from two vantage points: the subjugation of the demonic left by means of the divine left, and the containment of the divine left within the divine right. While it is the case that the word “left” is used with two distinct meanings, there does not seem to be any equivocation on the part of the Zohar, for the apparent tension is resolved by a proper understanding of the dialectical relation between the demonic and the divine. That is, the subjugation of the unholy left is accomplished by means of the divine left, which, unlike the former, is contained within the right. Whereas exile represents the domination of the (demonic) left, redemption represents the containment of the (divine) left within the (divine) right. Put differently: exile is a condition of pure judgment, redemption one of mercy balanced with judgment. The severing of this balance is, in the first place, one of the causes for the emergence of an independent demonic realm.

Revelation

In Egypt, Israel was under the dominion of the “Other Side.” The exodus represented a transference of power from the unholy to the

holy. This process reached completion only at the theophanous event of Sinai. Before Israel could receive the Torah, however, two other significant events in their history were recorded in Scripture.

The first was the war with Amaleq (Exod. 17:8–16). The Zohar, building upon a midrashic theme,⁸⁵ maintains that Israel was attacked because they had forsaken the ways of God.⁸⁶ Moreover, Amaleq, says the author of the Zohar, is “the prosecutor of the Holy One, blessed be He, above,”⁸⁷ that is, *Siṭra Aḥra*. Hence, the theosophic significance of the war with Amaleq is equivalent to that of the destruction of the Egyptians: the wiping out of the demonic by the divine. This dynamic, according to the Zohar, is to be found in the verse “And when Moses raised his hand Israel prevailed, and when he let down his hand Amaleq prevailed” (Exod. 17:11): “‘When he raised,’ that is, when he lifted the right hand on top of the left, and he prayed [lit. intended] by means of the spreading of his hands.”⁸⁸ But here too, as in the case of the splitting of the sea, the subjugation of the demonic left is achieved by means of the divine right, which in itself contains the divine left. Indeed, in one passage, the Zohar interprets the verse concerning the raising of the right hand of Moses in light of the verse concerning God’s right hand shattering the enemy.⁸⁹

The second event preceding the account of the Sinaitic revelation that the Zohar makes special note of is the meeting of Moses with his father-in-law, Jethro, in the wilderness (Exod. 18:1 ff.). The section of the Zohar on Jethro begins with an exegetical comment about Aaron’s lifting up of the right hand over the left.⁹⁰ The relevancy of this remark can be understood only in light of the symbolic correspondence of Aaron, high priest of the Israelites, to the divine right side, the attribute of love, and of Jethro, priest of Midian, to the demonic left. The Zohar explicitly states that the “Other Side,” like the side of holiness, has two forces, a king and a priest: “In the ‘Other Side,’ which is not the side of holiness, there is the secret of the king, and it has been explained that he is called ‘the old and foolish king’ [Eccles. 4:13]. And beneath him is the priest of On.”⁹¹ The Zohar goes on to say,

when that king and that priest are subdued and broken, then all the other forces [of the demonic] are subdued and they acknowledge the Holy One, blessed be He. Then the Holy One,

blessed be He, alone governs above and below ... In the manner of this very secret the Holy One, blessed be He, acted in the land [below], for He broke the “old and foolish king” who was Pharaoh. When Moses came to Pharaoh and said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us” (Exod. 5:3), he opened up and said, “I know not the Lord” (Exod. 5:2) ... When He smote him and his people, he came and acknowledged the Holy One, blessed be He. Afterwards that priest of On, Jethro, who served under him, was broken and subdued until he came and acknowledged the Holy One, blessed be He, and said, “Blessed be the Lord who saved you, etc. Now I know that the Lord is great” (Exod. 18:10–11) ... When that king and priest acknowledged the Holy One, blessed be He, and were broken before him, then the Holy One, blessed be He, ascended in His glory upon everything above and below.⁹² And until the Holy One, blessed be He, ascended in His glory when those [two] confessed before Him, the Torah was not given.

The conversion of Jethro, like the overthrowing of Pharaoh, was a necessary stage in the redemptive process. Only when the subjugation of these two demonic powers was completed could the revelatory process ensue.

The giving of the Torah, according to the Zohar, likewise symbolizes the containment of the left within the right, but in two senses. The first is the one with which we are already familiar: the unification of the left within the right in the realm of divinity. This is expressed in several ways in the Zohar. There is, first of all, the kabbalistic interpretation of Exodus 19:16, “And it came to pass on the third day,” the day in which the revelation took place: “On the third day precisely, for it is mercy [*rahamei*],”⁹³ that is, the balance between love (*hesed*) on the right and strength (*gevurah*) on the left. Moreover, the Zohar interprets the biblical theme concerning the appearance of lightning and fire at Sinai in the following manner: “It has been taught: R. Judah said: The Torah was given on the side of strength. R. Jose said: If so, then it was on the left side! He said to him: It was restored [*ithaddar*] to the right, as it says, ‘From His right hand a fiery law unto them’ [Deut. 33:3], and it is written, ‘Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, etc.’ We find that *the left is restored* [*deithazar*] to *the right, and the right to the left.*”⁹⁴ The verse describing the Sinaitic

revelation, Deuteronomy 33:3, is here compared to the verse describing the miracle at the sea, Exodus 15:6, for both verses, according to the Zohar, instruct us about the mystery of the containment, or restoration, of the left within the right. The redemptive act in the one case, and the revelatory act in the other, are achieved by means of the right hand which contains within itself the left.

With respect to revelation, the Zohar repeats this theme by reinterpreting a midrashic motif,⁹⁵ namely, the primordial Torah was written as black fire upon white fire. “R. Isaac said: The Torah was given as black fire upon white fire in order *to contain [le’akhlela] the right in the left, so that the left would be restored [de-ithazar] to the right*, as it says, ‘From His right hand a fiery law unto them’ ... R. Abba said: The tablets were before their eyes, and the letters that were flying about were visible in two fires, white fire and black fire, to show that the right and left are one.”⁹⁶ The Torah “comes from strength [the left] and is contained [*we-itkelilat*] in the right.”⁹⁷

This containment of the left within the right is reflected, according to the Zohar, in the alignment of the people at the moment of revelation: five groups on the right and five on the left.⁹⁸ It is reflected, moreover, in the very structure of the tablets that Moses received.

It has been taught: Five voices [i.e., commandments] were on the right, and five on the left. *Those on the left were contained in the right*, and from the right those on the left were revealed. And here everything was [contained in] the right, and those [on the left] were contained in those [on the right]. The one who stood on one side and saw the other side could read those letters [on the other side]. For we have learnt that the left was restored to the right, as it is written, “From His right hand a fiery law unto them.”⁹⁹

Finally, the very object of revelation, the Torah, embodies the mystery of the left being contained in the right. This can be explained in one of several ways: (1) The written Torah corresponds symbolically to *Tif’eret*, which is the balance between the right and the left.¹⁰⁰ (2) There are two aspects to the Torah, the written and the oral. The former represents the right, and the latter the left,¹⁰¹ or, alternatively, *Tif’eret* and *Malkhut*.¹⁰² Hence, the day of the Sinaitic

revelation, the one source for both aspects of Torah, is the wedding day of the masculine and feminine potencies of the divine.¹⁰³ (3) The Torah comprises 613 commandments, 248 positive and 365 negative. The former derive from the right side of the divine, the masculine *zakhor*, and the latter from the left side, the feminine *shamor*.¹⁰⁴ Insofar as the Torah given at Sinai includes all 613, it symbolizes the balance of positive and negative, right and left.

The event of revelation as understood by the Zohar thus represents the complete containment of the left within the right in the divine sphere. Apart from this, however, there is another nuance to this motif in the Zohar, namely, the reintegration of the demonic left into the divine right. The exodus from Egypt was the first step in Israel's spiritual odyssey out of the realm of the unholy; hence, the evil inclination, the left side, symbolized by the leaven, had to be totally removed. At Sinai, not only did the left side not have to be removed, it had to be reappropriated. This, according to the Zohar, is the mystical intent of the biblical injunction to bring leavened bread as the first fruits of the Lord on Pentecost.

“You shall bring out of your habitations two wave loaves [of two tenth measures; they shall be of fine flour and shall be baked with leaven]” (Lev. 23:17). This is the bread by which Israel got wise, the supernal wisdom of the Torah, and they entered its ways. Now we must look carefully. On Passover Israel went out from the bread which is called leaven [*hamets*], as it is written, “You shall not see any leaven” [Exod. 13:7], and “Whoever eats that which is leavened” [Exod. 12:19]. What is the reason? On account of the honor of that bread which is called unleavened [*matsah*]. Now that Israel merited the highest bread, it was not appropriate for the leaven to be wiped out and not seen at all. And why was this sacrifice [of the bread of the first fruits] from leaven, as it is written, “they shall be of fine flour and shall be baked with leaven”? Moreover, on that very day [when the Torah was given] the evil inclination was wiped out,¹⁰⁵ for the Torah, which is called freedom, was to be found! This may be compared to a king who had an only son who was sick. One day the son desired to eat. They said to him: The king's son should eat this medicine, and until he eats that no other food will be found in the house. So it was done. When he ate the medicine,

he said to him: From now on you may eat whatever you desire, and it will not harm you. Similarly, when Israel left Egypt, they did not know the essence or secret of Faith. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Israel shall eat medicine, and until they eat the medicine no other food shall be shown to them. When they ate the unleavened bread, which was medicine, in order to enter and to know the secret of Faith, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: From now on leaven shall be shown to them, and they can eat it, for it cannot harm them. And all the more so on the day of Shavu'ot, the supernal bread, which is a complete medicine, is summoned.¹⁰⁶

In this passage, the author of the Zohar makes two statements that, *prima facie*, are contradictory. On the one hand, he says, "it was not appropriate for the leaven [symbolic of the evil inclination] to be wiped out and not seen at all," while on the other hand, relying on rabbinic sources, he asserts that, on the very day that the Torah was given, "the evil inclination was wiped out." This apparent tension can be resolved only if we understand the two assertions in a dialectical relation: "it was not appropriate for the leaven to be wiped out" because "the evil inclination was wiped out." When Israel left Egypt it was necessary to remove all leaven, for at that time they were comparable to a sick child who could consume only the prescribed medicine, that is, the unleavened bread, symbolic of the entry into the realm of holiness, the beginning of faith. After they received the higher type of bread, namely, the bread of wisdom embodied in the Torah,¹⁰⁷ this was no longer necessary. On the contrary, the very leaven that was forbidden on Passover was required on Shavu'ot. At the moment of revelation, the left side was once again appropriated by Israel, for at that time it presented no danger to the people, its efficacy being undermined by the Torah, the most perfect antidote to the malady of the evil inclination.¹⁰⁸ In the presence of the "complete medicine," the unholy is restored to its source in the holy.

Conclusion

We have attempted to trace a common theme that runs through various portions of the Zohar. This theme serves as the exegetical axis upon which the zoharic understanding of exile, redemption, and

revelation turns. The historical movement of Israel from Egypt to Sinai is, at the same time, a spiritual movement from the dominion of the left to that of the right. The ultimate stage of this process, the revelation of the Torah, is one in which we find the containment of the left within the right. Such a process began in Egypt but reached completion only at Sinai. The perfect state is not one in which evil is entirely obliterated,¹⁰⁹ but rather one in which it is contained within the good. Only the sick soul must eliminate all traces of the left; the healthy soul, by contrast, can reappropriate the left and thereby unite it with the right. Indeed, the essence of divine worship is to worship God with both hearts,¹¹⁰ that is, to contain the evil inclination within the good, the left within the right.¹¹¹

Notes

1. See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1956), pp. 213–244; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 1–126. See also Daniel C. Matt, *Zohar: Book of Enlightenment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), pp. 3–39.
2. See, however, Yehuda Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar,” in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), pp. 87–236 (Hebrew). This essay, which is rich in textual analyses, and has indeed set the standard for all future research into the Zohar, contains many insights that may be useful to those interested in pursuing the issue of literary structure and its relation to thematic content in the Zohar.
3. I am limiting myself in this chapter to an analysis of texts that form part of the main body of the Zohar. For a discussion of the various literary strata in the Zohar, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 159–163; idem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), pp. 214–220.
4. See Gershom Scholem, “The Kabbalah of R. Jacob and R. Isaac Kohen,” *Madda‘ei ha-Yahadut*, 2, 1927, pp. 193–197 (Hebrew); Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 124–128.
5. Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob;” Joseph Dan, “Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 5, 1980, pp. 17–41.
6. According to R. Isaac, the ten emanations of the left comprise “three worlds which were created and destroyed” (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 9:2, ed. Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck [Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1965], p. 68) and seven archons that do battle against the seven lower holy emanations. See Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” pp. 194, 248–251. The expression “emanations of the left” was not used by R. Isaac, but rather by his student, R. Moses of Burgos. See Scholem, “R. Moshe, the Student of R. Yitshaq,” *Tarbits*, 4, 1933, pp. 207–225 (Hebrew).

7. Scholem, "R. Moshe," p. 209. See also ʿOdros Abulafia, *Otsar ha-Kavod* (Warsaw, 1879; reprinted Jerusalem, 1970), 3a: "Where dogs bark there the Angel of Death is to be seen, for [he] is emanated from the left side, which is an emanation in itself." This should not be understood in any absolute sense, but rather as meaning that the left comprises its own powers which parallel those of the divine. See *ibid.*, 23b, concerning the "worlds created and destroyed" (see notes 6 and 22).
8. Scholem, "Kabbalah of R. Jacob," pp. 193–194. See also Shulamit Shahar, "Catharism and the Beginnings of the Kabbalah in Languedoc: Elements Common to Catharic Scriptures and the Book Bahir," *Tarbits*, 40, 1971, p. 502 (Hebrew), and p. viii of the English summary. Shahar concludes that, despite the similarities between some of the doctrines of the Catharic sects in Languedoc in the twelfth century and the kabbalah of the *Bahir*, with respect to the question of evil, one must make a clear distinction between the two: the former were "entirely dualistic," "making an absolute distinction between the good God and the principle of evil," whereas the latter remained "completely monistic, since God is portrayed as the Creator of Chaos, and Satan is one of His attributes." See following note.
9. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 454, 458–461. As Tishby noted, the kabbalists' concern with discovering the source for the demonic realm within the divine was an effort to mitigate the potential dualism of their doctrine concerning a left emanation. See note 12.
10. According to R. Isaac, the ten emanations of the left emerged from *Binah*, the third *sefirah*, whereas, according to R. Moses of Burgos, they emanated from *Gevurah*, the fifth *sefirah*, or the attribute of judgment. See Scholem, "Kabbalah of R. Jacob," p. 194; *idem*, "R. Moshe," p. 210. See *idem*, *Pirquei Yesod be-Havanat ha-Qabbalah u-Semaleha* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1976), pp. 191–193 (Hebrew). As Scholem points out (pp. 193 ff.), in the kabbalah before the Zohar there was a third explanation for the origin of evil, *viz.*, the last *sefirah*. This is reflected in the Zohar as well; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 460–461.
11. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 450–454.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 450–451. It should be noted that Tishby (p. 454) distinguishes between morphological and ontological parallelism. In other words, while it is true that there is a parallelism of structure between the two realms, they are not of the same ontological standing; the demonic realm is of a secondary nature in comparison with the divine, or, according to one of the metaphors employed in the Zohar, the relation of the two is like that of an ape to a human being (Zohar 2:148b). According to Tishby, this distinction is one of the various attempts to mitigate the potential dualism of the doctrine of two realms. See note 9.
13. Zohar 3:41b. See also Zohar 2:223b–224a; 3:70a. On occasion it is not the entire sefirotic realm but only the seven lower *sefirot* that are said to have a parallel in the demonic realm; see Zohar 1:194a. (See note 6.) Although there are several names for the demonic forces in the Zohar, the most common are: "lower crowns" (see, e.g., Zohar 1:95b, 167a; 2:21b, 35b, 39b, 64b, 85b, 94b; 3:14b, 48b, 69a, 95b, 111b, 119b, 208b, 209b); "lower grades" (see, e.g., Zohar 1:133b, 177a [but see the remark of Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 471 n. 14], 194a; 2:244b); "impure crowns of magic below" (see, e.g., Zohar 1:167a; 2:30b; 3:41b); and, collectively, *Sitra Aħra* (see, e.g., Zohar 1:191b, 204b, 228a; 2:69a, and elsewhere).
14. Zohar 1:53a, 160a; 2:192b, 194b, 243a; 3:63a, 207a. Even though there is a right and left dimension in both realms, the demonic vis-à-vis the divine is

- known as the “left,” while the divine vis-à-vis the demonic is known as the “right.” See Zohar 1:195b; 211b; 3:259b. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 471 n. 19.
15. Zohar 1:148a (*Sitrei Torah*), 161b (*Sitrei Torah*). Cf. also 1:5a, 64a, 153a, 160b; 2:163b, 236b, 243a; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 461–464. The pairing of Samael and Lilith as husband and wife in the demonic realm, corresponding to Adam and Eve, was already made by R. Isaac ha-Kohen in his “Treatise on the Left Emanation,” see Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” pp. 251–252, 260, 262. For a discussion of R. Isaac’s historical and literary sources, see Dan, “Samael,” pp. 17–40. (The relevant passage is translated on pp. 18–19.) See note 44.
 16. Zohar 2:38a. (Cf. also Zohar 1:166b; 2:40b.) By means of the merit of the “three knots of faith,” that is, the three Patriarchs and the *sefirot* they represent, the Israelites were released from the “three knots of magic” by which the Egyptians had bound them; see note 41. See Liebes, *Sections*, s.v. *qishra*, pp. 394–395, 400. For an extended discussion of the possible Christian influence on the Zohar with respect to the notion of the Trinity, see idem, “Christian Influences in the Zohar,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 2, 1982/83, pp. 43–74 (Hebrew). See also idem, “Messiah,” pp. 130–131 n. 182.
 17. Zohar 1:211b; 2:244a, 263a.
 18. Zohar 1:99b. See *ibid.*, 125b, 161a; 3:112b, 145a. On this basis, e.g., the Zohar (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*) reinterprets the midrashic comment on Deut. 34:10, “And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like Moses”: “In Israel none arose, but in the nations of the world there arose; and who was it? Balaam.” See *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, ed. Louis Finkelstein (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1969), sec. 357, p. 430; for other rabbinic references, see Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), vol. 6, p. 125 n. 727. The author of the Zohar writes, “Moses’ works are above, Balaam’s below. Moses made [theurgical] use of the holy crown of the supernal King above, and Balaam made [magical] use of the lower crowns below which are not holy” (Zohar 2:21b). Cf. Moses de Leon, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. A. W. Greenup (London, 1911), pp. 16–18; *Zohar Hadash*, ed. Reuven Margalio (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1986), 58b; Zohar 3:193b. The motif of Balaam as a chief magician and protagonist of the demonic is repeated often in the Zohar. See e.g., *Zohar Hadash*, 66a; Zohar 1:125b, 126a, 166b; 3:112b, 194a, 207b, 212a. The association of Balaam with magic is found already in rabbinic Aggadah; see Ginzberg, *Legends*, index, s.v. “Balaam, the magical powers of.” Moreover, according to earlier sources, Balaam was considered the chief magician of Pharaoh; see Babylonian Talmud *Soṭah* 11a; Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 2, pp. 334–335. See Zohar 2, 69a. See note 41. The Aramaic *ishtammash* (lit. “made use of”) was used technically in a theurgical context already in the Mishnah; see Mishnah, *Avot* 1:13. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 358 n. 17, and idem, *Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism, and Talmudic Tradition*, 2nd edn. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), p. 54 n. 36. It is of interest to note that in this passage (Zohar 1:99b) the mystic (R. Abba) learns his wisdom from a book brought to him by “the children of the East.” Now, according to midrashic tradition (see, e.g., *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 8:23), the wisdom of the children of the East consisted of astrology and divination. See Saul Lieberman, *Greek in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965), p. 98. Moreover, according to the Zohar itself, the land of the East was the place whence Laban, Be’or, and Balaam learned all their sorcery, for it was the place into which the angels Azza and Azael fell. See Zohar 1:126a, 133b, 223a. The

- children of the East, therefore, were masters of magical knowledge. Yet here, they are portrayed as bearers of the correct mystical (theurgical) knowledge. Hence, in this context, the line between theurgical and magical knowledge is difficult to draw. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 684–685, who distinguishes between the two in terms of the ultimate purpose for which the given act was performed, that is, whether to influence the upper powers or whether to gain benefit for oneself. But see *ibid.*, pp. 1160–1161, where the distinction is somewhat blurred. See Gershom Scholem, *Re'shit ha-Qabbalah* (Tel Aviv: Schocken, 1948), pp. 143–144; Liebes, “Messiah,” p. 180 n. 319.
19. See Zohar 2:254b–255a; 3:292b (*Idra Zuta*). For a discussion of the cathartic view, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 289–290, 458–459; Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 1976), pp. 178–182 (Hebrew); Liebes, *Sections*, p. 147; Moshe Idel, “The Evil Thought of the Deity,” *Tarbits*, 49, 1980, pp. 356–364 (Hebrew).
 20. See Zohar 2:176b (*Sifra di-Tseni'uta*); 3:128b (*Idra Rabba*), 135a, 142a, 292a (*Idra Zuta*). The biblical basis for this mythical conception is Gen. 36:31–39. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 276–277, 289. For a discussion of the possible source for this conception in the Castilian circle, and particularly Ṭodros Abulafia, see Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 219–221. Moreover, as Liebes points out (p. 219), this conception was probably suggested to the kabbalists by the midrashic claim that God at first considered creating the world with judgment and only afterwards decided to combine judgment and mercy together. See, e.g., *Genesis Rabbah* 12:15, pp. 112–113.
 21. See Zohar 2:34b. The source for this mythical conception was R. Isaac ha-Kohen; see note 6. Cf. Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” pp. 194–195.
 22. See, e.g., Zohar 1:31a, 151a; 2:64a, 83a, 175b; 3:15b, 39b, 65a, 99a, 118b, 262b; Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, ed. Joseph Ben-Shlomo, 2 vols (Jerusalem: Bialik Insitute, 1981), vol. 1, p. 235.
 23. See Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” p. 194; *idem*, *Pirquei Yesod*, p. 200; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 458–461.
 24. See Zohar 1:16a; 2:149b; 3:148a. See note 10.
 25. See Zohar 1:17a–b. With regard to the question “What creates the imbalance in the sefirotic world?” there are basically two approaches: it results either from an internal process or as a result of human sin. See Scholem, *Pirquei Yesod*, pp. 202–204.
 26. Here I have made use of Tishby's terminology; see note 12.
 27. For references, see note 31. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 68–69. Tishby suggests that many of the passages in the Zohar that deride Egypt are in reality intended against Islam and the Arabs.
 28. The power of the magicians is, from the outset, rendered impotent in comparison with the power of God. Hence, we are told that the rod that Aaron cast down, and which became a serpent, swallowed up the rods the magicians cast down (Exod. 7:12). Moreover, the magicians' use of secret arts could match the divine power only for the first two plagues (*ibid.* 8:18–19). Finally, the magicians themselves are affected by the plague of boils and have to use their power to cause them to disappear. For a succinct discussion of these issues, see Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, trans. J. S. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 71–72. The impotence of the Egyptian magicians vis-à-vis God was a favorite theme in rabbinic Aggadah. See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 67b, *Exodus Rabbah* 10:7, *Midrash Tanḥuma* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1972), Wa-era 14, pp. 253–256. See also Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 2, pp. 335, 352; vol. 5, p. 429 n. 185.

29. Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 49b. See also *ibid.*, Menaḥot 85a, *Exodus Rabbah* 9:6. For other references in aggadic literature to this theme, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, index, s.v. "Egyptians, masters of astrology and magic."
30. See, e.g., Zohar 1:81b, 83a, 249a; 2:30b, 35b, 38a, 191a, 192b; 3:50b, 69a, 70a. See notes 35–45.
31. See, e.g., Zohar 1:167a; 2:30b; 3:41b, 70a, 192a. This is also the underlying meaning of a repeated claim in the Zohar concerning the special relation between the feminine and magic. That is, the demonic realm vis-à-vis the divine is considered to be feminine (although there is both a feminine and masculine dimension within the left side; see note 14); accordingly, all magic (i.e. the demonic) is related to the feminine. See Zohar *Ḥadash*, 92b; 1:126a.
32. Zohar 3:41b. See also Zohar 2:223b–224a.
33. Zohar 1:125b. See also Zohar 2:215b. The "primordial serpent" in the Zohar frequently refers to the feminine counterpart to Samael in the realm of the Other Side (based on the aggadic image that Samael rode upon the serpent; cf. *Pirquei Rabbi Eli'ezer* [Warsaw, 1852], 13:31b), but it can also refer to this whole realm or to the masculine potency alone. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 467–469.
34. Zohar 1:83a (translated in Matt, *Zohar*, p. 63). Cf. *ibid.*, 133b, where the author of the Zohar elaborates upon the talmudic interpretation of Gen. 25:6, "And to the sons of the concubines, which Abraham had, Abraham gave gifts," that is, Abraham transmitted to them a "name of impurity" by which to do magic (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 91a, and the commentary of Rashi, ad loc.). According to the Zohar, Abraham gave the sons of his concubines the names of the impure forces that are the lower grades; that is, Abraham imparted to them knowledge of the demonic realm. See *ibid.*, 223a. This interpretation likewise presupposes that Abraham had significant knowledge of the demonic realm. See note 45.
35. See Matt, *Zohar*, p. 220. Matt goes on to say, "This dangerous psychic journey is the crucible of Abraham's spiritual transformation." That is, as the passage from the Zohar itself (1:83a) emphasizes, it was necessary for Abraham to descend into Egypt (the "Other Side") before entering the land of Israel (the portion of the Holy One) so that he would be purified. That is also the mystical significance of Israel's enslavement in Egypt: spiritual purification by means of contact with the unholy. See also Zohar 2:184a: "The words of Torah reside only there [i.e. in the desert, which is the abode of the demonic force], for there is no light except that which emerges from darkness. When that ["other"] side is subdued, the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends and is glorified. And there is no divine worship except amidst the darkness, and no good except within evil. When a person enters an evil way and forsakes it, then the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends in his glory. Thus the perfection of all is good and evil together, and afterwards to ascend to the good ... This is the complete worship." See note 45.
36. Zohar 3:207a.
37. *Ibid.*, 70a.
38. Zohar 2:35b. Cf. *ibid.*, 38a; 3:50b.
39. Zohar 2:35b. Cf. *ibid.*, 41a, 80b.
40. Zohar 2:25a, 38a, 52b, 69a; 3:212a (it was by means of the magic of Balaam that the Egyptians bound the Israelites; see Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 6, p. 27 n. 156). On the usage of the word "knot" (*qishra*) as a magical bond in the Zohar, see Liebes, *Sections*, p. 397. This linguistic association is indeed quite old. For a survey of ancient Near Eastern materials, including relevant biblical texts,

relating to magical bonds and knots, see Michael Fishbane, "Studies in Biblical Magic: Origins, Uses and Transformations of Terminology and Literary Form," Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 1971, chaps. 1–2.

41. Zohar 1:195a; 2:28a, 37b, 52b, 67b. According to rabbinic sources, Pharaoh was a magician par excellence; see Babylonian Talmud, Mo'ed Qaṭan 18a (cf. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 75a), *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Exod. 7:15. See also Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 2, pp. 335, 352, 358; vol. 3, p. 13; vol. 5, p. 428 n. 175.
42. The attribution of the metaphor "the great crocodile" in Ezek. 19:3 to the Pharaoh in the time of the exodus can be found already in midrashic literature. See *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, trans. Jacob Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1976), 2:175; *Exodus Rabbah* 9:4. See Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 3, p. 66; vol. 6, p. 27 n. 156.
43. Zohar 2:34a. In the continuation of this section, the Zohar makes use of the rabbinic myth concerning Leviathan and his mate, that is, a male and a female sea-monster. See Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 74b based on Isaiah 27:1; Ginzberg, *Legends*, index, s.v. "Leviathan." According to the author of the Zohar, Leviathan and his mate correspond to Samael and Lilith, who, in turn, correspond to the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*. The Zohar was here influenced by the writings of R. Isaac ha-Kohen; see Scholem, "Kabbalah of R. Jacob," pp. 262–263, and the translation of this passage in Dan, "Samael," pp. 38–39. See note 15. According to this passage (Zohar 2:34a–b), there are the great crocodile, that is, Samael, and ten streams, that is, vessels that contain the demonic forces: "in each stream there wanders about one crocodile" (ibid., 34b). The ten crocodiles, collectively, are the ten "lower crowns" that correspond to the ten *sefirot*. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 466. Cf. also Zohar 1:52a. On the historical influence of R. Isaac upon the author of the Zohar, see Scholem, "Kabbalah of R. Jacob," p. 195. According to Scholem, however, the "great crocodile" represents Samael, while the streams, in the midst of which he crouches, are the remaining nine lower crowns. The text, in my opinion, seems to bear out the interpretation of Tishby.
44. Zohar 2:34a.
45. Ibid. According to the Zohar, this knowledge has an especially esoteric nature. With regard to this, the author of the Zohar was influenced by the Castilian kabbalists, who were reluctant to elaborate on this topic and who likewise spoke of the secret of the demonic as being known to only a select few. See Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 123–124. Thus, after the initial discourse on the "great crocodile" we read, "R. Simeon said: The account of creation – the comrades are busy studying it and they have knowledge of it, but few are they who know how to allude to the account of creation according to the mystery of the great crocodile. Thus, we learned [cf. *Pirquei Rabbi Eli'ezer* 9] that the entire world evolved only upon the scales of that [crocodile]" (2:34b). For a discussion of the literary sources and theosophical significance of this passage, see Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 123–126. The statement concerning Moses' attainment of knowledge of the "great crocodile" succeeds a discussion about Job. The error of Job, according to the Zohar, was that he did not give any portion of his sacrifices (which were all burnt offerings) to the Other Side, and thereby aroused its jealousy. The sin of Job is referred to in the Zohar as "not including evil and good together," for had he given a portion to the demonic realm as well, then he would have comprised the two together. "Thus it is fitting for a person to know good and evil, and then return to the good. That is the secret of faith." (See notes 35 and 111.) Job is described in

Scripture as being “removed from evil” (Job 1:8), that is, he had no portion in *Siṭra Aḥra*. See Zohar 2:181b–182a; 3:101b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 453–454. By contrast, Moses, like Abraham (see notes 34), had a portion in both realms; thus it says “Go to Pharaoh,” that is to say, attain knowledge of the demonic realm, a knowledge that Job did not possess. See Liebes, “Messiah,” p. 126. On Solomon’s being taught from a book of magic by Asmodeus, see Zohar 2:128a; 3:19a, 77a. Cf. also Zohar 3:233a–b concerning the legend of Solomon riding an eagle to a place in the wilderness called “Tarmod” (see 1 Kings 9:18: “Tadmor”), where Azza and Azael were bound by chains of iron and where none but Balaam was allowed to enter. From that place Solomon “learnt wisdom.”

46. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 377–378, 382–385. “The subservience of the *Shekhinah* to *Siṭra Aḥra*,” concludes Tishby, “is the hidden mystery of the exile of the *Shekhinah*. The upper exile is a disturbance of the order of the divine reality, a closing of the channels of influence and an eclipse of the lights due to the removal of the *Shekhinah* from the realm of the *sefirot* and her joining with the *Siṭra Aḥra*. The exile of Israel in the countries of the nations is a process that parallels an event that occurs above.” See note 48.
47. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 378, 382–383; Liebes, “Messiah,” p. 198.
48. This is expressed in several ways: (1) the submission of the *Shekhinah* to *Siṭra Aḥra* (see note 46); (2) the unification of *Tiferet* with Lilith (see Zohar 1:122a–b; 3:69a); (3) the dominion of the other nations over Israel (see Zohar 1:84b–85a); (4) Israel’s being nourished by the power of *Siṭra Aḥra* in place of the power of holiness (see Zohar 1:95b; 2:152b).
49. On the analogy between the pair of opposites, male–female and right–left, see, e.g., Zohar 1:30a, 70a. See note 81.
50. Zohar 1:211b. Cf. *ibid.*, 201a; 2:29a, 36a. See also Menaḥem Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1961), 41c–d (ad Exod. 12:22). On the theme of the *Shekhinah* employing the forces of *Siṭra Aḥra* in order to punish the wicked, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 376–377.
51. Zohar 2:36b.
52. Zohar 1:261a; 2:187a.
53. Zohar 2:231b. See *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 80–83; Isaiah Tishby, *Perush Aggadot le-R. Azri’el* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1945), p. 56.
54. Zohar 2:37b (based on rabbinic interpretation of *wa-yhw̄h* as “the Lord and His Court;” see *Genesis Rabbah* 51:2, p. 533, *Exodus Rabbah* 12:4). See also *ibid.*, 37a; 3:176a. See Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, ed. Gershon Scholem, “Two Treatises of R. Moses de León,” *Qovets al Yad*, n.s. 8, 1975, p. 344 (Hebrew). It should be noted that, with respect to this very issue, Naḥmanides was very careful to emphasize that the plagues in general, and particularly the plague of the killing of the firstborn, were carried out by the *Shekhinah* in conjunction with the Holy One, that is, the attribute of judgment together with that of mercy. The motivation here was clearly to avoid the separation of the *Shekhinah* from the rest of the divine attributes, a sin the kabbalists referred to as *qītstsuts bi-neṭi’ot*, that is, “cutting the shoots,” an expression used in the classical Aggadah to refer to Adam (see *Genesis Rabbah* 19:3, p. 172) or to Elisha ben Abuya (Babylonian Talmud, *Ḥagigah* 14b). (On the kabbalistic meaning of “cutting the shoots,” see Gershon Scholem, “A New Document Regarding the History of the Beginning of Kabbalah,” in *Sefer Bialik* [Tel Aviv: Emunot, 1934], p. 153 [Hebrew], and Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 373–374.) See Moses Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Mosheh ben Naḥman*, ed. Ḥayyim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad

- ha-Rav Kook, 1959–60), vol. 1, p. 329 (ad Exod. 12:12). Cf. also the following supercommentaries on Naḥmanides: Shem Ṭov ibn Gaon, *Keter Shem Ṭov*, in *Ma'or wa-Shemesh* (Livorno, 1839), 34a; Joshua ibn Shuaib, *Be'ur Sodot ha-Ramban*, attributed to Meir ibn Sahula (Warsaw, 1875), 12b; Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim: A Critical Edition*, ed. Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Akadamon, 1981), p. 79.
55. On “night” as a name for *Shekhinah*, see, e.g., Zohar 1:16b, 92b; 2:239b, and elsewhere. See Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, p. 341.
 56. Zohar 2:38a. See Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah* 41a (ad Exod. 11:4).
 57. Zohar 2:38a. Cf. Moses de Leon, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, MS Oxford 1607, fol. 54b (a critical edition of the aforementioned work appears in Elliot R. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de León's Sefer ha-Rimmon* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988]).
 58. On the dual character of the *Shekhinah*, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 376–379. Cf. also Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol. 1, p. 273 (ad Genesis 49:24), and Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 83. It should be noted that, according to the Zohar, not only *Shekhinah* but each of the *sefirot* has the capacity to act with mercy and judgment; see Zohar 2:36a; 3:15a, 36b, 146a, 262b. This latter idea can be traced back to the circle of kabbalists in Gerona; see, e.g., Jacob ben Sheshet, *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Hayyim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1964), 2:359. Cf. *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, fol. 71a [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 145–146]; Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:235.
 59. See Zohar 2:36a, 37a. This is the esoteric meaning of the killing of the firstborn at midnight, that is, at a time when the *Shekhinah* performs two functions reflecting her dual nature: mercy toward Israel and judgment toward Egypt. See Zohar 2:37b, 80b.
 60. See Zohar 1:226b; 2:40a, 182a; 3:95b. Cf. *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, MS Oxford 1607, fol. 54a–b [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 132–133]. It should be noted that leaven was already used allegorically as a symbol for that which is evil or impure in Greco-Jewish, New Testament, and talmudic sources. See Philo, *Questions on Exodus*, I:15, II:14 (but see *The Special Laws*, II:184); 1 Cor. 5:6–8; Matt. 16:11–12; Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 17a; *Genesis Rabbah* 34:10, p. 320; *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. Solomon Buber (New York: Sefer, 1946), *Noah* 4, 15b. And see Baruch Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 120 n. 13.
 61. Zohar 2:38b.
 62. See note 49.
 63. Zohar 2:38. Cf. 1:260a; 2:131a; 3:22a.
 64. For references, see note 54.
 65. Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol. 1, p. 348 (ad Exod. 13:21).
 66. See Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 81; Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah* 43a (ad Exod. 13:21).
 67. Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol. 1, p. 348 (ad Exod. 13:21).
 68. The notion of the fourfold unity between the *Shekhinah* and the Patriarchs (i.e. the *sefirot* *Hesed*, *Gevurah*, and *Raḥamim*) is repeated often in the Zohar. It is related, alternatively, to the four components of the chariot or to the four legs of the throne. See Zohar 1:60b, 99a, 120b, 150a, 237a, 248b; 3:174a, 182a, 262b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 588–589.
 69. Zohar 2:46a–b. Cf. also 3:191b.
 70. Zohar 1:46a. Cf. also *ibid.*, 5b, 32a; 3:93b, 134b.
 71. See Zohar 1:17a, 253a.

72. Zohar 2:52b.
73. See Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol. 1, p. 353 (ad Exod. 14:31); Ibn Shuaib, *Be'ur Sodot ha-Ramban*, p. 13a; Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 82; Baḥya ben Asher, *Perush al ha-Torah*, ed. Ḥayyim D. Chavel, 5th edn. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1981), 2:121. See also Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah* 43b.
74. Zohar 2:53b. Cf. the commentaries of R. Moses Cordovero and R. Abraham Galante to the Zohar, ad loc., cited by Abraham Azulai, *Or ha-Ḥammah* (Benei-Berak, Israel, 1973), 2: 43b–44a.
75. The word *gedolah* is a common name for the attribute of *hesed* or the right hand; see, e.g., Zohar 2:59b, 286b; 3:277a, 302a.
76. The word *yad* by itself refers to the left hand; see Zohar 3:142b. See also *Sefer ha-Bahir*, ed. Reuven Margalioṭ (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978), 163 (Gershon Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir* [Leipzig: W. Drugulin, 1923], 109, p. 116), where the principle of evil is said to have the “form of a hand.”
77. On the correspondence of the ten fingers to the ten *sefirot*, see *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:3; *Sefer ha-Bahir* 124 (Scholem, 87, p. 94); 132 (Scholem, 94, p. 101). See Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol. 1, p. 372 (ad Exod. 17:12); Zohar 2:75b.
78. Zohar 2:56b.
79. Cf. Zohar 1:19b, 86a, 236b, 241a, 267b; 2:19b, 226a; 3:58a, 150b.
80. This description of the *Shekhinah* is to be found already in the *Bahir* and in other early kabbalistic sources. See Scholem, *Pirquei Yesod*, p. 276. Cf. also Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 371. A related idea, also found in the earlier sources, is that the whole sefirotic order is reflected in each of the *sefirot*. See Tishby, *Perush ha-Aggadot*, p. 15 n. 2.
81. This clearly reflects the aggadic myth that Adam was created as androgynous and was then separated into man and woman. For references, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 5, pp. 88–89 n. 42. Cf. Zohar 1:35a, 37b, 165a; 2:55a, 231a–b; 3:10b, 19a, 44b; Zohar *Ḥadash*, 55c–d, 66c. According to the Zohar, not only Adam but the soul of each person was originally made androgynous, and only upon descent to the world is divided into male and female; at the time of marriage the original unity is restored (see Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 63a). See Zohar 1:85a, 91b, 108a; 2:246a; 3:43a–b, 283b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1355–1356. The one who remains single is called by the Zohar, *pelag gufa*, that is, “half-a-body.” See Zohar 3:7b, 57b, 296a, (*Idra Zuṭa*); Liebes, “Sections,” pp. 277–278; Matt, *Zohar*, p. 217. The kabbalists applied the aggadic myth to the divine: as the complete human personality is to be found only in the unification of male and female, so too the divine being is only complete when male (*Tif'eret*) and female (*Malkhut*) are united. See Tishby, *Perush ha-Aggadot*, p. 86; idem, *Wisdom*, vol. 1, pp. 278, 288. Cf. also Liebes, *Sections*, p. 33 n. 26, and idem, “Messiah,” p. 202.
82. Zohar 2:57b. See also 3:37a.
83. Zohar 2:57a. Cf. *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 39; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1052. Cf. Zohar 1:230b; 2:162b, 223a, 263a; 3:17b, 80b, 118b, 176b. Cf. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 2:41.
84. Zohar 2:57a. The notion of the left hand over the right signifying misfortune is reflected in *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 2:41: “When the Israelites do the will of God, they make His left hand to be like the right, as it is said, ‘Thy right hand, O Lord ... Thy right hand, O Lord’ – two times. And when the Israelites fail to do the will of God, they make His right hand to be like the left, as it is said, ‘He hath drawn back His right hand’ [Lam. 2:3].” See Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 149.

85. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 2:139; Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 5b; *Midrash Tanhuma*, Beshallah 25, pp. 304–305; *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana*, ed. Bernard Mandelbaum (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), 3, pp. 35–53.
86. Zohar 2:65b. Such an interpretation is, of course, suggested by the juxtaposition of verse 7, “And he called the name of the place Massah and Meribah, because of the faultfinding of the children of Israel, saying, Is the Lord among us or not?” with verse 8, “Then came Amaleq and fought with Israel in Rephidim.” See Rashi’s commentary on Exod. 17:8.
87. Zohar 2:65b. See Zohar 1:29a; 2:65a, 194b–195a; 3:175a, 281b.
88. Zohar 2:66a. The lifting of Moses’ hands, that is, the raising up of the right hand over the left, is here interpreted as an act of prayer. See *Sefer ha-Bahir*, p. 138; Zohar 2:57a. Cf. Ṭodros Abulafia, *Otsar ha-Kavod*, p. 29b. Abulafia, like the author of the Zohar, interprets this passage as the joining together of the left hand with the right. This, notes Abulafia, is the supreme act of faith. See note 111. It is the ultimate task of *homo religiosus* to contain the left within the right. See Zohar 2:26b, 32a; 3:39b, 178a. See Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shelema* (New York: American Biblical Encyclopedia Society, 1951), vol. 14, p. 121 n. 106. The joining together of left and right especially characterizes the mystical import of prayer; see Zohar 2:57a. Cf. Moses de León’s “Untitled Commentary on the *Sefirot*,” MS Munich 47, fols. 340a–b. Concerning this work, see Scholem, “Eine unbekannte mystische Schrift des Mose de Leon,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 71, 1927, pp. 109–123. In terms of prayer, this is alternatively expressed (based on Ps. 100:2) as the placing of *Shekhinah* between the right and left as a preparation for the ultimate unification between her and the Holy One; see Zohar 1:229b, 3:8a–b, and cf. Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, MS Oxford 1607, fols. 14b, 24b [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 37–38, 63]. See also the interpretation of Song of Songs 2:6 in Zohar 1:163b; 2:138b, 238b; 3:118b, 119b (cf. Menahem Recanaṭi, *Ta’amei ha-Mitsvot* [Basel, 1581], 8a), 148b.
89. Zohar 2:66a. On the mystical significance of the war with Amaleq as the wiping out of the left by the right, see Zohar 2:65b, 194b; 3:281b.
90. *Ibid.*, 67a. See *Sefer ha-Bahir* 124; 2:57a, 225a; 3:92b. Cf. MS Munich 47, fol. 340b; *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, fol. 111b [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 254–255].
91. *Ibid.*, p. 67b. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 450–451.
92. Cf. Zohar 2:184a (cited in note 35).
93. Zohar 2:81a. So, too, according to the Zohar, the third day of creation stands for mercy (*raḥamim*), which is the balance between *hesed* (the right) and *gevurah* (the left). See 1:17a. See also Zohar 1:120a, with reference to the “third day” in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac; see note 111. The third day was the appropriate one for the event of giving the Torah, for the latter symbolically represents *Tiferet*, which is the balance between right and left. See note 101.
94. *Ibid.*
95. See Palestinian Talmud, Sheqalim 6:1, Soṭah 8:3; *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, ed. Shimshon Dunaski (Jerusalem: Dvir, 1980), 5:9, pp. 133–134. Cf. *Midrash Tanhuma*, Bere’shit 1, p. 1, where the reading is slightly different. See also *Midrash Konen*, in Adolph Jellinek, *Beit ha-Midrash*, 4th edn. (Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1982), 2:23, and *Midrash Eser ha-Dibberot*, in *ibid.*, 1:62, where the anthropomorphic element (i.e. the arm of God) is added. Cf. Scholem, *Pirqei Yesod*, p. 164 n. 18. According to Scholem, one must view these midrashic statements in the context of the anthropo-

- morphism of the *Shi'ur Qomah* tradition. See also Moshe Idel, "The Concept of Torah in Heikhalot Literature and Its Transformation in Kabbalah," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 1, 1981, pp. 43–45 (Hebrew).
96. Zohar 2:84a. This midrashic theme was interpreted in various ways by kabbalists of the thirteenth century. In one passage, attributed by Scholem to R. Isaac the Blind, a Provençal kabbalist, the white fire refers symbolically to *Tif'eret*, the Written Torah, and the black fire to *Malkhut*, the Oral Torah. See Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Schocken, 1978), pp. 48–49. For other references, see Tishby, *Perush ha-Aggadot*, p. 77 n. 7. The midrash was used in an altogether different manner by Nahmanides in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah; see p. 2 of the Chavel edition. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 38, and Idel, "Concept," p. 45.
 97. Zohar 2:84a. See 1:48b.
 98. Zohar 2:82a (based on Deut. 29:9–10). Cf. MS Munich 47, fol. 341a, where de León refers to this passage as "our rabbis, may their memory be blessed, alluded to, etc." The exact date of this work is still unclear, but from this passage it would appear to have been composed after the author had worked on the Zohar. See, however, Asi Farber, "On the Sources of Rabbi Moses de Leon's Early Kabbalistic System," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 3, 1984, pp. 87–88 (Hebrew).
 99. Zohar 2:84b, 98. See Zohar 2:90a. Cf. Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, MS British Museum 759, fol. 41a (Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 357–358).
 100. See Zohar 1:64a; 2:60a. Cf. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 49.
 101. See Zohar 3:153a, 257a.
 102. See Zohar 2:161b; 3:264a. Cf. Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1079.
 103. See Zohar 1:8a.
 104. See Zohar 2:70b, 91a, 162a–b, 165b, 275a; 3:92b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*), 264a; *Zohar Hadash*, 54b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1157–1158.
 105. The Zohar here reflects a statement made by the rabbis to the effect that the pollution (*zohama*) by means of which the serpent inseminated Eve ceased when Israel stood at Mount Sinai; see Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 146a, Yevamot 103b, Avodah Zarah 22b. The Zohar connects this idea with another rabbinic notion, viz., the cessation of the evil inclination at the moment of revelation. Specifically, according to one tannaitic source (R. Neḥemiah), there was a temporary uprooting of the evil inclination from the hearts of the Israelites when they heard the commandment "Thou shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:3) at the event of revelation; see *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:15, p. 15. According to the zoharic sources, the evil inclination returned on account of the sin of the golden calf. See Zohar 1:36b, 52b, 63b, 70b, 126b, 228a; 2:94a, 168a, 193b, 236b, 242b; 3:97b. The final and ultimate destruction of the evil inclination is to occur at the advent of the Messiah; see Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 52a. For other references, see Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 290 n. 3; Ephraim Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), pp. 416–417 n. 2 (Hebrew).
 106. Zohar 2:183a–b. See also 3:97a.
 107. See Zohar 2:40a, 61b (see Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 113–116, 245–247), 183a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1105. On the unleavened bread as a symbol for the *Shekhinah*, the beginning of faith, see note 60.
 108. This too is based on a midrashic motif. For references, see Schechter, *Aspects*, pp. 273–275.

109. See Zohar 3:63a (*Piqqudin*), where it is stressed that evil should not be completely eliminated, for it is as necessary in the world as is the good. The ideal of spiritual perfection in the Zohar is one in which the person achieves holiness through contact with the unholy, and by means of such contact the unholy itself is transformed or contained within the holy. See notes 35, 45, and 111. The notion that the evil inclination (i.e. the sexual desire) should not be eradicated, on account of its necessity for the begetting of life in the world, can be found in several rabbinic sources. See, e.g., Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 69b; *Genesis Rabbah* 9:7, pp. 71–72. See also *Leviticus Rabbah*, ed. Mordecai Margulies (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993), 14:5, p. 308.
110. See Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 54b. Cf. Zohar 1:155b, 178b; 3:80b, 267a; and *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, fol. 39b [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 100–101].
111. See Zohar 2:26b (with reference to Deut. 4:39), and *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, fol. 39b [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 101]. Cf. Zohar 2:161b and 3:264a. The wicked, according to the Zohar, cause a blemish (*pegam*) above by causing a separation of right and left, that is, by not containing the left (evil inclination) in the right (good inclination). See Zohar 2:26b. This too was the sin of Job: by not giving the realm of the Other Side its proper due, he did not contain the left within the right; see note 45. On the nature of *pegam* in the Zohar as the separation of male and female, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1355; Liebes, “Messiah,” p. 198. The notion of the containment of the left in the right is a pivotal idea upon which much of the theosophical hermeneutics in the Zohar turns. It would be impossible to give all the contexts in which such an idea occurs. Worthy of mention, however, are (1) the zoharic interpretation of the act of creation; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 271, 371–372, 426–429, 549–550; (2) the building of the Tabernacle; see *ibid.*, pp. 188–189; (3) the Aqedah; see Zohar 1:119b, 133b, 230b, 2:257a, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, fol. 78b [Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 161], and Gikatilla, *Sha’arei Orah*, 1:224–5; (4) the love of God, *ahavah rabbah*, which contains both sides, *hesed* and *din*; see Zohar 1:11b–12a; (5) faith itself, insofar as it is the union of male and female; see Zohar 1:49b, 55b, 160a, 172b; 2:89a, 92a, 161a.

2 Light through Darkness: The Ideal of Human Perfection in the Zohar

Introduction

One of the perennial, and more vexing, problems in religious thought and philosophy has been the question *unde malum*. In ancient, medieval, and modern thought, the issue has been viewed mostly in its theological context. From the perspective of traditional monotheistic theology, the problem thus presents itself: If God is truly all good and all powerful, then why would God cause or even allow evil, whether natural (e.g. earthquakes, floods, human disease) or moral (murder, rape, and the like), to exist? Inasmuch as the existence of evil, at least from the phenomenological point of view, is an indisputable fact, it would seem that either divine omnipotence or benevolence must be limited.¹

This question, when examined from the divine axis, has prompted various responses in the religious consciousness of the West, ranging from the neo-Platonic denial of the reality of evil,² on the one hand, to the dualist affirmation of opposing forces eternally struggling in a cosmic process,³ on the other. In the former case, the whole problem of evil is rendered logically fallacious insofar as evil is not a real entity but merely the absence of good, just as darkness is not considered a positive state but merely the absence of light. Technically speaking, one does not cause darkness, for darkness comes about simply when light is removed. Similarly, one cannot legitimately ask, "Does God create evil?" for evil as such is a privation and consequently has no direct cause. While the metaphysician, with cunning ratiocination, may be satisfied with this approach, the psychological dimension of evil as an immediate and direct experience for the individual is hardly addressed by such philosophic gymnastics.⁴ In

the case of the dualist position, on the contrary, the real-life struggle with evil as a positive and immediate force is not only not undermined, but maintained on a cosmic level. The consequence of this posture, however, is that God can be said to have control over only part of existence,⁵ even if in a modified dualist position, such as that of the Qumran community in the Dead Sea,⁶ the one God is the ultimate cause of both good and evil, light and darkness. Hence, in the dualistic model, unlike the neo-Platonic, the soul's existential grappling with evil is affirmed, but at the expense of severely limiting divine omnipotence and restricting God's control over history.

Alternatively, the problem of evil can be viewed from the vantage point of religious anthropology. That is, in what sense and to what degree does the person of faith appropriate the evil dimension of experience – whether it be understood as an internalized principle of will or as an objective cosmic force – in his or her spiritual quest? The latter is the focus of this chapter. I will analyze this problem specifically in terms of the theosophic symbolism of the crowning work of medieval Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar*, pseudepigraphically attributed to the second-century Palestinian rabbi, Simeon ben Yoḥai, though actually written in the last decades of the thirteenth century in northern Spain.⁷

This chapter will examine an ideal of human perfection that is found in the *Zohar*,⁸ according to which one must incorporate evil, even the demonic side, into one's spiritual path. I will suggest that there are two distinct typologies in the *Zohar*, one positive and the other negative, and that both assume this to be the case. In the one instance, appropriation of the demonic is viewed only as a means for purgation and refinement, whereas in the other it is a means for containment and unification. Common to both is the assumption that one can achieve holiness only through the unholy, that one can see the light only through darkness. The role of the former in the context of the *Zohar*'s struggle with dualism has already been discussed by Isaiah Tishby.⁹ As Tishby concludes after surveying the relevant sources, this notion of incorporating the demonic into the religious life is a tacit affirmation of the gnostic position by the author of the *Zohar*, for, in the final analysis, spiritual perfection is achieved only after one wins the battle against the forces of evil and darkness. While this may be the case, Tishby does not take into account the second typology that I will discuss. Regarding this latter notion, however,

the Zohar makes its most innovative contribution and, in my opinion, provides us with an *Aufheben* of the gnostic position. At the outset I should like to note that these are not the only ideals that one can discover in the Zohar. At times, the Zohar stresses that one should avoid all contact with evil,¹⁰ while at other times, the author envisions a messianic future in which the demonic shell, to use a zoharic metaphor that became central in later Jewish mysticism,¹¹ will be broken.¹² Notwithstanding this qualification, the theme that I have selected warrants special treatment, for it is, in my view, the ethical doctrine most consistent with the mythological and theosophical assumptions of the Zohar.

The “Gnostic” Influence

Among the most important sources that informed the theosophic outlook of the author of the Zohar are kabbalistic texts derived from what Scholem has called the “gnostic” school that emerged in the second half of the thirteenth century in Castile.¹³ The essential doctrine of this school, which distinguished it from earlier kabbalistic currents such as the Gerona school,¹⁴ was the affirmation of a demonic force that structurally parallels the divine: as the one is constituted by ten “holy” emanations (*sefirot*) on the right, so the other is constituted by ten “unholy” emanations on the left. Already in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, the first literary source based on a theosophic doctrine of emanations to emerge in medieval Europe,¹⁵ Satan is identified as one of the divine “attributes,” the “left hand” “whose name is evil” and “who is set on the north side of God.”¹⁶ In the kabbalistic circles of Castile, however, the demonic is presented not simply as one of the powers of God, but rather as a realm fully complementing that of the divine. In the words of Moses of Burgos, a member of the circle, “There is a left [side] corresponding to the right, intended to perfect the right side, to punish and chastise with ‘chastisements of love’ those who walk in a bad way in order to purify them.”¹⁷ Or, as expressed by another member of the circle, Ṭodros Abulafia: “Where dogs bark there the Angel of Death is to be seen, for [he] is emanated from the left side, which is an emanation in itself.”¹⁸ It must be emphasized, however, that the dualistic posture in this circle is not of an ontological or metaphysical sort. That is, the kabbalistic conception

as it developed in Castile did not posit two absolute cosmic powers. R. Moses and R. Ṭodros explicitly state that the one God makes both good and evil, light and dark, the good and evil impulses of the human individual.¹⁹ Against this conceptual background we must understand these kabbalists' concern with the question of the genesis of the demonic left side. The underlying assumption here is that even the demonic derives from a stage in the emanative process. The demonic is thus depicted as an extension of a divine attribute, usually identified as judgment,²⁰ rather than as an autonomous power.²¹

Yet, these very same kabbalists insisted on an ongoing cosmic struggle between the domains of light and darkness, sometimes pictured as a mythical war between the seven forces on the right and seven demonic archons on the left. For R. Moses, it would appear that this struggle is a fundamental, enduring ontological principle: "All reality," he wrote, "is dependent on peace and war, which are opposites."²² "And this is an established tradition handed over to all masters of the hidden wisdom ... that reality in general could not exist except through the existents that do good and [those] that do evil, [those] that establish and sustain, [and those] that exterminate and destroy, [those that] give reward and [those] that punish."²³ In contrast, R. Moses' teacher, R. Isaac ha-Kohen, imagines a time when the demonic will be uprooted. Thus, he ends his "Treatise on the Left Emanations" with an apocalyptic description of the time-to-come (based on legends recorded in Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 74b) when Gabriel, the angel of judgment, together with Michael, the angel of love, will descend to destroy the powers of Samael and Lilith: "And when it is willed the emanation that comes from the side of Samael and Lilith through the blind angel will be diminished and weakened in utter destruction by means of Gabriel, the angel of strength, who stirs up a war with them with the help of the angel of love."²⁴ When the emanations of the left are destroyed, then once again "the bride [i.e. *Shekhinah*] will rejoice with her groom [*Tif'eret*] and the righteous will take pleasure" in the salty flesh of the slain Leviathan.²⁵

The gnostic theme of competing cosmic forces is likewise one of the essential doctrines of the Zohar. Like his Castilian predecessors, the author of the Zohar posits a demonic realm, *Siṭra Aḥra*, the "Other Side," which parallels the divine.²⁶ Moreover, the author of the Zohar similarly was concerned with the problem of the origin of evil. Elsewhere I have discussed the two basic approaches to this

problem in the Zohar, which I have termed, respectively the “cathartic” and the “emanative” views.²⁷ According to the former, evil is the waste eliminated from divine thought, a process that occurs during the first stages of activity before the emanative process.²⁸ The primary act is conceived of as an excretion of the unbalanced forces of judgment, referred to as the “glowing sparks in divine thought”²⁹ or mythically as the “primordial kings of Edom who died” (based on Gen. 36:31)³⁰ or the “worlds created and destroyed.”³¹ As a result of the divine catharsis, two sides emerged: the side of happiness (the holy realm) and the side of sadness (the demonic).³² The source of evil, then, is in the dross contained in divine thought.³³ For the purposes of this analysis, it is important to bear in mind that the sphere of untempered judgment precedes that of the balanced and harmonious cosmos, the “Edomite” kings before the “Israelite” kings,³⁴ the destroyed worlds before the worlds that are sustained.

According to the second category, the demonic realm is viewed as a link in the continuous chain of being. There are no absolute gaps in nature and hence no complete break between the divine and the demonic. Indeed, in one place³⁵ the Zohar describes all of reality in terms of the image of a nut that is composed of the shell and the kernel: one grade is a shell to the grade above, which, in relation to the grade below, is the kernel but in relation to the grade above a shell, and so on. This conception is clearly philosophic in nature, reflecting particularly, as Alexander Altmann has shown,³⁶ the neo-Platonic idea of the continuity of being that was well known to the kabbalists from various sources. Insofar as all of reality is one, the demonic cannot be viewed as being in absolute opposition to the divine. On the contrary, the former must derive from the latter. It is thus that the author of the Zohar, following the precedent set by other kabbalists, locates the source for evil in the left side of the divine.³⁷ Furthermore, an imbalance in the sefirotic world, a breaking of the harmony between right and left, ultimately eventuates in the coming-to-be of an “autonomous” left realm. With respect to the question of what creates this imbalance, again two lines can be drawn: the imbalance results from an internal process but can be reinforced as a result of human sin.³⁸ Hence, while the demonic structurally parallels the divine, the former is ontologically posterior to the latter.

Thus far there is a clear line of development from the earlier sources to the Zohar. In one pivotal notion, however, the Zohar went

beyond these sources. As mentioned above, although the Castilian mystics affirmed that God created both the right and left, they posited no mediating principle by which the dark force could be incorporated into the path of light. In the case of R. Isaac, it seems clear that the emanations of the left are accorded no place in the religious life. The demonic, though originating in the divine, remains outside it until such time that the emanation of the left will be altogether annihilated. For R. Moses, while it is true that the forces of evil and darkness are accorded a place in the divine scheme as instruments through which the wicked are punished, he still does not assign to these forces any role whatsoever in the devotional life of the saintly or pious. The author of the Zohar, in contrast, does assign such a role to the underworld of darkness. Moreover, he provides us with a mediating principle, the containment of the left in the right, in virtue of which the demonic is restored to the right. This notion is an exegetical axis upon which much of zoharic hermeneutics turns.³⁹ In many cases the reference is to an inter-divine process – the containment of the divine attribute of judgment in the attribute of love, the left hand within the right. However, it can also refer to the containment of the demonic left within the divine right. As we shall see, these two uses are dialectically interrelated in the Zohar.

Descent As Spiritual Perfection

The incorporation of the Other Side in the religious life is unequivocally affirmed by the Zohar in several contexts. There is, first of all, the zoharic claim that the path of the spiritual adept is one of descent followed by ascent, that is, before one achieves the status of holiness one must descend into the realm of evil.⁴⁰ There is a clear connection, as Tishby has noted,⁴¹ between this theme and the idea later developed by Sabbatian theology on the basis of Isaac Luria's teaching about the necessary descent into the demonic shells or, as formulated subsequently by the Hasidim, "descent for the sake of ascent."⁴² In the Zohar, the purpose of the descent, however, is not to raise the fallen sparks, to use the standard Lurianic term, but rather to purge the soul of all its impurities. It seems to me that the analogue for this notion of purgation in the Zohar is the cathartic view of the divine mentioned above: just as God had to discharge the impure forces in

divine thought before God could emanate the holy forces, so too the human soul must refine itself and remove all dross before it can attain the level of holiness. This image of spiritual transformation drawn from alchemy is related by the Zohar to the verse “And Abram went down to Egypt” (Gen. 12:10):

R. Simeon said, Come and see: Everything has secret wisdom. This verse hints at wisdom and the levels down below, to the depths of which Abraham descended. He knew them but did not become attached ... Come and see the secret of the word: If Abram had not gone into Egypt and been refined there first, he could not have partaken of the Blessed Holy One. Similarly with his children, when the Blessed Holy One wanted to make them unique, a perfect people, and to draw them near to Him: If they had not gone down to Egypt and been refined there first, they would not have become His special ones. So too the Holy Land: If she had not been given first to Canaan to control, she would not have become the portion, the share of the Blessed Holy One.⁴³

The esoteric meaning of Abram’s descent into Egypt, like that of the children of Israel in the time of Moses, is spiritual purification by means of contact with the demonic (symbolized by Egypt). Moses Cordovero (1522–70) in his commentary on this section in the Zohar says, “As silver is refined in lead, so holiness is refined through the power of the demonic.”⁴⁴ Before partaking of holiness, of entering the sefirotic realm, it is necessary to go down to the depths of the unholy. Indeed, the land itself, according to the Zohar, could not become holy unless it were first inhabited by Canaan, the force of the unholy. This last sentence is all the more daring inasmuch as the “Land of Israel” is a mystical symbol for the *Shekhinah*. The Zohar’s point, then, is that even the *Shekhinah* must be purified through contact with the demonic.

In the passage above, the role accorded to the demonic in the religious life is negative – one enters the world of darkness merely to purge one’s own impurities, to remove the dross from the silver. The dialectic of the spiritual path, however, is established by the Zohar in various other ways. In one place it is related to the close proximity that the *Shekhinah*, the last of the holy emanations, has to the

demonic world. Much of the struggle between the demonic and divine is played out with respect to the *Shekhinah*, for she is the divine power that borders on the demonic, indeed, is a bridge between light and darkness.⁴⁵ She is thus described in the very first lines of the Zohar as a rose surrounded by thorns. This point is made clearly in the Zohar's commentary on Exodus 3:2, "And the angel of the Lord [*Shekhinah*] appeared to him [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of a thorn-bush": "The thorn-bush [i.e. the demonic potency] was surely within that holiness [i.e. *Shekhinah*] and cleaving to it, for everything cleaves together, the pure and the impure; there is no purity except from within impurity. This is the mystery, 'Who can bring a pure thing from what is impure' (Job 14:4). The shell and the kernel are together."⁴⁶ Just as in the realm above shell and kernel, evil and good, are bound together, so too below in the human domain: the sacred emerges out of the profane.

Another hermeneutical context in which this dialectic is established is the Zohar's comment in response to the question of why the Torah was given in the desert, the place where the force of the demonic dominates:

The words of Torah reside only there, for there is no light except that which emerges out of darkness. When that [Other] Side is subdued the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends and is glorified. And there is no divine worship except amidst darkness, and no good except within evil. When a person enters an evil way and forsakes it, then the Holy One, blessed be He, ascends in His glory. Thus the perfection of all is good and evil together, and afterwards to ascend to the good ... This is complete worship.⁴⁷

The most perfect divine worship is only that which emerges out of darkness, for only when one returns to the good from evil is the Other Side "subdued" and the Holy One "glorified." Tishby sees in this passage a tacit affirmation of the Zohar's dualistic stance, for the ultimate worship entails the victory of the human over the demonic.⁴⁸ It seems to me, however, that the notion of subduing the Other Side entails not the eradication but rather the reintegration of demonic energy to its divine source. I shall return to this point later.

Containment of the Demonic in the Divine

The inclusion of the demonic in the spiritual path is also affirmed in connection with Job, whose fatal flaw, according to the Zohar, was that he separated good and evil instead of containing them together. Here the Zohar uses slightly different terminology that, as we shall see, holds the key to understanding the Zohar's unique principle of mediation or synthesis:

Job never gave any portion to [the Other Side], as it is written "he offered up burnt offerings according to the number of them all" (Job 1:5). The burnt offering rises upward. He did not give any portion to the Other Side for had he given him a portion he could not have overcome him afterwards ... Come and see: Just as he separated and did not contain the good and evil [together], so in the exact manner he was judged: [God] gave him good and then evil and then returned him to the good. Thus it is fitting for a person to know good and to know evil, and then return to the good. That is the secret of faith.⁴⁹

In the Zohar, the *mitswot* have one of two purposes: either to strengthen and sustain the realm of holiness by maintaining the flow of divine light from the uppermost grades to the lowest, or to neutralize the forces of evil so they do not interfere with the unity of the holy realm.⁵⁰ Sacrifices in particular, according to the Zohar, are an instance where we quite literally "give the devil his due." That is, a portion of every sacrifice is set aside for *Siṭra Aḥra*, the one exception being the *olah*, the burnt offering, which according to Scripture is burnt entirely for God. Job, however, offered up only burnt offerings, thus depriving the demonic of its proper share.

The sin of Job is referred to as "not including evil and good together," for had he offered a sacrifice with an allotted portion to the demonic he would have comprised the two together in one act. Job is, accordingly, described in Scripture as being "removed from evil" (Job 1:8), that is, he had no portion in the Other Side.⁵¹ Paradoxically, by not participating in evil, Job was overcome by evil; by separating evil from good, Job strengthened the former. From the case of Job we can learn, therefore, the "secret of faith": "one should know good and evil" and only then "return to the good." This parallels the description

of the “perfection of all” examined above: “good and evil together, and afterwards to ascend to the good.” But here, in contrast to the other passages we have cited, the Zohar speaks about containment.

The ideal state is one in which evil and good are contained together as one, and not one in which evil and good are separated. Had Job contained good and evil together – in one sacrifice – then evil as an autonomous force would have been subdued, or, in the language of the Zohar, Satan would have been removed from the sanctuary (*Shekhinah*) and the side of holiness would have ascended upwards. The removal of Satan from the sanctuary cannot come about, however, by means of the total divorce of the demonic from the holy, for such a divorce is precisely what Job sought to accomplish. Satan is removed from the holy only when the demonic and holy are combined together by means of the proper human intention. The one who separates good and evil sustains the “quasi” independence of the demonic realm, whereas the one who contains the two together restores the demonic to its divine root. An act of separation or division merely increases evil, which by definition is separation and division.

It is interesting to note that this exegetical comment on Job occurs as part of the Zohar section on Exodus 10:1, “And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Go in to Pharaoh.’” According to the Zohar, the esoteric meaning of this verse is that God implored Moses to plumb the inner depths of the divine secrets concerning the demonic, symbolized by the kingdom of Egypt and especially its chief power, Pharaoh. Moses, unlike Job, did not flee from evil; rather he was commanded specifically to acquire knowledge of it. Such knowledge was considered by the Castilian kabbalists and by the author of the Zohar to be the most esoteric of all kabbalistic wisdom.⁵² It seems to me that, in the case of the Zohar, the claim that this knowledge holds the key to divine secrets can be explained by the fact that only one who knows both the demonic and the divine can understand the underlying unity of the two realms.⁵³ And only one who knows this can unify God, for by uniting the left with the right, one regains an original wholeness or unity of opposites that is present in the Godhead before the process of differentiation unfolds. As it is expressed in one place in the Zohar:

R. Isaac said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world and wanted to reveal the depth out of the hiddenness and

the light from within the darkness, they were contained within one another. Therefore out of darkness emerged the light and out of the hiddenness emerged and was revealed the depth. One emerged from the other ... And all things were contained one with another, the good inclination and the evil inclination, right and left, Israel and the nations, white and black. All things were dependent on one another.⁵⁴

The ethical demand that evil be contained in the good mirrors the ontological principle of *coincidentia oppositorum*. To separate good and evil is ultimately to deny the unity of the divine.

The containment of the evil inclination in the good is developed most fully in the Zohar's interpretation of Deuteronomy 4:39: "And know this day, and consider it in your hearts, that the Lord is God." Here too, as we shall see, this idea has a direct bearing on the notion of *yihud*, unification of the divine:

R. Eliezer began to expound: It is written, "And know this day, and consider it in your hearts, that the Lord is God" (Deut. 4:39). This verse should have been written as follows: "And know this day that the Lord is God, and consider it in your hearts." Moreover, it should have said "consider it in your heart" (*libbekha*). Yet Moses said: If you want to understand this and know that the Lord is God, then consider it in your hearts (*levavekha*) and you will know it. "Your hearts" – the good inclination and the evil inclination,⁵⁵ for one is contained in the other and they are one. Then you will know that the Lord is God for one is contained in the other, and they are one. Thus it is written "consider it in your hearts" in order to know the matter. Moreover, R. Eliezer said: the wicked make a blemish above. What [is] the blemish? For the left is not contained in the right, the evil inclination is not contained in the good inclination on account of the sins of humanity ... And thus it says, "And consider it in your hearts," to contain them as one, the left in the right.⁵⁶

The secret knowledge alluded to in Deuteronomy 4:39 concerns the unification of the two names of God: YHWH and Elohim. In kabbalistic terms, these two names correspond to the two divine attributes *Tif'eret*, the Holy One, the sixth *sefirah*, and *Malkhut*, or

Shekhinah, the tenth *sefirah*. This kabbalistic interpretation is based, in the final analysis, upon the rabbinic explanation of these names: YHWH referring to the divine attribute of *raḥamim*, mercy, and Elohim to the attribute of *din*, rigor or stern judgment.⁵⁷ It is clear that in this passage the two names refer to the male and female potencies within the sefirotic world: the male vis-à-vis the female is merciful (overflowing, gracious), whereas the female vis-à-vis the male is judgmental (limiting, restricting). To know that the attributes of mercy and judgment are contained one within the other, that YHWH is Elohim – that is the esoteric knowledge imparted by this verse.

But how is such knowledge possible? The key to attaining this lies in the “consideration” of one’s hearts, the two inclinations of the human spirit. When one examines the hearts within, one will discover that the two hearts, the good and evil inclinations, are contained one within another. It must be pointed out, however, that the two inclinations in the Zohar do not merely represent psychological principles of will or impulse as they do in the classical rabbinic sources;⁵⁸ they correspond, respectively, to the ontological forces of the divine and the demonic. The good inclination on the right side symbolizes the force of holiness rooted in the sefirotic realm, whereas the evil inclination symbolizes the force of impurity rooted in the demonic realm.⁵⁹ The point of this passage, however, is to establish the principle that the two forces are to be contained one within the other. Indeed, the wicked cause a blemish above, for by doing evil they cling exclusively to the evil inclination and consequently do not contain the left within the right.

The containment of the evil inclination within the good not only reflects the containment of Elohim within YHWH, but serves as a foundation for deriving this higher esoteric knowledge, a knowledge described elsewhere in the Zohar as the “secret of faith.”⁶⁰ The verse thus reads, “And know this day, and consider it in your hearts that the Lord is God,” for in order to know that the Lord is God, that mercy and judgment are one, the person must consider the unity of his hearts, the evil and good inclinations. The containment of the demonic left within the divine right is thus an essential component of *yihud*, the unification of the divine left and right. In mythic terms, it is the feminine aspect of the divine that unites with the masculine. This unity, however, is threatened by the forces of evil,

Siṭra Aḥra, which try to capture the *Shekhinah* and thereby cause a separation between the masculine and feminine. The one who does not unite evil with the good allows the evil to remain autonomous and, consequently, disrupts the unity of male and female within the divine. The ideal for the righteous is therefore to contain the left within the right; the wicked, by contrast, “separate the evil inclination from the good, and cleave to evil.”⁶¹ According to the Zohar, as we have seen, the sin of Job likewise was that he separated good and evil, though not by clinging to evil but rather by fleeing from it. Hence, to exclude evil absolutely is in effect the same as exclusively cleaving to evil: both bring about the separation of forces that should be united.

That the ideal state is one of containment rather than eradication of the demonic is suggested to me by two other passages. The first is the Zohar’s interpretation of Psalm 51:20: “Do good in thy favour to Zion, build the walls of Jerusalem.”⁶² The verse refers to the restoration of Zion and the building of the Temple in the future. The Zohar notes that at first God shall do good to Zion, the inner city, and only afterwards build up the walls of Jerusalem. This is a reversal of the ordinary human process in which the building of the wall (the shell) precedes that of the sanctuary (the kernel) so that the former can protect the latter. Why do we find a reversal here? The Zohar responds, “In the case of the building of the Temple when the evil side will be removed from the world it will not be necessary [for the wall to precede and thereby protect the sanctuary] because the kernel and shell shall belong to Her [the Temple = *Shekhinah*].” Note carefully the exact language of the text: on one hand, we are told that the evil side is removed from the world, *de-siṭra visha yit’avar me-alma*, while on the other hand we are told that the shell and the kernel belong to the Temple, *de-ha moḥa u-qelippah deleih hawei*. When the Temple is not standing and the evil side has dominion in the world, then there is a separation of inner and outer, the kernel and the shell; when, however, the Temple is rebuilt and evil is removed from the world, then inner and outer both belong to the holy. The Zohar does not conclude by saying that there is no longer any shell in the time of the restoration of Zion;⁶³ it says rather that in that time, the shell itself as the kernel will be part of the holy Temple (symbolic of the *Shekhinah*). This is, according to the Zohar, the intent of the biblical expression “the walls of Jerusalem,” that is, “that wall on the outside

that is the shell verily belongs to her,” *ha-hi homah di-levar de-ih*
qelippah deleih hi mammash.

There is finally an extraordinary passage that again affirms the ideal of the reintegration of the demonic in the divine. Leviticus 23:17 says that the people of Israel were ordered to bring as the first-fruits of the Lord on Pentecost two wave loaves baked with leaven. The author of the Zohar wonders: why is the biblical injunction to bring specifically leavened bread on Pentecost, the day that commemorates the Sinaitic revelation, the very ingredient forbidden on Passover, the day that commemorates the exodus from Egypt? To this query the Zohar responds,

Now we must look carefully. On Passover Israel went out from the bread that is called leaven, as it is written, “You shall not see any leaven” (Exod. 13:7) ... What is the reason? On account of the honor of that bread that is called unleavened. Now that Israel merited the highest bread, it was not appropriate for the leaven to be wiped out and not seen at all. And why was this sacrifice from leaven? ... For on that very day [Pentecost] the evil inclination was wiped out because the Torah, which is called freedom, was to be found.⁶⁴

The Zohar goes on to give a parable in order to elucidate the point.⁶⁵ A king had an only son who was sick. When the son desired to eat, it was necessary to give him only the prescribed medicine; after he ate the medicine and became healthy he could eat whatever he desired. “Similarly,” continues the Zohar,

when Israel left Egypt they did not know the essence or secret of Faith. The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Israel shall eat medicine, and until they eat the medicine no other food shall be shown to them. When they ate the unleavened bread, which was medicine in order to enter and to know the secret of Faith, the Holy One, blessed be He, said: From now on leaven shall be shown to them, and they can eat it, for it cannot harm them. And all the more so on the day of Pentecost the supernal bread, which is the complete medicine, is summoned.

In this passage, two statements would appear to contradict one another. On the one hand, the author of the Zohar states that on

Pentecost “it was not appropriate for the leaven [symbolic of the evil inclination⁶⁶] to be wiped out and not seen,” while on the other hand, relying on rabbinic sources,⁶⁷ he states that on that very day “the evil inclination was wiped out.” This apparent tension can be resolved only if we understand the two assertions in terms of the dialectic that we have examined in the course of this chapter. Upon leaving Egypt, where the people of Israel were immersed in the demonic shells,⁶⁸ they had to remove all vestiges of evil and enter the way of holiness. Hence the leaven, symbolic of the Other Side, had to be removed, and unleavened bread, symbolic of the first gradation of faith, the *Shekhinah*, had to be consumed.⁶⁹ After the people received the higher type of bread, the bread of wisdom embodied in the Torah,⁷⁰ symbolic of *Tif’eret*,⁷¹ this was no longer necessary. At the Sinaitic revelation the left side was reappropriated by Israel, for at that time it presented no danger to the people, its efficacy being undermined by the Torah, the “complete medicine.”⁷² By means of the “higher bread” the unholy is restored to its source in the holy and no longer need be destroyed.

Conclusion

From all the texts that we have examined, a clear pattern has emerged. The spiritual path that is most complete is one that incorporates evil as well as good. The conceptual framework for this ideal in the Zohar is the dialectical relation that exists between the demonic and the divine. That is, the former is rooted in and sustained by the latter. We have seen above, however, that there are basically two ways to explain this in the Zohar: the cathartic and the emanative views. In either case, the ethical ideal of inclusion of the left in the spiritual path follows logically. Yet, in one case the ideal is merely negative and in the other positive.

According to the cathartic view, just as in the divine the forces of impurity emerged prior to those of holiness, so too in the life of the human spirit the evil inclination precedes the good. Moreover, just as the initial stage in the divine process is a purging of evil, so too by the human spirit purification of the impure is the preliminary stage in the path. This purification is achieved exclusively by means of contact with the impure. In terms of the Zohar’s own

symbolic language: one must go down to Egypt before one can enter the Holy Land.

According to the emanative view, on the other hand, the demonic force is said to have emanated from one of the grades in the upper realm. To contain evil in the good – that is the true affirmation of divine unity, for in its ontic root the evil is bound to the good.⁷³ It follows, therefore, that even in the darkness there is a spark of light. This notion, which became a central motif in the kabbalah of Isaac Luria and subsequently in the writings of the Hasidim, is not stated explicitly in the Zohar, although it is implicit in various contexts, some of which we have already mentioned. In contrast to later sources, however, the task of *homo religiosus* in the Zohar is not the separation of the holy spark from the demonic shell,⁷⁴ but rather inclusion of the latter in the former. Evil has no absolute existence in itself; it is ontologically posterior to the divine, for the life-force of evil derives from the divine attribute of judgment. The realm of evil is constituted by the unbalanced force of judgment that has, as it were, assumed an unwarranted autonomy. Hence, the religious and moral task of the human being is to restore that energy to its divine source, to balance judgment with mercy, to temper the untempered force of severity with the effluence of love – to contain the left in the right.

The gnostic sources imparted to the kabbalah the idea of two forces, light and dark, right and left, which structurally parallel each other. Both these forces have their origin in the one God. According to these sources, however, there is no principle by which to reintegrate the demonic into the divine. At best, there is an affirmation of the old apocalyptic idea, albeit in new symbolic terms, of the eventual uprooting of evil by the good. Even the characterization of the demonic as God's instrument in punishing and purifying the wicked does not imply a restoration of the evil forces to their source in the divine. The Zohar, in contrast, although accepting the gnostic typology, introduced into the discussion a mediating principle, "the left contained in the right," and by doing so, moved beyond gnostic dualism into theosophical monism. The theosophical doctrine, moreover, is reflected in the moral and religious sphere. That is, the ethical task of the human being is to contain the left in the right and thereby restore the former to its source in the latter. The idea of spiritual perfection as it is developed in certain zoharic texts is one in

which the person achieves holiness through contact with the unholy, and by means of such contact, the unholy is transformed and contained in the holy. The purpose of religious life is not to liberate the spark of light from its demonic shell in order to separate the two realms. On the contrary, the one who separates the two, like Job, creates a blemish above. The goal, however, is to contain the left in the right. To see the light through darkness – that, according to the Zohar, is the ultimate perfection.

Notes

1. The scholarly literature on this issue is vast. As a representative philosophical treatment of the problem, see H. J. McCloskey, “God and Evil,” in *God and Evil*, ed. Nelson Pike (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), pp. 61–84.
2. The classical formulation of evil as the privation of good is to be found in Plotinus, *Enneads* 1:8 (the following citations are taken from the Loeb edition of Plotinus translated by A. H. Armstrong). Cf. *Enneads* 1:8.1: “evil ... appears in the absence of every sort of good;” “the better [i.e. the good] is Form, and the worse [i.e. evil] is nothing but privation of form.” See *Enneads* 1:8.3: “evil cannot be included in what really exists [i.e. Intellect or Soul] or in what is beyond existence [the One], for these are good. So it remains that if evil exists, it must be among non-existent things, as a sort of form of non-existence.” Plotinus further identifies matter as the principle of absolute evil insofar as the quality of formlessness or privation essentially characterizes matter; all bodies, on the other hand, that participate in matter are said to be “secondary” evil. See *Enneads* 1:8.6: “But when something is absolutely deficient – and this is matter – this is essential evil without any share in good.” See, however, *Enneads* 5:8.7: “Then matter too is a sort of ultimate form.” A key Platonic text for the Plotinian conception is *Theaetetus* 176a: “Evils ... can never be done away, for the good must always have its contrary, nor have they any place in the divine world; but they must needs haunt this region of our moral nature ... In the divine there is no shadow of unrighteousness, only the perfection of righteousness.” On the view that only good can be attributed to God, see note 6. The Plotinian position became the most widely accepted view in subsequent Christian writers. See Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John Jones (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 73–88, 148–162 = *Divine Names* 4:18–35; James B. Russell, *Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 109–112, 128–129, 202–203; Régis Jolivet, *Le problème du mal d’après Saint Augustin* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1936), pp. 28–43, 131–162; Jacques Maritain, *Saint Thomas and the Problem of Evil* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1942). For a parallel to this line of reasoning in the medieval Jewish tradition, cf. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Sholom Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 3:10, pp. 438–440.
3. Perhaps the best-known form of this dualism is that of Iranian Zoroastrianism, which sets good and evil at the beginning of world history. Yet, as scholars have argued, even the dualism of Sassanian and Gathic Zoroastrianism

was qualified inasmuch as the “Wise Lord” is both ontologically superior and chronologically prior to the evil spirit. See Shaul Shaked, “Some Notes on Ahreman, the Evil Spirit, and His Creation,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom Scholem*, ed. Ephraim E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 227–234. And see the comprehensive study by Richard C. Zaehner, *Zurvan, A Zoroastrian Dilemma* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955). A species of this type of dualism, in one form or another, characterizes the syncretistic phenomenon of gnosticism that flourished in the first centuries of the Common Era. Various explanations for the origin of gnostic dualism have been given by scholars, most notably Hans Jonas, who distinguished between two kinds of gnostic dualism: (1) the “Iranian,” represented by the Mandaeans and Manichaean writings, which affirmed an eternal opposition between the forces of good and evil; and (2) the “Syro-Egyptian” strand, represented by the Nag Hammadi texts and the systems described by the Church Fathers, in which evil – the material world – derives from a “tragic split” in the Godhead, a fall within the divine realm. Cf. Hans Jonas, *Gnosis und spätantiker Geist* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1939), vol. 1, pp. 256–267, 328–331. For a succinct summary of the different gnostic views, see Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert McL. Wilson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 59–67. See also Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), pp. 17–34, which traces the basis of the “Gnostic mythological consciousness of evil” to a “radical transformation” of the Jewish apocalyptic myth of the Fallen Angels.

4. See the description of evil in James B. Russell, *The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977), pp. 17–35.
5. The view that God is the author only of the good can likewise be traced to Plato; cf. *Republic* 379c: “for the good we must assume no other cause than God, but the cause of evil we must look for in other things and not God.” See also the citation from *Theaetetus* given in note 2. According to Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber* 12:84, the Essenes maintained “the belief that the deity is the cause of all good, but of no evil.” On several occasions Philo himself maintains that God is the cause only of the good, and evil is caused by the powers subordinate to God; see Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), vol. 1, pp. 272–273.
6. Jacob Licht, “An Analysis of the Treatise of the Two Spirits in DSD,” *Scripta Hierosolymitana*, 4, 1958, pp. 88–99; A. R. C. Leaney, *The Rule of Qumran and Its Meaning* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 37–56; Preben Wernberg-Møller, “A Reconsideration of the Two Spirits in the Rule of the Community (IQS III, 13–IV, 26),” *Revue Qumran*, 3, 1961–62, pp. 413–441. See also John G. Gammie, “Spatial and Ethical Dualism in Jewish Wisdom and Apocalyptic Literature,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 93, 1974, pp. 356–385. Some scholars have argued that even Zoroastrian dualism is not absolute “metaphysical dualism” inasmuch as the evil spirit, like the good spirit, derives from the one Wise Lord; see note 3. In a certain respect there is a fundamental inconsistency in the Qumran doctrine, for, on the one hand, God is said to be the creator of both spirits, evil and good, yet, on the other hand, the eschatological culmination of history is envisioned as a time when the sons of light will rise up and conquer – indeed destroy – the sons of darkness. (For a similar

tension in Zoroastrianism, see Richard C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* [New York: Putnam, 1961], pp. 308–316.) If one begins from the monotheistic premise that God creates both good and evil, then the rabbinic ideal that one must worship God with both the good and evil inclinations (cf. Mishnah, Berakhot 9.5; *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, sec. 32, p. 55) must be seen as a more logically consistent doctrine. For the rabbinic affirmation of God as creating the good and evil inclinations, a form of ethical dualism not unrelated to the Qumran doctrine, cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:14, p. 128; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan* on Gen. 2:7; *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, sec. 45, p. 103; Solomon Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (New York: Schocken, 1961), p. 290 n. 3; Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), pp. 416–417 n. 2 (Hebrew). And cf. the interpretation of Eccl. 7:14, “God has made one even as the other,” attributed to R. Aqiva in Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 15a: “He created the righteous and he created the wicked, he created the Garden of Eden and he created Gehinnom.” For an analysis of this text, see Alan Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977), pp. 22. See also the interesting parallel to this passage in *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 28, p. 426: “‘God has made the one even as the other,’ God has made the righteous and the wicked, as it is written ‘Then his brother emerged, holding on to the heel of Esau’ (Gen. 25:26). R. Pinḥas [in the name of] R. Hīlqiah in the name of R. Simon said: not even a rib was between them, and the one emerged righteous and the other wicked.” In this case the wicked created by God has been subsumed typologically under the figure of Esau and the righteous under the figure of Jacob; see note 34. On the appellation “wicked” for Esau in rabbinic sources, see Irit Aminoff, “The Figures Esau and the Kingdom of Edom in Palestinian Midrashic–Talmudic Literature in the Tannaitic and Amoraic Periods,” Ph.D. dissertation, Melbourne University, 1981, pp. 15–17, 27–28, and passim. It must be pointed out, however, that certain rabbinic statements reflect the apocalyptic view that posited an abrogation of the evil inclination at the end of time; see note 11. Cf. also the following interpretation of Ps. 5:5, “evil cannot abide in You,” in *Midrash Tehillim*, ed. Solomon Buber (Vilna: Rom, 1891) 5:7, 27b: “For You do not dwell by evil nor evil by You.” Though the fuller context of this passage is not clear, it would seem that the midrashist wants to remove evil from God in a way that would be analogous to the Platonic tradition.

7. On the author of the Zohar, assumed by scholars to be Moses ben Shem Ṭov de León (ca. 1240–1305), see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 156–204; idem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 213–242; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 91–94; Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 3–10; and Elliot R. Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*: Critical Edition and Introductory Study,” Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 1986, pp. 1–43 (*Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 11–71).
8. For the purposes of this study I am limiting my analysis to the main body of the Zohar. On the various literary strata that make up the Zohar, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 159–162.
9. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 447–448. The problem of evil in the Zohar was also discussed briefly by Scholem in *Major Trends*, pp. 235–239, and more fully in idem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit* (Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1962), pp. 49–82. Like Tishby, Scholem also tended to emphasize the “gnostic” or dualistic dimension of the Zohar’s treatment, though he too noted that at times the author of the Zohar affirmed a more monistic, even pantheistic, approach, stressing that there is only one continuous reality in existence.

10. This theme is especially emphasized in connection with certain commandments whose purpose is to separate the divine and demonic realms. Furthermore, the position of Israel vis-à-vis the other nations is viewed in terms of this separation of demonic and divine realms. See Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. Louis Schoffman, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), vol. 1, pp. 246–247; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 441–443; Morris Fierstein, “‘God’s Need for the Commandments’ in Medieval Kabbalah,” *Conservative Judaism*, 36, 1982, pp. 50–51; Jacob Katz, *Halakha and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, its Various Faces and Social Relevance* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), p. 44 (Hebrew). In “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” 1:118–123, I have discussed this motif specifically as it appears in that work; see the revised analysis in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 59, 1988, pp. 217–251.
11. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 450–454; idem, *The Doctrine of Evil and the “Kelipah” in Lurianic Kabbalism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), pp. 62–79 (Hebrew). For a discussion of the possible literary sources for this imagery, see Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969), pp. 172–179.
12. Cf. for example, Zohar 2:41a, 108b (see note 63), 199b, 258a; 3:54a. The zoharic view is based on the rabbinic legend, itself based on earlier apocalyptic sources, mentioned in Babylonian Talmud, Sukkot 52a concerning the complete obliteration of the evil inclination in the messianic era. See Schechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, p. 290 n. 3; Urbach, *Sages*, pp. 416–417 n. 2. It should be noted, however, that it is possible to interpret the zoharic idea about the annihilation of the demonic in the messianic future as an affirmation of the reintegration of the demonic into the divine rather than an affirmation of the dualistic stance. See in particular the interpretation of Deut. 32:39 in Zohar 2:108b: “In that [messianic] time it is written, ‘See, then, that I, I am He, there is no God beside Me’ ... The Holy One, blessed be He, said: Then you will see that which you could not see beforehand. ‘That I, I,’ why is [the pronoun repeated] two times? To emphasize that at that time there will be no God but Him ... the Other Side [the demonic realm] will be removed ... for nothing of the pollution [with which, according to rabbinic tradition, the serpent inseminated Eve; cf. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 16a and parallels] will be left in the world and the world will be one.” In this regard it is interesting to note that, in his Hebrew theosophic writings, de León sometimes stresses the pantheistic view, particularly in contexts where the demonic realm is discussed; see Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” 2:268, 301, 313 [*Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 264, 296, 307].
13. See Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” pp. 193–197; idem, *Les origines de la Kabbale* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1966), pp. 310–316; idem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 55–57.
14. Cf. the following remark of the late thirteenth-century kabbalist, Isaac of Acre: “‘For aliens entered the sacred areas of the Lord’s House’ (Jer. 51:51) – ‘Aliens’ alludes to the outer gradations [the demonic realm] ... This is the way of the kabbalists of Sefarad [i.e. Castile] who merited to receive the kabbalah of the outer gradations. However, the kabbalists of Catalonia [i.e. Gerona] received a proper kabbalah concerning the ten *sefirot belimah* [the holy emanations] but did not receive anything with respect to the outer gradations.” The passage is cited by Gottlieb, *Studies*, pp. 341–342. See also Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 124–125. Yet, as Scholem noted (*Les origines*,

- pp. 306–316), already in the writings of Isaac the Blind of Provence one can discern a doctrine of dual forces, the holy and the unholy, albeit in a very rudimentary form. This accords with the testimony of Isaac ha-Kohen that he found in Arles ancient documents espousing the gnostic doctrine.
15. Scholem, *Les origines*, pp. 59–211; idem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 42–44. According to Scholem, the work, pseudepigraphically attributed to R. Neḥuniah ben ha-Qanah of second-century Palestine, actually appeared in Provence sometime in the second half of the twelfth century. Scholem did not, however, rule out the possibility of earlier sources for the *Bahir* originating in the East, such as the *Raza Rabba* (“Great Mystery”) dating from the ninth or tenth century and preserved in the writings of the thirteenth-century German pietists. See Scholem, *Re’shit ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 41–49, 195–238; idem, *Les origines*, pp. 194–201. Other scholars have substantiated Scholem’s claim that the *Bahir* appeared in Provence by drawing attention to similarities between it and certain Catharic doctrines that surfaced in that area during that time. See O. H. Lehmann, “The Theology of the Mystical Book *Bahir* and Its Sources,” *Studia Patristica*, 1, 1957, pp. 477–783; Shulamit Shahar, “Catharism and the Beginnings of the Kabbalah in Languedoc: Elements Common to Catharic Scriptures and the Book *Bahir*,” *Tarbits*, 40, 1971, pp. 483–509 (Hebrew). See also Joseph Dan, “Midrash and the Dawn of Kabbalah,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey Hartmann and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), pp. 127–140. When evaluating Scholem’s hypothesis one should keep in mind that the other major school of mystical speculation in Provence during this time, the school of Abraham ben David and his son, Isaac the Blind, developed a kabbalistic terminology that is almost entirely independent of the theosophy of the *Bahir*. If the latter work did emerge at this time and place, one would expect to find some influence of it upon these other mystics. Scholem argued (*Les origines*, p. 224 n. 17, 225), however, that in several cases the influence of the *Bahir* on Provençal kabbalists, such as Jacob the Nazir, was evident. In addition, Scholem noted that some of the fragments attributed to the Hasid, that is, Isaac the Blind, in the super-commentary on Nahmanides’ commentary on the Pentateuch attributed to Meir Ibn Sahula contain citations from the *Bahir*; see *Les origines*, p. 53. The first to make extensive use of the *Bahir*, as far as I am aware, are Isaac’s disciples, the Spanish kabbalists who wrote in Gerona in the first part of the thirteenth century. See the comments of Moshe Idel, “The *Sefirot* above the *Sefirot*,” *Tarbits*, 51, 1981, p. 239 (Hebrew); and Joseph Dan, “Mysticism in Jewish History, Religion and Literature,” in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Joseph Dan and Frank Talmage (Cambridge, MA: Association for Jewish Studies, 1982), pp. 11–12. Cf. also the following remark of Isaac of Acre in his *Otsar Hayyim* (MS Jewish Theological Seminary Mic. 1674 [ENA 1589] fol. 133b): “The sages of Catalonia [Gerona] rely on a strong foundation that is the *Sefer Bahir*, and the sages of Sefarad [Castile] rely on a firm foundation that is the *Sefer ha-Zohar*.” The specific distinction that Isaac of Acre draws between the two schools centers around the tradition concerning demonic forces: whereas the kabbalists of Castile received such a tradition, the kabbalists of Gerona did not; see preceding note. What is of interest to emphasize for our purposes is the particular connection made between the Geronese kabbalists and the *Bahir*.
 16. See *Sefer ha-Bahir*, ed. Reuven Margalioṭ (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978), pp. 162–163. According to one fragment attributed to Isaac the Blind by Ibn Sahula (see note 15), the former likewise identified the forces of

- impurity as emanating from the left side of God, the *sefirah* of *paḥad* or *gevurah*; see Scholem, *Les origines*, p. 310.
17. Moses of Burgos, "Left Pillar," ed. Gershom Scholem, *Tarbits*, 4, 1933, p. 209.
 18. *Otsar ha-Kavod*, 3a.
 19. "Left Pillar," p. 209; *Otsar ha-Kavod*, 24a.
 20. According to some kabbalists, for example, Isaac ha-Kohen, the left emanations derived from the third divine gradation, *Binah*, whereas according to other kabbalists, for example, Moses of Burgos, the demonic powers derived from the fifth emanation, *Din* or *Gevurah*. Cf. Scholem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt*, pp. 54–57.
 21. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 442–443, 447–450.
 22. "Left Pillar," p. 211.
 23. *Ibid.*, pp. 208–209.
 24. Scholem, "Kabbalah of R. Jacob," p. 263.
 25. *Ibid.*, p. 264.
 26. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 450–452. I have discussed the various nuances of the structural parallelism between the holy and satanic realms in the Zohar in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics," *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 11, 1986, pp. 29–30.
 27. Wolfson, "Left Contained," pp. 31–32.
 28. Gottlieb, *Kabbala Literature*, pp. 178–182; Liebes, *Sections*, p. 147; Moshe Idel, "The Evil Thought of the Deity," *Tarbits*, 49, 1980, pp. 356–364 (Hebrew). Idel compares the zoharic notion of the emergence of the demonic powers as a result of the purgation of evil from the divine thought to the Zervanite myth of the birth of the evil Ahriman from the evil thought of Zurvan.
 29. See Zohar 3:292b (*Idra Zuta*); 2:254b; and cf. 3:48b, where the primordial forces of judgment, the 325 sparks that emerge from the "flame of darkness" (*botsina de-qardinuta*) are identified as the hairs that are on the head of supernal Man; when the hairs are removed, then the forces of judgment are ameliorated and the Man is purified. As a result the "man of war" (Exod. 15:3) becomes the "perfect and upright man" (Job 1:1), the "righteous one" (Gen. 6:9). It is significant that in this context it is one being – and not two – who is transformed from a state of impurity to purity, an idea substantiated by Job 14:4; see note 46, where the relevant portion of the text is translated. From the further description of the head of this Man as being "red like a rose" and of the hair likewise being red, it is clear that the proto-demonic force is being portrayed in accordance with the scriptural account of Esau (see Gen. 25:25). Cf. Zohar 1:153a, where Esau is described in almost the exact terms as the primal Man is in this context. Similarly, the Bible (Gen. 27:11) describes Jacob as being "smooth skinned" in comparison with Esau, who is hairy. Hence, just as Esau emerges before Jacob, the hairy one before the smooth-skinned one, so the forces of judgment, whence come the lower forces of impurity, emerge before the forces of mercy. On Esau as a symbol for the demonic, see note 34. On the zoharic conception, *botsina de-qardinuta*, see Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 145–151, 161–164; Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 207–208.
 30. See Zohar 2:108b, 176b (*Sifra di-Tseni'uta*); 3:128b (*Idra Rabba*); 142a (*Idra Rabba*); 292a (*Idra Zuta*). See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 276–277, 289–290; Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 219–221. As Liebes points out (p. 219), the kabbalistic conception was probably influenced by the midrashic idea (cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 12:15, pp. 112–113) that initially God wanted to create the world with judgment but then combined mercy and judgment together. See following note.

31. *Genesis Rabbah* 9:2, p. 68; see Zohar 2:34b. The source for this mythical image is Isaac ha-Kohen, according to whom the ten emanations of the left comprise “three worlds that were created and destroyed,” corresponding to the three upper divine gradations and seven archons that do battle against the seven lower divine gradations. See Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” pp. 194–195, 248–251. Cf. additional texts cited by Idel, “Evil Thought,” pp. 359–360. R. Eleazar of Worms likewise connects this midrashic image of “worlds created and destroyed” with God’s attempt to create the world exclusively by means of the evil inclination; see Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidim* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1978), pp. 210–211 (Hebrew); idem, “Samael, Lilith, and the Concept of Evil in Early Kabbalah,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 5, 1980, pp. 32–37.
32. Cf. Zohar 2:254b–55a; 3:292a. See Wolfson, “*Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” 2:268 (*Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 265), where the worship of idolatry or the belief in other gods (i.e. the demonic realm of the Other Side) is said to derive from the “refuse of thought.” It is clear, moreover, from that context (“*Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” 2:269) that the belief in the other gods is identical with philosophical reasoning. Cf. Zohar 2:124a: “R. Hiyya said, [Make no mention of the] names of other gods’ (Exod. 23:13). This refers to one who is occupied with other books that are not from the side of Torah.” It seems to me that “other books” here is a reference to books of philosophy. Yet, see Zohar 2:237a, and Zohar *Hadash*, 38a, where Greece is identified as that kingdom that is in closest proximity to the way of faith, that is, Judaism. I assume that in these contexts there is a positive evaluation of philosophy. On the Zohar’s complicated relationship to philosophy, see the remarks of Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières: A Twelfth-Century Talmudist* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 300 n. 65. See also Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 173, 183, 194, 203, and the text from *Sefer ha-Rimmon* cited on pp. 397–398 n. 154; Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 22–23.
33. Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 458; Liebes, *Sections*, p. 320.
34. It should be pointed out that in one passage the Zohar (2:108b) tries to uphold the ontological priority of Israel as against the chronological priority of Esau: “Israel is the upper kernel [lit. brain] of the world. Israel arose in the [divine] Thought first [cf. *Genesis Rabbah* 1:4, p. 6]. The idolatrous nations, which are the shell, preceded [Israel], as it is written, ‘And these are the kings who, reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites.’” It is quite possible that the zoharic interpretation of Gen. 36:31 ff. is a symbolic depiction of the historical relationship between the Church and the Synagogue, that is, Christianity, which is symbolically Edom or the demonic power, reigns before Judaism. See Baer, *Jews in Christian Spain*, vol. 1, pp. 246–247; Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 196–197. On the symbolic correlation of Edom and Christianity, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 5, p. 272 n. 19; Gerson Cohen, “Esau as a Symbol in Early Medieval Thought,” in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. Alexander Altmann (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 27–30. On Esau (= Edom) as a symbol for the demonic power, see Zohar 1:137b–38a, 138b, 139a, 142b, 143a, 171b, 177a; 2:163b, 167a, 188b; 3:48b (see note 29), 124a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 185a, 197a, 246b; *Tiqqunei Zohar* 59, 93a. Cf. the following text from MS Paris 859, fol. 16a, cited by Idel, “Evil Thought,” p. 358: “The forces of impurity emanate before the forces of purity, for at first the refuse is purified, and afterwards the forces of purity emerge. Thus it says, ‘The dross having been separated from the silver, a vessel emerged for the smith’ (Prov. 25:4). So it is by Cain and

Abel, Cain came out first from the refuse which is on the left side, and afterwards Abel who is from the side of mercy. And similarly by Esau and Jacob. And [it] says: Esau emerged from the dross of the gold. Therefore, Isaac loved Esau for he came from his dregs." As Idel pointed out (*ibid.* n. 8), the expression "dross of gold" betrays a zoharic influence; cf. Zohar 3:50b. On the statement "Isaac loved Esau etc.," cf. Zohar 1:137b, 139a. The temporal precedence of the demonic over the holy is reflected as well in the zoharic interpretation of the rite of circumcision whereby the unholy foreskin is removed and the holy corona disclosed; see Zohar 1:13a, 32a–b, 95a–b; 2:40a, 255b; 3:72b–73a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 11a and 37, 78a. In this context, finally, it is of interest to consider the following fragment of the Ebionite *Kerygmata Petrou* that is extant in the Jewish–Christian *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies*, cited in *New Testament Apocrypha*, ed. Wilhelm Schneemelcher; English translation ed. Robert McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963–65), vol. 2, p. 121: "As in the beginning the one God, being as it were a right hand and a left, created first the heavens and then the earth, so also he assembled in pairs everything that follows. In the case of man, however, he no longer proceeded in this way, but he reversed every pair. For whereas he created what was stronger as the first and what was weaker as the second, in the case of man we find the opposite ... Thus from Adam ... there sprang as the first the unrighteous Cain, as the second the righteous Abel ... And from Abraham ... there issued two first, Ishmael first and then Isaac, who was blessed of God. From Isaac again there originated two, the godless Esau and the pious Jacob." In the fuller version of the text (*ibid.*, pp. 545–546) it is clear that the firstborn is identified as the feminine that derives from the "feeble left hand of God," that is, the evil one. The chain of associations is very close to the later kabbalistic model. On the possible Jewish influence on the Pseudo-Clementine literature, see the references cited in Stroumsa, *Another Seed*, p. 30 n. 51, and Segal, *Two Powers*, p. 256–257. The correlation between the left hand of God and weakness and the right hand and strength is made in the following midrashic comment on Exod. 15:6: "Thy right hand, O Lord, glorious in power, Thy right hand, O Lord, shatters the foe," in *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* 2:41: "When the Israelites do the will of God, they make His left hand to be like the right, as it is said, 'Thy right hand, O Lord ... Thy right hand, O Lord' – two times. And when the Israelites fail to do the will of God, they make His right hand to be like the left, as it is said, 'He has drawn back, His right hand' (Lam. 2:3)." See Judah Goldin, *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), p. 149.

35. Zohar 1:19b–20a. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 239, and references given in p. 406 n. 114.
36. Altmann, "Motif," p. 117.
37. There are basically three opinions in the Zohar on the exact source of evil in the divine: *Binah*, *Gevurah*, or *Malkhut*. For references, see Wolfson, "Left Contained," p. 32 and nn. 22–24.
38. See Scholem, *Von der mystischen Gestalt*, pp. 69–72.
39. See Wolfson, "Left Contained," pp. 29–30.
40. Cf. Zohar 1:83a.
41. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 457–458.
42. On the Lurianic and Sabbatian roots of this idea, see Tishby, *Doctrine of Evil*, p. 88; Joseph Weiss, "The Emergence of the Hasidic Way," *Zion*, 16, 1951, pp. 73–75 (Hebrew); Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 78–141. For the development of this idea

- particularly in the school of Habad Hasidism, see Rachel Elijor, *The Theory of Divinity of Hasidut Habad: Second Generation* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), pp. 262–264 (Hebrew). For Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav’s particular use of this notion, see Arthur Green, *Tormented Master: A Life of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav* (University: University of Alabama Press, 1979), pp. 67, 264, 308.
43. I have used the translation of Daniel Matt in his *Zohar*, pp. 63–64. The *Zohar*’s identification of Egypt with the earthly representation of the demonic is based ultimately on the scriptural and rabbinic conception of Egypt as the seat of magical power (cf., e.g., Exod. 7:12; 8:3, 14, 18–19; 9:11); Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 67b; Qiddushin 49b; Menahot 85a; for other references see Ginzberg, *Legends*, s.v. “Egyptians, masters of astrology and magic”), understood in the *Zohar* to be the force of the demonic. Cf. *Zohar* 1:81b, 83a, 249a; 2:30b, 35b, 38a, 191a, 192b; 3:50b, 69a, 70a, 207a. See Wolfson “Left Contained,” pp. 33–37, where I have worked this out in detail.
 44. Cited by Matt, *Zohar*, p. 220.
 45. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 376–379. A striking description of this is given in *Zohar Hadash*, 1c (*Sitrei Otiyyot*); “In the mystery of Enoch [it is said]: There is another *he* below [the demonic] which is bound to this *he* [i.e. *Shekhinah*], symbolized by the last letter of the Tetragrammaton, the letter *he*; in this context the *Shekhinah* is said to be symbolized by a *he* for she is a point that is surrounded by four camps of angels, and the letter *he* numerically equals five], and they correspond one to the other. Then it is time to cry [cf. Eccl. 3:4]. The sign for this is *ahah* [i.e. an expression of grief; cf. Jer. 1:6, and note that there is a dot in the second *he*], for all the surrounding evil encloses [them] below in the form of a *dalet* [i.e. on all four sides, *dalet* = four]. It surrounds these four and the point [i.e. *Shekhinah*]. And the point stands within a hard shell which encloses it [symbolized by the dot in the second *he* of the word *ahah*]. Then the Moon [*Shekhinah*] is eclipsed and its light is covered, and permission is given to judge the world with evil judgments.”
 46. *Zohar* 2:69b. Cf. *Zohar* 3:48b: “From the ‘flame of darkness’ [see note 29] there emerged three hundred and twenty-five inscribed sparks, and they were united in the side of Strength [the left side of judgment] ... and when they entered in a body they were called Man (*ish*) ... the ‘Man of War’ (Exod. 15:3) ... Since the lower judgments are united and joined to the hair of this one, it is called the severe judgment. And when the hair on his head is removed, [the judgment] is ameliorated [lit. sweetened] and the judgments below are not summoned. And then he is called pure, as it is written, ‘Who can bring a pure thing from what is impure?’ (Job 14:4). From the impure certainly!” Concerning this text, see note 29. Whereas in *Zohar* 2:69b, the unity of the divine and the demonic is perceived from the perspective of the lowest divine gradation and its proximity to the unholy realm, in *Zohar* 3:48b this unity is perceived from the perspective of the very first stages of emanation. It is noteworthy that the same text is cited as a scriptural locus in both cases.
 47. *Zohar* 2:184a.
 48. Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 457.
 49. *Zohar* 2:34a.
 50. Faierstein, “‘God’s Need,’” pp. 50–51; Daniel Matt, “The Mystic and the Mizwot,” in *Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 387–388. See note 10.
 51. Cf. *Zohar* 2:181b–82a; 3:101b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 453–454.
 52. See Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 125–126.

53. See notes 29 and 73.
54. Zohar 3:80b.
55. This is based on the rabbinic interpretation of Deut. 6:5, "And love the Lord with all your heart," *levavekha*, which they read in the plural, that is, "hearts," and as a reference to the two inclinations, the good and the evil; see references in note 6.
56. Zohar 2:26b–27a. Moses de León refers to this zoharic interpretation in "Sefer ha-Rimmon" 2:100 [*Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 101]. It is interesting to note that de León gives the verse two interpretations: according to the former the unity implied by Deut. 4:39 involves the attributes of judgment and mercy, whereas according to the latter it involves the evil and good inclinations. In the Zohar both interpretations are combined. See "Sefer ha-Rimmon," 1:45.
57. See, for example, *Sifrei on Deuteronomy*, sec. 26, p. 41; *Genesis Rabbah* 12:15, pp. 112–113. For a summary of the rabbinic doctrine, see Urbach, *Sages*, pp. 396–407. For a comparison of the Philonic and rabbinic views, see Nils A. Dahl and Alan Segal, "Philo and the Rabbis on the Names of God," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 9, 1978, pp. 1–28, and references to other scholarly literature cited in p. 2 nn. 5–6.
58. See references to studies by Schechter and Urbach cited in note 6. It should be pointed out that in some rabbinic statements, most notably that of Resh Laqish (third-century Palestine), the evil inclination seems to be more than merely a psychological impulse. In the case of the aforementioned rabbi, the evil inclination is identified with Satan or the Angel of Death; see Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 16a, and cf. Urbach, *Sages*, pp. 149, 416.
59. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 768–770.
60. See, for example, Zohar 1:12a.
61. Zohar 2:26b.
62. Zohar 2:108a–b.
63. Yet, it must be pointed out that in the continuation of the text the Zohar contrasts the original process of emanation in which the shell, the kings of Edom, preceded the kernel, Israel, and the future restoration when the Holy One, blessed be He, "will put first the kernel without any shell." For the background of this passage, see note 34. For other contexts wherein the Zohar affirms the annihilation of the demonic in the future, see note 12.
64. Zohar 2:183a–b.
65. For a variation of this parable, see "Sefer ha-Rimmon" 2:133 (*Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 132–133).
66. Leaven was used allegorically as a symbol for that which is evil or impure in Jewish and Christian sources dating from the Greco-Roman period; see sources cited in Bokser, *Origins of the Seder*, p. 120 n. 13.
67. *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:15, p. 15.
68. See note 43.
69. Zohar 1:226b; 2:40a, 182a; 3:95b; "Sefer ha-Rimmon" 1:121 and 2:136, 328–329 (*Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 135, 321–322).
70. The symbolic correlation of bread and wisdom is an ancient haggadic tradition. See in particular the comparative study of the concept of manna in the Gospel of John and the Philonic corpus in Peder Borgen, *Bread from Heaven: An Exegetical Study of the Concept of Manna in the Gospel of John and the Writings of Philo* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1965).
71. Zohar 2:40a, 61b, 183a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1105; Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 113–116, 245–247.

72. On the notion of Torah as a medicine or drug, especially against the malady of the evil inclination, see Schechter, *Aspects*, pp. 273–275.
73. See in particular Moses de León, “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” ed. Jochanan Wijnhoven, Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 1964, pp. 148–149: “Good and evil are two causes, separate and distinct one from another. Yet the mystery of the Tree is one ... Thus it is a religious duty and obligation to know and seek out that very matter [the forces of the demonic] to distinguish between good and evil but not to cleave to it.”
74. Isaiah Tishby, “Gnostic Doctrines in Sixteenth Century Jewish Mysticism,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 6, 1955, p. 152. For a later kabbalistic development that, like the Zohar, emphasizes the incorporation of evil within the good, see Bracha Zak, “The Shell for the Sake of Holiness,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 3, 1983/84, pp. 191–206 (Hebrew).

3 Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: *Peshaṭ* and *Sod* in Zoharic Hermeneutics

Scholars who have discussed the hermeneutical posture of thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalah in general, and that of Zohar in particular, have usually subscribed to the view that one of the controlling factors in kabbalistic exegesis is the distinction between the exoteric meaning, the *peshaṭ*, or *sensus litteralis*, and the esoteric, that is, the mystical or kabbalistic interpretation, the *sensus spiritualis*. The Torah is thus depicted as possessing an external and internal dimension, the hidden meaning and its revealed, literal counterpart. Correspondingly, the method of interpretation itself is characterized by this set of polarities, *nigleh* and *nistar*, the exoteric and esoteric. It should be noted, parenthetically, that with respect to this issue, scholars have also called attention to the fundamental similarity between the hermeneutical posture of philosopher and kabbalist, for both assumed a twofold sense in Scripture, the literal and hidden meaning, the latter corresponding respectively to either philosophical or mystical truths.¹

It is generally thought, moreover, that the hierarchical view implied by this dichotomy was expanded further by Spanish kabbalists in the latter part of the thirteenth century by means of the well-known conception of the fourfold scheme of interpretation that eventually received the name *pardes*, an acronym for *peshaṭ* (literal), *remez* (allegorical), *derashah* (homiletical), and *sod* (esoteric). As the history and development of this notion have been discussed by various scholars, I will not enter into a lengthy discussion about the origin of this structure or a detailed analysis of each of its components.² My focus rather is on the question of hierarchy of meaning that this structure implies, and whether this is an appropriate characterization from the particular vantage point of the kabbalists' understanding of Scripture.

From a certain perspective it is indeed valid to view this fourfold structure in a hierarchical way. This does not imply, however, that the kabbalistic exegete himself progresses in some linear fashion from the plain sense, to the homiletical, then to the allegorical, and, finally, penetrating the ultimate meaning of Scripture, the mystical.³ It is unlikely that any kabbalist, especially in the period under discussion, would have considered these different layers of meaning as absolutely distinct. It is nevertheless plausible to suggest that, for the kabbalists, the four senses of Scripture are to be arranged in some hierarchical manner, the literal sense occupying the bottom rung and the mystical the highest. After all, whatever the external influence on Jewish exegetes that may have fostered the articulation of four levels of meaning, there existed four well-defined exegetical methods that corresponded to each of these interpretative categories.⁴ In that respect, it is necessary to emphasize what should be an obvious historical factor: the four layers of meaning must be understood in their proper literary or textual context. Hence, precedents for literal interpretation are to be found not only in the classical rabbinic texts but especially in the Andalusian and Franco-German traditions of scriptural exegesis; midrashic interpretation had a long history stretching from the formative period of rabbinic thought to the late Middle Ages; allegorical or tropological forms of interpretation were employed to a degree in rabbinic literature and highlighted by medieval Jewish philosophers; and an evolving theosophic system existed that could be, as indeed it was, applied exegetically by the kabbalists. From this vantage point it is entirely correct to view the stratification of the four layers of meaning in a hierarchical way.

Two important claims for the understanding of kabbalistic hermeneutics follow from the hierarchical approach. First, the literal meaning is assigned a secondary value with respect to determining the “true” meaning of Scripture, which is thought to consist of allusions to processes occurring in the divine world. Words of Scripture, kabbalistically interpreted, become *figurae* or *signa* of the supra-mundane, divine reality. Second, the dichotomy between the external and internal sense may lead one to the conclusion that, for the kabbalist, the *peshat* can obscure the true meaning of the biblical text, the *sod*. Expressed in slightly different terms, the mystical interpretation, much like the philosophic according to Maimonides,⁵ is thought to arise out of a sense of conflict between the literal meaning

of Scripture and theosophical truth.⁶ The mystical reading of the biblical text thus supplants the literal sense. This viewpoint has been most emphatically articulated by Gershom Scholem, who set out to explain how the mystic approach to Scripture embraces simultaneously a conservative and a revolutionary attitude:

But even where the religious authority of the same sacred book is recognized, a revolutionary attitude is inevitable once the mystic invalidates the literal meaning. But how can he cast aside the literal meaning while still recognizing the authority of the text? This is possible because he regards the literal meaning as simply nonexistent or as valid only for a limited time. It is *replaced* by a mystical interpretation.⁷

It must be noted that on another occasion, Scholem remarked with respect to the Zohar that its author “remains closely bound to the Scriptural text. Often an idea is not so much extrapolated and projected into the Biblical word but rather conceived in the process of mystical reflection upon the latter.”⁸ In yet another context, Scholem commented that the critical effort “to determine whether the Biblical text inspired the [mystical] exegesis or whether the exegesis was a deliberate choice” may be “too rationalistic a view” to evaluate the creativity of the mystic, for the “thought processes of mystics are largely unconscious, and they may be quite unaware of the clash between old and new which is of such passionate interest to the historian.”⁹ Although in these two instances Scholem does acknowledge that, from the internal, uncritical perspective of the mystics themselves, kabbalistic ideas may be thought to spring from the scriptural text, it is clear that his general orientation was to deny that concern with the literal sense figured in any prominent way in kabbalistic exegesis. In the final analysis, according to Scholem, kabbalistic hermeneutics is based on a radical dichotomy of the hidden and revealed meanings. Thus, after describing the assumption of theosophical kabbalists that the Torah is a *corpus symbolicum* of the hidden divine reality revealed in the *sefirot*,¹⁰ Scholem concludes that “this method of interpretation has proved almost barren for a plain understanding of the Holy Writ.”¹¹ In yet another passage Scholem observes that, although the author of the Zohar advances examples of four layers of meaning, the literal, homiletical, allegorical, and

mystical, only the fourth matters to him, for the first three methods “are either taken from other writings or, at the most, developed from ideas not peculiar to Kabbalism. Only when it is a question of revealing the mystery of a verse – or rather one of its many mysteries – does the author show real enthusiasm.”¹² We may conclude, therefore, that, according to Scholem, genuine interest in problems of *peshat* does not figure prominently in zoharic – and, by extension, kabbalistic – hermeneutics.

Such a view has been shared by other scholars as well; here I will mention two others, Wilhelm Bacher and Isaiah Tishby, whose remarks are focused especially on the case of the Zohar. Although Bacher acknowledged that the method of literal interpretation, *peshat*, played a significant role in the Zohar,¹³ it was clearly his opinion that, for the author of this book, the literal sense is superseded by the various other levels of meaning, including the internal, mystical sense. “Le sens littéral simple est, pour lui, le degré inférieur de l’interprétation biblique; c’est le *sens multiple* de l’Ecriture qui est le fondement de son système, et c’est à la doctrine du sens multiple de la parole de l’Ecriture qu’il emprunte la justification des mystères qui y sont contenus.”¹⁴ For Bacher, therefore, the literal is quite distinct from the esoteric. A similar view is taken by Isaiah Tishby. After reviewing the critical passages in the Zohar, where there is a critique of those who accept only the literal meaning of Scripture, Tishby remarks that the “author of the Zohar concluded from the doubts that undermined the literal meaning of Scripture that the ‘Torah of truth’ was to be found in the internal part of the Torah, which is concealed by its external form.”¹⁵ Elsewhere Tishby notes that, for the author of Zohar, “there is no comparison as to worth between the revealed meaning of Torah and the hidden meaning. The external significance of the Torah relates primarily to existence in the physical world, whereas the internal significance is connected with the system of the Godhead.”¹⁶ To be sure, Tishby is careful to note that the Zohar does not reject the literal meaning, nor does it attack those rabbis who confine themselves to the study of Torah in its literal sense as we find, for example, in the case of the anonymous author of *Ra’aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*.¹⁷ Judged from the kabbalistic perspective, the value of *peshat*, together with the other forms of exegesis, *derashah* and *remez*, is that it functions as an aid to uncover the inner mystical truth.¹⁸ In its essential nature, however, the literal

sense does not reveal anything of the esoteric matters that preoccupy the mind of the kabbalist, and indeed may impede the attainment of such knowledge.¹⁹

It is my contention that this scholarly approach prevents one from understanding one of the basic assumptions that underlies the hermeneutical stance of the Zohar and its unique conception of a text: insofar as the Torah represents not only the intention of the divine author but the configuration of the divine structure or form,²⁰ it follows that the *sensus litteralis* comprehends all the senses of Scripture, exoteric and esoteric. That is, the *sensus spiritualis* is part of the Bible's signification inasmuch as it is intended by the divine author.²¹ The Zohar does not simply reject or denigrate the more normative literal–historical–grammatical understanding of *peshat*, but operates with a theological conception of *peshat* that assumes that the Torah, the divine image, comprehends the mystical meaning in its most elemental and ideogrammatic form. The hidden and revealed, therefore, are not distinct spheres of meaning from the vantage point of the divine author or the kabbalist who has penetrated the innermost depths of Torah, an experience compared in the Zohar and other kabbalistic sources to sexual union.²² Scholars who have discussed zoharic hermeneutics in the past have not adequately taken into account the positive conception of the *peshat* operative in the Zohar. Yet, precisely this conception provides us with the zoharic notion of text, and, by extension, meaning. In a sense the kabbalistic conception, expressed especially by the Zohar, reverts to the conception of *peshat* that emerges from rabbinic writings where it signifies authorial intention,²³ as determined through an authoritative teaching, rather than the simple or literal meaning, connotations that become standard in the medieval exegetical tradition.²⁴ That is, from the vantage point of the rabbi, *peshat* designates the scriptural verse in its appropriate context, which, in turn, may be illuminated by literal or midrashic explanations. The simple or plain meaning, therefore, is one, but not the only, aspect of *peshat*, the semantic unity of the text.²⁵ The question of the zoharic conception of *peshat* thus lies at the center, and not the periphery, of a discussion on the hermeneutical principles and strategies of the Zohar. A key issue in determining this conception is the relationship between *peshat* and *sod* that I will investigate in detail in the remainder of this essay.

Before discussing the role of *peshat* in zoharic hermeneutics, it is of interest to consider several sources that provide more background for the position adopted by the Zohar. I begin with the hermeneutical posture espoused by Naḥmanides (1194–1270). It can be shown from any number of sources that Naḥmanides subscribed to the view that Scripture has an inner and an outer dimension,²⁶ or, as he put it in one context, “the verses of Scripture are true literally and figuratively,”²⁷ or again, “the Torah makes explicit and alludes.”²⁸ One passage is particularly striking in that he distinguishes three senses to a scriptural text (the example is Prov. 31:10), viz. the literal (*melitsah*), the figurative (*mashal*), and the esoteric (*sod*).²⁹ That Naḥmanides considered all these levels to be contained within the text of Scripture is most evident from his interpretation of the rabbinic dictum, “a biblical verse does not lose its literal sense,” *ein miqra yotsei midei peshuto*,³⁰ in his notes to the second principle in the introduction to Maimonides’ *Sefer ha-Mitswot*. Reacting to Maimonides’ claim that the rabbis occasionally derived laws from Scripture without any textual basis, and thereby denied their own principle stated previously, Naḥmanides emphasized that with respect to biblical interpretations connected with halakhic matters, the verse does not lose its literal sense because all these interpretations “are contained in the language of the text” (*kullam be-lashon ha-katuv nikhlalim*). Naḥmanides goes on to contrast his own conception of *peshat* with those “who lack knowledge of the language” – or, according to another reading, the “language of those who lack knowledge” – and the Sadducees, that is, the Karaites. It seems likely that by the former, Naḥmanides means those who would limit the literal sense to that which is established on purely philological and historical grounds. Such a group, like the Karaites, would fail to see the polysemous nature of Scripture. For Naḥmanides, by contrast, “the text contains everything ... for the book of God’s Torah is complete, there is no extra word in it nor any lacking, everything was written in wisdom.”³¹ Scripture thus comprises both the literal and figurative meaning, the external and internal sense:

This is the meaning of their dictum, “a verse should not lose its literal sense;” they did not say, “a verse is only according to its literal sense.” We have rather the interpretation [of the verse] together with the literal sense, and it should not lose either of

them. On the contrary, Scripture must bear everything, and both are true.³²

I do not mean to suggest that Naḥmanides rejects the idea of *peshaṭ* in the more restricted connotation as the *sensus litteralis*. On the contrary, from his comment that there is both *midrash* and *peshaṭ*, it is evident that he accepts the standard medieval conception of *peshaṭ* as the historical, grammatical, and philological meaning. What is crucial for Naḥmanides, however, is that this notion of *peshaṭ* is itself contained in a broader conception of a scriptural text that comprises all meanings, including the mystical.³³ As Bernard Septimus has pointed out, Naḥmanides advanced the Andalusian tradition of *peshaṭ* “by broadening the conception of interpretation” to include rabbinic – halakhic and aggadic – as well as kabbalistic modes of explanation.³⁴ For Naḥmanides, then, the term *peshaṭ* denotes the textual reality that comprises the literal and midrashic – and under the rubric of midrashic the kabbalist includes the mystical – explanations. The same point is made by another thirteenth-century kabbalist from Castile, Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen: “[The principle] ‘a verse should not lose its literal sense’ always applies to all the Torah; the literal sense (*ha-peshaṭ*) is the root, the homiletical (*ha-midrash*) the branch, and everything is true.”³⁵

It is this notion of the text as comprehending the external and internal meanings that, in my view, provides the underlying principle for Naḥmanides’ repeated claim that the contextual meaning of certain biblical texts can be comprehended only through knowledge of the esoteric lore. In the vast majority of cases Naḥmanides keeps the literal and kabbalistic meanings distinct, treating the latter like an added dimension that enhances our understanding of Scripture but nevertheless should not be confused with the plain sense. It is thus that Naḥmanides often alerts the reader to the fact that he is divulging esoteric matters by the introduction, *al derekh ha-emet*, “by way of truth.” On occasion, however, Naḥmanides relates a kabbalistic explanation without identifying it as such. Furthermore, a significant number of examples in his commentary indicate that he entertained the possibility that the simple, plain, or contextual meaning was comprehensible only in terms of kabbalistic truths. Various scholars have discussed this phenomenon as it appears in the Torah commentary of Naḥmanides.³⁶ In a paper on

Nahmanides' kabbalistic hermeneutics, I have argued that one can distinguish two typologies wherein this convergence is operative: in some instances the literal and mystical meanings overlap because there is only one textual dimension corresponding to one reality outside the text, whereas in other instances there is an overlapping meaning, but the text allows for two levels, exoteric and esoteric, which correspond to two levels of reality, the mundane and the divine.³⁷ This exegetical posture challenges in a fundamental way the notion of an interpretative hierarchy applied universally and without qualification by the kabbalists. Not only is it the case that the literal sense does not always obscure the hidden signification, but the latter in some instances alone provides the key to read the text contextually. It is some such conception that underlies Ezra of Gerona's remark in his introduction to his commentary on Song of Songs to the effect that biblical exegetes do not understand certain sections of Torah, for they are based on the wisdom of kabbalah.³⁸ That is to say, the esoteric meaning is not ancillary, but rather is necessary, for the very comprehension of the plain sense of the scriptural text. To put the matter epigrammatically, *sod* is the depth of *peshaṭ*.

It is instinctive to compare Nahmanides' hermeneutic with that of Jacob ben Sheshet, an older contemporary Geronese kabbalist, though apparently belonging to an independent circle.³⁹ To begin with, it is necessary to mention, as Scholem did, the obvious contrast between the two kabbalists with respect to their stated positions regarding the nature of kabbalah.⁴⁰ Nahmanides for his part described kabbalah as a body of received tradition that must be transmitted orally from teacher to student and that cannot be comprehended by human reasoning or supposition.⁴¹ The point is made in various contexts in Nahmanides' writings, but for the sake of comparing his view with that of Jacob ben Sheshet, I will cite the following passage from Nahmanides' "Sermon on Ecclesiastes," for it focuses on the mystical reasons for the commandments, precisely the principal concern of ben Sheshet:

With respect to these matters and others like them one cannot understand their truth from one's own mind (*mi-da'at atsmo*) but only through tradition (*be-qabbalah*). This matter is explained in the Torah to whoever has heard the rationale for the commandments through a tradition (*ta'am ha-mitsvot*

be-qabbalah) as is fitting. This refers to one who has received from a mouth that has received, going back to Moses, our teacher, [who received] from God.⁴²

Jacob ben Sheshet, in diametrically opposite terms, expressed the viewpoint that one can, indeed from a religious perspective must, innovate kabbalistic interpretations (or, more specifically, mystical rationales for the commandments) in order to propagate and glorify the Torah. This is epitomized in succinct fashion in the following directive offered by Jacob ben Sheshet in *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*: “Know that the words of the rabbis, may their memory be for a blessing, are the words of the living God and they should not be contradicted, but it is a commandment for every sage to innovate [interpretations] of the Torah according to his ability.”⁴³ To cite a second example from the same work: “For in every matter a person can give his own explanation from his mind, and there is nothing deficient in this.”⁴⁴ Elaborating on this theme in another work, *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, Jacob ben Sheshet writes,

I know that there may be some among the pious and sages of Israel who will blame me for I have written the reason for two or three commandments in the Torah, which may be an opening for one to give a reason for many other commandments by way of wisdom. I can bring a proof that every sage is capable of offering a reason for every commandment whose reason is not explicitly stated in the Torah.⁴⁵

That the innovation is to be considered no less authoritative than a received idea is emphasized in Jacob ben Sheshet’s bold claim with respect to his view that the meaning of the Tetragrammaton, like the Torah in general, varies in accordance with its vocalization:⁴⁶ “If I had not innovated it from my heart, I would have said that it is a law given to Moses at Sinai.”⁴⁷ One should not, however, conclude from these comments that Jacob ben Sheshet was not the recipient of kabbalistic doctrine transmitted orally; on the contrary, on more than one occasion he reports having received traditions in just such a manner, as, for instance, from Isaac the Blind.⁴⁸ Moreover, it is evident that Jacob ben Sheshet did not think that the wisdom of kabbalah was exhausted by his own innovative views or even by those he received.⁴⁹

The fact of the matter is, however, that he does maintain, *contra* the explicit claims of Naḥmanides, that kabbalistic explanations can be adduced through the exercise of one's own powers of discernment and scriptural exegesis. Although I myself have challenged the standard characterization of Naḥmanides as a "reserved"⁵⁰ or "conservative"⁵¹ kabbalist, arguing that he is not merely the recipient of a limited corpus of secrets but rather expands the range of kabbalistic secrets through a consistent and innovative hermeneutical posture vis-à-vis Scripture as read often through the lenses of rabbinic *aggadah* (including in this category the kabbalistic treatise, *Sefer ha-Bahir*),⁵² it still is evident that the distinction between Naḥmanides' and Jacob ben Sheshet's understanding of the kabbalistic enterprise must be upheld. Even if Naḥmanides is up to much the same task as Jacob ben Sheshet, his insistence that kabbalah is a received tradition is instructive and must be set against the overtly innovative orientation of Jacob ben Sheshet.

Having delineated in clear fashion the essential difference between Naḥmanides and Jacob ben Sheshet, it is necessary to draw one's attention to a basic similarity in approach between the two. It emerges from a few places in the latter's writings that he shared the hermeneutical assumption expressed by Naḥmanides to the effect that the *peshat* of the verse can overlap with the *sod*, indeed that occasionally the most appropriate way to comprehend *peshat* is through *sod*. One passage in particular is noteworthy for interpreting the rabbinic dictum, "a verse should not lose its literal sense;" Jacob ben Sheshet employs language that is remarkably close to that of Naḥmanides in his notes to Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, which I cited previously.⁵³

From all the matters that I have written you can understand that there is no event in the world that does not have a force above that appears to be a paradigm (*dugma*) or image (*dimyon*) [of that which is below]. Therefore, when you find something in the words of our rabbis, blessed be their memory, or in the words of the Torah, or one of the reasons for the commandments, or the [speculation] of one of their rewards, do not think in your heart that it is said with regard to the lower matter. Rather it is said with respect to the supernal [matter] that corresponds to the lower. Regarding that which is written in the

Torah, our sages, blessed be their memory, already said, “a verse should not lose its literal sense.” Inasmuch as it says “a verse should not lose [its literal sense],” but not that Scripture is interpreted [only] according to its literal sense, we learn that even though the Torah has seventy aspects,⁵⁴ none of them can deny the *peshat*, and perhaps the *peshat* is one of the seventy. Thus, no sage has permission to offer an interpretation that contradicts the *peshat*, for the rabbis, blessed be their memory, have said [“a verse should not lose its literal sense”].⁵⁵ [Concerning] the *peshat* there are commentators who say that the verse is missing four or two words, or half of it is extra and unnecessary; yet, Scripture is as it is. In truth, there are many verses to which we must add a word or two in order to understand their *peshat*, but this is not due to a deficiency in Scripture but rather our deficiency, for we do not comprehend the holy language [Hebrew] except as it compares to the language in which we are immersed in the exile because of our sins.⁵⁶

Like Nahmanides, then, Jacob ben Sheshet maintains that the principle of the rabbis is that a verse should not lose its literal sense, not that a verse is to be interpreted only in accordance with its literal sense. A careful scrutiny of Jacob’s writings, a project beyond the confines of this essay, would reveal, moreover, that, like Nahmanides, he too has extended the meaning of the word *peshat* so that the simple meaning (often rendered through the prism of rabbinic interpretation) can itself constitute the esoteric signification. The positive role accorded the *peshat* meaning is based on the hermeneutical principle articulated at the start of the preceding quotation, the principle that served as the cornerstone of biblical exegesis for the theosophic kabbalists: events later are to be understood in terms of their supernal patterns or images in the sefirotic pleroma. Biblical narrative and law, therefore, themselves are to be interpreted as symbolic of this upper realm. Just as in the ontic sphere, the mundane has its correlate in the divine, and the latter is only known through the former, so on the textual plane the esoteric or mystical signification is apprehended only through the exoteric or literal–historical–grammatical meaning. Discerning the *peshat*, therefore, enables the exegete to interpret the scriptural text kabbalistically. In the final analysis, for Jacob ben Sheshet, like other theosophic kabbalists of his time, the

Torah in its mystical essence is identical with the divine name.⁵⁷ This identity underlies his claim, alluded to earlier, that the unvocalized Torah scroll admits of multiple meanings, just as the Tetragrammaton allows for a multiplicity of vocalizations, each engendering a different vehicle for kabbalistic intention during prayer. Yet, despite Jacob ben Sheshet's claim that the meaning of each and every word of the Torah changes in accordance with its vocalization, the fact is that there is one text whose ideogrammatic form represents the shape of the divine. This principle underlies Jacob ben Sheshet's claim against the commentators who on occasion derive the *peshat* by adding or detracting words from Scripture: the written text is as it is – nothing more or less! This understanding of “Scripture as it is” provides the basic element in Jacob ben Sheshet's conception of *peshat*, that is, the “text” that encompasses the multiple levels of meaning. The rabbinic stricture against negating the *peshat*, therefore, does not preclude either rabbinic, especially aggadic, or kabbalistic interpretations. On the contrary, it may happen that the kabbalistic interpretation is itself the *peshat*, or, put differently, the *peshat*, when properly understood, allows one to comprehend the mystical sense of Scripture.⁵⁸ This view is affirmed as well in an anonymous text, attributed to Naḥmanides, called the “Treatise on the Inwardness of the Torah.” This text, *prima facie*, espouses an extreme form of the hierarchical view by clearly distinguishing between the literal sense (*derekh peshat*) and the internal sense (*derekh penimi*), which is identified further as the inner soul (*neshamah penimit*) of Torah.⁵⁹ The author even criticizes those who would limit their understanding of Torah to the literal sense and urges the reader to believe that alongside the literal meanings are deep secrets in Scripture.⁶⁰ He insists, moreover, like Jacob ben Sheshet,⁶¹ that the Torah scroll is not vocalized because any received vocalization would limit the meaning of the verses in a set and fixed way.⁶² In spite of his emphasis on the potentiality for infinite interpretability, the author is careful to note that all meanings “are contained within the simple verses of Scripture (*peshatei ha-miqra*), and all of Torah acts according to this literal sense (*peshat*).”⁶³ For those who can comprehend the inner soul of Torah, it is evident that the *sensus mysticus* is comprised within the *sensus litteralis*.

What has been stated with regard to Naḥmanides, Jacob ben Sheshet, and the anonymous kabbalist can, in my view, be

transferred to other mystic exegetes as well. To appreciate the way in which the theosophic kabbalists, especially in the formative period of kabbalistic literary history, looked at Scripture, it is necessary to grasp the dynamics of kabbalistic interpretation with respect to the fundamental issue of the relationship between *peshat* and *sod*. The position of the theosophic kabbalists in general, and that of the authorship of the Zohar in particular, is put into sharp relief when compared with the view of Abraham Abulafia, leading expounder of the ecstatic kabbalah in the second half of the thirteenth century. In his detailed discussion of the seven exegetical methods of Abulafia, Moshe Idel has pointed out that the *peshat*, according to Abulafia, is oriented toward the masses who cannot comprehend truths on their own accord. The literal sense thus serves a pedagogical purpose, transmitting the tradition in order to educate the masses to perform good deeds, to submit to the authority of the law, and to inculcate truth in accordance with the level of their comprehension.⁶⁴ Although Abulafia pays lip service to the rabbinic dictum, “a verse should not lose its literal sense,” it is clear that for him there is a radical dichotomy between the literal and mystical, the exoteric and esoteric.⁶⁵ A typical statement of this is found in his *Or ha-Sekhel* in the following passage:

Even though we have alluded to the hidden matters, the verses should not lose their literal sense. Insofar as there is nothing compelling us to believe that this is an allegory and should not be [understood] according to its literal sense in any manner, we should initially believe the literal sense as it is ... Afterwards it should be interpreted as much as it can withstand according to the hidden way, for all that which is interpreted according to what is hidden instructs about a deeper wisdom and is more beneficial to a person than the exoteric teaching. The exoteric is written to benefit the masses who have no analytic skill to distinguish between truth and falsehood, but this will not benefit the knowledgeable person who seeks felicity unique to the rational faculty.⁶⁶

The negative view of *peshat* emerges with clarity from Abulafia's understanding of the mystical dimension of the text. This mode of interpretation, focused as it is on reading the text as a string of

separate letters that make up the different divine names, is, as Idel has aptly put it, a “text-destroying exegesis.”⁶⁷

The theosophic exegete, by contrast, would maintain the equal validity and necessity of the literal meaning. Indeed, the insight of the mystical illumination is such that there is an awareness that the esoteric is inseparable from the exoteric and, in the last analysis, a full appreciation of the one is dependent upon the other. The point is well made by Menaḥem Recanaṭi: “In every place in the Torah that you can elevate the [meaning of] a particular narrative (*ha-ma’aseh*)⁶⁸ or commandment to an entity higher than it [i.e. the *sefirot*], you must elevate it ... provided that you do not say that the matter is not as it is in its literal sense.”⁶⁹ The necessity to preserve the literal meaning together with the esoteric emphasized by the kabbalists resonates with the following claim in an anonymous passage, presumably written by someone of Ashkenazi extraction, interpreting the statement attributed to R. Ḥanina bar Papa in Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 65a: “He whose wine is not poured in his house as water is not in the category of blessing”:

The Torah is compared to water and to wine,⁷⁰ that is, the Torah in its literal sense is compared to water and the hidden sense to wine, for the numerical value [of the word wine, *yayin*] is [that of the word] secret [sod], as it says, “The wine enters and the secret comes forth.”⁷¹ That is to say, when one has learnt the mysteries of Torah, which are compared to wine as the literal meaning of Torah is compared to water, then the wine pours forth like water, that is, its mysteries together with the literal sense. In such a case there is certainly a sign of blessing!⁷²

The concurrence of *pashaṭ* and *sod* from the perspective of the kabbalistic reading is made in the following statement of Isaac of Acre:

I have seen the truth of the revealed and hidden secret (*sod nokhah we-nistar*) in many verses and in prayers and blessings. The one who believes only in the hidden (*nistar*) is in the category of the heretics, and these are the foolish of the philosophers who philosophize and are dependent upon their speculations. They are wise in their own eyes, for they have no knowledge of the ten *sefirot belimah*, which are the name of the

Holy One, blessed be He. Their faith is evil and deficient, for they act negligently with respect to prayer and blessings and make light of all the commandments. The one who believes solely in the external (*nokhah*) are the foolish of the traditionalists (*ha-mequbbalim*), for it is inappropriate to separate the Holy One, blessed be He, and His name. It is certainly the case that the Holy One, blessed be He, is His name and His name is the Holy One, blessed be He. Thus the ten *sefirot belimah* are the boundary without boundary⁷³ ... through them one can comprehend the secrets of the *haggadot* and the establishment of the words of the rabbis, blessed be their memory, “a verse should not lose its literal sense.”⁷⁴

Interestingly, Isaac of Acre classifies the philosophers as those who neglect the literal sense and believe only in the hidden, that is, the inner or allegorical meaning, a claim well known from other kabbalistic sources as well.⁷⁵ The traditionalists, on the other hand, believe only in the revealed sense and lack knowledge of the hidden meaning that is focused on the sefirotic world. The truth, one may presume, lies with the one who heeds both the revealed and the hidden meanings. Indeed, as Isaac says, it is only through knowledge of the *sefirot*, the *nistar*, that one can both comprehend the aggadic texts and fulfill the injunction of the rabbis that a verse does not lose its literal sense (*peshat*).

If we turn at this juncture to the Zohar, we will find that here too the notion of *peshat* is such that it comprehends within itself the *sensus mysticus*. This assumption underlies the hermeneutical strategy of the Zohar to discover in every minute detail of Scripture an allusion or symbol pointing to the hidden world of God. Far from being an impediment or obstacle to the mystical sense, therefore, the *peshat* (understood in its expanded sense) provides the key for unlocking kabbalistic truths. From the vantage point of zoharic hermeneutics the internal, mystical dimension of Torah, the *nistar*, is not concealed but rather revealed by the external form or garment, the *nigleh*. Indeed, biblical interpretation in the Zohar can be characterized as a form of hyperliteralism,⁷⁶ for the very words of Scripture are transformed into vehicles for God’s self-revelation⁷⁷ inasmuch as the letters are, to use the expression of the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Temunah*, “the true image, as it is written, ‘he beholds the image

of the Lord' (Num. 12:8), and this is the secret of the name of the Holy One, blessed be He."⁷⁸ This is the force of the repeated identification in the Zohar of God's name and the Torah: the verses of Scripture refer to intra-divine processes in the sefirotic realm inasmuch as the latter is said to be constituted within the name that is the Torah.⁷⁹ In contemporary semiotic terms, the matter may be expressed as follows: the symbolic transformation of Scripture undertaken by the zoharic authorship is dependent on such a close reading of the conventional textual signs that this mode of anagogic interpretation engenders a kind of literalism whereby the gap between levels of discourse (like that between ontological spheres) is closed. The kabbalistic interpretation proffered by the Zohar thus necessitates, in Betty Roitman's telling expression, a "return to the text," for through the kabbalistic reading scriptural words "become elements of a lexicon and present themselves as independent syntagms of greater or lesser length, each of which functions as the statement of a semantic equivalence."⁸⁰

To be sure, I do not deny that in some of the most important statements in zoharic literature affirming the diverse interpretative layers of Scripture the hierarchical view is evident. Thus, for example, there is the well-known metaphor employed in *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on the book of Ruth, which compares the Torah to a nut: just as the nut has three external shells and a kernel within, so too the words of Torah have four types of meaning, the literal sense (*ma'aseh*),⁸¹ the homiletical (*midrash*), the allegorical (*haggadah*),⁸² and the mystical (*sod*).⁸³ In another context the Zohar at first notes that every verse can be interpreted according to three senses: literal (*peshat*), homiletical (*midrash*), and mystical referred to as the "supernal wisdom" (*hokhmah ila'ah*). The Torah is then described by the metaphor of the tree whose different parts are said to correspond to various types of meaning: literal, homiletic, allegorical, numerological, mystical, and halakhic.⁸⁴ Moreover, on several occasions the Zohar speaks of the Torah as being like the name of God in terms of being both hidden and revealed,⁸⁵ and in at least one place it is emphasized that the revealed meaning is appropriate for human beings whereas the hidden is reserved for God, though Simeon ben Yoḥai was granted permission to reveal the secret truths.⁸⁶ The hierarchical approach is evident as well in one of the more dramatic and imaginative sections in the Zohar wherein

the author describes the adventures of the fellowship of Simeon ben Yoḥai in the most wondrous and fantastic terms. They are said to be in a garden, which is described further as the place from which one enters the world-to-come. After having fallen into a deep sleep, they are aroused by an angelic voice. The narrative then unfolds three successive stages of revelation, each reaching higher limits than the previous one. The first entails an encounter with “masters of Scripture” (*ma’rei miqra*), the second with the “masters of Mishnah” (*ma’rei matnita*), and the third with “masters of *aggadah*” (*ma’reihon de-aggadah*).⁸⁷ From the context it is evident that each group reveals deeper matters, culminating with the masters of *aggadah* who are described as possessing “faces illuminated like the light of the sun ... for they see each day the light of Torah as is appropriate.” The comrades are not given permission to enter into the place where the masters of *aggadah* are located, presumably because their teachings are too esoteric. What is significant for our purposes is the hierarchical ordering of interpretative postures implicit here: Scripture, Mishnah, and *aggadah*, the latter, I suggest, being identical with kabbalistic meaning.⁸⁸

Perhaps the passage that is most hierarchical in nature is the one that distinguishes four levels of meaning in the scriptural text: the narrative that is the garment, the laws that are the body, the mystical secrets that are the soul, and the innermost secrets – to be revealed only in the messianic future – that are the soul of the soul. These four are said to correspond respectively to the following ontological gradations: the heavens, *Shekhinah*, *Tif’eret*, and *Keter*.⁸⁹ The wicked are those who say that the Torah consists only of narratives and therefore look at the garment, the *peshaṭ*,⁹⁰ but not the body that consists of the laws and commandments. From the context it would appear that the wicked are Christian exegetes who are viewed as literalists in the sense that they look at and accept only the narrative of Hebrew Scripture, insofar as it serves as the background for their own Scripture. They do not consider the body underneath the external garment, for they explicitly reject the biblical laws as interpreted in the rabbinic tradition.⁹¹ The righteous, by contrast, know how to look at the Torah to see what lies beneath the garment. It is essential to note that the body is correlated with the *Shekhinah* as well as the commandments, two themes that find expression elsewhere in the zoharic corpus.⁹²

A careful examination of the key passages that suggest that the literal meaning hides or envelopes the mystical truth will demonstrate, however, that this is from the perspective of only the uninitiated or unenlightened. The process of mystical enlightenment or illumination consists precisely of the fact that the *ba'al ha-sod* sees the inner light (the esoteric matter) shine through the external shell (the literal sense) of the text. Perhaps this is nowhere more evident than in the following account:

The Holy One, blessed be He, enters all the hidden matters [or words] that He has made in the holy Torah, and everything is found in the Torah. The Torah reveals that hidden matter and immediately it is cloaked in another garment wherein it is concealed and not revealed. Even though the matter is hidden in its garment, the wise, who are full of eyes (*malyyan ayyenin*), see it from within its garment (*ham'an lah mi-go levushah*). When that matter is revealed, before it enters into a garment, they cast an open eye (*peqihu de-eina*) upon it, and even though it is immediately hidden it is not removed from their eyes.⁹³

The disclosure of that which is hidden within the Torah occurs through the outer garment in which it is cloaked. This is the force of the claim that the wise, who are “full of eyes,” *malyyan ayyenin* (I return to this image later), see the concealed matter from within the garment, *ham'an lah mi-go levushah*. The function of the garment, paradoxically, is to concomitantly conceal and reveal: the secret is hidden from everyone by the garment, but it is only from within the garment that the secret is revealed to the wise.⁹⁴ The plausibility of this interpretation is supported by the famous parable of the beautiful maiden and her lover, which immediately follows the passage just cited. In this parable the maiden, who symbolizes the Torah, is said to disclose four levels to her lover, the mystic, in a gradual process of unveiling: the first stage corresponds to the level of literal sense (*peshat*), the second to homiletical or midrashic interpretation (*derashah*), the third to allegory (*haggadah*), and the fourth to the mystical or esoteric. The last stage is not given a specific name but is described as the maiden revealing herself “face to face” (*anpin be-anpin*) to the lover and disclosing “all her hidden secrets and hidden ways.”⁹⁵ When the mysteries or secrets of Torah are revealed

to the mystic, he unites with the Torah and is called *husband of Torah* and *master of the house*, epithets that signify that this union is of an amatory nature. In the moment of unification the maiden says to the lover,

Do you see the allusion that I alluded to at first [i.e. the initial disclosure that corresponds to the literal sense]? So many secrets were contained in it. Now he sees that nothing should be added or taken away from those words [of Scripture]. Then the *peshaṭ* of the verse is [revealed] as it is, not a single word should be added or deleted.⁹⁶

At the end of the process, when one comprehends the mystical essence of Torah, and thus unites with her in an intimate relation akin to sexual union, then, and only then, does the plain sense of the verse become comprehensible. Traditional commentators on the Zohar have realized the full implication of this passage: mystical enlightenment culminates with a reappropriation of *peshaṭ*,⁹⁷ here understood as the text as it is, to use the terminology of Jacob ben Sheshet, which comprises all senses of Scripture, including the *sensus mysticus*.

The inclusion of *sod* within *peshaṭ* is highlighted as well in the following statement of Moses de León in one of his Hebrew theosophic works:

Those very stories [in the Bible] are the secret of God, and they are included in the wisdom of His thought, the secret of His name. When a person removes the mask of blindness from his face, then he will find in that very story and literal sense (*ha-ma'aseh*)⁹⁸ a hill of spices⁹⁹ and frankincense.¹⁰⁰ Then his blind eyes will be opened¹⁰¹ and his thoughts will gladden, and he will say, "Whoever you are, O great mountain" (Zech. 4:7), exalted, "where you hid on the day of the incident"¹⁰² (1 Sam. 20:19), as I explained in the book that I composed called *Pardes*. I called it by the name *Pardes* in virtue of the matter that is known, for I composed it in accordance with the secret of the four ways [of interpretation], according to its very name [as alluded to in the saying] "Four entered the *Pardes*,"¹⁰³ in other words, *peshaṭ*, *remez*, *derashah*, *sod*, this is the matter of *Pardes*. I explained there these matters pertaining to the secret of the

narrative and literal sense written in the Torah, to show that everything is the eternal life and the true Torah, and there is nothing in all the Torah that is not contained in the secret of His name, may He be elevated.¹⁰⁴

In this passage, de León mentions his use of the fourfold method of interpretation but insists that all levels of meaning, including the literal narrative (*sensus historicus*), are contained in the secret of the name that is mystically identified with the Torah. It may be concluded, therefore, that the *peshaṭ* itself comprehends the *sod*. This last point is brought out in a striking fashion in another zoharic passage that serves as the preamble to the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* ("Book of Concealment"). In the middle of that passage, a parable is given to describe the fate of one who is occupied with the study of *Sifra di-Tseni'uta*, a process referred to, on the basis of the description of Aqiva in the famous legend of four who entered *Pardes*, as "entering and existing." Such a person is compared to a man who lived in the mountains and knew nothing of life in the city. This man sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw. One day he went to the city and was given bread, cakes kneaded in oil, and fine pastry made with honey and oil. At each interval, he inquired about the ingredients used to make the item he was consuming and was told, in each case, wheat. After having received the last item, he proclaimed, "I am the master of all these (*ma'rei dikhol illein*), for I eat the essence (*iqara*)¹⁰⁵ of them all, which is wheat."¹⁰⁶ The one who successfully studies the "Book of Concealment" is thus compared to the mountain man who eats the essential ingredient used in making all the different items, viz. wheat. There seems to be in this parable a self-awareness on the part of the author of Zohar that the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* somehow represents the kernel of zoharic theosophy whereas other parts, perhaps especially the *Idrot*, are further elaborations that are comparable to the various baked goods in relation to the wheat.¹⁰⁷ It is evident, moreover, that wheat functions here as a symbol for Torah, a well-known motif in classical rabbinic literature¹⁰⁸ in general and thirteenth-century kabbalistic sources in particular.¹⁰⁹ Of especial interest is the talmudic expression "masters of wheat," *marei ḥiṭya*, for those who have mastered the sources.¹¹⁰ That the Zohar is probably drawing on this image is strengthened by the fact that the *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* is composed of five chapters, which perhaps are meant to call to mind the

five books of the Torah; that is, this part of the Zohar is structurally parallel to the Pentateuch.¹¹¹ Furthermore, it is possible that the wheat, bread, cakes, and fine pastry allude to the four levels of interpretation, literal, midrashic, allegorical, and mystical.¹¹² The wheat, therefore, symbolizes the literal sense of Torah,¹¹³ its essence or most basic ingredient, which is at the same time, as the Zohar points out, the principle (*kelala*),¹¹⁴ i.e. that which comprises within itself all the other levels. The movement of zoharic hermeneutics may be thus compared to a circle, beginning and ending with the text in its literal sense. For the Zohar, the search for the deepest truths of Scripture is a gradual stripping away of the external forms or garments until one gets to the inner core, but when one gets to that inner core what one finds is nothing other than the *pashaṭ*, that is, the text as it is. To interpret, from the perspective of the Zohar, is not to impose finite meaning on the text, but to unfold the infinite meaning within the text. A description of the interpretation process as a form of appropriation by Paul Ricoeur is, I believe, particularly apt in characterizing the convergence of *pashaṭ* and *sod* in the Zohar: “Appropriation ... is the recovery of that which is at work, in labour, within the text. What the interpreter says is a re-saying which reactivates what is said by the text.”¹¹⁵ By decoding the text in light of sefirotic symbolism the theosophic kabbalist recovers that which is at work within Scripture, at least as viewed from his own perspective.

It is of interest to consider at this juncture the following description of Moses Cordovero (1522–70), for he has combined the negative attitude toward *pashaṭ* characteristic of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* with a more positive orientation of the main body of the Zohar.

A person must remove the garments from the Torah and break her shells in order to comprehend her depth and her hidden spirituality¹¹⁶ ... They must without doubt strip the Torah from all of her shells ... then they will understand without any external garment. This is the secret of the Torah that the Holy One, blessed be He, will create in the future ... All her shells will be broken and the inner core of the Torah will be comprehended ... The kabbalistic secret is clothed in the literal sense for one cannot know how to expound it except by way of the literal sense, as if one said Abraham was a merciful man [i.e., from the attribute of *hesed* or

mercy], and his going to Egypt [symbolizes] his descent to the shells ... In this manner one cannot speak of kabbalah without it being mixed with the secret of the literal sense and corporeality.¹¹⁷

Cordovero thus begins with a description of the necessity to break the shell of the literal sense, to remove its garment, in order to comprehend the inner core or mystical essence of Torah. The denuded Torah, without shell or garment, characterizes the state of affairs in the messianic age. The Torah in the preredemptive state must have these shells or garment. There is little doubt that with respect to this negative view of *peshaṭ* Cordovero was influenced by the formulation of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*.¹¹⁸ In the second part of the passage, however, Cordovero insists, in line with the main body of the Zohar, that the esoteric meaning can be comprehended only through the literal sense. *Sod*, therefore, is clothed in *peshaṭ*, and the only way to apprehend the former is through the latter.

What is perhaps an even more succinct presentation of the hermeneutical orientation of the Zohar, which I would term the retrieval of *peshaṭ*, is contained in the following statement of Moses Ḥayyim Ephraim of Sudlikov (ca. 1737–1800), grandson of Israel ben Eliezer, *Ba'al Shem Tov* (1700–60):

The secret of *teqi'ah*, *teru'ah*, *teqi'ah* is [to be explained] by [the rabbinic idiom] “a verse should not lose its literal sense.” That is, initially a person must study and comprehend the literal sense. Afterwards he should expand to [the comprehension of] the various lights and secrets of the Torah. And after that from the power of interpretation he should return and come [to an understanding of] the true literal sense (*ha-peshaṭ ha-emet*). This is [the significance] of *teqi'ah*, *teru'ah*, *teqi'ah*. At first there is the *teqi'ah* that instructs about the literal sense (*ha-peshaṭ*), i.e., a straight sound (*qol pashuṭ*).¹¹⁹ Afterwards there is a *teru'ah*, which contains the letters *torah ayin*, i.e., the [Torah] is interpreted in seventy [the numerical value of *ayin*] ways. And afterwards a *teqi'ah*, to return to the true literal sense.¹²⁰

In the case of the Zohar, one finds precisely the kind of “mystical literalism”¹²¹ described by the Hasidic master that is predicated on the notion that the esoteric sense is contained within

the literal, an insight apprehended by the mystic who returns to the literal sense, that is, the true literal sense, *ha-peshaṭ ha-emet*, only after interpreting the text in its multiple aspects. The literal sense is a cover hiding the mystical light only for the unenlightened; the mystic, by contrast, sees that light through and within the cover. The rejection by the Zohar of a purely literal reading of biblical narrative does not imply a bifurcation of meaning between *peshaṭ* and *sod*, but only a failure to understand the inherent mystical dimensions of *peshaṭ*.¹²² Even the *peshaṭ* contains *sod*, and one who looks at the *peshaṭ* without knowledge of the supernal realm cannot truly understand *peshaṭ*. This, I believe, is implied in the following passage: “Even though the narrative of the Torah or the [literal] account (*ovada*)¹²³ goes out from the principle of Torah (*mi-kelala de-oraita*) [i.e. the realm of divine emanations that in their collectivity are the Torah in its supernal form] it does not go out to instruct about itself alone but rather to instruct about that supernal principle of Torah (*kelala ila’ah de-oraita*).”¹²⁴ The function of the literal-narrative meaning is to instruct the reader about the supernal Torah, the divine pleroma. Without such knowledge, the Torah in its purely literal fashion is not even comprehended. This is the force of the mystical understanding of the *sensus litteralis* presented in the Zohar. Thus, in one of the contexts in which the Zohar emphasizes that the Torah, like the name of God, is hidden and revealed, the focus is an interpretation of “And she [Tamar] sat down at the entrance to Einayim” (Gen. 38:14).

R. Abba said: This section proves that the Torah is hidden and revealed. I have looked through the entire Torah and have not found a place that is called *petah einayim*. Rather all is hidden and it contains a secret of secrets ... What is *petah einayim*? [The word *petah* may be gathered from what] is written, “he [Abraham] was sitting at the entrance of the tent” (Gen. 18:1). It is also written, “and the Lord will pass over the door” (Exod. 12:23), and “Open the gates of righteousness for me” (Ps. 118:19). [The word] “eyes” [signifies] that all eyes of the word are looking upon this opening.¹²⁵

It is obvious, then, that the hidden meaning of the expression *petah einayim* refers to the fact that it functions as a symbol for the last of the divine gradations, *Shekhinah*, the opening to which all eyes are

turned.¹²⁶ The kabbalistic signification, therefore, is the sole meaning that the term has for the Zohar; it does not represent a deeper meaning set over against a more straightforward literal meaning, for no “actual” place corresponds to that name.¹²⁷ The interpretation of the Zohar is based on a particular reading of the verse found in several rabbinic sources,¹²⁸ though the statement in *Genesis Rabbah* 85:7 is that which most closely resembles the language of the Zohar:

Rabbi said: We have reviewed all of Scripture and we have not found a place which is called *petah einayim*. What, then, is *petah einayim*? This is to teach that she cast her eyes to the opening to which all eyes are cast. And she said: Let it be Your will that I should not leave this house empty handed.¹²⁹

Like the midrashist, the kabbalist begins from the assumption that there is no actual place known by the name *petah einayim*.¹³⁰ Therefore, the simple meaning of the biblical expression must be sought elsewhere. The explanation in the midrashic compilation attributed to Rabbi, that is, Judah the Prince¹³¹ – which itself is intended as an explanation of *peshat* and not an interpretative layer superimposed on the text – that this refers to the “opening” to which all eyes are cast, that is, a figurative characterization of God,¹³² is appropriate and transformed by the Zohar into a theosophic symbol. That is, this opening is none other than the divine Presence, the last of the *sefirot*, which is often characterized in theosophic kabbalistic literature as the gateway or openness through which one enters into the sefirotic pleroma. Hence, the *peshat* here is comprehensible only in light of the *sod*, though the formulation of the latter is based on the midrashic (and decidedly non-mystical) reading. In this case, therefore, the claim that the Torah is hidden and revealed should not be construed as an affirmation of dual meaning in the text, but rather as saying that the revealed meaning is itself intelligible only in light of a hidden signification or symbolic correspondence. In this respect, the Zohar follows Naḥmanides and Jacob ben Sheshet, who, as I mentioned earlier, affirmed that on occasion the mystical meaning alone provides an adequate explanation for the *peshat*. To take another illustration from the Zohar:

R. Simeon said: If people only knew the words of Torah, then they would comprehend that there is no word or letter in the

Torah that does not contain supernal, precious secrets. Come and see: It is written, “Moses spoke and God answered him with a voice” (Exod. 19:19). It has been taught:¹³³ What is [the meaning of] “with a voice”? With the voice of Moses. This is correct, the voice of Moses precisely (*dayqa*), the voice to which he was attached and through which he was superior to all other prophets.¹³⁴

In this particular example, the kabbalistic recasting of the midrashic reading is offered as the *peshat* of the verse, the plain meaning. Hence, the voice through which God responded to Moses is, as reflected already in the midrashic interpretation, the voice of Moses, but in the Zohar the latter is transformed into a symbol for one of the *sefirot*, viz. *Tif'eret*, the gradation to which the earthly Moses is attached.¹³⁵ The transformation of the midrashic into the kabbalistic is noted by the author of Zohar by his use of the expression *dayqa* in connection with the phrase “voice of Moses,” which I have rendered as “precisely.” The Zohar uses this term in many contexts to emphasize the kabbalistic intent¹³⁶ of the given passage, as, for example, in the following:

It has been taught¹³⁷ [concerning the verse] “For on this day atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you of all your sins” (Lev. 16:30). It should have been [written] “this day” (*ha-yom ha-zeh*). But it says “on this day” (*ba-yom ha-zeh*) precisely (*dayqa*), for on that day the Holy Ancient One is revealed to atone for everyone’s sins.¹³⁸

The pretext here is a presumed problem with *peshat* – a repeated phenomenon in the Zohar to which I will return later on – which is answered by stressing that the precise form of the biblical text instructs the reader about a mystical process. It will be noted that the same role is played by the word *mammash*, which served already as a technical term in rabbinic literature to denote that a given biblical expression should be understood in its factual or real sense and not in some imaginative, figurative, or allegorical way.¹³⁹ In the Zohar the word *mammash* can designate that a specific term is to be understood in its kabbalistic signification.¹⁴⁰ Thus, for instance, one reads,

He began to expound again and said: “From my flesh I will see God” (Job 19:26). Why [is it written] “from my flesh” (*u-mibesari*)? It should have been “from myself” (*u-me’atsmi*). Rather, from my flesh literally (*mammash*)! And what is it? As it is written, “The holy flesh will pass away from you” (Jer. 11:15), and it is written, “Thus shall My covenant be marked in your flesh” (Gen. 17:13). It has been taught: Whenever a person is marked by the holy sign of that covenant, from it he sees the Holy One, blessed be He. From it literally (*mammash*)!¹⁴¹

This is a striking example of the hyperliteralism that characterizes the zoharic reading of Scripture. By means of the technique of *gezerah shawah*, the linking of seemingly disparate contextual fields based on identity of expression,¹⁴² the Zohar determines that the occurrence of the word “flesh” (*basar*) in Job 19:26 must be explained as denoting the *membrum virile*; hence, it is from the phallus that one sees God.¹⁴³ The meaning of this is clarified by the mystical notion, itself rooted in earlier midrashic modes of thinking, that the sign of the covenant of circumcision is a letter inscribed on the body.¹⁴⁴ In that sense it can be said that one sees God from the very flesh on which the sign of the covenant has been inscribed.

Another example of the hyperliteralism of the Zohar may be gathered from the following passage: “The first tablets were inscribed from that place [*Binah*]. This is the secret of the verse, ‘incised on the tablets’ (Exod. 32:16). Do not read ‘incised’ (*harut*) but rather freedom (*herut*).¹⁴⁵ *Herut* indeed (*mammash*) – the place upon which is dependent all freedom.”¹⁴⁶ Utilizing the midrashic reading of the biblical expression *harut* as *herut*, the Zohar renders the plain sense of the verse as referring to the *sefirah* that is designated by the term *herut*, the ontic source of all freedom, that is, *Binah*, which is the source as well for the tablets of law, the subject of the verse in question. On occasion the Zohar uses both of these expressions together, *mammash* and *dayqa*, to note that the literal meaning is comprehensible only in terms of the kabbalistic significance.¹⁴⁷ To cite one pertinent example:

R. Judah: Israel did not come close to Mount Sinai until they entered the portion of the Righteous One [*Tsaddiq*, i.e. the ninth emanation or *Yesod*, Foundation] and merited it. From

where do we know? It is written, “On that very day they entered the wilderness of Sinai” (Exod. 19:1). “On that very day” indeed (*mammash dayqa*)! And it is written, “In that day they shall say: This is our God; we trusted in Him [and He delivered us]” (Isa. 25:9).¹⁴⁸

The kabbalistic explanation that Israel approached Mount Sinai only after having entered the divine grade of *Yesod*, or *Tsaddiq*, is derived from the literal expression *ba-yom ha-zeh*, “on that very day,” for the word *zeh*, the masculine demonstrative pronoun, is one of the standard symbols for this particular *sefirah*.¹⁴⁹ Further support for this reading is adduced from Isaiah 25:9, where the demonstrative *zeh* is again used, as read by the theosophic exegete, as a name of this attribute of God. The kabbalistic truth is, in the last analysis, revealed to a careful reader of the text in its most elemental sense through the rabbinic hermeneutical technique of *gezerah shawah*.¹⁵⁰

That the implication of the expressions *dayqa* and *mammash* is to signify the convergence of *peshat* and *sod*, such that the determination of kabbalistic meaning is channeled through the linguistic signification of the terms in the given utterance,¹⁵¹ can be seen unambiguously from the following passage:

R. Simeon said: it is written “And new moon after new moon, and sabbath after sabbath” (Isa. 66:23). Why is the one [new moon] compared to the other [sabbath]? Everything amounts to one gradation, the one coupled with the other. The happiness of the one is not found in the other except when the Holy Ancient One is revealed; then the happiness of all [is found]. It has been taught: “A psalm. A song, for the sabbath day” (Ps. 92:1), to the sabbath day literally (*mammash*)! This is a praise that the Holy One, blessed be He, utters. At that time the happiness is found and the soul is increased for the Ancient One is revealed and the union is set. Similarly, when the moon is renewed the sun illuminates her with the happiness of the light of the Ancient One above. Therefore this sacrifice [offered on the New Moon] is above so that everything will be ameliorated and happiness will be found in the world. Thus [it is said] “they should bring a sacrifice for me,” the word [*al*] precisely (*dayqa millah*). It has been taught: It is written, “A burnt offering for

sabbath in addition to the regular burnt offering” (Num. 28:10). One must focus one’s mental intention higher than the rest of the days. Thus [it is written] specifically (*dayqa*) “in addition to [i.e. *al*, which can be read as the preposition ‘atop’ or ‘over’] the burnt offering.” It has been taught: [with respect to] Hannah it is written, “she prayed to (*al*) the Lord” (1 Sam. 1:10). [The word] *al* indeed (*dayqa*), for children are dependent on the holy *mazzal* [i.e. *Keter* or the Holy Ancient One]¹⁵² ... There is no word or even a small letter in the Torah that does not allude to the supernal wisdom, and from which are suspended heaps of secrets of the supernal wisdom.¹⁵³

In this highly compact passage, the Zohar draws various mystical conclusions by effectively overliteralizing the verses under discussion. In particular, attention is paid to what would appear to be a rather innocuous word, the preposition *al*, which, when read kabbalistically, is decoded as a sign for the uppermost aspects of the divine. Having determined the meaning of this term, it is possible to link together disparate textual units – in this case derived both from biblical and talmudic sources – by means of the technique of *gezerah shawah*. What would appear from the outside as an obvious imposition of an external and autonomous system upon the biblical text is in fact presented as the precise and literal meaning of the relevant verses. Therefore the concluding statement is to the effect that every word, indeed every letter, of Scripture alludes to a supernal secret. In the case of the Zohar we might say, inverting the instructive phrase of one scholar, *peshat* is “deep midrash,”¹⁵⁴ if we understand by the latter a reference to theosophic symbolism.

Another, and by far the most frequently employed, term in the Zohar to mark the convergence of *peshat* and *sod* is the word *wadda’y*. With respect to this usage it must be noted that the Zohar is again drawing on rabbinic literature, wherein this word, like *mammash*, functioned as a *terminus technicus* to underscore or emphasize the factual or sensible meaning, the *peshat* as it came to be called in Amoraic sources, of a certain expression in contrast to a nonliteral or figurative connotation.¹⁵⁵ At least three different nuances can be discerned in the zoharic usage of the key term. It is used to emphasize the actual or real meaning,¹⁵⁶ to mark a kabbalistic symbol,¹⁵⁷ or to signify the convergence of the exoteric (literal)

and esoteric (symbolic) meaning,¹⁵⁸ I will mention only a few examples of countless possibilities found scattered throughout the landscape of the Zohar. From a purely statistical perspective the examples I will give are somewhat arbitrary in that they reflect only a very small portion of the passages that could have been cited. However, by calling attention to the limited cases where this exegetical device is used, I hope minimally to focus scholarly attention on an important, but neglected, phenomenon in zoharic hermeneutics. It is my intention, moreover, that the typologies established here will be tested, refined, and applied in other studies in the future.

Let me begin with the following zoharic interpretation of Esther 8:15:

Mordecai went out before the king in royal attire [*levush malkhut*, lit. in the garment of royalty], the garment of royalty indeed (*wadda'y*) [i.e.] the image of that [supernal] world ... R. Shim'on said: how sweet are these words, fortunate is my lot. I know that the righteous in that world are clothed in the garment called the garment of royalty, and indeed so it is.¹⁵⁹

The expression *levush malkhut*, understood in its literal sense from the vantage point of the Zohar, signifies the luminous garment that derives from the *Shekhinah*, the divine attribute also called by the name *Malkhut*. The verse informs us, then, that when Mordecai went before the King he was cloaked in just such an aura, which is construed as an image of the garment of the righteous in the sefirotic realm. There is here no second meaning for the expression *levush malkhut*; its plain meaning indicates the mystical notion. Another way of putting this matter is that the literalism of the text instructs the reader about the esoteric doctrine. The same approach is apparent in the zoharic interpretation of the verse, "When the men of the place [of Gerar] asked him [Isaac] about his wife, he said, 'She is my sister'" (Gen. 26:7):

This is similar [to the incident of] Abraham,¹⁶⁰ for the *Shekhinah* was with him and his wife, and on account of the *Shekhinah* [the statement] was uttered, as it is written, "Say to Wisdom, You are my sister" (Prov. 7:4). Therefore he was strengthened and said "She is my sister." By both Abraham and Isaac it was certainly

appropriate, for in the verse it is written, “My sister, my darling, my faultless dove” (Song of Songs 5:2). Thus it was indeed (*wadda’y*) appropriate for them to say “She is my sister.”¹⁶¹

Troubled by an obvious problem that has engaged the interest of biblical commentators through the ages regarding Isaac’s (like Abraham’s) overt deception, the Zohar provides an explanation that accounts for the *peshaṭ* but only by reference to a kabbalistic secret. The connotation of the word “sister” in the account of Abraham and Isaac is *Shekhinah*, a usage attested in the two other biblical verses – when read kabbalistically as well – cited in the preceding passage. The *peshaṭ*, when so understood, removes the problem of lying entirely, for both Patriarchs referred to the divine Presence and not their respective spouses. Even though the *peshaṭ* offered by the zoharic reading ignores the continuation of the verse itself, it is evident that the kabbalistic explanation of the word “sister” is indeed presented as the plain meaning of the idiom in this context.

Let me cite another example to illustrate the point:

R. Ḥiyya began to expound, “the glory of God is to conceal the matter, the glory of kings is to search out the matter” (Prov. 25:2). “The glory of God is to conceal the matter,” for a person does not have permission to reveal secret matters, as they have not been given permission to reveal matters that the Ancient of Days concealed, as it is said, “that they may eat their fill and cover that which the Ancient One [concealed]” (Isa. 23:18).¹⁶² “To eat their fill,” up to that place wherein they have permission [to reveal] and no more. Thus it is said, *we-limekhaseh atiq*, verily (*wadda’y*) that which the Ancient One (*atiq*) covers.¹⁶³

The author of the Zohar follows here the reading of the verse from Isaiah attributed to R. Eleazar in the Talmud (b. Pesahim 119a): “What is the meaning of *li-mekhaseh atiq*? That which the Ancient of Days (*atiq yomin*) has concealed. And what is that? The secrets of Torah.” The midrashic reading is accepted by the Zohar as the *peshaṭ* of the verse, signified by the usage of the *terminus technicus wadda’y*. In the case of the Zohar, moreover, the talmudic reference is transposed in light of sefirotic theosophy, for the word *atiq* designates the

first of the divine gradations, though already in the Talmud the word *atiq* has a specific theological reference. In this case as well, therefore, we have an instance where the *peshaṭ* of a verse is rendered by its esoteric meaning. That the word *wadda'y* serves as a kind of signpost to designate that the plain sense of the biblical expression is to be rendered by its sefirotic correlation is repeatedly stressed in the Zohar, as for example:

Why is it written, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness” (Prov. 3:17)? [R. Eleazar] said to [R. Hiyya]: How foolish are people of the world, for they do not know how to consider words of Torah, for the words of Torah are the way to merit that pleasantness of God, as it is written, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness.” The ways of pleasantness (*no'am*) indeed! What is this pleasantness? As it is written, “To gaze upon the beauty (*no'am*) of the Lord.” It has been taught that the Torah and its ways derive from that Beauty ... Thus, it is written, “Her ways are ways of pleasantness, and all her paths peaceful.”¹⁶⁴

From the vantage point of the kabbalist, then, the expression *darkhei no'am*, “the ways of pleasantness,” refers to the gradation in the sefirotic pleroma out of which the Torah, itself a designation for the *sefirah* of *Tif'eret*, emerges. In that sense, the expression should be taken quite literally, for the ways of Torah are the ways of pleasantness; that is, pleasantness is the ontic source for the Torah.

The exegetical function that the author of the Zohar assigned to the word *wadda'y* as marking the overlapping of exoteric and esoteric signification can also be seen from the following passage:

What is [the meaning of what is] written, “So he [Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood (*ets*)” (Exod. 15:25)? The word *ets* is nothing but the Torah,¹⁶⁵ as it is written, “She is a tree of life (*ets ḥayyim*) to those who grasp her” (Prov. 3:18). And the [word] Torah is nothing but the Holy One, blessed be He. R. Abba said: the [word] tree is nothing but the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, “For man [is] the tree of the field” (Num. 20:19),¹⁶⁶ the tree of the field (*ets ha-sadeh*) indeed (*wadda'y*), i.e., the tree of the field of holy apples.¹⁶⁷

Using the ancient midrashic formula to derive semantic meaning from a specific expression, “the word X is nothing but Y,”¹⁶⁸ the author of Zohar sets out to show that the reference to the piece of wood in Exodus 15:25 refers to God or, to be more precise, the aspect of God that corresponds to the Torah and is called the Holy One, blessed be He, that is, *Tif’eret*. The first view achieves this by two steps: first, by following rabbinic exegesis and specifying that the word “tree” (or “wood”) signifies Torah; and second, that the word “Torah” denotes the Holy One, blessed be He. R. Abba, by contrast, reaches the goal with one step: the word “tree” itself denotes the Holy One, blessed be He. This is proven from the verse, “For man [is] the tree of the field,” which is read as the tree of the “field of holy apples,” that is, the *Shekhinah*. The tree that is in the field of holy apples is *Tif’eret*, also designated as the *anthropos*.

From the perspective of the zoharic authorship, then, the word *wadda’y* can signify that the literal sense of Scripture is to be sought in its kabbalistic meaning. That this is so may be seen clearly from one final example:

“The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: This is the ritual law that the Lord has commanded” (Num. 19:1–2). R. Yose began to expound: “This is the Torah that Moses set before the Israelites” (Deut. 4:44). Come and see: The words of Torah are holy, supernal, and sweet ... For he who is involved in [the study of] Torah it is as if he stands each day on Mount Sinai and receives the Torah ... The comrades have thus taught: Here it is written “this is the ritual law” (*zo’t huqqat ha-torah*) and [in the other case] it is written “and this is the Torah” (*we-zo’t ha-torah*). What is the difference between these two? This concerns a supernal mystery and thus have I learnt: “This is the Torah” to show everything in one unity, to contain the Community of Israel [*Shekhinah*] within the Holy One, blessed be He [*Tif’eret*] so that everything will be found as one. Therefore [it is written] “and this is the Torah.” Why is there the additional *waw* [in the word *we-zo’t*]? As it has been said, to show that everything is one without any separation. [The word] *we-zo’t* [signifies] the principle (*kelal*) and the exception (*perat*) as one, the masculine and feminine. Thus [it is written] “And this is the Torah” indeed (*wadda’y*)! But the word *zo’t* without the

additional *waw* [signifies] “the ritual law” (*ḥuqqat ha-torah*) indeed (*wadda’y*), and not the Torah, i.e., the law of the Torah and the decree of the Torah ... Thus [it is written] “and this is the Torah” literally (*mammash*), [signifying] one complete unity, the containment of the masculine and feminine, the *waw* and the *he* [the word signifies] the *he* alone, and thus [it is written] “this is the ritual law.”¹⁶⁹

Ever a close reader of the biblical text, the zoharic author here heeds the distinction between the two expressions “and this is the Torah” (*we-zo’t ha-torah*), on the one hand, and “this is the ritual law” (*zo’t ḥuqqat ha-torah*), on the other. The former expression when decoded (perhaps “encoded” would be the more appropriate word) kabbalistically alludes to the unity of the feminine and masculine aspects of the divine, *Shekhinah* and *Tif’eret*, signified, respectively, by the words *zo’t* and *torah*, whereas the latter refers exclusively to the feminine aspect designated as *zo’t* as well as *ḥuqqat ha-torah*. The verse “and this is the torah” is thus being read as: this, *zo’t*, that is, *Shekhinah*, is one with the Torah, that is, *Tif’eret*. By contrast, the verse “this is the ritual law” is read as follows: this, *zo’t*, that is, *Shekhinah*, is the ritual law, *ḥuqqat torah*, both terms designating the same potency of the Godhead. The former verse, therefore, unlike the latter, is a statement that proclaims the divine unity, understood in its particular kabbalistic nuance. This point is related by the kabbalistic interpreter to the additional *waw* in the former case, *we-zo’t*, a letter that signifies the union of male and female. In the last analysis, therefore, the kabbalistic reading is indicated by the very orthography of Scripture, which constitutes the *peshat* in the extended sense of the term.

The centrality of the role of *peshat* in zoharic hermeneutics can be ascertained as well from the many instances in the Zohar wherein a problem with the simple meaning serves as the basis for a kabbalistic truth that, when exposed, illuminates the verse. Suffice it here to mention a few examples to illustrate this phenomenon. In one passage the claim of the Zohar that every word of Scripture has a secret is based on a problem with the literal meaning of Exodus 2:6, “When she [the daughter of Pharaoh] opened it, she saw that it was a child,” *wa-tiftaḥ wa-tir’ehu et ha-yeled*. The obvious problem, reflected in any number of medieval biblical exegetes,¹⁷⁰ is why the

word *wa-tir'ehu*, which contains the verb ("saw") and the direct object ("him"), is followed by another direct object of the same verb, "the child," *et ha-yeled*. This problem in *peshat* serves as the springboard for the mystical imagination of the author of Zohar, who notes that the extra letters in the word *wa-tir'ehu*, the *he* and *waw*, which symbolize the attributes of *Shekhinah* and *Tif'eret*, were inscribed on the infant Moses. This kabbalistic interpretation is based in part upon the following statement in Babylonian Talmud, Soṭah 12b: "When she opened it, she saw that it was a child.' It should have been written *wa-tir'eh* (she saw) [instead of *wa-tir'ehu*, she saw him]. R. Yose ben Ḥanina said that she saw the *Shekhinah* with him." In his commentary on the relevant verse, the eleventh-century exegete R. Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes (Rashi) cites this talmudic interpretation as the midrashic one after he offers what he considers to be the *peshat*, viz. the direct object "the child" (*et ha-yeled*) modifies the prior expression "she saw him" (*wa-tir'ehu*). From the perspective of R. Yose ben Ḥanina, however, the midrashic explanation is itself the *peshat* of the verse. Scripture should have used the verbal form *wa-tera* followed by the direct object *et ha-yeled*. The seemingly superfluous expression, *wa-tir'ehu*, therefore, is interpreted as a reference to the *Shekhinah*. According to the opinion of some later Ashkenazi authorities, the reference to the *Shekhinah* is derived from the two extra letters in the word *wa-tir'ehu*, the *he* and *waw*, for these letters make up one of the names of God, *ho*.¹⁷¹ Thus, for instance, Judah ben Eliezer (twelfth and thirteenth century), writes, "When she opened it, she saw that it was a child.' R. Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi) explains that she saw the *Shekhinah* with him. This is derived from the fact that it is not written *she saw* (*wa-tera*) but rather *she saw him* (*wa-tir'ehu*), and this [the extra letters *he-waw*] is the name of the Holy One, blessed be He."¹⁷² Similarly, in the Torah commentary stemming from the circle of Judah ben Samuel the Pious, though erroneously attributed to Eleazar ben Judah of Worms, one finds the following formulation: "'She saw him' (*wa-tir'ehu*) should be read as she saw *ho* (*he-waw*), she saw the light of the *Shekhinah*."¹⁷³ The Zohar continues this line of interpretation, but, in accordance with its own theosophic conception, distinguishes between the *he* and *waw*, referring, as was said earlier, to *Shekhinah* and *Tif'eret*. Although the kabbalistic explanation carries one far from the *sensus litteralis* in any conventional manner, it is

instructive that the mystical exegesis begins with a textual difficulty on the *peshat* level.

Another example of this phenomenon occurs in the zoharic interpretation of “The Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, ‘I am El Shaddai’” (Gen. 17:1). The Zohar raises a question about the use of the particular divine name, El Shaddai, in this context. This question has been posed by most of the standard medieval biblical commentaries, including, for instance, Rashi, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Nahmanides, and Obadiah Sforno. It is clear, then, that the query of the Zohar must be understood within this context. The response of the Zohar involves a complicated kabbalistic exegesis that will illuminate this particular usage in terms of a mystical signification. That is, circumcision effects a change from the demonic realm, symbolized by the word *shed*, to the divine, represented by *Shaddai* or the last of the *sefirot*, the *Shekhinah*. The two words, *shed* and *Shaddai*, share the same consonants with the exception of the *yod* in the latter, the letter that corresponds to the sign of the covenant, *ot berit*, that is, the sign of circumcision. After having been circumcised Abraham can be called *tamim*, which the Zohar renders in accordance with the Targum as *shelim*, that is, “perfect.” Such a person is blessed by *Shekhinah* as is further attested by the verse, “May El Shaddai bless you” (Gen. 28:3). The kabbalistic exegesis is propelled by and returns to a concern with the literal sense of the text.

One can discern the same process in the following passage:

“Elohim blessed Noah and his sons” (Gen. 9:1). R. Abba began to expound, “It is the blessing of the Lord that enriches, and no toil can increase it” (Prov. 10:22). “The blessing of the Lord” (*birkat yhw*) is the *Shekhinah*, for she is appointed over the blessings of the world, and from her the blessings go out for everyone.¹⁷⁴

According to the zoharic reading of Genesis 9:1, the *Shekhinah*, last of the ten gradations, blessed Noah. This is highlighted by the mystical exegesis of Proverbs 10:22, where *birkat yhw* is deciphered as a technical name for the *Shekhinah*. The point of the passage is that the verse in Genesis can be understood only when one is aware that Elohim is a name of the *Shekhinah*, the source of blessing. This is *peshuto shel miqra*, that is, the plain meaning of the text; no other

sense would serve as an outer shell or covering hiding the inner meaning. On the contrary, the text allows for only one meaning, the proper deciphering of which belongs in the hands of the enlightened kabbalist. Thus, in the continuation of this passage, the Zohar explains the semantic shift from the use of the name YHWH in “Then the Lord said to Noah, Go into the ark etc.” (Gen. 7:1), to Elohim in “Elohim blessed Noah and his sons” (Gen. 9:1): “As it is said, the master of the house grants permission for one to enter, and afterwards the wife tells one to exit. One enters at first with the permission of the master and in the end leaves with the permission of the wife.” When the allusions are properly decoded, it turns out that the Tetragrammaton corresponds to the masculine potency, *Tif’eret*, and Elohim to the feminine *Shekhinah*. The kabbalistic symbolism allows the zoharic authorship to account for a subtle shift in the text concerning the various divine names, an issue that has continued to provide grist for the mill of biblical scholarship. In this connection it should be noted that the Zohar often pays careful attention to the different names of God as they appear in the Bible inasmuch as they refer to particular *sefirot*. To take what may be considered a rather typical example of this phenomenon: “R. Eleazar said the *Shekhinah* was speaking with [Abraham] for through this gradation the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed to him, as it is written, ‘I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the name El Shaddai.’ [R. Simeon] said to him: So it certainly (*wadda’y*) is!” In these cases it is unequivocally the case that the very *peshaṭ* of Scripture can only be comprehended by way of kabbalistic explication.

Another typology that can be discerned in the Zohar concerns the interpretation of a verse wherein a problem with the literal sense functions as a stimulus for the kabbalistic interpretation. In these cases, unlike the ones previously discussed, the assumption is not that the *peshaṭ* is the *sod*, but only that concern with the *peshaṭ* serves as the pretext to develop the esoteric reading. An example of this may be seen in the following:

Come and see, it is written, “This shall be (*we-hayita zo’t*) to you a law for all time” (Lev. 16:34). It should have been [written] “this shall be for you” (*we-hayita lakhem*) [i.e. without the article *zo’t*]. What is the import of the word “this” (*zo’t*)? For it is said a law for all time (*huqqat olam*). In every place [the

expression] “a law for all time” (*huqqat olam*) is called the decree of the king, for all laws enter into that place and it seals them as one who seals everything in a treasure. “A law for all time” indeed (*wadda’y*)! In that [grade referred to as] *zo’t* is inscribed and engraved all its hidden and concealed matters.¹⁷⁵

Beginning with an ostensible problem at the level of the simple meaning, the Zohar is able to interpret the seemingly extra word as a cipher for a deep mystical truth. The word is not superfluous, but rather indicates to us the kabbalistic significance of the whole verse: the law referred to is not simply the rituals specified for atonement on Yom Kippur, but it is a mystical symbol for the last of the gradations. In this case, and countless others that I could have cited, the literal sense does not entirely overlap with the mystical. The issue rather is that the latter is derived by a probing of the former. It is precisely such a strategy that fills the pages of the Zohar, the kabbalist exegete heeding each and every word of Scripture, maintaining the divinity and ultimate significance of the text as it is in its received form.

In sum, it may be concluded that the scholarly consensus that the interest in *peshat* in the Zohar is secondary, and unrelated to the internal meaning, must be corrected. From three distinct vantage points it can be argued that concern with the literal sense is essential to zoharic hermeneutics. First, the Zohar is operating with a theological conception of the *sensus litteralis* such that it is thought to comprise within itself all senses of Scripture, including the mystical. Second, numerous examples in the Zohar indicate that the authorship of this work accepted the view that in certain cases, the *peshat* of a verse is comprehensible only in terms of *sod*; that is, the kabbalistic meaning is not a supplementary one but is rather the exclusive sense of the text. Third, the search for the esoteric meaning in Zohar often begins with a standard problem of reading the verse contextually. While the mystical imagination carries the Zohar beyond the reaches of the literal meaning in any exact sense of the term, from the perspective of Zohar itself, by removing the external coverings, one opens up the text to see it as it is in its most basic form, viz. a self-revelation of God. Discovering *peshat*, for the authorship of the Zohar, means discarding the outer layers that conceal the inner light or soul of the text. Those who look only at the *peshat*, without knowledge of

what lies beneath, do not in the end really understand even the *peshat*; that is, they have no text. In that sense, the act of reading (i.e. interpreting) is constitutive not only of meaning, but of the text itself.

This point is depicted in a profound way in one of the parables spoken by the mysterious elder to R. Yose: “Who is the beautiful maiden who has no eyes, and whose body is hidden and revealed; she goes out in the morning and hides during the day, adorned in ornamentations that are not.”¹⁷⁶ From the continuation of this section it is evident that this maiden symbolizes the Torah who stands before her lover. Thus, we have a striking contrast between the description of Torah as the maiden without eyes and the mystic exegete who, as I noted earlier in another context, is referred to as the “wise one full of eyes.”¹⁷⁷ The force of the latter expression is clear enough, as may be gathered, for instance, from another passage in Zohar where the mystics are characterized as “masters of the eyes (*ma’rei de-ayyenin*) who know with their mind and contemplate the wisdom of the Master.”¹⁷⁸ This last description reflects a shift in the epistemological focus characteristic of the Zohar from the auditory to the visual as the essential modality by which gnosis of the divine is gained.¹⁷⁹

But what does it mean to say of the Torah that it has no eyes? Yehuda Liebes has suggested two possible meanings: the first that it is invisible and the second that it has no aspect or color. The former explanation fits well into the context, for, as it has been pointed out already, the maiden is described as hiding and revealing herself in progressive stages before the lover. That is, the Torah is invisible to all but the kabbalist who knows how to “see” – that is, interpret – her. The difficulty with this explanation is a philological one, for the actual expression is that the maiden has no eyes. This implies that she cannot see, not that she cannot be seen. It thus seems to me more likely that the second explanation is the correct one. That the word “eyes” has the connotation of colors, aspects, or characteristics is attested already in biblical¹⁸⁰ and rabbinic¹⁸¹ usage.

Specifically, in terms of kabbalistic precedents mention should be made of Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen’s statement to the effect that Tanin, the intermediary between Samael and Lilith in the demonic realm, corresponding to *Yesod* on the side of holiness, is described as having no eyes, that is, no characteristic.¹⁸² In the zoharic parable, I would suggest, moreover, that this description of the maiden indicates that the parabolic image is operative simultaneously on

two planes, the hermeneutical and the ontic. That is to say, the maiden symbolizes not only Torah but the divine grade to which the latter corresponds, viz. the *Shekhinah*.¹⁸³ It can be shown from other passages in the Zohar that the Torah is identified as the feminine persona of God, the *Shekhinah*, a conception rooted in the older aggadic motif concerning the female image of the Torah,¹⁸⁴ even though, according to a widely attested conception in thirteenth-century kabbalah, the Written Torah corresponds to the masculine and the Oral Torah to the feminine. It is the case, moreover, that the *Shekhinah* is often enough described as that which has no form or color of its own, but only that which it receives from above. The maiden without eyes, therefore, signifies that the text in and of itself is “blind,” without sense; whatever meaning the text has is imparted to it by the open eye (*peqihu de-eina*) of the reader in the same manner that the *Shekhinah* assumes the forms that she receives from the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, the *membrum virile* in the divine organism. The interpreter thus stands in the position of the masculine *Yesod* when confronting the text, which is likened to the female *Shekhinah*, and the interpretative relation is essentially erotic in its nature.¹⁸⁵ The mystic, full of eyes, gives sense to the eyeless text by his bestowing glance, a glance that bestows by disclosing that which is latent in the text. The constitution of meaning in the hermeneutical relationship underlies the task of reading, according to the Zohar. Paradoxically, this act of bestowal is characterized as an appropriation of that which the text reveals from within its concealment. This is true for all levels of meaning; only at the end of the process, when the mystic stands face to face with the text, is the text finally disclosed.

The Zohar’s rejection of a purely literal reading of biblical narrative does not imply a bifurcation of meaning between *peshaṭ* and *sod*, but only a failure to understand the inherent mystical dimensions of *peshaṭ*. That is, even *peshaṭ* contains *sod*, and the one who looks at the plain meaning without knowledge of the supernal realm cannot truly understand the plain meaning. The relation between esoteric and exoteric levels of meaning is very much reflected, as Idel has noted, in the respective ontology of the given kabbalist.¹⁸⁶ Hence, the ontological assumption that the corporeal world symbolically reflects the divine, a common feature of theosophic kabbalah, in the realm of exegesis generates a positive attitude toward *peshaṭ* and its relationship to *sod*. This positive attitude is

even more pronounced in the case of the Zohar, where pantheistic tendencies are evident.¹⁸⁷ That is, all reality is said to form one continuous chain so that there are no radical breaks. It follows that entities in the mundane realm are but final links in this chain. Analogously, the literal sense comprises within itself the esoteric truths. The *peshat*, therefore, is not a shell that is to be broken or a garment to be discarded, but rather a veil to be penetrated so that through it one can behold the mystical insight – in the words of the Zohar, to see the secret matter from within its garment. The attitude of Zohar toward the written text of Scripture had an enduring influence on the kabbalistic tradition, which unfolded for several hundred years after the Zohar's appearance. For example, the noted kabbalist Ḥayyim Vital (1543–1620), who in his programmatic introduction to the *Sha'ar ha-Haqqdamot* launches, on the basis of zoharic passages drawn mainly from *Ra'aya Meheimna* and the *Tiqqunim*,¹⁸⁸ a sharp critique of those who adopt a literalist approach toward the Written and Oral Torah, in one place underlines the inherent necessity of the *peshat* and its organic relation to the *sod* or inner meaning:

This too [the attribution of physical characteristics such as wings to the angels] will be a wonder in the eyes of the literalists, and they will think that in this too there is form, and the matter is not [to be taken] according to its literal meaning. They do not understand that the literal sense (*peshat*) and the symbolic (*remez*)¹⁸⁹ are one thing like the soul and the body, for the one is the image and likeness of the other. If the soul would change its limbs from the limbs of the body, of necessity the former could not be clothed in the latter. A small vessel cannot contain a larger one; and if the latter goes inside the former, it cannot go inside with all its parts. In this manner the literal meaning of Scripture (*peshatei ha-torah*) must be like the soul of the Torah and its inwardness (*nishmat ha-torah u-penimiyutah*) for the body is the image of the soul. It is also necessary that the inwardness be something spiritual, for if not it would have no need to be clothed, as [it follows from] the way of the literalists who explain the beginning of the Torah.¹⁹⁰

From this passage we can understand the thrust of Vital's attack on the literalists. He does not oppose the study of *peshat*; what

he does reject is the study of *peshat* divorced from any consideration of *sod*. In his view the literal and the symbolic meanings are one organic unity in a relationship like that of the soul and body. Just as there is a morphological resemblance between soul and body enabling the former to be clothed in the latter, so too there is correspondence between the literal and esoteric textual levels. The hidden signification is clothed in and ultimately known through the literal. The view expressed here confirms the posture of the Zohar which I have discussed at length in this essay.

The implicit principle of zoharic hermeneutics is rendered explicitly by subsequent kabbalists, such as Isaiah ben Abraham Horowitz (ca. 1565–1630), known as *ha-SheLaH ha-Qadosh*, the “holy Shelah,” based on the initials of his major work, the *Shenei Luhot ha-Berit* (“Two Tablets of the Covenant”). Commenting on the relation of the hidden (*nistar*) to the revealed (*nigleh*), the Shelah writes:

The revealed is the hidden, i.e., the revealed is the disclosure of the hidden and its dissemination. It follows that the revealed is the hidden. Thus it is with respect to matters of the Torah: the revealed is not an independent matter in relation to the hidden, in accord with the view of the masses who hold that the hidden way is separate and the revealed way separate. This is not the case, but rather the hidden evolves [through a chain] and is revealed. To this the verse alludes, “Like golden apples in silver showpieces is a phrase well turned” (Prov. 25:11). That is to say, just as the silver approximates the gold but it is on a lower level, so is the revealed in relation to the hidden.¹⁹¹

Although in the continuation of this passage the Shelah approvingly refers to Maimonides’ interpretation of the verse from Proverbs in the introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the fact is that the position he has articulated reflects that of the Zohar with respect to the essential correspondence of the two levels of meaning. Just as ontically the external (the material world) is the manifestation of the internal (the spiritual realm of the divine emanations), so textually the exoteric meaning (the literal sense) is the externalization or disclosure of the esoteric (the mystical sense). There is thus a complete identification of the esoteric and exoteric so that any potential

conflict between the two is resolved: the religious obligation to study talmudic disputes (*hawwayot Abbaye we-Rava*) is itself included in the mandate to study mystical matters (*ma'aseh merkavah*).¹⁹²

I conclude with one final example, a statement of Shneur Zalman of Lyady (1745–1813), founder of Habad Hasidism, which likewise reflects the hermeneutical orientation of the zoharic authorship and indicates to what an extent the latter had a profound influence on the shaping of subsequent Jewish mystical conceptions about the text and its multivalent levels of meaning:

Thus [Scripture] is called *miqra*, for one reads (*qore*) and draws down the revelation of the light of the Infinite (*Ein-Sof*) by means of the letters¹⁹³ even if one does not understand anything ... This is not the case with respect to the Oral Torah, which is clothed in wisdom, and therefore if one does not understand one does not draw down [the light]. With respect to the Written Torah, however, one draws down [the light] even if one does not understand ... since the source of the emanation (*meqor ha-hamshakhah*) is above wisdom ... Thus the Written Torah is called *miqra*, for they read and draw down [the emanation] by means of the letters ... Included in the study of Scripture is also the study of *aggadot*, for most of the *aggadot* are on verses [in Scripture] and few are homiletical. Moreover, they are not comprehended and are thus considered to be in the category of Scripture. Included in Scripture is also the study of the inwardness of Torah (*penimiyut ha-torah*), for the midrash of Zohar is on the verses of Torah. Moreover, in the study of the secrets of Torah one only comprehends the reality (*ha-metsi'ut*) [of the divine] from the chain [of emanation] and not from the essence [or substance] (*ha-mahut*) [of God]. Therefore it is not the same as Mishnah or Talmud through which one comprehends the essence of His wisdom (*mahut hokhmato*).¹⁹⁴

Shneur Zalman thus distinguishes between study of Scripture and kabbalah, on the one hand, and Mishnah and Talmud, on the other. Whereas by means of the former one comprehends the reality of the divine as expressed in the chain of emanation rather than from God's own essence, the latter enables one to comprehend the essence of God's Wisdom as clothed on those levels. Most important for our

purposes, Shneur Zalman includes study of kabbalistic secrets within the parameters of Scripture which, in its most fundamental sense, entails the mere reading of the text, for esoteric Wisdom is largely based on the delineation of the inwardness (*penimiyyut*) of the verses of Scripture, epitomized by Zohar. Against the background of the continuous chain of emanation, the Written Torah in its elemental form, that is, the very letters of the Torah scroll, is to be viewed as the final garment of the light of the *Ein-Sof*. By simply reading the letters of Torah, therefore, even without the slightest comprehension, one can draw down light from the Infinite.¹⁹⁵ In that sense there is a complete appropriation of the mystical claim that the Torah, in its literal sense, is the name of God:

“Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day” (Deut. 6:6). This is the Written Torah, *miqra*, from the verse “They shall serve you to summon (*lemiqra*) the community” (Num. 10:2), said with respect to the trumpets, for this is the expression of calling (*qeri’ah*) and gathering (*asefah*). Thus all the Torah is the names of the Holy One, blessed be He. By means of this [Scripture] one reads and draws down the light of the Infinite from above to below.¹⁹⁶

Though embellished with their own particular terminology, the statements of Shneur Zalman are a faithful depiction of the attitude of the Zohar itself toward the text of Scripture. Indeed, the repeated claim in the Zohar that the Torah is the name of God affirms that in its literal sense – determined by the Massoretic orthography – Scripture comprises the mystical significations. By means of the open eye, the wise one will see the inner light in and through the very garment that at the same time conceals it from the purview of everyone else.

Notes

1. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1077–1082; Frank Talmage, “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 313–355.
2. See Wilhelm Bacher, “Das Merkwort PRDS in der jüdischen Bibelexegese,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 13, 1893, pp. 294–305; P. Sandler,

- “On the Problem of Pardes and the Fourfold Orientation,” in *Sefer Orbakh: ma’amarim be-heqer ha-Tanakh: Mugash li-khevod Eliyahu Orbakh li-melot lo shiv'im shanah* (Jerusalem: Ha-Hevrah le-heqer ha-miqra be-Yisra'el, 1955), pp. 222–235 (Hebrew); Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 53–61; Albert Van Der Heide “Pardes: Methodological Reflections on the Theory of the Four Senses,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 34, 1983, pp. 147–159; Talmage, “Apples of God,” pp. 319–321.
3. See especially the article of Van der Heide referred to in note 2.
 4. A similar point has recently been made by Moshe Idel, “PaRDeS: Some Reflections on Kabbalistic Hermeneutics,” in *Death, Ecstasy, and Other Worldly Journeys*, ed. John J. Collins and Michael Fishbane (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 249–268.
 5. See Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides’s Attitude toward Jewish Mysticism,” in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German Jewish Scholarship*, ed. Alfred Jospe (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1981), p. 203: “the unsettling realization that there are contradictions between the literal meaning of Scripture and philosophical truth ... drives Maimonides to develop his theory of the layers of esoteric and exoteric meaning.” One could argue that even for Maimonides the conflict between the literal reading and the figurative is applicable only when the text is taken at face value as understood by the philosophically unenlightened. That is to say, the external meaning is, when properly understood, to be read figuratively. This indeed is the purport of the bulk of the first part of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which consists of the lexical chapters treating various terms in Scripture, many of which suggest on the superficial level an anthropomorphic conception of God.
 6. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 33.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 13 (author’s emphasis).
 8. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 205.
 9. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 33.
 10. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 209.
 11. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 12. *Ibid.*, p. 210.
 13. Wilhelm Bacher, “L’Exégèse Biblique dans le Zohar,” *Revue des Études Juives*, 22, 1891, pp. 41–45.
 14. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
 15. Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1083.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 1085.
 17. See *ibid.*, pp. 1090–1092; and the recent analysis in Pinchas Giller, “The Tiqqunim: Symbolization and Theurgy,” Ph.D. thesis, Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, 1990, pp. 106–109 (see the revised version of Giller’s dissertation, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993], pp. 65–68). Even in the case of this kabbalist, however, it can be argued that the denigration of the literal sense is directed at those who would affirm the exoteric meaning at the expense of entirely ignoring the esoteric; see Giller, *ibid.*, pp. 125–126 (*Enlightened Will Shine*, pp. 73–74). See, e.g., the representative statement in *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 43, 82a: “BeReShIT—there is a dry place [*atar yavesh*, the consonants of the word *bere’shit*] ... Thus is one who causes the kabbalah and wisdom to be removed from the Oral Torah and the Written Torah, and he causes that no one will be occupied with them. For they say that there is only *peshat* in the Torah and the Talmud. Such a person is surely like one who removes the spring from the river and the garden.” *Ibid.*

sec. 69, 114a: “Woe to those foolish people whose hearts are closed and whose eyes are closed, concerning whom it is said, ‘They have eyes but they do not see’ (Ps. 115:5) the light of the Torah. They are animals who do not see or know anything but the straw of Torah, which is the external shell and its chaff ... The sages of Torah, the masters of secrets, throw away the straw and chaff, and eat the wheat of Torah that is within. The twenty-two letters of the Torah are the numerical value of the word wheat.” (Concerning this numerology, see note 109. See, by contrast, Zohar 3:275b [*Ra’aya Meheimna*], wherein the leniencies of *halakhah* are described as the straw of Torah and the restrictions as the wheat; both together are contrasted with the secrets of Torah.) Cf. *Zohar Hadash*, 118b (*Tiqqunim*): “R. Simeon began to expound: Woe to those people whose hearts are closed and whose eyes are shut, for they do not pay attention to the various secrets hidden in the Torah. They desire only to eat the straw of the Torah, which is the literal sense (*peshat*), the garment of the Torah, but they do not taste the kernel that is within.” See also *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 19, 38a. The claim I have made with regard to the author of the *Tiqqunim* and *Ra’aya Meheimna* can also be applied to Hayyim Vital’s discussion in the introduction to the *Sha’ar ha-Haqqdamot* (Jerusalem, 1909), 1a–4d, which is based largely on the relevant passages discussed or mentioned in this note. See discussion later and the text cited at note 190.

18. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1089.
19. See Talmage, “Apples of Gold,” p. 314, who notes in passing that the exoteric sense, the *nigleh*, “may impede, as is suggested in the mystical classic the Zohar.”
20. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 39; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1080–1081; Idel, “Concept of Torah,” pp. 49–58.
21. My formulation is indebted to the description of St. Thomas Aquinas’ hermeneutics in James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), p. 54. See also Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l’écriture*, second part, vol. 2 (Paris: Aubier, 1964), p. 160. For a different interpretation of Aquinas, see Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 55–56, 219 n. 14. See also the description of the symbolist mentality in Marie-Dominique Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, trans. Jerome Taylor and Lester K. Little (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 110–111: “Consideration of sacred history involved a biblical interpretation which took literal history (*littera*) as the basis for continuous reference to supra-historical realities figured in terrestrial events ... the very nature of the Judaeo-Christian revelation posits an ongoing interrelationship among things that underlay this hermeneutic approach ... it was the extent and the forms taken by the application of the principle that produced a generalized typology and so determined the scriptural symbolism common to the Middle Ages.” It follows, according to Chenu’s analysis, that allegorical readings of Scripture that destroyed the literal sense of the text are contrary to the nature of symbolism; see *ibid.*, p. 117.
22. See Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 135–145, 198–203; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 227–228; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol,” *History of Religions*, 27, 1987, pp. 207–213; *idem*, “The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation

- and Interpretation in the Zohar,” *Religion*, 18, 1988, pp. 323–324; idem, “Female Imaging of the Torah: From Literary Metaphor to Religious Symbol,” in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. Jacob Neusner, Ernst S. Frerichs, and Nahum M. Sarna (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 295–298, 302–305.
23. I owe this formulation to David Weiss Halivni, who uses it, however, to describe “the peshat of a halakhic text.” See his *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).
 24. See especially Raphael Loewe, “The ‘Plain’ Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis,” *Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies London*, 1, 1964, pp. 140–185.
 25. See Sarah Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization in Respect to the Distinction Between Peshat and Derash* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), pp. 31–32 (Hebrew).
 26. See *Sefer ha-Mitsvot le-ha-RaMBaM we-Hassagot ha-RaMBaM*, ed. Ḥayyim D. Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1981), p. 45.
 27. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
 28. Nahmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah* vol. 2, p. 203 (ad Num. 3:1). See also *ibid.* vol. 1, p. 4 (introduction). On the use of the word *remez* in Nahmanides, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 14, 1989, pp. 164–165.
 29. See *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. Ḥayyim D. Chavel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1982), vol. 1, p. 180. In my earlier study, “By Way of Truth,” pp. 128–129, I interpreted this passage in a somewhat different manner, arguing that in this context Nahmanides used the word *mashal* synonymously with *melitsah*, both referring to the literal or external sense. After reconsidering the passage, however, it seems that the word *mashal* here, as elsewhere in Nahmanides’s oeuvre, denotes the figurative or parabolic sense. Cf. Ezra of Gerona’s introduction to his *Perush le-Shir ha-Shirim* in *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 2, p. 480.
 30. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 63a; Yevamot 11b, 24a. This principle has been the focus of much scholarly discussion. For representative treatments, see Israel Frankel, *Peshat in Talmudic and Midrashic Literature* (Toronto: La Salle Press, 1956), pp. 71–77; Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity* (Copenhagen: E. Munksgaard, 1961), p. 66; Loewe, “‘Plain’ Meaning,” pp. 164–167; Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization*, pp. 37–43.
 31. *Sefer ha-Mitsvot*, p. 44.
 32. *Ibid.*, p. 45. For a different understanding of Nahmanides’ statement, see Kamin, *Rashi’s Exegetical Categorization*, p. 38.
 33. See Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination*, p. 215, who considers Nahmanides an example of the maximalist approach that sees “the whole body of science and theology ... epitomized in the Bible.” The task of the interpreter is thus to decode that which is contained in the biblical verses. Funkenstein’s statement that “Ramban ... went as far as to claim that the philosophical translation actually constitutes the simple, literal sense of the Scriptures, while allegory is the mystical, kabbalistic dimension of understanding, in which the whole Scripture is nothing but a continuous name [of] God,” is to me problematic.
 34. Bernard Septimus, “‘Open Rebuke and Concealed Love’: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations*

- in *His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 18.
35. *Perush Mirkevet Yehezqel le-R. Ya'aqov ben Ya'aqov ha-Kohen mi-Qastilyah*, ed. Asi Faber, M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1978, p. 46.
 36. See Septimus, "'Open Rebuke,'" p. 21 n. 37; David Berger, "Miracles and the Natural Order in Naḥmanides," in *Rabbi Moses Naḥmanides*, p. 112 n. 19. See note 37.
 37. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," pp. 129–153.
 38. *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 2, p. 479.
 39. See Moshe Idel, "La història de la càbala a Barcelona," *Curs La Càbala* (Barcelona, 1989), pp. 59–74; idem, "Naḥmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah, and Spiritual Leadership," in *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the 13th Century*, ed. Moshe Idel and Mortimer Ostow (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), pp. 15–96. It is difficult to date Jacob ben Sheshet's career with any precision, though Scholem surmises that he was writing around 1240. See Scholem, *Origins*, p. 251.
 40. Scholem, *Origins*, p. 380.
 41. This understanding of Naḥmanides has been most fully worked out by Moshe Idel, "We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition on This," in *Rabbi Moses Naḥmanides*, pp. 53–71; see also idem, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 215.
 42. *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 1, p. 190.
 43. *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittāḥon*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 2, p. 364. In several contexts Jacob ben Sheshet notes that the kabbalistic reason he offers reflects his own opinion in contrast to something he has received either orally or from an authoritative text; see, e.g., pp. 361, 368, 385.
 44. *Ibid.*, p. 378.
 45. *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, ed. Georges Vajda (Jerusalem: Israel, 1968), p. 83. The passage is already cited, with a different rendering, in Scholem, *Origins*, p. 381.
 46. See *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, pp. 107–108; *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittāḥon*, p. 370; Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Tsedeq*, printed in Gottlieb, *Studies*, p. 154; Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah*, 40b. For further discussion of these sources, see Moshe Idel, "Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah," in *Midrash and Literature*, pp. 146–147, 150.
 47. *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittāḥon*, p. 370; see Idel, "We Have No Tradition," p. 68 n. 58; idem, "Infinities," p. 146. The innovative posture of Jacob ben Sheshet appears later on in Recanaṭi; cf. *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Mitsvot* (Basel, 1581), 3a, 4b.
 48. See, e.g., (a) *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittāḥon*, p. 357: "Thus I have heard from the mouth (*shama'ti mi-pi*) of the Ḥasid, R. Isaac the son of the great R. Abraham, may his memory be for a blessing, who said in the name of his father;" (b) p. 362: "Thus I have heard this formulation (*shama'ti zeh ha-lashon*) in the name of the Ḥasid, R. Isaac the son of the great R. Abraham, may his memory be for a blessing;" (c) p. 364: "Thus I have heard from the mouth of the sage, R. Joseph the son of Samuel, may his memory be for a blessing" (cf. *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, pp. 193–196); (d) p. 380: "Thus I have received from the mouth (*qibbalti mi-pi*) of R. Isaac the Frenchman, blessed be his memory" (cf. p. 396; on the identity of this figure, see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 251); (e) p. 401: "Thus I received in the name (*qibbalti be-shem*) of the Ḥasid, R. Isaac the son of the great R. Abraham, may his memory be for a blessing;" (f) p. 409: "Thus I have heard this formulation in the name of the

- Hasid, R. Isaac the son of the great R. Abraham, may his memory be for a blessing.” Cf. *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, p. 82.
49. See, e.g., *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*, p. 369.
 50. Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 384–386.
 51. The term employed and popularized by Idel; see “We Have No Kabbalistic Tradition.”
 52. See “By Way of Truth,” pp. 103–129, 153–178.
 53. As already noted by Chavel in his edition of *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*, p. 379 n. 1.
 54. *Numbers Rabbah* 13:16.
 55. Cf. *Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhoḥim*, p. 180.
 56. *Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon*, p. 379.
 57. See *ibid.*, p. 418.
 58. See *ibid.*, pp. 390–391, 402.
 59. See Scholem, *Peraqim le-Toledot Sifrut ha-Qabbalah* (Jerusalem: Azriel, 1931), p. 113.
 60. *Ibid.*, pp. 112, 113–114.
 61. See note 46.
 62. Scholem, *Peraqim*, p. 115.
 63. *Ibid.*
 64. Moshe Idel, *Language, Torah and Hermeneutics in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 83–87.
 65. See *ibid.*, pp. 73–77.
 66. MS Vatican 233, fols. 43a–b.
 67. *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 207–208.
 68. The same word is employed in *Midrash ha-Ne’elam* for the literal sense, and its Aramaic equivalent is used in the main body of the Zohar. See notes 81, 98, 123. On the word *ma’aseh* in Amoraic literature to denote narratives, see Wilhelm Bacher, *Die exegetische Terminologie der jüdischen Traditionsliteratur*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1899), vol. 2, p. 116.
 69. *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mitsvot* (London, 1963), 2a.
 70. Babylonian Talmud, Ta’anit 7a.
 71. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 38a; Eruvin 65a.
 72. MS Oxford 352, fol. 189b.
 73. This expression reflects the language of Azriel of Gerona. See his *Sha’ar ha-Sho’el (Perush Eser Sefirot)*, in Meir Ibn Gabbai, *Derekh Emunah* (Jerusalem, 1967), 2b.
 74. MS Guenzberg 775, fol. 50a.
 75. See Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me’irat Einayim*, pp. 58–59. where is cited the text criticizing the philosophers from Jacob ben Sheshet’s *Sha’ar ha-Shamayim*. See the editor’s comments on pp. 409–414, and especially 414 n. 16, where he cites the relevant passage from *Otsar Hayyim*.
 76. See Matt, *Zohar*, p. 31.
 77. See Idel, “Infinities of Torah,” p. 151.
 78. Printed in *Sefer ha-Malkhut* (Casablanca, 1930), 6b. For an analysis of this motif from the vantage point of the Zohar, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “Anthropomorphic Imagery and Letter Symbolism in the Zohar,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 8, 1989, pp. 147–181 (Hebrew).
 79. See note 20.
 80. Betty Roitman, “Sacred Language and Open Text,” in *Midrash and Literature*, pp. 171–172.
 81. See note 68.

82. See Frank Talmage, "The Term 'Haggadah' in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 4, 1985–86, pp. 271–273 (Hebrew).
83. *Zohar Hadash*, 83a.
84. *Zohar* 3:202a.
85. *Zohar* 1:234b; 2:230b; 3:71b, 73a, 75a, 98b.
86. *Zohar* 3:159a.
87. *Zohar* 3:162a–b.
88. The relation of aggadah to kabbalah is one of the critical questions in assessing the role accorded the theosophic doctrine within the system of normative Judaism (i.e. the Judaism determined by the rabbinic corpus) by medieval Jewish mystics. This question has been the focus of various scholarly accounts. For a review of the issue from the particular vantage point of Naḥmanides, cf. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth," pp. 153–178. It must be noted that kabbalists related the word *haggadah* to the Aramaic root *nagad*, i.e., to stretch, to draw or pull, to flow. They thus localized the discourse of haggadah in the divine gradation characterized by these verbs, viz. the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, which corresponds to the *membrum virile* in the divine realm. As such *Yesod* is the locus of haggadah and *sod* of esoteric gnosis; indeed, in some sense the two are identical. See Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of God," pp. 205–215. See also the telling remark of Moses Cordovero, *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1989), 17:144.
89. *Zohar* 1:152a. Cf. the formulation of Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 110: "The words and letters [of Torah] ... are like the garment of a person ... the plain meanings and the commentaries are the body, the true kabbalah and the great powers and secrets ... are the soul, and this is [the import of] the verse, 'From my flesh I will see God' (Job 19:26)."
90. The identification of the *peshat* as a garment is quite common in kabbalistic literature, where the word is related to the verb *pashaṭ*, i.e. to remove one's garment. The noun, *peshat*, derived from the verb, *pashaṭ*, is understood as the object that is removed, i.e., the garment. An interesting exception to this rule is to be found in Elḥanan ben Abraham Ibn Eskira, *Sefer Yesod Olam*, MS Guenzberg 607, fols. 10a–b, wherein the *peshat* is described as the material substratum that receives the different forms as garments: "We must understand the matter concerning the *peshat* properly and thoroughly ... The word [is derived from] the language 'he removed his clothing,' for it takes off a matter and puts on a matter. And this is their saying, 'a verse should not lose its literal sense,' for the matter is permanent and the forms change. The written Scripture is like the matter and the forms are taken off and put on, but it endures."
91. For a similar critique of the Christian reading of Scripture, see Judah Barzillai, *Perush Sefer Yetsirah*, ed. Solomon J. Halberstam (Berlin: H. Itzkowski, 1885), p. 77. See also Frank Talmage, "R. David Kimhi as Polemicist," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 38, 1967, pp. 219–220, who cites a passage in which RaDaQ accused Christians of literalism connected to the anthropomorphic conception of God. On the other hand, as Talmage points out, RaDaQ on occasion accuses Christians of being extreme allegorists who deny the literal meaning of the legal portions of Scripture. See Marcel Simon, *Verus Israel: étude sur les relations entre chrétiens et juifs dans l'Empire romain*, 135–425 (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948), p. 181.
92. On the relation of *Shekhinah* to the body (*guf*), see Liebes, *Sections*, p. 178 n. 33; on the identification of *Shekhinah* as the locus of *mitsvot*, see Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 18–19 n. 35, and 59–62.

93. Zohar 2:98b.
94. That the garment is a locus of vision is attested as well in the continuation of the zoharic passage (Zohar 2:99a): "That elder began to expound: 'Moses went inside the cloud and ascended the mountain' (Exod. 24:18). What is this cloud? It is as it is written, 'I have set My bow in the cloud' (Gen. 9:13). It has been taught that the bow sent its garments and gave them to Moses, and by means of that garment Moses ascended to the mountain, and from it he saw what he saw and delighted in all." Cf. Zohar 2:229a. On the theme of the garment as the locus of vision or esoteric knowledge, see Dorit Cohen-Alloro, *The Secret of the Garment in the Zohar* (Jerusalem: Research Projects of the Institute of Jewish Studies, 1987), pp. 69–74 (Hebrew).
95. Zohar 2:99a.
96. Ibid. 99b. For a slightly different interpretation of the expression used here, *peshatei di-qera*, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1085.
97. See, for example, the views of Moses Cordovero and Abraham Galante cited in Azulai, *Or ha-Ḥammah* 2:125a–b.
98. The same term employed to connote the literal sense in *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*. See note 68.
99. Song of Songs 8:14.
100. Ibid. 4:6.
101. Isa. 35:5.
102. The Hebrew expression used here is *yom ha-ma'aseh*, which may reflect the previous use of the word *ma'aseh* in this passage, denoting the literal sense of the biblical narrative.
103. Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 14b and parallels.
104. *She'elot u-Teshuvot le-R. Mosheh de-Li'on be-Inyenei Qabbalah*, in Isaiah Tishby, *Studies in the Kabbalah and Its Branches: Researches and Sources* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 1:56, 64 (Hebrew). Cf. "Sefer ha-Mishkal," pp. 49, 105.
105. Cf. Zohar 2:257b, where Mishnah is described as "the secret that exists within for one learns there the essence of everything (*iqara de-khola*)."
106. Zohar 2:176a. Cf. *ibid.* 61b–62a, where various levels of food are distinguished, and designated specifically for the "comrades engaged in Torah," i.e., the kabbalists, is the "food of the spirit and soul," which is said to derive from the second gradation, supernal Wisdom.
107. For an alternative explanation of this passage, see Yehuda Liebes, "How the Zohar Was Written," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 8, 1989, pp. 17–18 (Hebrew).
108. See note 110. The more frequent symbol for Torah in rabbinic literature is bread. Cf. *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, sec. 45, p. 104; Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 120a; Ḥagigah 14a; Sanhedrin 104b; *Numbers Rabbah* 13:16. Cf. the expression "the leaven of the Pharisees," in Mark 8:15; see also Matthew 16:11–12 and Luke 12:1. For a later use of bread as a symbol for Torah study, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah, 4:13; *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:30. On bread as a symbol for the Oral Law, see *Zohar Ḥadash*, 50b. See also Zohar 3:33b (*Piqqudim*).
109. Wolfson, "Anthropomorphic Imagery," p. 155 nn. 33–34. To the sources mentioned there, see also Zohar 3:188b (*Yanuqa*), where the wheat is identified as the *Shekhinah* that comprises the twenty-two letters within herself, and cf. *Tiqunei Zohar*, sec. 69, 114a.
110. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 64a (already noted by Matt, *Zohar*,

- p. 203 n. 152); *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 7:7, p. 155 (where wheat refers more specifically to the cultic laws in Leviticus).
111. Cf. the anonymous commentary on *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* from a student of Isaac Luria, published in *Zohar ha-Raqi'a* (Jerusalem, n.d.), 119a; and the commentary of Elijah ben Solomon, the Gaon of Vilna, on *Sifra di-Tseni'uta* (Jerusalem, 1986), 1a.
 112. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 203 n. 152.
 113. This stands in marked contrast to *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 69, 114a, where the wheat is associated with the inner essence of Torah apprehended by the mystics, as opposed to the straw or chaff, which is identified as the literal meaning. Cf. *Zohar* 3:272a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*).
 114. *Zohar* 2:176b.
 115. Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 164.
 116. Cf. Hayyim Vital in his introduction to *Sha'ar ha-Haqqadamot* (Jerusalem, 1909), 1b: "When [the Torah] is in the world of emanation it is called kabbalah, for there it is removed from all the garments that are called the literal sense (*pashaṭ*) from the expression 'I had taken off (*pashaṭti*) my robe' (Song of Songs 5:3), for [the literal sense] is the aspect of the external garment which is upon the skin of a person, sometimes spread (*mitpashaṭ*) over him, and this is the essence of the meaning of the word *pashaṭ*." See, however, *Sha'ar ha-Mitswot* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 83 (*Peri Ets Hayyim*, ed. Meir Poppers [Jerusalem, 1980], p. 356), where Vital speaks of the containment of all four subjects, Scripture, Mishnah, Talmud, and Kabbalah, within the world of emanation insofar as the latter compromises within itself all that which is below it in the chain of being. Still, it is evident from the context that Scripture, the Written Torah, belongs most properly to the lowest of the four worlds, the world of *Asiyah*, whereas the three aspects of Oral Torah – Mishnah, Talmud, and Kabbalah – belong, respectively, to the remaining three worlds, *Yetsirah*, *Beri'ah*, and *Atsilut*.
 117. *Or Yaqar to Ra'aya Meheimna* (Jerusalem, 1987), 15:87.
 118. See note 17.
 119. Babylonian Talmud, Rosh ha-Shanah 26b.
 120. *Degel Maḥaneh Efrayim* (New York, 1984), 87b.
 121. Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 31, 253.
 122. Cf. *Zohar* 1:163a; 3:149a–b, 152a.
 123. The Aramaic *ovada* parallels the Hebrew *ma'aseh* used in *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on Ruth for the literal meaning; see note 68.
 124. *Zohar* 3:149b.
 125. *Ibid.* 71b–72a.
 126. *Ibid.* 14a.
 127. Cf. the interpretation of Isa. 5:1 in *Zohar* 1:95b–96a.
 128. Cf. Palestinian Talmud, Ketubot 13:1 (ed. Venice, 35c); *Soṭah* 1:4 (16d), attributed to R. Ḥiyya; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, Wa-yeshev 17, 93b–94a, in the name of R. Joshua ben Levi.
 129. *Genesis Rabbah* 88:7, p. 1041.
 130. See, by contrast, the comment of Rav reported in the name of R. Ḥanin in Babylonian Talmud, *Soṭah* 10a.
 131. The attribution to Rabbi is found in Palestinian Talmud, Ketubot 13:1, but in the other sources the attribution varies. See references in note 128.
 132. See, especially, the wording of the version in *Midrash Aggadah*, ed. Solomon Buber (Vienna, 1894), p. 92: "And she sat down at the entrance to Einayim"

- (Gen. 38–14). We reviewed all of Scripture and did not find a place whose name was *petah einayim*. Rather this [expression] is to teach that she cast her eyes upon the one (*be-mi*) to whom all eyes are cast. And she said before the Holy One, blessed be He, Let it be Your will that I do not leave this entrance empty.”
133. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 45a.
 134. Zohar 3:265a.
 135. Cf. Ibid. 7a.
 136. To be sure, there are instances where the word *dayqa* signifies not a kabbalistic meaning, but rather a more straightforward midrashic sense. See, e.g., Zohar 1:133b in connection with the interpretation of the verse, “Abraham willed all that he owned to Isaac” (Gen. 25:5).
 137. Zohar 2:185b.
 138. Ibid. 3:68b.
 139. Bacher, *Die Exegetische Terminologie der Jüdischen Traditionsliteratur*, vol. 1, p. 49 n. 1, 105; vol. 2, p. 113; Loewe, “‘Plain’ Meaning,” pp. 170–172.
 140. See, e.g., Zohar 2:61b; 3:73a, 188b. In other contexts the word *mammash* signifies the nonfigurative, though not necessarily kabbalistic, meaning. See, e.g., Zohar 1:133a, where the verse, “Isaac then brought her [Rebekah] into the tent of his mother Sarah” (Gen. 24:67), is interpreted in terms of the tradition that Rebekah was in the actual image (*diyogna mammash*) of Sarah. Thus the verse reads “the tent of his mother Sarah” (*sara immo wadda’y*). On this use of the term *wadda’y*, see note 156. See also Zohar 3:160b, where we find the expression *mitqashsherei be-qudsha verikh hu mammash*, which must be rendered, “they were bound to the Holy One, blessed be He, in actuality.” The Zohar also employs the term *be-gufa* to denote the sense of actuality as opposed to a figurative or metaphorical sense. Cf. Liebes, *Section*, p. 182 n. 45.
 141. Zohar 1:94a.
 142. For background on this hermeneutical principle, see Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), pp. 58–62.
 143. See Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision of God,” p. 206.
 144. I have studied this motif in depth in “Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine,” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 78, 1987, pp. 77–112.
 145. Cf. Mishnah, Avot 6:2; Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 54a.
 146. Zohar 3:6b.
 147. Cf. *ibid.* 2:62a.
 148. *Ibid.* 61a.
 149. On the interpretation of demonstrative pronouns in kabbalistic literature and its relation to midrashic precedents, see Betty Roitman, “Sacred Language,” pp. 159–175, esp. 165 ff.
 150. The potential randomness of the hermeneutical technique of *gezerah shawah* is already evident from the statement of the rabbis to the effect that a person should not adduce a *gezerah shawah* on his own (Palestinian Talmud, Pesahim 6:1, 33a; Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 19b). See Lieberman, *Hellenism*, p. 61; Loewe, “‘Plain’ Meaning,” pp. 152–153 n. 79. See *ibid.*, pp. 164–165, where the author suggests that the Amoraic formula “a verse does not its literal sense,” originating in Pumbeditha, was employed “to counter exorbitant deductions from identity or close analogy of expression (*gezerah shawah*).”

151. My formulation here is deliberately lifted from Roitman, "Sacred Language," p. 167, which, however, takes the opposite position when describing the kabbalistic system of textual exposition: "Most important, this determination of meaning is not channeled through the linguistic signification of the terms in the utterance. Anagogic interpretation of this kind is dependent on a code which is not linguistic in the sense of natural language, although it integrates in its system certain linguistic elements not actualized in the discourse." In my opinion the system of exposition operative in the main body of Zohar functions precisely in the way which Roitman denies, viz. the symbolic encoding of the biblical text – what she calls the "anagogic interpretation" – is indeed dependent on the determination of meaning of the relevant terms (*parole*) in terms of normal modes of discourse (*langue*). Roitman herself reaches a similar conclusion; see pp. 171–172 (partially cited in note 80).
152. Based on the passage in Babylonian Talmud, Mo'ed Qatan 28a to the effect that one's children, livelihood, and sustenance are dependent on fate (*mazzal*) and not merit (*zekhut*). In the interpretation of the Zohar the word *mazzal* designates either *Keter* or, according to the more recondite doctrine of the *Idrot*, one of the aspects of the upper *partzuf*, *Arikh Anpin* or *Atiqa Qaddisha*.
153. Zohar 3:79b.
154. See William Braude, "Midrash as Deep Peshat," in *Studies in Judaica, Karaitica and Islamica Presented to Leon Nemoy on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Sheldon R. Brunswick (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 1982), pp. 31–38.
155. Bacher, *Die Exegetische Terminologie*, vol. 1, pp. 48–49; vol. 2, p. 60; Loewe, "Plain' Meaning," pp. 170–172.
156. Here (as in the next two notes as well) I will cite only a sampling of the relevant sources: See Zohar 1:8b, 10a, 45a, 63b, 87a, 91a, 95a, 108a, 110b, 133a (cited in note 92), 142a, 153b, 175a, 192b, 219a, 221b; 2:4a, 10a, 44b, 47b, 48a, 49b, 62a, 66a, 146a, 183b, 187b, 225a, 243a, 247b; 3:6b, 77a, 98b, 147b, 163b, 239b. This particular usage is prevalent in *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* as well. See, e.g., Zohar 3:28a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*), 264b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); Zohar *Hadash*, 31c (*Tiqqunim*).
157. See Zohar 1:74a, 86a, 96a, 132b, 158b, 247b; 2:65b, 148b, 189b; 3:103a, 148a, 173b, 174a.
158. See Zohar 1:50b, 82b, 85b, 93a, 105a, 145a, 191b, 196b, 240a, 245b, 249a; 2:33a, 121b, 127b, 148b. It must be noted that kabbalists before the generation of the Zohar already employed the expression *wadda'y* to render the simple meaning in terms of a mystical truth. Thus, for example, this usage is found in a passage of Ezra of Gerona, alluded to briefly by Jacob ben Sheshet (See *Sefer ha-Emunah ve-ha-Bittahon*, p. 377) and cited more extensively by Recanati, *Perush al ha-Torah* 48d). The same usage is found in Joseph Gikatilla and Moses de León's Hebrew writings. See *Sha'arei Or*, 1:149 n. 3.
159. Zohar 3:169b.
160. Cf. *ibid.* 1:82a.
161. *Ibid.* 140b.
162. I have translated the expression *we-limekhasheh atiq* according to the reading of the Zohar, which follows that of Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 119a. The more literal rendering of this expression is "clothe themselves eloquently."
163. Zohar 3:105b.
164. Zohar 2:57b.
165. Babylonian Talmud, Arakhin 15b.

166. I have translated the verse in light of the zoharic reading and not as an accurate rendering of the literal sense.
167. Zohar 2:60a–b.
168. Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, pp. 49–51.
169. Zohar 3:179b.
170. See, e.g., commentaries of Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi), R. Samuel ben Meir (Rashbam), Abraham Ibn Ezra, and Obadiah ben Jacob Sforno on the relevant verse. See also Nahmanides on Exod. 36:5.
171. See, e.g., commentary of Rashi to the Mishnah in Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 45a, s.v., *ani wa-ho*.
172. Cited in J. Gellis, *Tosafot ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 1987), 6:42.
173. *Perush ha-Roqeah al ha-Torah*, ed. C. Konyevsky (Bene Beraq: 1980), 2:14.
174. Zohar 1:70b–71a.
175. Ibid. 3:69a–b.
176. Ibid. 2:95a.
177. The image of being covered with eyes is used in Ezekiel to describe the wheels (*ofanim*) of the chariot; see 1:18, 10:12. This very image is used in Heikhalot texts, where, however, the *ofanim* designate a distinct class of angels. See Peter Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr 1981), sec. 40. Cf. *ibid.*, sec. 29, where the angels in general are said to be full of eyes. See *ibid.*, sec. 12, where God is said to have set 365,000 eyes in Metatron, who is the transformed Enoch. And *ibid.*, sec. 33, where the angel Kerubiel is described by this image, as well as *ibid.*, sec. 41, where the image is applied to Serapiel. See also *ibid.*, sec. 246, 596; *Masekhet Heikhalot*, in *Beit ha-Midrash 2:43*. In *Heikhalot Rabbati* we read about the eyes in the robe (*haluq*) of God; see *Synopse*, sec. 102. Cf. MS Oxford–Bodleian 1610, fol. 46a, where a tradition is cited in the name of the *ba'alei merkavah* to the effect that God is filled with eyes from inside and outside. I have not yet located a text from ancient Jewish mystical speculation that describes the mystic himself as full of eyes nor have I located in rabbinic literature the notion that a sage or exegete is so described. See, however, Philo, *Questiones et Solutiones in Exodum*: III:43, where the soul is said to be “all eyes” so that it may “receive lightning-flashes” of illumination. This is related to a motif repeated on a number of occasions by Philo concerning God’s implanting eyes in an individual so that the individual will be able to see God. See Gerhard Delling, “The ‘One Who Sees God’ in Philo,” in *Nourished with Peace: Studies in Hellenistic Judaism in Memory of Samuel Sandmel*, ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn, Earle Hilgert, and Burton L. Mack (Chico: Scholars Press, 1984), pp. 33–34.
178. Zohar 2:235b (*Tosefta*).
179. Wolfson, “Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience,” pp. 317 ff., esp. 321, 340–341 n. 86.
180. Cf. Num. 11:7, and see Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:2.
181. See, e.g., Mishnah, Shabbat 1:6.
182. Scholem, “Kabbalah of R. Jacob,” pp. 262–263. This source was already suggested by Liebes, *Sections*, p. 190 n. 78. See also Ṭodros Abulafia, *Sha'ar ha-Razim*, ed. Michal Kushnir-Oron (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), p. 65.
183. See Liebes, *Sections*, who cites this interpretation as that of later kabbalists but rejects it as the intended or contextual meaning of the Zohar. But see note 184.
184. Cf. Wolfson, “Female Imaging,” pp. 295–297. To the sources mentioned there one should add *Zohar Hadash*, 55c–d (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*).
185. See the references given in note 22.

186. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 208.
187. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 222–224, 241; idem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 147–148; Joseph Ben-Shlomo, “The Research of Gershom Scholem on Pantheism in the Kabbalah,” in *Gershom Scholem: The Man and His Work* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1983), pp. 22–23 (Hebrew).
188. See note 17.
189. For this usage of the word *remez* in kabbalistic sources, see Wolfson, “By Way of Truth,” pp. 164–165 n. 188.
190. *Sha’ar Ma’amerei RaZaL* (Jerusalem, 1898), 8d.
191. *Shenei Luḥot ha-Berit* (Amsterdam, 1648), 3a.
192. See *ibid.* 16a–b; and Jacob Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1984), p. 98 (Hebrew).
193. The notion that the letters of the Torah serve as a conduit to draw down the light of the Infinite is a commonplace in Hasidic literature, serving ultimately as the background for the notion of Torah study as a contemplative act. See Joseph Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 56–68. For a comprehensive discussion of the earlier kabbalistic sources for this magico-mystical conception, which influenced the Hasidic formulation, see Moshe Idel, “Perceptions of Kabbalah in the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 1, 1991, pp. 76–104. See note 195.
194. *Liqqutei Torah* (New York, 1984), *Wa-yiqra*, 5b–c.
195. Elsewhere in his writings Shneur Zalman characterizes Torah study as a vehicle by means of which one unites with the light of the Infinite (*or ein sof*) insofar as the Torah itself is the very expression of the divine will and wisdom rather than something ontically distinct from God. Cf. *Tanya* (New York: Kehot, 1979), I, 9a–10a, 29a–b; IV, 145a (in that context he distinguishes between two goals of Torah study, both rooted in Lurianic thought as transmitted by Vital, to redeem the holy sparks from the demonic shells and to unify the forces above by drawing down the light from the Infinite); and the recent discussion in Naftali Lowenthal, *Communicating the Infinite: The Emergence of the Habad School* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 59–60.
196. *Liqqutei Torah, Wa-ethanan*, 12c.

4 Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature

In a recently published volume, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, Bernard McGinn has noted that, in the history of scholarship on Western Christian mysticism, an “overconcentration on the highly ambiguous notion of mystical experience has blocked careful analysis of the special hermeneutics of mystical texts.”¹ As a corrective to this scholarly imbalance, McGinn calls for the “recognition of the interdependence of experience and interpretation.” A growing sentiment amongst scholars of Jewish mysticism, spurred especially by the work of Moshe Idel,² is that the opposite claim can be made with respect to the dominant scholarly approach to kabbalistic texts. That is, there has been for the most part in the academic treatment of medieval Jewish mysticism an overconcentration on the hermeneutics of mystical texts and a concomitant neglect of the ecstatic experiences that often underlie these literary compositions. In an effort to counter the description of kabbalah as predominantly theoretical rather than practical, Idel has in his own research paid far greater attention to the experiential side of kabbalistic thought, including the motifs of *devequt*,³ *unio mystica*,⁴ and a variety of other meditative or contemplative techniques intended to induce religious ecstasy.⁵ Even in his discussion of kabbalistic hermeneutics Idel includes a section on pneumatic interpretation and union with the Torah, thereby focusing on a relatively neglected aspect of the Jewish mystical tradition concerning the experiential dimension of study.⁶ What is necessary to redress the imbalance of which I spoke above is not a focus on experience divorced from interpretation, for, heeding McGinn’s words, we must recognize the interdependence of one on the other. It is evident from the kabbalistic sources themselves that one cannot separate the interpretative and experiential modes: the

nature of mystical experience is such that it is conditioned and shaped by the concepts and symbols that inform the particular kabbalist's worldview as it is applied hermeneutically to the canonical texts and prescribed rituals of the tradition. It is certainly the case, therefore, that the ideas expressed in Jewish mystical literature represent a lived experience rather than some detached realm of imaginative speculation. In that sense, the scholar must ultimately focus on the "anthropology of experience"⁷ to assess the cultural and religious significance of Jewish mysticism in its different historical phases. What I have just said is equally appropriate to both theosophical and ecstatic kabbalah, but my immediate concern in this study is one specific instance of the former trend, viz. the Zohar, arguably the most influential work of Jewish mysticism in the Middle Ages, which in time helped change the face of Judaism.

Any attempt to understand the Zohar must take into account the fact that the theosophical ruminations contained in this anthology are not merely speculative devices for expressing the knowable aspect of God, but are practical means for achieving a state of ecstasy, i.e., an experience of immediacy with God that may eventuate in union or communion (most frequently designated by the traditional term *devequt*). The texts themselves – at the compositional level – reflect a state wherein the mystic experienced the divine pleroma and reintegrated his soul with its ontic source. This point, so basic to the understanding of the religious experience underlying this work, was well understood by the anonymous author of the *Tiqqunei Zohar*, who thus reflected on the verse, "And the enlightened will shine like the splendor of the sky" (Dan. 12:3): "The enlightened are R. Simeon and his colleagues; they were illuminated when they gathered to produce this composition. Permission was given to them and to Elijah who was with them, and to all the souls of the [celestial] academy to descend amongst them, and to all the angels."⁸ I am employing the word "ecstasy" to refer to an experience whereby the mystic transcends the confines of the spatio-temporal world; this transcendence may be experienced either as translation to otherworldly realms or as intense illumination in this world. In my usage, therefore, "ecstasy" denotes a category of religious phenomenology rather than a phenomenological typology. Indeed, I hope to advance the discussion on the nature of ecstasy in medieval Jewish mysticism by cutting across the phenomenological boundaries and suggest that matters of theosophy are not merely

speculative forms, but rather are ontic paradigms that are experienced in a state of ecstatic illumination, essentially facilitated by the hermeneutic process. The point is well expressed in the following comment in an anonymous kabbalistic commentary on the ten divine emanations (*sefirot*): “For the one who merits this wisdom these awesome entities are inscribed upon his heart and they increase upon him all day; these entities are joyous in his heart and all the secrets of Torah are revealed to him.”⁹

It is evident that the authorship of the Zohar likewise assumed that when the kabbalist gained knowledge of the divine potencies he ecstatically entered a state of mind, such that he was illuminated by these potencies and united with them. Thus, one finds in the Zohar applied to the mystical comrades engaged in theosophic speculation an Aramaic equivalent of the expression used to describe Aqiva’s successful experience of the mystical orchard (*pardes*), to enter and to exit.¹⁰ In the case of the relevant zoharic texts the expression *ma’n de-al we-nafaq*, “the one who enters and exits,” denotes entering into and exiting from an ecstatic state of illumination wherein the mystical secrets are revealed.¹¹ To cite a few examples: “Happy is the lot of one who cleaves to his Master, who enters and exits.”¹² “Happy is the lot of one who enters and exits and who knows how to contemplate the secrets of his Master to cleave to Him, for by means of these secrets a person can cleave to his Master and know the perfection of wisdom in the supernal mystery.”¹³ “Happy is the lot of the one who merits to know His ways and who does not deviate from or err with respect to them, for these matters are hidden, and the supernal holy ones shine in them like one who shines from the light of a flame; these matters are transmitted only to one who enters and exits.”¹⁴ “Happy is the one who enters and exits to know the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He. Thus it is written, ‘The path of the righteous is like radiant sunlight [ever brightening until noon]’ (Prov. 4: 18), and it is written, ‘And your people, all of them righteous [shall possess the land for all time]’ (Isa. 60:21).”¹⁵ To be sure, in one section of the Zohar, the *Idra Rabba* (“Great Assembly”), this terminology seems to be used in a spatial sense, i.e., the frame of reference of the entry and departure is a gathering of the group of mystics:

R. Simeon sat and wept, and said: Woe if I reveal! Woe if I do not reveal! The comrades who were there were silent. R. Abba rose

and said to him: If it pleases the master to reveal, as it is written, “The secret of the Lord is with those who fear Him” (Ps. 25: 14), and these comrades are fearers of the Holy One, blessed be He, and they have already entered the assembly of the Tabernacle, some of them have entered and some of them have departed.¹⁶

On one level the reference to the assembly of the Tabernacle (*idra de-vei mashkena*) refers to an apparently lost literary unit that dealt with the secrets of the Tabernacle in a form and style comparable to the other Idrot sections of the zoharic anthology.¹⁷ In that sense, the meaning of the above passage is that R. Simeon can feel confident about disclosing the deepest secrets, for some of the rabbis present at the moment had already been tested by a previous gathering wherein esoteric matters were revealed, i.e., those rabbis underwent the experience and survived: they entered in peace and exited in peace. On another level, this assembly may be a symbolic reference to the Presence (*Shekhinah*), the last of the ten divine emanations.¹⁸ That is, the entry into and departure from the assembly of the Tabernacle (another standard symbol for the *Shekhinah* in kabbalistic literature in general and the *Zohar* in particular)¹⁹ signifies the union of the mystic with the Presence. The two explanations are not contradictory, for the textual account itself probably would have been based on precisely some such experience of union: the entry into the *Shekhinah* engenders the knowledge of mystical truths about the structure of the Tabernacle, for the earthly Tabernacle is ontically parallel to its supernal archetype.²⁰ One might go further and suggest that, from the vantage point of the *Zohar*, the gathering of mystics to expound the mysteries of Torah is a collective experience of union with the Presence;²¹ those who survive the experience depart therefrom, whereas others who are unworthy die,²² although in some cases the death that ensues from the ecstatic union is viewed in a positive light.²³

The mystical aspect of theosophic gnosis in the *Zohar* was duly noted by Gershom Scholem in the opening paragraphs of the sixth lecture in his pioneering study, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, on the theosophic doctrine of the *Zohar*: “If I were asked to characterize in one word the essential traits of the world of Kabbalistic thought, those which set it apart from other forms of Jewish mysticism, I would say that the *Zohar* represents Jewish theosophy,

i.e., a Jewish form of theosophy.”²⁴ Scholem goes on to clarify his terminology: “theosophy signifies a mystical doctrine, or school of thought, which purports to perceive and to describe the mysterious workings of the Divinity, perhaps also believing it possible to become absorbed in its contemplation. Theosophy postulates a kind of divine emanation whereby God, abandoning his self-contained repose, awakens to mysterious life; further, it maintains that the mysteries of creation reflect the pulsation of this divine life.”²⁵ It is evident, then, that in this context, Scholem placed primary emphasis on the doctrinal aspect of zoharic theosophy, but he nevertheless considered the experiential dimension associated with this system of thought: the theosophist does not merely describe the workings of the divine in a detached manner; he perceives them and may even be absorbed in mystical contemplation. In the continuation of the above text Scholem remarks that in the history of kabbalah an “original perception, born from deep meditation, of a given mode of divine reality, was externalized and transformed into mere book-learning, in which the symbols lost their tremendous meaning and unfettered allegory filled their empty husks.” In the case of the Zohar, however, the object of gnosis, the *sefirot*, “still had the unbroken reality of mystical experience.”²⁶ This is consistent with other statements made by Scholem to the effect that experience of ecstasy, encounter with the Absolute, or even mystical union, often lie at the bottom of many kabbalistic writings, even though most kabbalists were reticent to discuss such experiences at length.²⁷

The important insight that theosophical speculations cannot be understood without an awareness of the mystical aspect that underlies them has not always been appreciated by scholars of the Zohar; even Scholem himself at times veered from this orientation and assumed a more rationalist or intellectualist approach to kabbalistic sources. Thus, in *Major Trends*, Scholem comments that while experiences of ascent or visualization do not disappear altogether from kabbalistic texts, “on the whole, Kabbalistic meditation and contemplation takes on a more spiritualized aspect.”²⁸ In the continuation, Scholem signals out the Zohar by noting that this work “has little use for ecstasy; the part it plays both in the descriptive and dogmatical sections of this voluminous work is entirely subordinate. Allusions to it there are, but it is obvious that other and different aspects of mysticism are much nearer to the author’s heart.”²⁹

Scholem even goes on to suggest that part of the success of the Zohar can be traced to “this attitude of restraint which struck a familiar chord in the Jewish heart.”³⁰ It is possible that one might remove any contradiction here by stating that Scholem distinguished between ecstasy proper, involving an ascent or translation to otherworldly realms, and mystical experience of the *sefirot*, although I am not inclined to resolve the tension in Scholem in this way.

It seems rather that with respect to this central issue, as in some other cases, Scholem was genuinely ambivalent, contradictory, or dialectical. On one hand, he understood the centrality of mystical or ecstatic vision for the taxonomy of kabbalistic theosophy, but, on the other, he tended to marginalize the place of ecstasy and mystical experience in the history of theosophic kabbalah. The force of his denial of the mystical or ecstatic component is captured in his claim that kabbalistic contemplation takes on a more “spiritualized aspect.” What Scholem intended by this expression is made clear in another passage (written much later) where he is even more emphatic in his denial of the visionary element in theosophic kabbalah: “The concentration on the world of the *Sefirot* is not bound up with visions, but is solely a matter for the intellect prepared to ascend from level to level and to meditate on the qualities unique to each level. If meditation activates at first the faculty of imagination, it continues by activating the faculty of the intellect.”³¹ This is not the place to discuss at length Scholem’s phenomenology of mystical experience as it applies to Jewish mysticism, for my ultimate purpose is to discuss the Zohar, and not Scholem. But it must be noted that Scholem’s characterization, especially in the passage I have just cited, not only flies in the face of the explicit claims of many kabbalists, but also contradicts his own earlier account of the visionary underpinning of kabbalistic theosophy. It is probable that Scholem took as his model the descriptions of the *ascensio mentis* in Isaac the Blind and/or his disciples in Gerona.³² But Scholem presents an over-rationalized reading of these sources, for, as I have argued elsewhere in great detail, in the case of these kabbalists (and subsequent authors influenced by them) the mental or contemplative ascent to the divine pleroma, culminating in a state of *devequt*, union or communion, is facilitated by the faculty of the imagination and not the intellect.³³ It is important to emphasize as well that a central concern of theosophic kabbalists, in line with older forms of Jewish esotericism, was

the visualization of the divine in the form of an *anthropos*. The point is underscored in one particular zoharic passage which notes that the one who “knows the secret of wisdom,” connected especially to the *botsina de-qardinuta*, the hard (or dark) flame that gives shape to the various gradations of the sefirotic pleroma,³⁴ “can comprehend and produce a measure in all aspects, until he knows the supernal secrets, the secrets of his master, the secrets of wisdom so that he may know and comprehend.”³⁵ By contemplating the process of emanation above through the mechanism of the *botsina de-qardinuta*, the kabbalist himself measures or constructs the divine form.³⁶ The locus of that form is the imagination, for the latter was understood by kabbalists, largely owing to neo-Platonic influences, as the faculty wherein the imageless and incorporeal spiritual entity can assume form. In that sense it is impossible to separate the experiential and ecstatic elements in theosophic kabbalah, for any gnosis of the *sefirot* involves some sort of imaginative translation into the divine pleroma that is properly speaking an ecstatic state.

The degree to which this insight has been neglected by modern scholars can be gauged by a cursory glance at the learned contributions to the volume, *The Age of the Zohar, Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1989: of the seventeen articles pertaining to the Zohar or related literature, not a single one deals in any sustained manner with mystical techniques or experiences. The only study that broaches the subject in any manner is Ithamar Gruenwald’s “The Midrashic Condition: From Talmudic to Zoharic Hermeneutics.”³⁷ After acknowledging the contributions of both Isaiah Tishby and Moshe Idel in emphasizing (*contra* Scholem) the phenomenon of *unio mystica* in Jewish sources, Gruenwald asserts that one of the more interesting hermeneutical problems in the modern research into kabbalah remains the need to establish a method that would enable us to evaluate whether a particular kabbalist “passes from the state of theoretical description to an actual realization of his mystical wishes.”³⁸ From his study of the zoharic interpretation of the priestly blessing, especially as compared with the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, Gruenwald finds a strong theurgical or magical orientation, but not much evidence for an ecstatic–mystical approach. Apart from Gruenwald’s essay, the majority of the studies in the volume are concerned with textual, compositional, historical, or exegetical issues, especially the decoding

of the complex theosophic symbolism that fills the pages of the Zohar. Yet, behind the multifaceted symbols and interpretations of biblical verses found in the Zohar is the mind of a mystic (or group of mystics, following the suggestion of Yehuda Liebes³⁹) ecstatically transformed by contemplation of the divine light refracted in nature, the soul, and the Torah. Genuine ecstatic experience indeed underlies the hermeneutical posture of the Zohar, as I suggested in several studies that pre-dated the publication of the aforementioned volume.⁴⁰ One cannot, from the vantage point of theosophic Kabbalah in general, and the Zohar in particular, separate theory and praxis, gnosis and ecstasy, contemplation and imaginative representation.

In honoring the jubilee anniversary of the publication of Scholem's seminal work, I would like to delve more deeply into the experiential and mystical dimensions of the Zohar by focusing on one particular motif, to wit, visionary ascents of the soul to the celestial realms. To date, as far as I am aware, no systematic analysis of this critical typology of mystical experience in zoharic literature has been studied.⁴¹ While other forms of experience are certainly emphasized in the Zohar, it is true that the zoharic authorship placed great emphasis on the experience of heavenly ascent. In this regard, the Castilian kabbalists were not exceptional, for the older tradition of celestial journeys was preserved – in a practical and not merely theoretical way – by the pietists of northern France and Germany⁴² and the theosophical kabbalists of Provence and northern Spain. In the case of the latter, the upward journey was understood in a neo-Platonic vein as a contemplative ascent achieved by means of words or prayer and/or Torah study.⁴³ The motif of the heavenly ascent in zoharic literature clearly draws upon these earlier kabbalistic sources, although the nuances of the Zohar are somewhat different. Beyond the obvious merit of providing the first in-depth analysis of this motif in the different literary strata of the Zohar, the ensuing study should contribute to our appreciation of the deeply mystical and ecstatic nature of theosophic gnosis in the zoharic corpus. Central to the lived experience underlying the Zohar is the belief that the mystical sages, designated by several technical terms, including the righteous (*tsaddiqim*), masters of faith (*ma'rei meheimanuta*), or those who are worthy of faith (*benei meheimanuta*), reapers of the field (*mehatsdei haqla*), and the enlightened (*maskilim*), occupy a

place in the divine pleroma. The mystic can, and on occasion does, transport himself to that ontic sphere. In such a state the individual is transformed from normal sensory perception and rational intellection to a mode of experience that in a most exact sense should be called ecstasy.

That the interest in the structures of ancient Jewish mysticism had immediate practical implications for the zoharic authorship is attested in the opening comments to the literary unit that deals in an extensive manner with the palaces (*heikhalot*) from the side of holiness:⁴⁴

R. Simeon said: It has been taught that there are palaces that exist for the sake of arranging the order of praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, whether the order is that which exists in word or that which exists in will, for⁴⁵ there is an order that exists in word and an order that exists in the will and intention of the heart, to know and contemplate, i.e., to contemplate above until the Infinite, for there are fixed all the intentions and thoughts, and they cannot be uttered at all. Rather, just as He is hidden so too all His words are hidden. Come and see that which has been said regarding these palaces: All these orders are one principle for the sake of comprising the lower in the upper.⁴⁶

In the continuation of this text, mention is made of the long and short prayers arranged by Moses, for in a fundamental sense the ascent through the celestial palaces is a liturgical act.⁴⁷ Indeed, throughout the descriptions of the palaces (in both the abbreviated and extended versions) the vertical flight of the soul is linked to the rising of the words of prayer. This is epitomized, for instance, in the following words:

R. Simeon said: Who is the one who knows how to arrange the prayer of his Master like Moses who when he needed it arranged a long prayer and when he needed it arranged a short prayer?
R. Simeon said: I have found in the books of the ancients the order of the secret of secrets in one bond, the times when it is necessary to arrange one's prayer as is appropriate, and to bind the knots⁴⁸ to ameliorate [the judgments of] the Master as is

appropriate, and to know how to unify the perfect unity, to rend the heavens and to open the gates and doors so that no one will stay his hand. Happy are the righteous who know how to appease their Master, to annul the decrees, to cause the Presence to dwell in the world, to draw down blessings.⁴⁹

The theurgical task of prayer is to unite the different cosmic forces. “When one worships his Master in prayer with desire and the intention of the heart, his will cleaves [to the divine] like a flame to coal,⁵⁰ to unify those lower heavens on the side of holiness, to crown them with one name below, and from there to unify those inner, supernal heavens, so that all will be one in that supernal heaven that stands over them.”⁵¹ In one zoharic passage the very term *ma’aseh merkavah* (usually rendered “account of the chariot”) is connected with the fact that Adam has the capacity to combine (*leharkiv*) one thing with another, thereby uniting the different links in the chain of being.⁵² What needs to be emphasized again is the fact that according to the Zohar, the visual contemplation of the palaces in the mind’s eye provides an occasion for an ascent of the soul to the uppermost reaches of the divine, the Infinite; by means of that flight one combines all grades of being, which results in the overflow of the divine influx upon earth. “All of these orders,” reflects the zoharic authorship, “are to cause the Presence to dwell in the world.”⁵³ In the main body of zoharic literature the mystic ascent of intention in prayer (*kawwanah*) and the contemplative ascent of the soul are combined in such a way that it is difficult to differentiate the two, especially in the sections that describe the ascent through the celestial palaces. To cite one final example:

It is written [“My beloved is like a gazelle or like a young stag; there he stands behind our wall] gazing through the windows” (Song of Songs 2:9). These exist so that he might see all those worshippers who come first to the Synagogue and are counted amongst the first ten.⁵⁴ Then they ascend and are written above for they are called comrades (*ḥaverim*) in relation to Him, as it is written. “Lovers (*ḥaverim*) are listening; let me hear your voice” (ibid., 8: 13). Happy are the righteous who know how to set their prayer as is appropriate, for when that prayer began to ascend they ascend by means of that prayer, and they enter all

the heavens and all the palaces until the gate of the upper opening [i.e., the *Shekhinah*] and that prayer enters before the King to be crowned.⁵⁵

A perusal of the relevant sources indicates that in most cases, the zoharic authorship has contextualized the heavenly ascent in a soteriological framework, i.e. the principal type of celestial voyager is the righteous one who has departed from this bodily life. On numerous occasions in the Zohar, one reads about the soul of the righteous, separated from the body at death, entering the earthly Garden of Eden, and from there, ascending through the various palaces to the divine pleroma, particularly to the last of the emanations which is called, inter alia, the *tseror ha-ḥayyim*, bundle of life, the ontic source to which the soul returns.⁵⁶ In some passages, the zoharic authorship notes that the visual ascent of the soul occurs at specific times, viz. Sabbath, the Festivals, and the New Moon.⁵⁷ This may, properly speaking, be called a flight into union,⁵⁸ for the goal of the ascent is the unification of the soul and the Presence, a unification that is often described in intensely erotic terms. Here we note a curious element: it is the soul that rises to the heavenly regions and is ultimately absorbed in the divine feminine, yet the soul experiences the ecstasy of flight and union in bodily sensations. After separating from the physical body and entering the earthly Garden of Eden, the soul assumes a celestial or astral body,⁵⁹ sometimes depicted as the garment woven from the deeds of the soul⁶⁰ or alternatively described as being composed of the celestial light or ether characteristic of the paradisiacal state.⁶¹ In virtue of this spiritual garment, which is in the likeness of the physical body, the soul undergoes kinesthetic and tactile experiences in the course of its ascent, and ultimately enjoys a tangible sense of delight in the moment of the visual encounter with the divine.⁶² It is evident, moreover, from the zoharic accounts of the celestial palaces that the subject of ascent is the soul that has separated from the body.⁶³ The very structure of the palaces is predicated on the ontological parallelism between the seven palaces or halls in the lower Garden of Eden, a physical place in the sublunar world, and the seven palaces in the supernal Garden of Eden, i.e., the divine Presence,⁶⁴ which in turn correspond to the seven lower emanations in the divine pleroma (at times it appears that the seventh palace is itself the last of those emanations, the *Shekhinah*⁶⁵). In these

descriptions as well one can typically find the employment of corporeal images to describe the experience of the soul.

The primary concern of this study, however, is not the ascent of the soul through the palaces after death, but rather those instances in zoharic literature where the soteriological model is applied to mystical states achieved during the corporeal life of the individual. In the first instance, according to one zoharic passage, an ecstatic ascent to the spiritual realm recurs every Friday afternoon at the liminal point between the cessation of mundane time and the inception of Sabbath.⁶⁶

When R. Hamnuna the Elder would come out of the river on Friday afternoon he would sit one moment, and raising his eyes in joy he would say that he sat there to see the gladness of the supernal angels, some ascending and others descending. Every Friday evening a person dwells in the world of souls (*olam ha-neshamot*). Happy is the one who knows the secrets of his Master.⁶⁷

The Zohar thus presents the legendary Hamnuna the Elder as the prototypical ecstatic. In sixteenth-century kabbalistic sources this narrative was sometimes used as the textual basis to ground the custom of ritual ablution (*tevilah*) on Friday afternoon.⁶⁸ While the zoharic context probably implies bathing before Sabbath rather than the specified ritual of ablution,⁶⁹ it is nevertheless interesting that the protagonist is portrayed as coming out of a body of water before he sits down to raise his eyes joyously and have a visionary experience. One may assume that implied here is some kind of purificatory rite of passage (if not technically ritual ablution) that must precede the ecstatic vision. The reference to the body of water is also relevant insofar as it may function here, reflecting a much older Jewish tradition, as a medium for visualization.⁷⁰ The physical posture and gestures by which Hamnuna enters the ecstatic state are also noteworthy: he sits and casts his eyes upward to see the ascending and descending angels. The ecstatic vision is thus facilitated by a sitting pose as well as the raising of the eyes.⁷¹ It is not reported that Hamnuna himself experienced an other-worldly journey; on the contrary, it seems that he saw events of the celestial realm as he bodily sat upon earth near the river and gazed heavenward. By

contrast, the Zohar informs the reader that on Sabbath eve one is transported to the world of souls. The language here is critical, “every Friday evening a person dwells in the world of souls,” which implies that one has ascended and does not merely see the angels going up and down. That this entails some kind of prescriptive, and not merely descriptive, knowledge is underscored by the concluding remark, “happy is the one who knows the secrets of his Master,” i.e., the one who possesses the practical knowledge that includes techniques of ascent.

The details of the ascent experience are offered in the passage immediately preceding the text that I have cited. The Zohar presents an intensely mythical and dramatic account of the concomitant ascent and descent of souls at the time of the arrival of Sabbath, an account that is prefaced with the remark, “this mystery is given to the wise.”⁷² The souls of the righteous in the lower Garden of Eden ascend to the upper Garden of Eden at the same time that the extra souls descend to crown the people of Israel. “Souls ascend and souls descend to crown the holy people; on Sabbath eve there is a rotation of souls, some come and others go, some ascend and others descend.”⁷³ This rotation of souls, also described in terms of the image of holy chariots, is set into motion just before the beginning of Sabbath, but reaches some kind of stasis at the moment that the Sabbath is sanctified in the *Amidah* of the evening prayer:

So it goes until the [angelic] announcer rises and proclaims: “Sanctified! Sanctified!” Then rest is found and contentment for all. The wicked in Gehinnom are appeased in their places and they have repose. All the souls are crowned, the ones above and the ones below. Happy are the people who may partake of this!⁷⁴

However, at a later point during the course of the night there is another rotation of souls and the state of restfulness is disrupted:

At midnight of Sabbath eve the wise are aroused to have their intercourse (*mit'arin le-shimmusha dilhon*) [in] the upper spirit in which they were crowned when the day was sanctified. When they are asleep on their beds and their other souls want to ascend to see the glory of the King, then that upper spirit that

descended at [the inception of] Sabbath eve takes that soul and elevates it above. That other soul is cleansed by the aromatic fluids of the Garden of Eden, and there it sees what it sees. When it descends to rest in its place at midnight, that soul returns to its place. Those who are wise should say one verse for the arousal of that upper holy soul, the crown of Sabbath, e.g., “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me as a herald of joy to the humble etc.” (Isa. 61:1), “When those moved, these moved; and when those stood still, these stood still; and when these were borne above the earth etc.” (Ezek. 1:22), “Wherever the spirit impelled them to go, they went etc.” (ibid., 20), for they are crowned by that spirit in virtue of their arousal in the joy of intercourse, and the emanation of that upper spirit of Sabbath is in that devotional act of intercourse.⁷⁵

Without entering into all the technical details of this fascinating passage, suffice it to say that it clearly demonstrates that the zoharic authorship entertained the possibility of visionary ascent for a living soul. It is evident, moreover, as I have already noted, that through prayer, one can ascend in a way comparable to the post-mortem ascent of the soul. Thus, for example, one reads in the context of the explication of the dynamic processes of the third of the seven palaces, “The one who knows the secrets and achieves perfection cleaves to his Master and abolishes all harsh decrees, and he crowns his Master and draws down blessings on the whole world, and this is the person who is called the righteous, pillar of the world.⁷⁶ His prayer does not return empty, and his portion is in the world-to-come, and he is counted amongst those of faith (*benei meheimanuta*).⁷⁷ Through the utterance of prayer, one mystically ascends to the sefirotic pleroma and then theurgically draws down the divine energies. Mention should also be made here of a passage that recurs several times in the Zohar that deals with an explication of the uppermost aspects of the divine thought, especially as it relates to the human capacity to attract this effluence from the supernal source.⁷⁸ The theosophic exposition begins with the statement (based on Gen. 14:22), “R. Simeon said: I raised my hands above in prayer.” The implication of starting with this well-known prayer gesture⁷⁹ is clear enough: by raising his hands in prayer, R. Simeon draws

down the divine overflow from the highest realm of the Godhead. As a result of this process, the mystic is illuminated by the light of the divine potencies, and only by virtue of this illumination can he expound secrets that have been concealed.⁸⁰ This topos is repeated in several contexts in the Zohar. Thus, in the beginning of the section containing secrets of physiognomy and chiromancy, called *Raza de-Razin* ("Secret of Secrets"), one reads, "R. Simeon said: I have raised my hands in prayer to the One who created the world, for even though the ancients revealed in this verse [Gen. 5:1] supernal secrets, one must contemplate and look at the secrets of the book of primordial Adam, for from there is derived the hidden book of King Solomon."⁸¹ The lifting of the hands thus serves as a propaedeutic to contemplate and reveal the hidden secrets that are registered in the ancient esoteric works. The point was well understood by the anonymous author of *Tiqunei Zohar*, who commented on the same verse, no doubt reflecting the aforesaid passage, "This is the book of the generations of Adam (Gen. 5:1). R. Simeon began to expound and said: I raised my hands to the One who created the world, so that He would reveal to us hidden and concealed secrets, to utter them before the *Shekhinah* and her 60 myriad hosts of holy angels above and 60 myriad holy angels below, so that I would not enter in shame before You."⁸² Lifting of the hands in supplication implores and impels God to reveal concealed truths through the agency of the mystic. The same technique is alluded to at the beginning of the Great Assembly, but in that case, all of the comrades are said to raise their fingers before entering the field to hear the esoteric matters revealed. The master, R. Simeon, prays and then begins to expound about the disclosure and concealment of secrets.⁸³ Finally, in another passage, one similarly reads, "R. Simeon said: I raised my hands in prayer to the supernal Holy One so that these matters would be revealed by me in the world as they are hidden in my heart."⁸⁴ All of these examples indicate that the raising of the hands serves as a device by which the mystic draws down the influx of light from above before he begins to disclose concealed secrets. To break the code of esotericism, it is necessary for one to enter an ecstatic state, and the means to so enter is through prayer. In these passages, however, it does not appear that the gesture of raising the hands induces a flight of the soul.

From other passages in the various literary strata of the Zohar it is evident that the study of Torah can serve as the mechanism to

actuate the visionary ascent to the supernal realms of being. Thus, for instance, in a passage from *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* we read,

R. Judah taught: Whoever is occupied with [the study of] Torah as much as is required, his soul is elevated above when he is asleep, and he is taught from the depths of Torah ... R. Isaac taught: Whoever is occupied with Torah for its own sake, when he is asleep at night his soul rises and he is shown those matters that will be in the world in the future.⁸⁵

The theme of nocturnal ascent is developed more fully in other zoharic contexts wherein it is emphasized that during sleep the soul separates from the body and rises upward. If the soul is worthy, then it ascends without any obstruction until it reaches the *Shekhinah*; if, however, the soul is unworthy, the ascent is blocked and it is forced to roam about the world.⁸⁶ In some passages of the Zohar this theme is connected with the idea that at midnight God takes delight with the righteous in the Garden of Eden. It is the latter idea that serves as the mythic underpinning of the ritual (expressed, of course, in the literary guise of R. Simeon and his colleagues) of rising at midnight to study esoteric matters.⁸⁷ As it is put in one zoharic text,

At midnight R. Abba and the rest of the comrades rose to be occupied in [the study of] Torah. R. Abba said: From here on let us say words to crown the righteous in the Garden of Eden, for now is the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, and the righteous in the Garden of Eden listen for the voices of the righteous who are on earth.⁸⁸

The comrades who study kabbalistic matters at midnight thus join the souls of the righteous located at that moment in the upper Paradise, i.e., the divine Presence; it is through this study, moreover, that the righteous are crowned. Just as the crown of God is made from the words of prayer, so too the crowns of the righteous souls in the supernal Garden of Eden are composed of words of Torah that rise from the mouth of the righteous individuals below, i.e., the kabbalists.⁸⁹ The kabbalists who occupy themselves with Torah-study at midnight are, therefore, the righteous below who

correspond to the righteous souls who ascend from the lower to upper Garden of Eden:

Each and every night the souls of the righteous ascend, and at midnight the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to the Garden of Eden to take delight in them. In whom? R. Yose said: In all of them, those who are in their habitations in that world and those who sit in their habitations in this world; the Holy One, blessed be He, takes delight in them at midnight. Come and see: The world above needs the arousal of the world below. When the souls of the righteous depart from this world and ascend above, they are clothed in the supernal light in a glorious image, and in them the Holy One, blessed be He, takes delight and desires them for they are the fruit of His actions ... R. Yose said: [The Holy One, blessed He, delights in] even those in this world. How is this so? He said to him: At midnight all the truly righteous rise to study Torah and to hear the praises of Torah. It is said that the Holy One, blessed He, and all the righteous that are with Him in the Garden of Eden come to hear their voices. A thread of mercy extends to them during the day, as it says, "By day may the Lord vouchsafe His faithful care, so that at night a song to Him may be with me" (Ps. 42:9).⁹⁰ It follows that the praises that rise before Him at night are a complete praise.⁹¹

In several passages dealing with this motif, the Zohar cites the verse, "O you who linger in the garden, lovers are listening; let me hear your voice" (Song of Songs 8:13), for the garden is the feminine Presence, the lovers the masculine element of the divine and the souls of the righteous, and the voice is that of the kabbalist occupied with study of Torah.⁹² The kabbalists, therefore, are truly partners (*haverim*) of the divine, for by means of their study they ascend to join the pleroma, specifically the last of the emanations, which is the opening that receives them. The homologous relation between the righteous below, who group together to study the esoteric meaning of Scripture, and the righteous souls above in the Garden of Eden is not merely horizontal; there is a vertical intersection as well, for the righteous below ascend to join the righteous above:

The souls of people ascend, each one as is appropriate ... Happy is the lot of the righteous for their souls ascend upward and they

are not obstructed in another place that is not necessary. At midnight the herald stands and calls out, and the opening is opened. Then the wind of the north side is stirred, and it strikes the harp of David that plays by itself ... Happy is the lot of the one who wakes at that time and is occupied with Torah. Whoever rises at that time and is occupied with Torah is called a partner of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the Community of Israel.⁹³

From these passages, and many others that could have been cited, it is clear that individuals occupied with esoteric study are themselves united with the divine Presence⁹⁴ at the culmination of their nocturnal ascent:

Come and see: When the north wind is stirred up the Community of Israel is received in the left ... and the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to take delight with the righteous who are in the Garden of Eden. Whoever is aroused at that time to study Torah joins her, for she and her hosts praise the supernal King. All those who participate with her in the praise of Torah are written amongst those who belong to the palace and are called by their names, and these are inscribed in the day.⁹⁵

The point is reiterated in slightly different language in the following passage:

R. Hizqiyah was sitting before R. Isaac. They rose at midnight to study Torah. R. Isaac began to expound, saying: "Now bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord [who stand nightly in the house of the Lord]" (Ps. 134:1). This verse has been established by the comrades. But this praise relates to all those who are faithful (*benei meheimanuta*). Who are the faithful? Those who study Torah and know how to unify the Holy Name as is appropriate. The praise of those faithful is that they rise at midnight to study Torah and cleave by means of it to the Community of Israel [*Shekhinah*], to praise her before the Holy One, blessed be He, in words of Torah. Come and see: When a person rises at midnight to study Torah and the north wind stirs at midnight, the doe [*Shekhinah*] rises and praises the Holy One, blessed be

He. When she rises several thousand and tens of thousands rise with her, and they all begin to praise the Holy King. The Holy One, blessed be He, listens to the one who is righteous and rises at midnight to study Torah ... as it is written “O you who linger in the garden, lovers are listening; let me hear your voice” (Song of Songs 8:13) ... You are the glory of the Holy King, You are the crown of the King. That doe is crowned by those people and she stands before the King and says: See with which son I have come before You, by which son I have been aroused in relation to You, they who are the most praiseworthy of all before the King! He answered and said: “Those who stand nightly in the house of the Lord,” these are the servants of the Lord who are worthy to bless the Holy King, and their blessing is a blessing, as it says, “Lift your hands toward the sanctuary and bless the Lord” (Ps. 134:2).⁹⁶

Midnight is a propitious time to study Torah in a kabbalistic vein, inasmuch as at that precise moment the masculine potency of the divine (the Holy One, blessed be He) enters the feminine (the Garden of Eden) to delight with the souls of the righteous. Through study of Torah, the kabbalists ascend to cleave to the divine Presence, a theme connected exegetically in the above passage to Psalm 134, which begins “a song of ascents,” *shir ha-ma'alot*. Torah study leads to an ecstatic ascent that ultimately serves a theurgical function insofar as the kabbalists who “stand in the house of the Lord,” i.e., are in union with the *Shekhinah*, are capable of blessing the divine. Alternatively, the kabbalists become crowns on the head of the *Shekhinah* (symbolized as the doe) so that she can stand before the masculine deity and offer praises. Not only do the kabbalists cleave to the Presence (symbolically depicted by the image of their being crowned by the *Shekhinah*), but they assist in the unification of the latter with her masculine consort (expressed by the image of their crowning the *Shekhinah*). “Come and see: When the north wind stirs at midnight ... those who belong to the supernal palace rise to be involved with the praise of Torah, and they join the Community of Israel until the day shines; when morning comes she and all those who belong to the palace come before the Holy King, and they are called sons of the King and Matrona ... At night they were occupied with the Matrona, now they come with the Matrona to unite her with the King.”⁹⁷ In this

respect, the kabbalists fulfill the role of *Yesod*, the conduit that connects the masculine and feminine aspects of the Godhead:

At midnight the Holy One, blessed be He, enters the Garden of Eden to take delight with the righteous. At that time one must rise to study Torah. Thus it is said that the Holy One, blessed be He, and all the righteous in the Garden of Eden listen to their voice, as it is written, “O you who linger in the garden, lovers are listening; let me hear your voice” (Song of Songs 8:13). The one who lingers in the garden, i.e., the Community of Israel, for she praises him before the Holy One, blessed be He, by virtue of the praise of Torah at night. Happy is the lot of one who joins her to praise the Holy One, blessed be He, by means of the praise of Torah. When morning comes the Community of Israel comes and takes delight with the Holy One, blessed be He, and he extends to her the sceptre of mercy [i.e., the *sefirah* of *Yesod*, which corresponds to the phallus].⁹⁸ She does not enter alone but together with those who join her. Thus is it written, “By day may the lord vouchsafe His faithful care, so that at night [a song to Him may be with me, a prayer to the God of my life]” (Ps. 42:9).⁹⁹

Hence, the kabbalist who rises at midnight to study Torah is in the place of *Yesod*, the attribute that bestows the divine effluence upon the *Shekhinah*. This is consistent with the view expressed in sundry ways in the *Zohar*, as well as in other thirteenth-century kabbalistic literature, to the effect that this particular gradation is the locus of esoteric knowledge. Consequently, the *maskil* corresponds to *Yesod*, and in the moment of mystical illumination it is precisely that divine element that overflows to the kabbalist.

R. Ḥizkiyah said: Whoever is occupied with Torah at that hour certainly has a constant portion in the world-to-come. R. Yose said: What is the meaning of constant? He said to him: Thus I have learnt that every midnight when the Holy One, blessed be He, is aroused in the Garden of Eden all those plants of the Garden are irrigated more from that river, which is called the “raging torrent,”¹⁰⁰ the “refreshing stream,”¹⁰¹ whose waters never cease. For the one who rises and studies Torah it is as if that river pours forth upon his head and waters him from those plants of the Garden of Eden.¹⁰²

The ascent experience of the kabbalist, brought about through the study of Torah at the midnight hour, culminates in the ecstatic experience of ontic transformation. In the passage just cited, the transformation is characterized as the pouring forth of *Yesod*, the ever-gushing stream, upon the heads of the kabbalists such that they draw sustenance from the sefirotic entities, the plants of the Garden of Eden. Implicit here is the symbolization of the coronation motif as some form of unification.¹⁰³ It is worthwhile to cite here a passage from one of Moses de León's Hebrew theosophic works that helps illuminate the zoharic conception:

The secret of the splendor of the supernal light, the good that is hidden for the souls of the righteous, "no eye has seen, O God, but You" (Isa. 64:3). We must believe and know that the supernal Garden of Eden is the secret of the bundle of life, and the Holy One, blessed be He, desires that Garden constantly, and the souls of the righteous are bound there, and they enjoy its splendor. The splendor¹⁰⁴ of the supernal Garden of Eden is nothing but the light of the splendor of the river that comes forth from Eden, which enters into it and bestows upon it the light and inner splendor from the secret of the world-to-come, which is the supernal holy of holies of which it says "no eye has seen, O God, but You."¹⁰⁵

De León's description of the souls of the righteous in the supernal Garden of Eden is applied in some zoharic texts to the souls of the kabbalists that gain entry into this grade of being and shine with the splendor of the river, i.e., *Yesod*, the gradation that corresponds to the *membrum virile* of the divine *anthropos*. The image of the river overflowing upon the heads of the kabbalists¹⁰⁶ indicates that they are in a state of ecstatic illumination linked especially to that grade, the source of all secrets, which is characterized by a dialectic of disclosure and concealment appropriate to esoteric matters.¹⁰⁷ In another zoharic passage, the transformation of the kabbalist who studies at midnight is depicted in the following way:

"Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power" (Exod. 15:6).
R. Simeon said: When the morning shines and the doe rises, she is filled from every side, and she enters hundreds of palaces of

the King. When the north wind stirs and the desire of the doe is to be aroused in the world, the one who at midnight is involved in [the study of] Torah comes with her before the King. When the morning shines the thread of mercy is drawn upon him. He looks heavenward and the light of understanding of the holy gnosis rests upon him, and he is crowned by it, and everyone is afraid of him. At that point that person is called a son of the Holy One, blessed be He, a son of the palace of the King. He enters all the [heavenly] gates and no one obstructs him. When he calls to the palace of the King, concerning him it is written, "The Lord is near to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth" (Ps. 145:18). What is truth? As it has been established, "You will give truth to Jacob" (Micah 7:20), for he knows how to unify the holy name in his prayer as is appropriate. And this is the worship of the Holy King.¹⁰⁸

Thus, the kabbalist who rises at midnight to study is totally transformed in the morning light. He has not only assisted the *Shekhinah* in her unification with the masculine aspect of God, but he has himself become a full-fledged member of the divine pleroma; he is, in the language of the zoharic text, a son of the Holy One, blessed be He, a son of the holy palace. On account of this transformation, the prayers of the mystic are guaranteed to be successful, for no one in the celestial realms has the power to block the passage of his prayers; indeed, at that moment the mystic has attained a higher ontic status than any of the angelic beings who populate the heavenly palaces.

The analysis of the material cited in this study indicates quite convincingly that the zoharic authorship considered visionary ascents of the soul a real possibility. While all souls, to some extent, experience a nocturnal ascent during sleep, the kabbalist is given a privileged position in terms of attaining this peak religious experience. More specifically, the mechanism by means of which the kabbalist ascends to the heavenly realms and beyond to the divine pleroma consists of recitation of prayer and study of Torah. The two ritual acts converge in what is one of the central ecstatic experiences described in the Zohar regarding the midnight study of Torah on the part of the kabbalist. As a result of studying Torah at this hour, when God enters the supernal Garden of Eden and takes delight with the

souls of the righteous, the kabbalist himself is transported from the terrestrial realm to the heavens, culminating in a union with the *Shekhinah*. The transformative quality of the mystical experience is underscored in the way that Moses de León refers to the kabbalists in one of his writings, viz. “the holy enlightened ones, servants of the Supernal One” (*maskilim ha-qedoshim meshartei elyon*).¹⁰⁹ This is not simply a rhetorical phrase of approbation but rather a precise attribution: the kabbalist is ontically transformed as a result of his ascent through study to the higher realms of being. This transformation is most fulfilled in the ecstatic state wherein the kabbalist participates, indeed becomes one, with the *Shekhinah*. It is through this union, moreover, that the kabbalist merits to receive knowledge of the divine secrets.¹¹⁰ Moreover, the Torah-study of the kabbalist has the theurgical function of assisting the *Shekhinah* in standing before the masculine aspect of the deity to utter prayers, and ultimately facilitating the union of the male and female poles of divinity. In the process, the kabbalist himself is transformed and receives the divine influx from either *Yesod* or the *Shekhinah*. At that stage his own (morning) prayers are offered before God and readily received as he is now a member of the divine pleroma, that is, he has been divinized.

We are left to wonder if behind these dramatic and highly visual characterizations, the zoharic authorship had some concrete reality in mind. That is, are we justified in reading these passages as allusions to a contemporary mystical rite that the Spanish kabbalists in the last decades of the thirteenth century (and perhaps also the first decades of the fourteenth century) experienced? Were there midnight study groups in Castile that provided the context for communal kabbalistic study and visionary ascents to the divine pleroma? It is likely that the zoharic description of a similar ritual connected with the night of Pentecost, involving the study of different aspects of Torah throughout that night, was in fact rooted in some actual practice on the part of this circle of kabbalists, which, as Liebes has argued, may have had messianic implications.¹¹¹ It seems to me that the zoharic references to the communal midnight study of Torah also reflect actual practice and are not to be construed simply as imaginative constructions of one idiosyncratic individual (Moses de León). These actual gatherings set the stage for the narrative drama that unfolds in the pages of the Zohar. The biographical data of the thirteenth-century mystics are cloaked in the mythical garb of

Simeon ben Yoḥai and his colleagues.¹¹² Like all mythologies, however, the mythic portrayal in the Zohar is anchored in a historical reality. If that is the case, then perhaps some of the kabbalistic practices discussed in zoharic literature are not, as Scholem suggested, “rites which its author had only dreamed of and projected back into a remote archaic past. Many of these new rites recommended by the Zohar, which attributed them to Simeon ben Yoḥai and his circle, were practiced for the first time in Safed.”¹¹³ That the mystical rites mentioned in the Zohar were projected back to second-century Palestine cannot be denied; however, the question of when they were first actually practiced (or whether the zoharic descriptions sometimes represent kabbalistic interpretations of existing rituals) remains open. It may be the case that some of the rites described in the Zohar refer to actual practices that were preserved in small circles of kabbalists¹¹⁴ or were recovered by the Safedian kabbalists and eventually popularized through the influence of Lurianic kabbalah on pietistic, devotional, and moralistic literature as Scholem concluded. The determination of whether or not actual practice underlies the kabbalistic rites recorded in the Zohar depends upon one’s orientation towards the literary nature of this work and the priority that one gives to practice and experience as opposed to symbols and myths.¹¹⁵ In point of fact these two issues are not unrelated: by shifting the focus from single to multiple authorship, scholars will begin more readily to acknowledge the historical group behind the fictional fellowship of Simeon ben Yoḥai, and will therefore appreciate the lived and living experiences underlying many of the theoretical and exegetical deliberations in the Zohar. The particular motif of visionary ascent, analyzed in detail in this study, provides an excellent window through which one can view the profoundly ecstatic and mystical elements of zoharic theosophy.

Notes

1. Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: Crossroad, 1991), p. xiv.
2. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 27–29.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 35–58.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–73.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 74–111.

6. Ibid., pp. 234–249. See also my studies referred to in note 40, and Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through A Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 326–392.
7. Victor Turner and Edward Bruner (eds), *The Anthropology of Experience* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).
8. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 1a.
9. MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale 824, fol. 108a. On this text, see Gershom Scholem, “Index of Commentaries on the Ten *Sefirot*,” *Qiryat Sefer*, 10, 1933–34, pp. 499 n. 7 and 508 n. 95 (Hebrew). The language of this text resembles Recanaṭi’s paraphrase of Ezra of Gerona in his *Perush al ha-Torah*, 37d.
10. According to some versions of this legend, the fate of Aqiva is described as ascending and descending in peace. For the variant readings, see Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Ki-Fshutah*, Part V: Order Mo’ed (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1962), p. 1290 n. 21; see also Ephraim E. Urbach, “The Traditions about Merkabah Mysticism in the Tannaitic Period,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Ephraim E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), p. 14 n. 59 (Hebrew section); David Halperin, *The Merkabah in Rabbinic Literature* (New Haven: American Oriental Society, 1980), p. 92.
11. Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 154–155, 240–241; Matt, *Zohar*, p. 279, s.v., “entered ... emerged.”
12. *Zohar* 1:44a. Cf. *Zohar* 2:176a, 179a (*Sifra di-Tseni’uta*); *Zohar Ḥadash*, 2b (*Sitrei Otiyyot*) and 6c (*Sitrei Otiyyot*).
13. *Zohar* 2:213b.
14. Ibid. 3:290a (*Idra Zuta*).
15. Ibid. 297a.
16. Ibid. 127b (*Idra Rabba*).
17. Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 153–154. The section in the printed *Zohar* marked as the *Idra de-Mashkena* (2:122b–123b) appears to be a mistake, even though it does properly belong to the *Idra stratum* of zoharic literature. See Liebes, “Messiah,” pp. 88 n. 7, 153 n. 238. It may be relevant to consider here as well the section printed in *Zohar* 2:159a–160b, which begins, “From here are [disclosed] the hidden secrets of the Tabernacle from the mouth of the light” (i.e., Simeon ben Yoḥai; cf. Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 137, 139–140, 158). It is evident from the end of the passage that this is a discrete textual unit that is incomplete. Finally, in this connection it is of importance to note that a significant portion of one of Joseph of Hamadan’s works, *Sefer Tashaq*, is an elaborate kabbalistic commentary on the Tabernacle (exegetically linked to Exod. 25 and Song of Songs 1:1–2:5). It will be shown, moreover, that precisely this theme (which involves the *hieros gamos* of the King and the Matrona) is the central issue and organizing principle of the entire work. Cf. Gershom Scholem, *Einige kabbalistische Handschriften im Britischen Museum* (Jerusalem: Soncino-Blätter, 1932), pp. 11–29; Alexander Altmann, “Concerning the Question of the Authorship of *Sefer Ta’amey ha-Mitswot* Ascribed to R. Isaac Ibn Farḥi,” *Qiryat Sefer*, 40, 1964–65, pp. 256–276, 405–412 (Hebrew); Jeremy Zwelling, “Joseph of Hamadan’s *Sefer Tashak*: Critical Text Edition with Introduction,” Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA, 1975, pp. xix–xx. It is possible that Hamadan was drawing upon the zoharic text, entitled *Idra de-Vei Mashkena*, which dealt with

- the secrets of the Tabernacle. It should be recalled that in *Sefer Tashaq*, there are passages that emulate the style and content of the Idrot. On the complex relation between Joseph of Hamadan and the Zohar, see Liebes, "How the Zohar Was Written," pp. 25–34.
18. On the use of the word *idra* as a symbol for the feminine Presence, see Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 94, 99, 104–105; Matt, *Zohar*, p. 279, s.v., "crossing the threshold of the Dwelling." See esp. the comment of David ben Yehuda he-Ḥasid, cited by Matt, *Zohar*, p. 278, s.v., "the threshing house": "The secret [is clear] ... to anyone who has entered the threshing house." See also Joseph Angeleṭ, *Livnat ha-Sappir* (Jerusalem, 1913), 28a: "I have understood from the *Idra de-Vei Mashkena* in the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* [Angeleṭ's standard way of referring to the Zohar] that every time it says in the midrash they entered the house of assembly it means that they entered to see the splendor of the Presence." Angeleṭ goes on to cite a passage that appears in Zohar 2:128b; see Liebes, "Messiah," p. 153 n. 239. The possibility that the gathering of the mystical fellowship symbolically represents the *Shekhinah* is strengthened by the fact that the entire group consists of ten rabbis who correspond to the ten divine gradations, which, in turn, are all comprised within the last of them. On the meaning of the gathering of the fellowship, see Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 128–134.
 19. See, e.g., Zohar 2:130a, 159a (in that context the lower Tabernacle, or the Tabernacle of Metatron, symbolizes the *Shekhinah* in contrast to the upper concealed Tabernacle identified as *Binah*), 234b, 238a (although it should be noted that on this very page the Tabernacle is also interpreted as a reference to Wisdom), 239b–240a; 3:114b. Needless to say, the examples could be greatly multiplied.
 20. This motif can be traced to much older sources, adumbrated in the Bible itself (cf. Exod. 25:9, 40). For a convenient summary of the biblical motif in its ancient Near Eastern context, see Carol L. Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol From the Biblical Cult* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1976), pp. 172–173. For the development of related motifs in rabbinic literature, see Victor Aptowitz, "The Celestial Temple as Viewed in the Aggadah," trans. Aryeh Rubinstein, in *Binah: Studies in Jewish Thought*, ed. Joseph Dan (New York: Praeger, 1989), pp. 1–29.
 21. This is evident from any number of passages in the zoharic anthology. See, e.g., Zohar 2:163b, where the comrades (*havrayya*) are designated the "face of the *Shekhinah*," for she "is hidden within them, [s]he is concealed and they are revealed." Perhaps one of the more poignant accounts of the collective state of ecstatic union with the *Shekhinah* occurs in Zohar 1:8a, which describes the ritual of studying on the night of Pentecost: "R. Simeon was sitting and studying Torah the night [of the day] that the bride [the *Shekhinah*] unites with her husband [the Holy One]. It has been taught: All the comrades, who belong to the palace of the bride, on the night the bride is prepared to enter the next day into the nuptial chamber with her husband must be with her the whole night. They must rejoice with her in her adornments with which she is adorned, to study Torah, from the Pentateuch to the Prophets, from the Prophets to the Writings, the collections of midrash of scriptural verses, and the secrets of Wisdom, for these are her adornments and ornamentation. She and her maidens enter and stand upon their heads and she is adorned through them and is gladdened by them all that night. On the next day she does not enter the nuptial chamber except with them, and they are called sons of the nuptial chamber. When they enter the nuptial chamber the Holy One, blessed

be He, inquires concerning them, blesses them, and crowns them in the crown of the bride; praiseworthy is their lot." The mystical fellows adorn the *Shekhinah* by means of their novel interpretations of Torah, especially pertaining to esoteric matters (on the image of the different parts of traditional literature being the adornments or ornamentations of the feminine Torah, cf. *Midrash Tanhuma*, Ki Tissa 18, pp. 412–413). On this passage and its relationship to the *Idra Rabba*, see Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 187–188, 208–209. See parallel in *Zohar* 3:97b–98a, which also speaks of the "ancient pietists" staying up the whole night of Pentecost to adorn the *Shekhinah* for her union the next day. Those who fulfill this act are said to be crowned by the *Shekhinah* at night and by the Holy One and the *Shekhinah* during the wedding ceremony of the day. That passage ends with the statement: "in the world there is no one who knows how to adorn the ornaments of the bride except for the comrades." This is clearly a reference to the group of practicing kabbalists active in late-thirteenth-century Castile. Cf. the testimony of Moses de León in his kabbalistic explanation of Pentecost, extant in MS Vatican 428, fol. 37b: "The ancient ones, blessed be their memory, the pillars of the world who know how to draw down the grace from the exalted heights, practiced the custom of not sleeping these two nights of Pentecost. All night they would study the Pentateuch, Prophets, Writings, and from there they would skip over to Talmud and haggadot, and then read in the wisdom of the secrets of Torah (*hokhmat sitrei ha-torah*) until the morning light. This is a tradition of the fathers in the hands of these select individuals, the 'remnant whom the Lord calls' (Joel 3:5)."

22. *Zohar* 3:141a (*Idra Rabba*).
23. *Zohar* 3:144a (*Idra Rabba*; cf. *Zohar* 1:217a); 3: 287b (*Idra Zuta*). See also *Zohar H'adash*, 18d–19a (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*), and see Liebes, "How the Zohar Was Written," p. 6 n. 20, and Elliot R. Wolfson, "Hai Gaon's Letter and Commentary on 'Aleynu: Further Evidence of Moses de León's Pseudepigraphic Activity,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 81, 1991, pp. 400–401 nn. 149–150.
24. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 205.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 206.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 207. It is curious that, in his paraphrase of Scholem, Mircea Eliade ignores entirely the dimension of mystical experience or contemplation underlying zoharic theosophy. "According to Scholem," Eliade writes, "the Zohar represents Jewish theosophy, that is, a mystical doctrine whose principal goal is the knowledge and description of the mysterious works of the divinity" (*A History of Religious Ideas*, trans. Williard R. Trask [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], vol. 3, p. 170). This is a very partial (perhaps biased) reading of Scholem, for the latter, as I have indicated, insisted on the experiential and contemplative dimension of zoharic theosophy. To be sure, as will be noted in the continuation of this study, Scholem is not always consistent on this issue, but the remark of Eliade simply ignores the dialectics of Scholem's thinking.
27. Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 15, 121–122. It is appropriate here to recall Scholem's characterization of ancient gnosticism as a "mystical esotericism for the elect based on illumination and the acquisition of a higher knowledge of things heavenly and divine" (*Jewish Gnosticism, Merkabah Mysticism and Talmudic Tradition* [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1965], p. 1). In a fundamental sense this seems to be an accurate reflection of Scholem's own view of kabbalistic gnosis.
28. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 122.

29. Ibid., p. 123.
30. Ibid.
31. Idem, *Kabbalah*, p. 370.
32. Scholem discussed contemplative mysticism of this school in several studies during the course of his career: Gershom Scholem, "Der Begriff der Kawwana in der alten Kabbala," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 78, 1934, pp. 492–518 (English translation by Noah Jacobs, "The Concept of Kavvanah in Early Kabbalah," in *Studies in Jewish Thought*, pp. 162–180); *Re'shit ha-Qabbalah*, pp. 114–122; Scholem, *Origins*, 299–309. For more recent reviews of the topic of *devequt* in kabbalistic texts, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 35–88, and Seth Brody, "Human Hands Dwell in Heavenly Heights: Worship and Mystical Experience in Thirteenth-Century Kabbalah," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1991, pp. 264–395. Brody's work reached me after the completion of this study and thus I did not have the opportunity to assimilate his discussion of relevant material that intersects with my study in the body of the paper. See note 41.
33. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 270–325.
34. Some kabbalists, and modern scholars following them, explain this expression as "dark light," although the more precise translation is "hardened flame;" the term *bohsina de-qadrinuta* would be the Aramaic equivalent of "dark light." See Scholem, *Origins*, p. 336 n. 278; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 325–326; Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 145–151, 161–164; Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 207–208.
35. *Zohar Hadash*, 58c–d. Cf. *Zohar* 2:233a, 258a; *Zohar Hadash*, 49b–c.
36. Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 146–147; idem, "Messiah," pp. 199–200.
37. Ithamar Gruenwald, "The Midrashic Condition: From Talmudic to Zoharic Hermeneutics," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 8, 1989, pp. 255–298 (Hebrew). It should be noted that Roland Goetschel's study included in the same volume, "The Conception of Prophecy in the Works of Moses de León and Joseph Gikatilla," pp. 217–238 (Hebrew), provides a detailed analysis of the doctrines of prophecy in these two kabbalists but does not deal with the issue of actual prophetic experience. Noteworthy as well is the study of Liebes (see note 17), which provides the theoretical basis for a more nuanced appreciation of the mystical elements that underlie many of the theoretical and exegetical deliberations in the zoharic literature; see note 112.
38. Gruenwald, "Midrashic Condition," p. 293.
39. See note 17.
40. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Circumcision, Vision of God, and Textual Interpretation: From Midrashic Trope to Mystical Symbol," *History of Religions*, 27, 1987, pp. 189–215; idem, "The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar," *Religion*, 18, 1988, pp. 311–345 (a revised version of this study appears in chapter 7 of *Through a Speculum*).
41. A preliminary discussion of some aspects of this phenomenon can be found in Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 587–595. See *ibid.*, pp. 809–814, where Tishby discusses the various themes connected with the ascent of the soul to the divine realm during sleep. See also the reference to Elliot Ginsburg cited in note 66. For discussion of ascent of the soul in other Jewish mystical sources, from the Merkavah mysticism of Late Antiquity to the Hasidic writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, see Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 88–96 (in that survey, however, Idel does not discuss zoharic texts). See Brody, "Human Hands," pp. 334–379, who develops the zoharic notion of *devequt* as "visionary assimilation" into divinity in contrast to the Catalonian ideal of *devequt* as "intellective vision" of thought cleaving to God. While the

distinction between the Catalanian and Castilian material may not be as sharp as Brody suggests, I share his sensitivity to the visionary aspect of the zoharic treatment (see my studies referred to in previous note utilized by Brody) and accept with him the need to appreciate the “new paradigm of transformation experience” in the Zohar whereby “*devequt* is depicted as the attainment of ontic assimilation into the mystery of sefirotic unity and visionary participation in the holy coupling of the celestial lovers Malkhut and Tiferet” (pp. 337–338). Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere and in this chapter, I would agree with Brody’s contention that in the Zohar one cannot separate vision and ontic participation (see pp. 352–353), i.e., the act of seeing the divine entails participation in the sefirotic pleroma. Although Brody mentions my study “The Hermeneutics of Visionary Experience” (p. 126 n. 70), it is regrettable that in his extended discussion of the Sinaitic theophany as the paradigmatic visionary experience (pp. 354–361) he does not refer to my study, even when citing some of the exact zoharic sources that I discussed.

42. Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 373 n. 77; idem, *Origins*, p. 248 n. 98; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 27, 91–92. See also Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 37–38; Abraham J. Heschel, “On the Holy Spirit in the Middle Ages,” *Alexander Marx Festschrift* (New York, 1950), pp. 182–186 (Hebrew). See also the tradition discussed by Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 78, of Yehudai Gaon (eighth century) to the effect that the ascent of the penitent to God is through the seven heavens, a theme that is apparently based on the talmudic dictum that “repentance reaches the throne of glory” (Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 86a). An interesting elaboration of this tradition of ascent through repentance, clearly indicating kabbalistic influence, can be found in the penitential poem of Abrekh ben Isaac; see Leon J. Weinberger, *Rabbanite and Karaitic Liturgical Poetry in South-Eastern Europe* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1991), pp. 17–18 of the English introduction and pp. 49–52 (poem no. 23) of the Hebrew text. In that poem the soul of the penitent ascends by recounting and contemplating the divine attributes (*middot*) at a propitious time. Some mystical technique of visual contemplation of the *sefirot* seems to be implied in this text.
43. See the references to Scholem’s studies in note 32; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 42–46; idem, “Types of Redemptive Activity in the Middle Ages,” in *Messianism and Eschatology*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 1984), p. 274 (Hebrew).
44. There are two versions of the text dealing with the palaces (*heikhalot*), the abbreviated one in Zohar 1:38a–45b and the longer one in Zohar 2:244b–269a.
45. It is noteworthy that the reading here in both the Cremona and Mantua editions is significantly different from the received text in the standard editions: “for there is an order that can be known and contemplated and there is an order that exists in the will in order to contemplate above up to the Infinite.”
46. Zohar 2:244b.
47. Cf. *ibid.* 245b.
48. The word “knot” is used in zoharic literature, reflecting a much older semantic tradition, to refer to a magical or theurgical bond. See Liebes, *Sections*, p. 397; Wolfson, “Left Contained,” p. 35 n. 40.
49. Zohar 1:41a.
50. Based on the image in *Sefer Yetsirah* 1:6 describing the relationship of the first and last of the ten *sefirot*.

51. Zohar 2:213b.
52. Cf. *ibid.* 260a and see discussion in Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 594 n. 27; Elliot R. Wolfson, "Letter Symbolism and Merkavah Imagery in the Zohar," *Alei Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexandre Safran*, ed. Moshe Hallamish (Bar-Ilan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1990), pp. 220–221 (English section).
53. Zohar 2:245a.
54. Based on the talmudic dictum concerning the first ten men who make up the required quorum receiving the reward of all those who follow; cf. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 47b. See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mystical–Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, ed. David Blumenthal (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), pp. 52–56, and see other references cited on p. 72 n. 92.
55. Zohar 2:250a. This text reflects the idea expressed in older sources concerning the glory being crowned by the prayers of Israel. For some references see Wolfson, "Mystical–Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer," pp. 77–78 n. 146.
56. Cf. Zohar 1:7a, 38b, 65b–66a, 81a (*Sitrei Torah*), 224b; 2:11a, 156b. Cf. "Sefer ha-Mishkal," pp. 47–63, esp. 60–62. The reverse of this process, the descent of the soul from the divine pleroma to the physical world, also involves traversing the palaces of the upper and lower Garden of Eden. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 740–747.
57. Cf. Zohar 1:81a (*Sitrei Torah*), 2:156b. See also 1:224b; *Livnat ha-Sappir*, 3c. On the ascension of the souls of the righteous from the terrestrial to the celestial Garden of Eden on Friday afternoon as the extra souls (*neshamot yeterot*) descend, see Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 132.
58. I have borrowed this expression from the title of chapter 4 of Clive Hunt, *Images of Flight* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).
59. For discussion of this motif in kabbalistic writings, see Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel; ed. Jonathan Chipman (New York: Schocken, 1991), pp. 251–273. On the genesis of the idea of the subtle or astral body in neo-Platonic sources, see the studies of Mead and Dodds cited by Scholem, pp. 313–314 n. 17.
60. See, e.g., Zohar 1:224a–b; 2:247a; Gershom Scholem, "The Paradise Garb of Souls and the Origin of the Concept of *Haluqa de-Rabbanan*," *Tarbits*, 24, 1954–55, pp. 290–306 (Hebrew); Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 188–189, 835; Cohen-Alloro, *Secret of the Garment*, pp. 60–67, and the relevant zoharic sources cited on pp. 106–114. Scholem thought that the image of the eschatological garment woven from a person's deeds parallels, indeed may ultimately derive from, the Iranian notion of the *Daena*, i.e., the image of the higher self that accompanies the deceased, which comes into being from one's good works. See *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 264–265 and references cited on p. 315 nn. 30–32.
61. Cf. Zohar 1:7a, 38b, 91a; 2:11a, 150a. This tradition, which may go back to Persian sources, is already apparent in the apocalyptic and mystical texts of ancient Judaism as well as in early Christian and Mandaean literature. See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, p. 262, and references cited on p. 315 n. 26. For a later development of this motif in Persian writings, see Henry Corbin, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, trans. Nancy Pearson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), pp. 34, 84–86, 100–101, 207–209.

62. See Hunt, *Images of Flight*, pp. 136–137. On the near-physical quality of the visual experience of the souls of the righteous and their cleaving to the Presence, see esp. Zohar 1:232a (*Tosefta*).
63. See, e.g., Zohar 1:38a–b.
64. Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 591–594.
65. See, e.g., Zohar 1:246a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 593–594, 749–770.
66. Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, p. 133, which duly notes the ecstatic element implied in this zoharic text. My discussion is indebted to Ginsburg's insightful analysis.
67. Zohar 2:136b.
68. See, e.g., Elijah de Vidas, *Totse'ot Hayyim* 91, published together with *Re'shit Hokhmah ha-Shalem* (Jerusalem, 1984), 3:340; Moses Cordovero, *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1976), 9:64; Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot* (Jerusalem, 1963), 62a. The first two sources are cited by Ginsburg; see the reference in note 69.
69. Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, p. 248 n. 34. On the history of the practice of ritual ablu-tion before the arrival of the Sabbath, see *ibid.*, pp. 227–231, 249–251 nn. 37–42.
70. As already noted by Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 183–184 n. 287, who cites as well the relevant scholarly discussions by Gruenwald and Idel.
71. It is of interest to note here that occasionally in the Zohar the closing of the eyes (sometimes specified further as the rotation of the closed eye) is singled out as a means to have an ecstatic vision of the luminous emanations of the divine pleroma. See, e.g., Zohar 1:18b, 42a, 97a–b (*Sitrei Torah*); 2:23a–b, 43b; 3:187b; *Zohar Hadash*, 63b. The technique is mentioned as well in Moses de León's Hebrew writings; see Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 291–292; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 140. For discussion of various opinions regarding the position of the eyes during worship, see Eric Zimmer, "Poses and Postures during Prayer," *Sidra*, 5, 1989, pp. 89–95 (Hebrew); Zeev Gries, *Conduct Literature (Regimen Vitae) Its History and Place in the Life of Beshtian Hasidism* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1989), pp. 220–222 (Hebrew). On the closing of the eyes and meditation in the Abulafian tradition, see Moshe Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 134–136.
72. Zohar 2:136a.
73. *Ibid.*
74. *Ibid.*
75. *Ibid.*
76. Cf. Prov. 10:25; Babylonian Talmud, Yoma 38b.
77. Zohar 1:43a.
78. Cf. Zohar 1:65a; 2:268b–269a. See also 2:226a. According to Liebes, "Messiah," p. 97, this text is part of the Idrot literature.
79. Zimmer, "Poses and Postures," pp. 95–107, esp. 100, where some kabbalistic sources are discussed.
80. Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 97–98, explains the use of this expression in the Zohar in terms of the obligation to reveal secrets, on the one hand, and the humble feeling that the disclosure of secrets is forbidden, on the other. My explanation is nuanced in a slightly different way, focusing on the ecstatic experience of illumination that ensues from the raising of the hands. On the theurgical implication of raising the hands in prayer, see esp. Zohar 3:195b.
81. Zohar 2:70a.
82. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 70, 121a.
83. Cf. Zohar 3:127b (*Idra Rabba*).

84. Ibid. 287b.
85. *Zohar Hadash*, 28b.
86. Zohar 1:11a, 19a–b, 36b, 83a, 92a, 122a (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*), 130a, 183a, 200a; 2:195b; 3: 21b, 120b, 260a.
87. Zohar 1:72a, 77a–b, 242b; 3:67b. In several zoharic contexts, this motif is associated with the rabbinic idea (cf. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 3b) that every midnight a north wind would blow and produce sounds on David's harp in order to wake him up to study Torah until the dawn. Cf. Zohar 1:178b.
88. Zohar 2:209a.
89. Cf. Zohar 1:178b, where this imagery is (following the aggadic passage in Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 3b) applied to David, who rose at midnight to utter hymns and praises before God: "The words of Torah that he uttered ascended and were crowned before the Holy One, blessed be He." See also Zohar 3:21b–22a.
90. See reference to the talmudic source in note 87.
91. Zohar 1:82b.
92. Zohar 1:77b, 92a, 178b, 231b; 2:46a; 3:13a, 22a, 213a.
93. Zohar 3:21b–22a.
94. In other passages as well it is emphasized that occupation with the Torah brings about unification with the divine Presence. See, e.g., Zohar 2:217a; 3:96a; *Zohar Hadash*, 27d. The examples could be greatly multiplied.
95. Zohar 3:156b.
96. Ibid. 12b–13a.
97. Ibid. 260a. Cf. description of the ritual of Torah study on the night of Pentecost cited in note 21.
98. Cf. Zohar 1:92a.
99. Ibid. 2:46a, translated in Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1137–1139. Cf. Zohar 3:90b.
100. Judges 5:21.
101. Cf. Ps. 36:9.
102. Zohar 1:92a–b.
103. On the image of the crown or coronation in kabbalistic sources as a symbol for unification, see Wolfson, "Mystical–Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer," pp. 52–55; idem, "Female Imaging," pp. 292–293; Moshe Idel, "Universalization and Integration: Two Conceptions of Mystical Union in Jewish Mysticism," in *Mystical Union and Monotheistic Faith: An Ecumenical Dialogue*, ed. Moshe Idel and Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1989), pp. 35–36, 199 n. 27; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 112–16, 118, passim. I have elaborated upon the symbol of the crown in *Through a Speculum*, pp. 357–368.
104. I have here followed the reading of the *editio princeps* (Basel, 1608), as well as several other manuscript witnesses, rather than the text established by Wijnhoven (see note 105) which reads here, "and this is (*we-zehu*) the supernal Garden of Eden" rather than "the splendor (*we-ziv*) of the supernal Garden of Eden."
105. "Sefer ha-Mishkal," pp. 59–60.
106. This precise image is used by Isaac Luria in one of his poems; see Liebes, "Hymns for the Sabbath Meals Composed by the Holy Ari," *Molad*, n.s., 4, 1972, p. 551 (Hebrew).
107. Liebes, "Messiah," pp. 138–145. On the phallogocentric nature of kabbalistic hermeneutics, see also my article on circumcision referred to in note 40.
108. Zohar 2:56b–57a.

109. "Sefer ha-Mishkal," p. 53 (I have followed the variant from MSS Leiden 13 and Parma 1230 cited in the critical apparatus *ad locum*: this conforms to the reading in the Basel edition as well).
110. The orientation of the Zohar is well captured in the following language of Joseph Angelet, *Livnat ha-Sappir*, 56c, corrected by MS British Museum 27,000, fol. 134a: "Come and see: when a person comes close to the Torah, which is called good (*tov*), as it is written, 'I prefer (*tov li*) the teaching you proclaimed' (Ps. 119: 72), he then comes close to the Holy One, blessed be He, who is called good (*tov*), as it is written. 'The Lord is good (*tov*) to all' (ibid., 145:9). Then he comes close to being righteous, as it is written, 'Hail the just man, for he shall fare well (*tov*)' (Isa. 3: 10). And since he is righteous the *Shekhinah* rests upon him and instructs him about the supernal secrets of Torah, for the *Shekhinah* is united only with the good, for the righteous (*tsaddiq*, i.e., the masculine) and righteousness (*tsedeq*, i.e., the feminine) go as one."
111. See note 21.
112. This is the implication of Liebes' study, "How the Zohar Was Written," as well; see esp. pp. 68–71. And see idem, "New Directions in the Study of Kabbala," *Pe'amim*, 50, 1992, pp. 160–161 (Hebrew).
113. Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, p. 134.
114. See, for instance, the suggestive remark of Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, p. 250 n. 38, about the need to investigate the "possible connections between the ritual adaptations of Byzantine–Turkish provenance and the full-blown ritual creativity of Safed Kabbalah."
115. I do not intend to deny the correlation of myth and ritual in kabbalistic sources, a hallmark of Scholem's understanding of kabbalistic ritual as a mythic revitalization of rabbinic rites; see Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 29–30; idem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 94–100, 132–133; Isaiah Tishby, *Paths of Faith and Heresy: Essays in Kabbalah and Sabbateanism* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), pp. 11–22 (Hebrew); and see discussion in Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 186–216. The issue I raise, however, concerns the question of valence as reflected in the scholarly treatment of theosophic kabbalah, i.e., is priority to be given to ideas, myths, and symbols (generally the realm of discourse and language) or to the categories of action and experience (the realm of behavior). See Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1987), pp. 101–103.

5 Coronation of the Sabbath Bride: Kabbalistic Myth and the Ritual of Androgynization

Historians of religion have long noted the intricate nexus of myth and ritual: The function of ritual is to instantiate a particular myth, which in turn provides the symbolic narrative that informs and organizes the practitioner's behavior in the world. Through ritual performance, therefore, the individual inscribes the mythic belief in the spatio-temporal world. One may challenge the universal application of this nexus to different religious societies, but it is beyond question that the relationship between myth and ritual as delineated above can be applied legitimately to the history of kabbalistic speculation in which the supreme importance accorded normative halakhic practice is upheld.¹ Even the antinomian tendencies, latent in some early sources and actualized in the Sabbatian and Frankist heresies of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, are dialectically related to the nomian impulse: abrogation of the law was perceived as the ultimate means to fulfill it.² As a number of scholars have pointed out in recent years, in the literature of theosophic kabbalah the traditional commandments were seen as the principal way that the human being interacts with and is influenced by the divine.³ From this vantage point, it seems to me entirely apt to use the technical theological term "sacrament" to describe the kabbalistic understanding of ritual. That is, according to the mainstream approach adopted by theosophic kabbalists, the ritual serves as the symbolic embodiment through which the divine permeates the social sphere of the practitioner at the same time that the practitioner gains phenomenal access to the realm of the divine. By participating in the rite with the proper mystical intentionality, the individual not only connects with God, but acts upon God. At the same time, however, the one who performs the rite symbolically embodies, or better signifies,

the sacred secret of the divine power operating in the world. Sacramentality thus entails the mutual empowerment of God and human, as the one is manifest through the other by virtue of the symbolizing function of the ritual.⁴

But the scope of theurgic efficacy is not limited to the human relationship to God; it extends to the various potencies of the Godhead. Indeed, the anthropocentric and the theocentric perspectives are not easily distinguishable in the kabbalistic explanations of the commandments. Not only is it the case that the kabbalists presume that what God does affects humanity just as what humanity does affects God, but the very imaging of the one reflects the imaging of the other. The ritualization of myth and the mythicization of ritual are interweaving patterns of mystical piety in the kabbalistic sources. Moreover, the double mirroring of humanity and divinity – the form of God is reflected in the *anthropos* and the form of the *anthropos* in God⁵ – sheds light on the kabbalistic use of religious ritual to depict the dynamic myth of the supernal realm.

In this study, I will explore one particular mythic complex that is portrayed as an essential ritual performed not by the mystic but by the sefirotic gradations: the coronation of the Sabbath queen.⁶ One of the most powerful images of the Sabbath in classical rabbinic sources is that of the bride or queen. In two virtually identical talmudic passages, the Sabbath is personified as the bride who is greeted by various rabbis at sunset on Friday evening.⁷ In one midrashic passage, the Sabbath is compared parabolically to the bride who enters the bridal chamber, which is identified as the six days of creation.⁸ According to another midrashic passage, all the six weekdays are paired as male–female couples, and the feminine Sabbath is paired with the masculine Israel. Significantly, the proof-text that is cited in that context is *zakhor et yom ha-shabbat leqaddesho*, “remember the Sabbath to sanctify it” (Exod. 20:8), for the word *leqaddesho* is read as “to betroth it.”⁹ In another midrashic source, God and the Sabbath are compared, respectively, to the King and the Matrona.¹⁰ The motif of Sabbath as a personified queen of God is enhanced in a passage in a text that is related to the ancient esoteric corpus, the *Seder Rabbah di-Bere’shit*. According to that passage, on Friday evening God takes the angelic Sabbath and places her on the throne of glory, and all the other celestial princes rejoice before the Sabbath. One can imagine here that there is something akin to the wedding celebration.¹¹ The key to this

interpretation is the image of enthronement, which often functions as a symbolic depiction of the sacred union between male and female.¹²

In the kabbalistic literature, these agadic motifs are developed and expanded into an elaborate mythical drama centered around the image of the crowning of the Queen of Sabbath, which is identified more specifically with the *Shekhinah*, the last of ten divine emanations. To be sure, Israel below has a critical role to play in facilitating the ceremonial coronation above on the eve of Sabbath, particularly through liturgical recitation. In that respect, this rite should not be treated in isolation from the general theurgical principle widely adopted by the kabbalists, which is expressed in an especially succinct way in one zoharic passage wherein R. Eleazar reports having heard the following statement from R. Abba about the relationship of the feminine *Shekhinah* to the masculine *Tif'eret*: "There is no perfection, desire, or yearning of the Community of Israel for the Holy One, blessed be He, except through the souls of the righteous, for they arouse the spring of water below corresponding to that which is above. In that moment, the perfection of desire and yearning is in one union to produce fruit."¹³ The action of the righteous below results in a seminal discharge that causes the supernal phallus to overflow and to inseminate the female attribute of the divine. Elsewhere this process is depicted explicitly in terms of orgasmic imagery: the righteous unite with the *Shekhinah* to stimulate the female waters (*mayyin nuqvin*) from below, which in turn arouse the male waters (*mayyin dukhrin*) from above.¹⁴ To cast the theurgical principle in terms of the gender dynamic: the heterosexual pairing in the Godhead is facilitated by the homoerotic arousal of the phallic potency by the righteous males who correspond to the phallus.¹⁵ Although this principle is clearly operative in the case of the rite of coronation, the full drama occurs in the pleroma of divine potencies.

The centrality of Sabbath in the imagination of the theosophic kabbalists has been well noted by previous scholars.¹⁶ Simply put, the ultimate significance of Sabbath in kabbalistic theosophy is related to the presumption that it comprises both a feminine and a masculine aspect, typologized as the *shamor* of the eve of Sabbath and the *zakhor* of the day of Sabbath,¹⁷ which is reflective of the nature of the covenant of divine unity more generally. Moses de León expresses the matter in succinct fashion: "You must know that the secret of Sabbath is the essence of faith and of the covenant, and thus

there is in it *zakhor* and *shamor*, *zakhor* for the male (*zakhar*) and *shamor* for the female (*neqevah*).¹⁸ Exile is the spiritual condition of separation or the incomplete union of male and female, whereas redemption is the complete union and consummation. Insofar as redemption is portrayed in this light, Sabbath serves as a prolepsis of the eschaton. To be sure, already in classical rabbinic sources one finds the connection between Sabbath and eschatology: Sabbath is depicted as a foreshadowing of the world-to-come and the world-to-come is described as the day that is entirely Sabbath.¹⁹ From the perspective of the kabbalists, however, this connection implies a fundamental change in the nature of being manifest in the divine, human, and cosmic planes. Indeed, according to the theosophic kabbalah, the basic rhythm of time itself is invested with soteriological significance: the six days of the week represent the exile in which male and female are separated and the demonic has dominion over the world, whereas the Sabbath is the moment of redemption in which the sacred coupling of male and female is realized and the letters of the Tetragrammaton (*yod he waw he*) are reunited such that the providential care over existence is entrusted solely to God. To cite but one of numerous zoharic texts that enunciate this motif: "On the weekdays the lower *Shekhinah* is clothed in those shells of death, which are from [the attribute of] judgment, but on Sabbath she is divested of them on account of the Tree of Life... At that time *yod he waw* unite with the *he*, and rest is found in relation to the *he* and all that is beneath her."²⁰

The designation of the Sabbath as the appropriate time for the *hieros gamos* above between the king and queen provides the underlying basis for the widely attested explanation in kabbalistic literature of the talmudic dictum that Friday evening is the time for the Torah scholar to engage in physical sex and thereby fulfill his conjugal responsibility.²¹ I cite but two of numerous sources that illustrate the point. The first example is from the secret of the Sabbath (*sod ha-shabbat*) composed by Joseph Gikatilla. In this text, the fifth of the eleven activities that Gikatilla delineates as essential for the proper observance of the Sabbath is sexual intercourse. On this matter, Gikatilla writes:

Sexual intercourse is the secret of holiness (*sod ha-qedushah*) and the multiplication of the [divine] image, and its opposite is the diminution of the image. Therefore, sexual intercourse on

Friday evenings is the time of the conjugal obligation of the scholar, “who yields his fruit in season” (Ps. 1:3),²² in the secret of *zakhor* and *shamor*, and the secret of “you must keep My Sabbaths” (Exod. 31:13). Since the extra soul (*neshamah yeterah*)²³ is added to a person on Sabbath eve, then is the time for the sanctification of the union (*qedushat ha-hibbur*) and worthy children [shall be born] on behalf of the “eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths” (Isa. 56:4).²⁴

The very end of this citation is an allusion to the fact that the sages, who are obligated to engage in carnal intercourse on the eve of Sabbath according to a tradition recorded in the Talmud,²⁵ are considered to be eunuchs the rest of the week while they abstain from physical sexuality, a motif that is widely attested in kabbalistic literature from the period of the Zohar (the later part of the thirteenth century) and in subsequent generations.²⁶ The ambivalent nature of Gikatilla’s remarks about carnal sexuality is indicative of a more prevalent attitude expressed by medieval kabbalists. On the one hand, holiness is linked to sexual intercourse, which is related specifically to procreation as the means to augment the divine image in the world,²⁷ but, on the other, the mystic must refrain from engaging in sex in the course of the week.²⁸ The ontic condition of the Sabbath is such that the enlightened kabbalist can partake of physical pleasures, for by so doing he theurgically assists in the sacred union of the masculine and feminine gradations in the sefirotic realm. The limited asceticism required during the week gives way to the full embrace of the carnal on the Sabbath, since on that day the corporeal is transformed from a crude materiality to a spiritual state.²⁹ Gikatilla’s point is corroborated by a second example derived from the commentary on the biblical prohibitions by Joseph of Hamadan: “Whoever keeps the Sabbath causes the unity above and the time of intercourse above, as the sages, blessed be their memory, said, the time of intercourse for the scholars is on Friday evening. Regarding he who keeps the Sabbath it is as if he unites the bridegroom, who is the King, Lord of hosts, with the bride, the Community of Israel, perfect in all perfections and comprised of all beauty, and he causes the supernal and the lower beings to be blessed.”³⁰

The eschatological character of Sabbath is thus expressed in the ontological elevation of the material to the spiritual.³¹ Once again

the kabbalists follow a path opened up by rabbinic exegesis by associating the Sabbath with the realm of souls, which in the medieval setting is further identified as the neo-Platonic world of ideal forms. However, the increase of the pneumatic element on the Sabbath, or, in the language of the rabbis, the “extra soul” (*neshamah yeterah*), does not result in the negation of the body and the renunciation of physical pleasure. On the contrary, the augmentation of soul on Sabbath yields the spiritualization of the corporeal, and hence fulfilling sensual needs remains an essential component in the idea of restfulness on the Sabbath,³² for the latter is, according to the locution of Naḥmanides, the “fount of all blessings” and the “foundation of the world.”³³ The aforementioned passage from Gikatilla is revealing on this score: Friday evening is the time for scholars to engage in carnal intercourse precisely because it is the moment in which Jews are endowed with the extra soul. A similar argument is made by the anonymous author of the kabbalistic treatise on sexual etiquette, the *Iggeret ha-Qodesh*, in all probability composed near the end of the thirteenth century.³⁴ According to this text, the rabbinic tradition that physical sex is appropriate for the sages only on Friday evening is explained on the grounds that the Sabbath is a time of increased spirituality, the day “that is entirely cessation and repose,” the “foundation of the world,” which is “in the pattern of the world of souls.”³⁵ A similar perspective is affirmed by the fifteenth-century Italian kabbalist Judah Ḥayyat in his commentary on the anonymous *Ma‘arekhet ha-Elohut*, wherein the sin of Adam is portrayed as a reification of the feminine that results from the separation of the male and female, the mystical significance of the plucking of the fruit from the tree.³⁶ Elaborating on the kabbalistic interpretation of the primordial transgression, Ḥayyat writes,

Since intercourse is considered profane in relation to Adam after he had sinned, and it is performed through the sign of the holy covenant, it is appropriate not to engage in sexual intercourse except for the nights of Sabbath in order not to make from that which is holy something profane. On the eve of Sabbath he is in his potency and intercourse is then holy, for the days of the week, wherein the shells surround them below, are completed and finished on the day of Sabbath. This is the secret of [the tradition that] the time for scholars to fulfill their marital obligation is on the eve of Sabbath.³⁷

Ḥayyat thus explicitly advocates a qualified asceticism as the ideal of pietistic behavior. On account of Adam's sin, which transformed sexuality from a sacred to a profane act, it is necessary to abstain from carnal intercourse during the days of the week. By contrast, physical sex is permissible, indeed obligatory, on the Sabbath, for that day is one in which the profane itself is sanctified and thereby elevated to a higher ontic status. This metamorphosis must also be seen in terms of gender inasmuch as the kabbalists widely affirmed the standard hierarchy in medieval European culture whereby the lower (physical) entity was viewed as female and the upper (spiritual) as masculine.³⁸ In short, the feminine body is valenced as masculine on the Sabbath, which is another way of articulating the view that Sabbath is a prolepsis of the redemption, a state characterized by the substitution of the ethereal/angelic body for the coarse physical/human body. More specifically, the *Shekhinah*, the last of the ten sefirotic emanations, is the focus of this ontic transformation. In the course of the week the fulfillment of religious ritual, and particularly prayer, transforms the *Shekhinah* from a state of diminution (*qatnut*) to augmentation (*gadlut*), a transformation that signifies the ontic transition from a state of exile to one of redemption. According to the imagery employed in one zoharic context to depict this transition, the female virgin without breasts becomes the voluptuous bride prepared to unite with her masculine consort.³⁹ But it is the Sabbath that truly anticipates the eschatological overcoming of time and the transposition of the physical order.

That this metamorphosis assumes gender characteristics as well may be seen, for example, from the following passage that describes the conjunction of *Malkhut* ("kingdom") and the three Patriarchs (symbolic of the three sides of the sefirotic edifice or the fourth, fifth, and sixth emanations, *Ḥesed* ["lovingkindness"], *Din* ["judgment"], and *Raḥamim* ["mercy"]), which results in the elevation of the *Shekhinah* from the lower world of the feminine (*alma de-nuqba; olam ha-neqevah*) to *Binah* ("understanding"), the supernal world of the masculine (*alma di-dekhura; olam ha-zakhar*):⁴⁰ "Come and see: The holy kingdom (*malkhuta qaddisha*) does not receive the holy and perfect kingdom until she is joined to the patriarchs, and when she is joined to the patriarchs a perfect edifice is constructed from the supernal world, which is the world of the masculine."⁴¹ The gender transformation is described as well by the zoharic

authorship in terms of the decomposition of the word *shabbat* into *shin* and *bat*. The *shin*, which symbolically represents the masculine, for its three branches correspond to the three Patriarchs, is united with the *bat*, the daughter or the *Shekhinah*.⁴² The union of the *shin* and the *bat*, which creates both the linguistic and the ontological reality of the Sabbath,⁴³ transforms the latter. Alternatively expressed, this unity signifies the three aspects of Sabbath: the *bat*, which corresponds to the *Shekhinah* or the “night of Sabbath” (*leil shabbat*), unites with the *shin*, which corresponds to *Yesod* or the “day of Sabbath” (*yom shabbat*),⁴⁴ and as a result they are elevated and reintegrated in *Binah*, which corresponds to the “great Sabbath” (*shabbat ha-gadol*)⁴⁵ or the “supernal Sabbath” (*shabbat ila'ah*).⁴⁶ The ultimate consequence of the constitution of the fourfold chariot⁴⁷ through the conjunction of the *bat* and the *shin* is the assimilation of the feminine into the masculine, which is portrayed as the ascension of the daughter into the higher aspects of the Godhead.

The point is implied in Zohar 2:204a.⁴⁸ The six days of the week are said to correspond to the “other” days that exist within the “holy circle” and are bound to the “holy point.” Those who are holy during the week, which I assume refers to those who abstain from engaging in sexual acts with their wives,⁴⁹ cause the six weekdays to be united with the six inner days, which are united with the central point. During the six days the point is hidden, but on the Sabbath the point ascends and is crowned and united above so that everything is concealed within it. The transition from the state of occultation to the ascent and coronation of the point symbolizes the gender transformation of the latter, which corresponds to the *Shekhinah*. The process is related in slightly different terms in the continuation of the passage:

When the point ascends everything is hidden, and she ascends. When she ascends, she is called *shabbat*. What is *shabbat*? The secret of the matter: When that point ascends and the light shines, she is crowned by the Patriachs.⁵⁰ When she is crowned by the Patriachs, she is joined and united with them to become one, and she is called *shabbat*. *Shabbat: shin bat*. The secret of the three Patriachs that are united with the only daughter, and she is crowned by them, and they are one in the world-to-come. Everything is one, and this is *shin bat* so that everything will be one.⁵¹

Sabbath is depicted in the above passage, to use a technical term of Jungian psychology, as the “quaternity,” for the feminine *Shekhinah* is united with the three Patriarchs. In other passages in zoharic and related literature, these attributes are identified as the four legs of the chariot⁵² or as the fourfold chariot.⁵³ The ascension of the point and its coronation signify the restoration of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*, which is described as the “palace for the supernal point,” that is, the womb that contains the semen of *Hokhmah*. The attribute of *Binah*, the divine mother, is thus assigned the function of containing the supernal point of *Hokhmah*, the father, and the lower point of *Shekhinah*, the daughter. From a symbolic perspective, then, the reintegration of daughter and mother approximates the union of father and mother, which in effect signals the masculinization of the lower point. The gender transformation that eventuates from this reunion is the mystical secret of Sabbath, which anticipates the complete redemption of the world-to-come.

The image of the point assumes a dual symbolic connotation. On the one hand, the point clearly has masculine, indeed phallic, significance inasmuch as it symbolizes the attribute of *Hokhmah*, which deposits its seminal discharge into the receptacle of *Binah*.⁵⁴ On the other hand, the point has a feminine connotation inasmuch as it symbolizes the *Shekhinah*, which is depicted as the female in relation to the three Patriarchs. The doubling of the point is thus an alternative formulation of the doctrine of the twofold *Hokhmah*, which is widely affirmed in kabbalistic literature.⁵⁵ The androgynous nature of the image of the point as it relates specifically to the Sabbath is emphasized by Moses de León:

Thus you can know what is written, “You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy for you. He who profanes it shall be put to death” (Exod. 31:14). This is the secret of the point, for she inherits from the point of thought, which is the supernal point, and from there the entities emanate in their mystery until the end of thought, which is the final point, the secret of the holy covenant, and she stands amongst her hosts in the secret of the midpoint, which is the beginning of the edifice, within the circle. For the circle does not revolve on its axis except through the midpoint, which is in the space of the circle (*ḥalal ha-iggul*) ... According to this mystery it says, “He who profanes (*meḥalaleha*) it shall be put to

death,” the one who enters the space of the point of the edifice to uproot the thing from all of its emendations and from all of its matters shall be put to death.⁵⁶

According to this text, the sin of desecrating the Sabbath is interpreted symbolically as entering into the space of the midpoint of the circle, which corresponds to the *Shekhinah*.⁵⁷ The application of the symbol of the point to the *Shekhinah* is related to the fact that this attribute receives the flux of emanation from the supernal point or the attribute of *Hokhmah*. Hence, the *Shekhinah*, which is the lower form of wisdom, is characterized by the very symbol that is associated with the upper form of wisdom.⁵⁸ I would suggest, moreover, that implicit here is a presumption regarding the gender transformation of the *Shekhinah*.⁵⁹ To put the matter concretely, the symbolization of the *Shekhinah* as the point in the center of the circle signifies the aspect of the female genitalia that is anatomically homologous to the penis of the male, which is associated with the vagina or the uterus.⁶⁰ This, I surmise, is the implication of the designation of the midpoint of the circle as the “secret of the holy covenant,” *sod berit ha-qodesh*.⁶¹ That is, the term “holy covenant,” which generally applies to the phallus, is assigned to that part of the female anatomy that corresponds to the *membrum virile*.⁶² Support for this interpretation is found in the reworking of this motif in another work of Moses de León:

The secret of the Sabbath is the lower point ... and all the lower entities sit beneath this one point, which is the final point. Indeed, the foundation stone is that from which the world is established, and it is the midpoint of all the seventy nations and she stands in the middle ... Just as King Solomon, the secret of the median line, stands in the middle between the upper waters and the lower waters, so the secret of the lower point stands in the middle. Thus, she stands in the middle and revolves until she ascends in holiness, and the seventy thrones stand surrounding this point that is in the middle ... There is no circle without the beginning of this point that is in the middle ... When everything is in the surrounding circle and the point is in the middle, which is the space of the circle, the one who comes to touch the space of the circle, which is in the middle and which is called the “Sabbath,” is deserving of the punishment of death.⁶³

The halakhic category of desecration of the Sabbath (*ḥilul shabbat*) is thus interpreted symbolically as the inappropriate touching of the midpoint, the space (*ḥalal*) of the circle, an act that has obvious erotic overtones.⁶⁴

The complex gender valence of the symbol of the point is underscored in another zoharic passage wherein the *Shekhinah* is depicted in terms of the older mythical idea of the celestial beast (*ḥayyah*) upon whose forehead is inscribed the name “Israel” and whose function it is to lead the celestial choir in reciting prayers before the enthroned glory.⁶⁵

This beast is aroused and she diminishes herself on account of the love of song. How does she diminish herself? On account of the love of song she diminishes herself little by little until she is made into a single point. When she diminishes herself through song, it is written, “A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman” (Exod. 2:1). “A Levite woman” – verily from the left side. How does he grab hold of her? Out of love he stretches out his left hand beneath her head. If you say, since she is a single point, how can he grab hold of a small point? But with respect to that which is above whatever is a small thing is praiseworthy, superior, and augmented in the supernal augmentation. Immediately the high priest arouses her, grabs hold of her, and embraces her. Had she been large he could not have held on to her at all. However, since she diminished herself and she is a single point, they grab hold of her and they lift her up above. When they elevate her and she sits between these two sides, the pillar that stands in the middle is united with her in the passion of kisses and in the love of one union. Concerning this [it is written] “Then Jacob kissed Rachel” (Gen. 29:11), through the passion of kisses they are conjoined one to another without separation until she receives the soul of delights as is appropriate.⁶⁶

This passage reveals the esoteric significance of the attribution of the point to the feminine. The point is symbolic of condensation or concentration, which are aspects of the attribute of judgment associated with the female potency.⁶⁷ The compression of the feminine into a point, moreover, is presented as the necessary condition

for the union of the male and female: had the feminine been enlarged she could not have been embraced and elevated to unite with the masculine, which is portrayed as the “pillar that stands in the middle.” The conjunction of male and female, related by the biblical image of Jacob kissing Rachel, results in the feminine receiving the soul of delights, which denotes her reception of a higher (masculine) ontic status, presumably from *Binah*, the treasure of all souls in the divine pleroma. The diminution of the feminine into a point is thus valorized as a positive act insofar as it facilitates the heterosexual union within the divine.⁶⁸ As a result of that union, however, the point of the feminine is integrated into the masculine, a process that is completed when the lower feminine is restored to her source in the upper feminine, which is designated in zoharic and related kabbalistic literature as the world of the masculine. On account of the transmutation of the feminine into the masculine, it is appropriate to attribute the image of the point, which is related to the phallic aspect of the upper *Hokhmah*, to the lower *Hokhmah*. It is precisely this symbolic intent as well that underlies the zoharic attribution of the point to the *Shekhinah* in her manifestation as the *bat* that combines with the *shin* to constitute the *shabbat*.

The elevation of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*, the mythic drama elicited by the rituals of Sabbath, typifies the symbolic intent of the eschatological moment. What is attained in the eschaton is a restoration of the original condition of the world before the sin of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Both the beginning of creation and the end of redemption are homologized as manifestations of the Sabbath. The Sabbath sacramentally commemorates the beginning that anticipates the end and the end that retrieves the beginning.⁶⁹ The point is articulated lucidly in the following remark of Ḥayyim Vital, included in the Lurianic commentaries on passages from the Zohar edited by his son, Samuel:

Initially, before [Adam] sinned, the union of *Ze'eir Anpin* and his *Nuqba* was above in the bosom of *Abba* and *Imma* and in their palace, for the world was in the secret of the holiness of Sabbath. Therefore, at that time the soul of the first Adam was from *Ze'eir Anpin*, which at that time was in the aspect of *Binah*, and from there was the soul. And *Malkhut* was in the secret of *Ze'eir Anpin* and from there was the spirit of Adam.

Consequently, the soul (*neshamah*) was masculine from *Ze'eir Anpin* and the spirit (*ruah*) feminine from *Malkhut*. However, after Adam sinned the worlds descended from their gradations and they were in the aspect of the weekdays, and *Malkhut* descended to the place of creation whence derived the soul (*nefesh*) of Adam at that time. Now his soul (*nefesh*) is from *Malkhut*, which has descended to the place wherein was the creation, and his spirit (*ruah*) is from *Ze'eir Anpin*, which has descended to the place wherein was *Malkhut*, and his soul (*neshamah*) is from *Binah*, which has descended to the place wherein was *Ze'eir Anpin*. Thus it follows that the soul (*neshamah*) is from *Binah*, the spirit (*ruah*) from *Ze'eir Anpin*, and his soul (*nefesh*) from *Malkhut* ... Before he sinned the worlds were superior: His soul (*neshamah*) was from *Ze'eir Anpin*, which was then in the place of *Binah*, and his spirit (*ruah*) from his *Nuqba*, which was then in the place of *Ze'eir Anpin*.⁷⁰

Before the transgression of Adam and Eve, the ontic condition of reality was such that the union of the lower masculine and feminine potencies, referred to as *Ze'eir Anpin* and *Nuqba*, was realized in the place wherein the upper masculine and feminine potencies, *Abba* and *Imma*, are united. In this situation, the world was in the state of the holiness of Sabbath. Both aspects of Adam's soul derived from a masculine gradation, for the source of the soul (*neshamah*) was *Ze'eir Anpin*, which was on the level of *Binah*, and that of the spirit (*ruah*) was *Malkhut*, which was on the level of *Ze'eir Anpin*. As a result of the sin, however, the world was lowered from the sacredness of Sabbath to the profanity of the six weekdays. In this diminished state, the soul (*nefesh*) derived from *Malkhut*, which descended to the level of creation beneath the world of emanation, the spirit (*ruah*) from *Ze'eir Anpin*, which descended to the level of *Malkhut*, and the soul (*neshamah*) from *Binah*, which descended to the level of *Ze'eir Anpin*. The redemption will be a restoration of the original situation before the transgressive behavior of Adam and Eve and hence, the ontic status of the soul will be elevated from the feminine to the masculine.⁷¹

That the redemptive state entails the masculinization of the feminine is underscored in an interpretation attributed to Isaac Luria of a different passage in the Zohar regarding the three

meals of Sabbath, which are called the “meals of faith,” *se‘udatei di-meheimanuta*.⁷² It is evident that Luria’s reading of this text is informed by the other zoharic passage that I expounded above.⁷³ After delineating the correspondences of the three meals to three personae (*partsufim*) of the divine (the Friday night meal to the *Ḥaqal Tappuḥin Qaddishin*, the Saturday afternoon meal to *Atika Qaddisha*, and the Saturday evening meal to *Ze‘eir Anpin*), Luria comments “The matter is that Sabbath is the secret of the conjunction (*hitdabbequt*) of the *bat* and *shin*, which consists of the three Patriachs.”⁷⁴ Luria proceeds to explain this process of elevation of the *Shekhinah* in terms of the technical details of the theosophic structure as it applies to the different temporal moments of the Sabbath reflected in the respective meals. For my purposes, Luria’s comments regarding the third meal are the most interesting and relevant to the question of the eschatological ideal and gender relationships. I will cite a rather lengthy section of the passage given its central importance to my argument:

The third meal is the secret of the elevation of *Ze‘eir Anpin* entirely within the supernal *Abba* and *Imma*, the last three [*sefirot*] within him in the last three in them, and the three patriachs in him in the three patriachs in them, and three forms of consciousness (*moḥot*) in him in the three forms of consciousness in them. This is called the “property without boundaries” (*nahalah beli metsarim*),⁷⁵ for the shell has no dominion there since it is entirely contained in the supernal *Abba* and *Imma*, and nothing of it remains below like the first order of emanation. When he ascends and he will be contained entirely in *Abba* and *Imma*, he is near the supernal forehead in the secret of the first three [entities] in *Atiqa*, and this is the time of favor (*et ratson*). This ascent is not attained by the bride but only by the bridegroom. Therefore it is called the meal of *Ze‘eir Anpin*. We pray that the bride, too, will return to this level, and this is [the meaning of] “As for me, may my prayer come to You, O Lord, at a favorable moment” (Ps. 69:14). It is known already that she is called “prayer” and “moment,” and the secret of “As for me” (*wa-ani*) is to join *ani* [the feminine] and the *waw* [the masculine]. Therefore, during the afternoon service (*minḥah*) of Sabbath we read from the Torah scroll, to conjoin her with her

husband, which is the Written Torah ... Since *Ze'eir Anpin* is contained entirely within *Abba* and *Imma*, the judgments in *Ze'eir Anpin* are nullified, even though it is their [appropriate] time because the supernal forehead gazes upon him as he ascends there close to him. All the worlds are quiet and in peace for the supernal forehead sits upon the throne of the rivers of fire, to subdue them ... Thus we do not say *qiddush* at all for she is very hidden. There is the place of eating but not drinking ... During the time of the third meal the judgments are not discerned at all and everything is complete mercy. Therefore, Moses departed at this time, and not during the morning, to indicate that he ascended in the secret of simple mercy. Indeed, Moses, Joseph, and David had to depart on Sabbath for the sake of the three [forces] remaining in *Malkhut*, to elevate them above together with her husband.⁷⁶

What is implied in this relatively early Lurianic text is the view of redemption as the elevation and assimilation of the feminine into the masculine. This process is depicted primarily as the reintegration of the daughter (accompanied by the son) into the mother. That redemption is linked essentially to the elevation of *Malkhut* to *Binah* is a zoharic motif expanded in the Lurianic sources. This fundamental principle of kabbalistic symbology is articulated clearly by Vital in the following passage describing the appropriate intention that the worshiper should have at the point of the liturgy when the oneness of God is proclaimed through the recitation of Deuteronomy 6:4:

We are in the supernal pairing of *Abba* and *Imma*, and our intention now is to elevate the female waters (*mayyin nuqvin*) to them from their offspring, which are *Ze'eir* and *Nuqba*, and also the souls of the righteous, and all of these need to elevate the female to the supernal mother. Thus the verse says, "Ascribe might to God, whose majesty is over Israel" (Ps. 68:35). The explanation of this is that God, blessed be He, as it were, needs help, support, and strength from the actions of Israel below. *Malkhut* is called the "fallen booth of David" (Amos 9:11), for on account of our sins and through our evil actions she has fallen. When she desires to ascend, it must be by means of our

merits and good actions, for our sins cause her to fall, as it were, and our merits elevate her. Thus, it is not possible for her to ascend now if there are not completely righteous men amongst us whose holy and pure souls have the power to elevate her to the place of the mother ... For this reason the exile continues and it is prolonged, for there is none amongst us who can rise to this level. If there were amongst us someone who could elevate his soul, he would also elevate *Malkhut* and the union would be accomplished properly, and the time of redemption would be expedited.⁷⁷

The righteous below have the power to elevate the *Shekhinah* by becoming the female waters that arouse the male waters above, which results in the union of the male and female.⁷⁸ Vital emphasizes that, in the present state, this process is partially and temporally enacted through the simulated death associated with the liturgical recitation of the supplication prayer.⁷⁹ In this state, moreover, there is a reversal of the gender hierarchy: the exile is marked by the domination of woman by man, portrayed in the physical stance of the man being on top of the woman, but redemption is characterized by the female being on top of the male, for the woman has assumed the status of the man, that is, the feminine is transposed from that which is encompassed to that which encompasses. The eschatological transposition of the female into the male is often expressed in terms of the verse “a woman shall encircle a man” (Jer. 31:21).⁸⁰ The application of this verse to the condition of the eschaton is already established in a statement attributed to Samuel bar Nahmani. In that context, the male metaphorically represents God and the female the Jewish people. The present historical period is marked by the male surrounding the female, for God must cause Israel to repent in order to fulfill his will, but in the future the female shall surround the male, which signifies that Israel will fulfill God’s will without any prompting from above.⁸¹ The kabbalists clearly built upon this midrashic reading, but they shifted the focus from an axiological to an ontological perspective. That is, according to the kabbalistic interpretation, on a simple level, the gender dimorphism signifies the hierarchical relationship that pertains between God and the Jews, but on a deeper level it represents the binary nature of the divine. The surrounding of the one attribute by the other denotes the condition of being as

such: in the present historical circumstance, the male surrounds the female, for the active principle of the masculine dominates the passive feminine; however, in the messianic future, the female will surround the male, which betokens the elevation of the feminine to a higher ontic status. Given the prevailing androcentrism in the literature of the kabbalists, this elevation does not entail a transvaluation of the gender hierarchy such that the female is accorded a loftier position than the male. On the contrary, the androcentric position is preserved intact inasmuch as the image of the female surrounding the male conveys the idea that the feminine is restored to the masculine. This ontic restoration is related specifically to the symbol of the crown as is made explicit in an interpretation of another zoharic text written by Luria. Reflecting on the sixth day of creation, which is linked exegetically to the phrase “is heard” (*nishma*) in the verse, “The song of the turtledove is heard in our land” (Song of Songs 2:12), Luria comments:

The sixth day is the holy phallus (*berit qodesh*), for after the holy seed is formed in the two testicles, as the verse says, “The song of the turtledove,” the semen goes out by way to the holy phallus to the point of Zion. Insofar as hearing (*shemi’ah*) is related to *Malkhut*, the sixth day is called [by the expression] “is heard,” and it is contained within *Malkhut*. It is called by her name to indicate that she governs ... and she ascends to the Infinite. This is from the side of *asiyyah*, the mother, for from her side the feminine rules over the masculine in the secret of the “crown of her husband” (Prov. 12:4) and in the secret of the [letters] *he* and *yod* from the [name] *elohim*, in the secret of the *yod*, the *dalet* over the *waw*, in the secret of the world-to-come. This alludes to the fact that Adam, who was created on that [day], would in the future place *asiyyah* [doing] before *shemi’ah* [hearing], to ascend in the secret of the world-to-come until the Infinite. Thus, the mentioning of [the word] *nishma* in *Yesod* alludes to the strengthening of *Malkhut* and her elevation above to the place whence she was hewn, until the point that *Binah* precedes *Malkhut* from below to above. “In our land,” this is the day of Sabbath, which is from the land of the living, the world-to-come, the world of souls, the world of comforts. On the sixth day *Malkhut* ascended to draw down the supernal light from all

the emanations and to bring it down to Adam so that his soul would be comprised of all the emanations from the beginning of the gradations until their end ... On the Sabbath there is the supernal union and *Tif'eret* is coupled with *Malkhut*. Had Adam not sinned, the world would have been quiet and peaceful, without Satan and without evil infliction. The supernal union would have been face-to-face, but he caused the sin with regard to the Tree of Knowledge.⁸²

The Sabbath is thus characterized in terms of the heterosexual union in the divine realm between *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, a union that is facilitated by human activity below. Moreover, we should assume that this face-to-face union informs us about the texture of the redemption insofar as the Sabbath is identified (following earlier rabbinic sources) as the pattern of the world-to-come or the world of souls. One should not, however, ignore Luria's remarks about the sixth day, which in fact hold the key to understanding the sacralization of the heterosexuality affirmed in the Sabbath. The sixth day alone is correlated with the world-to-come, but in that context, the nature of the redemption is depicted as the feminine ruling over the masculine, an idea articulated in terms of the biblical verse "a capable wife is a crown for her husband" (Prov. 12:4), and not as the face-to-face union of man and woman. To be sure, even the sixth day is described in heterosexual terms, specifically as the emission of the semen from the holy phallus, which corresponds to *Yesod*. However, Luria insists that what is distinctive about the sixth day is that the semen is contained in *Malkhut* in the characteristic of hearing. By contrast, the elevation of *Malkhut* to *Binah*, the daughter to the mother, results in the doing (*asiyyah*) taking precedence over the hearing (*shemi'ah*). This is obviously an allusion to the biblical tradition that the Israelites responded to the declamation at Sinai of the record of the covenant on the part of Moses with the enthusiastic remark, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey" (Exod. 24:7). The allusion to the Sinaitic theophany here is not insignificant; on the contrary, the status of existence at that moment indicates something about the nature of the world-to-come attained on the sixth day. That is, just as at Sinai the Israelites were sexually pure, having abstained from intercourse for three days before the epiphany of the divine glory upon the

mountain (cf. Exod. 19:14–15), so the nature of the sixth day of creation is marked by sexual abstinence.

This state is graphically depicted as the ascent of *Malkhut* and the consequent dominance of the *dalet* (the feminine) over the *waw* (the masculine). Emission of semen from the (phallic) *Yesod* is paired with the ascent of (the feminine) *Malkhut*, for both allude to the same process, albeit from opposite ends of the spectrum. The ascent of the feminine to the position of the crown is an alternative way of expressing the creative impulse of the divine represented by the image of the phallus discharging semen.⁸³ The ascetical implications of the former mirror the erotic dimensions of the latter.⁸⁴ In other words, the domination of the feminine is the precondition for the ascetic transvaluation of eros in the eschaton. Luria's thinking on this matter betrays the influence of the following zoharic passage from the section called *Ta ḥazei*:⁸⁵

In the future, which is the end of days, in the sixth day, which is the sixth millennium, the Messiah will come ... Even though the portion of the Community of Israel is on the fourth day, she is alluded to on the sixth day in order to be proximate to her husband who is called *Tsaddiq*, the day of Sabbath, in order to prepare the table for him. Thus it is written, "For the Lord has created something new on earth, a woman shall encircle a man" (Jer. 31:21). This is in the time of the Messiah, which is the sixth day, and thus it is written "And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day" (Gen. 1:31). Why [does Scripture] add here a [letter] *he* [in the word] *ha-shishi* in contrast to all the other days? In every place the *he* refers to the Community of Israel, which comes to unite with her husband, the day of Sabbath. When her husband comes to her, he raises her from the dust.⁸⁶

The eschatological condition is such that the created order of the weekdays, which are symbolically correlated with the divine potencies, is changed: the *Shekhinah*, which technically corresponds to the fourth day, is put in the position of the sixth day so that she may unite with her masculine consort, the day of Sabbath. The relationship of *Tif'eret* and *Shekhinah* is linked exegetically to the verse that underscores the female encompassing the male, *neqevah tesovev*

gaver (Jer. 31:21). The messianic future is marked by the reunification of the feminine and masculine potencies of the divine. The sexual pairing results in the elevation of the feminine from her exilic state of degradation and humiliation, metaphorically depicted as the husband, the day of Sabbath, lifting up the Community of Israel, one of the standard names for the *Shekhinah*, from the dust. In that redemptive state, moreover, the gender hierarchy is reversed, for the lower and weaker female surrounds the higher and more powerful male. The image of surrounding clearly conveys the symbol of the crown. According to a theme repeated in any number of kabbalistic texts, the word *aṭarah*, which is one of the standard names attributed to the *Shekhinah*, connotes the sense of surrounding or encompassing. But it is precisely such a connotation that underlies as well the application of the term *aṭarah* to the corona of the male organ. Here I cite two texts that illustrate the point. The first example is taken from the anonymous *Sefer ha-Shem*:

[The term] *aṭarah* is [related to the words] “encompassing” (*heqqef*) and “surrounding” (*sibbuṽ*), as it says, “O Lord, You encompass him (*ta’ferennu*) with favor like a shield” (Ps. 5:13). The *aṭarah* encircles the head as well, and thus she encircles everything that emanates from her, and she also rises to the “head of Your true word” (ibid. 119:160) through the power of the crown (*keter*) and of the mercy (*ḥesed*) that is within her. The corona of circumcision (*aṭeret ha-milah*) in the arc of the penis alludes to this *aṭarah*, and in the arc is the form of a *waw* and in the corona the form of a *yod*,⁸⁷ the “glorious crown” (*aṭeret tif’eret*).⁸⁸

The second illustration is taken from one of the collections teachings attributed to Ḥayyim Vital:

The point of the feminine in the end of the ten [points] is itself related to *Yesod*, the aspect of the seventh point in relation to him, the crown on the head of the righteous, which is *Yesod* ... for this point was in the aspect of *Keter* that is within her. Therefore, it is called *aṭarah*, for [the words] *keter* and *aṭarah* have the same meaning, for *aṭarah* has the connotation of surrounding (*sibbuṽ*), as [in the verse] “[Saul and his men] were trying to

encircle (*oṭrim*) David and his men” (1 Sam. 23:26), and *keter* is from the expression “[For the villain] hedges in (*makhtir*) the just man” (Hab. 1:4), and from the expression “crown” (*koteret*), for *Keter* encompasses the four brains in the secret of the skull, and similarly the *Aṭarah* encompasses the head of *Yesod* in the secret of “the crowns are on the heads of the righteous.” It follows that the crown of the phallus (*aṭeret yesod*) is itself the point of *Malkhut* in the aspect of the crown (*keter*) that is within her.⁸⁹

We may assume that such symbolism is implicit in the aforementioned description of the messianic era from the zoharic corpus. The image of the female crowning the male portends the reversal of gender roles to be attained in the eschatological future. The crowning, however, betrays the deeper ontological significance of this reversal: the female is transformed into the corona of the phallus and thereby restored to the male. Needless to say, I am not arguing that every single occurrence of the term *aṭarah* in kabbalistic literature should be interpreted as a reference to the corona of the phallus. What I have suggested is that the fact that the term *aṭarah* signifies both the crown worn on the head and the penile corona allows for the philological convergence of the two meanings such that references to the former may imply the latter, a claim that is supported by a plethora of texts, and not by a psychoanalytic propensity applied anachronistically to the kabbalistic sources.⁹⁰ In this context, I will mention one passage from Moses Cordovero that expresses succinctly the interpretative stance adopted by a variety of kabbalists:

The [attribute of] *Malkhut* is called *aṭarah*. She is not called this except when she ascends to *Keter*, and there she is a crown on the head of her husband, the glorious crown (*aṭeret tif'eret*). Thus she is a crown on the head of every righteous person, and she is the crown on the Torah scroll.⁹¹

It would appear that the phallic interpretation of the crown is not embraced by Cordovero in this context,⁹² even though it is present in the sources from *Tiqqunei Zohar* and *Ra'aya Meheimna* that served as the textual basis for his remark.⁹³ However, Cordovero himself refers the reader in the continuation of the above passage to

a discussion of the letter *zayin* in *Sha'ar ha-Otiyyot*, the chapter that deals exclusively with the mystical significance of the letters. From that context, it is abundantly clear that the *aṭarah* symbolically refers to the corona of the male organ. To cite the relevant part of the passage:

There are those who explain that the *zayin* is *Yesod*, and it is the secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*) and the secret of Sabbath (*sod ha-shabbat*), and just as Sabbath is the crown of the six weekdays, so in the *zayin* there is a crown on the *waw*, and this crown is the corona of the phallus (*aṭarah sheba-verit*) ... When [*Malkhut*] ascends to the head of every righteous man, she is the crown on the head of every righteous man. The intention is that the garment of the righteous in the world-to-come is from the side of *Malkhut* ... Indeed, this is from the side of *Malkhut* when she is below, exerting dominion in this world, but when she ascends above, from the side of *Binah* ... she is a crown on the head of the righteous one who is the foundation of the world (*tsaddiq yesod olam*). This is [the import of the rabbinic dictum] “In the world-to-come there is no eating etc., but the righteous are sitting and their crowns are on their heads,”⁹⁴ for the world-to-come is *Binah* ... Since the crown is on the head of the righteous man, the *yod* is on top of the *waw*, and this is the *zayin* ... Moreover, there is a crown on the top of the Torah scroll ... and this refers to her ascent by way of the gradations to *Ḥokhmah*, which is above, and this is the “crown of her husband” (Prov. 12:4). Then she is a *yod* on top of the *waw*, and this is the *zayin* ... Sometimes this *yod* sits on the head of the three Patriarchs and three crownlets (*ziyyunin*)⁹⁵ are made on the *shin*, and similarly with respect to *Netsah*, *Hod*, and *Yesod*.⁹⁶

In this passage, Cordovero articulates one of the fundamental ideas that has informed the eschatological teaching of theosophic kabbalists. The redeemed state is marked by the *Shekhinah* rising to the status of the crown, which is depicted by several distinct images, the crown on the head of the righteous, the crown of the husband, the crown on the Torah scroll, and the corona of the *membrum virile*. The ascent of the *Shekhinah* transforms her gender as she is reintegrated into the masculine.⁹⁷ More specifically, the feminine *Shekhinah* is transposed and assimilated into the male

organ. This transposition is related orthographically to the fact that the *Shekhinah* is depicted as the *yod* that sits atop the *waw* to form the *zayin*.⁹⁸ The completion of Sabbath, which is represented by the *zayin*, the seventh letter of the Hebrew alphabet whose numerical value is seven, is realized through the union of the *yod* and the *waw*. This orthography is an alternative way of expressing the idea that the *Shekhinah* is restored to the phallus (symbolized by the *waw*) in the form of the sign of the covenant (the *yod*). As I have argued in a number of studies, this restoration constitutes the ultimate redemption inasmuch as the gender binary is overcome and the unity of the divine is fully consummated. Significantly, Cordovero associates the same process with the elevation of the *Shekhinah* above the three central *sefirot* represented by the biblical Patriarchs. In her capacity as the crown of the Patriarchs, the *Shekhinah* is the *yod* that dwells upon the three-pronged *shin* in the form of the ornamental crownlets. In a passage from his massive zoharic commentary, *Or Yaqar*, Cordovero elaborates on this point in his reflections on the expression *aṭeret zahav gedolah*, “magnificent crown of gold,” in Esther 8:15:

Further on it is explained that [the crown] is called the angel of the Lord (*mal'akh yhw*), and it is known that this refers to *Malkhut*. But this is problematic insofar as *Malkhut* is the garment (*ha-levush*) itself. The matter is, however, as it is explained in the *Tiqqunim* that *Malkhut* is beneath *Yesod*, and it is certainly lower than the *Tsaddiq*, “His footstool” (Ps. 99:5).⁹⁹ Therefore, from her the garment for the righteous is made, for they are on the level of *Yesod*, and *Malkhut* is the garment for *Yesod* since she is below him and he is hidden within her, as is known. But she has another aspect: She ascends to become a crown on the head of the righteous one, for on this aspect she is above *Yesod*, the fourth in relation to the three Patriarchs. Just as she is then called the crown on the head of the righteous one, on the spiritual plane this aspect becomes a crown for the righteous. And this is [the import of the dictum] “the righteous are sitting with their crowns upon their heads.” This aspect [endows the attributes of] of rising (*qimah*) and standing (*amidah*) to *Malkhut*. Therefore it says “as the angel of the Lord stood by” (Zech. 3:5) in relation to the *Aṭarah*.¹⁰⁰

According to Cordovero's formulation, the attribute of *Malkhut* has two aspects, one that accords her the status of being below *Yesod* and the other that elevates her above the phallic gradation. Whereas the attribute of the garment that *Malkhut* bestows upon the righteous (just as she is a garment for *Yesod*) is related to the former, the image of the crown that is upon the head of the righteous is related to the latter. *Malkhut* attains the second characteristic when she joins the Patriarchs to complete the quaternity of the divine chariot. The gender metamorphosis implied by this process is alluded to in slightly different terminology in the concluding statement of the above citation: the aspect of the crown confers upon *Malkhut* the erect and upright status of rising and standing. These characteristics signify a vertical position associated with the masculine as opposed to sitting or reclining, the horizontal posture correlated with the feminine.¹⁰¹ In virtue of this elevated state, the *Shekhinah* assumes the posture of the angel of the Lord, who is described as standing.¹⁰² The elevation of *Malkhut* to the position of the crown of the Patriarchs signifies her transformation and assimilation into the male. The mystical significance of the motif of coronation of Sabbath consists of precisely such a dynamic in the divine pleroma, and in that respect this event is a prolepsis of the redemption.

Several scholars have focused on this image to underscore the centrality of the symbol of the feminine in kabbalistic speculation. To a degree, this is of course correct, but what I find lacking is a sophisticated and fuller comprehension of this symbolism in light of a sustained analysis of the issues of gender and eros in the kabbalistic orientation. My contention is that the image of the Sabbath bride is a symbol of liminality signifying the transition from separation (historical exile) to unification (redemption). Bridal imagery is thus appropriate to characterize the transition from the exilic to the redemptive state, but the latter is most fully represented by images that describe the reintegration of the feminine *Shekhinah* to the masculine potency. Even the image of the *Shekhinah* as a bride adorned for her wedding represents a transition from exile to redemption. The latter is fully represented when the bride enters the nuptial chamber and is transformed therein into the crown of the bridegroom. The point is expressed by Moses de León: "Therefore our rabbis, blessed be their memory, would say, 'Come forth, O Bride,'

when the Sabbath began and the day was sanctified, like one who waits for the bride to enter the nuptial chamber. But during the day [of Sabbath] the [layer of] dew surrounded their heads and they were crowned by ‘a crown of beauty and a diadem of glory’ (Isa. 28:5).¹⁰³ De León contrasts the ontic status of the *Shekhinah* on Friday night, the eve of Sabbath, and the day of Sabbath: in the former, she is like a bride waiting to enter the nuptial chamber, but in the latter, she has been transformed into the crown on the heads of the male rabbis. The citation from Isaiah suggests an eschatological understanding of this process. Sabbath is a prolepsis of the messianic redemption precisely because its mystical significance entails the masculinization of the feminine *Shekhinah*. As I have noted above, this is reflected in the very name *shabbat*, which is decomposed into the *shin* together with the word *bat*. The *shin*, which has three branches, is the masculine potency that is united with the *bat*, the daughter or the *Shekhinah*. The union of the *shin* and the *bat*, forming *shabbat*, transforms the *bat* into the crown of the *shin*.

The crowning represents the coronation of the Sabbath bride as she prepares to unite with the holy King. On the most basic level, this reflects standard regal symbolism: the *Shekhinah* is, after all, the Queen, and thus the image of her being crowned makes perfect sense. This imagery is enhanced, moreover, by the symbol of the Sabbath bride, for in the Jewish tradition the actual practice of the bridegroom and the bride wearing crowns is well attested. However, this symbolism has a deeper significance: the crowning represents the assimilation of the *Shekhinah* into the phallic *Yesod*, a metamorphosis that is related in zoharic literature to the sacred union of male and female. As I have argued in a separate study, the phallicization of the feminine is alluded to in the zoharic understanding of the biblical admonition to “remember the Sabbath day,” which is the scriptural basis for the ritual obligation to sanctify the Sabbath with a blessing over a cup of wine. According to the fertile imagination of the author of the *Zohar*, the word *zakhor* refers to the “secret of the masculine,” *raza di-dekhura*, the phallic attribute of *Yesod*. Sanctification of the Sabbath on Friday evening is thus an act of re/membering, for the union of the Queen and King above, which is facilitated by the actions of the Jewish people below, results in the transformation of the female into an aspect of the phallus, and in a most exact sense, the female is transposed into a part of the male member.¹⁰⁴

In conclusion, I note that the eschatological implications of the phallic transformation of the Sabbath bride is the implicit meaning of the well-known hymn by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Solomon Alkabetz, *lekhah dodi*. The refrain, *lekhah dodi liqra't kallah penei shabbat neqabbelah*, "Come, my beloved, to greet the bride, let us receive the face of Sabbath," indicates quite clearly the leitmotif of the poem as a whole: the union of the male and female aspects of God, which appropriately takes place on Sabbath evening. Thus, the first stanza expresses this motif in terms of the two locutions for Sabbath observance given in, respectively, Exodus 20:8 and Deuteronomy 5:12: *shamor we-zakhor be-dibbur ehad hishmi'anu el ha-meyuhad yhwh ehad u-shemo ehad leshem u-letif'eret we-litehilah*, "The unique God caused us to hear 'observe' and 'remember' in one word, the Lord is one and his name is one, for fame, and splendor, and praise." The two words are heard simultaneously and, following the earlier rabbinic view, were miraculously spoken at once.¹⁰⁵ For the kabbalist, this alludes to the mystery of the holy union of the male and female, also represented by the eschatological image of God and his name being one. The culminating stanza of the poem returns to this motif: *bo'i ve-shalom azeret ba'lah gam be-simḥah u-vetsahalah tokh emunei am segulah bo'i khallah bo'i khallah*, "Come in peace, crown of her husband, with joy and happiness, amidst the believers of the treasured people, come, O bride, come O bride." The meaning of this verse was well understood by the Polish kabbalist Jacob bar Raphael of Poznan, who wrote the following in his commentary on the words of Alkabetz: "By way of the mystical meaning, 'Come in peace,' for it is known that the attribute of *Yesod* is called peace (*shalom*) ... and he is the one that unifies the King and the Matrona, and then she becomes the 'crown of her husband,' according to the verse, 'a capable wife is a crown for her husband' (*eshet ḥayil azeret ba'lah*) (Prov. 12:4)."¹⁰⁶ Through the phallic attribute of *Yesod*, the Sabbath bride is transformed into the crown of her husband, and the feminine is thereby reintegrated into the male. The bride of Sabbath is thus summoned to come forth in peace so that the holy union can be consummated, and she will be transformed into the masculine crown.

Many other texts could have been cited to support this interpretation, but for our purposes what I have cited is sufficient.¹⁰⁷ The imaging of God in gender terms is obviously one of the most

important elements of the kabbalistic tradition. And, as other scholars have noted, this imaging involves both male and female. What I have tried to accomplish in this study, as well as in my other work, is to understand the gender imagery in a proper cultural context. In a condition of exile, which is an ontological state marked by a separation of male and female, the path to reunification is through the sexual mating of a man and his spouse. In the exilic state, therefore, heterosexuality is the behavioral norm and erotic imagery of the feminine is appropriate. In the redemptive state, however, when the female is restored to the male, the heterosexual language must yield to the autoerotic discourse rooted in the myth of the male androgyne: the female is assimilated into the corona of the phallus. The ultimate erotic gratification is not derived from the desire for the other, because the other has become fully integrated into oneself. In the present historical condition the process is dialectic, and the redemptive state of Sabbath perpetually gives way to the fragmentation of the week. Hence, each and every Sabbath eve provides a temporal context for the reenactment of this mythic drama, the overcoming of differentiation. As the first and critical stage of this drama, the *Shekhinah* assumes the image of the beautiful bride who arouses the desire of the male. In the moment of union, however, the bride is transformed into the crown of her husband, the symbol that most fully expresses the overcoming of the gender dichotomy characteristic of the ultimate redemption.

Notes

1. The point was well recognized by Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 132–133: “the Kabbalists strove from the very first to anchor the ritual of Rabbinical Judaism in myth by means of a mystical practice” (author’s emphasis).
2. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 293–294; R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, “Messianismus und Mystik,” in *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), pp. 20–21.
3. See Daniel Matt, “The Mystic and the Mizwot,” in *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, ed. Arthur Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987), pp. 367–404; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 59, 1988, pp. 217–251; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 156–199; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1155–1213; Pinchas Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later*

- Strata of the Zohar* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), pp. 81–105; Charles Mopsik, *Les Grands Textes de la Cabale: Les Rites qui font Dieu* (Paris: Verdier, 1993).
4. My account of the sacrament is indebted to the rich and nuanced discussion in Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J. and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995).
 5. As I have pointed out in a number of previous studies, kabbalistic anthropology (following an orientation already articulated in the classical rabbinic corpus) identifies humanity in its ideal form with Israel. Hence, the word *anthropos* used here should not be construed in a generic sense as referring to humanity, but is limited rather to the Jewish people who truly (according to the kabbalistic sources) bear the image of God, both pneumatically and somatically. Even with respect to the Jewish people, the anthropology is more limited inasmuch as the title “human being” in the most exact sense can be applied only to Jewish males. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and History in the Zohar,” in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. Elisheva Carlebach, David S. Myers, and John Efron (Hanover: Brandeis University Press, 1998), pp. 214–246. The attempt on the part of most scholars to render technical terms such as *bar nash* (or its Hebrew equivalent *ben adam*) in a gender-neutral manner cannot go unchallenged. A more exacting translation of this expression, which would reflect the context, is “Jewish male.”
 6. Regarding the motif of the coronation of the feminine and the masculine potencies of the divine on the Sabbath, see Elliot Ginsburg, *The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 74, 102, 112–115, 137–138. My understanding of the coronation as a gender transformation of the *Shekhinah* is not mentioned or explored by Ginsburg or any other scholar to the best of my knowledge.
 7. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 119a and Baba Qama 32a–b.
 8. *Genesis Rabbah* 10:9, p. 85.
 9. *Ibid.* 11:8, pp. 95–96.
 10. *Leviticus Rabbah* 27:10, p. 643, and parallels cited in note 7.
 11. *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, ed. Peter Schäfer, Margarite Schlüter, and Hans Georg von Mutius (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1982), 850 and 852. See Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 103–104; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 130–131 n. 48.
 12. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 93, 98–105, 246; *idem*, *Along the Path*, pp. 180–181 n. 352.
 13. *Zohar* 1:244b.
 14. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 110–115, and references to other scholarly discussions given on pp. 227 n. 160 and 228 n. 168.
 15. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 371–372 n. 155. On the transmutation of heterosexual imagery into male homoeroticism to depict the texture of the mystical experience, see *ibid.*, pp. 369–372; *idem*, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 107–110; and my study referred to in note 26. This phenomenon has been discussed independently by Yehuda Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” *Alpayyim*, 9, 1994, pp. 104–112 (Hebrew). While my position shares some basic elements with that of Liebes, we fundamentally disagree with respect to the question of the ultimate nature of the erotic impulse. In my opinion, the heterosexual, which is appropriate at the initial stage of overcoming the ontological separation of exile, gives way to the homoerotic. The final repair (*tiqqun*) consists of

the (ideally) ascetic bonding of the members of the mystical fraternity. In this bond, the actual and idealized feminine are expendable. For a recent criticism of the view of Liebes on this score, see Gil Anidjar, "Jewish Mysticism Alterable and Unalterable: On Orienting Kabbalah Studies and the 'Zohar of Christian Spain,'" *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, and Society*, 3, 1996, pp. 118–125 (my thanks to Lawrence Fine for drawing my attention to this study). Although I am critical of Liebes' privileging of the heterosexual over the homoerotic, I cannot accept Anidjar's tendentious argument that Liebes refuses to acknowledge same-sex interactions on account of a deliberate refusal to acknowledge homoerotic sexuality between males, a hermeneutic posture that the author refers to as "distanctiation," which he relates to the broader phenomenon of what he calls (following the work of Edward Said) "Jewish Orientalism." According to my own work in this area, which is totally ignored by Anidjar, the homoeroticism is (at least ideally, as may be reconstructed from the relevant texts) predicated on sexual renunciation. I am not denying the possibility of male homosexuality (see *Circle in the Square*, pp. 223–224 n. 145, where I discuss the issue at length), but I am arguing that the dynamic of eros operative in the kabbalistic sources (primarily the zoharic and Lurianic material) presumes that the male homoeroticism takes shape within the framework of the mystical fellowship, participation in which is based on temporary sexual abstinence. Had Anidjar engaged my discussions of this matter (not to mention other scholars), his own "discursive space" would have been more inclusive, less discriminatory, and ultimately more generous. The overwhelmingly geocentric nature of Anidjar's analysis of contemporary kabbalistic scholarship (the three major figures he discusses are Scholem, Idel, and Liebes) clearly attests to a totalizing and exclusionary hermeneutics, a repetition of a pattern that renders marginal other scholars who have written on the relevant topics discussed by him. To be sure, occasionally in the notes, Anidjar does refer to scholarly voices that have not been sufficiently heeded, but these references cannot redress the imbalance he creates in the main body of his study. Thus, to cite but one of several pertinent examples, Anidjar credits only Idel and Liebes with emphasizing *contra* Scholem the experiential and ecstatic elements of Jewish mysticism (pp. 98–99). His failure to note my own work on this issue is inexcusable, not only on the grounds that I have emphasized the experiential underpinning of theosophic kabbalah in my own independent voice (traceable to studies that began to appear in 1987), but also because in my discourse I have presented a more balanced picture of Scholem's contribution (see, for example, Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 277–279).

16. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1215–1238; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*.
17. The kabbalistic symbolism, already expressed in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, is based on the discrepancy between the two accounts of the Decalogue: in Exod. 20:8 the locution is to "remember" (*zakhor*) the Sabbath, whereas in Deut. 5:12 it is to "observe" (*shamor*) the Sabbath. According to the kabbalistic symbolism, in some measure based on earlier rabbinic sources, the two terms refer, respectively, to the masculine and to the feminine aspects of the divine. See Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 142–143, 158–159; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1220–1223; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 107–108. Needless to say, the attribution of gender to Sabbath is already expressed in the classical rabbinic corpus, specifically in terms of the metaphorical images of king and queen (or bride). See Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Young, 1951), pp. 53–62.

18. Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 118. Cf. "Sefer ha-Mishkal," p. 110. In that context, Moses de León relates the typological classification of Sabbath as *zakhor* and *shamor* to the rabbinic dictum that Sabbath is equivalent to all the commandments of the Torah (Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 1:8, ed. Venice, 3c; Nedarim 3:14, 38b; *Exodus Rabbah* 25:12; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 4:4), inasmuch as the Torah itself can be viewed in terms of the distinction between *zakhor* and *shamor*, the former corresponding to the positive commandments and the latter to the negative prohibitions. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1223; Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 63–71 (English introduction).
19. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 3:199; Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 57b; Rosh ha-Shanah 31a; Sanhedrin 97a; Avodah Zarah 3b; Tamid 33b; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, 1, p. 5; *Masekhet Soferim*, ed. Michael Higger (New York: Debe Rabbanan, 1937), 18, pp. 312–313; *Pirqei Rabbi Eli'ezer*, 19, 44a; *Midrash Otiyyot de-R. Aqiva*, in *Battei Midrashot*, ed. Solomon Wertheimer (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1980), 2:346. See Heschel, *Sabbath*, pp. 73–76; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 65, 72, 84, 95–100, 133, 145–146 n. 46. Worthy of note is the description in the *Pseudo-Clementine Homilies* XVII of the Sabbath, the seventh power of God, whose image is the aeon-to-come. See Shlomo Pines, "Points of Similarity between the Exposition of the Doctrine of the Sefirot in the Sefer Yezira and a Text of the Pseudo-Clementine Homilies," *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities*, 7, 1989, pp. 96–97, and my own analysis of this passage in relation to a text from *Sefer ha-Bahir* in *Along the Path*, p. 81.
20. Zohar 3:243b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*). David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid, *Or Zaru'a*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 2203, fol. 39a, expresses this ontological transition in time in the following way: during the week the world is ruled by the dominion of the archons, whereas on Sabbath it enters under the domain of the Holy One.
21. Palestinian Talmud, Ketuvot 5:8, ed. Venice, 30b; Babylonian Talmud, Ketuvot 62b; Baba Qama 82a; Zohar 1:14a–b; 50a; 112a (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*); 2:63b, 89a, 136a, 204b–205a; 3:49b, 78a, 81a, 82a, 143a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 16, 38b; sec. 21, 57a, 61a; sec. 36, 78a; sec. 56, 90a. See note 12. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1232–1233, 1357; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 15.
22. The verse is speaking about the righteous man who is compared to a tree "planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season." I have modified the literal rendering to fit the context.
23. Babylonian Talmud, Beitsah 16a; Ta'anit 27b. Regarding this rabbinic motif and its evolution in kabbalistic sources, see Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 121–136.
24. *Heikhal ha-Shem* (Venice, 1601), 40a. Cf. Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:107.
25. See references cited in note 21.
26. For recent discussion of this motif, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1997), pp. 151–185.
27. For discussion of this theme, see Charles Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition and the Kabbalah," in *Zone: Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone Books, 1989), pp. 48–73.
28. This ambivalence on the part of the kabbalists has been duly noted by David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), pp. 109–118.

29. The kabbalistic perspective is predicated on the belief that the holiness of the Sabbath is intrinsic to the day itself and thus to the constituent rhythm of time. The holiness of the Sabbath, therefore, is not dependent on theurgic action from below (in the language of zoharic symbolism, *it'aruta di-letata*), although the human agent obviously has a role to play in the cosmic drama. See, in particular, Zohar 3:94b. The point is stated clearly by Ḥayyim ben Solomon of Chernovitz in the opening section of his *Sidduro shel Shabbat* (Jerusalem, 1960), 9a–10b. In particular, this author draws an analogy between the creation of the world and the Sabbath: just as there was no one outside of God to incite the act of divine creativity, so on the Sabbath there is no need for arousal from below to bring about the holiness of the day.
30. MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale heb. 817, fol. 142b. Cf. David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid, *Or Zaru'a*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 2203, fol. 39b.
31. Cf. the characterization in Ḥayyim Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot* (Jerusalem, 1963), 63a, of the holiness of Sabbath as the ascent of *Ze'ir Anpin* and *Nuqba*, the two lower countenances of the divine, to *Abba* and *Imma*, the two upper countenances.
32. The corporeal and sensual nature of restfulness on Sabbath is also reflected in the rabbinic understanding of the “delight of the Sabbath” (*oneg shabbat*), which involves, inter alia, the wearing of special garments and the eating of distinctive foods. See *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 3:1; Heschel, *Sabbath*, pp. 18–19; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 64–65. With respect to this basic issue in the phenomenology of religious experience associated with the Sabbath, the kabbalists were merely continuing the orientation expressed in classical rabbinic literature.
33. Naḥmanides, *Perushei ha-Torah*, vol.1, p. 30 (ad Gen. 2:3).
34. According to some scholars the author of this composition was Gikatilla. See Gershom Scholem, “Did Naḥmanides Write the Book Iggeret ha-Qodesh,” *Qiryat Sefer*, 21, 1944–45, pp. 175–186 (Hebrew); Seymour Cohen, *The Holy Letter: A Study in Medieval Jewish Sexual Morality* (New York: Ktav, 1976), pp. 8–18; Charles Mopsik, *Lettre sur la Sainteté: Le secret de la relation entre l'homme et la femme dans la cabale* (Paris: Verdier, 1986), pp. 20–29. The attribution of the text to Gikatilla was later modified by Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 66.
35. *Kitvei Ramban*, vol. 2, p. 327.
36. *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (Mantua 1558), 114b–115b. Immediately before the interpretation of Adam's sin there is a discussion of a variety of different visionary accounts in Scripture (see 113b–114a). The common denominator of these different contexts is that the object of vision was the *Shekhinah*, identified more specifically as the *aṭarah*, which corresponds to the corona of the phallus. The phallic understanding of the *aṭarah* is the underlying explanation for the prohibition of looking at the hands of the priests during the blessing and of looking at the rainbow. For other kabbalistic sources that support this reading, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 336–339. Gazing at the *aṭarah* is also applied to the sin of Lot's wife. Insofar as the *Shekhinah* is compared to salt, it follows that the just punishment for the one who looked at that attribute was to be changed into a pillar of salt. Finally, the vision of this attribute can have a positive religious application. The citation of the rabbinic dictum, “the one who prays should cast his eyes below and his heart above” (Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 105b), in this context (114a; cf. 132a–b), indicates that the *Shekhinah* is the object of the visual contemplation required as part of liturgical worship.

37. *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, 120a.
38. See, for example, Zohar 1:79a (*Sitrei Torah*). For the expression of this medieval commonplace in Christian sources, see the astute remarks of Grace Jantzen, *Power, Gender, and Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 130–132. The background for this misogynist attitude in Hellenistic and Jewish sources, which both influenced Christianity in its classical formulations, is treated by Jantzen, pp. 26–58.
39. Zohar 3:296a (*Idra Zuṭa*). Cf. Zohar 1:256a. On the use of the image of the growing of breasts, connected to the motif of becoming a bride, see the Lurianic text discussed by Ronit Meroz, “Redemption in the Lurianic Teaching,” Ph.D. dissertation, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1988, pp. 115–116 n. 60 (Hebrew). On the phallic significance of breasts in kabbalistic symbolism, with particular reference to zoharic texts, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 102, 109–110, 218–219 nn. 124–125, 224 n. 151, 226–227 n. 156.
40. See Gershom Scholem, “On the Development of the Concept of Worlds in the Early Kabbalah,” *Tarbits*, 3, 1931, pp. 39–41 (Hebrew); Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 89, 99, 103.
41. Zohar 1:246b–247a; cf. 2:31a; Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* (Jerusalem, 1962), 14:4, 74c.
42. Cf. Zohar 3:243b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*): “The *shin* [comprises] the three colors of the rainbow and the sign of the covenant of the rainbow is the only daughter, the Sabbath queen.” According to this text, the combination of the *shin* and *bat* in the word *shabbat* signifies the androgynous nature of the phallic gradation, the rainbow (*qeshet*), which is composed of the three (masculine) colors and the (feminine) sign of the covenant.
43. In effect, the linguistic and the ontological are not ultimately distinct inasmuch as from the kabbalistic perspective the very nature of being is determined by the oral and written forms of the Hebrew language. For a list of some of the relevant scholarly treatments of language in kabbalistic sources, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 155 n. 1.
44. Technically speaking, the *shin* symbolizes the three lines, which correspond to the Patriarchs or the central sefirotic emanations. However, inasmuch as these three lines are contained within *Yesod*, it seems valid to decode the *shin* as a reference to the day of Sabbath, generally associated with this gradation. Consider, for example, the passage cited in note 41. For a later text that betrays the influence of this orientation, see Samuel Vital, *Hemdat Yisra'el* (Munkacs, 1901), 129b–130a: “Afterwards he should say, ‘Come forth, O bride’ (*bo'i khallah*) two times corresponding to *Netsah* and *Hod*, and then he should say ‘Come forth, O bride, the Sabbath queen’ (*bo'i khallah shabbat malkhata*). The issue is that [the word] *bo'i* is numerically equal to *ehad* [i.e. they both equal 13], and the three together equal [the word] *tal* [i.e. 39] in the secret of YHW as it has been mentioned [i.e. the first three letters of the Tetragrammaton spelled out in full, *ywd he waw*, 10 + 6 + 4 + 5 + 1 + 6 + 1 + 6, equal 39]. He should intend in the first *bo'i* [the attribute] *Netsah*, in the second *bo'i* [the attribute of] *Hod*, and the third *bo'i* [the attribute of] *Yesod*. In the third, he says ‘Come forth, O bride, the Sabbath etc.’ to allude to the *shin bat*, for at that moment all three are comprised within *Yesod* corresponding to the *shin*, and then all three are contained [in *Yesod*].” Vital’s remarks are based on the teaching of Luria cited by his father, Ḥayyim, in *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 66a.
45. Zohar 1:5b; “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 111; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1224.
46. Zohar 2:143b.

47. The notion that the supernal chariot is constituted by the union of David and the three Patriarchs, which symbolizes the *Shekhinah* and the three central gradations, *Ḥesed*, *Din*, and *Raḥamim*, is widely attested in zoharic and related kabbalistic literature. For example, see Zohar 1:154b, 248b; 3:146a, 262b.
48. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1225, 1264–1265 n. 111; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 73–74.
49. See my study cited in note 26. The ideal of holiness (*qedushah*) is linked with abstinence (*perishut*) already in classical rabbinic sources. See Steven Fraade, “Ascetical Aspects of Ancient Judaism,” in *Jewish Spirituality From the Bible through the Middle Ages*, pp. 270–271.
50. On the elevation of the *Shekhinah* (depicted by the symbol of the stone) to be crowned by the Patriarchs, see Zohar 1:231b.
51. Zohar 2:204a.
52. Zohar 1:248b.
53. See note 47. The expression *ha-merkavah meruba’at* is used to describe the zoharic view by Simeon Lavi, *Ketem Paz*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1981), 2:441b.
54. This symbolism is widely attested in zoharic and related kabbalistic literature. For example, cf. Zohar 1:15b, 156b; 3:264b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); Moses de León, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 8–9.
55. See Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 92–93, 178–180. The relationship of the father to the daughter assumes a definite erotic nature in the kabbalistic symbolism. This is epitomized in the following passage in Zohar 1:156b (*Sitrei Torah*): “The desire of the father is constantly towards his daughter, for the daughter, his beloved, is always near him since she is the only daughter amongst the six sons.” Cf. the parallel in *She’elot u-Teshuvot le-R. Mosheh de-Li’on*, p. 43. I have explored the erotic relation of the father and daughter in the engendering myth of kabbalistic theosophy in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,” *Poetics Today*, 19, 1998, pp. 161–162.
56. “*Sefer ha-Mishkal*,” pp. 110–111. Very similar language to Moses de León’s is used by Recanaṭi, *Perush al ha-Torah*, 46a (ad Exod. 20:7): “‘He who profanes it shall be put to death’ (Exod. 31:14), for it alludes to *zakhor* and *shamor*. There are some who explain the expression ‘he who profanes it’ (*meḥalaleha*) in relation to the Community of Israel, which is the midpoint, and surrounding it are the seventy nations, like a point in the middle of the circle, as it says, ‘I set this Jerusalem in the midst of nations’ (Ezek. 5:5). It says concerning her, ‘he who profanes it’ (*meḥalaleha*), that is, the one who enters her space (*ḥalalah*) to uproot something from her emendations and from all of her matters shall die.” See Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 90–91.
57. Cf. Zohar 1:6a. It is of interest to compare the kabbalistic application of the symbol of the midpoint to the *Shekhinah* with the following passage of Irenaeus summarizing the gnostic myth of Acamoth presented by Ptolemy, a student of Valentinus: “This mother they call also the eighth, wisdom (Sophia), land, Jerusalem, holy spirit, and ‘lord’ in the masculine gender. She occupies the place of the midpoint; and until the end, she is above the craftsman but below or outside the fullness” (translated in Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1987], p. 291). The series of symbolic associations related to Acamoth in the recounting of the gnostic myth are remarkably close to the kabbalistic descriptions of *Shekhinah*. Especially relevant to this study is the image of the midpoint, but also the fact that the gnostic source emphasizes the fact that Acamoth is addressed by the masculine “lord,” or “master,” rather than the appropriate feminine title

- “mistress.” In kabbalistic sources as well the title *adonai*, which means “lord,” is applied to the *Shekhinah* in her role as demiurge of the lower world. In terms of this role, the feminine *Shekhinah* is masculinized. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 103–106. The phenomenological affinity between the gnostic characterizations (especially from the Valentinian school) of Jerusalem as the feminine hypostasis of wisdom banished from the pleroma and the portrayal of Jerusalem in the early texts of theosophic kabbalah has been duly noted by Moshe Idel, “Jerusalem in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Thought,” in *The History of Jerusalem: Crusades and Ayyubids, 1099–1250*, ed. Joshua Prawer and Haggai Ben-Shammai (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 1991), pp. 265–267 (Hebrew).
58. The masculine implication of the symbol of the point is also related on occasion to the homology between the tenth and the third emanations, *Shekhinah* and *Binah*, the daughter and the mother. See, for example, the following explanation of the opening passage of the Zohar in Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi* (Jerusalem, 1898), 3b: “Thus the Community of Israel alludes to the side, which is the point of the *yod*, and she is the bride of Moses (*kallat mosheh*), for just as there is *Da'at* from within in the secret of Moses and Israel, and *Tiferet* from without in the secret of Jacob, so there is the bride of Moses from within, which is the Community of Israel, and *Malkhut* from without in the secret of the *Shekhinah*, and this refers to Rachel, the wife of Jacob. Therefore, it says that the lily is the Community of Israel, the inner point, and there is another external lily on the outside, and it is amongst the thorns for the shells are near her ... The explanation of the verse, ‘Like a lily among thorns’ (Song of Songs 2:2), refers to the lower lily, whereas ‘so is my darling’ refers to the upper lily, which is ‘among the maidens.’ She is called ‘my darling’ for she is in the likeness of the supernal mother, which is *Binah*, ‘like mother, like daughter’ (Ezek. 16:44), in the secret of this inner point. With respect to this aspect it is said that Moses merited the [attribute of] *Binah*, for he merited to unite with this inner aspect called the bride of Moses.”
59. Support for my interpretation is found in later kabbalistic writings where the implicit symbolism of the earlier sources is drawn out explicitly. Consider, for example, the following passage of Hayyim Vital, *Ets Hayyim* (Jerusalem, 1910), 39:14, 78c, which in part is an elaboration of a passage in Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:118: “The bottom foot of the *waw* is very subtle, and it is the point of the corona of the phallus (*neqqudat ha-atarah shel ha-yesod*), the image of a small *yod* ... And this point enters the vagina of the feminine (*yesod ha-neqevah*), which is the *he* of the Tetragrammaton, the point of Zion that is in her. Consequently, the intercourse is called complete.” See also *Adam Yashar* (Jerusalem, 1994), p. 44: “The point of the feminine was in the end of the aspect of the corona of the phallus itself (*be-sof behinat ha-atarah atsmah shel ha-yesod*) ... the diadem on the head of the righteous (*atarah be-rosh tsaddiq*), which is *Yesod*. We have already said above that this point was in the aspect of the crown (*keter*) that is within her, and thus she is called *atarah*, for [the words] *keter* and *atarah* have the same connotation ... Thus when the feminine was in the aspect of the corona (*atarah*) there was not yet a female in relation to a male.” A parallel to this passage is found in *Ets Hayyim*, 34:2, 46b–d, and compare the text cited in note 100. The relevance of this comment lies in the fact that here the attribution of the symbol of the point to the feminine relates very explicitly to the corona of the phallus, the aspect of the feminine that is contextualized in the masculine. From that perspective, the symbol of the corona signifies the transcendence of gender dimorphism, which

amounts in kabbalistic writings to the reconstitution of the male androgyne. For some other passages in the writings of Vital that embrace this symbolism, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 117–118. For a later application of this symbolism, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*: Redemption and the Overcoming of Gender Dimorphism in the Messianic Kabbalah of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto,” *History of Religions*, 37, 1997, pp. 289–332. The masculine nature of the symbol of the corona of the penis (*ateret yesod*) is underscored in one passage in *Sha’ar ha-Kawwanot*, 65b, where it is identified as the locus of the attribute of mercy. The eschatological effacement of the feminine is implicit in another image that Vital employs to depict the messianic era: the culmination of the process of purification (*berur*) occurs when all the holy sparks are elevated in the form of the female waters from their entrapment in the demonic shells. When that process is completed the shells will be abrogated – an idea exegetically linked to the verse “He will destroy death forever” (Isa. 25:8) – since there will be no vitality to sustain them. See *Ets Hayyim*, 39:1, 65c–66a, 66c–d. The task of redemption, therefore, consists of purifying the female waters and restoring all the sparks of holiness to the foundation of the feminine aspect of the divine (*yesod nuqba di-ze’eir anpin*). This task is facilitated by sexual intercourse (*ziwwug*) between a man and his wife, but with the completion of the process that act loses its mystical significance. The point underlies Vital’s distinction in *Ets Hayyim*, 39:4, 69a, between the “lower physical copulation” (*ziwwug gufaniyyot tahton*), which involves phallic penetration of the vagina (*lehiztawweg bi-vehinat ziwwug ha-tahton di-yesod dileih bi-yesod dilah*), and the “supernal spiritual copulation” (*ziwwug ruhani elyon*), which entails the union brought about through the kisses of the mouth. (On the contrast between the “spiritual supernal copulation,” *ziwwug ha-elyon ruhani*, and the “physical lower copulation,” *ziwwug tahton gufani*, cf. *ibid.* 39:9, 73b–74b. In that context [73d], even the latter is described in terms of the upper displacement of the genitals: “They are joined together in the aspect of the kisses, the male gives from his supernal foundation [*yesod shelo ha-elyon*], which is the tongue in his mouth, one spirit within her supernal foundation [*yesod shelah ha-elyon*], which is placed in the mouth of the female.”) The purpose of the “lower copulation of the genitals” (*ziwwug tahton di-yesod*) is to purify the sparks and hence it is temporary, since one can envision a time when all the sparks will be liberated from the demonic and restored to the divine, whereas the “supernal copulation of the kisses” (*ziwwug elyon di-neshiqin*) is continuous, reflecting a permanent ontic situation wherein the male and female (related, more specifically, to the configurations of *Abba* and *Imma*, father and mother) are bound together in a spiritual bond.

60. The same symbolic intent of the image of the midpoint, designated the “holy of holies” (*qodesh qodashim*), seems to be implied in Zohar 1:229a–b, 231a. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 225 n. 152. I would like to take this opportunity to correct my suggestion that the holy of holies according to that zoharic passage corresponds to the clitoris, which is anatomically homologous to the penis. It is more likely that the medieval kabbalists accepted the commonplace assumption that the interior penis of the female anatomy was identified as the uterus or the vagina, for the specific imaging of the clitoris as the male organ in the female becomes prevalent at a later date in the Renaissance. See Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 4, 26–28, 33–35, 63–65, 78–93, 97–8, 137–141. The implicit zoharic symbolism is made

explicit especially in the later Lurianic kabbalah. See, for example, Vital, *Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi*, 33c: "Know that just as a man produces semen and places a drop of the male waters in the feminine, and they derive from his brain, so too in the case of the woman the drop of the female waters is derived from her brain until the foundation (*yesod*) that is in her, which is her womb (*beit ha-rehem*), and this drop is called the female waters (*mayyin nuqvin*). From these two types of drops, the male waters and the female waters, which derive from the brain of the male and from the brain of the female, and which are all placed in her foundation wherein they are united, the foetus is formed." The designation "holy of holies" is also applied to *Binah*, which is the palace that contains the supernal point of *Hokhmah*. Cf. Zohar 1:2a, 200a; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 8–9, 29. It must be pointed out, however, that in the words *yehabbeq lah ba'lah uvi-yesoda dilah de-avid nayyeḥa lah yehei kattish kattishin* in Luria's poem, *azammer bi-shevaḥin* (in *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 72c, the first word is *asader*), *yesod* does seem to refer to the clitoris of the divine feminine, which is stimulated by her male counterpart.

61. The phallic symbolism of the attribution of the point to the feminine is underscored in the identification of that point as the sign of the covenant (*ot berit*) by the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar*. Cf. Zohar 1:24b; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 18, 36b; sec. 21, 57b; sec. 29, 73a; sec. 37, 78a. The phallic intent of the symbol of the midpoint as it is employed in the Zohar is drawn explicitly by Vital in the following passage in *Ets Hayyim*, 32:4, 37b (cf. the parallel in *Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi*, 31c): "At first you must know that the term 'point' (*nequddah*) rightfully applies only to the aspect of *Yesod*, whether it is *Yesod* of the male or *Yesod* of the female, although its essence is in *Yesod* of the female. Remember this principle to understand the language of the Zohar with respect to the matter of the point, and she is called the midpoint for the aspect of the point of *Yesod* is in the middle of the body." Finally, let me note that the symbolic homology of the phallus and an aspect of the female genitals is to be contrasted with another recurring theme in kabbalistic literature: the localization of the feminine as the corona of the male organ. Here I cite one example of this widespread phenomenon from Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 44: "You already know that the secret of circumcision alludes to [the attribute] *Tsaddiq*, and the Sabbath to [the attribute] *Aṭarah*, and the corona (*aṭarah*) that is disclosed as a result of the cutting of the foreskin alludes to *Aṭarah*, and all the rest [of the organ] alludes to *Tsaddiq*." For other examples of this symbolism, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 358–359, 362–363; idem, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 20, 41, 45–46, 88–89.
62. According to one passage (Zohar 1:226a), Zion, which is one of the designations of *Yesod*, is identified as the central point wherein the *Shekhinah* resides. It is not unreasonable to assume that the attribution of the symbol of the midpoint to the *Shekhinah* itself is related to a similar phallic posture. Cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 18, 36b. On the land of Israel, which is symbolic of the *Shekhinah*, as the midpoint, which corresponds to the supernal point, see Zohar 1:209b. On Jerusalem as the midpoint, see Zohar 2:184b; 3:171a. In the latter context, the point within Jerusalem is assigned the task of overflowing with water, an evident phallic function, which is compared to the mother who nurses her son. On the phallic connotation of breast-feeding, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 102, 108–109. The phallic implication of the symbol of the point attributed to the *Shekhinah* is also implied in the characterization of that attribute as the foundation stone that is the ground of all existence. Cf. Zohar 1:71b.

63. Wolfson *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 333–334. In his commentary on Ezekiel's chariot vision, *Sha'ar Yesod ha-Merkavah*, MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 283, fol. 169b, Moses de León refers to and elaborates on the relevant discussion in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*.
64. The erotic overtone of the kabbalistic understanding *hillul shabbat* is drawn explicitly in *Tiqunei Zohar*, sec. 21, 45b; sec. 30, 73b; sec. 36, 77b. On the explanation of the desecration of the Sabbath (*hillul shabbat*) in terms of allowing the demonic shell to enter the space of holiness, see *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 63b and 66d.
65. For references, see David Halperin, *The Faces of the Chariot: Early Jewish Responses to Ezekiel's Vision* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1988), p. 404; and Wolfson, *Along the Path*, p. 118 n. 48.
66. Zohar 3:250b.
67. This zoharic understanding of the condensation of the point, which results from the feminine attribute of judgment, played a critical role in certain versions of the Lurianic doctrine of *tsimtsum*, the primordial withdrawal of divine light, which occurs in the central point of the vacated circular space. Cf. *Ets Hayyim*, 1:2, 11c; *Mavo She'arim* (Jerusalem, 1904), 1b–c. As Vital makes clear, especially in the latter context, the midpoint of the Infinite is the potency of the root of judgment, which is disclosed at a subsequent stage of the emanative process. See Yoram Jacobson, "Moses Hayim Luzzatto's Doctrine of Divine Guidance and Its Relation to His Kabbalistic Teachings," *Italia Judaica: Atti del III Convegno internazionale* (Rome: Ministero per i beni culturali e ambientali, 1989), p. 43 n. 96 (Hebrew); idem, "The Aspect of the 'Feminine' in the Lurianic Kabbalah," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism: 50 Years After*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), p. 246.
68. The zoharic idea of the compression of the feminine into a point as a necessary condition for sexual union with the male is related to the notion explicitly stated in the rabbinic literature (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 22b) that intercourse transforms the woman into a vessel. That is, from the kabbalistic vantage point, the image of a vessel conveys the sense of limitation and containment, characteristics associated with the feminine potency of judgment. The punctiform nature of the feminine symbolizes the opening of the external orifice of the vagina, which transforms the woman from a closed virgin to an open vessel ready to receive the seminal drops of the male. Cf. *Ets Hayyim*, 39:10, 74d–75b. According to another symbolic interpretation, the aspect of the point attributed to *Malkhut*, which is compared to a *yod* insofar as it comprises the ten potencies, is identified with the rib or side of Adam whence the feminine is constructed. See *Sha'ar ha-Pesuqim* (Jerusalem, 1912), 4b; *Liqqutei Torah* (Jerusalem, 1978), p. 11. See, by contrast, *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 70a: "The intent of [the prayer] 'You have sanctified [the seventh day]' ... It is known that on the eve of Sabbath the aspect of the consciousness (*moḥin*) for *Malkhut* is produced. And it is known that every aspect of the consciousness is from the side of *Hokhmah*, which is called 'holy' (*qodesh*). This is the import of what is said 'You have sanctified the seventh day' (*attah qiddashta et yom ha-shevi'i*). Regarding the matter of the standing prayer (*amidah*) of the evening service, you should have in mind that up to now *Malkhut* was the aspect of a small point beneath *Yesod*, face-to-face. Now she has grown and she has become a countenance (*partsuf*) in all the length of *Netsah*, *Hod*, and *Yesod* of *Ze'ir Anpin*, which disappeared, stood up, and ascended above together with the middle three [gradations] of *Ze'ir Anpin*. It follows that the

- goal of this standing prayer is for the sake of unifying Rachel and Jacob.” A similar explanation is offered in *Peri Ets Hayyim* (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 395.
69. The kabbalistic understanding of Sabbath on this score was well understood (intentionally or not) by Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), pp. 310–315, 420. The affinity of Rosenzweig’s understanding of Sabbath and the view developed in kabbalistic sources is briefly noted by Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, p. 161 n. 140, and discussed more extensively in Elliot R. Wolfson, “Facing the Effaced: Mystical Eschatology and the Idealistic Orientation in the Thought of Franz Rosenzweig,” *Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, 4, 1997, pp. 56–57, 68–70.
 70. *Sha’ar Ma’amerei Rashbi*, 19b.
 71. In *Liqqutei Torah*, p. 20, Vital describes the sin of Adam in terms of the “male changing into a female,” *ha-zakhar nehepakkh le-nuqba*.
 72. Zohar 2:88a–b.
 73. As already noted by Meroz, “Redemption,” p. 119 n. 69.
 74. *Sha’ar Ma’amerei Rashbi*, 18b.
 75. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 51a; Shabbat 118a.
 76. *Sha’ar Ma’amerei Rashbi*, 18b–c.
 77. *Sha’ar ha-Kawwanot*, 24b.
 78. For a fuller discussion of this motif, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 110–116.
 79. See Yehuda Liebes, “‘Two Young Roes of a Doe’: The Secret Sermon of Isaac Luria Before His Death,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 10, 1992, pp. 124–125 (Hebrew).
 80. Cf. Zohar 1:257a. That Jer. 31:21 symbolically implies for the kabbalist the masculinization of the feminine is made clear in the following remark of Moses de León, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 60: “The supernal world [*Binah*] is indeed the secret of the king to whom peace belongs [Babylonian Talmud, Shavu’ot 35b], and this peace [*Yesod*] is the cause of the ‘woman encircling the man,’ through his cause and his matter. In fact, she [*Binah*] is feminine and all of her limbs are in this status except when peace is aroused and he transforms all the limbs to be masculine on account of his cause. It is known to the enlightened that this is the holy covenant (*berit qodesh*.)” The feminine *Binah* is thus masculinized on account of the phallic *Yesod*, a process that is linked exegetically to the biblical locution of the woman encircling the man. This posture signifies that the female has assumed the ontic status of the male. The meaning of de León’s statement is made clear from a parallel remark in the untitled fragment of one of his works extant in MS Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 47, fol. 366a (concerning this work see Gershom Scholem, “Eine unbekannte mystische Schrift des Mose de Leon,” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 71, 1927, pp. 109–123): “The secret of his existence from *Hokhmah* and below is not discernible or revealed except when existence rises from the supernal world [*Binah*], which is the jubilee, and this is the secret of ‘a woman shall encircle a man,’ inasmuch as the supernal world is the origin of life for everything, the source of the rivers that come forth like a woman who produces fruit according to its species. However, she encircles the man through the power of the cause of the one righteous being [*Yesod*] who stands beneath her. For you shall find that all of the limbs are in the status of the feminine until the covenant comes, which is a limb that is singular and unique, and it transforms all the limbs into being male. According to this secret, the supernal world [*Binah*] is ‘a woman that encircles a man,’ and the lower world [*Malkhut*] is the

female that stands in perpetual femininity (*naqvut olamit*), for by no means is she ever transformed into a male.” The last comment, that the lower world or *Malkhut* is the feminine that is not transformed into a male, is contradicted by other passages in the Zohar and the Hebrew writings of de León wherein a gender transformation is clearly attributed to this divine gradation, indeed, in emulation of the supernal world or *Binah*. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 98–106. The passage from the untitled fragment of de León has been recently cited by Charles Mopsik, *Le Sicle du Sanctuaire: Chéqel ha-Qodech* (Paris: Verdier, 1996), pp. 174–175 n. 462 (the author inadvertently gave the source as fol. 366b, which should be corrected to fol. 366a). Instead of embracing the paradigm of a gender transformation of the female into male, Mopsik refers to *Binah* as “la sefira féminine qui possède un membre masculin.” However, it makes sense to speak of a female with a penis only if we posit a masculinization of the feminine. In other kabbalistic sources (including works of de León), Jer. 31:21 is applied to the relationship of *Binah* to *Hokhmah*. For a selective list of references, see Wolfson, *Along the Path*, p. 182 n. 353. See also Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, ed. Gershom Scholem, *Qovets al Yad*, 8, 1976, p. 332.

81. *Midrash Tehillim* 73:4, 168a.
82. *Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi*, 5a–b.
83. The phallic connotation of the crown in zoharic literature (as well as other kabbalistic texts that draw upon a similar symbology) is underscored by the fact that the verbal form “to be crowned” is used to denote sexual intercourse or the union that ensues from such intercourse. Cf. Zohar 1:50a, 153b, 172b; 2:58a, 261a; 3:4b, 25a–b, 96b, 98a. This particular usage is related to a more general connotation of this phrase to refer to a unitive experience of the soul and a divine attribute. Cf. Zohar 1:80a, 84a, 110b (*Sitrei Torah*), 119b, 144b, 163b, 194b, 197a, 206a; 2:97b, 205a, 216a, 244a, 245a, 253b; 3:34b, 81a, 89b, 111b (*Piqqudin*), 150b, 264b, 269b; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 21, 56a. On the use of the image of the crown to denote mystical union, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 284, 357–368. The kabbalistic symbolism of the crown is related to the metaphorical use of this symbol to denote the contemplative ideal of intellectual conjunction (*devequt*). For a recent discussion of this motif, see Adena Tanenbaum, “The Adornment of the Soul: A Philosophical Motif in Andalusian *Piyyut*,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 66, 1995, pp. 236–238.
84. This is another example of the larger phenomenon that characterizes much of the kabbalistic literature: the ascetic impulse is rooted in erotic desire. This confluence of asceticism and eroticism is prevalent in many religious cultures, as a variety of scholars have noted. Here I mention a few exemplary studies that explore this nexus: Georges Bataille, *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and the Taboo* (New York: Walker, 1962); Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973); Annemarie Schimmel, “Eros – Heavenly and Not So Heavenly – in Sufi Literature and Life,” in *Society and the Sexes in Medieval Islam*, ed. Afaf Lufti al-Sayyid-Marsot (Malibu: Undena, 1979), pp. 119–141; Julius Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love: The Metaphysics of Sex* (New York: Inner Traditions, 1983); Bernard McGinn, “The Language of Love in Christian and Jewish Mysticism,” in *Mysticism and Language*, ed. Steven Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 202–235; and, most recently, Jeffrey Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995).
85. This title is used to refer to those passages that begin with the idiom, *ta hazei*, “come and see.” See Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 387 n. 33; idem, *Kabbalah*,

- pp. 217–218. It is possible that these textual units were composed by the anonymous author of *Ra'aya Meheimna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*. Compare the view of Cordovero cited in *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), p. 1032. Scholem supports Cordovero's opinion by reference to MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 204.
86. Zohar 1:257a.
 87. Similar language appears in Isaac of Acre, *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 2, translated in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 359.
 88. *Heikkhal ha-Shem*, 30a.
 89. *Arba Me'ot Sheqel Kesef* (Cracow, 1886), 27c–d.
 90. Such a criticism against my interpretation of the symbol of the crown has been made by Colette Sirat in her review of *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* published in *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale*, 39, 1996, p. 169. Sirat's claim that in the Middle Ages the crown was "more a symbol of power than of sexuality" completely neglects the preponderance of textual evidence that I cite to show that the term *aṭarah*, "crown," is applied more specifically to the corona of the penis. Her charge that my reading is skewed by a Freudian perspective and current feminist criticism rings hollow in the face of the texts themselves. Moreover, as I have indicated above (see note 83), in zoharic literature, the predicate "crowning" is sometimes used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse, a usage clearly related to the fact that the crown stands for the corona of the male organ.
 91. *Pardes Rimmonim* 16, 34a, s.v. *aṭarah*.
 92. By contrast, in the parallel passage in the unpublished section of *Elimah Rabbati*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 2174, fol. 61b, the phallic implication of the attribution of the term *aṭarah* to the *Shekhhinah* is made explicitly: "*Malkhut* is called *aṭarah*, and she is not called in this way except when she ascends to *Keter*, and from there she is a crown on the head of her husband, a glorious crown (*aṭeret tiferet*). Similarly, [she is the] crown on the Torah scroll, and the crown on the head of every righteous man, that is, the corona on the phallus (*aṭarah al yesod*). These aspects are in the aspect of the *yod* that is in her, and from the side of the aspect of *Keter* she is the crown (*aṭarah*)."
 93. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 19–20.
 94. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 17a.
 95. Babylonian Talmud, Menahot 29b.
 96. *Pardes Rimmonim* 27:10, 61d–62a.
 97. Occasionally, Cordovero does emphasize that the feminine *Malkhut* assumes a higher ontic status than the masculine when she rises to the status of the crown on the head of the male. See, for example, *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1973), 2:1: "The highest [of all levels] is that she becomes the 'crown of her husband' (*aṭeret ba'lah*), for [in] this [aspect] she is certainly above him and he draws from her, and she is made into a crown for his head." On the elevation of *Malkhut* to *Abba*, that is, *Ḥokhmah*, whence she is bound to *Keter*, see *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1987), 15:236. In that context, three elevations are attributed to *Malkhut*: the first involves her ascent to the bosom of *Tiferet*, which elevates her above *Netsah* and *Hod*; the second entails her ascent to the status of a "capable wife who is a crown for her husband" (Prov. 12:4), which is depicted as the *yod* on top of the *waw*; and the third relates to her ascent to *Ḥokhmah*, which binds her to *Keter*.

98. This motif is repeated on a number of occasions in the later strata of zoharic literature. See Zohar 2:158a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 16a; sec. 10, 24b; sec. 13, 27b; sec. 19, 41a; sec. 21, 44b, 62b.
99. Regarding this imagery in the later strata of the Zohar, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Images of God's Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism," in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 161–162.
100. *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1986), 14:109.
101. See Zohar 1:132b, 133a, 156b (*Sitrei Torah*), 246a; 2:183a; 3:97b (*Piqqudin*), 120b, 261b, 284b; Wolfson *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 79; idem, *Along the Path*, p. 240 n. 108.
102. Cordovero's comment reflects the particular formulation in Zohar 3:169b: "As the angel of the Lord stood by' (Zech. 3:5). What is [the meaning of] 'stood by?' This is the crown that is called the angel of the Lord, and it stands on the heads of the righteous."
103. "Sefer ha-Mishkal," p. 115, previously cited in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, p. 275 n. 14. In this connection, it is of interest to note the comment of Jacob Emden, *Siddur Amudei Shamayim* (Altona, 1745), 339b: "One says silently 'Come forth, O bride, the Sabbath queen' (*bo'i khallah shabbat ha-malkah*), for it is in the secret of *Da'at*, which unifies them. At first when she prepares herself to enter she is called the 'bride' (*kallah*), but when she enters the nuptial chamber and she is united [with the male] she is called the 'queen' (*ha-malkah*)." The transition from bride to queen noted by Emden parallels the distinction I have drawn between bride and crown. On the transformation of the feminine (*neqevah*) to the bride (*kallah*) through the agency of the male, see *Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot*, 65a.
104. Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant."
105. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 3:252.
106. *Shevah Imrei Hen* (Jerusalem, 1987), p. 19. A similar explanation can be found in Jacob Koppel Lifschuetz, *Siddur Qol Ya'akov* (Slavuta, 1804), Kawwanat Shabbat, 11a: "'Come in peace, crown of her husband.' This verse is speaking about the additional soul that is received now in the field according to the secret of the supplementary Sabbath. It comes from *Malkhut*, which is called 'glorious crown' (*ateret tiferet*), and everything is through *Yesod*, which illuminates her. And this is [the meaning of] 'come in peace,' the secret of *Yesod*, which is the secret of the domestic welfare (*shelom bayit*), the soul that comes forth from *Malkhut*, which is called 'crown of her husband' (*ateret ba'lah*)."
107. The coronation of the *Shekhinah* as an intrinsic feature of the Sabbath is emphasized in other kabbalistic sources wherein it is clear that a phallic transformation is implied by this act of crowning. For example, see the following description of the *Shekhinah* in the hymn *el mistatter be-shafirir hevyon*, composed by Abraham Maimin, in Abraham Abba, *Emunat Avraham al Zemiroi Shabbat Qodesh* (Eshdod, 1996), p. 59: *na haqem malkhut david u-shelomo ba-atarah she-itte'rah lo immo keneset yisra'el kallah qeru'ah vi-ne'imah ateret tiferet be-yad y'hw'w*. Significantly, in several places in his hymn *azammer bi-shevahim*, Luria describes the condition of *Malkhut* on Friday evening in terms of the imagery of being crowned from the masculine potency.

6 Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the Zohar

The construction of history is dependent on the memory of the past, but a memory that is always selective and malleable. Forgetfulness is thus itself an integral component of memory, for what is remembered is only remembered against the background of what is forgotten. Collective memory, no less than individual memory, is shaped as much by what is forgotten as by what is remembered. As Patrick Geary recently expressed it, “All memory, whether ‘individual,’ ‘collective,’ or ‘historical,’ is memory *for* something, and this political (in a broad sense) purpose cannot be ignored.”¹ This political dimension of memory points to the essential role played by forgetfulness as one of the conditions that determines the attainment of historical truth.²

Historians who seek to write about cultural memory and the identity of the Jewish people in the Middle Ages must confront the fact that the principal (if not exclusive)³ documents at our disposal were produced by elitist rabbinic groups that defined themselves in terms of particular interpretations of a given corpus of textual material. These rabbinic circles were, to borrow the technical term employed by Brian Stock, “textual communities,” for they “demonstrated a parallel use of texts, both to structure the internal behaviour of the groups’ members and to provide solidarity against the outside world.”⁴ The project of the construction of identity carried out by these communities in the Middle Ages was compounded by the fact that they had to evaluate the existential condition of the Jew vis-à-vis the other, primarily the Christian or the Muslim.⁵ While one would be wise to avoid overemphasizing the anxiety of the other on the shaping of Jewish identity in medieval Europe, it is no exaggeration to say that the task of self-definition for the Jew in the Middle Ages

(at least as articulated by the relatively small groups of literati) was carried out over and against another dominant religion. The theological, the social, and the political are inseparable aspects of a singular phenomenon. Moreover, in the eschatologically charged milieu of Christendom in the High Middle Ages, the shaping of identity could not be isolated from the issue of messianic redemption – that is, a primary concern of the religious leaders engaged in polemical confrontation with respect to the identification of the devout Jew or faithful Christian had to do with the belief in who was the true Messiah, and when the messianic age did or would arrive.⁶ Holy crusades against infidels, forced conversions, willful acts of apostasy, and public disputations were different ways of expressing in the social sphere the eschatological zeal and theological intolerance that prevailed in medieval Christianity.

In this study, I will focus on the role of memory and forgetfulness in the construction of historical time according to the complex symbolic hermeneutics of *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the “Book of Splendor.” The pervasive assumption in critical Jewish historiography that this pseudepigraphic work was composed by one individual, Moses ben Shem Ṭov de León, has recently been called into question,⁷ but little evidence has been marshaled heretofore to doubt that most of the composition and redaction of this book took place in Castile in the second half of the thirteenth century.⁸ Beyond the obvious importance of this text to the study of Jewish esotericism, the Zohar is a profoundly significant historical document, for, as Yitzhak Baer long ago commented, a “real-life setting is clearly discernible” through the “mystic haze shrouding it.” Baer thus concluded that the zoharic tales “are not figments of the imagination, invented to provide a frame for the discussions and teachings of the ancient sages,” but are reflections of the “contemporary scene.”⁹ Of the various examples adduced by Baer, perhaps the most intriguing is his analysis of the passage in the Zohar concerning the water clock that was used to awaken R. Abba and R. Jacob at midnight so that they could study Torah.¹⁰ On the basis of the historical fact that Isaac of Toledo devised a water clock at the behest of Alfonso X, Baer conjectured that the narrative in the Zohar is not “pure fiction” and that the deeds ascribed to the mystical fraternity (specifically rising at midnight to study) were “part of a real Jewish experience in Spain.”¹¹

In a similar vein, but with a somewhat different emphasis, Scholem remarked that, in the Zohar, Moses de León “reflects the actual religious situation, and expounds it through kabbalistic interpretation.”¹² What Scholem had in mind is that the social realia of thirteenth-century Spain are reflected in the Zohar,¹³ but he did not address the possibility of an actual group of kabbalists whose mystical lifestyles are personified by the imaginary fellowship (*ḥavrayya*) of the zoharic text, a position that I think is adumbrated in the remarks of Baer.¹⁴ Thus, in the continuation of the aforementioned passage, Scholem concludes that Moses de León “clothed his interpretation of Judaism in an archaic garb.” The interpretation is attributed to the one individual, Moses de León, and no reference is made to a kabbalistic “fraternity” in the manner that the term is being used in contemporary scholarship. The current trend (of which I am an advocate)¹⁵ to see in the fictional fellowship of the Zohar a reflection of an actual group of mystics involved in communal study, visual meditation, and contemplative worship is a further elaboration of the earlier position rather than a radical and revolutionary break. With respect to this issue, as with respect to most scholarly issues, advancement in knowledge comes by way of a dialectical engagement with the past: seeing beyond is not seeing against¹⁶ but seeing further down a pathway of thought opened up by one’s predecessor.

Samael, the Serpent, and the Mythic Grounding of the Jewish–Christian Polemic

Behind the fictional debates and discourses recorded in the Zohar can be discerned various kabbalistic positions, which converged in this period and geographical region, regarding the nature of the Jews and their relationship to God and to the world. Much of the exegesis of Scripture in the Zohar revolves around the question of identity and self-definition vis-à-vis the other. The attitude toward Christianity and Islam that emerges from the Zohar has been examined by several scholars.¹⁷ The particular concerns of this study deal exclusively with the former.¹⁸ In great measure, my analysis of memory, forgetfulness, and the construction of history in the Zohar should be viewed as a chapter in medieval Jewish–Christian polemics, coming precisely at

the time when the writing of polemical literature by Jews against Christians reached its peak in response to the intensive wave of Christian missionizing in the thirteenth century. The impetus for the writing of polemical treatises by Jews was not to convert Christians, but to retrieve former coreligionists who had abandoned the covenant, and some of whom had themselves written disputations against the Jews.¹⁹ It has been noted in the scholarly literature that the zoharic authorship had a complex and ambiguous relationship to Christianity: conscious appropriation of principal theological and eschatological doctrines, on the one hand, and categorical rejection and demonization, on the other. Christianity is portrayed as the socially abhorrent political force that causes Israel to suffer, and that incessantly attempts to lure her onto the path of heresy and licentiousness. According to the symbolism of the Zohar, Christians are the embodiment of demonic impurity in the world.²⁰

The point is driven home succinctly in the zoharic exegesis of the words, “Your kinsmen who hate you, who spurn you because of Me” (Isa. 66:5). The “kinsmen” are identified as the “children of Esau,” in other words, the Christians,²¹ “for there is no nation that mocks Israel to their face and who spit in their faces like the children of Edom, and it is said that they are all impure like a menstruous woman (*niddah*), and this is [the import of the expression] ‘who spurn you’ (*menaddekhem*).”²² The metaphorical comparison of the children of Edom to a *niddah*, based on the biblical idiom *menaddekhem*, discloses an essential dimension of the zoharic understanding of the ontological impurity of Christianity.²³ The spiritual attraction of the Church is comparable to seduction of the woman during her menstrual period when intercourse is forbidden. Going beyond the normative halakhic restriction against sexual relations with a menstruating woman,²⁴ the author of the Zohar, in conformity with the symbology adopted by other kabbalistic authors of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries,²⁵ associated the blood of menstruation with the demonic potency.²⁶ In one particularly noteworthy passage, the Zohar delineates intercourse with a menstruous woman as one of three acts that drive the *Shekhinah* away from the world, the other two being intercourse with a Christian woman, literally, “the daughter of an alien god” (based on Mal. 2:11) – that is, the god of estrangement or the demonic Other Side²⁷ – and killing one’s own children by aborting a fetus in the womb.²⁸ In this context,

then, sexual intercourse with a menstruous woman is distinguished from sexual intercourse with a Christian woman, but the two are linked together because both acts involve the insertion of the holy covenant inscribed upon the circumcised penis into an unholy space. Introducing this passage, Baer remarked that the Zohar “inveighs against lewd practices which were apparently common among the urbane aristocracy of its day.”²⁹ What is important from my perspective is the manner in which that social critique is expressed, for this alone allows one access to the life world constructed by the imagination of the kabbalists who belonged to the mystical brotherhood in Castile. Following the view of a number of medieval halakhic authorities, the zoharic authorship maintained that Christianity is idolatry.³⁰ Thus, for example, in one context, it is deduced exegetically from the verse, “For you must not worship any other god, because the Lord, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God” (Exod. 34:14), that he who worships Esau is as if he has worshiped the alien god.³¹ Insofar as the mishnaic ruling (Shabbat 8:1) ascribed to idolatry the same status of impurity as menstruation, it was an easy step for the thirteenth-century kabbalists to equate Christianity and menstruation. Fornication with a Christian woman has the same effect as sexual intercourse with one’s wife during her menstrual period: the holy covenant is defiled and the offspring of such a union partakes ontologically of the impure spirit.³² In gender terms, this defilement can be seen as the feminization of the masculine Jew. Promiscuous sexual behavior and idolatrous religious practices were thus understood as forms of seduction by the serpentine force of feminine impurity.³³

The unholiness of the theological doctrine propounded by the Church is akin to the blood of menstruation, that is, the impure and unmitigated force of judgment. The nexus between Christianity and menstrual impurity is deepened in another passage in the Zohar, according to which the menstruant is associated with magic. According to that text, the rationale for the biblical injunction against physical contact with a menstruant is that during this time the “spirit of impurity is conjoined to her” and “she is prone to carry out acts of sorcery more than at other times.”³⁴ In that context, moreover, mention is made of Balaam, the prototype of the Gentile prophet and sorcerer. It is likely that the figure of Balaam is employed by the author of the Zohar to represent Jesus, a point that is suggested by the

comparison that is made (based on a midrashic reading of Deut. 34:10)³⁵ between Moses and Balaam: just as no prophet exceeded the former with respect to the holy powers, so no prophet exceeded the latter with respect to the unholy powers.³⁶ The linkage of Jesus (or Christianity more generally) and magical practices is a well-attested polemical motif,³⁷ and it is clear that the zoharic authorship is continuing this longstanding tradition in its representation of Jesus as the chief wizard of satanic power.

The spiritual force of the Christian faith, therefore, is magic, which is correlated with the impurity of menstruation. Thus, according to another zoharic passage, physical contact with the menstruant causes a blemish above for, by this action, one arouses the “potent serpent” (*hivya taqqifa*) that casts its filth upon the *Shekhinah* and thereby separates the masculine and feminine potencies in the Godhead. Sexual intercourse with a menstruant is a reenactment of the primordial sin in which the serpent inseminated Eve, which corresponds above to the defilement of the *Shekhinah* by the demonic power, a point related to the verse, “for he has defiled the Lord’s sanctuary” (Num. 19:20).³⁸ Underlying the symbolic discourse, however, is an important assumption by the author of the Zohar about the historical process. Insofar as the image of the serpent is associated with Esau (a point to which I shall return momentarily), it follows that when a male Jew cohabits with a menstruating woman, he causes the supernal force of Esau to have dominion over the *Shekhinah*. This particular textual example illustrates a larger point: the polemic against Christianity in zoharic literature is cast specifically in terms of the issues of gender, sexuality, and embodiment.³⁹

The demonic depiction of Christianity is reinforced by the zoharic appropriation of the aggadic motif that Samael is the guardian angel of Esau or Edom.⁴⁰ A striking example of this orientation is found in the zoharic reflections on the description in Genesis 25:22–26 of the gestation and birth of Esau and Jacob. The prenatal struggle of the twins in the womb is explained ontologically: Esau is the “aspect that rides the serpent,”⁴¹ an expression that calls to mind the aggadic image of Samael riding upon the serpent that appeared in the shape of a camel,⁴² and Jacob is the “aspect that sits upon the holy and perfect throne in the aspect of the sun that cohabitates with the moon.”⁴³ Esau is the male demonic power (Samael) united with the female serpent in a way that parallels

Jacob's unification with the throne, which is the symbolic depiction of the unity of the masculine *Tif'eret* and the feminine *Malkhut*, also represented by the sun and the moon. In the continuation of this passage, Esau is identified more specifically with the evil serpent (*hivya bisha*) who is the most cunning of all the beasts.⁴⁴ The vexing exegetical problem of Jacob's apparent deceptiveness with respect to purchasing the birthright from Esau, a point exploited by Christian polemicists against the Jews,⁴⁵ is explained by the Zohar in terms of these ontological correspondences: in order to keep the demonic power of the serpent apart from the side of holiness, it was necessary for Jacob to act deceptively.⁴⁶ "Thus, all the actions of Jacob, who is in the secret of faith, with respect to Esau were not to give a place to that serpent to desecrate the sanctuary, not to come close to it, and not to rule in the world."⁴⁷

The cunning of Jacob, therefore, is justified by its theological significance: to keep separate the realms of the demonic and the holy. From another passage in the Zohar, it is evident that this act has a redemptive quality; indeed, Jacob is portrayed as rectifying the sin of Adam and Eve brought about through Samael and the serpent. Presented with two explanations of the serpent in the biblical narrative, the view of R. Isaac that the serpent refers symbolically to the evil inclination and the view of R. Judah that the serpent is literally a serpent, R. Simeon ben Yoḥai asserts that both explanations are correct. Appropriating the aggadic motif briefly mentioned above, the author of the Zohar claims that Samael appeared on the serpent, which is the image of Satan. Samael's destruction of the "primordial tree" that God created, which resulted in bringing death to the world, was not rectified until Jacob, identified symbolically as the "holy tree" (*ilana qaddisha*) and as the "form of Adam" (*dugma de-adam*),⁴⁸ came and took the blessings from Esau so that neither Samael above nor his likeness below would be blessed. The soteriological justification for Jacob's action is thus based on the legal principle of measure for measure: just as Samael prevented the blessings from the primordial tree, so Jacob blocked the blessings from Esau.⁴⁹ In another passage, the Zohar again contextualizes the biblical narrative in terms of the conflict between Judaism and Christianity, but in that setting there is an awareness of the historical situation of the Jew vis-à-vis the Christian in the Middle Ages. Jacob may have deceptively appropriated the blessings from Esau, but the descendants of the

former were still subservient to the descendants of the latter. The author of the Zohar reassures the reader that the true consequence of Jacob's action will only be disclosed in the messianic future, when Israel will be a unified nation in the world and will rule above and below.⁵⁰

The portrait of Jacob that may be drawn from this text is that of a second Adam who rectifies the sin of the first Adam brought about by the seduction of Samael and the serpent. Although the zoharic author utilized earlier rabbinic sources to express this notion of Jacob as Adam redivivus, including the idea that the beauty of Jacob was like that of Adam,⁵¹ the approach adopted by the Zohar is related more directly (albeit in a polemical way) to the Pauline typology of Adam and Jesus, which had a great impact on the history of Christian theology.⁵² For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus brings salvation to the world, for through this act of divine grace the punishment of death incurred by humanity as a result of the fall is overcome. Jesus is thus the "last Adam" (ἔσχατος Ἀδὰμ), who rectifies the sin of the "first Adam" (πρῶτος Ἀδὰμ): through the first Adam, the "natural body" (σῶμα φυσικόν) of creation, all humans are physically born and die, whereas through the final Adam, the "spiritual body" (σῶμα πνευματικόν) of the eschaton,⁵³ all humans are spiritually reborn and redeemed.⁵⁴ Jesus, the eschatological Adam, is the father of a new humanity "freed from the tyranny of sin and death," for in him the "essential oneness of humankind" is reconstituted as a "spiritual community," (i.e. the Church), which is symbolically depicted as the "body of Christ" (το σῶμα του Χριστου).⁵⁵

For the author of the Zohar, it is not Jesus but Jacob who restores the world to its original ontic condition. Moreover, the culpability for the sin is somewhat removed from Adam and placed more squarely on Samael.⁵⁶ The positive valorization of Adam is upheld by the fact that Jacob is depicted as having the form and beauty of Adam. Hence, what Jacob rectifies is not the fallen nature of Adam but the usurpation of Samael. This is the import of the zoharic statement that the act of destroying the "primordial tree" (*ilana qadma'ah*), that is, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, "was hanging on Samael until another holy tree (*ilana ahra qaddisha*), that is, Jacob, came and took from him the blessings so that Samael above and Esau below would not be blessed." The seemingly deceitful ruse of Jacob is justified by the fact that it mends the rupture in the

cosmic order created by the sinful act of Samael. By linking the satanic force and Esau, the zoharic authorship cleverly undermines the Pauline interpretation of the Genesis narrative: not only is Jesus not the second Adam who restores the pristine divine image to humanity, but the religion of Jesus is the earthly manifestation of the very force that desecrated that image. A further decoding of the Kabbalistic symbolism underlying the designation of Jacob as “another holy tree” brings the anti-Christological polemic into even sharper focus: Jacob symbolizes the attribute of *Tiferet*, which corresponds to the tree of life and the Written Torah. The point of the passage, therefore, is that the way of the law, the Torah, is the antidote to counterbalance the satanic effect of the primordial serpent, identified as Esau, a cipher for Western Christendom.

Reversing the Christian myth, Jacob-Israel, and not Jesus, is the tree of life that bears the fruit of salvation, which replaces the fruit of the tree of knowledge through which sin came into the world.⁵⁷ The eschatological aspiration of the Zohar, therefore, can be seen in terms of the overcoming of Esau.⁵⁸ This conception of salvation history is exemplified in the following description of the messianic era: “The tree of life will emit the vital force that will never cease, for it has ceased now on account of the fact that the evil serpent rules and the moon is hidden ... At that time that evil inclination, which is the evil spirit, will vanish from the world ... and after it is removed from the world the moon is not hidden and the wellsprings of the river that flows and issues forth will not cease.”⁵⁹ In this context, attested in other passages as well,⁶⁰ the tree of life symbolizes *Yesod*, which corresponds to the divine phallus, the center of the creative energy, also depicted by the symbol of the river. In the messianic age, the vital force will flow incessantly from this source because the obstructing force of the evil serpent will be obliterated.⁶¹ This phallic restitution also effects the feminine aspect of the divine, for in the condition of exile, the domination of the serpent causes the *Shekhinah*, symbolized by the moon, to be concealed. According to another passage, the concealment of the moon is the symbolic import of the description of the emergence of Jacob from Rebekah’s womb holding onto the heel of Esau (Gen. 25:26).⁶² The (temporarily) subservient position of Jacob vis-à-vis Esau is also related to the scriptural claim that the kings of Edom reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites (Gen. 36:31).⁶³ In the period of history before the

advent of the Messiah, the force of Esau, or Christendom, rules over Israel, and the moon, which is symbolic of the *Shekhinah* or the power of Israel, is hidden. But when the efficacy of the demonic serpent is overcome by the rectification of the holy phallus, the “river that flows and issues forth,” the moon is no longer hidden.⁶⁴

From the point of view of the zoharic authorship, the ontological opposition of the two faiths is alluded to in the very narrative of creation. The primordial darkness (*hoshekh*), associated with chaos (*tohu*) and symbolized by the shell (*qelippah*) of the nut, is identified as the force whence Edom derives,⁶⁵ whereas Jacob is rooted ontically in the spirit of God (*ruah elohim*), symbolized by the kernel (*moḥa*) of the nut.⁶⁶ According to another passage, Israel is identified as the “supernal holy core” and the idolatrous nations as the shell.⁶⁷ The botanical image of the shell preceding the core is supported exegetically by the verse concerning the rule of the Edomite kings before the kings of Israel.⁶⁸ The citation of this verse, moreover, makes it clear that the “idolatrous nations” refers to the Christians. Precisely, this symbolism underlies another image employed by Moses de León: the “other god” is the demonic foreskin that surrounds the holy corona of the phallus in the manner that the shell surrounds the core of the nut.⁶⁹ All of these images allude to the mystery that the demonic powers emanate before the holy ones, even though the latter have ontological priority and in the end will prevail.⁷⁰

The theological struggle with Christianity is treated in the Zohar in overtly erotic terms. The key to understanding the meshing of the spiritual and the sexual in this matter is the symbol of the serpent. There are passages in the Zohar wherein the serpent symbolizes the feminine dimension of the demonic, the seductive Lilith who tempts men and appears in the image of a whore. In other contexts, the serpent mythically represents the demonic force in general without any gender specification, although in relation to the divine, the demonic is gendered as feminine in kabbalistic ontology. In other zoharic texts, the serpent depicts the demonic male whose phallic drive is directed toward penetrating the sacred space of the divine feminine, the *Shekhinah*, an idea that is expressed in terms of the aggadic motif⁷¹ of the primordial serpent inseminating Eve.⁷² It is evident, as Tishby has noted,⁷³ that the serpent, whether male or female, symbolizes the demonic sexual force. What Tishby neglected to mention is the obvious point that the mythical image of the serpent is

symbolic of the phallus. But it is precisely this association that allows one to resolve the apparent contradictions in the Zohar with respect to the gender of the serpent. That is, both on the side of holiness and on the side of impurity the phallus, like the serpent, is androgynous.⁷⁴ However, there is an essential difference between the androgyny of the holy phallus (manifest in the ninth and tenth gradations, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*) and that of the demonic phallus (represented by Samael and Lilith). In the case of the former, the female is ontically rooted in the male, whereas in the latter, the male is an aspect of the female. The shift in the gender polarity is underscored in the following zoharic reflection on Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons:

He began to speak and he said: "Who are these" (*mi elleh*) (Gen. 48:8)? One may infer that he was speaking about worship from the side of idolatry [as it says] "This is your god, O Israel" (*elleh elohekha yisra'el*) (Exod. 32:4). Rather it is a secret: When all the aspects of that evil serpent, the serpent that comes from the side of the impure spirit, and the one who rides upon it are united, they are called "these" (*elleh*) ... The Holy Spirit is called "this" (*z'ot*), and it is the secret of the holy, inscribed covenant that is always found on men.⁷⁵ And this [is the import of] "This is my God and I will glorify Him" (*zeh eli we-anvehu*) (ibid. 15:3), and "This is the Lord" (*zeh yhwh*) (Isa. 25:9). But these [demonic forces] are called *elleh*, and thus it is written, "This is your god, O Israel." And for this reason it is written, "Though she might forget these" (*gam elleh tishkaḥnah*), but "I," the secret of *anokhi*, "never could forget you" (*we-anokhi lo eshkaḥekh*) (ibid. 49:15).⁷⁶

The androgyne on the demonic side, portrayed by Samael and the serpent upon whom he rides, is parallel to the androgyne on the holy side, symbolized by the holy covenant that is inscribed on the phallus. Thus, the plural *elleh* connotes the union in the unholy realm that is comparable to the conjunction of *zeh* and *z'ot*, which signifies the union in the holy realm. But there is a major difference between the two: the union of the male and the female in the demonic realm results in the manifestation of the latter in the guise of the former – that is, Samael riding upon the serpent is an actualization of the force of judgment – whereas the union in the divine realm is symbolized by

the integration of the feminine *Shekhinah*, referred to as the Holy Spirit, into an aspect of the holy covenant. In his marginal notes to a parallel to this passage in another zoharic context,⁷⁷ Ḥayyim Vital correctly explained that the statement that the Holy Spirit is in the “mystery of the holy, inscribed covenant” refers to *aṭarah* (i.e., the corona of the phallus). Indeed, how else could one interpret the zoharic claim? Note that the female aspect of the divine is not depicted here in terms that are generally associated with the feminine gender. On the contrary, the *Shekhinah* is identified specifically as part of the *membrum virile*, and precisely in that capacity does she correspond to the serpent upon whom Samael rides. The rectification of the sin of the serpent, *tiqqun ha-naḥash*, is through the sign of the covenant, *ot berit*, inscribed on the flesh of the male Jew. The exegesis of Isaiah 49:15 at the conclusion of the passage is particularly important, for by means of it, the zoharic author makes the point that forgetfulness is associated with the demonic powers and removed entirely from the *Shekhinah*, for she is the secret of the covenant of circumcision, the locus of corporeal memory.

The theme of circumcision thus plays a crucial part in the zoharic polemic with the Christian faith.⁷⁸ In clever exegetical fashion, the author of the Zohar turns the Pauline view regarding circumcision on its head.⁷⁹ Not only is the literal circumcision of the flesh not overcome by the spiritual circumcision of baptism, which is a reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ,⁸⁰ but through the physical rite the corporeal is spiritualized and the spiritual corporealized. In the final analysis, circumcision (*milah*) is the true incarnation of the divine word (*millah*) in the flesh. Hence, Abraham, and not Jesus, is the creative potency of the divine manifest in the world. The point is disclosed in a reading of the verse, “The blossoms have appeared in the land, the time of pruning⁸¹ has come, the song of the turtledove is heard in our land” (Song of Songs 2:12), which serves as the proem (*petiḥta*) to the zoharic exegesis of the epiphany of the three angels to Abraham after his circumcision at the beginning of the section *Wa-yera* (Gen. 18).⁸² I translate the part of the text that is most pertinent to the Jewish–Christian polemic:

“The song of the turtledove is heard in the land,” this is the word of the Holy One, blessed be He, which did not exist in the world until Adam was created. When Adam came into being,

everything existed. After Adam sinned, everything departed from the world and the earth was cursed, as it is written, “Cursed be the earth because of you” (Gen. 3:17), and it is written, “If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you” (ibid. 4:12), and it is written, “Thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you” (ibid. 3:18). Noah came and he crafted spades and hoes in the world,⁸³ and after that [it is written] “He drank of the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent” (Gen. 9:21). People of the world came and sinned before the Holy One, blessed be He, and the forces of the earth vanished as it was in the beginning. They remained like this until Abraham came, for when Abraham came to the world, immediately “the blossoms appeared in the land.” All the forces of the earth were rectified and they were revealed. “The time of pruning has come,” [this refers to] the time that the Holy One, blessed be He, told him to circumcise himself, for the time had come when the covenant should be found in Abraham and he circumcised himself. Then this verse was fulfilled in him, the world was established, and the word of the Holy One, blessed be He, was revealed through him, as it is written, “The Lord appeared to him” (ibid. 18:1).⁸⁴

The key to understanding this passage is the manner in which one interprets the expression “word of the Holy One, blessed be He,” *millah de-qudsha berikh hu*. I suggest that this is not simply a rhetorical trope to allude to the speech of God, but rather a technical reference to the hypostatic word of God. The divine word is first manifest in Adam, but it is fully revealed through Abraham after his circumcision. Implicit in this passage is a play on the words *millah*, “speech,” and *milah*, “circumcision.” The full disclosure of the former is only through the latter. By means of the bodily circumcision, moreover, reality is ontically grounded, and the rectification of the primordial sin of Adam and Eve is enacted. Although the word was first revealed through Adam, as a consequence of his sin there was a disruption in the cosmic order, mythically portrayed as the cursing of the earth. To understand the nature of that curse, which in turn illuminates the metaphysical nature of sin, it is necessary to decode the remark that as a result of Adam’s sin “everything departed from the world” (*kulla istaleq me-alma*); but in order to comprehend that

comment, it is necessary to ponder the preceding remark, “When Adam came into being, everything existed,” (*keivvan de-ishtakakh adam ishtakakh kulla*). In the above translation I rendered the word *kulla* in these two statements as “everything,” but this fails to capture the allusion to the divine emanation that is “the All” (in Hebrew *ha-kol*), a standard name in the theosophic kabbalistic symbolism (including that of the Zohar) for *Yesod*. It must also be stated that this particular designation has an obvious phallic connotation: *Yesod* is called *ha-kol* because it is the gradation that comprises all the other gradations in the same manner that the phallus was thought of as comprehending within itself all the other bodily parts.⁸⁵

Following this line of interpretation, the consequence of the sin of Adam was the removal of the (phallic) All from the earth, which led to the devastation of the latter. Only when Abraham was circumcised, and the word of God was fully manifest in the world through him, did the earth again become productive. The concluding comment in this opening sermon of the Zohar on Genesis 18:1 reiterates this very point in slightly different language: “Come and see: When Adam sinned, he sinned with respect to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as it is written, ‘but as for the tree of knowledge etc.’ (Gen. 2:17). He sinned with respect to it and he caused death for all human beings of the world. Thus it is written, ‘what if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever!’ (ibid. 3:22). When Abraham came, he rectified the world through the other tree, which is the tree of life, and he made known the faith to all people of the world.”⁸⁶ Circumcision thus retains the theological and soteriological significance denied it by Paul; indeed, it is through circumcision of the flesh, and not baptism or the belief in the resurrection, that one truly attains the “mystery of the faith” (*sod ha-emunah*).⁸⁷ From that perspective it may be said that by means of circumcision, Christianity itself is ultimately redeemed.

Memory, Masculinity, and the Secret of the Covenant

The zoharic reflections on memory and forgetfulness are based on the correlation of masculinity and memory related to the philological presumption regarding the link between *zakhar* and *zekher*.

Reflecting on this etymological connection in its biblical roots, Amos Funkenstein remarked that one should expect that within a patriarchal society, the male (*zakhar*) alone constitutes the memory (*zekher*) insofar as the idea of “nation,” “assembly,” or “community” is always exclusive of women.⁸⁸ Funkenstein interprets the philological connection of *zakhar* and *zekher* in light of his understanding of the interplay and interconnectedness of collective and individual memory, namely, the individual’s act of personal remembering is an instantiation of a system of linguistic signs and symbols shared by a cultural collectivity. In the case of ancient Israel, and much of Jewish history that followed, that system was predominantly male. The particular gendering of memory as masculine is also related to the more specific correlation of remembrance and the covenant of circumcision. The covenant, biblically, is called a “sign,” for it functions as that which reminds one of the relationship between God and Israel. Memory is thus linked fundamentally to the masculine because the site of the covenantal incision is the phallus.⁸⁹ The more specific link between memory and the *membrum virile* is a bedrock of kabbalistic speculation. The correlation between *zakhar* and *zakhor*, first expressed in *Sefer ha-Bahir*,⁹⁰ is developed and applied to various exegetical contexts by the author of the Zohar.⁹¹ I begin by citing an interpretation of the verse, “Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,” (*zakhor et yom ha-shabbat leqaddesho*) (Exod. 20:8):

“Remember” (*zakhor*) refers to the secret of the masculine, the secret of the masculine that takes all the limbs of the supernal world; “the Sabbath day” (*et yom ha-shabbat*) to include the eve of Sabbath, which is the [attribute of the] night, and this is [the import of] “and keep it holy” (*leqaddesho*), for it is in need of holiness from the holy nation, and it is crowned through them, as is appropriate. “Remember” (*zakhor*), the place in which there is no forgetfulness and no forgetfulness exists in it, for there is no forgetfulness in the place of the supernal covenant, and all the more so above. There is forgetfulness below, the place that must be remembered, and concerning this it is written, “May [God] be ever mindful of his father’s iniquity” (Ps. 109:14). There are angels appointed there who recall the merits and sins of people, and there is no forgetfulness before the holy throne, [with respect to] what is before [the throne]. And who is before?

[The attribute called] *zakhor*, and all the more so above, for everything is the mystery of the masculine. The secret of the holy name, YHW, is inscribed there, and [that which is] below needs to be sanctified, and it is sanctified through *zakhor*, for from that it takes all holiness and all blessings. And this occurs when the eve of Sabbath is crowned upon the holy nation, as is appropriate, through prayers, supplications, and hymns of joy.⁹²

The biblical admonition to “remember the Sabbath day” serves as an exegetical springboard for the fertile imagination of the Zohar’s author. The word *zakhor* refers to the “secret of the masculine,” *raza di-dekhura*, the attribute *Yesod*. The phallic signification of this symbol is underscored by the description of the “secret of the masculine” as that which “takes all the limbs of the supernal world,” an idea that reflects the biological notion (which I mentioned above) that the penis gathers the energy of all the upper limbs of the body. Indeed, in the passage immediately preceding the one that I translated, the author of the Zohar makes the point explicitly: “‘Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,’ this is the secret of the holy phallus,⁹³ for in that phallus all the sources of the bodily limbs exist, and it is that which contains everything.”⁹⁴

In the place of the masculine, which is the supernal covenant or the phallus, there is no forgetfulness, for this gradation is the ontological locus of memory. Beneath this gradation, however, there is a place wherein forgetfulness is operative, and thus there must be angels to recall the good and the bad deeds of men. In this context, the place characterized by forgetfulness corresponds to the *Shekhinah*, or feminine presence, although in another zoharic passage the place of forgetfulness is associated with the “extremity of the side of darkness” (i.e., the demonic realm).⁹⁵ Prima facie, the view that forgetfulness is characteristic of the *Shekhinah* would seem to contradict the rabbinic teaching that there is no forgetfulness before the throne of glory.⁹⁶ The zoharic author, however, masterfully interprets this dictum to refer to that which is before the throne (i.e., the attribute *zakhor* or the masculine *Yesod*), and not to the feminine throne itself. The lower grade, which is imaged as feminine, is said to be sanctified by the masculine, a process that unfolds when Sabbath eve, which symbolizes the *Shekhinah*, is crowned by the prayers of the Jewish

people. From the end of the passage, we learn that the process is reciprocal: in the moment that the *Shekhinah* is crowned by the people of Israel, the people of Israel are crowned by the *Shekhinah*.⁹⁷

The crowning represents the coronation of the Sabbath bride, or the *Shekhinah*, as she prepares to unite with the holy King.⁹⁸ On the most basic level, this reflects standard regal symbolism: the *Shekhinah* is, after all, the Queen and thus the image of her being crowned makes perfectly good sense. This imagery is enhanced, moreover, by the symbol of the Sabbath bride, for in the Jewish tradition there is attested the actual practice of the bridegroom and the bride wearing crowns. But there is a deeper significance to this symbolism: the crowning represents the assimilation of the *Shekhinah* into the phallic *Yesod*, a metamorphosis that is related in zoharic literature to the sacred union of male and female.⁹⁹ The phallicization of the feminine is also alluded to in the comment that the *Shekhinah*, or “that which is below,” is “sanctified through *zakhor*, for from that it takes all holiness and all blessings.” By receiving the overflow from the attribute called *zakhor*, the forgetfulness, associated with the *Shekhinah*, is overcome. The act of remembering, therefore, has the role of uniting the female and the male, a union that results in the transformation of the female into an aspect of the male. Thus, the biblical verse that frames this whole discussion, *zakhor et yom ha-shabbat*, is related exegetically to the eve of Sabbath and to the day of Sabbath, the feminine and the masculine.

Re/membering the Covenant: Messianic Overcoming of Binary Opposition

According to the predominant symbolism of the Zohar, an intrinsic link is forged between the phallus, memory, and history: the circumcised phallus, which bears the mark of the divine covenant in the flesh, is the locus of the collective memory that renders history meaningful. Rejecting the universalizing and spiritualizing tendencies of Christianity, the zoharic author insists that the site of salvation remains the embodied sign of circumcision. The identity of the Jew, even in the messianic age, is inextricably linked to the sign inscribed on the flesh. Circumcision, therefore, signifies the cultural difference between Jew and Christian, but also the gender difference

between male and female within the body politic of Israel. However, as I have already noted above, an essential element of the theosophic teaching proffered by the zoharic authorship is that the female itself is an aspect of the male, a point underscored by the androgynous nature of the covenant in general and that of circumcision in particular. A particularly straightforward articulation of this idea is given by Moses de León: “The secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*) is the corona (*aṭarah*) in the secret of the glorious crown (*aṭeret tif’eret*), and when a person is circumcised and he enters the secret of the holy covenant, he enters two gradations that are one unit, the corona (*aṭarah*) and the Eternally Living One (*ḥei ha-olamim*), the secret of the All (*kol*), and all is one unit.”¹⁰⁰ By means of the rite of circumcision, therefore, one is conjoined to the ninth and the tenth *sefirot*, *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, referred to here as the Eternally Living One (or the All) and the corona, which constitute one entity. The female aspect is thus totally assimilated to the male. In a similar vein, one could argue that Christians should find their restoration in the Jews, for the otherness of Edom is overcome in the reintegration of the demonic into the divine.¹⁰¹ It is important to note that in terms of medieval gender stereotypes, another profound reversal is at work here: the Jew is associated with masculine virility (emblematic of divine grace) and the Christian with feminine constriction (symbolic of divine judgment),¹⁰² which is most fully expressed in the monastic ideal of celibacy or sexual impotency.¹⁰³ The “other god” is thus portrayed as the castrated being (the emasculated male) who stands in antithetical opposition to the phallic potency of the divine.¹⁰⁴ But the cultural and gender boundaries are fluid, for the process of history, culminating with the coming of the Messiah, is perceived as the engenderment of memory by means of which the bifurcation of male and female, Jew and Christian, is overcome.

I have noted several times that the locus of memory in the divine realm is the attribute that corresponds to the phallus, the seat of the creative element of the Godhead. This is instantiated below in the body of the Jewish male: memory is incised upon the flesh. But as I have also indicated above, the phallus is androgynous. Thus, one finds a distinction in the Zohar between two kinds of memory, *peqidah* and *zekhirah*, correlated, respectively, with the feminine and the masculine.¹⁰⁵ The historical situation of exile entails the separation of male and female, a rupture induced by the forgetting of the covenant.

This state of forgetfulness is not merely the result of poor attention or the inability to retain something that escapes the mind, or even the psychopathological condition of amnesia. The forgetting of the covenant is more than a subjective lapse of memory; it is the ontological state of oblivion, the concealment of that which must be concealed from the one who must conceal.¹⁰⁶ An allusion to this veiled concealment, the doubling of forgetfulness, is found in the following zoharic exegesis of the verse, “At the end of two years’ time, Pharaoh dreamed that he was standing by the Nile” (Gen. 46:1):

“At the end of” (*wa-yehi miqqets*). What is [the meaning of] *miqqets*? R. Simeon said: The place in which there is no memory (*zekhirah*), and this is the extremity of the left (*qets di-semo’la*). What is the reason? For it is written, “But remember me (*zekhartani*) when all is well with you again” (Gen. 40:14). Was it appropriate for Joseph the Righteous to say, “But remember me”? Rather, when Joseph contemplated his dream he said: Certainly this is a dream of memory (*helma di-zekhirah*). But he erred with respect to this for everything is [dependent] on the Holy One, blessed be He. Therefore, the place in which there is forgetfulness (*nashyu*) rose before him. What is written? “The chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph; he forgot him” (ibid., 23). Since it is written “the chief cupbearer did not remember” (*we-lo zakhar*), why does it say, “he forgot him” (*wa-yishkahehu*)? Rather, [the word] *wa-yishkahehu* [refers to] the place in which there is forgetfulness (*shikheḥah*), and this is the extremity of the side of darkness (*qets de-sitra de-ḥoshekh*).¹⁰⁷

Forgetfulness is linked to the demonic, for it is always oppositional and conflictual: strife is of the essence of this oblivion. The particular manifestation of that conflict is the veiling of the sign of the covenant.¹⁰⁸ Joseph, who is called “righteous” (*tsaddiq*) because of his diligence with respect to sexual purity (*shemirat ha-berit*) and on account of his symbolic correspondence to *Yesod*, the divine phallus,¹⁰⁹ thought that it was appropriate to interpret the dream of the cupbearer (*sar ha-mashkim*), since he felt that it derived from the side of memory. Consequently, Joseph exposed that which should have been hidden, a disclosure that resulted in the domination of forgetfulness, the demonic force of darkness, over the power of

remembrance. Oblivion is the absence of demarcation, the concealment of the sign that leads to a state of disorientation and exile, the separation of male and female. “Come and see: All the time that Joseph, who is the supernal covenant, exists, the covenant of the *Shekhinah* exists together with Israel in peace as is appropriate, but when Joseph, the supernal covenant, departs from the world, the covenant of the *Shekhinah* and Israel go into exile. Thus it has been established, as it is written, ‘A new king arose over Egypt who did not know Joseph’ (Exod. 1:8).”¹¹⁰ The departure of Joseph from the world – the sundering of the male/female bond – results in the exile of the *Shekhinah* and the Jewish people. That this state is characterized by oblivion is underscored by the biblical claim that the king of Egypt (the satanic power) has no recollection of Joseph (the phallic covenant).

The power of Christianity, according to the zoharic author, can also be understood as the lure of oblivion in which the covenant is forgotten, a withholding of the sign. Redemption, conversely, is the restoration of memory, the retrieval of the covenant in its twofold aspect as male and female, which is revealed in the unveiling of the hidden sign. The point is poignantly expressed in the zoharic interpretation of the sign of the covenant seen by Noah in the form of the rainbow:

It is written, “[When the bow is in the clouds] I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant” (Gen. 9:16), for the desire of the Holy One, blessed be He, is towards it¹¹¹ constantly and the one who is not worthy through it cannot enter before the Master. Thus it is written, “I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant.” “I will see it,” what [is the meaning of] “I will see it”? This is a secret, as it is said, “Put a mark on the foreheads etc.” (Ezek. 9:4) to be manifest on them. Others say that this is the inscription of the holy sign on the flesh. R. Judah said: Certainly everything is this way, but the rainbow that is seen in the world exists in a supernal mystery. When Israel will go out from the exile, this rainbow will be adorned in the colors of the bride who is adorned for her husband. That Jew said to him: Thus my father said to me when he departed from this world: Do not expect the feet of Messiah until that rainbow is seen in the world, adorned in the bright colors and illuminating the world. Then you can

expect the Messiah. From where do you know? As it is written, “I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant.” Now it is seen in darkened colors to be a reminder that a flood will not come. However, in that time it will be seen in bright colors and it will be adorned in the ornamentation of a bride who is adorned for her husband. Then [is it appropriate to say] “and remember the everlasting covenant” (*lizkor berit olam*). The Holy One, blessed be He, remembers that covenant that is in exile and He lifts her up from the dust, as it is written, “they will seek the Lord their God and David their king” (Hosea 3:5), and it is written, “they shall serve the Lord their God and David, the king whom I will raise up for them” (Jer. 30:9). “I will raise up” from the dust, as it says, “I will raise up again the fallen booth of David” (Amos 9:11). Thus [it is written] “I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant,” to raise her up from the dust.¹¹²

The author of the Zohar utilizes the biblical narrative concerning Noah and the rainbow in order to characterize the arrival of the messianic age. The physical manifestation of the rainbow is symbolic of a process within the Godhead. From the beginning of this passage, it would appear that the rainbow corresponds to the phallic aspect of the *Shekhinah*, which is referred to on a number of occasions in the Zohar as the “sign of the covenant,”¹¹³ the very term that Scripture uses in this context to describe the rainbow. This symbolic usage of the word *qeshet* is attested in other zoharic passages, of which I will here mention only two examples:

It is written, “Like the appearance of the bow (*ke-mar’eh ha-qeshet*) that shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the glory of the Lord” (Ezek. 1:28), the appearance of all the colors, and thus [it is written] “I have set My bow (*qashti*) in the clouds” (Gen. 9:13). What is “My bow”? As it is said with respect to Joseph, “Yet his bow (*qashto*) stayed taut” (ibid. 49:24), for Joseph is called righteous (*tsaddiq*). Therefore “his bow” is the covenant of the bow (*berit de-qeshet*) that is contained in the righteous, for in the covenant the one is united with the other. Since Noah was righteous, his covenant was a bow.¹¹⁴

The symbolic understanding of the rainbow is confirmed in another passage wherein it is asserted (based on Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 16a) that looking at the rainbow is prohibited because it is akin to looking at the *Shekhinah*, the same rationale that is used to explain the prohibition of looking at the fingers of the priests during the priestly blessing. In an effort to explain this dictum, the Zohar (through the persona of R. Abba) explains that there is a bow above and a bow below. With respect to the former, it is forbidden to look at its colors because “he who looks at its colors it is as if he looked at the place above and it is forbidden to look at it in order not to cause shame for the *Shekhinah*.” On the other hand, the bow below refers to “that sign of the covenant inscribed on a person, for he who looks at it causes shame above.”¹¹⁵ The parallelism between the lower and the upper bow instructs about the nature of the latter: just as the *qeshet* below is the sign of the covenant inscribed on the phallus, so the *qeshet* above is related to that aspect of God that corresponds to this part of the anatomy, the place that must remain hidden in order not to cause shame to the *Shekhinah*.¹¹⁶ The phallic understanding of the rainbow is verified by the view that the object of God’s vision (according to Gen. 9:16) is the inscription of the covenant upon the flesh. When God sees the sign of circumcision, He remembers the everlasting covenant.

The second part of the zoharic interpretation of Noah’s rainbow cited above involves the complex gender symbolism, especially related to the transformation that is connected to the messianic redemption. From the claim that the rainbow will be “adorned in the ornamentation of a bride,” it would appear that this symbol corresponds to the feminine *Shekhinah*, and not to the masculine *Yesod*.¹¹⁷ This is a reasonable deduction, but before one jumps to conclusions about the imaginary constructions of the divine female, it is necessary to situate this passage in the larger framework of the assumptions about gender that one finds in both the Zohar and related theosophic literature. The rainbow is a liminal symbol, for it marks the transition from exile to redemption. In the exilic state, there is separation of male and female, and hence the rainbow appears in darkened colors; in the redemptive state, by contrast, there is a reunion of male and female, and the rainbow shines in bright colors, like a bride adorned before the bridegroom. In the exile, moreover, the rainbow is depicted as the forsaken covenant buried in the dust,

but in the time of redemption the covenant shall be uplifted and restored to the phallus as the sign of the covenant. The point is clarified in a second passage where the end of exile is described in the following way:

Then the rainbow will be seen in the cloud in bright colors like a wife that is adorned for her husband, as it is written, "I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant" ... "I will see it," in the bright colors, as is appropriate, and then [I will] "remember the everlasting covenant." What is the 'everlasting covenant' (*berit olam*)? This is the Community of Israel, and the *waw* will be united with the *he*, and she will be lifted from the dust, as it says, "and God remembered His covenant" (Exod. 2:24), this is the Community of Israel for she is the covenant, as it says, "and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant" (Gen. 9:13). When the *waw* is aroused in relation to the *he*, then supernal miracles will be aroused in the world ... and He will lift the Community of Israel from the dust, and the Holy One, blessed be He, will remember her.¹¹⁸

At the beginning of the redemption, it is appropriate for the rainbow to appear in the form of the bride (or wife), so that the erotic yearning of the male will be aroused and the union of the two consummated.¹¹⁹ The attribute of the divine that corresponds to the rainbow at this moment of transition is configured as the feminine other of heterosexualized masculine desire. The conjugal relation of the male and the female, represented respectively by the letters *waw* and *he* of the Tetragrammaton, rectifies the ontological separation of exile.¹²⁰ But the reunion of male and female is a process of reintegration of the female in the male or, to put the matter somewhat differently, insofar as the female provides the space to contain the male she is the extended phallus.¹²¹ The othering of the feminine, which entails the psychic projection of the feminine as other, is to be evaluated strictly from the point of view of the male.¹²²

The following account of Lacan's theory of signification given by Judith Butler is particularly helpful for an understanding of the phallogentric dimension of the zoharic imagery: "This is an Other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration. For women to

'be' the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to 'embody' the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through 'being' its Other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity.¹²³ Bracketing the question of the constructivist legitimacy of the Lacanian position,¹²⁴ in my estimation the structuralist approach can be applied without distortion to the zoharic texts. The phallogocentric morphology is expressed in the aforementioned passage from the Zohar in terms of the image of God's remembering the covenant, which must be construed as an act of re/membering, that is, of transforming the female into the sign of the covenant that is inscribed on the male organ.¹²⁵ From a passage in one of Moses de León's Hebrew writings, it is clear that the memory elicited by God's looking at the rainbow as the sign of the covenant signifies the gender transformation of the *Shekhinah* into part of the phallic *Yesod*, which is expressed concomitantly as the amelioration of judgment by mercy:

Whenever the rainbow is seen in the cloud, then the sign of the covenant is within her and the judgment vanishes from the world ... The secret is "I will remember My covenant" (Gen. 9:15), for there is no memory (*zekhirah*) without the sign of the covenant (*ot berit*). Therefore they established the blessing [on the rainbow], "Blessed be the one who remembers the covenant" (*zokher ha-berit*),¹²⁶ for then she contains all the colors that are seen within her from [the gradation that is called] the All. Thus, God, blessed be He, has mercy over the creatures and over the earth. Know that the secret of the matter of the rainbow and [that of] the covenant are joined together. Therefore, they established that it is forbidden for a person to look at the rainbow in order not to cause shame to the *Shekhinah* and not to look within her. Thus the prophet said, "Like the appearance of the bow (*ke-mar'eh ha-qeshet*) that shines in the clouds on a day of rain, such was the appearance of the surrounding radiance. That was the appearance of the semblance of the glory of the Lord" (Ezek. 1:28).¹²⁷

From the vantage point of the zoharic symbolism, the reinscription of memory, and the overcoming of oblivion that it entails,

is the secret that endows history with meaning and purpose. Judaism's spiritual struggle with Christianity plays a critical role in this drama. The seductive power of Christianity induces the forgetting of the covenant (manifest in both theological and sexual terms), which brings about the separation of male and female, and the consequent dominance of the evil serpent. As a result of that domination, the virility of the Jew (located in the circumcised phallus) is compromised and the masculine is feminized. By contrast, redemption is the reunion of male and female such that the latter is restored to the former in the image of the sign of the covenant. In the messianic era, the force of Edom is subjugated to that of Jacob, and the feminine potency is masculinized.¹²⁸

Notes

1. Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion At the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 12.
2. Viewed from this perspective, the split between critical historical consciousness and collective memory may not be as sharp as it emerges from Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), even if we readily grant that the critical historian is not the custodian of the cultural memory that has been essential to the Jewish historical experience. To be sure, the traditional effort of remembering the past is a process that often entailed the conscious submersion of the past in the dark waters of oblivion, whereas the historian's reflective scrutiny of the Jewish past is predicated (at least ideally) on the assumption that forgetfulness is not the best handmaiden to memory. The historian's attempt to recollect the past indiscriminately entails a historicizing of Judaism rooted in the secularization of Jewish history, which does indeed represent a decisive break with traditional modes of remembrance and the imaginative consecration of the past (*Zakhor*, pp. 81, 91). It is nevertheless clear that the historian's vision of the past is itself colored by certain cultural presumptions (primarily of a linguistic and semiotic nature) imparted by collective memory, which inevitably involve a process of selectivity and forgetfulness in remembering the past. A similar position has been articulated by Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1993). For a challenge to Yerushalmi's thesis based on the idea that "historical consciousness" is not in antithetical opposition to collective memory, see Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 11, 18–21; and the remarks on this debate by David Myers, "Remembering *Zakhor*: A Super-commentary," *History and Memory: Studies in Representation of the Past*, 4, 1992, pp. 129–146 (I thank the author for calling my attention to his study, which helped me refine my own argument).
3. I do not subscribe to a monolithic representation of Judaism in the Middle Ages based on rabbinic documents; on the contrary, one must assume a plurality of interacting Judaisms in spite of the effort of some rabbis to present

a uniform picture. The cultural pluralism of medieval Jewish societies embraced various forms of sectarianism as well as differing conceptions of Rabbanite Judaism itself. Even if we wish to consider rabbinic Judaism as the mainstream Jewish culture, it would be historically inaccurate to speak of a homogeneous rabbinism. Thus, one should not neglect other kinds of material available to the scholar studying the nature of Jewish identity in the Middle Ages, for example, Muslim heresiography of the Jews or Karaite historiography. For two recent works of scholarship dealing, respectively, with these corpora, see Steven Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 17–46, and Fred D. Astren, “History, Historicization, and Historical Claims in Karaite Jewish Literature,” Ph.D. thesis, University of California at Berkeley, 1993.

4. Brian Stock, *The Implications of Literacy: Written Language and Models of Interpretation in the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 90. I have employed in a more elaborate fashion Stock’s notion of the “textual community” in “Orality, Textuality, and Revelation as Modes of Education and Formation in Jewish Mystical Circles of the High Middle Ages,” in *Educating People of Faith: Exploring the History of Jewish and Christian Communities*, ed. John Van Engen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 178–207. Stock’s model has been profitably applied to classical rabbinic Judaism by William S. Green, “Otherness Within: Towards a Theory of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism,” in *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, “Others” in Late Antiquity*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico: Scholars Press, 1985), pp. 49–69, esp. 53–55. Green’s comments about the the rabbinic circles in the classical period are, in my view, entirely applicable to the medieval rabbinic circles whence the pietists and mystics emerged.
5. For a recent study that reexamines this issue, see Martin Cohen, *Under Crescent & Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).
6. See Gerson Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Culture* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1991), pp. 271–297. On the role of the messianic question in Jewish–Christian polemics in the High Middle Ages, see Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 111–124, 136, 155, 179, 181–184, 209–210, 220; Robert Chazan, *Daggers of Faith: Thirteenth-Century Christian Missionizing and Jewish Response* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), pp. 57–59, 69–70, 74–82, 86–88, 90–100, 104–114, 117–136, 142–145, 149–150, 153, 168–169, 170–173; idem, *Barcelona and Beyond: The Disputation of 1263 and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 172–194. This issue has been examined from a new perspective in the provocative study of Israel Yuval, “Vengeance and Damnation, Blood and Defamation: From Jewish Martyrdom to Blood Libel Accusations,” *Zion*, 58, 1993, pp. 33–90; and compare the impassioned responses to this study and the rejoinder by Yuval in *Zion*, 59, 1994. The centrality of messianic eschatology in thirteenth-century kabbalah was noted by Baer, *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, pp. 248–250, 276–281. Consider especially Baer’s description of the period of the Zohar as one of “near-messianic times” (p. 269), a view that has been resurrected in more recent scholarship by Liebes (see reference below). Regarding the messianic dimensions of thirteenth-century Jewish mysticism, see Joseph Dan, “The Beginning of the Messianic Myth in the Kabbalistic Doctrine of the

- Thirteenth Century,” in *Messianism and Eschatology: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Zvi Baras (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), pp. 239–252 (Hebrew); Moshe Idel, “Introduction,” in Aaron Zeev Aescoly, *Jewish Messianic Movements: Sources and Documents on Messianism in Jewish History, Volume One: From the Bar-Kokhba Revolt until the Expulsion of the Jews From Spain*, ed. Yehuda Even-Shemuel (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1987), pp. 9–28, esp. 11–16 (Hebrew); idem, “Typologies of Redemptive Activity in the Middle Ages,” in *Messianism and Eschatology*, pp. 253–279 (Hebrew); idem, *Messianism and Mysticism* (Tel-Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1992), pp. 17–38 (Hebrew); and Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 1–84. For the historical record, it should be noted that the messianic enthusiasm of the author of the Zohar, expressed as a belief in the imminent coming of the Messiah, which served as the justification for revealing kabbalistic secrets, was emphasized by Heinrich Graetz, *History of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1894), vol. 4, pp. 18–19. Graetz’s position, which differs significantly from that of Scholem (especially as he expressed it in *Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp. 39–41), is not mentioned by Liebes.
7. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 85–138.
 8. Most recently, Israel Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigle She-BaNistar: The Halachic Residue in the Zohar* (Tel-Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 1995) (Hebrew), emphasizes the impact of the religious customs and the method of study of Franco-German Jewish culture on the zoharic authorship, but he still maintains that the work is of Spanish origin. More specifically, Ta-Shma is of the opinion that the Zohar was composed in the 1260s or 1270s in Toledo or Guadalajara in the circle of Jonah ben Abraham Gerondi, where one finds a blend of the Ashkenazi and the Sephardi traditions.
 9. *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, pp. 267.
 10. Zohar 1:92b.
 11. *History of Jews*, vol. 1, p. 268. Regrettably, in my study of the midnight study vigil in the Zohar, “Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature,” in *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, ed. Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1993), pp. 209–235, I neglected to mention these important and pertinent remarks of Baer. Indeed, the position that I adopt in that study, that the references to the communal midnight study in the Zohar reflect actual practice and are not to be construed simply as imaginative constructions, basically concurs with Baer’s view. Although Baer himself (*History of Jews*, vol. 1, p. 437 n. 24) referred the reader to Scholem’s work for an investigation of the “real-life setting of the Zohar,” it seems to me that Baer’s own analysis was closer to the mark and in an essential way anticipated the socially oriented trend in current scholarship.
 12. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 58.
 13. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 225, where Scholem again remarks that the “medieval environment can be recognized in many details of the Zohar.” In that context he specifically mentions the work of Baer.
 14. On the other hand, it must be noted that Scholem did entertain the possibility that the author of the Zohar, whom he considered to be Moses de León, belonged to a group of Castilian mystics described as the “representatives of the Gnostical reaction in the history of Spanish kabbalism,” i.e. Isaac and Jacob ha-Kohen of Soria, Ṭodros ben Joseph Abulafia of Toledo, and Moses ben Simeon of Burgos. See Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 175, 187, and 190.

15. See Liebes' study cited in note 7; idem, "New Directions," pp. 160–161; idem, "Zohar and Eros," pp. 67–119; Wolfson, "Forms of Visionary Ascent;" idem, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 326–392.
16. I owe this formulation to my colleague, David Leahy, who used it in response to a comment that I made that a certain aspect of his own philosophical thinking regarding the "absolute consciousness absolutely without self," articulated more fully in his *Foundation Matter the Body Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), reminded me of an idea central to Hegel's phenomenology of the self. I have extended the scope of his comment to characterize the scholarly endeavor in the humanities in general. It appears that the process of innovation and its presentation in the world of scholarship is the reverse of the situation in the political arena, where the radically new is clothed as the old and tested. Consider, for example, the following remark of Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 452: "Subtle subversion, rather than explicit negation, would seem to be how most successful counter-revolutions in human history have been achieved. All is utterly changed – yet ostensibly all stays the same." Perhaps in scholarly fields that are more politically oriented, and hence more concerned with safeguarding territory and exercising domination, the political model is more readily adopted, but in that domain of human endeavor the more revolutionary the claim the more legitimating and empowering.
17. On the zoharic attitude to Christianity, see Adolf Jellinek, "Christlicher Einfluss auf die Kabbala," *Der Orient*, 12, 1851, pp. 580–583; Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 4, p. 23; Wilhelm Bacher, "Judaeo-Christian Polemics in the Zohar," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 3, 1891, pp. 781–784; Yitzhak Baer, "The Historical Background of the Ra'aya Mehemna'," *Zion*, 5, 1940, pp. 1–44 (Hebrew); idem, "The Kabbalistic Doctrine in the Christological Teaching of Abner of Burgos," *Tarbits*, 27, 1958, p. 281 (Hebrew); idem, *History of Jews*, vol. 1, pp. 266–277; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 973; Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, p. 70; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 65–68, 139–161; Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 15–22, 240. On the zoharic attitude towards Islam, see Ronald C. Kiener, "The Image of Islam in the Zohar," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought*, 8, 1989, pp. 43–65 (English section).
18. In previous studies, I have touched upon the polemical responses in the Zohar (and related kabbalistic literature) and my reflections here should be viewed as an expansion of my earlier thoughts. See Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization," pp. 245–246, 248–249; idem, "Light through Darkness: The Ideal of Human Perfection in the Zohar," *Harvard Theological Review*, 81, 1988, pp. 81 n. 29, 82–83 n. 34, and 86 n. 46; idem, "Woman – The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. Laurence Silberstein and Robert Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), pp. 168–169, 189–190.
19. See *The Book of the Covenant of Joseph Kimḥi*, trans. Frank Talmage (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1972), pp. 19–20, and other references cited on p. 19 n. 50; David Berger, *The Jewish–Christian Debate in the High Middle Ages: A Critical Edition of the Nizzahon Vetus with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979), p. 16; Cohen, *Friars and the Jews*; Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*.
20. Abraham Gross, "Satan and Christianity: The Demonization of Christianity in the Writings of Abraham Saba," *Zion*, 58, 1993, pp. 91–105 (Hebrew),

notes that the portrayal of Christianity as the demonic religion and the view of Jesus as the incarnation of Samael or the devil, which are found in Spanish kabbalistic works from the second half of the fifteenth century, can be traced back to thirteenth-century sources composed by Ḥasidei Ashkenaz and the kabbalists in northern Spain, such as Nahmanides and Bahya ben Asher. He does not deal explicitly with the Zohar, which probably had the greatest impact on subsequent kabbalists.

21. The author of the Zohar fits into what Gerson Cohen identified as the exegetical approach to the problem of Edom–Rome taken by Babylonian, Spanish, and Provençal Jewish scholars as opposed to the orientation found in southern Italian sources. According to the former, the name of Edom was applied primarily to Christianity and only secondarily to Rome after the Roman Empire adopted that faith as the official state religion. See Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Culture*, pp. 243–269, esp. 259–260.
22. Zohar 2:188b; part of this text is quoted (in a different translation) by Matt, *Zohar*, p. 17. On the zoharic representation of medieval Christianity as the demonic force in the world, see Graetz, *History of the Jews*, vol. 4, p. 17; Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, p. 40; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 66–68, 244 n. 92. The association of the Other Side and the nations of the world (without specifying a specific link to Christianity) is noted by Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 451.
23. The contrast between the ontic grounding of the Jewish soul in the realm of holiness and that of the non-Jewish soul (especially the “idoltrous nations,” which is a code for Christians) is repeated on many occasions in the zoharic corpus and related kabbalistic literature. Cf. Zohar 1:47a, 131a, 220a; 2:21b; 3:25b, 37a, 104b, 105b, 119a, 259b; and see Wolfson, “Mystical Rationalization,” pp. 242–244, 248. I note, parenthetically, that in *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 65, Moses de León has some negative comments about the Muslim woman during her menstrual period. The correlation of the blood of menstruation, particularly related to the birth of Jesus (as we find, for example, in the different recensions of the *Toledot Yeshu*), and Christianity is employed in Jewish polemical literature in the Middle Ages in an effort to discredit the doctrine of the virgin birth; hence the attribution of the title *ben niddah*, “son of a menstruant,” to Jesus. See Samuel Krauss, *Das Leben Jesu nach Jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902), pp. 38–41, 64–68, 118, 139–140; *Sefer Nestor ha-Komer*, ed. Abraham Berliner (Altona, Germany: Gebrüder Bonn, 1874), p. 7; Berger, *Jewish–Christian Debate*, pp. 43–44, 183–184, 350–354. This polemical trope is used as well by Abraham Abulafia, although he is mostly concerned with emphasizing the material nature of the blood in order to contrast the spirituality of the Jewish Messiah (the Sabbath) and the corporeality of Jesus (the sixth day). See Idel, *Studies in Ecstatic Kabbalah*, pp. 52–53.
24. See Rachel Biale, *Women and Jewish Law: An Exploration of Women’s Issues in Halakhic Sources* (New York: Schocken, 1984), pp. 147–174; Shaye J. D. Cohen, “Purity and Piety: The Separation of Menstruants from the Sancta,” in *Daughters of the King: Women and the Synagogue*, ed. Susan Grossman and Rivka Haut (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1992), pp. 103–115; idem, “Menstruants and the Sacred in Judaism and Christianity,” in *Women’s History and Ancient History*, ed. S. Pomeroy (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 273–299; Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, pp. 55–7. I do not mean to suggest that in the classical rabbinic sources one cannot find negative depictions of menstruation that ultimately reflect a misogynistic orientation. Consider, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 17:8,

- p. 160, where the laws of menstruation are explained as a punishment for Eve's having brought about the death of Adam.
25. For a fuller treatment of menstruation in the kabbalistic material, see Sharon Koren, "Mysticism and Menstruation: The Significance of Female Impurity to Medieval Jewish Spirituality," Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, New Haven, 1999.
 26. Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 344–345; *Mishkan ha-Edut*, MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fols. 24a–b; and see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1358–1359. If we follow the suggestion of Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), p. 75, that according to the priestly conception impurity was not only an offense against God but introduced a "kind of demonic contagion into the community," then the biblical laws regarding menstruation (Lev. 15:19–33) already presuppose the idea that the blood of menstruation is the materialization of the anti-godly force. For discussion of this position, see also Jacob Neusner, *The Idea of Purity in Ancient Judaism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973), pp. 9–31. It goes without saying that the characterization of menstrual blood as the source of demonic impurity and the ensuing menstrual taboos are found in a variety of different cultures. For representative studies, see William N. Stephens, "A Cross-Cultural Study of Menstrual Taboos," *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 64, 1961, pp. 385–316; Paula Weideger, *Menstruation and Menopause: The Physiology and Psychology, the Myth and the Reality* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 85–113; Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, "Introduction," in *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 3–50; Knight, *Blood Relations*, pp. 374–416; Mary Jane Lupton, *Menstruation and Psychoanalysis* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 92–105. In the Middle Ages, this negative conception of the female body led to widely held superstitious beliefs (often presented as scientific in nature) about the detrimental effects of the blood of menstruation on a woman's offspring. See Claude Thomasset, "The Nature of Woman," trans. Arthur Goldhammer, in *A History of Women in the West, II. Silence of the Middle Ages*, ed. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 54–58, 65–66; Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 151 and references cited in n. 62.
 27. Cf. Zohar 1:204b, where the "alien kingdom" (*malkhuta aḥra*) of the idolatrous nations is called the "other one" (*aher*) based on the verse "For you must not worship any other god, because the Lord, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God" (Exod. 34:14). And cf. Zohar 2:61a, where the same verse is cited as a proof-text to support the view that one should not have sexual intercourse with a Gentile woman, again referred to as the "daughter of an alien god." Cf. Zohar 1:131b; *Zohar Hadash*, 75a, 86b.
 28. Zohar 2:3a–b, translated in Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1202–1205.
 29. *History of the Jews*, vol. 1, p. 262.
 30. See Matt, *Zohar*, p. 240; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 234 n. 47.
 31. Zohar 1:171b. The passionate zeal (*qin'ah*) associated with the God of Israel in Scripture is linked specifically to the phallus, or the divine attribute that corresponds to the phallus, in zoharic texts. Cf. Zohar 1:66b, 131b; 2:3b; 3:190a; Wolfson *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 230.
 32. Zohar 1:131b; 2:87b; Moses de León, *Mishkan ha-Edut*, MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fols. 26a–27a; *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 212–213.

33. The Zohar repeatedly links sexual relations with Gentile women and idolatry (understood as the worship of the other god of the demonic realm). See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1365, and other sources mentioned in Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 140 n. 2. Cf. *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 63, and Zohar 1:214a, where sexual intercourse with a non-Jew is considered a world-destroying act. It is of interest to consider the linkage of the sign of circumcision and idolatry on the part of Gentile women according to the remark placed in the mouth of the Jew in Peter Abelard, *A Dialogue of a Philosopher with a Jew, and a Christian*, trans. Pierre J. Payer (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1979), p. 47. The correlation of idolatry and menstruation is found already in the pseudepigraphal *Letter of Jeremiah*, but in that context the issue is a purely cultic one, that is, since the pagan does not have to abide by the laws of menstruation, the likelihood that sacrifices to idols may have been touched by women during the menstrual period or at childbirth is great. See Neusner, *Idea of Purity*, p. 36.
34. Zohar 1:126b. Cf. Zohar 3:79a–b; Zohar *Ḥadash*, 81b–c; *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 279–280.
35. *Sifre on Deuteronomy*, sec. 357, p. 430. Cf. *Numbers Rabbah* 20:1; *Midrash Tanḥuma*, Balaq 1, p. 785.
36. Cf. Zohar 2:21b–22a, 69b; 3:192a, 193b–194a; Zohar *Ḥadash*, 47c; *She'elot u-Teshuvot*, pp. 74–75; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 16–19; see Matt, Zohar, p. 240. The association of Balaam's magical acts and the demonic is repeated on many occasions in zoharic literature; cf. Zohar 1:125b–126a; 3:113a, 200b, 206b–210b, 264a; Zohar *Ḥadash*, 47c. In the first and last two of these references, Balaam is described as drawing down the force of impurity from the supernal serpent by committing sexual acts with his she-ass every night, an idea already expressed in rabbinic sources. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 105a–b (in that setting the view that Balaam had intercourse with his she-ass is juxtaposed to the idea that he performed sorcery with his penis) and Babylonian Talmud, Avodah Zarah 4b; see also *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance*, ed. Ernest G. Clarke with Walter E. Aufrecht, John C. Hurd, and F. Spitzer (Hoboken: Ktav, 1984), pp. 187–188 (ad Num. 22:30). One wonders if implicit in this rabbinic tradition is a polemic against Christians who are depicted as a race of asses, an image that is especially related to the issue of sexual promiscuity. See Aline Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 117–118. On the inherent impurity of Balaam, again linked to the image of the serpent, cf. Zohar 1:169b (in that passage Balaam is contrasted with Jacob). For discussion of Balaam's magical practices and the demonic realm in zoharic literature, see Cohen-Alloro, *Secret of the Garment*, pp. 75–81. On the symbolic correspondence of the *ḥamor* and *aton* to the masculine and the feminine potencies in the demonic realm, cf. Zohar 3:207a; Zohar *Ḥadash*, 78c. See note 61.
37. See Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978); Stephen Benko, *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 103–139; Francis C. R. Thee, *Julius Africanus and the Early Christian View of Magic* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1984), pp. 316–448; Alan Segal, *Rebecca's Children: Judaism and Christianity in the Roman World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 143–146; Valerie Flint, *The Rise of Magic in Early Medieval Europe* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991).

38. Zohar 3:79a. The different symbolic connotations of the mythical image of the serpent inseminating Eve in zoharic texts have been duly noted by Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 461, 467–470.
39. This is, of course, not exclusive to the Zohar. Consider, for example, the reference in medieval Jewish texts to the promiscuous nature of the mother of Jesus, cited by Berger, *Jewish–Christian Debate*, p. 23. The discrediting of the sexual behavior of the father of Jesus figures prominently in the polemical *Toledot Yeshu*; see Bernhard Blumenkranz, “The Roman Church and the Jews,” in *Essential Papers on Judaism and Christianity in Conflict: From Late Antiquity to the Reformation*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (New York: New York University Press, 1991), p. 221. The assault on the parentage of Jesus may have been contemporary with his life. Cf. *The Gospel of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings of Jesus*, trans. Marvin Meyer (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), sec. 105, p. 63: “Jesus said, ‘Whoever knows the father and the mother will be called the child of a whore.’” Consider also the claim of the Jew reported in Origen, *Contra Clesum* 1:28, 32 (trans. Henry Chadwick [Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1980], pp. 28 and 31–32) that the mother of Jesus was convicted of adultery with a soldier named Panthera (the term used in a derogatory sense to refer to the father of Jesus in rabbinic sources; see Chadwick, p. 31 n. 3; Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, pp. 46–50). This tradition may also underlie the response of the Jews to Jesus in John 8:41, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God.” These last two references are noted by Meyer, *Gospel of Thomas*, p. 106. It is relevant here to recall as well the argument of Smith, *Jesus the Magician*, p. 26, that the reference to Jesus as the “son of Mary” in Mark 6:3 should be understood in a pejorative sense as a challenge to the father of Jesus. Smith supports his reading by noting that the genealogy of Jesus in Matt. 1:2–16 only mentions four women, all of whom gave birth as a result of illicit sexual relations. The claim that Christians were lax with regard to sexual prohibitions is a common motif in medieval Jewish polemical literature. See, for example, *Book of the Covenant*, pp. 33, 35, 48; Berger, *Jewish–Christian Debate*, p. 224 (in that context the Gentile practice of having sexual relations with menstruant women is mentioned explicitly); and compare the passage from Meir ben Simeon’s *Milhemet Mitswah*, cited by Chazan, *Daggers of Faith*, p. 63.
40. *Midrash Tanhuma*, Wa-yishlah 8, p. 137; Zohar 1:146a, 170a; 2:11a, 111a, 163b; 3:124a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 199b, 243a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 246b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 248a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); Zohar *Hadash*, 23d (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*), 47a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 69, 105a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 464.
41. The expression, *de-rakhiv nahash*, “one who rides a serpent,” is applied to Esau in Zohar 1:171a. In that context, the Aramaic equivalent, *de-rakhiv al hivya*, is also employed to describe Esau. Cf. Zohar 1:146a, 228a; 2:268b. It should be noted that in some passages of the *Ra’aya Meheimna* stratum of the zoharic corpus, the serpent is associated with Ishmael and Samael with Edom (concerning the latter, see the references in note 20). Cf. Zohar 3:124a, 246b. (In other contexts, this kabbalist follows the main body of the Zohar and links Esau to the serpent; for example, cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 59, 93a.) This may reflect a more negative stance vis-à-vis Islam on the part of this anonymous kabbalist. For the opposite view that this author was more conciliatory towards Islam than Christianity, see Giller, *Enlightened Will Shine*, p. 51 and other relevant references cited on p. 146 n. 114. It is possible that the portrayal of Ishmael (i.e., Islam) as a serpent influenced Sabbatai Tsevi’s identification of

himself as the “holy serpent” (attested in the use of a crooked serpent as part of his signature). See Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi*, pp. 227, 235–236, 391, 813. There are, of course, other reasons to explain the adoption of this symbol, including the numerological equivalence of *naḥash* and *mashiah*, as Scholem has noted, but it is plausible, in light of Sabbatai Tsevi’s conversion to Islam, that the issue I have mentioned is also relevant. For a more detailed discussion of the Sabbatian idea expressed through the numerological equivalence of *naḥash* and *mashiah*, see Yehuda Liebes, *On Sabbateanism and Its Kabbalah: Collected Essays* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1995), pp. 172–182 (Hebrew). Finally, it is of interest to consider a remark of Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto in *Qin’at ha-Shem Tseva’ot*, in *Sefer Ginzei Ramḥal*, ed. Ḥayyim Friedlander (Bene Berak, 1984), p. 106. Luzzatto states that it appears from a passage in Zohar 3:282a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*) that “the Messiah, who is in the secret of the *Shekhinah*, must be clothed in the shell that is in the secret of Shabbetai, which is the shell of Ishmael in the secret of the diminution of the moon.” Cf. *Qin’at ha-Shem Tseva’ot*, pp. 112–113. This is an obvious reference to the central tenet of Sabbatian ideology regarding the messianic identity of Sabbatai Tsevi who wore the garment of Islam, an interpretation that Luzzatto summarily rejects. See Isaiah Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah and Its Branches: Researches and Sources* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1993), vol. 3, pp. 756–779, esp. 759–769 (Hebrew).

42. *Pirquei Rabbi Eli’ezer* 13:31b; *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 200; Zohar 1:35b, 55a, 263b; 2:236a–b, 243a, 243b–244a, 268b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 467. The characterization of the primordial serpent in the form of a camel is made explicitly in a tradition attributed to Simeon ben Eleazar in *Genesis Rabbah* 19:1, p. 171.
43. Zohar 1:137b–138a. Cf. *ibid.* 3:64a.
44. The identification of Esau, demonic impurity, and the serpent is implied as well in Zohar 1:177a.
45. See Berger, *Jewish–Christian Debate*, p. 56.
46. An entirely different approach is offered in Zohar 2:12b. Building on a view expressed in *Seder Eliyahu Rabbah*, ed. Meir Friedmann (Vienna: Achiasaf, 1904), 19:114, the author of the Zohar explains the domination of Edom in this exile over Israel as compensation for the tears that Esau shed when Jacob took the blessing of the firstborn away from him: “The redemption of Israel only depends on weeping, when the tears that Esau wept before his father will be completed and consummated ... The weeping that Esau wept and the tears that he shed have brought Israel into exile. When these tears are annulled by the weeping of Israel, they will come out of exile.” See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1514–1515, and Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, p. 34. Cf. Zohar *Ḥadash*, 23b (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*): “You should know that since Jacob took the blessings from Esau through deception, permission was not given to any nation in the world to subjugate Israel except for the nation of Esau.”
47. Zohar 1:138b. Cf. *ibid.* 143a, 145b–146a; and the parallel in *She’elot u-Teshuvot*, pp. 45–46. The zoharic view with respect to keeping the serpent outside the inner sanctum should be compared with the idea expressed by Joseph Gikatilla in his *Sod ha-Naḥash u-Mishpaṭo*, translated and analyzed by Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 79–80; the relevant part of the Hebrew text is printed in *idem*, *Major Trends*, pp. 405–406 n. 113. According to that text as well, evil results from the disruption of proper boundaries when the serpent, which belongs on the outside, penetrates to the inside, which is the precinct of the holy. Cf. Gikatilla, *Sha’arei Oraḥ*, 1:101–102, 135, 154,

- 211–214; 2:25, 127. Although the language of the Zohar tends to be more dualistic (as Scholem himself notes, *On the Mystical Shape*, p. 81; idem, *Major Trends*, p. 239; see also the introduction of Ben-Shlomo to his edition of *Sha'arei Orah*, pp. 38–39), there is an important similarity between the zoharic treatment of Esau as the evil serpent and Gikatilla's depiction of the primordial serpent, which he identifies as Amaleq. In this connection, it is also of interest to consider the view of the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar* regarding the proper boundary separating the holy and the demonic; see Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 222–223.
48. For a useful study to understand the range of philological meanings attached to this technical term in medieval biblical exegesis, see Sarah Kamin, “*Dugma* in Rashi's Commentary on Song of Songs,” in *Jews and Christians Interpret the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1991), pp. 13–30 (Hebrew). On the use of the term in the Zohar, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 38.
 49. Zohar 1:35b. The transaction between Jacob and Esau is understood in the Zohar to be a particular illustration of the more general principle of the appeasement of the Other Side through the giving of gifts. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 453–454.
 50. Zohar 1:145b.
 51. Babylonian Talmud, Baba Metsi'a 84a.
 52. Paul's eschatological anthropology is related to his theology of the covenants: just as the pneumatic Adam fulfills or perfects the somatic Adam, so the new covenant of grace surpasses the old covenant of law. The Adam–Jesus typology thus serves a different theopolitical agenda than the equation between Jesus and Moses adopted by Jewish Christians such as the Ebionites. The belief in Jesus as the *novus Moses* was predicated on the recognition that both the Church and the Synagogue were legitimate paths and that certain aspects of Jewish ritual had to be upheld even by Christian believers insofar as Moses was a true and eternal prophet of God. See Hans J. Schoeps, *Paul: The Theology of the Apostle in the Light of Jewish Religious History*, trans. Harold Knight (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), pp. 245–248. The Jewish Christian view contrasts sharply with the portrayal of Jesus as superior to Moses in Heb. 3:1–6, the position that became normative in the history of the Church. Regarding this passage, see David Flusser, *Judaism and the Origins of Christianity* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1988), pp. 261–268.
 53. The notion of the “pneumatic body” of Christ of which all believers are members is the theological principle underlying the ethical mandate to glorify the body, which is described as the “temple of the Holy Spirit.” Cf. 1 Cor. 6:15–20. On the transformation of the “body of humiliation” of sinful humanity into the “glorious body” of Christ, cf. Phil. 3:21.
 54. Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:21–22, 45–49; Col. 3:9–10; see Robin Scroggs, *The Last Adam: A Study in Pauline Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966); William D. Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: Some Rabbinic Elements in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980), pp. 36–57, 120, 268, 304; Alan Segal, *Paul the Convert: The Apostolate and Apostasy of Saul the Pharisee* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), pp. 65–66. The relation of Jesus to Adam is also presumed in Luke 3:23–38, which traces the genealogical line from Jesus to Adam, who is identified as the son of God. See Paula Fredriksen, *From Jesus to Christ: The Origins of the New Testament Images of Jesus* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), pp. 29 and 191.
 55. William D. Davies, *Jewish and Pauline Studies* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 207–208 and 301. On the image of the “body of Christ” related to

- the spiritual community of the Church, cf. 1 Cor. 6:15, 10:17, 12:12–13, 27; Rom. 7:4, 12:5; Col. 1:18, 24.
56. One detects a similar homiletical strategy in *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 368–369. The attitude expressed in the Zohar should be viewed within the framework of other medieval Jewish sources that polemicize against the Christian doctrine of original sin. See Joel Rembaum, “Medieval Jewish Criticism of the Doctrine of Original Sin,” *Association for Jewish Studies Review*, 7–8, 1982–83, pp. 353–382. See also Bezalel Safran, “Rabbi Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 75–106. In other zoharic texts, the blame for the sin is attributed to the female who brought death to the world by cleaving to the “place of death,” that is, the demonic realm. Cf. Zohar 1:36a.
 57. See Erich Neumann, *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 253.
 58. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 43.
 59. Zohar 1:130b–131a.
 60. In contexts where the symbol of the tree of life is used to refer *Yesod*, the latter is often also depicted by the symbol of the incessantly flowing river. The convergence of these two images is obviously meant to underscore the phallic nature of this divine attribute. Cf. Zohar 1:35a; 3:239b; *Shushan Edut*, p. 361; *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, p. 381; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 69.
 61. According to Zohar 1:238a, the eschatological promise of Zech. 9:9 indicates that the Messiah will subdue the masculine and feminine powers of the demonic realm, symbolized by the donkey and the she-ass (see note 36). The citation of Isa. 63:1 in that context alludes to the fact that this process comes about through the execution of divine judgment against the bloody force of Edom. Hence, the messianic king is associated symbolically with the *Shekhinah*, which is a manifestation of judgment.
 62. Zohar 1:138a.
 63. Zohar 1:108b, 177a–b; 2:108b, 111a; 3:128a, 135a, 142a, 292a; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 65–67.
 64. The image of the eclipse of the moon, or the diminution of the light of the moon, for the exile of the *Shekhinah*, which reflects her separation from the masculine *Tiferet*, symbolically represented by the sun, is repeated quite often in kabbalistic literature, including the zoharic corpus. Conversely, the state of redemption is commonly depicted as the moon being illuminated by the sun. For example, cf. Zohar 1:75b, 165a, 181a–b, 199a, 239b; 2:137a–b, 167b; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 61, 85–86; *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 369. According to Zohar 1:20a, the separation of the moon from the sun is described as a diminution of the moon’s light, which results in the creation of shells that protect the kernel, a process that is referred to as the “rectification of the kernel,” *tiqquna de-moḥa*. In this context, then, a positive role is assigned to the notion of the shell as a material garment that covers and shields the light.
 65. On the association of Esau and the primordial darkness, cf. Zohar 2:167a. As Liebes has argued, in *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 146–149, the correlation of *tohu* and barrenness in Zohar 1:3b, an ontic condition rectified by the appearance of Abraham, may signify Israel’s exilic condition under the domination of Christianity.
 66. *Zohar Hadash*, 55b. On the use of the image of the shells to characterize the realm of demonic forces, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 461–464.

67. As Liebes notes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 89 n. 188, the source for this image was probably Judah Halevi's *Sefer ha-Kuzari* 4:23. On the image of Israel as the core, cf. Zohar 2:195a.
68. Zohar 2:108b. See Wolfson, "Light through Darkness," p. 82 n. 34.
69. *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, pp. 68–69.
70. Regarding the kabbalistic doctrine of the emergence of the demonic shell prior to the divine core, see Idel, "Evil Thought."
71. For a list of relevant rabbinic sources, see Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 5, p. 133 n. 3, and for the zoharic passages, see Reuven Margalio, *Sha'arei Zohar* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1978), p. 69, s.v. Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 146a. It is of interest to note that in several contexts (Zohar 2:52b, 219b; 3:249b), the bite of the "great serpent" functions in a positive way as the catalyst that opens the womb of the female (portrayed symbolically as a hind based on Ps. 42:2) to give birth. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 395–396, 468–469, 738–740. In Zohar 3:67b (*Ra'aya Meheimna*) the image of the serpent opening the womb by biting is applied specifically to the birth of the Messiah. This enigmatic image of the Zohar was considered by later kabbalists to contain one of the most recondite secrets of the divine. Compare the discussion between Isaac Luria and Ḥayyim Vital regarding Zohar 2:52b in Meir Benayahu, *The Toledoth ha-Ari and Luria's "Manner of Life" (Hanhagoth)* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1967), pp. 197–198 (Hebrew); and see Meroz, "Redemption," pp. 307–315; Liebes, "Two Young Roes," pp. 128–130, 137–148. On the evolution of this secret in Sabbatean literature, see references in *ibid.*, p. 128 n. 146.
72. See note 38.
73. Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 468.
74. I have discussed the mythic symbol of the androgynous phallus in a number of my studies. See Wolfson, "Woman – The Feminine as Other," pp. 186–188; *idem*, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 275 n. 14, 317, 342, 344, 357–359, 371 n. 155, 388–389; *idem*, *Circle in the Square*, 46–47, 85–92, 117–118, 147–148 n. 42, 198–199 n. 11, 201 n. 29, 202 n. 31, and 224 n. 147; *idem*, *Along the Path*, pp. 84, 87–88, 173 n. 319, 175 n. 329, 186 n. 376, 222 n. 172. Neumann, *Great Mother*, p. 49, refers to the "uroboric nature" of the phallus, a term that he employs to convey the idea that phallic images can be symbolic of both the masculine and the feminine. Particularly interesting is Neumann's reference (note 18 *ad locum*) to the Indian sculpture of the phallus in which Shiva or Shakti is contained. And compare the description of the uroboric snake woman, i.e. a woman with a phallus, on p. 170. For a more extensive discussion of the mythological symbol of the uroboros, with special attention to its hermaphroditic character, see *idem*, *The Origins and History of Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), pp. 5–38, 187, 414–418. The image of the uroboros is connected to the demonic power in Zohar 2:176b (*Sifra di-Tseni'uta*), as noted by Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 467. Moreover, in that context, the serpent, whose tail is said to be on its head rather than in its mouth, is associated with the symbol of the sea-monster (*tanin*). It is also important to note that the particular act that is related to the image of the serpent is the engraving or inscribing of letters. The more conventional image of the uroboros, i.e., the circular snake whose tail is in its mouth, appears in Zohar 2:179a and 3:205b. These zoharic references are cited by Scholem, *Sabbatai Ševi*, p. 236 n. 105. On the head and the tail of the evil serpent, cf. Zohar 2:268b; 3:119b. In the latter context, the *Shekhinah* in exile is described as executing providence over the nations of the world in the

- manner that the serpent crawls upon the earth, with its head bent to the dust and its tail extended in the air.
75. The expression that I have translated as “men” is *bar nash*, the Aramaic equivalent of *ben adam*. From the context it is evident that this term does not denote all of humanity but is limited to Jewish males, for the inscription of the sign of the covenant is exclusive to the latter. Cf. Zohar 1:94a, 162a. This usage is attested in other zoharic passages, although in some contexts a more exacting term, *bar nash yisra’el*, is used (Zohar 2:865a; 3:25b). To cite one striking example: “Thus a person (*bar nash*) should not mix his image with the image of an idolater because the one is holy and the other is impure” (Zohar 1:219b–220a; and cf. the parallel in Zohar 3:104b). In this context the word *bar nash* refers to the Jew who is contrasted with the idolater, that is, the Christian. The masculine character of *bar nash* is underscored from the meaning of the passage, which is to prohibit sexual relations between the Jewish male and the Christian female. For a similar contrast between *bar nash* and the idolatrous nations, cf. Zohar 1:131a, 205a; 2:88b. According to zoharic anthropology, the human being in the fullest sense is the circumcised Jew. The point is stated explicitly in the *sod milah* appended to Moses de León, *Nefesh ha-Ḥakhmah*, ed. Wijnhoven, “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 131: “When one receives the holy covenant that is sealed and inscribed on his flesh, then he is included in the category of a human being (*nikhlal bi-khelal adam*).” This is expressed on occasion in the Zohar in terms of the rabbinic notion that Jews, in contrast to idolaters, are called by the name *adam*. Cf. Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 61a; Baba Metsi’a 114b; Keritut 6b; Zohar 1:20b, 28b; 2:25b (*Piqqudin*), 86a, 275b; 3:125a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 219a, 238b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 130. The kabbalistic symbolism reinforces the androcentrism of the rabbinic conception of circumcision. On the rabbinic view, see the recent analysis of Lawrence Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood: Circumcision and Gender in Rabbinic Judaism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). Hoffmann correctly notes that circumcision as a “cultural symbol” underscores the “gender opposition in rabbinic Judaism” (p. 24). In particular, Hoffman focuses on the “binary opposition of men’s blood drawn during circumcision and women’s blood that flows during menstruation” (p. 23); and see extended the discussion on pp. 136–154.
76. Zohar 1:228a.
77. Ibid. 2:236b.
78. The issue of circumcision is the subtext of the polemical zoharic passage cited and discussed by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 146–152; and see Liebes’ comments on p. 233 nn. 36 and 42. Kiener, “Image of Islam,” pp. 48, 54–60, notes the centrality of the ritual practice of circumcision in the polemic against the Muslim faith that one finds in zoharic literature. On this point, see also Wolfson, “Circumcision and the Divine Name,” pp. 98–99; idem, *Through a Speculum*, p. 366 n. 142.
79. Many scholars have written on Paul’s treatment of circumcision; here I only mention three relatively recent discussions: John Collins, “A Symbol of Otherness: Circumcision and Salvation in the First Century,” in “*To See Ourselves as Others See Us*,” pp. 163–186; Segal, *Paul the Convert*, pp. 187–223, and Daniel Boyarin, *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 25–27, 36–38, 106–135.
80. Here I follow the suggestion of Boyarin, *A Radical Jew*, p. 27, who cites in support of his interpretation A. J. M. Wedderburn, *Baptism and Resurrection*:

- Studies in Pauline Theology Against Its Graeco-Roman Background* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), p. 84.
81. The Hebrew *zamir* has a double connotation, “singing” and “pruning.” Both meanings are attested in the zoharic text. In this context, the pruning is related more specifically to the rite of circumcision.
 82. The contextualization of a polemic against Christianity in the zoharic exegesis of Genesis 18 is not accidental, for this verse was used in Christian polemics as a scriptural proof-text to anchor the doctrine of the Trinity in Hebrew Scripture. For example, see *Book of the Covenant*, pp. 61–64. In the Eastern Orthodox iconographic tradition, especially prominent in Russian Orthodoxy, the appearance of the three angels to Abraham is assumed to be the sensory apparition of the three divine hypostases and is thus known as the “Old Testament Trinity.” See Leonid Ouspensky, *Theology of the Icon*, trans. Anthony Gythiel (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1992), pp. 267, 276, 294–296, 398–399, 401–402, 408.
 83. The presumption of the Zohar is an aggadic elaboration of the verse, “Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard” (Gen. 9:20), which is followed by the narrative of Noah’s drunkenness. The idea that Noah was responsible for the introduction of instruments in the world is suggested, no doubt, by the biblical description of him as one who worked the land. The depiction of Noah as a drunkard is related more specifically to the fact that he is described as the first to plant a vineyard.
 84. Zohar 1:97a–b. My reading of this passage confirms the interpretation of Zohar 1:3b proposed by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 146–150.
 85. The point is made explicitly in many kabbalistic documents. Here I mention only a few representative examples from the oeuvre of Moses de León: *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 61; *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, p. 381; *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 227.
 86. Zohar 1:102b.
 87. In several contexts, Moses de León describes the rite of circumcision as entering the “mystery of faith.” Cf. *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 67; “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 133.
 88. Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History*, p. 6.
 89. The connection of memory and phallus, based on the Hebrew etymology, is noted by Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 87. This nexus also underlies Derrida’s depiction of circumcision as the “concise experience” of the primordial cut on the flesh which occurs at the designated time, the signature of self, the scar that opens the way, the encircling of oneself by means of which one is named. See Derrida, “Shibboleth,” p. 341; *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 59–60, 65–74, 87–88.
 90. *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 182: “Why is it written [by Sabbath] ‘remember’ (*zakhor*) [Exod. 20:8] and ‘keep’ (*shamor*) [Deut. 5:12]? ‘Remember’ is for the male (*zakhor le-zakhar*) and ‘keep’ for the bride (*shamor le-khallah*).” See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1223; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 107–108. The impact of this text is discernible in a number of subsequent kabbalistic texts, as noted by Margaliot in his note *ad locum*. See also sources cited by Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, p. 134; and compare the analysis of this bahiric text in idem, *Origins*, pp. 142–143, 158–159.
 91. Cf. Zohar 1:48b; 2:92a (*Piqqudin*), 118b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 138a; 3:80b.
 92. Zohar 2:92b.

93. *Berit qaddisha*, which literally means the “holy covenant.” It is evident, however, that in this context, as in many other zoharic passages, the term *berit* is best translated as “phallus,” the site of the covenant of circumcision.
94. Zohar 2:92a.
95. Zohar 1:193b. According to another passage (1:160a), the twofold aspect of memory, signified by the words *zekhirah* and *peqidah*, is applied to the demonic realm.
96. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 32b; *Midrash Tehillim* 137:8, 263b. Cf. *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 160. This formulation is part of the *zikhronot* prayer included in the *musaf* for Rosh ha-Shanah: *ki ein shikheḥah lifnei khisse khevodekha we-ein nistar mineged einekha*. See *Mahzor la-Yamim ha-Nora'im*, 2 vols., ed. Daniel S. Goldschmidt (Jerusalem: Qoren, 1970), vol. 1, p. 256. An alternative locution, *ein shikheḥah lifnei ha-maqom*, “there is no forgetfulness before God,” is found in Tosefta, Yoma 2:7; Palestinian Talmud, Yoma 3:9, 41b; *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 3:8, p. 89. A literal rendering of this expression in Aramaic is found in Zohar 1:199b, *deleit nashyu qameih quḏsha berikh hu*. Cf. *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 3:7, p. 46; *Midrash Tanhuma*, ed. Buber, Ki Tetse 11, 20b; *Eikhah Rabbah*, ed. Solomon Buber (Vilna: Rom, 1899), 5:1, p. 154.
97. The reciprocal coronation between the *Shekhinah* and the righteous comes about, according to the Zohar, through other ritual activities, notably study of Torah. See Wolfson, “Forms of Visionary Ascent,” p. 230. Cf. the formulation in Zohar 1:84a: “Praiseworthy are the righteous who are crowned by the Holy One, blessed be He, and He is crowned by them.”
98. For discussion of the motif of Sabbath as the *hieros gamos*, see Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 101–121. On a number of occasions in his analysis, Ginsburg touches upon the image of coronation as it relates to the union of male and female.
99. For other examples of this symbolic understanding of crowning, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 357–368. Regarding the understanding of sexual union as the assimilation of the female into the male, see idem, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 92–98.
100. “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 133. I have translated according to the version of this passage extant in MS Florence, Bibliotheca Laurentiana Plut. 88.42, reconstructed from the editor’s apparatus. This reading, more or less, conforms to that which is found in the printed edition of Basel, 1608. Cf. Zohar 1:13a; 3:91b–92a.
101. The kabbalistic characterization of redemption as the reintegration of the principle of evil into holiness was already made by Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, p. 77. In that context, however, Scholem left open the question whether this reintegration implied the complete annihilation of the principle of evil or its suspension (i.e. termination and elevation) in the holy. Regarding this theme, see Wolfson, “Left Contained,” pp. 37–45.
102. I do not mean to suggest that for the zoharic authorship the attribute of judgment is purely passive. On the contrary, there are many descriptions of divine and even demonic judgment as an aggressive force. (A *locus classicus* to depict the active quality of judgment, related especially to avenging sexual sins connected to the male organ, is Lev. 26:25; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 1365.) The issue is, rather, that the attribute of judgment in relation to the attribute of mercy or grace is the quality of limitation and restriction. Absolute judgment, therefore, is characterized as impotency or celibacy, both associated with Christianity.

103. Zohar 2:112a: "The one who does not attempt to produce offspring cleaves to the side of the evil man (*adam bisha*) and enters beneath his wings." On the "ontological flaw" of celibacy and the death of the Edomite kings, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 68. Regarding the zoharic opposition to the Christian monastic ideal, see *ibid.*, pp. 149 and 190 n. 201. On Jewish polemicizing against the Christian ideals of monasticism and celibacy, see *Book of the Covenant*, p. 35 n. 21.
104. Zohar 2:103a, 108b–109a (in that context the emasculated demonic force is associated with the rabbinic idea of the castration of the masculine Leviathan; cf. Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 74b; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 72). See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 517, 1362.
105. Cf. Zohar 1:115a, 159b–160a. In 119a it seems that the *peqidah* and *zekhirah* mark two stages in the process of redemption, a motif that became a central messianic teaching in later kabbalistic texts, for example, in the *Ma'amar ha-Ge'ullah* of Moses Hayyim Luzzato. On the possible Sabbatian background to Luzzato's notion of two stages of redemption, see Tishby, *Studies in Kabbalah*, vol. 3, pp. 780–808; Liebes, *On Sabbateanism*, p. 319 n. 119.
106. My distinction between cognitive forgetting and ontological oblivion, and the characterization of the latter, is indebted to the analysis of Martin Heidegger, *Parmenides*, trans. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 71–83.
107. Zohar 1:193b.
108. According to the zoharic symbolism, this is the mystical intent of the biblical injunction for Israel to wipe out the memory of Amaleq (Exod. 17:14; Deut. 25:19). Insofar as Amaleq is the personification of the demonic power, which is associated with oblivion, it follows that an appropriate means to control this force is the obliteration of its memory from existence. Significantly, the Zohar adopts the aggadic view that Amaleq is associated with sins related specifically to the covenant of circumcision, the locus of memory on the flesh. Cf. Zohar 1:28b; 2:65a, 66a, 67a, 195a; 3:30b, 190a.
109. Zohar 1:59b, 71b, 153b, 184a, 189b, 197b, 229a, 251a, 257a; 2:23a; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 62. Note that in Zohar 1:93b the birth of the messianic king from the seed of Boaz is explained in terms of the latter's sexual purity with respect to the phallus.
110. Zohar 1:184a.
111. The word that I have translated as "it" is *bah*, which is in the feminine form. I have not rendered this as "her" because this gives the impression that the point of this passage is that desire of God is for the female persona of the *Shekhinah*. In fact, the issue here is the phallic covenant, which is related to the *Shekhinah*, but not in the image of a female. The feminine grammatical form is used because it relates to the word *qeshet*, the visible sign of the eternal covenant, but in terms of the theosophic symbolism the *qeshet* corresponds to the female aspect of the Godhead that is localized in the phallus, the sign of the covenant (*ot berit*).
112. Zohar 1:72b. Cf. *ibid.* 2:11a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 18, 36b.
113. Cf. Zohar 1:65b, 93b; 2:57b, 66b, 87b, 180b, 195a; *Shushan Edut*, pp. 363–364; "Sefer ha-Mishkal," p. 132. In some passages, by contrast, the "sign of the covenant" refers symbolically to *Yesod* rather than *Shekhinah*. Cf. Zohar 1:47b, 94a, 114b, 153b, 222b, 236b, 246a, 247b; 2:23a, 200a, 225a; 3:84a.
114. Zohar 1:71b. The view expressed by Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 617 n. 215, that in this passage the bow refers symbolically to *Malkhut*, can be accepted only if

- it is understood that it is the aspect of *Malkhut* comprised within *Yesod*, which is precisely the point of the comment that the “covenant of the bow” is “contained in the righteous.” By contrast, cf. the interpretation of Gen. 49:24 in Zohar 1:247a, wherein *qeshet* is said to refer to the female spouse of Joseph, presumably a reference to the feminine personification of *Shekhinah*. On the phallic connotation of *qeshet*, cf. Zohar 1:18a, 72b; 3:84a; and see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 286, 334 n. 30, 337–338 n. 40, 340–341, 368–369 n. 149, 386–387.
115. Zohar 2:66b. I discussed this passage in *Through a Speculum*, p. 334, but I did not go far enough in my understanding of the phallic nature of the rainbow in this context.
116. Zohar 1:71b: “Permission is not given to gaze with the eye upon the rainbow when it appears in the world so that no shame will appear before the *Shekhinah*.” For a Hebrew parallel to this passage, cf. *Shushan Edut*, p. 364. In his commentary on the liturgy, Eleazar of Worms remarks that the worshiper sees the *Shekhinah* only in the beginning of his prayers, for “more than that would be a disgrace for the *Shekhinah*.” See *Perushei Siddur ha-Tefillah la-Roqeah*, ed. Moshe Hershler and Yehudah A. Hershler (Jerusalem: Machon ha-Rav Hershler, 1992), p. 2. According to my analysis of this passage in “Sacred Space and Mental Iconography: *Imago Templi* and Contemplation in Rhineland Jewish Pietism,” in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, ed. Robert Chazan, William Hallo, and Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), pp. 632–633 (the passage is translated on pp. 607–608), the shamefulness described here is related to the phallic element of the *Shekhinah* in a manner that parallels the zoharic idea.
117. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 15, asserts that in the Zohar the rainbow generally alludes to *Yesod*, but acknowledges that in this context (the reference to Zohar 1:62b should be corrected to 72b; in the original Hebrew version the reference is correct) the rainbow appears to represent *Malkhut*, or the feminine *Shekhinah*. I have adopted a similar approach, but I have provided the ontological structure that resolves the tension between these two interpretations. That is, the rainbow, like the phallus, is an androgynous symbol and thus can represent both the male and the female. Indeed, in my opinion, the female is itself part of the male.
118. Zohar 1:117a.
119. On the liminality of the symbol of the bride applied to the *Shekhinah*, consider the following comment of Ezra of Gerona on the verse, “Your cheeks are comely with plaited wreaths” (Song of Songs 1:10), in *Kitvei Ramban* 2:487: “The figurative language (*ha-mashal*) refers to the *Shekhinah* coming out from exile and she is like a bride that enters the nuptial chamber.” Cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 12, 27a: “The lilies refer to the children of Israel who shall be in exile amongst the mixed multitude who are the thorns. This is the secret of ‘I will make an end (*khalah*) of all the nations among which I have banished you, but I will not make an end of you’ (Jer. 46:28). He showed him the reward of the general assembly of study (*agra de-khallah*), and it is the ‘blazing fire’ (Exod. 3:2) amongst the thorns, which are the sinners when they oppress the *Shekhinah* and Israel. Their reward is the bride (*kallah*), for the *Shekhinah* goes from them as a bride and the groom comes on account of her. This is the meaning of ‘the profit of the public lectures is the pushing’ (*agra de-khallah duhaqa*), that is, he will bring them out of exile on account of her.” For a different use of this talmudic dictum, *agra de-khallah duhaqa*

- (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 6b), cf. Zohar 3:239a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*). In that context, the dictum is interpreted as support for the idea that those who are engaged in the study of the Torah in the exile suffer on behalf of the *Shekhinah*.
120. Zohar 1:119a, 145b–146a. In the latter context it is stated explicitly that the rectification for the sin of the primordial serpent is through the union of male and female. On the use of this zoharic text by the Frankists, see Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, p. 139.
 121. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 92–98. The reading of the zoharic passage that I have offered here confirms my remarks in *Through a Speculum*, pp. 274–275 n. 14. That the nature of heterosexual eros is linked essentially to the construction of the feminine as the place to contain the masculine is stated explicitly in the exegesis of Song of Songs 7:11 in Zohar 1:88b: “‘I am my beloved’s’ is first and afterwards ‘his desire is for me.’ ‘I am my beloved’s,’ to establish a place for him initially and afterwards ‘his desire is for me.’” On the essential role of the female to contain the male, cf. the interpretation of the expression *aron ha-berit* in Zohar 2:214b as a reference to the *Shekhinah* that contains the holy body of the divine *anthropos*, which is also depicted as the secret of the Torah. In that context, moreover, this symbolic nexus is applied to the custom of placing the corpse of the righteous man in a coffin, for he alone is worthy of such an honor, since he was careful with respect to the “sign of the holy covenant.” The biblical paradigm is Joseph, of whom Scripture says that “he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt” (Gen. 50:26). Commenting on the double *yod* in the word *wayyisem*, the author of the Zohar writes, “The covenant was joined to the covenant, the secret below in the secret above, and he entered the coffin.”
 122. Consider the account of the creation of Eve out of Adam given in Zohar 3:83b: “The Holy One, blessed be He, took her from his side, shaped her, and brought her before him. Then Adam had sexual intercourse with his wife and she was a support to him.” According to this passage, there is a transition from the original androgynous state (Gen. 1:26–28), in which the female was contained within the male, to a separation of the female from the male (ibid. 2:18–24). What is significant is that even in the case of the second account of the creation of the woman, the female gender is described strictly from the point of view of the heterosexual desire and procreative mandate of the male. The zoharic author thus understands the biblical locution of God making a “fitting helper” for Adam in terms of separating the female from the male so that the male can have sexual relations with the female. Cf. Zohar 3:296a (*Idra Zuta*), translated and discussed in Wolfson, “Woman – The Feminine as Other,” pp. 175–176. Given the repeated emphasis in the Zohar on coitus as the masculinization of the female (see the reference at the end of note 110), there is simply no textual justification to interpret the second account of creation as more equalitarian than the first.
 123. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 44.
 124. A critique of Lacan’s “heterosexist structuralism” is given by Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 43–57; and idem, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 57–91.
 125. For further discussion of this understanding of the kabbalistic doctrine of redemption, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 116–121. In part, the kabbalistic understanding of the act of remembering reflects the philological use of the root *pqd* in the talmudic expression (attributed to Joshua ben Levi) in

- Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 62b, “every man is obligated to have conjugal relations with [literally, to remember] his wife (*lifqod et ishto*) when he goes on a journey.” Cf. *Shulhan Arukh*, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 240; Yoreh De’ah 184; Even ha-Ezer 76. This euphemistic usage is biblical in origin; cf. Judges 15:1. One must also bear in mind those biblical passages where the root *pqd* is used in conjunction with God visiting the barren woman, an act that results in the opening of the womb. Cf. Gen. 21:1; 2 Sam. 2:21.
126. Tosefta, Berakhot 6:5; Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 9:3, 12d); Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 59a. Cf. *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 161.
127. *Shushan Edut*, pp. 363–364.
128. The occultation of the feminine in the messianic era is affirmed in a number of zoharic passages. In exile the *Shekhinah* is dispersed among the nations in order to protect her children, but in such a state she is exposed (on the description of the destruction of the Temple as the separation of the Matrona from the King resulting in the exposure of the genitals, cf. Zohar 3:74b). In the redemption, however, the *Shekhinah* will be concealed within the rebuilt Temple like a woman who is compared metaphorically to the fruitful vine hidden within the house (on the basis on Ps. 128:3). The word *tsenu’ah* in these contexts has the double connotation of “hidden” and (sexually) “modest.” Cf. Zohar 1:84b, 115b–116a; 2:170b–171a; *Zohar Hadash*, 66a–b; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, p. 93. The language of the zoharic texts may be based on *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 156. The eschatological condition of the *Shekhinah* reflects and is reinforced by the sexual modesty of Jewish women, who are (ideally) to remain within the home so that the upper covenant is not forgotten or damaged. Cf. Zohar 3:125b; *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 372. In his commentary on Ezekiel’s chariot vision, Moses de León connects this idea exegetically to the words “the heavens opened and I saw visions of God,” that is, in the exilic state that which was concealed is disclosed, for there is no shelter or covering protecting the *Shekhinah*. This dispersion is the symbolic significance of the heavens opening up. Most interestingly, the visions of God are here related directly to this state of disclosure that is associated with exile (hence the word for visions, *mar’ot*, is written in the defective form). In the state of exile, the *Shekhinah* is in the form of the mirror (*mar’eh*) in which the image is seen, whereas in the state of redemption she is hidden. Cf. MS Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica ebr. 283, fol. 166a. On the concealment and internalization of the feminine, cf. *ibid.*, fol. 167a. Finally, it should be noted that elsewhere in zoharic literature, it is emphasized that during the week, when the *Shekhinah* is entrapped in the demonic shells (symbolic of exile), she is compared to a gate that is closed so that the unholy will not have intercourse with the holy, but when she is liberated on Sabbath and the day of the new moon, the gate is opened, for then the holy has intercourse with the holy (symbolic of redemption), and the moon is illuminated by and united with the sun. Cf. Zohar 1:75a–b; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 18, 34a; sec. 19, 38a; sec. 21, 61a; sec. 30, 73a–b; sec. 36, 78a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 438–439, 1226–1227; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 115–116, 292–293. Needless to say, this motif is another version of the standard kabbalistic understanding of exile as the separation of the masculine and feminine aspects of God.

7 Fore/giveness on the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response

Seit menlich böser Geist sich
Bemächtigt des glüklichen Altertums, unendlich,
Langher währt Eines, gesangsfeind, klanglos, das
In Maasen vergeht, des Sinnes gewaltsames. Ungebundenes aber
Hasset Gott.

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Der Einzige*¹

Time Of Forgiveness In The Giving Before Time

“To Err is *Human*, to Forgive, *Divine*,”² in this relatively simple, albeit strikingly incisive, couplet, Alexander Pope offered the world one of the most memorable and oft-cited reflections on the constitutional difference between human and divine nature. But what does it mean to speak of forgiveness as a distinctive character trait of godliness in contrast to the all too human propensity to stray from the path of righteousness? To apprehend the signification of a forgiving God, indeed a God whose very way of being in relation to the world is to forgive, we must chart three conditions contained analytically in the concept of forgiveness. We may call these conditions necessary, but not sufficient, that is, the saying of forgiveness implies that each of these conditions be met, but for there to be the forgiving of the other who is forgiven, something more than these conditions must come to play. The conditions set the logical parameters of the experience, but the experience itself exceeds the parameters in which it allows itself to be present and verbally apprehended.

In the first instance, I note that forgiveness should be clearly demarcated from forgetfulness. Here I would take issue with a

commonplace perception about the causal relationship between the two, which has been expressed by no less a figure than Shakespeare through the mouth of King Lear, "Pray you now, forget and forgive."³ I do not think that forgiveness is consequent to forgetfulness; on the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that the two are mutually exclusive, for if a matter is forgotten, there is no need for it to be forgiven. The consciousness we attribute to God does not forget; it forgives; it gives before there is forgetfulness. To give before, to fore/give, is precisely not to forget, for one who forgets cannot forgive. Forgiveness demands to come before forgetfulness.

The second condition is a correlate of the first: if forgiveness is predicated on the absence of forgetfulness, it presupposes the act of memory. For something to be forgiven, it must be remembered. Forgiveness demands. It entrusts the other by commissioning from the other, laying claim on one to respond to the other without an exchange of goods. Forgiveness bears within itself the limit of its own delimitation, by assuming the laying-at-hand of that which is remembered, that which proceeds (or slips) from the past into the present, and thereby is anticipated in the future, the retrieval of that which is momentary, the return of that which is to come. Forgiveness happens in time, forgetfulness is the obfuscation of time. Forgiveness ensues from the mediated sense of time's immediacy, indeed from the experience of time as the immediate and irreducible possibility of there being something, even if that something is nothing; forgetfulness holds sway when there is no more to become, when the light of there-being is veiled in the darkness of being-there. Forgiveness is the giving-before that grounds the fecundity of temporality in the *nunc stans*, forgetfulness the taking-away that extirpates the possibility of the present without which there is neither remembrance of the past nor expectation of the future. In the moment of forgiving, time endures, and no more turns into not yet, but in the standstill of forgetting, time withdraws, and not yet becomes no more.⁴

The third condition involves the axiological mechanism by means of which forgiveness is assured in God's relationship to human beings. Here the discourse turns to the culturally specific formulation, which may indeed have a more universalist application but which is nevertheless experienced as part of the foundation of the particular ethnic identity. The focus of my reflections henceforth refers to descriptions of God's unique relation to the Jewish people.

In this case, forgiveness has been traditionally linked to the symbol of the covenant. Beyond the legalistic background of this ancient phenomenon, the covenant assumed semiological significance in the course of the religious history of Judaism: covenant is the sign that brings forth to memory, that which calls to mind, and thus breaks open the path to forgiveness. The resonance of what is unsaid in this saying can be heard best if we again contrast forgiveness and forgetfulness. Forgiveness is the presence of the sign, inscription, the cutting of the covenant upon the rock; forgetfulness the absence of the sign, erasure, the depositing of the trace beneath the rock. To erase that trace is the mark of humankind, to give before, to fore/give, that of transcendence. In forgiving, one gives before, participating in the dialogue that releases the tension of the moment; by forgetting, we remain submerged in the oblivion of the past, the silent speech of senseless chatter, the emptiness that is full.

Return of Daughter to Mother's Womb: Ontological Condition of the Turn

Having established some of the contours of forgiveness as it takes shape within a specific cultural matrix, I will set out to examine this phenomenon from the even more limited vantage point of the medieval kabbalistic tradition, and even here my scope is far more narrow, since I will look at the symbolic depiction of forgiveness as this affectivity is refracted through the prism of the complex aggregate of textual units that we call *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the “zoharic literature,”⁵ which in all likelihood assumed literary shape, more or less, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Castile. To lay out even more precisely the trajectory of my thinking, I will focus on the symbol of Yom Kippur, which is one of the standard names employed by kabbalists to delimit the third of the ten divine potencies, *Binah*, understanding, which is also referred to as the mother, the womb, the place of return, *teshuvah*, the retracing of the way to return to origin, the world of the masculine, the world that is coming, and a myriad of other poetic tropes. Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is the day of amends, that is, the day on which there is the mending of that which is torn. The reparation (*tiqqun*) comes by way of the return of the lower seven emanations to the womb of the mother whence they

emerged, a restoration that anticipates the state of union achieved in the eschaton.⁶ By thinking philosophically about forgiveness and atonement, we set out to capture the mythic import of Yom Kippur, especially as it relates to the symbol of the mother in the esoteric tradition. In listening to the word communicated by the poetic utterance, we hear again that which has been uttered before, but never in the precise way that it is heard in this moment.⁷ In that respect, we follow as we lead.

I begin with a zoharic text, an explication of the verse, *tiq'u va-ḥodesh shofar ba-keseh le-yom ḥaggenu*, “Blow the ram’s horn on the new moon, on the full moon for our feast day” (Ps. 81:4), interpreted rabbinically as a reference to Rosh ha-Shanah, the new-year festival celebrated on the first day of the seventh month, the festival that occurs when the moon is new, that is, when it is hidden, as opposed to the middle of the month, on the fifteenth, when the moon is full. The Hebrew rendered as “full moon” is *keseh*, a term that is explicable (as medieval commentaries such as Abraham Ibn Ezra and Rashi duly noted) from the occurrence of the expression *le-yom ha-keseh* in Proverbs 7:20, which seems to refer to the middle of the month, used there to signify the appointed time when the man returns home from his business trip. The rabbinic reading not only ignores the *peshat*, the contextual sense, but turns the text against itself, for the term *ba-keseh* is understood as the time when the moon is hidden, that is, at the beginning of the month when the moon is renewed, rather than the middle of the month when it is full.⁸ The mystical reading proffered in the following passage builds upon this interpretative foundation:

R. Eleazar said: It is written, “on the full moon for our feast day” (Ps. 81:4) ... [*ba-keseh*] with [the letter] *he*, for the moon is concealed (*de-itkasya sihara*) ... Come and see: On that day the moon is hidden, and she does not shine until the tenth of the month when Israel all repent in a perfect repentance, and the supernal mother returns and illuminates her. On that day she takes the illumination of the mother, and joy is found in everything. Thus it is written, *yom ha-kippurim hu* (“This is the day of Yom Kippur”) (Lev. 23:27). It should have been *yom kippur* [in the singular]. Why is it *yom ha-kippurim* [in the plural]? To indicate that two lights are illumined as one, the upper radiance

shining upon the lower radiance. On that day she shines from the supernal light and not from the light of the sun. Therefore it is written “on the full moon for our feast day.” R. Abba sent [a question] to R. Simeon: What is the [appropriate] time for the copulation of the Community of Israel and the holy king? He responded to him [with the words of Abraham]: “And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s daughter; and she became my wife” (Gen. 20:12) ... R. Hiyya said to R. Abba: What did he say in his response to you? He said that the coupling of the king and the queen is certainly only at the time that she is illumined from the supernal father, for when she is illumined from him they call her “holy” (*qodesh*), for she takes from the house of the father, and they are united as one, for the king is called “holy,” as it is written, “Israel is holy unto the Lord” (Jer. 2:3), for he takes from the place that is called “holy.” Consequently, “she is my father’s daughter though not my mother’s daughter,” for this name [*qodesh*] is from the house of the father and not from the house of the mother. And thus “she became my wife,” to unite as one at that time and not another time, at the time she takes from the house of the father and not at the time she takes from the house of the mother. The day of Yom Kippur proves the point for sexual intercourse is forbidden, for the coupling does not take place since she takes from the house of the mother rather than from the house of the father.¹⁰

The secret unique to Yom Kippur is related to a theosophic process that unfolds therein, the ontological reality that yields the existential meaning associated with this particular moment in time. An analysis of the role of time in kabbalistic ontology obviously lies beyond the circumscribed boundaries of this study, but it is necessary to make a preliminary observation about the texture of time,¹¹ for without a working hypothesis with respect to this matter, we cannot comprehend the theosophic mystery distinctive to the time of Yom Kippur. In general terms, we may say that for the medieval kabbalists, time is not dependent on the motion of bodies in space, nor is it conceived as the fleeting shadow of the eternal forms in the world of matter. Indeed, time is not dependent on physical existence at all, for it is of the very essence of the sefirotic potencies, which

constitute the mystical shape of the Godhead. Time, therefore, is not extrinsic to God; on the contrary, it is the very pulsation of the divine energy.¹² To the degree that this energy is configured in the symbolic imagination of the kabbalists as consciousness, it follows that temporality is essentially indistinguishable from consciousness. Moreover, just as the consciousness of God is infinite in its extensionality, so too is the duration of time potentially infinite, an infinity that is expressed in the ceaseless cycle of renewal and regeneration of the moment.

The kabbalistic perspective is expressed succinctly by Moses Cordovero: "Time is the secret of the rotation of the emanations (*sod gilgul ha-sefirot*), during the day this particular emanation, during the night this particular emanation, and on Sabbath this particular emanation. The time that was from the day that the world was created and the emanations rotated is not the time that evolves from now and forward, but rather there are new aspects, for the succession of time (*sefer zemanim*) that is before him has no boundary and no end."¹³ Cordovero relates this ever-changing aspect of time to the phenomenon of new interpretations of Torah: there is always a novel explanation to be drawn forth from the text, since the Torah is the manifestation of the divine essence that is infinite. Cordovero's linkage of innovative explications of Torah and the ever-changing nature of time is a fascinating idea worthy of further exploration, but what is most important for my purposes is his formulation that time is the secret of the rotation of the sefirotic emanations.¹⁴ This underscores the point that time is the very essence of the divine nature and not something extrinsic to it. Moreover, inasmuch as the divine nature is limitless, it follows that each moment of time, which is the very expression of that nature, will be unlike that which has preceded it. From the perspective of kabbalistic theosophy, the element of time that is most real is the present, which is perhaps best captured by the Bergsonian idea of the *élan vital*, the ever-gushing stream of temporality that flows without pause, although never in the same manner. The present alone possesses ontic reality in the prehension of consciousness, for only the presence of the moment makes possible the remembrance of the past and the anticipation of the future.

With this brief introduction to the kabbalistic understanding of time, we may return to the specific example of Yom Kippur. This holiest day on the Jewish calendar assumes a particular

theosophic significance, which in turn has an impact on the practitioner's liturgical experience of time. The mystery is laid bare by heeding the philological concealment unveiled in the utterance of the festival's biblical name, *yom ha-kippurim*, literally, the "day of atonements." The plural form of this expression is decoded symbolically by the zoharic authorship as an allusion to the fact that on that day the supernal radiance, *Binah*, the third of the ten emanations, shines upon the lower radiance, *Malkhut*, the tenth emanation, an illumination that can be conveyed as well by the anthropomorphic image of the mother casting her light upon the daughter, which in another passage is depicted as the illumination of the lower mother by the supernal mother.¹⁵

The reunion of mother and daughter is also described as the time that the daughter takes from the house of the mother rather than from the house of the father. The incestuous relationship implied in the image of the daughter taking from the father is utilized by the author of the zoharic passage to depict symbolically the emanation of the lower wisdom, often referred to as the wisdom of Solomon (*hokhmat shelomo*), from the upper wisdom, or the wisdom of God (*hokhmat elohim*).¹⁶ On the day that the daughter receives from the father, the daughter and the son unite in holy matrimony.¹⁷ The incestuous mating of father and daughter facilitates the second incestuous relationship between sister and brother by means of which they adopt the personae of king and queen. Not only is there an astonishing use of incestuous relations by kabbalists to characterize intra-divine processes, but it is precisely the cohabitation of father and daughter, on the one hand, and that of son and daughter, on the other, that convey the notion of sacred sexuality, the theosophic symbol that underlies the pietistic ideal of spiritual eros.¹⁸ The point is underscored in the aforecited zoharic text by the claim that the word *qodesh*, "holy," applies to the father, the son, and the daughter, which correspond, respectively, to the second, sixth, and tenth emanations, *Hokhmah*, *Tif'eret*, and *Malkhut*. In this context, as elsewhere in the Zohar, the word *qodesh* is related specifically to the sacral dimension of sexual matters, for the operative notion is that holiness is attained not by sexual abstinence, but through the proper mental intentionality that purifies the act of intercourse.¹⁹ In this particular setting, the point being made is that holiness consists of the son and the daughter, *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, the holy King and

the Community of Israel, receiving the overflow from the father, *Hokhmah*, which facilitates the union of the king and the queen.²⁰

By contrast, on Yom Kippur, when the daughter is illumined by the mother, the union between *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut* is forbidden. The theosophic secret is related sacramentally to the ritual prohibition of sex between a husband and his wife on that day. The temporary ascetic renunciation below symbolically reflects the ontological condition above, for the union of mother and daughter precludes the possibility of the union between daughter and son.²¹ The reparation on the day of atonement, therefore, involves not the heterosexual image of the king cohabiting with the queen, but the presumably asexual image of the mother radiating upon the daughter, which is also portrayed as the return of the daughter to the mother's womb. It must be noted, however, that in some passages, the zoharic authorship utilizes images of a decidedly erotic nature to depict the lower world of *Malkhut* receiving the blessing from the upper world of *Binah*. For instance, in one text, the relationship of these sefirotic gradations on Yom Kippur is described as the visitation of the mother to the palace of the daughter, which results in the radiation of the face (*nehiru de-anpin*), a trope often used in zoharic texts to convey the sense of joy related to the overflow of the divine efflux, which on occasion is expressed in terms of the erotic union that binds together the different aspects of being.²²

Come and see: The lower world exists to receive constantly, and it is the precious stone, and the supernal world only gives her in the manner in which she exists ... In the manner in which the lower world is crowned she draws from that which is above ... When does she exist in the supernal light? I would say on Yom Kippur, for on Yom Kippur that precious stone shines with the supernal light from the light of the world-to-come ... When the supernal mother, the world-to-come, comes to dwell in the palace of the lower world, so that there will be an illumination of the face ... it emits all of the blessings and it shines on everything, and all that freedom is found and Israel takes from those blessings. When the world-to-come enters the palace of the lower world, the lower rejoices with her children in that supernal meal. The table is then blessed and all of the worlds are blessed, and all joy and all the illumination of the face are found there.²³

In the complex symbology embraced by the Castilian kabbalists who lie behind the fictional personae of the zoharic narrative, a variety of different unifications characterize the intra-divine processes. In general, most scholars have focused on the heterosexual motif of the *hieros gamos* that occurs between the sixth and the tenth emanations, *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, the holy King and his Matrona, as the central form of unity. There is certainly justification for this emphasis insofar as the kabbalists themselves often privilege heterosexual union as the most appropriate image to convey the ideal state of harmony and perfection that will be realized in the messianic age. Exile is marked by the separation of male and female, whereas redemption entails the reunification of the two. The eschatological goal of *tiqqun*, therefore, involves the repairing of male and female so that the primordial state of wholeness will be retrieved. In addition to the heterosexual image of union, however, there is incontrovertible evidence in kabbalistic writings for a paradigm of same-sex unions within the Godhead, either male–male or female–female. To be sure, these homosexual relationships are transmuted into heterosexual terms such that the active partner is portrayed as male vis-à-vis the passive partner who is female. In the specific case of the relationship between *Binah* and *Malkhut*, the former is depicted as the “world of the masculine” and the latter as the “world of the feminine,” even though female images are clearly assigned to both of these gradations in the symbolic imagination of the kabbalists.²⁴ Thus, the two *sefirot* are respectively imaged as mother and daughter, or alternatively as supernal mother and lower mother, as well as the two sisters, Leah and Rachel.²⁵

Moreover, not only is it the case that the upper female is valorized as male in relation to the lower female, but the latter is itself transformed into a male by virtue of its union with the former. This is precisely the import of the symbol of the mother as it emerges from the zoharic material and related kabbalistic sources: although we rightly assume that motherhood is a biological function of the female sex, from the perspective of gender as it is constructed in the relevant works of theosophic kabbalah, the role of mothering is decidedly masculine, indeed phallic, in its nature.²⁶ Hence, in one passage, the zoharic authorship describes the transformation of the daughter into the mother in terms of the image of *Binah* bestowing her garments on *Malkhut* such that the latter is vested in the form of the Israelite

males.²⁷ Yom Kippur itself is a symbolic embodiment of this transformation, which is portrayed either as the ascent of *Malkhut* to *Binah* or as the descent of *Binah* to *Malkhut*. In the final analysis, both processes signify the metamorphosis by means of which the lower female assumes the role of the upper female, which is to say, the lower female is masculinized and adopts the persona of the mother who bestows blessings of sustenance upon her offspring.²⁸ On Yom Kippur, the *Shekhinah* is thus marked by a double movement: the ascent to the mother above and the overflowing to Israel below. The zoharic symbolism is well summarized by Moses de León:

Yom ha-kippurim: All beginnings are difficult in their inception, but in the end they are well grounded [literally, “they stand in their property”]. The gradations revolve and rotate, each one according to its measure, one atop the other, and the higher one atop both of them [based on Eccles. 5:7]. Indeed, her beginning is difficult in its inception, but in her end she dwells in the house of her mother, and her mother crowns her and adorns her, and she takes for her “seal and cord” (Gen. 38:25), “lighting oil and incense” (Num. 4:7), as her foundation, to illuminate the side of her face [based on Exod. 25:37]. She is called by the name of her mother in the splendor of her radiant face, *Yom ha-kippurim*, for the mother shines her face upon her, “and she said to her, ‘I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy’ ” (Ruth 3:1). Israel, the holy nation, have repented from their ways ... Forgive your nation, Israel ... all the faces are illuminated in relation to them ... How good and pleasant is it when Israel are in their proper order, and “the mother sits over the fledglings” (Deut. 22:6). They are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst, “they are the seed the Lord has blessed” (Isa. 61:9). For you must know that when Israel arouse the repentance, and they come before the Lord, blessed be he, in love, and they turn from their evil ways, they are called children of the blessed Holy One, as it says, “You are children of the Lord your God” (Deut. 14:1). He placed his *Shekhinah* over them, to guide them, to discipline them, and to lead them, like a mother that disciplines her children, as it says, “the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son” (ibid. 8:5). Thus when the blessed One places his fear upon them, they return to him and they distance

themselves from their evil ways. Consequently, the blessed One forgives them, and his *Shekhinah* returns to them, they are radiant and they are forgiven.²⁹

De León appropriates the rabbinic maxim that “all beginnings are difficult”³⁰ in order to characterize the nature of the *Shekhinah* at the beginning of the year, that is, on Rosh ha-Shanah, the day of judgment, *yom ha-din*. Kabbalistically understood, this implies that the attribute of judgment, which is the *Shekhinah*, has dominion on that day. By contrast, her end is related to Yom Kippur, for on that day the judgmental aspect of the *Shekhinah* is ameliorated and transformed by her ascent to and reintegration in the womb of *Binah*, which is metaphorically depicted as the stability that she achieves when she comes to dwell in the house of her mother. On Yom Kippur, the *Shekhinah* is crowned and glorified by the illumination of *Binah*, and thus she assumes the name of her mother, for she is endowed with the properties of motherhood in relation to the people of Israel who have atoned for their sins and who have been forgiven by God. In her role as the mother sustaining her children in the hour that they have been forgiven, the *Shekhinah* is transformed from judgment to mercy, a transformation that implies as well the masculinization of her femininity. The point is underscored in the following zoharic passage wherein several interpretations of the verse “And Melchizedek, king of Shalem,” *u-malki tsedeq melekh shalem* (Gen. 14:18), are proffered:

Melekh shalem precisely, the king that rules in perfection (*bi-shelemo*). When is he the perfect king (*melekh shalem*)? On Yom Kippur for all the faces are illuminated ... Another interpretation: “And Melchizedek,” this is the final world, “king of Shalem,” this is the supernal world, for the one is crowned in the other without separation, two worlds as one.³¹

The cryptic biblical reference to Melchizedek is decoded as a symbolic allusion to the *Shekhinah*,³² who is called by this name because this attribute is the “perfect king,” *melekh shalem*, but she achieves this masculine status only on Yom Kippur when all of the sefirotic gradations radiate upon her as a result of her union with the supernal world of *Binah*. In the day of Yom Kippur, therefore, the

heterosexual bonding of son and daughter, or king and queen, is transcended for the sake of the higher unification between the two female configurations, which is expressed in the above passage as the mutual crowning of the “final world,” the *Shekhinah*, and the “supernal world,” *Binah*. The unity of the two worlds entails the masculine transposition of the feminine character of the divine, which is depicted paradoxically by the convergence of the symbols of mother and king. As I noted above, this theosophic process is reflected in the traditional injunction to abstain from sexual intercourse on Yom Kippur. The ritual prohibition to engage in coitus reflects the ontological fact that above there is a union between the lower and the upper females, which results in the transformation of the daughter into the mother, a process that bestows upon the former the title of king, which is associated with the latter. The application of the symbol of the king to *Binah* and *Malkhut* denotes the quality of overflowing that is associated with both attributes in relation to what is beneath them. The point is disclosed in the following zoharic passage: “There is a king above, which is the mystery of the holy of holies ... and there is a king below, which is in the likeness of that supernal king, and it is the king over everything that is below.”³³ When the female adopts the posture of that which emanates, the status of the masculine is conferred upon her.³⁴ On occasion, the authorship of a particular zoharic text reflects an awareness of the complexity of the gender valence implied by the attribution of the title “king” to divine potencies that are ostensibly female. To cite one illustration of this phenomenon:

“The house of the king” (*beit ha-melekh*) (1 Kings 9:1), this refers to the holy of holies, which is the inwardness of everything. “The king,” this refers to the king in general (*setam melekh*). Even though this is the supernal king, it is female in relation to the supernal point, the concealed of everything, but even though it is female, it is male in relation to the king below.³⁵

The fluidity of gender attribution is well captured in this passage: *Binah*, which is designated the “supernal king,” is female in relation to *Hokhmah*, the masculine potency depicted as the “supernal point,” but she is male in relation to the king below, which is *Malkhut*. Although it is not stated explicitly in this context, it is not inaccurate

to say (based on other zoharic passages) that *Malkhut* itself is called “king” as well because she is masculine in relation to the forces that exist beneath her insofar as they are sustained by the overflow of the divine pleroma that emanates upon them through her channel.³⁶ The critical point for this analysis is that the transposition of the female gender is actualized particularly on Yom Kippur, for on that day, the daughter receives the illumination from the mother and thereby assumes the function and the name of the latter.³⁷

Concealment of Ascent: Forgiveness and the Eschatological Overcoming of Eros

The erotic texture of the merging of these two potencies, the revealed world (*alma de-itgalya*) of the lower feminine and the concealed world (*alma de-itkasya*) of the upper feminine,³⁸ is disclosed in the fundamental paradox of veiling and unveiling, which is in fact the basic structure of the symbol in kabbalistic lore in virtue of which one can justly speak of the eros of language. In the context of describing the last of the seven holy palaces (*heikhalot*), which are chambers within the *Shekhinah* that parallel the lower seven emanations in the sefirotic pleroma, and thus serve as a bridge that links the divine and the mundane realms,³⁹ the zoharic authorship offers an elaborate account of the homosexual bonding of *Binah* and *Malkhut*, the upper and the lower *Shekhinah*, albeit couched in heterosexual terms:

The seventh palace: In this palace there is no actual image; everything is in concealment ... Thus this palace is called the holy of holies. The holy of holies is a place that is prepared for that supernal soul, the principle of everything, the world-to-come in relation to this world. When all the spirits are united one with the other, and they are perfected through one another, as is appropriate, then the supernal spirit, the soul of everything, is aroused in relation to that which is above, the concealed of all the concealed ones, so that it be aroused upon everything, to illuminate them from above to below, to perfect them, to kindle the lights. When all is perfected through the illumination of everything, and the supernal light descends, then

this seventh palace is the concealed palace in the concealment of everything, to receive that holy of holies, the light that descends, and to be filled from there like a female that is impregnated from a male. It is filled only from that palace that is prepared to receive that supernal light. This mystery is: The seventh palace is the place of the union of the intercourse, to join together the seventh with the seventh, so that everything is one perfection, as is appropriate. Fortunate is the lot of the one who knows how to bind together this unity, he is beloved above and he is beloved below.⁴⁰

It appears that in this passage the seventh palace is identified as the *Shekhinah*,⁴¹ which is designated as the holy of holies.⁴² The latter expression is generally applied in the zoharic corpus to *Binah*,⁴³ but it is here associated with the *Shekhinah*, for she is the palace that is prepared to receive the luminous overflow of *Binah*, which is referred to as well as the supernal soul and the world-to-come. From several other passages in the zoharic corpus the theosophic significance of this title is related more specifically to the ascent and union of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*. Thus, for example, this mystery is linked exegetically (through the persona of R. Eleazar) to the verse “Who is she who comes up from the desert?” (Song of Songs 3:6): “Who is she’ (*mi zo’t*), the containment of the dual holiness of the two worlds in one unity and in one bond. ‘Who comes up’ (*olah*), verily, to constitute the holy of holies, for the holy of holies consists of ‘who’ (*mi*) joined to ‘she’ (*zo’t*), so that she will be the burnt offering (*olah*), which is the holy of holies.”⁴⁴ The holy of holies, therefore, denotes the ascent of the *Shekhinah* (signified by the feminine demonstrative pronoun “this,” *zo’t*) to *Binah* (signified by the interrogative pronoun “who,” *mi*). The ascending *Shekhinah* is also related to the mystery of the burnt offering, the *olah*, whose lexical meaning denotes both the proper name of the sacrifice and more generically “she that rises.”⁴⁵ The intricate weaving of the different symbolic threads is beautifully expressed in a second passage:

He began his exposition, “This is the teaching regarding the burnt offering. This is the burnt offering” (Lev. 6:2) ... The burnt offering (*olah*) is the ascent and the binding of the Community of Israel above, and her conjunction within the

world-to-come, so that everything will be one.⁴⁶ The burnt offering is called the holy of holies, and therefore she is called *olah*, for she ascends and she is crowned, so that all will be unified in one joyous bond. On account of the fact that she ascends ever higher, it is written, “This is the teaching regarding the burnt offering,” *zo’t torat ha-olah*, the secret of male and female as one, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The burnt offering (*ha-olah*), for she ascends within the world-to-come, to be bound within that which is verily called the holy of holies, and the burnt offering, too, is the holy of holies.⁴⁷

The mystical significance of the burnt offering (*olah*) is related symbolically to the ascent of the *Shekhinah* to her source in *Binah*, the world-to-come, which entails the masculinization of the feminine. The gender transformation is realized initially through the union of the female (*Malkhut*) and her masculine consort (*Tiferet*), but it is ultimately and most fully achieved when the lower female (*Malkhut*) is restored to the upper female (*Binah*), a restoration that is conveyed in the symbol of the holy of holies.⁴⁸ This symbolic intent underlies the zoharic description of the seventh palace cited above. This palace assumes the name “holy of holies” on account of the fact that it receives the illumination of *Binah*, which is recurrently designated by this very term. In receiving the light of *Binah*, moreover, the seventh palace is described as the female who is impregnated by the male, even though the union occurs between two females, *Binah* and *Malkhut*. The elusive remark that the “seventh palace is the place of the union of the intercourse, to join together the seventh with the seventh,” must be decoded as a reference to the union of mother and daughter, for both *Binah* and *Malkhut* are referred to as the seventh, which relates as well to the application of the symbol of Sabbath to each of these gradations.⁴⁹ This pairing of the two female configurations can be depicted in heterosexual terms insofar as the former is masculine in relation to the latter.

The term “holy of holies” thus connotes the union of mother and daughter, a connotation that further illuminates something fundamental about the nature of secrecy. Indeed, the hermeneutical structure of the secret as that which is unveiled in its veiling and veiled in its unveiling is alluded to in the return of the daughter to the womb of the mother, which is also expressed as the entry of the

mother into the palace of the daughter. In a parallel passage to the one cited above that describes the seventh palace, the zoharic authorship articulates this point more clearly by drawing a connection between three words, *olam* (“world”), *olim* (“ascending”), and *illum* (“concealment”),⁵⁰ in an effort to elucidate the nature of the *Shekhinah* in her ascent to *Binah*: “This palace is called the holy of holies, the place to receive the supernal souls that are called here in order to arouse the world-to-come in relation to her. This world is called *olam*, for *olam* refers to the ascent (*seliqa*), for the lower world ascends to the supernal world, and it is hidden within her and concealed therein, revealed in the concealment (*itgalya vi-setirah*).”⁵¹ The transformation of the daughter and her being uplifted to the status of the mother are predicated on her attaining the paradoxical posture of being revealed in the concealment. Precisely this form of union provides the model by which kabbalists understood the symbolic import of the traditional notion of redemption. To be redeemed entails the theosophic process by means of which the feminine presence is restored to her source, the attribute of the divine that corresponds to the jubilee and to the world-to-come, two symbols that convey the idea of eschatological emancipation.

The symbolism posited in the main body of the Zohar is formulated succinctly by the Spanish kabbalist, Joseph Gikatilla, a likely member of the fraternity that produced the zoharic composition:

On occasion this emanation is called jubilee. I have already informed you that all types of freedom and redemption are dependent on this emanation ... When the lower emanations hold on to the emanation of the jubilee and draw down the efflux of her blessing below, then all types of freedom and redemption are found in all the emanations and in all things sustained by means of the emanation of *Malkhut* who receives the overflow of the blessing from them. Know that in a future time the righteous will ascend until they hold on to the emanation of *Binah*, which is the secret of the world-to-come. Then all types of destruction and all types of calamity will be liberated and redeemed ... The secret of *Binah* is called the jubilee because through it everything is liberated. The reason is that he who merits to be conjoined to her never sees any worry or any deficit ... and he who is conjoined to the jubilee is redeemed, for there

is nothing surrounding the jubilee that can be harmful ... And this emanation is called in the language of our rabbis, blessed be their memory, repentance. The reason is that the souls (*neshamot*) emanate from this place, the spirits (*ruḥot*) from *Tif'eret*, and the souls (*nefashot*) from *Malkhut*, and they are all bound to one another to the point that they merit to be united in the emanation of *Binah* ... and this is the secret of repentance ... Thus contemplate that repentance is the secret of the world-to-come. And after we have explained to you this great secret, we must again inform you of the order of the gradations of repentance. For everyone of Israel has a way of returning after he has been sold, “redemption shall be his and he will be released in the jubilee” (Lev. 25:31), and it says, “In the year of the jubilee, each man shall return to his holding” (ibid., 13). Through the secret of the emanation of *Binah* the soul can return and hold on to the place whence it was taken. This is [the meaning of] what is said, “each man shall return to his holding” (*tashuvu ish el aḥuzzato*) – the expression of holding (*aḥizah*).⁵²

Repentance is interpreted theosophically in light of the symbol of freedom, which in turn is equated with the mystical notion of conjunction with the world-to-come. The soul that repents, therefore, returns to the ontic source whence it derived. As Gikatilla notes, the secret of this ideal of conjunction is alluded to in the expression *aḥizah*, literally, “holding,” utilized in the verse that describes the restoration of property to its original owner in the jubilee. Kabbalistically understood, redemption (*ge'ulah*) entails the return of the soul to its portion in the world-to-come. Just as no economic transaction can erase the memory of originary ownership, no barter of the soul can eliminate its sense of belonging to the womb of the mother whence it came into being. This belonging is the ultimate, and indeed the only genuine, sense of possession. *Teshuvah*, repentance, is the re/turn of the soul to its source, which occasions the sense of freedom bestowed on the one who is conjoined to the world-to-come. The esoteric significance of Yom Kippur is related to the fact that this day is marked essentially by the path of return of the repentant soul. The atonement granted this soul is explained theosophically in terms of the union of *Binah* and *Malkhut*, which results in the purification of the stains imparted to the latter as a

consequence of the sins of Israel by means of the former. *Binah* draws her power of atonement from the fact that she is united to the world of mercy, that is, the first emanation, *Keter*, which is entirely white (*lavan*),⁵³ and thus she is designated by the name Lebanon (*levanon*) and she is described as the one that “purifies the transgressions of Israel” (*melavenet avonotan shel yisra’el*). As a result of this purification, *Malkhut* is transformed, for she is restored from her displacement and exile brought about by the sinfulness of Israel to a state of adornment and reunification with the upper divine emanations. In Gikatilla’s own words:

On account of his mercy and lovingkindness the Lord, blessed be he, instituted for Israel one day during the year to purify them from their impurities and to cleanse them, and he called it *yom ha-kippurim*. The reason it is called *yom ha-kippurim* in the plural is because these two emanations are united on that very day, the emanation of *Binah* and the emanation of *Malkhut*. Thus, the emanation of *Binah* purifies and cleanses every kind of filth and dirt that Israel bestowed on the emanation of *Malkhut*. When these two emanations are united to reverse [the judgments] to the merits of Israel and to purify their dirt, they are called accordingly *yom ha-kippurim*. Thus I will provide an allusion: “If your sins are like crimson, they will be whitened like snow” (Isa. 1:18). The supernal one is called Lebanon, and the lower one is garbed in a garment of crimson. Israel must transform the crimson garment into white, and therefore it is called *yom ha-kippurim* ... Since these two emanations, which correspond to one another in the secret of the supernal mother and the lower mother, are involved on this day in the purification of Israel, sexual intercourse is prohibited on Yom Kippur, even though it is permissible on Sabbaths and Festivals. The secret is known to those who know the esoteric lore. “And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s daughter; and she became my wife” (Gen. 20:12). This is the secret of its being called *yom ha-kippurim*. Understand this well.⁵⁴

Transgression creates a blemish above, which results in the separation of the male and female aspects of the divine. It stands

to reason, therefore, that the first phase in the rectification of this condition calls for the re/pairing of the King and his Matrona. This unification is facilitated, moreover, by righteous action below, especially by those who engage in conjugal sex with the right intention. For the kabbalists themselves, intercourse was ideally limited to the Sabbaths, some of the Festivals, and other exceptional times that were endowed with the spiritual significance of holy days, such as the first night after a woman was cleansed from her menstrual cycle or the night after a man returned from a trip.⁵⁵ In spite of this rather austere lifestyle, which might strike the contemporary ear as severely constricting, it is correct to assert that kabbalists ascribed positive value to coitus as a redemptive act. Most scholars have affirmed this dimension of the kabbalistic attitude toward sexuality. This, however, is only part of the story. Beyond the fulfillment of sexual desire in the sacred coupling of husband and wife, there is a return to ascetic denial, a refraining from engaging in physical sex, which mirrors an ontic state above whereby the divine forces are united in a manner that precludes the act of intercourse below. Yom Kippur is a ritual enactment of the alternative paradigm that needs to be considered carefully in an attempt to comprehend the soteriological teaching embraced by the kabbalists, particularly as it relates to the value assigned to sexual behavior. That is, the complete repair of the rupture in the Godhead exceeds the model of heterosexual bonding. The reunion of mother and daughter, or the upper and lower mothers, which occurs on Yom Kippur, the day of the great Sabbath, signifies the homoerotic mating that transcends male–female intercourse. The injunction to refrain from sex on Yom Kippur underscores the belief that ascetic renunciation provides the means by which the higher modality of union is achieved.

Heterosexuality serves as the intermediary step that leads from exile to redemption, from the state of separation to one of integration. In the redemptive process, the *Shekhinah* is transformed into *Binah* as a result of her union with the male *Tif'eret*. In a particularly poignant passage from one of the most recondite sections of the zoharic corpus, the *Sitrei Otiyyot*,⁵⁶ which deals with the mysteries of the letters of the Tetragrammaton, the transformation of the lower female feminine into the upper masculine feminine is expressed in terms of the metamorphosis of the letter *he*, which is also identified as the *kaf*, into the final letter *mem*; the former

represents the half-circle, or the partially eclipsed moon, and the latter the full circle, or the moon in its complete illumination. The process by means of which the half-circle is completed is related more specifically to the image of the point that exists in the middle of the *kaf*. Utilizing the geometric conception that the circle is formed from its midpoint, the zoharic authorship asserts that the point in the middle of the lunar disk, which is gendered as feminine, receives the light of the masculine sun. As a result of this illumination, the open side of the *he*, whose function is related to the reception of the male, is closed, and the letter itself is transformed into the final *mem*, which is sealed on all four sides. The midpoint, as is attested in other zoharic texts, corresponds to the vagina or the uterus, the part of the female that corresponds to the penis.⁵⁷ That the midpoint, which is also identified as the pupil of the eye, completes the circle by means of its receiving the light of the male signals the transmutation of the open vagina into the closed womb, a process that entails the masculinization of the feminine. The eschatological dimension of this transformation is highlighted by the fact that the final *mem* is associated orthographically with the words *le-marbeh ha-misrah*, “in token of abundant authority” (Isa. 9:6), an expression that has obvious messianic implications.

Fore/giveness and the Concealment of the Mother's Nakedness

In the coupling of mother and daughter, moreover, lies the secret of forgiveness, the giving before that engenders being in the concealment of its disclosure. The paradox is alluded to in the image of the holy of holies, the innermost secret whence all secrets are secreted in the fore/giving. In this space, memory is perfectly sealed, nothing is forgotten, only fore/given. When forgiveness is granted below, the primordial act of fore/giveness is reenacted, an act that results in the opening of the path that leads to the holy of holies, the womb that holds the many in the diversity of its unity. This bond of mother and daughter, which is theurgically realized on Yom Kippur through the ritual acts of the Community of Israel, signifies the ultimate oneness to which all things strive. It is a union that transcends heterosexual eros, an ideal unity that bespeaks the eschatological vision of the kabbalists. The union that is attained in the end is predicated on the

sense of forgiveness, which is experienced as the liberation of the soul from the constraints of time and as the release from the chain of desire.

The giving-before of fore/giveness is occasioned by the act of repentance, the turning back to the source, which is further characterized as the amelioration of the forces of judgment and the consequent dominion of the attribute of mercy such that each of the emanations is accorded its proper place. As a result of this realignment in the sefirotic realm, *Binah* is called the “complete repentance and the world is atoned, for the mother dwells in complete joy, as it is written, ‘as a happy mother of children’ (Ps. 113:9), and then it is called *yom ha-kippurim*, concerning which it is written, ‘to purify you from all your sins’ (Lev. 16:30).”⁵⁸ Significantly, the return to origin is marked by the uncovering of that which is hidden. To the degree that the source whence all things return is characterized by the quality of hiddenness – as I have noted above, one of the designations of *Binah* in the zoharic corpus is the “concealed world” – the uncovering can never assume the form of revealing a reified and static essence. On the contrary, inasmuch as the disclosure is always of that which is concealed, the uncovered withholds its own presence in the moment of its uncovering. What is revealed, therefore, is an absence that is present only as that which shows itself as concealed. The union of mother and daughter, which is the symbolic import of Yom Kippur, embodies the paradox of the exposure of the withdrawal that is manifest as the withdrawal of the exposure. This paradox is conveyed philologically in the biblical expression *mi zo’t*, which is not read by the zoharic authorship as a question, but rather as an assertion. That is, *mi zo’t* means not “who is she?” but “who is she,” that is, the concealed world of *Binah* is the revealed world of *Malkhut*.

The day of atonement, therefore, is endowed with eschatological significance, for it is the time in which the supernal union of mother and daughter is realized. In that respect, Yom Kippur proleptically anticipates the utopian restoration of the lower female to the upper female, which entails the masculine transvaluation of the feminine. From one perspective, the actualization of this union is predicated on the uncovering of that which is concealed, indeed the exposure of concealment as such. On the other hand, inasmuch as that which is revealed is hidden, and the presence is always a presence

of an absence whose absence is only reinforced by the presencing of that which is present in its absence, disclosure itself is a form of concealment.⁵⁹ In the theosophic symbolism adopted in the zoharic texts discussed in this study, the mother re/presents the absence in the presence, which is the engendering dialectic of secrecy, that is, the veil that sets the limit of the ocular gaze and the contemplative vision, just as the placenta and the amniotic fluid delimit the boundary of the first dwelling place to which the child perpetually seeks to return. The zoharic authorship artfully expresses this aspect of the concealed disclosure on Yom Kippur in the following passage:

R. Isaac said: It is written, “as a happy mother of children, Hallelujah” (Ps. 113:9). The mother is known, but who are the children? R. Simeon said: It has been taught that the blessed Holy One has two children, one male and the other female ... and the mother hovers over them to nourish them. Thus it is written, “do not take the mother together with the children” (Deut. 22:6). It has been taught that people should not multiply their sins below for this results in the removal of the mother from her children. It is written, “She is your mother – do not uncover her nakedness” (Lev. 18:7). Woe to one who uncovers the nakedness! When people of the world repent and increase the merits before the blessed Holy One, and the mother returns and covers her children, then she is called “repentance” (*teshuvah*). What is *teshuvah*? *Teshuvah* consists of the mother returning to her station, and then it is written, “as a happy mother of children,” the mother of the children most certainly. Therefore a person is not exempt from the obligation to procreate until he begets a son and a daughter.⁶⁰

In this context, Yom Kippur is depicted symbolically in terms of the union of the mother with her two children, the son and daughter, which correspond, respectively, to *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. The esoteric significance of *teshuvah*, therefore, is not simply the entry of the daughter (or even the son and daughter) back into the womb, but it is related to the repositioning of the mother as the one that hovers over her children in order to sustain them. Sin severs the bond of the mother and her children, a bond predicated on the covering up of her genitals in the moment that she nourishes them.

Exposure of the genitals results in the removal of the mother from the children, which is related to the biblical injunction of *shiluah ha-qen*, driving away the mother bird from the nest (Deut. 22:6–7). The kabbalistic interpretation reverses the contextual meaning of the text, for the dislodging of the mother is portrayed negatively as the uncovering of her genitals, rather than as a positive act of mercy. Through the act of repentance, by contrast, the nakedness is re/covered and the mother is returned to her place.⁶¹ To cite another zoharic passage where the matter is fully articulated:

R. Yose said: It is written, “The nakedness of your father and the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover” (Lev. 18:7), and it is written, “she is your mother – do not uncover her nakedness” (ibid.). It has been taught that she is certainly your mother. Thus if you uncover her nakedness, you must certainly restore her so that there will be repair ... It is written, “do not uncover,” for when the matter is repaired, it is repaired corresponding to the one who uncovers, and this is called *teshuvah*. R. Isaac said: All the sins of the world are connected to this until the point that the mother is revealed on account of them. When she is revealed all the children are revealed, and it is written, “do not take the mother together with the children” (Deut. 22:6). When the world below is repaired all is repaired until the repair rises to the holy mother, and she is repaired and concealed from that which has been uncovered. Thus it is written, “Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered up” (Ps. 32:1). Then she is called *teshuvah*, *teshuvah* certainly, and then she is called *yom ha-kippurim*, as it is written, “from all your sins you will purified before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30). R. Judah said: When is she called *teshuvah*? When the mother is concealed and she exists in joy over the children, as it is written, “as a happy mother of children” (Ps. 113:9), and she returns to her position. The one that is closed returns to its place.⁶²

The eschatological restoration, which is dramatized in the liturgical rites of Yom Kippur, is linked to the setting of the proper boundaries established by returning the mother to her children. This return entails the covering of the genitals of the mother that were uncovered as a result of acts of transgression.⁶³ Repentance is

identified theosophically with the attribute of *Binah*, which is described as the “hidden place that is above, the depth of the well ... the depth of the depths.”⁶⁴ The way to access that place is through fore/giving, the giving-before that occasions the fecundity of time as it materializes in the habitation of space. Redemption, therefore, is characterized by the reversal of the erotic stimulus, the withholding of the impulse to extend, the concealment of the projection in the inner sanctum where the secrets are secreted. In the transition from the mundane to the sacred, from the weekday to Sabbath, heterosexual eros is necessary to overcome the fragmentation. The will to bestow is incited by the desire to receive.⁶⁵ But as the Sabbath progresses, the erotic passion itself dissipates as it gives way to a higher bond that relates more specifically to the elevation of the *Shekhinah* and her restoration to *Binah*.⁶⁶ This dynamic typifies as well Yom Kippur, which is indeed the great Sabbath. In the union of mother and daughter, the erotic yearning of the male for the female and the female for the male yields to the bond that is beyond desire, the world-to-come that comes beyond time in the giving before there is receiving. “The one who returns in repentance is as one who restores the blessed Holy One and the *Shekhinah* to their place, and this is the secret of redemption.”⁶⁷ In the end – not the chronological terminus, but the ontological purpose – heterosexual eros is overcome, for son and daughter, the King and the Matrona, are restored to their place of origin by the one who repents. The mystical efficacy of repentance is such that it is indistinguishable from redemption, for both terms signify the ultimate reintegration of the gender binary in the womb of the mother.

Notes

1. Friedrich Hölderin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press: 1980), p. 459:

For since evil spirit
Has taken possession of happy antiquity, unendingly
Long now one power has prevailed, hostile to song, without resonance,
That within measures transgresses, the violence of the mind. But God hates
The unbound.

2. Alexander Pope, *Essays on Criticism*, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 525.

3. William Shakespeare, *King Lear* IV:vii, in *The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 84.
4. My discussion of time here reflects the influence of Hannah Arendt's Heideggerian interpretation of the Augustinian notion of memory as the vast spaces of the inner life, which makes possible the recollection of the past as well as the anticipation of the future. See Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 144–146.
5. I borrow this term from Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 159.
6. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 102–103.
7. My thought in this matter has been influenced by Martin Heidegger. For instance, consider his formulation in *Parmenides*, p. 12: “The poetry of the poet or the treatise of a thinker stands within its own proper unique word. It compels us to perceive this word again and again as if we were hearing it for the first time. These newborn words transpose us in every case to a new shore ... Only if we are already appropriated by this transporting are we in the care of the word.”
8. The rabbinic perspective is captured succinctly in the Targum, which renders the term *ba-keshet* as *be-yarḥa de-mitkasei*, “when the moon is hidden.” See Babylonian Talmud, Beitsah 16b.
9. In a copy of the Zohar (Amsterdam, 1715) with variant readings supplied by R. Jacob Vilna, which was recently purchased by the library at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, there is here added the words, *we-if'ahed qodesh be-qodesh*, “and holiness unites with holiness,” a reading that underscores the erotic connotation of “holy” in this context.
10. Zohar 3:100b.
11. It is still my hope to write a comprehensive study of the ontology of time in kabbalistic sources. For preliminary reflections, which capture some of the drift of my thinking, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 145–178; idem, “The Face of Jacob in the Moon: Mystical Transformations of an Aggadic Myth,” in *The Seduction of Myth in Judaism: Challenge and Response*, ed. S. Daniel Breslauer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 235–270, esp. 253–254 n. 4.
12. In “From Sealed Book to Open Text,” I argued that for the kabbalists, generally speaking, temporality is localized in *Yesod*, the phallic gradation of the divine. I suggested, moreover, that time is correlated with the masculine and space with the feminine. In a more extensive discussion of the phenomenology of time in kabbalistic symbolism, I hope to elucidate this point. I do want to note, however, that ostensibly there are exceptions to the paradigm I suggested. Consider, for example, the linkage of time, or more specifically the moment (*et*), to the feminine potency of the *Shekhinah* in Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:135–136. According to Gikatilla, the attribute of Adonai, which is one of the designations of the *Shekhinah*, is called *et*, and when she is conjoined to *Yesod*, she is called *et tovah*, the “time of goodness,” whereas when she is conjoined to the demonic force that lies outside the divine realm, she is called *et ra'ah*, the “time of evil.” The symbolic nexus between time and the *Shekhinah*, based on a passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, is suggested by Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, p. 196. See, however, Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 86–87, where I argue that implicit in this bahiric text is the notion of time ensuing from the androgynous phallus. That is to say, time is marked by the

duality of darkness and light, which correspond, respectively, to the feminine and the masculine attributes of the divine. The ontological root for both of these elements is the phallic potency. See *ibid.*, pp. 201–22 n. 31, where I discuss this matter in more detail and provide some other texts to illustrate my thesis. In my opinion, the relevant discussion in Gikatilla is also predicated on a similar notion. That is, even though time is related to the feminine *Shekhinah*, the bestowal of temporality on her is due to the influence she receives from the male. If she receives from *Yesod*, then it is a time of goodness, and, conversely, if she receives from the demonic force, it is a time of evil. That time is ultimately related to the phallic potency is underscored in Gikatilla's comment, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:134–135: "Know that when the attribute of *zakhor* [the masculine] is united with [that of] *shamor* [the feminine], all of the world is complete and perfect. The secret is [alluded to in the verse] 'All that he does is appropriate to its time' [*et ha-kol asah yafeh ve-itto*] (Eccles. 3:11), for the attribute of *zakhor* is called by the secret of 'all' (*kol*) and the attribute of *shamor* is called 'time' (*et*). When *zakhor* and *shamor* are united as one, in the secret of *kol* and in the secret of *et*, then it says, *et ha-kol asah yafeh ve-itto*. The secret [of the word *itto*] is *et waw*." The expression *itto*, "its time," can be decomposed into the word *et* together with the letter *waw*. The former stands symbolically for the feminine potency and the latter for the masculine. In the word *itto*, therefore, is an allusion to the mystery of the divine androgyne, the union of male and female in the Godhead. It is this union that underlies the kabbalistic understanding of time. Gikatilla also refers to this union as *et ratson*, the "time of favor." The application of the word *et* to the feminine, therefore, is dependent on her union with the attribute that corresponds to the phallus, for the latter is the ultimate generative source of being/consciousness, which is the essence of time.

13. *Zohar in Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1987), 15:89.
14. This is not the context to provide a detailed account of the evolution of this idea in kabbalistic sources that may have influenced Cordovero. Let me simply state that kabbalists from an earlier period already identified the sefirotic emanations as the succession of time, *seder zemannim*. For instance, see Azriel of Gerona, *Perush Eser Sefirot*, printed in Meir ibn Gabbai, *Derekh Emunah* (Warsaw, 1890), 3d–4a.
15. Zohar 3:102a: "On that day two lights shine as one, the supernal mother illumines the lower mother, and thus it is written *yom ha-kippurim* as has been said." See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1246–1247. On the image of two mothers, which correspond respectively to *Binah* and *Malkhut*, see Zohar 2:22a.
16. On the disproportionate love of the father for the daughter portrayed in the zoharic symbolism, which on occasion is described as provoking the jealousy of the mother, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 299.
17. According to other zoharic passages, the union of father and mother serves as a catalyst for the union of son and daughter or brother and sister. See Zohar 3:61b–62a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 299.
18. On the use of incestuous relations as the most appropriate means to convey the sacred coupling of divine potencies, see Wolfson, "Hebraic and Hellenistic Conceptions," pp. 147–178. On the ambiguous relationship of the son to the mother, see Zohar 3:15b–16a, cited in note 62. In the Indian esoteric tradition as well both brother–sister copulation and father–daughter incest are used as a symbolic means to convey processes among the deities. See Sadashiv Ambadas Dange, *Sexual Symbolism from the Vedic Ritual* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1979), pp. xvi–xvii, 117–159.

19. See Wolfson, "Eunuchs," p. 154.
20. The point is particularly underscored according to the reading that I mentioned in note 9. In a similar vein, in the Zohar and related Hebrew theosophic works of Moses de León, *Binah* is called *heikhal ha-qodesh*, the "holy palace," or *qodesh qodashim*, the "holy of holies," inasmuch as it receives the seminal overflow from *Hokhmah*, which is identified as *qodesh*, "holiness." Regarding these symbolic images, see *R. Moses de Leon's Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. Charles Mopsik (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), pp. 24–25, and other references in nn. 205–210.
21. According to Zohar 2:185b, the prohibition of sexual intercourse on Yom Kippur corresponds to the gradation of *Yesod*. See the parallel to this text in *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. Mopsik, p. 26.
22. Zohar 1:70a, 71a; 2:135b, 259a, 271b. Another important connotation of the term *nehiru de-anpin* is the state of mystical ecstasy, which is applied more specifically to the priest who unifies the divine name by carrying out his sacrificial rites. See Zohar 3:39a, 89b, 241a. In one context, 3:146a, the zoharic author uses the expression *anpin nehirin*, "illuminated face," to describe the ecstatic condition of the priest, which is based on the Hebrew phrase *panim me'erot* connected to the priestly blessing in *Numbers Rabbah* 11:6. See *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 254, where the zoharic expression is rendered as *panim me'irim*.
23. Zohar 2:184b–185a.
24. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 89, 99, 103, and the reference to Scholem's study cited on p. 205 n. 47.
25. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 295.
26. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 98–106. Arthur Green, "Kabbalistic Re-vision: A Review Article of Elliot Wolfson's Through a Speculum that Shines," *History of Religions*, 36, 1997, p. 270, claims that my understanding of gender symbolism in the theosophic kabbalah has set aside "the truly important role occupied by the female, especially in the Zoharic sources." He then proceeds to offer a litany of images used to characterize the *Shekhinah*, including, queen of the lower worlds, hind of the dawn, mother who nourishes the universe, city, temple, holy of holies, kingship (*malkhut*, which Green perplexingly renders as the decidedly neutral term "realm") that exerts dominion, governance, and judgment over existence. After going through this list, Green concludes, "The Zohar is at least as fixed with celebration of the female as it is with the male ... Wolfson's dismissal of this entire world of symbols through his single insight concerning *atarah* ... produces a significantly distorted picture of kabbalistic eros." The charge that I have dismissed the entire world of symbols characterizing the *Shekhinah* as feminine is simply inaccurate and unfair. The real contribution of my work, which is ignored by Green, is the recognition that the positive characteristics of the *Shekhinah* are predicated on an androcentric axiology that kabbalists shared with other medieval men, enhanced as well by biblical and rabbinic sources. Hence, as I have documented in detail, activities that clearly must be attributed to the female body, such as childbearing and lactation, are valenced as masculine in the symbology of the kabbalists. That is, when a woman gives birth or breast-feeds, she assumes the gender value of a male. The masculine appropriation of female biological traits is the most revealing sign of the extent of the androcentricism that characterizes this tradition. I have not ignored the feminine depictions of the *Shekhinah*, as Green claims, but what I have done is contextualized them in a more nuanced gender analysis that is predicated on a clear distinction between gender as a

- cultural construct and a biological sex. This is the point that is consistently missed by critics such as Green, but it is precisely with respect to this matter that the paradigm shifts as a result of my work. It is not sufficient to cite the presentation of the supposedly feminine traits of the *Shekhinah* in the work of a scholar like Tishby, since the latter had no way of analyzing the use of gender in a sophisticated manner. To cite one of many possible examples, in *Wisdom*, pp. 379–381, Tishby discusses the attribution of the symbol of the mother to the *Shekhinah*, but he nowhere notes that this very symbol involves the depiction of the feminine in terms that are clearly masculine according to the gender valuation accepted by medieval kabbalists like the author of the zoharic text. I fear that Green's reliance on Tishby as an authority to level a criticism against me is easily disposable.
27. Zohar 1:2a, translated and discussed in Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 104–105.
 28. The masculinization of the lower female through her ascent to the upper female is connected in Zohar 2:182b–183a to the ritual practice of standing during the blessing and counting the forty-nine days of the *omer* between Passover and Pentecost: “When the house of the Matrona is sanctified, she ascends above to be bound to those supernal days above. Thus we stand when we count, for those are the supernal days, and whenever a person enters those supernal days, whether in prayer or in praise, he must stand on his feet ... to stand as a male who stands in his strength and not as a female whose way it is to sit ... Since this is the mystery of the masculine, women are exempt from this computation ... in the manner of ‘all the males shall appear’ (Exod. 23:17), men and not women, for the mystery of the covenant is in the masculine and not in the feminine.” Cf. Zohar 3:97b: “Since those days are days of the world of the masculine, this enumeration is given only to men, and thus this enumeration is accomplished in a standing posture.” See the parallel in *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 137–138.
 29. *Ibid.* pp. 162–163.
 30. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 2:203.
 31. Zohar 1:87a.
 32. Cf. Zohar 3:193b
 33. Zohar 2:67b.
 34. The point is stated clearly in Zohar 1:163a: “Why is [*Binah*] called *ḥasidah* [derived from Ps. 104:17]? Even though this supernal world is female, she is called male when she emanates all beneficence and all light emerges from her. Therefore she is called *ḥasidah*, for mercy (*ḥesed*), which is the primordial light, emerges from her.” The feminine *Binah* assumes the name *ḥasidah* when she functions as the male that overflows and the attribute of *ḥesed* issues forth from her.
 35. Zohar 2:4a.
 36. See Zohar 1:47b: “Who is the king? This is the Community of Israel, for he bestows upon her all the pleasures of the worlds, and all of the holy forces that issue from above go out from this place.” The emanative capacity of *Shekhinah* is derived from the phallic potency of *Yesod* through which the supernal influx overflows to Her. The procreative connotation of the term “king” when it is attributed to the *Shekhinah* is also made explicit in other zoharic passages. See, for instance, Zohar 1:122a, 235b, 246a.
 37. The zoharic interpretation of Yom Kippur is well summarized by Vital, *Sha‘ar ha-Kawwanot*, 102b–c: “On this day *Malkhut*, which is the feminine of *Ze‘eir Anpin*, receives all of these aspects from the supernal mother herself and not

through her husband *Ze'eir Anpin*. It is called *yom ha-kippurim* in the plural, and this is the matter of Rachel, the feminine of *Ze'eir Anpin*, who ascends on this day until the supernal mother herself ... and the two of them are united ... All of the prayers on Yom Kippur are for the sake of constructing Rachel, the main feminine of *Ze'eir Anpin*, so that she will be crowned and adorned by means of the supernal mother.” Needless to say, many more examples could have been cited, but for the purposes of this study this one text will suffice to make the point.

38. Zohar 1:152a (*Sitrei Torah*), 154a–b, 158a–b, 259a, 2:29b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 295.
39. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 591–54.
40. Zohar 1:45–a–b.
41. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 613 n. 183.
42. On the use of the term “holy of holies” as a designation of the mystery of the womb related to the *Shekhinah*, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 381.
43. Zohar 2:4b, 67b. See note 20.
44. Zohar 1:10a.
45. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 883, 923–924.
46. Cf. Zohar 2:239b: “[The *Shekhinah* is called] the burnt offering (*olah*), for she ascends and is crowned above, to be bound, as is fitting, until the place that is called the holy of holies.”
47. Zohar 2:238b.
48. See *ibid.* 1:70a; 3:107b.
49. On the attribution of the term “seventh” to *Binah*, see *ibid.* 2:184a: “All mysteries and all of the precious holy ones are dependent on the seventh, and that seventh is the supernal world, which is called the world-to-come.” See also *Zohar Hadash*, 29a: “The great Sabbath is also called the seventh from below to above.” Related to this symbol is the application of the image of the seven days (Zohar 3:89b) or that of the seven years (2:31a) to *Binah*. See Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 2:46: “Know that in every place that you find in the Torah a sevenfold calculation, such as seven years, seven times, it refers to the secret of the *sefirot* from *Yesod* to *Binah*, and in some contexts from *Binah* to *Yesod*.” The *Shekhinah* similarly is referred to throughout the zoharic corpus as the “seventh” insofar as this is the last of the lower seven emanations of the divine pleroma. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 613 n. 183, which interprets the zoharic remark that the seventh palace is the place of the union of the seventh with the seventh as a reference to the intercourse of *Yesod* and *Malkhut*. This interpretation privileges the heterosexual and obscures the female homoeroticism, which is related to the reunion of the mother and the daughter. Also relevant here is the attribution of the symbol of the seventh year, *shemittah*, to *Malkhut* and the seven cycles of seven, the jubilee, to *Binah*; see Zohar 1:22a, 50b, 95b, 147a, 147b, 153b, 154a, 183a, 240b, 251b; 2:22a, 85b, 114a, 121a; 3:97b, 108a, 110b, 115a, 180b. In that respect as well, we can meaningfully speak of the attribution of the term “seventh” to both *Binah* and *Malkhut*.
50. The word *le-olah* is vocalized as *le'alem* in several rabbinic texts, often associated with Exod. 3:15. See Palestinian Talmud, Yoma 3:7, 40d; Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 71a; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 3:11; *Midrash Kohen* in *Beit ha-Midrash*, 2:24. See also the play on words between *ha-olah* and *he'lem* in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 10. Most of the aforementioned rabbinic sources were noted by Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, p. 11 n. 1.
51. Zohar 2:258b.
52. *Sha'arei Orah*, 2:59–61.

53. See *ibid.* 126. In that context as well, Gikatilla enunciates the point that the power of forgiveness derives from the whiteness of *Keter*, the world that is complete mercy, which illuminates *Binah* on the day of Yom Kippur.
54. *Ibid.* 64–65.
55. See Wolfson, “Eunuchs,” pp. 158–160. The comparison of the night of ritual immersion as well as the night that a man returns from a trip to that of the eve of Sabbath is implied in Zohar 1:50a, which influenced numerous subsequent kabbalists.
56. *Zohar Hadash*, 5b–c.
57. See Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 316–324.
58. Zohar 3:15b.
59. Here my discourse is indebted to Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 30–33. The striking difference between Irigaray’s discourse and the standard kabbalistic symbolism is that she posits the image of the womb as a counterpoint to the phallic bias of the Freudian approach. To the degree that kabbalists interpret the womb in phallic terms, there may be a greater affinity between their symbolism and Freudian concepts. I have nevertheless availed myself of Irigaray, for she has articulated in a profound way the convergence of absence and presence as it relates to the mother.
60. Zohar 1:219a.
61. This is the mystical rationale for the liturgical act of reading the laws pertaining to illicit sexual relations (Lev. 18) during the afternoon service of Yom Kippur. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 102–103, and sources cited on pp. 219–220 nn. 127–128.
62. Zohar 3:15b–16a.
63. The sensitivity of the issue of the mother–son relationship, and the specific problem of uncovering the genitals of the mother, is emphasized in the interpretation of Gen. 29:31 in Zohar 1:154a–b. I will cite here only a portion of this psychologically astonishing exegesis: “The jubilee is always the concealed world and all of its matters are not revealed. Therefore all of its actions are hidden from Jacob. Come and see: The lower world is revealed, and it is the beginning of everything to ascend in its gradations. Just as the supernal wisdom is the beginning of everything, so too the lower world is wisdom and it is the beginning of everything. Therefore it is called ‘you’ (*attah*), for it is the sabbatical year, and it is revealed. The supernal world, which is the jubilee, is called ‘he’ (*hu*), for all of its matters are concealed. The secret of the matter is related to Leah, as it is written, ‘And he lay with her that night’ (Gen. 30:16) ... The supernal world is always concealed, and Jacob was conjoined through his will only to that which is revealed, and the secret of this is what is written, ‘and he clings to his wife’ (Gen. 2:24). ‘The Lord saw that Leah was unloved’ (*ibid.* 29:31): From here [it is deduced that] a man despises the nakedness of his mother, and thus one can unite with his mother in every place without any apprehension. Thus they said that a son joins with his mother [cf. Mishnah, Qiddushin 4:12]. All was hidden from Jacob for the supernal world was not revealed at all.”
64. Zohar 3:70a.
65. That is, the female or the left side of judgment (or limitation) is considered to provide the stimulus for the male or the right side of mercy (or expansion) to project forward in the act of intercourse. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 300–301.
66. See Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 325–343.
67. Zohar 3:278a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*).

8 Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah

Perhaps truth is a woman
who has reasons
for not letting us see her reasons?

Friedrich Nietzsche,
The Gay Science

Dis/closing the Secret Secretly

The occult tradition of Judaism, which by the High Middle Ages is referred to most frequently by the generic term “kabbalah,” literally, “that which has been received,” is usually studied under the rubric of “mysticism.” A far better term, however, to capture the nature of this phenomenon is “esotericism.” Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the mystical dimensions expressed in Jewish sources – and here I extend the scope to include more than just kabbalistic texts – are contextualized within the hermeneutical framework of esotericism.¹ Here it is relevant to recall as well that, in the first of his ten unhistorical aphorisms on the history of kabbalah, Gershom Scholem duly noted the central concern with the issue of secrecy in the kabbalistic sources. He remarked that the fundamental problem that presents itself is that, on the one hand, the kabbalists presume that truth is transmitted from generation to generation, but, on the other hand, the truth of which they speak is secretive and thus it cannot by nature be fully transmitted. In his inimitable style of ironic paradox, Scholem wrote, “Authentic tradition (*echte Tradition*) remains hidden; only the fallen tradition (*verfallende Tradition*) falls (*verfällt*) upon an object and only when it is fallen does its greatness become visible.”²

The truly esoteric knowledge cannot be divulged if it is to remain esoteric and thus a secret tradition that is transmitted is by definition a fallen (as opposed to an authentic) tradition.

The fascination with secrecy, which has held great power over the Jewish imagination through the generations,³ is often linked exegetically to the verse, “To investigate the matter is the glory of kings, but to conceal the matter is the glory of God” (Ps. 25:2). It is not an exaggeration to say that the words of the psalmist have served as an oracle posted on the walls of the small elitist circles wherein specific secrets pertaining to both symbols and rites have been transmitted orally and in writing. This is true, even though the eventual proliferation of written transmission of secrets usually posed a challenge to the explicit injunction against disclosing secrets publicly. To be sure, not every written exposition of occult knowledge is in defiance of this injunction, for there were kabbalists who mastered the art of concealing secrets by revealing them. This, in my mind, is exemplified in the zoharic literature, wherein mysteries of Torah are disclosed through being hidden, an exegetical pattern that the zoharic authorship discerns in the Torah itself.⁴ The exoteric and esoteric layers are distinguishable, but one can only be expressed through the other. The way to the secret is through the letter of the text, not by discarding it. One passage worth particular mention is a text wherein the hermeneutical dissimulation is framed in ontological terms: just as the name of God is both hidden and revealed, the former corresponding to YHWH and the latter to Adonai, so the Torah, which is identical with the name,⁵ is concurrently concealed and disclosed. Indeed, all the matters of this world and the supernal world are hidden and revealed.⁶ The example of the name illumines the impenetrable depth of the paradox: ultimately there are not two names, but one name, for the very name that is written “YHWH” is pronounced “Adonai.” The articulation of the name YHWH as Adonai, therefore, is precisely that which preserves the ineffability of the name. The inexpressibility of the inexpressible is preserved only through that which is expressed. Analogously, the exoteric sense of Torah sustains the esoteric meaning by masking it in the guise of that which it is not. In the final analysis, the hermeneutical position adopted in Zohar is such that there can be no unveiling of naked truth, for truth that is stark naked – divested of all appearance – is mere simulation. If the secret is the truth that is completely disrobed,

then the secret is nothing to see.⁷ By contrast, the truth that is apparent is disclosed in and through the garment of its enclosure.⁸ The tension between the formless glory and the image endowed with form accounts for what may be called the erotics of dressing in zoharic literature, which is predicated on the paradox that nudity is the ultimate veil and the veil the ultimate nudity: the naked body is the garment that obstructs the gaze, whereas the garment renders the body naked in its transparency.⁹

The full force of this dialectic can only be ascertained if one bears in mind the implicit gender signification of this symbolism:¹⁰ For the medieval kabbalist, the concealed name is correlated with the masculine, and the revealed name with the feminine. Consequently, the feminine is assigned the paradoxical role of representing that which cannot be represented. Representation in this case does not denote a re/presenting of that which is eclipsed from the field of vision, but the making present of that which forever alludes presence,¹¹ the representation of the masculine absence that is known as absent only in its specula(riza)tion through the mirror of the feminine.¹² The value of the feminine from the androcentric standpoint adopted by the male kabbalists lies exclusively in the fact that she is the speculum that refracts the nonrepresentable image of the masculine glory, an ocularcentric conception that can be expressed in auditory terms as the revealed name through which the concealed name is articulated.¹³ In a similar manner, the *peshat*, the outer sense of the text, serves as the sheath through which the *sod*, the secret, is disclosed. One obtains the covering of *peshat* through the exegetical act of uncovering.¹⁴ Later in this essay I shall return to this paradox of the mirror/garment, the cognizance of which is fundamental to the ecstatic experience underlying the hermeneutical orientation of zoharic kabbalah.

The matter of putting down secrets implicates the kabbalist in a process of esoteric writing, which is predicated on the notion that written allusions to secrets become themselves secrets that require decipherment at the hands of an interpreter. In this manner, the subtle interplay of revelation and concealment fosters a rhetoric of secrecy based on the interface of orality and writing as it pertains to the dissemination of esoteric knowledge. The hermeneutical circle thus created by the paradox of the secret as that which is disclosed in its concealment and concealed in its disclosure has preserved the

essentially esoteric nature of this enterprise even in textual communities (such as the fraternity surrounding the Zohar in late thirteenth-century Castile, or the mystical fellowship clustered around Isaac Luria in sixteenth-century Safed) that have advocated a fuller written expression of secrets. These secrets, whose authenticity presumably is linked to their having been transmitted in a continuous chain, retain something of their secret nature even when committed to writing. Indeed, the zoharic image of the book of concealment (*sifra di-tseni'uta*),¹⁵ that is, the book that conceals the secrets it reveals,¹⁶ captures the paradoxical nature of secrecy more overtly than a purely oral form of discourse: the secret as such must be exposed if it is to be a secret, but being a secret precludes its being exposed.

Still, we are intrigued by the phenomenon of secrecy in the history of kabbalah, and we ask what is it about secrets that is so compelling and seductive? Why is it that kabbalists have continuously fostered the notion of mysteries that cannot be openly disclosed even, and perhaps especially, in the context of written disclosure? The esotericism cultivated in kabbalistic fraternities does not simply involve the hiding of information from others. Quite the contrary, an important aspect of secrecy is clearly the investiture of power to those who seek to disseminate the secrets they possess, but in such a way that the hidden nature of the secret is preserved. To state the obvious, a secret presupposes the concomitant transmission and withholding on the part of the one in possession of the secret.¹⁷ If I possess a secret and transmit it to no one, the secret has no relevance. By the same token, if I readily divulge that secret without discretion, the secrecy of that secret is rendered ineffectual. What empowers me as the keeper of a secret is not only that I transmit it to some and not to others, but also that in the very transmission I maintain the secret by holding back in my advancing forward. From that vantage point, therefore, the secret is a secret only to the extent that it is concealed in its disclosure, but it may be concealed in its disclosure only if it is disclosed in its concealment.¹⁸

The confluence of concealment and disclosure underscores another essential element in the nature of secrecy expressed in the history of kabbalah. I refer to the link between esotericism and eroticism, which is related more specifically to the insight that transmission of secrets requires the play of openness and closure basic to the

push and pull of eros. The erotics of esoteric disclosure is a particular application of the more general perception that reading, which is marked by the dialectic of knowing and not knowing, is an act of desire.¹⁹ Alternatively expressed, the motif of passing on secrets, which we may refer to as the generative nature of esoteric knowledge, is associated in the kabbalistic tradition with the dynamic of flow and containment, the (male) master who bestows and the (male) disciple who receives. In the receiving, however, there is as much, if not more, power than in the bestowal, another facet that renders the use of the image of the (homo)erotic perfectly apt to characterize the process of communication of esoteric traditions.²⁰

On this score, it is of interest to remark that in one of his works Jacques Derrida notes in passing that the genealogy of secrecy is also a history of sexuality.²¹ Derrida's formulation seems to me to apply especially well to Jewish esotericism. In my own work, I have argued that the history of Jewish mysticism can be viewed as a progressive disclosure of the secret that is contextualized in the phallic aspect of the divine.²² This is not to deny that secrets operate on many different levels in Jewish mystical literature. However, my thesis is that (1) the structure of secrecy as such involves the uncovering of the sign that by nature must be concealed, and that (2) in the relevant sources (penned through the ages by male Jews), but especially conspicuous in the medieval Kabbalah, this is related to a phallogocentric eroticism.

My claim is based on two assumptions, which in my judgment are well attested in the primary texts of kabbalistic literature: the phallus is the mark of signification that by nature must be concealed.²³ The signifier, however, has the task of disclosing that which is signified. The convergence of these two factors yields the contradictory nature of secrecy: to reveal itself, the phallus must be veiled. From that vantage point, each explication of a secret is compared phenomenologically in kabbalistic literature to the primordial exposure of the phallus, or more specifically, the aspect of the phallus that is exposed through the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant, which is linked anatomically to the corona (*aṭarah*). Given the centrality of the covenant of circumcision in rabbinic Judaism (based on biblical precedent) as the marker of Jewish identity,²⁴ it should come as no surprise that kabbalists would interpret the foundational ceremony as the paradigm for an esoteric hermeneutic

based on the unmasking of the mystery that is concealed.²⁵ Circumcision is the sacrament through which the Jew enacts the role of dissimulation by cutting away the foreskin to create the sign, the presence that is re/presented through its own absence.²⁶ The paradox is fully expressed in the insistence on the part of kabbalists that it is forbidden to gaze on the corona that is laid bare.²⁷ In the disclosure is the concealment, for the marking of the sign occasions the erasure of the name.²⁸

The primacy accorded the phallogentric orientation in kabbalistic symbology is based on the larger assumption that sexual imagery is the principal linguistic field to which all others are related by way of euphemism or displacement. The primary works of theosophic kabbalah proffer the view that language itself, in both its verbal and graphic forms, is an expression of God's erotic impulse, which seeks closure in the narcissistic coincidence between the will of desire and its object.²⁹ In an ontological system that recognizes one ultimate reality, there is no genuine other;³⁰ hence, the underlying logic of the mythical structure is such that heterosexual eros is transmuted into the homoerotic, which in the final analysis is an expression of the autoerotic.³¹ From a psychoanalytic perspective, this may strike the ear as a form of reductionism, but from the standpoint of symbolic discourse the claim is expansionist in the extreme, for all forms of experience relate to the erotic, which is the most appropriate way to express the creative potency of the divine. The nexus of eroticism and esotericism in the kabbalistic worldview is predicated on the presumption that the deepest ontology of religious experience embraces the erotic.

I am in full agreement, therefore, with a position articulated by a number of scholars regarding the use of erotic imagery to characterize the experience of the sacred. Matters pertaining to the spiritual realm can be depicted in erotic terms because there is a presumption with respect to the nature of divine sexuality, which is reflected in human sexuality.³² My contention that kabbalists perceived the erotic, and more specifically phallic, element in the very texture of being is not equivalent to reducing everything in a simplistic fashion to the crude phallogentricism of the pornographic imagination, as some of my critics have mistakenly claimed.³³ On the contrary, as I have argued explicitly in several studies, the phallogentric eroticism of the kabbalistic tradition is predicated ideally on an

ascetic renunciation of heterosexual carnality and the concomitant affirmation of the homosocial rapture of mystical ecstasy,³⁴ which are expressed in the zoharic text in terms of erotic passion that binds together the members of the fraternity.³⁵

In this essay, I will explore one particular theme related to the larger nexus of eroticism and esotericism in medieval kabbalah. Previously, as I have intimated, I have investigated the phallogocentric dimension of kabbalistic esotericism, epitomized by the identification of the phallic potency of the divine *anthropos* as the ontological root of secrecy; this theme is underscored by the verbal assonance between the words *sod*, “secret,” and *yesod*, “foundation,” the term that is used most frequently to name the ninth of the ten attributes of the Godhead, which corresponds to the phallus. The complex of motifs to be discussed here has forced me to refocus my gaze, for I will reexamine the theme of secrecy in the kabbalistic tradition from the specific vantage point of the body of the feminine. As I shall demonstrate, however, the link between the feminine and the notion of secrecy affirmed by the kabbalists involved in the production of the zoharic literature is contingent on the occultation of the former. Simply put, my thesis is that the trope of the hidden woman, the female that must be veiled, functions as a symbolic depiction of the body of secrecy in the poetic discourse espoused by the zoharic authorship. In the complex gender orientation evident in the literary strands of the Zohar, the image of the woman as mystery entails the dissimulation that hides itself, for the secret that is unveiled in the pretense of not-showing is the masculine transvaluation of the feminine, the female specularized through the gaze of the male.

Secrecy Unveiled in the Veil of Femininity

The most poignant illustration of the motif of truth as the concealed woman in the zoharic corpus is the parabolic image spoken by the mysterious elder (*sabba*)³⁶ concerning the beautiful maiden without eyes, which is applied to the Torah.³⁷ This parabolic utterance is elucidated by means of another parable about the beautiful beloved who is hidden within her palace whence she discretely reveals herself to her lover in a sequence of disclosures, which culminates with the face-to-face encounter between the lover and the beloved, the

enlightened sage and the Torah. The parable is introduced by the hermeneutical claim that God hides all the secrets within the “garments” of the Torah, which refer to the literal words of the text.³⁸ The sage, who is described in contrast to the maiden/Torah as the one full of eyes, sees the mystery through the garment in which it is hidden. The secret, then, is garbed in the covering of the plain sense, but by means of that very covering it is revealed, though only to the one who has the eyes to see through the veil.³⁹

The zoharic author inserts this hermeneutical discussion about the meaning of the text in the context of a complicated deliberation on the nature of the soul of the convert.⁴⁰ I cannot enter here into a full discussion of what is arguably one of the most intricate and convoluted sections of the zoharic text. For the purposes of this analysis I will streamline the argument. The analogy is drawn in the following manner: just as God conceals the secrets of Torah in the cloak of the letters of the text, the soul of the Jew (or, more specifically, the *neshamah*, which originates in the gradation of *Binah*) in its descent from the supernal Garden of Eden (that is, *Malkhut*) to this world is cloaked in the soul of the convert. For the sage, the task is to set his interpretative glance on the Torah, which is the beautiful maiden without eyes, so that he may discern the secret hidden beneath the letter of the text, but there is no way for him to apprehend that esoteric meaning except through the garment of the literal sense. In the same manner, the mystery of the convert is such that the Jewish soul is temporarily garbed in the body of a Gentile.

The mystery of the convert is thus related exegetically to the verse, “If a priest’s daughter marries a layman” (Lev. 22:12): The “priest’s daughter” (*bat kohen*) refers symbolically to the holy soul of the Jew, for the latter emanates from its ontological source in *Binah*, the great mother of the sefirotic gradations. When the spirit (or breath) of *Hesed*, “lovingkindness,” which is allied symbolically with the priest, blows, the soul settles in the “concealment of the Tree of Life,” that is, within the phallic gradation of *Yesod*, whence it enters the repository of the Garden of Eden, which is the feminine *Malkhut*. When the male Jew below transgresses sexually by engaging in intercourse with the Gentile woman, he draws down the force of the evil inclination and the Jewish soul inhabits the “layman” (*ish zar*), the body of the non-Jew, in which it is trapped until the moment of conversion.⁴¹ The interpretation of this verse as a reference to the

phenomenon of conversion is buttressed by the symbolic association of the priest and *Hesed*, and the further association of the latter with the Patriarch Abraham, who is described in the Zohar (on the basis of an older rabbinic source⁴²) as the “first of the converts” (*qadma’ah la-giyyorin*).⁴³

The full implication of the zoharic text may be gained if we heed more attentively the import of the biblical idiom *ish zar*, which should be translated as the “foreign man,” for the term *zar* in zoharic literature denotes the ontological sense of otherness linked to the demonic potency.⁴⁴ Thus, elsewhere in the Zohar, the offspring that results from the intercourse of the male Jew and the female Christian are considered “alien children,” *banim zarim*, born from the one who has broken faith with God (Hosea 5:6).⁴⁵ The conjugal relationship between the Jewish man and the Christian woman sets the stage for the zoharic version of the ancient gnostic myth. This myth is reworked in the medieval kabbalistic source in distinctively ethnocentric terms, for the alienation of spirit is not related to the general condition of human embodiment, but rather to the particular embodiment of the Jewish soul in the Christian body, which results from the transgressive act. There is, however, another possibility embraced by the zoharic authorship and related as well to the verse concerning the marriage of the priest’s daughter and the strange man. In this case, the conversion comes about when the Christian soul desires to become Jewish, a desire that brings about the ontological transformation of the demonic soul into a spark of divinity. Moses de León succinctly expressed the matter in one of his Hebrew compositions:

You must know that the uncircumcised nations have no soul except from the side of impurity, for they are immersed in the foreskin, and on account of this their spirits are impure ... When they remove from themselves this filth, which is the foreskin, their impurity departs from them, and they approach their purity by means of the true justice (*ha-tsedeq ha-amiti*). Thus the convert is called the righteous convert (*ger tsedeq*), for this is the gradation of the covenant (*madregat ha-berit*), and this is the secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*) and the eternal life (*hei ha-olam*), which is the secret of Sabbath (*sod shabbat*).⁴⁶

Conversion thus entails an ontological transubstantiation, for the soul of the convert divests itself of its demonic character and enters into the divine realm of holiness. The point of access, and the grade to which the converted soul is attached, is the last of the sefirotic emanations, which is referred to in the above passage by several names, to wit, justice, the secret of the covenant, eternal life, and the secret of Sabbath. In the language of the Zohar, the convert separates from the Other Side and enters beneath the wings of the *Shekhinah*. The technical name of the convert, *ger tsedeq*, derives from the fact that the divine presence, the divine attribute to which the convert is conjoined, is referred to as Justice (*tsedeq*).⁴⁷

In order for this radical metastasis to take place, it is also necessary for the divine to inhabit the foreign body of the demonic. The soul of the convert is described accordingly by the zoharic authorship: "Woeful is the holy soul that belongs to the 'foreign man' and who emanates upon the proselyte that converts, and who flies to him from the Garden of Eden in a concealed way, upon the edifice that is constructed from the impure foreskin."⁴⁸ The latter clearly refers to the body of the Christian, which derives from the side of the foreskin, and thus stands in opposition to the covenant, the aspect of holiness that corresponds to Israel. The convert is described further as the "soul that belonged to the Other Side, the foreign man, and she is oppressed by him."⁴⁹ There is a glaring disparity, therefore, in the life of the convert, for before the conversion the soul of the potential convert is a Christian on the outside but secretly a Jew. Dissimulation lies at the core of the identity of the would-be convert: they are what they are not, for they are not what they are.

Tellingly, the zoharic author refers to this mystery as the "secret that is higher than all the rest."⁵⁰ Given the widely accepted view expressed in kabbalistic literature with respect to the origin of the Jewish soul in the sefirotic realm,⁵¹ it seems reasonable to conclude that the allusion here is to the fact that the embodiment of the Jewish soul in the Christian corresponds symbolically to the exile of the pneumatic spark of God. The esoteric significance of the soul being cloaked in a foreign garment is the displacement of an aspect of God from the pleroma of light, expressed in the mythical language of the estrangement of the daughter from the father. In a manifestly androcentric manner, the banished and disenfranchised aspect of the divine, which creates a blurring of identity in the social sphere, is

linked especially to the female gender.⁵² The point is made explicitly in the elder's interpretation of the verse, "If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights" (Exod. 21:10), in light of the verse, "And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who bestowed it" (Eccles. 12:7):

What is [the meaning of] "and the spirit returns?" This is the *Shekhinah*, which is the holy spirit. When the *Shekhinah* sees in the ten sojourns that she must take that Israel does not want to return in repentance before the blessed holy One, the Other Side rules over the holy land, as it has been established by the comrades. Come and see: The spirit of a man who is worthy is crowned in the image in the Garden of Eden below, and every Sabbath and new month the spirits are crowned, and they are divested [of the body] and they ascend above. Just as the blessed holy One acts in relation to the supernal, holy soul above, so too he acts in relation to that spirit below in the Garden of Eden below, which rises before him. He says, "This is the spirit of the body of so-and-so." Immediately, the blessed holy One crowns that spirit in several crowns, and he delights in her.⁵³

In terms of the specific example of the potential convert, one might say that before the conversion, the Jew is alienated in the other that mirrors the soul, as the soul that mirrors the other. The sense of dislocation is correlated with the duality of good and evil woven into the very fabric of being. This ontological presumption is related in the zoharic context by the poetic image of the rotating scale (*tiqla*),⁵⁴ which is described as the "pillar that stands in balance in the air that blows" (*ammuda de-qayyama letiqlin go aveira de-nashvat*). The weight comprises scales of justice (*mo'znei tsedeq*) on the right and scales of deceit (*mo'znei mirmah*) on the left, the force of holiness and the force of impurity.⁵⁵ In conjunction with this scale, the souls are said to "rise and descend, depart and return." However, when the right side is oppressed by the left, a condition that is tied exegetically to the phrase, "when a man rules over a man to treat him unjustly," *et asher shalat ha-adam be-adam le-ra lo* (Eccles. 8:9),⁵⁶ the daughter of the priest can be wed to the foreign man, the alien one who stems from the other side. Thus, the verse in question is related by the zoharic authorship to

the mystery of the oppression of the Jewish soul in the body of a Christian. The world is governed by the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Consequently, when those of the world behave in accordance with the side of goodness, the scale is tipped to the right side, but when they behave in accordance with the side of evil, it is tipped to the left. The Jewish souls, which are in the scale at the time that the evil force dominates, are oppressed by the demonic side.⁵⁷ What may be called the ontological possibility for conversion, therefore, involves the suffering and oppression of the Jewish soul in the body of the Christian, which is manifest in the historical domination of Jacob by Esau. Beyond the historical plane, moreover, this oppression signifies the anguish of the divine spark trapped in the shell of the demonic.

Immediately preceding the discussion of the concealment of secrets in the Torah, further mysteries regarding the convert are disclosed, but in this case in relation to the laws pertaining to the sale of an Israelite woman by her father into slavery (Exod. 21:7–11). The daughter refers symbolically to the Jewish soul and the father to God. In light of the complexity of the zoharic exegesis, the reader will be best served if I translate the relevant passage in full:

All the souls of the converts fly out from the Garden of Eden in a concealed manner. When the souls, which [the converts] inherit from the Garden of Eden, depart from this world, to what place do they return? It has been taught:⁵⁸ The one who takes and holds on to the property of converts at the outset merits them. So too all those supernal, holy souls that the blessed holy One prepares below, as we have said ... all of them issue forth at appointed times and ascend in order to take delight in the Garden of Eden. They encounter the souls of the converts, and those souls who hold on to them grasp them and merit them, and they are garbed in them, and they ascend. All of them exist in this garment, and they descend to the Garden in this garment, for in the Garden of Eden nothing exists without the garment of those who exist there. If you say that on account of this garment these souls are deprived of all the pleasure they had at first, it is written, “If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights” (Exod. 21:10). In the Garden they exist in the garment that they initially seized and merited. When they ascend above

they are divested of it, for there they exist without a garment ... When these holy souls descend to this world so that each one will dwell in its place, which is appropriate for human beings, all of them descend garbed in these souls [of the converts] of which we spoke, and thus they enter the holy seed, and in this garment they are enslaved by them in this world. When these garments draw on matters of this world, those holy souls are sustained from the scent emitted by these garments.⁵⁹

It is reasonable to conclude that the proximity of the above citation and the discussion of God's hiding secret matters in the Torah underscores the fact that, in the mind of the zoharic authorship, the ontological account of the convert, which entails the garbing of the holy seed of the Jewish soul in the Christian body, sheds light on the hermeneutical notion of secrets being cloaked in the letters of Torah. Just as in the case of the convert the external garment conceals the inner soul revealed therein, so in the case of Torah the literal sense is the covering that hides but also reveals the secret meaning. Accordingly, the task of reading does not necessitate the complete discarding of the garments for the soul to be disclosed. On the contrary, as I have already noted in passing, the language of the Zohar is very precise: the wise ones, who are full of eyes, see the hidden matter only through the garment (*mi-go levushah*).⁶⁰ After having established the general hermeneutical point, the zoharic authorship returns to the specific example of the convert:

In several places the blessed holy One gave a warning about the convert so that the holy seed will be forewarned regarding him, and afterward the concealed matter comes out from its sheath. When it is revealed, it returns immediately to its sheath wherein it is garbed. In every place that he gave a warning about the convert, the matter came out from its sheath and was revealed, and it says, "You know the soul of the convert" (Exod. 23:9). Immediately it entered its sheath, and returned to its garment wherein it was concealed, as it is written [in the continuation of the verse], "For you were converts in the land of Egypt." Scripture thought that since it was immediately garbed, there was no one taking heed of it. Through the soul of the convert the holy soul knows of the matters of this world and derives pleasure from them.⁶¹

In this most extraordinary passage, the zoharic authorship reveals the mystical intent of the biblical assertion that the Israelites were “strangers,” *gerim*, in Egypt, a historical reflection that is meant contextually to legitimate the moral prescript not to oppress the stranger. From the vantage point of the author of the zoharic passage, the rationale for the ethical injunction to act kindly toward the convert is the historical claim that the Israelites were converts themselves. But this is a secret that must be concealed. Most remarkable is the literary intent assigned to Scripture itself: “since it was immediately garbed, there was no one taking heed of it.” The operative notion of the secret espoused by the medieval kabbalists, epitomized by this zoharic text, involves the doubling of mystery: the Torah hides the secret it hides.⁶² That is, the ultimate dissimulation of Torah lies in the pretense that there is no secret. So profound is the mystery of conversion that the secret conceals its own secrecy; the dissimulation hides itself in the mirror of the text.⁶³ To reveal the secret, the concealment must be concealed, and thus the Torah seeks to hide the fact that the ancient Israelites were converts. But, of course, the zoharic author (that is, the kabbalistic luminary) knows better, and thus he uncovers the secret by bringing forth the hidden matter from beneath its sheath. In so doing, the secret no longer conceals its own secrecy in the masquerade of truth that is image. In the game of hide-and-seek, the mystic interpreter dis/covers the secret hiding beneath the garment. The selling of the Israelite maiden into slavery and the marriage of the priest’s daughter to a stranger, the two scriptural accounts related to the fate of the convert, both signify the displacement of the divine spark in a foreign body. To uncover the mystery that the ancient Israelites were converts is to understand the ultimate ontological truth that is predicated on the paradoxical coincidence of opposites: just as the soul of the Jew is embodied in the personhood of the Christian, so the divine inhabits the form of the demonic. To reveal this secret, moreover, has soteriological value inasmuch as the investiture of the esoteric sense in the letters of Torah is understood as the exile of the divine. The interpretative activity of the kabbalist, which is primarily the unveiling of the mystical import of Scripture, reveals the secret garbed in the cloak of the text, and thereby redeems the aspect of God imprisoned in the form of the incarnate Torah.⁶⁴

*Enclosure of the Feminine: Secrecy, Modesty,
and the Mystery of Redemption*

From other passages in the Zohar, one must conclude that the process of disclosure is indicative of the exilic condition when the feminine is dispersed among the nations, whereas the concealment of the mystery is characteristic of redemption, a state wherein the feminine is enclosed securely within her spatial boundaries.⁶⁵ The uncovering of secrets, which involves the disrobing of the text, is cast primarily in messianic terms as the means to bring about the union of male and female, but the consummation of that union results in the concealment of that which has been unveiled. The re/covery is portrayed geometrically as the centering of the point within the circle. *Prima facie*, it would seem that the depiction of redemption in terms of the concealment of the feminine is a reverse of the current situation described in a number of passages in zoharic literature: during the six weekdays the feminine is closed, but on the Sabbath she is open to receive the overflow from the masculine potency,⁶⁶ a process that is brought to fruition by the conjugal intercourse of the kabbalist with his wife on Friday evening.⁶⁷ Closer inspection of the relevant sources reveals that there is no contradiction, for the opening of the feminine to receive from the masculine is the initial stage of the redemptive process. However, the culminating phase results in the reintegration of the feminine to the masculine, which is depicted in a number of images, including the elevation of the feminine to the position of the crown on the masculine⁶⁸ or the centering of the feminine as the point within the circle. Both of these symbolic images are related in zoharic literature to the ontological stabilization of the *Shekhinah* on the Sabbath, which is a prolepsis of the final redemption.⁶⁹

Let us probe more deeply into the symbolic representation of the enclosure of the feminine within the masculine. I begin with a zoharic passage, which is an interpretation of the verse, "O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff" (Song of Songs 2:14):

"O my dove," this is the Community of Israel. "In the cranny of the rock," this is Jerusalem, for it rises above the rest of the world. Just as a rock is supernal to and stronger than everything, so Jerusalem is supernal to and stronger than everything.

“Hidden by the cliff,” this is the place that is called the Holy of Holies, the heart of all the world. Therefore, it is written “hidden by the cliff,” for there the *Shekhinah* is hidden like the woman who is modest (*tsenu‘ah*) in relation to her husband, and she does not depart from the house to the outside, as it is written, “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine within your house” (Ps. 128:3). Similarly, the Community of Israel does not rest outside of her place, the hiddenness of the gradation,⁷⁰ except in the time of exile.⁷¹

Following the position articulated in the classical rabbinic corpus, the zoharic author affirms that the dispersion of the *Shekhinah* among the nations was in order to protect Her children. Deviating from the rabbinic position, however, the kabbalist notes that such a state is precarious, for the *Shekhinah* is exposed and thus open to the pernicious effect of the demonic forces. Indeed, according to another passage in the Zohar, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple is described from the vantage point of the separation of the Matrona from the King, resulting in the exposure of the former’s genitals. Conversely, the construction of the Temple below as the place of dwelling for the divine glory parallels the unification above between the masculine and the feminine aspects of the divine, the blessed holy One and the *Shekhinah*. When the Temple stands and there is unity above and below, then the feminine is stabilized in her permanent habitation. Transgression on the part of Jewish males severs the bond between male and female, and the latter is driven from her dwelling. This banishment and consequent homelessness are depicted in the image of her being unclothed: “The King separates from the Matrona, and the Matrona is driven from her Temple, and consequently she is naked with respect to all, for the matter of the exposure of the genitals does not apply to the King without the Matrona or to the Matrona without the King, and thus it is written, ‘Do not uncover the nakedness of your father and the nakedness of your mother’ (Lev. 18:7).”⁷²

Exile entails separation of male and female, which in turn results in the exposure of the genitals, a situation that is especially dangerous for the feminine, inasmuch as she is subject to the potential encroachment of the demonic force of Samael. The prohibition against illicit sexual relations, referred to by the idiom *gilluy arayot*, the uncovering of the nakedness, is linked in zoharic literature to the

warning against the improper disclosure of the secrets of Torah.⁷³ It follows that if the exilic condition is one that is marked by the uncovering of the genitals, esoteric knowledge cannot be fully revealed. In the state of redemption, by contrast, the *Shekhinah* will be concealed within the rebuilt Temple, like a woman who is compared metaphorically to the fruitful vine hidden within the house. The spatial enclosure of the feminine within the confines of the Temple symbolically depicts the concealment of the feminine that is appropriate to her unification with the masculine. In the moment of *hieros gamos*, the *Shekhinah* is fully exposed vis-à-vis her masculine consort – an intimacy that is conveyed in the zoharic text by the image of the face-to-face encounter⁷⁴ – but in the same moment she must be concealed to protect herself against the possible intrusion of the demonic power.⁷⁵ Thus, the biblical locution interpreted as a reference to the holy of holies is *be-seter ha-madregah*, which should be rendered according to the theosophic symbolism deployed in the zoharic context as “in the secrecy of the gradation.” The place wherein the *Shekhinah* is hidden is the locus of occult wisdom, the divine gradation that is identified as the ontological root of secrecy. The matter of esotericism, therefore, is related directly to the erotic interpretation of the sacrificial cult of the Temple.

In another zoharic context, the matter is expressed specifically as an interpretation of the verse “A garden locked is my sister the bride, a fountain locked, a sealed-up spring” (Song of Songs 4:12): “R. Isaac said: When the holy King remembers Israel on account of his name, and the Matrona returns to her place, it is written ‘When he goes in to make expiation in the Shrine, nobody else shall be in the Tent of Meeting until he comes out’ (Lev. 16:17). Thus, when the priest entered to unify the holy name, to make atonement in holiness, to unite the King and the Matrona, it is written ‘nobody else shall be in the Tent of Meeting.’”⁷⁶ Entry into the sacred space of the Tabernacle, which is symbolically equivalent to the Temple, is prohibited because the cultic activity of the priest fosters the union of the masculine and the feminine aspects of the divine, a union that must be concealed. The necessity for concealment is tied to the female, who must be hidden within the erotogenic zone wherein the holy coupling takes place. The intrinsic hiddenness of the feminine is exegetically linked to the verse from the Song, wherein the sister/bride is compared poetically to the images of a locked garden,

a locked fountain, and a sealed-up spring.⁷⁷ To cite a third passage from the Zohar, where the point is further elaborated:

R. Jose began his discourse: “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine within your house; your sons, like olive saplings around your table” (Ps. 128:3). “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine,” all the time that your wife is inside the house and does not go out she is modest (*tsenu‘ah*), and it is proper for her to give birth to righteous offspring. “As a fruitful vine,” just as the vine is not planted in another species but only in its own, so the worthy woman does not produce seedlings in another man, and just as there is nothing grafted unto the vine from another tree, so too in the case of the worthy woman ... From this we learn that when the *Shekhinah* is hidden (*tseni‘a*) in her place as is appropriate for her, as it were, “your sons, like olive saplings,” this refers to Israel when they are dwelling in the land. “Around your table,” for they eat, drink, offer sacrifices, and are joyous before the blessed holy One, and the supernal and lower beings are blessed on account of them. When the *Shekhinah* departs, Israel are exiled from the table of their father and they are amongst the nations. They scream every day and there is none who hears them but the blessed holy One, as it is written, “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, [I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God]” (Lev. 26:44).⁷⁸

The concealment of the *Shekhinah* in her appropriate dwelling, which is reflected below in the edifice of the Temple, marks the ideal situation wherein the divine androgyny is perfectly constituted. The word *tsenu‘ah*, which is applied to the feminine *Shekhinah* in this citation and in the other relevant contexts, has the double connotation of “hidden” and (sexually) “modest.”⁷⁹ The philological point underscores the attitude cultivated by the traditional male kabbalists with respect to female sexuality and the notion of secrecy more generally: the eschatological condition of the *Shekhinah* reflects and is reinforced by the sexual modesty of Jewish women, who ideally should remain within the home so that the upper covenant, the sign of which is inscribed on the male organ, is not

forgotten or damaged. Thus, reflecting on why Jonah fled to Tarshish, the zoharic authorship comments,

The *Shekhinah* does not dwell outside the land of Israel, and thus in order for the *Shekhinah* not to dwell upon him, he fled from the land of Israel. The *Shekhinah* dwells there, as it says, “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine within your house” (Ps. 128:3). “A fruitful vine,” this refers to the *Shekhinah*. Just as the *Shekhinah* was hidden within the Holy of Holies, so too a wife must be modest and not go out from her house.⁸⁰

A link is thus forged between sexual modesty and the occultation of the feminine.⁸¹ This occultation, in turn, is related specifically to the concealment of secrets even though, from the traditional kabbalistic perspective, it is clearly the male to whom the secrets are entrusted. Not only is it exclusively to the male that the secrets are concomitantly revealed and concealed, but only to the male who is sexually pure, for the locus of the secret is in the gradation that corresponds to the phallus. Nevertheless, the female plays an instrumental role in this process, since the sexual modesty of the male is dependent on her, just as above the concealment of secrets is dependent on the enclosure of the feminine potency within the proper spatial boundaries of the idealized holy of holies. The point is made explicitly by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Moses Cordovero, reflecting on the verse, “When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them” (Gen. 6:1):

It says “daughters” and not “sons” because the essence of sexual modesty (*tseni'ut*) depends on the feminine, for [women] must be modest, and by means of this the men will be modest and the children will emerge with a disposition of modesty. Therefore, the beginning of the damage sprouted from the licentiousness of the daughters, and thus it says “and daughters were born to them.” And from here the sexual immorality (*peritsut*) began to produce a bad result, estranged children ... The explanation for the blessed copulation is related to the fact that the holy soul is garbed within it, and it must be like the supernal copulation, for just as the supernal copulation is hidden in secrecy, such that no created being can experience it, so too the lower copulation

must be in concealment (*tseṇi'ut*) such that it is not known by any creature in the world. Consequently, the holy soul, which is made from the supernal copulation, will descend, but when the copulation is in the open and in public no supernal holiness dwells there.⁸²

Sexual modesty, *tseṇi'ut*, is related to the concealment of the feminine, whereas licentiousness, *peritsut*, is related to the exposure of the feminine. Cordovero's remarks highlight the androcentric dimension of the kabbalistic symbolism, already implicit in the earlier sources, including the passages from the Zohar to which I have referred. The disclosure of the feminine reflects an ontologically defective state, albeit one that has an impact on the phenomenological accessibility of the divine. In his commentary on Ezekiel's chariot vision, Moses de León connects this idea exegetically to the words that inaugurate the prophetic epiphany, "the heavens opened and I saw visions of God," that is, in the exilic state, "that which was concealed is disclosed," *mah she-hayah satum nir'eh*, for there is no shelter or covering protecting the *Shekhinah*. The geographical dispersion of the exile is the symbolic intent of the heavens opening up, which signifies a rupture in the divine, "everything was a single unity that was bound in a sturdy bond in the secret of the heavens," *hayah ha-kol yiḥud meyuḥad mequshar be-qesher amits be-sod shamayim*. The visions of God are here related directly to this state of disclosure that is associated with exile, a point that is related exegetically to the fact that the word for visions, *mar'ot*, is written in the defective form (without the letter *waw*). In the state of exile, therefore, the *Shekhinah* is likened to the mirror (*mar'eh*) in which the image is seen, whereas in a more perfect state of redemption she would be hidden: "That which was concealed 'as a fruitful vine within your house' (Ps. 128:3) went outside, and she was seen and revealed in another land in this day; she descended to Babylonia outside her boundary, and she was made visible there."⁸³

A better understanding of the nexus of spatial delimitation and the occultation of the feminine will indicate even more clearly how deep the chord of androcentrism strikes in the kabbalistic literature. Above I noted in passing that the enclosure of the feminine within the masculine is portrayed in the geometric image of the midpoint of the circle. In a separate study, I have argued that the

symbolization of the *Shekhinah* as the point in the center of the circle signifies the aspect of the female that is anatomically homologous to the male.⁸⁴ Without rehearsing all of the technical arguments and textual examples that I put forth in support of my position, let me simply reiterate that the application of the symbol of the point to the feminine implies a gender transformation of the feminine. When the feminine potency is concentrated in the center of the circle, she is described in overtly phallic terms, such as the foundation stone, whence all entities derive or the spring that overflows and sustains all things. It is particularly important for this study that the symbol of the midpoint is also associated with the image of the enclosed female. The one, like the other, is meant to convey the symbolic intention regarding the phallic nature of the feminine.

The implications of this symbolism for the role of gender in the theosophic kabbalah should be obvious. The concealed feminine represents the body of secrecy, but in that occultation, she has been transposed into an aspect of the male. Given the structural affinity between the phallic potency and the rhetoric of secrecy, it should come as little surprise that, for the exclusively male kabbalists, the locus of secrets should be in the female envisioned as part of the male. We are now in a better position to understand the parabolic image of the Torah as the beautiful maiden without eyes to which I referred above. To sum up the previous discussion: the esoteric meaning is garbed in the exoteric in the same manner that the existential situation of the convert involves the dissimulation of the Jewish soul and the donning of the garment of a Christian. On the surface, the two would appear to be diametrically opposed. But, for the wise one who has eyes to see, the two are not radically distinct at all, for the truth of the internal is beheld precisely from the external covering. In the case of the convert, as I also noted above, the zoharic authorship relates the secret to the verse, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9). Taking the word *ger* to refer to the religious convert rather than to the ethnic stranger, the kabbalistic interpretation of the verse proffered by the zoharic authorship is that the Israelites themselves were converts. The seemingly ontological wedge separating Jew and non-Jew is thus substantially narrowed by this realization, which arises exegetically from the implicit meaning covered by the

sheath of the explicit text. As the continuation of that passage indicates, the one to whom the secrets are revealed comprehends not only that contextual sense is an allusion to inner truth, but that the allusion is the veil through which the unveiling is veiled in the veil of unveiling.

The hermeneutical relationship can be framed as well in gendered terms. Thus, for example, in one zoharic context, the divine is portrayed in the dichotomy of that which is hidden and that which is revealed (*setim we-galya*): “We have learnt that the blessed holy One is hidden and revealed. The revealed relates to the courthouse below and the concealed to the place whence all blessings emerge.”⁸⁵ To decode this relatively straightforward passage, it will be noted that the hidden aspect is related to the male, or more precisely to *Yesod*, the wellspring of all blessings, and the revealed to the female, or the *Shekhinah*, the attribute of limitation referred to symbolically as the lower courthouse, that is, the place whence judgment is issued. As I noted above, in other zoharic passages, the Torah is delineated in the same manner, for it is emphasized that the Torah is hidden and revealed because it is identical with the name, which is itself hidden and revealed. We are justified, therefore, in utilizing this formulation to disclose something fundamental about the zoharic attitude toward the hermeneutics of esotericism. In the continuation of the aforecited passage, the zoharic authorship draws the obvious hermeneutical principle as it emerges from the theosophical notion of the concomitant concealment and disclosure of the divine: “Therefore [to the extent] that all the words of a person are in secrecy, blessings dwell upon him, and if they are disclosed, it is a place upon which the courthouse rests on him. Since it is a place that is disclosed, that which is called the evil eye governs it. Everything is in the supernal mystery in the pattern of that which is above.”⁸⁶

Secrecy is contextualized in the phallic component of the divine, but in the moment of union, the female itself is transposed into part of the male. The reunion of male and female in the theosophic kabbalah is a process of reintegration of the female in the male or, to put the matter somewhat differently, insofar as the female provides the space to contain the male, she may be considered the extended phallus.⁸⁷ On the essential role of the female to contain the male, I mention here one example from the text of the Zohar,

which involves the interpretation of the expression *aron ha-berit*, “ark of the covenant,” as a reference to the *Shekhinah* that contains the mystery of the “image of the holy body” (*raza diyoqna de-gufa qaddisha*) of the divine *anthropos*, which is also depicted as the “secret of the Torah” (*raza de-oraita*).⁸⁸ In this context the “holy body” refers more specifically to the phallus, which is the aspect of the divine anatomy wherein the mystery of Torah is localized. It is stated explicitly in that passage that only one who is careful with respect to the phallus, which is referred to as the “sign of the holy covenant” (*ot qayyama qaddisha*), is considered to be in the category of the human (*adam*) in the fullest sense,⁸⁹ an anthropological classification that effectively dehumanizes both Jewish women and non-Jews, for the ontological status of the complete human is imparted exclusively to Jewish males. In that context, moreover, this symbolic nexus is applied to the custom of placing the corpse of the righteous man in a coffin, for he alone is worthy of such an honor, since he was careful with respect to the “sign of the holy covenant.” The biblical paradigm is Joseph, of whom it says that “he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt” (Gen. 50:26). Commenting on the double *yod* in the word *vayyisem*, the author of this zoharic passage writes:

The covenant was joined to the covenant, the secret below in the secret above, and he entered the coffin. What is the reason? For he guards the holy covenant and it is established in him. Thus it was appropriate for him to enter into the coffin, for only the righteous one, who knows and is aware of the fact that he has never sinned with respect to that phallus, the sign of the holy covenant, can enter into the coffin ... The coffin is not joined except to the righteous one who guards the sign of the holy covenant.⁹⁰

The mystical valence attributed to the placing of Joseph in the coffin involves the sacred union of the divine phallus – appropriately personified by Joseph, inasmuch as his righteousness is related to the fact that he was scrupulous in sexual matters pertaining especially to the phallus – and the feminine, symbolized by the casket. The symbolic image conveys the philosophical principle of the feminine as the empty space that contains the phallic potency. The

choice of this particular image is also important insofar as it underscores the nexus of eros and thanatos.⁹¹ The ultimate symbol of death is transformed into a potent image for eros. What may be gathered from this specific example is the more general claim that the “othering” of the feminine, which entails the psychic projection of the feminine as other, is to be evaluated strictly from the point of view of the male. The phallogocentric dimension of the zoharic imagery is well captured in the following account of Lacan’s theory of signification, given by Judith Butler: “This is an other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration. For women to ‘be’ the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to ‘embody’ the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through ‘being’ its other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity.”⁹² The contemporary feminist reflection is an entirely apt portrayal of the underlining assumption of the theosophic symbolism embraced by the members of the zoharic circle and other kabbalists.

From this perspective, one can comprehend that the zoharic portrayal of the body of secrecy is related in several key passages to the motif of the occultation of the feminine. The hidden woman is the modest wife secluded in the house, which parallels the enclosure of the *Shekhinah* in the holy of holies. In this state, the female is united in secrecy with the male, and as a result of that union she becomes the fruitful vine, an image that clearly conveys the act of bestowal and fruition, traits that are generally associated with the masculine and, more specifically, with the phallus. Indeed, the woman who is sealed up in the house becomes the fruitful vine, for she is transformed into the male, and the power that receives becomes the power that bestows. The ultimate secret, the mystery that marks the path of secrecy, centers around the fact that the occluded feminine is one whose femininity is no longer ontologically distinct from the male. For the kabbalists, this secret lies at the core of the mystical insight that brings about messianic redemption. In the case of the Zohar and related kabbalistic literature, however, the secret did not involve esoteric knowledge that had to be suppressed for political reasons. Rather, the erotic nature of the union necessitated the concealment of that which was exposed, which again underscores the fact that concealment and disclosure

are inseparably linked in dialectical tension. By contrast, in modern scholarship, this secret has assumed another connotation, for it has become dangerous to uncover that which is hidden in the symbol of the concealed woman.⁹³ Alas, in what can only be called hermeneutical revenge, the secret has hid itself precisely from the very scholars who have undertaken the systematic exposure of the mysteries of the tradition. The disclosure of this secret on my part has not been without a price, but it is a price that must be paid if the notion of secrecy in kabbalistic esotericism is to be properly understood.

Notes

1. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 166–224.
2. The original German text and translation are cited from David Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah," in *Gershom Scholem*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 103–104.
3. On the centrality of esotericism in the history of Jewish mysticism, consider the perceptive remarks of William T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Lippincott, 1960), p. 57: "The degrees in which mystics tend thus to cloak their experiences from the public view vary with individual temperaments and also with the traditions of the particular culture, religion, or society. The most extreme secrecy was observed ... among Jewish mystics."
4. On the hermeneutical play of concealment and disclosure evident in the zoharic orientation toward secrets, see Liebes, *Studies*, pp. 26–30. The point is expressed in any number of zoharic contexts, but perhaps nowhere as poignantly as in Zohar 2:98b–99b, which includes the exposition of the parable of the maiden without eyes. For an extended discussion of the hermeneutical implications of this parable, see Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden," pp. 155–203; idem, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 384–387. Needless to say, this parable has been discussed by a number of scholars. To mention here some of the relevant references: Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 55–56; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1084–1085; Talmage, "Apples of Gold," pp. 316–318; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 227–229; Liebes, "Zohar and Eros," pp. 87–98; Michal Oron, "'Place Me as a Seal upon Your Heart': Reflections on the Poetics of the Author of the Zohar in the Section of Sabba de-Mishpatim," in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), pp. 1–24 (Hebrew); and Pinchas Giller, "Love and Upheaval in the Zohar's Sabba de-Mishpatim," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 7, 1997, pp. 31–60.
5. Regarding this hermeneutical principle in medieval kabbalah, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 37–44; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 283–284, 292–295, 1079–1082; and Idel, "Concept of Torah," pp. 49–58.
6. Zohar 2:230b.

7. See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 50: "The Jewish *Geheimnis*, the hearth in which one looks for the center under a sensible cover [*enveloppe*] – the tent of the tabernacle, the stone of the temple, the robe that clothes the text of the covenant – is finally discovered as an empty room, is not uncovered, never ends being uncovered, as it has nothing to show." For an illuminating discussion of secret in Derrida's philosophical reflections, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 101–112.
8. A possible alternative to the view that I have attributed to the zoharic text may be found in a vivid parable employed by Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:195–199, in an effort to explicate the relationship of the Tetragrammaton, which is equated with the Torah (*ibid.*, p. 48; and references to the scholarly treatment of this topic given above in note 5), to the rest of the names and appellations: there is a progressive disrobing by the king, which is proportionate to those who are in his company, until the point that he takes off all of his clothing when he is alone with the queen. The garments here represent the other names and appellations by means of which the Tetragrammaton, which is the ontological name, governs the world. In a second passage from this work (*ibid.* 205–206), Gikatilla returns to this parabolic image, but in that context the disrobing by the king and the subsequent union between the king and his wife is related symbolically to God's relationship to the spiritual elite of the Jewish males, that is, the pious, ascetics, and pure ones. See Wolfson, "Eunuchs," pp. 172–174. Although it might seem that Gikatilla, in contrast to the zoharic authorship, embraces the notion of a naked truth, which would be expressed symbolically by the image of the king removing all of his clothes, the fact is that for Gikatilla as well there is always a garment, for the king who stands naked is the name itself, the Tetragrammaton, which is the ultimate garment. One might say that there is no nakedness beyond the attire of the four-letter name.
9. See Mario Perniola, "Between Clothing and Nudity," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), pp. 237–265.
10. Beyond the specific instance of the kabbalistic literature, it is evident that the issue of revealing and concealing is often linked to the eroticized body, a point that has been made by many writers from different theoretical perspectives. For recent discussion along these lines, see Alison L. Brown, *Subjects of Deceit: A Phenomenology of Lying* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 90–127.
11. I will take this opportunity to respond to the criticism of my work made by Yehuda Liebes, "Judaism and Myth," *Dimmu*, 14, 1997, p. 15 n. 5 (Hebrew). (I thank Gil Anidjar for drawing my attention to this essay.) In the body of his study (p. 7), Liebes makes the point that Jewish mystics have embraced the paradox that the vision of God is occasioned by not seeing, which he relates to the quality of humility. In the note, Liebes signals out my book, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, as an illustration of not grasping this point. This is a rather remarkable claim inasmuch as countless times in that work, as well as in other studies (not mentioned by Liebes), I have noted the ultimate paradox with respect to the vision of God in the history of Jewish mysticism engendered by the concomitant affirmation of presence and absence. Repeatedly, I have emphasized that the God who is visible to Jewish mystics is the invisible God, and that which is revealed is revealed in its concealment. On the very first page

of the book, I write, “The theological tension between vision and invisibility provides the narrative context to articulate the esoteric dialectic of concealment and disclosure so characteristic of the various currents of Jewish mysticism. To see the God who is hidden – or, more precisely, the aspect of God that is hiddenness as such – is the destiny of the Jewish mystic, bestowed upon him by the name Israel, which, as some ancient authors playfully proposed, signifies the one who sees God” (p. ix). In the conclusion of the book, I reiterate the point: “The tension between aniconism, on the one hand, and visualizing the deity, on the other, is an essential component of the relevant varieties of Jewish mystical speculation ... In all of the mystical sources dealt with in this study there is a tension between disclosure and concealment of the divine form. This tension, I believe, is related to the fact that the ultimate object of vision is the phallus that must be hidden. The unveiling of the veiled phallus in the visionary encounter necessitates language that is paradoxical and contradictory” (pp. 394–396). Leaving aside for a moment the correctness of my assumption that the phallus is the site of mystical vision, it is evident that I embrace the paradoxical notion that the vision is of that which is invisible. That is the force of my locution that the object of vision is that which must be hidden. Of the zoharic text itself, I say, “The Zohar thus embraces the paradox that the divine phallus is both concealed and revealed” (p. 343). I thus go on to speak of the “essential feature of the mystic vision as a seeing of the veiled phallus.” Again, one may quibble with my phallic interpretation, but one would have to admit that my thesis is predicated on accepting the paradox that the mystical vision is a seeing of that which must be veiled. Indeed, in my dissertation, “Sefer ha-Rimmon” 1:23, I touch upon this paradox when I note that Moses de León, whom I considered at the time to be the sole author of the Zohar, was influenced by the Maimonidean hermeneutic of esotericism, which is predicated on “letting that which is hidden appear and that which appears remain hidden. The teaching of truth, like truth itself, is characterized by a hide-and-seek dialectic: the concealed is disclosed as the disclosed is concealed.” Liebes’ criticism is nothing more than a cavalier dismissal of my work and does not measure up to the standard of legitimate academic dispute.

12. My analysis here is greatly indebted to Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 83–85. Although Irigaray does not deal with the symbolic orientation of the medieval kabbalists, her incisive remarks can be fruitfully applied to this world. Lest one protest that this not a justifiable application on my part, it should be remembered that Irigaray’s insights relate to the Western philosophical tradition of which the kabbalists are an integral part.
13. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 306–317. The convergence of the visual and auditory modes of symbolization related particularly to the role of the *Shekhinah* as the garment that makes the masculine glory both visible and audible is well captured in the summary account in Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* 23, s.v., *imrat*: “Thus the *Shekhinah* is a garment (*levush*) and a palace (*heikhal*) in relation to *Tiferet*, for the Tetragrammaton is not mentioned except in his palace, which is Adonai. And she is called by the term *imra* insofar as she is the diadem (*aṭarah*) on the head of her husband.” On the implications of this symbolism in the writings of Cordovero as it relates to the phallic transformation of the *Shekhinah* in her elevation, see Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 335–339.
14. There is obviously a play on the words *pashaṭ*, the external sense, and *lehaḥshif*, to strip away. The *pashaṭ*, which is the garment, is uncovered by an act of

- covering. Alternatively expressed, the unveiling of meaning appears through the veil of the text.
15. This literary unit, which is likely itself a composite of discrete textual strands, appears in Zohar 2:176b–179a.
 16. The ontological implication of the zoharic expression is underscored in the postscript to the textual unit wherein the “book of concealment,” *sifra ditseni’uta*, is identified with the “concealment of the King,” *tseni’uta de-malka*. The process of divine autogenesis, the unveiling of that which is veiled, is concomitantly the composition of the esoteric book, the text that reveals the secret by concealment. This idea is captured in the formulation used in a number of relevant zoharic passages, *tseni’uta de-sifra*, the “concealment of the book,” which conveys the idea that the book hides in its very disclosure. See Zohar 2:176a; 3:128a, 130a, 130b, 131a, 133a–b, 135a, 138b, 139a–b, 141a, 142a–b, 143a–b, 146b, 289a. On the poetic underpinning of this textual unit, which is related to the creativity of the divine, see Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” pp. 78–79. For a more general characterization of poetry as the utilization of the language of mystery to reveal the secret that must be concealed, see the poignant discussion in Norman O Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 3–4.
 17. This insight lies at the basis of the analysis of Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).
 18. Consider George Simmel’s notion of the triadic structure of secrecy discussed by Hans G. Kippenberg and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, “Introduction: Secrecy and Its Benefits,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. xiii–xiv.
 19. The erotic nature of reading is especially salient in the notion of textuality offered by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* and *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. See the pertinent reflections in the introduction to *Sexuality and Masquerade: The Dedalus Book of Sexual Ambiguity*, ed. Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Dedalus, 1996), pp. 4–5.
 20. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 368–372. An interesting formulation of the implicit homoerotic dimension of the transmission of secrets from the master to his disciples seems to be implied in the following remark of Joseph Angelet, *Livnat ha-Sappir* (Jerusalem, 1913), 60b–c: “You already know that the justice above, which is in the Jerusalem that is constructed, is the Tree of Life, and it is called ‘Lord,’ in the secret of ‘the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth’ (Josh. 3:11) ... and it is called male. The Community of Israel, which receives from him, is called by the name woman (*ishshah*), the ‘fire of the Lord’ (*esh h* [the individual *he* is a standard scribal circumlocution for the Tetragrammaton], which are the same letters that make up the word *ishshah*). Since Rashbi, may peace be upon him, would cause his wisdom and Torah, which was called the Tree of Life, to overflow to the sages, he too was called the ‘Tree of Life’ and the ‘Lord’ in this manner in relation to the lower beings who receive the Torah and wisdom from his mouth. This is proven from the *Idra* [the zoharic section that relates to the gathering of R. Simeon and the rest of the comrades to discourse about the most recondite theosophic secrets], for he set forth the arrayments (*tiqnen tiqqunim*) of the Tree of Life ... and the rest of the sages explicated the arrayments, each one in accordance with the level that he comprehended. If you comprehend the secret of ‘For in his image did God make the perfect man’ (Gen. 9:6 with the author’s addition of the word

‘perfect’), you will comprehend the great principle in the Torah that was explicated by Ben Azzai, and this is the great principle regarding ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18), and this is a secret concealed for the wise of heart, for by means of their arousal below the holy power is aroused above.” Let me note that Angelet’s reference to Ben Azzai, probably cited from memory, is a distortion of the relevant rabbinic source according to which Aqiva’s choice of the verse “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) as indicative of the “great principle” (*kelal gadol*) of Torah is opposed by Ben Azzai’s comment that the verse “This is the record of Adam’s genealogy: On the day that God created Adam, he made him in the image of God” (Gen. 5:1) is an even greater principle (*zeh kelal gadol mi-zeh*). See *Sifra*, Qedoshim 4:12. The order is inverted in *Genesis Rabbah* 24:7, 236–237. The main point for our purpose, however, is Angelet’s citation of the obligation to love one’s fellow man in the context of casting the process of transmission of secrets by the master, Simeon ben Yohai, to his colleagues. The master who imparts corresponds to the phallic potency of the tree of life, which overflows to the feminine receptacle, represented symbolically by the comrades who receive and explicate the words arrayed by the master. Together they constitute the perfect human, the androgynous Adam in whose image humanity was created. For a similar pattern in the body of Zohar, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 371–372 n. 155. It is also of interest to note that Angelet describes Simeon ben Yoḥai’s rhetorical activity in the dissemination of secrets in terms of the erotically charged verse, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young boys” (Song of Songs 2:3): the beloved is Simeon and the young boys the rest of the comrades. On the relationship of Angelet to the zoharic circle, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 134, 224–225 n. 298. For a more extensive discussion of some elements in the writings of this kabbalist, see Iris Felix, “Chapters in the Kabbalistic Thought of R. Joseph Angelet,” M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1991 (Hebrew).

21. J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 3.
22. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*.
23. In this matter, I have been especially influenced by the Lacanian notion that the phallus as signifier can play its role only when masked. See Arika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 87–88.
24. Many have written on circumcision, but particularly pertinent for our discussion of the kabbalistic androcentrism is the work of Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*.
25. See Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision,” reprinted with some slight modifications in idem, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 29–48, and notes on pp. 140–155.
26. The point is well understood by Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, pp. 81–82, who thus contrasted castration (the obliteration of the masculine to constitute the feminine as essential lack) and circumcision: “Now the Jewish operation, despite what is cut away, lies in the realm of the sign. What is cut away is only cut away in order to make a sign. It is ‘true’ that it is also in the realm of the body. But almost the reverse of castrating, this excision is what marks the body’s entry into the world of signs ... And rightly so, moreover: circumcision attests to a specialist’s expertise in the field of signs. Should the rest of the stage be transformed into a protesting chorus, in the name of castration no less, that changes, in fact, nothing. The spot left by the Jew is still there. To make him play it over again as a simulacrum is worth more. Provided he is made to pass

- as other. And without a veil? The thing taken from him was (only) a blind. Though a necessary one. His role will therefore be to enact dissimulation.”
27. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 339–345.
 28. I refer here to a process that elsewhere I have called the erasing of the erasure. See Wolfson *Circle in the Square*, pp. 49–78.
 29. See my study referred to in the previous note.
 30. See Wolfson, “Woman – the Feminine as Other.”
 31. See idem, “Eunuchs,” pp. 169–171.
 32. I will list only a few representative studies that affirm the confluence of the spiritual and the erotic: Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love*; Ben Zion Goldberg, *The Sacred Fire: The Story of Sex in Religion* (New York: University Books, 1958); Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*; Doninger O’Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism*; Kripal, *Kali’s Child*. See also the collection of essays in *Sexual Archetypes, East and West*, ed. Bina Gupta (New York: Paragon House, 1987); and on the relationship of mystical experience and the language of passion in medieval Christendom, see Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 141–170.
 33. Mark Verman, “Kabbalah Refracted: Review Essay,” *Shofar*, 14, 1996, p. 129; Green, “Kabbalistic Re-Vision,” p. 272 n. 16.
 34. See Wolfson, “Eunuchs;” idem, “Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 92–118. For a parallel insight that the celebration of the homosocial bonding between God and Christian men rests upon an unequivocal rejection of homosexual deviance, see Elizabeth B. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 165–200.
 35. Although in his discussion of the messianic theosophy of the *Idrot* sections of zoharic literature (*Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 37–43), Liebes recognizes the importance of the motif of love that binds together the members of the mystical fraternity, in his discussion of the *tiqqun* (rectification) through erotic union (pp. 71–74), he privileges heterosexual activity as the only form of eros that has redemptive value. The homoerotic relation that pertains between Simeon ben Yoḥai and the other members of the fraternity is explored by Liebes in “Zohar and Eros,” pp. 104–112, but in that context as well he assigns priority to heterosexuality as the means to bring about the messianic repair of the primal sin of celibacy. In my judgment, however, celibacy is not rectified simply by affirming and engaging in heterosexual intercourse. The matter is more complex inasmuch as the erotic bond of the members of the fraternity is predicated on the (temporary) abrogation of carnal sexuality. The *tiqqun* for celibacy, therefore, is attained dialectically through abstinence from physical sex between the kabbalist and his spouse, which facilitates the erotic bonding of the male mystics in their textual community. As I put the matter in “Eunuchs,” p. 165, the symbolic worldview of the Zohar entails the insight that “homoeroticism is the carnality of celibate renunciation.” See also my brief criticism of Liebes in *Through a Speculum*, p. 371 n. 155, and my more extensive remarks in “Constructions of the *Shekhinah* in the Messianic Theosophy of Abraham Cardoso, with an Annotated Edition of *Derush ha-Shekhinah*,” *Kabbalah*, 3, 1998, pp. 46–51.

36. In the concluding postscript of the relevant section, Zohar 2:114a, the elder is identified by name as R. Yeiva Sabba, who appears elsewhere in the zoharic narrative. See Zohar 1:55a, 59a, 225a; 2:135a. In a number of contexts, we read of the “book of R. Yeiva Sabba” (1:47a, 117b; 2:6a, 60b, 206b; 3:7b, 155b), or of the “book of legends (*aggadah*) of R. Yeiva Sabba” (3:289a, 293a, 295a), or simply the “legend (*aggadah*) of R. Yeiva Sabba” (3:290a, 290b). It is possible that the identification of the elder in the section on Mishpaṭim as R. Yeiva reflects a later redactional accretion to the base text.
37. Zohar 2:95a, 99a–b. For scholarly treatments of the parable, see the references supplied in note 4.
38. Zohar 2:98b. On the use of the image of the garment to describe the status of the literal sense of Torah, see Cohen-Alloro, *Secret of the Garment*, pp. 45–49.
39. For elaboration of this point, see Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” pp. 186–187. Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” p. 97 n. 182, criticizes my understanding of the image of the beautiful maiden without eyes as a reference to the fact that the text in and of itself is blind, that is, without sense. Liebes did not comprehend the dialectical force of my argument. Thus, he refers only to the part of my study that would seem to support his criticism and he neglects to cite the continuation of my argument that not only undermines his criticism but clearly indicates that my position is closer to what he presents as his own view. I argued that the hermeneutical theory implied in the zoharic parable is that in bestowing meaning on the text the interpreter draws meaning out from the text. From that perspective it is difficult to distinguish in a clear way between eisegesis and exegesis. It is curious that Liebes does not at all refer to a second passage in “Beautiful Maiden” (pp. 171–172) wherein I state explicitly that interpretation in the Zohar is an unfolding of the infinite meaning within the text. For the sake of setting the record straight, I will cite the relevant portion of my argument: “The movement of zoharic hermeneutics may be thus compared to a circle, beginning and ending with the text in its literal sense. For the Zohar the search for the deepest truths of Scripture is a gradual stripping away of the external forms or garments until one gets to the inner core, but when one gets to that inner core what one finds is nothing other than the *peshat*, i.e., the text as it is. To interpret, therefore, from the perspective of the Zohar, is not to impose finite meaning on the text, but to unfold the infinite meaning within the text.” In that context, moreover, I make use of Ricoeur’s term “appropriation” to convey the idea that interpretation is a recovery of what is latent in the text. It is lamentable that the judgmental ire of the scholarly critique was not tempered by a more careful assessment of my argument.
40. See Jochanan H. A. Wijnhoven, “The Zohar and the Proselyte,” in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday by His Students*, ed Michael A. Fishbane and Paul R. Flohr (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 120–140, esp. 130–131.
41. Zohar 2:95a–b. Compare the use of the expression *guf zar*, “alien body,” in Zohar 1:127a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*). In that context as well it is clear that the word *zar* refers more specifically to the non-Jew. I would thus respectfully take issue with Giller’s assertion, “Love and Upheaval,” p. 36, that *ish zar*, the “non-priest,” symbolizes the physical body in an apparently generic sense. Giller himself notes that throughout this zoharic section the “images of ascent and descent are employed to underscore the strained relationships between Jews and Gentiles.” The more nuanced interpretation of *ish zar* as a reference to the body of a non-Jew, or specifically that of a Christian, supports his claim about the underlying tension of this literary unit. The alienation to which the

zoharic authorship alludes in this case is not the generic imprisonment of the soul in the physical body, but relates more precisely to the entrapment of the Jewish soul in a Christian body. In this respect, one might contrast the zoharic myth of the alienation of the Jewish soul in the body of the Christian from the gnostic myth of the estrangement of the soul in general in the body, which has its roots in Platonic thought. In spite of the many important developments in scholarly research on the phenomenon of gnosticism in its multivalent nature, one of the most articulate formulations of this basic element in gnostic myth remains Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, pp. 48–99. Many scholars have noted the Platonic element of gnosticism in its classical expression. For a review of this relationship, with reference to many of the relevant studies, see Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 148–164. One might consider the kabbalistic orientation an ethnocentric application of the more generic philosophical position that lies at the core of the gnostic worldview, and this applies even to those gnostic texts that seem to be based on the notion of the fall of Sophia, which may be related in part to the Hellenistic Jewish speculation on wisdom (*hokhmah*). See George MacRae, “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” *Novum Testamentum*, 12, 1970, pp. 86–101.

42. According to a statement attributed to Rava in Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49b (and repeated in Hagigah 3a), Abraham is assigned the title *tehillah la-gerim*, the “first of the converts.” On the rabbinic portrait of Abraham as a proselyte (in some passages related to his own circumcision at the age of ninety-nine according to Gen. 17:24) or as one who (together with Sarah) was engaged in the process of converting others (derived exegetically from Gen. 12:5), see Gary G. Porton, *The Stranger within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), pp. 58, 91, 139, 197, 211, 217, 224 n. 45, 256 n. 85, 262 n. 142, 319 n. 310.
43. Zohar 2:95a. See Zohar 1:95a; Wijnhoven, “Zohar and the Proselyte,” pp. 125–127.
44. The demonic potency is thus designated in several passages in the Zohar by the biblical idiom (Ps. 81:10) *el zar*, “strange god.” In some contexts, this locution is related specifically to the male potency of the demonic realm as opposed to the feminine, which is designated *el nekhar*, the “foreign god.” See Zohar 1:161b; 2:182a, 243a, 263b, 268a; 3:13a, 106a–b. On the use of the term *zar* to refer to the demonic potency, see Zohar 2:133b; 3:7a, 55a, 73b, 297a. The nexus between idolatry, sexual misconduct, and the demonic is emphasized repeatedly in the zoharic corpus. See Zohar 1:131b; 2:3b, 61a, 87b, 90a; 3:84a, 142a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 461–462, 1365; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 140 n. 2.
45. Zohar 1:93a, 204a; 2:87b, 90a. See also *ibid.* 1:131a–b.
46. “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 132.
47. Zohar 1:13a–b, 96a.
48. Zohar 2:98b.
49. Zohar 2:95b. I have explored the demonization of Christianity in the zoharic literature in “Re/membering the Covenant.”
50. Zohar 2:95b.
51. For an extensive discussion of the zoharic treatment of the soul, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 677–722.
52. It goes without saying that this (dis)orientation is not unique to the medieval kabbalah, and has roots in much older phases of the Jewish religion, indeed stretching back to ancient Israel. For an enlightening study of the theme of concealment and the blurring of identity, see Timothy K. Beal, *The Book*

of *Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997).

53. Zohar 2:97b. On the motif of the exile of *Shekhinah* in the zoharic corpus, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 382–385. The psychical application of this theme is much older in kabbalistic sources. The nexus of the dispersion of the *Shekhinah* and the transmigration of the Jewish souls seems to be implied already in a passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*. See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 203–204. The possible gnostic background to the bahiric myth of the lower wisdom who falls from the realm of light was already noted by Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 93–95. In this context, it is noteworthy that the depiction of the feminine in the ancient gnostic works seems to me more equivocal than in the medieval kabbalistic sources. That is, in the former, there is a genuine ambivalence such that one finds both positive and negative images, whereas in the case of the latter, positive elements are only associated with the masculinized feminine. On the ambivalence of gender imagery in gnostic sources, see Michael A. Williams, “Uses of Gender Imagery in Ancient Gnostic Texts,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 196–227; idem, “Variety in Gnostic Perspectives on Gender,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 2–22. On the variance of the gnostic image of the feminine in particular, see Jorunn J. Buckley, “Sex, Suffering, and Incarnation: Female Symbolism in Gnosticism,” in *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Robert A. Segal, June Singer, and Murray Stein (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 94–106. In my judgment, the textual evidence of the kabbalistic material yields a far more monolithic picture inasmuch as the kabbalists were operating with a clear-cut principle of gender transformation rooted in an unambiguous androcentric perspective. In my work, I have referred to the containment of the female in the male, the left in the right, as the principle of the male androgyne, which is the key to understanding the kabbalistic idea of androgyny. With respect to the divine and the demonic, the male is ontologically privileged. However, the prioritizing of the masculine in both realms demands a double transposition of gender, the male into female and the female into male. In terms of the divine realm, the transformation of the male into female (enacted through the assimilation of the male kabbalist into the divine feminine) is to facilitate the metamorphosis of the female into the male (that is, to transpose the gender of the divine feminine so that she is restored to the male). The ideal of androgyny implied in the imaginal symbol of the divine *anthropos* (as refracted through the prism of the medieval male kabbalists) is thus one in which the primal androgyne is reconstituted (and still not beyond embodiment) when the female is reintegrated in the male. In terms of the demonic, the transposition of the male into female, that is, the male who is female, involves the image of the emasculated male, which is represented in the zoharic text by the symbol of the seven Edomite kings whose weapons were not found. The transposition of the female into male entails the symbol of the warrior queen, the phallic princess who wages war and avenges wrong, the quality of punitive judgment. Translated into sexual terms, the male Samael is the castrated god, who is emulated below by the Christian clergy who adopt celibacy as the ultimate spiritual ideal; the female Lilith is the prostitute arrayed in royal garments of seduction, the temptress who torments the male Jew in the guise of the Gentile woman. The insistence by my critics that I have

- imposed an androcentric (and even worse phallogocentric) reading on the kabbalistic sources is empty rhetoric that fails to engage in a sustained reading of either the primary materials or my analysis.
54. My translation of the word *tiqla* as “rotating scale” is an attempt to combine the two salient connotations of this term as it is employed in the zoharic text. See Zohar 1:109b–110a; 2:99b; and the lengthy discussion of this term in Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 327–331.
 55. See Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 331–332.
 56. As Liebes, “Eros and the Zohar,” p. 87 n. 126, points out, this is a unique occurrence in the body of the Zohar wherein both the force of holiness and that of impurity are designated by the term *adam*, a usage that is found in the later strata of zoharic literature to contrast Samael, the evil man (referred to as *adam beliyya’al* on the basis of Prov. 6:12), and the holy One, the good man (*adam tov*, which is also designated by the title *yisra’el*). See *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 67, 98b; *Zohar Hadash*, 106d (*Tiqqunim*). In the main body of the Zohar, the contrast between the divine and the demonic is often framed in terms of the philological point that only the former is referred to by the term *adam*, an anthropological approach indebted to the rabbinic notion that Jews, in contrast to idolaters, are called by the name *adam*. See Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 61a; *Baba Metsi’a* 114b; *Keritot* 6b; *Zohar* 1:20b, 28b, 1:35b; 2:25b (*Piquudin*), 86a, 120a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 162b, 275b; 3:125a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 143b, 219a, 238b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); *Zohar Hadash*, 37b; “*Sefer ha-Mishkal*,” p. 130; Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 30, 46–47, 54–55. On a key passage wherein the demonic force is represented as *ish* (as opposed to *adam*), see *Zohar* 3:48b, analyzed in Wolfson, “Light through Darkness,” p. 81 n. 29.
 57. *Zohar* 2:95b.
 58. Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 52b.
 59. *Zohar* 2:98b.
 60. I am here repeating and expanding my argument in “Beautiful Maiden,” pp. 169–170.
 61. *Zohar* 2:98b–99a.
 62. An even profounder level of dissimulation is the secret that is never kept.
 63. My formulation here is indebted to the description of truth as the feminine in Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, p. 89. On the trope of the book as a mirror in historical perspective, see Herbert Grabes, *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass: Kontinuität und Originalität der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Literatur des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1973), pp. 101–102.
 64. The sense of suffering on the part of God in his giving the Torah (personified in distinctively erotic terms as the feminine entity in which the male glory takes delight) to Israel is implied in a number of rabbinic statements, for example, Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 89a; *Exodus Rabbah* 33:1. Particularly the latter passage, which entails the parabolic image of God being sold together with the Torah to Israel, had an important impact on a parable in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which in turn influenced subsequent kabbalists. See Scholem, *Origins*, p. 170; and Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 11–12. See especially the commentary of Nahmanides on Exod. 25:3. The esoteric significance, which Nahmanides marks by his signature expression “by way of truth” (*al derekh ha-emet*), of the offering (*terumah*) is related to the wisdom that God gave to Solomon, that is, the feminine attribute of the *Shekhinah* that is imparted as a gift by the father (or the upper wisdom) to the son. In the context of alluding to this mystery, Nahmanides refers explicitly to the aggadic comment in

- Exodus Rabbah* 33:1, to which he adds the following interpretative gloss: "For the gift (*terumah*) will be for me and I am with her, in the manner of 'My beloved is mine and I am his' (Song of Songs 2:16), and thus it says "Exactly as I show you" [*ke-khol asher ani mar'eh otkha*] (Exod. 25:9), for the I (*ani*) is the vision (*mar'eh*)." For a brief discussion of this passage, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 15–16. Nahmanides is thus alluding to the fact that the *Shekhinah*, which is designated by the first person pronoun, is the speculum through which the divine appears, a speculum that is related as well to the Torah, which is the wisdom bestowed as a gift upon Israel by God. The nexus of the Torah as the prism by means of which the divine light is refracted and the exile of *Shekhinah* is also implicit in the zoharic parable according to my reading. This notion of the incarnation of the *Shekhinah* in the form of the Torah, which entails the suffering of God exiled in the letters of the material scroll, is a foundational aspect of Nahmanides' overall hermeneutical approach, which, unfortunately, has not been appreciated by most scholars who have worked on his admittedly complex and multidimensional thought. For a preliminary discussion of the symbolic identification of Torah and the feminine *Shekhinah* in Nahmanides, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 15–16. I intend to elaborate someday on the theme that I have mentioned in this note. On the incarnational aspect of Nahmanides' theosophy, see Wolfson, "The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides," *Da'at*, 24, 1990, pp. 25–49 (English section); idem, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 63–64.
65. Zohar 1:84b, 115b–116a; 2:170b–171a; 3:125b.
 66. Zohar 1:75b; 2:204a; *Tiqunei Zohar*, sec. 19, 38a; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 438–439, 1226–1227; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 115–116, 292–293; Wolfson, "Coronation," pp. 315–316.
 67. For a recent discussion of this motif, see Wolfson, "Eunuchs," pp. 159–162.
 68. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 116–117; idem, "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*," pp. 322–332.
 69. See idem, "Coronation," pp. 315–324.
 70. The Aramaic idiom *setiru de-darga*, which I have translated the "hiddenness of the gradation," is an exact rendering of the biblical expression *be-seter ha-madregah*, "hidden by the cliff." According to the zoharic interpretation, this term refers to the gradation wherein the *Shekhinah* is hidden in the time of redemption.
 71. Zohar 1:84b.
 72. Ibid. 3:74b.
 73. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 25.
 74. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
 75. In some zoharic passages, the concealment of the feminine from the masculine is given a negative valence. In this hiding, which is occasioned by the transgressions of Israel below, the divine feminine is compared to a woman in her menstrual period during which she is forbidden to have physical contact with her husband. See Zohar 1:61a.
 76. Zohar 3:66b. Consider the words of Blake from *Jerusalem in The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 193: "In Beulah the Female lets down her beautiful Tabernacle;/ Which the Male enters magnificent between her Cherubim:/ And becomes One with her mingling condensing in Self-love/ The Rocky Law of Condemnation & double Generation, & Death."
 77. The verse from the Song is applied in a number of passages in zoharic literature to the feminine *Shekhinah*. The opening of the closed woman is

- facilitated by the male or is said to occur as a result of the masculine potency. See Zohar 1:32b, 262b; 2:4a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction 12b; sec. 19, 38a (see note 64), 39a (in this context, the image of the locked garden is explicitly linked to the virgin); sec. 21, 60b, 61a; sec. 28, 72b; sec. 29, 72b–73a.
78. Zohar 1:115b–116a.
 79. The double connotation of the term *tsenu'ah* applied to the *Shekhinah* has its basis in a passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 156. In the effort to explain the divine potency referred to as the west, which clearly refers to the *Shekhinah* (given the well-established tradition concerning the location of the latter in the west), the following parable is offered: “[This may be compared to] the prince has a beautiful bride and she is hidden (*tsenu'ah*) in his chamber, and he would take great wealth from the house of his father and bring it to her, and she would take everything, and constantly hide (*matsna'at*) it and mix everything until the end of days.” On the implicitly (and, in some cases, explicitly) erotic relation that pertains between father, daughter, and son adopted in several bahiric passages, see Wolfson, “Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions,” pp. 156–167.
 80. Zohar 2:170b–171a.
 81. On the correlation of secrecy and sexual modesty, see Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text,” p. 157. See *ibid.*, p. 173 n. 57, where I mentioned that a similar nexus between mystery and modesty, which is connected to the feminine in particular, is essential to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.
 82. *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1963), 2:233.
 83. *R. Moses de León's Commentary to Ezekiel's Chariot*, Asi Farber-Ginat and Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1998), p. 58 (Hebrew).
 84. Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 319–324.
 85. Zohar 1:64b.
 86. *Ibid.*
 87. *Circle in the Square*, pp. 92–98. The correlation of the feminine and space has been well noted in feminist criticism. As an illustration of this insight, see Catharine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 140–180.
 88. Zohar 2:214b.
 89. The exact words of the zoharic text (2:214b) are *u-ma'n ihu de-qa'im be-raza de-adam ma'n de-natir ot qayyama qaddisha*, which translate literally as “and who is the one who exists in the secret of Adam? The one who guards the sign of the holy covenant.” In light of such statements, it is astonishing that my critics have accused me of reading the phallogocentric orientation into the Zohar and other kabbalistic sources that espouse a similar viewpoint.
 90. Zohar 2:214b.
 91. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 222–237.
 92. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 44. In my study, “Re/membering the Covenant,” I cite Butler's words. I repeat them here on account of their clarity and incisiveness.
 93. This is particularly evident in Green, “Kabbalistic Re-vision.” Green claims that my understanding of gender symbolism in the theosophic kabbalah has set aside “the truly important role occupied by the female, especially in the Zoharic sources” (p. 270). He then proceeds to offer a litany of images used to characterize the *Shekhinah*, including queen of the lower worlds, hind of the dawn, mother that nourishes the universe, city, temple, holy of holies, kingship (*malkhut*, which Green perplexingly renders with the neutral term “realm”) that exerts dominion, governance, and judgment over existence.

After going through this list, Green concludes, “The Zohar is at least as fixed with celebration of the female as it is with the male ... Wolfson’s dismissal of this entire world of symbols through his single insight concerning *atarah* ... produces a significantly distorted picture of kabbalistic eros.” Anyone truly familiar with the range of my work would readily discern that the notion that I have dismissed this entire world of symbols characterizing the *Shekhinah* is grossly misleading and unfair. The real issue that emerges from my work, which is ignored by Green, is that these positive characteristics of the *Shekhinah* are predicated on a gendered axiology that kabbalists shared with other men living in medieval European cities, enhanced as well by biblical and rabbinic sources. I have argued that ostensibly female images are valenced as masculine in the androcentric culture of the kabbalists. The androcentricism is so pervasive that female biological traits are appropriated as masculine. Thus, even birthing and lactation are seen as masculine traits, for in the dominant kabbalistic symbology, when a woman gives birth or nurses she assumes the gender value of a male. I have not ignored these obvious feminine attributes, as Green claims, but what I have done is contextualize them in a more sophisticated analysis of gender as a hermeneutical category. See especially Wolfson, “Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth,” in *Circle in the Square*, pp. 79–121, and the extensive notes on pp. 195–232. Regrettably, Green does not refer to this aspect of my work, which is in fact my singular contribution, and thus his criticisms consistently miss the point. Those who wish to ignore my emphasis on the phallogentric androcentrism that characterizes this tradition may find comfort in the alleged alternative presented by Green, but in my mind I do not see any real option being offered here that truly responds to my scholarship. One can only hope that intelligent readers will see through the glass darkly and understand that these barbs in no way pose a serious intellectual challenge to my thesis. My detailed response to Green’s review can be found in “*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*.” See also Wolfson, “Coronation.”

Index

- A
- Aaron
and Jethro 12
lifting of right hand over left 12
rod of 4, 20 n28
- Abba* 155–58, 174 n31, 178 n59, 183 n97
- Abba, R. 14, 19 n18, 78, 86, 87, 90, 113, 126, 146, 186, 206, 232
- Abel 52 n34
- Abelard, Peter 215 n33
- Abraham 289 n42
and circumcision 196–97
and demonic realm 21 n34
descent to Egypt 4, 21 n35, 35
and Isaac 52 n34, 84–85
and revelation of divine word 196–98
- Abraham ben David 49 n15
- Abulafia, Abraham xii, 68–69, 213 n23
- Abulafia, Ṭodros 18 n7, 20 n20, 26 n88, 31, 109 n182, 211 n14
- Acamoth, gnostic myth of 176–77 n57
- Adam
as androgynous 25 n81, 286 n20
beauty of 192
book of 125
and the capacity to combine 120
and cutting of the shoots 23 n54
death of 214 n24
divine word manifest in 197
and Edom xvi
and Eve 19 n15, 156, 226 n122
feminine constructed from side of 180 n68, 226 n122
first and last 192
form of 191
Jacob as second 191–93
and Jesus, Pauline typology of 192–93, 218 n52, 218 n54
pneumatic versus somatic 192, 218 n52
sin of 149–50, 155–56, 161, 174 n36, 181 n71, 191–92, 197–98
- Age of Zohar, The* (1989) 117
- aggadah
masters of 72
relation to kabbalah 104 n88
- Ahriman 50 n28
- Alef, Mem, Tau: Kabbalistic Musings on Time, Truth, and Death* (Wolfson) xiii
- Alkabets, Solomon 169
- Altmann, Alexander 33, 48 n11, 52 n36, 99 n5, 135 n17
- Amaleq 12, 26 n86, 26 n89, 218 n47, 224 n108
- anagogic interpretation 108 n151
- androgyny
of the demonic 195
male nature of 170, 178 n59, 290 n53
- androgynization 290 n53
circumcision 202
point symbolism 152–53
serpent symbolism 195–96
time, and androgynous phallus 252–53 n12
see also Sabbath bride, coronation of
- Angelet, Joseph 136 n18, 143 n110, 285–86 n20
- anthropology, kabbalistic 171 n5
- antinomianism 144
- Aquinas, St. Thomas 100 n21
- Arendt, Hannah 252 n4
- Ariḳh Anpin* 108 n152
- asceticism 148, 150, 172 n15, 176 n49, 235, 246, 264, 283 n8
and eroticism ix, 162, 182 n84
- Asmodeus 23 n45
- astral body 121
- aṭarah see* corona (*aṭarah*)
- Atiqa Qaddisha* 108 n152
- Azael 23 n45

Azza 23 n45

Azriel of Gerona 103 n73, 253 n14

Azulai, Abraham 25 n74, 105 n97

B

Bacher, William 59, 98 n2, 99 n13, 103 n68,
107 n139, 108 n155, 212 n17

Baer, Yitzhak 17, 48, 51 n34, 186, 189, 210 n6,
211 n11, 212 n17

Bahya ben Asher 25 n73, 213 n20

Balaam

- compared to Moses 19 n18, 190
- intercourse with his donkey 215 n36
- and Jesus 189–90
- and lower crowns 19 n18
- and magic 19 n18, 21 n40, 23 n45, 189,
215 n36

bar nash (*ben adam*) 171 n5, 221 n75

Baudick, Sandford 49 n15

ben Sheshet, Jacob 24 n58, 63–67, 74, 79,
102 n39, 102 n43, 102 n47, 103 n75,
108 n158

Berger, David 102, 212 n19, 216 n39, 217 n46

Binah 2, 3, 18 n10, 156

- application of the symbol of king to 239
- assigned the title jubilee 243, 256 n49
- attribution of seventh to 242, 256 n49
- as concealed world 240, 248, 251
- descent of 237
- the divine mother 152, 161, 177 n58,
230–40, 243, 253 n15, 265
- elevation of *Shekhinah* to 151, 155, 158,
159, 161, 165, 238, 241, 243, 251
- and the holy of holies 179 n60, 241–42,
254 n20
- left emanations derive from 50 n20,
52 n37
- and *Malkhut*, homosexual bonding of
240–42
- masculinization of 181 n80
- and Moses 177 n58
- secret of repentance 244, 248
- source of freedom 81, 243
- source of the soul 156, 265
- supernal Sabbath 151
- supernal world of the masculine 150,
181–82 n180, 236, 238–39, 255 n34
- tablets inscribed from 81
- transformation of *Shekhinah* into 246
- treasure of souls 155
- united with the world of mercy 245,
257 n53

upper, concealed Tabernacle 136 n19

as the world-to-come 165, 241–44

see also *Shekhinah*, ascent to *Binah*; Yom
Kippur

Blake, William 292 n76

Book of the Pomegranate (*Sefer ha-Rimmon*)

- 24 n57, 24 n60, 26 n88, 26 n90, 27 n99,
28 n110, 28 n111, 47 n7, 48 n12, 51 n32,
54 n56, 54 n65, 54 n69, 104 n92,
173 n18, 180 n63, 184 n101, 214 n26,
214 n31, 214 n32, 215 n34, 219 n56,
219 n64, 222 n85, 23 n96, 227 n126,
227 n128, 254 n22, 255 n28

botsina de-qardinuta 50 n29, 117, 138 n34
bread

- leavened, as first fruits 15–16, 42–43
- as symbol for Torah 16, 43, 105 n108
- unleavened 7, 15–16, 27 n107, 42–43
- and wisdom 16, 43, 54 n70

Brody, Seth 138 n32, 138–39 n41

burnt offering, mystical significance of 37,
241–42

Butler, Judith 207–8, 226 n123, 226 n24, 281,
293 n92

C

Cain and Abel 51–52 n34

Castilian kabbalists 2–3, 20 n20, 22 n45, 32,
34, 38, 48 n14, 49 n15, 118, 139 n41, 236

Catharism 18 n8, 49 n15

celibacy 202

- characterized as absolute judgment
223 n102
- and the death of the Edomite kings
224 n103
- and homoeroticism 287 n35
- and the monastic ideal 224 n103
- primal sin and rectification of 287 n35

Christianity

- Christian exegetes, as literalists 72, 104 n91
- and circumcision 196–98, 201–2
- convert, mystery of 266–67
- demonic power of 51 n34, 188, 190,
212–13 n20, 213 n22, 267, 269, 271
- depicted in the image of the ass 215 n36
- doctrine of Trinity 222 n82
- engendered as feminine 202
- and Esau 191–93, 269
- as idolatry 189, 194, 213 n23, 221 n75
- Jewish-Christian polemics 187–88, 202
- as lure of oblivion 204, 209
- and magic 190

- and menstruation 189, 213 n23, 216 n39
 missionizing of 188
 monasticism 224 n103
 ontological impurity of 187–89
 and the practice of celibacy 223 n102,
 290 n53
 and sexual promiscuity 216 n39
 sexual temptation of 188–89, 209
 symbolized by Edom 51 n34, 188, 202,
 213 n21
 theological intolerance of 186
 Zohar, influences in 19 n16
- circumcision 52 n39, 81, 90
 and Abraham 196–97, 289 n42
 and androcentrism 221 n75, 286 n24
 androgynous nature of 202
 contrasted with castration 286–87 n26
 and conversion 266
 corona of 163
 as covenant 199, 200
 as entry into the mystery of faith 222 n87
 and Islam 221 n78
 literal versus spiritual 196–98
 as locus of memory 196, 222 n89,
 224 n108
 as paradigm of an esoteric hermeneutic
 262–63
 Pauline view of 196–98, 221 n79
 and role of dissimulation 262–63,
 266–67
 secret of 179 n61
 sign of 90, 201, 215 n33
 and world of signs 286–87 n26
- clitoris, as male organ in the female 178–79 n60
- Cohen, Gerson 51 n34, 210 n6, 213 n21
- Cohen-Alloro, Dorit 105 n94, 140 n60, 215
 n36, 288 n38
- conversion
 form of dissimulation 267
ish zar (layman), import of 265–66
 Israelite woman, sale of by her father into
 slavery 269–70
 Israelites, as converts themselves
 270–71, 278–79
 Jewish man and Christian woman,
 intercourse between 265–66
 as ontological transubstantiation 266–67
 pneumatic spark of God, exile of
 267–69, 271
 soul of convert, nature of 265
tiqla (rotating scale), image of 268–69
- Corbin, Henry 140 n61
- Cordovero, Moses 25 n74, 35, 76–77,
 104 n88, 105 n97, 141 n68, 164–67,
 175 n41, 183 n85, 183 n97, 184 n102,
 233, 253 n14, 276–77, 284 n13
- corona (*aṭarah*)
 androgynization of 202
 disclosed through circumcision 52 n34,
 163, 262
 female, assimilated into 170, 179 n61
 female, transformation into 163–65
 gazing upon 174 n36, 263
 gender dimorphism, transcendence of
 177–78 n59
 of the phallus 165, 170, 174 n36,
 177–78 n59, 183 n90, 194, 196
 and role of dissimulation 262–63,
 266–67
 symbolic of *Shekhinah* 163, 174 n36,
 183 n92, 196, 202
- crocodile, great 5, 22 n43, 22 n45
- cutting the shoots 23 n54
- D
- Daena*, Iranian notion of 140 n60
- Dao de jing* xvii
- David 8, 164, 205
 departed on Sabbath 158
 fallen booth of 158, 205
 harp of 128, 142 n87
 rose at midnight 142 n89
 union with the three Patriarchs 176 n47
- David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid 136 n18,
 173 n20, 174 n30
- de Léon, Moses xiv, 19 n18, 23 n54, 24 n55,
 24 n57, 26 n88, 27 n98, 27 n99, 28 n12,
 47 n7, 54 n56, 55 n73, 74–75, 105 n104,
 109 n158, 131, 133, 137 n21, 137 n23,
 138 n37, 141 n71, 146–47, 152, 153,
 167–68, 173 n18, 176 n54, 176 n55,
 176 n56, 180 n63, 181–82 n80, 186–87,
 194, 202, 208, 211 n14, 213 n23, 214 n32,
 221 n75, 222 n85, 222 n87, 227 n128,
 237–38, 254 n20, 266, 277, 284 n11,
 293 n83
- demonic 1–7, 11–13, 15, 18 n9, 18 n12,
 18 n13, 18–19 n14, 19 n15, 22 n43,
 30–45, 48 n10, 48 n14, 49 n15, 50 n20,
 50 n28, 51 n32, 53 n43, 53 n45, 53 n46,
 55 n73, 90, 93, 110 n195, 147, 178 n59,
 218 n44, 219 n66, 220 n70, 223 n95,
 223 n102, 289 n44, 291 n56
 Abraham's knowledge of 21 n34, 23 n45

demonic (*cont.*):

- and Amaleq 224 n108
- androgynous nature of 195
- annihilation of in the messianic era
 - 48 n12, 54 n63, 219 n61
- Balaam, chief protagonist of 19 n18, 215 n36
- and the blood of menstruation 188, 214 n26
- breaking the shell of 31
- and Christianity 51 n34, 188, 190, 213 n20, 213 n22, 266–67, 269, 271
- and the color red 50 n29
- containment of in the divine 34, 37–43
- derives from the refuse of thought 51 n32
- descent into 34–36
- and the desecration of Sabbath 180 n64
- desert, the abode of 21 n35
- and emasculation 224 n104
- engendered as feminine 21 n31, 194, 290 n53
- and the evil inclination 40
- and the figure of Edom 51 n34, 202
- and the figure of Esau 50 n29, 51 n34, 190–91, 217 n44, 269
- and the foreskin 194
- and forgetfulness 196, 200, 203
- good and evil, separation of 37–41, 44–45
- and idolatry 215 n33
- Job overcome by 22–23 n45, 37–38
- Moses' knowledge of 23 n45, 38–39
- and the place of death 219 n56
- and sadness 33
- secret of 22 n45
- and the secret of faith 40
- and the serpent 191, 194–95, 217 n44, 220 n74
- Shekhinah* entrapped in 227 n128, 252–53 n12, 273–74
- temporal precedence over the holy 52 n34, 194
- see also* Other Side (*Sitra Aḥra*)
- Derekh Emunah* 103 n73, 253 n14
- Derrida, Jacques 222 n89, 262, 283 n7, 286 n21
- descent, as spiritual perfection
 - demonic energy, reintegration of 36
 - Other Side, incorporation of 34
 - purgation, notion of 34–35
 - Shekinah*, and struggle between demonic and divine 35–36

Din 2, 28 n111, 40, 50 n20, 150, 176 n47
see also judgment

Dionysius the Areopagite 45 n2
Doniger O'Flaherty, Wendy 182 n84, 287 n32

E

Egypt

- as demonic left side 3–5, 7, 11–12, 35, 38, 53 n43, 204, 271, 278
- descent to 4, 21 n35, 35, 44, 77
- and magic 3–4, 19 n16, 20 n28, 21 n29, 21 n40, 22 n41, 53 n43
- redemption from 6–9, 15–17, 42–43
- and the ten plagues 9–10
- Eleazar ben Judah of Worms 89
- Elijah 112
- Elijah ben Solomon 106 n111
- Elijah de Vidas 141 n68
- El Shaddai, use of 90–91
- Emden, Jacob 189 n103
- Esau 47 n6, 50 n29, 51–52 n34
 - and Christianity 188–91, 193–94, 269
 - and the image of the serpent 190–91, 216 n41, 217 n44, 218 n47
 - versus* Israel 51 n34
 - and Jacob 50 n29, 52 n34, 190–91, 193, 217 n46, 218 n49, 269
 - and primordial darkness 219 n65
 - Samael, as guardian angel of 190–93
 - Shekhinah*, defilement of 190
 - tears of 217 n46
- Ets Hayyim* 177–78 n59, 179 n61, 180 n67, 180 n68

evil

- cathartic and emanative views of 3, 32–33, 43–44
- cessation of 27 n105, 48
- dualist position 29–30, 44
- incorporation into spiritual path 30–31
- necessity of 28 n109
- neo-Platonism 29
- problem of 38–41, 44–45
- religious anthropology 30
- eyes
 - beautiful maiden without 93–94, 264, 278–79
 - being covered with 93, 109 n177
 - closing of 141 n71
- Ezekiel, chariot vision 277
- Ezra of Gerona 63, 101 n29, 108 n158, 135 n9, 225 n119

- F
- Farber, Asi 27 n98, 293 n83
- feminine, enclosure of
- androcentrism 277–78
 - concealment/disclosure, tension between 281–82
 - genitals, uncovering of 273–74
 - hermeneutical relationship, gendered terms of 279
 - King and Matrona, separation of 273
 - male and female, reunion of 279–80
 - within masculine 272–73
 - and redemption 272
 - and *Shekhinah* 273–75, 277–78, 280
 - Torah, as beautiful maiden without eyes 278–79
 - wife, as fruitful vine 275, 281
 - zoharic imagery, phallogocentric dimension of 281
 - see also* sexual modesty
- firstborn, killing of 6–8, 24 n59
- foreskin, demonic 194
- see also* circumcision
- forgetfulness *see* memory and forgetfulness
- forgiveness
- and covenant 229–30
 - and the eschatological overcoming of eros 240–47
 - versus* forgetfulness 228–29
 - holy of holies, and giving-before 247–48
 - mother's nakedness, concealment of 247–51
 - mother's womb, return of daughter to 230–40
 - and remembering 229
 - and repentance 248
 - time of 228–30
 - and Yom Kippur 248–51
- Foundations of Mysticism, The* (McGinn) 111
- Friday evenings *see* Sabbath eve
- Funkenstein, Amos 100 n21, 101 n33, 199, 209 n2, 222 n88
- G
- Garden of Eden 47 n6, 121, 123–24, 126–32, 140 n56, 140 n57, 142 n104, 155, 265, 267–69
- garment
- bestowed by *Binah* 236–37
 - of crimson 245
 - eschatological 140 n60
 - of Islam 217 n41
 - Jewish soul, oppression of in body of Christian 267–69, 271, 278
 - of light 98
 - literal sense, function of 70, 72–74, 76–77, 95, 100 n17, 104 n90, 106 n116, 265, 270, 284–85 n14, 288 n38, 288 n39
 - as locus of vision 105 n94
 - and *Malkhut* 166–67, 236–37
 - mirror/garment paradox 260
 - narratives, *versus* laws 72
 - of the rainbow 105 n94
 - of the righteous 165
 - of royalty 84
 - scent emitted by 270
 - secret revealed from within 73, 95, 265, 270–71
 - of seduction 290 n53
 - and *Shekhinah* 84, 284 n13
 - soul cloaked in 267, 269–70
 - spiritual nature of 121
 - and Tetragrammaton 283 n8
 - truth disclosed through 260
 - worn on Sabbath 174 n32
 - woven from deeds of the soul 121, 140 n60
- gender
- cultural context of 169–70
 - female, as encompassing the male 159–60, 162–65
 - sixth day, and nature of world-to-come 160–63
- Gerona, circle of kabbalists in 24 n58, 31, 48 n14, 49 n15
- Gevurah* (Strength) 2, 3, 13, 18 n10, 24 n68, 26 n93, 50 n16, 50 n20, 52 n37
- gezerah shawah* 81–82, 83
- Gikatilla, Joseph 20 n22, 24 n58, 28 n111, 102 n46, 108 n158, 138 n37, 147–49, 173 n23, 174 n34, 177 n59, 217–18 n47, 243–45, 252–53 n12, 256 n49, 257 n53, 283 n8
- Giller, Pinchas 99 n17, 216 n41, 282 n4, 288 n41
- gilluy arayot* 273
- Ginsburg, Elliot 140 n57, 141 n66, 141 n68, 141 n69, 141 n70, 143 n114, 171 n11, 172 n17, 173 n19, 173 n23, 174 n32, 176 n56, 223 n98, 227 n128
- Ginzberg, Louis 19 n18, 20 n28, 21 n29, 21 n40, 22 n41, 51 n34, 53 n43, 220 n71

gnosticism

- cosmic forces, competing 32–33
- dualism 46 n3
- and evil 30–31, 32–33, 43–44
- and the feminine 290 n53
- gnostic school of Castile 1–3, 31–32
- mediating principle, presence of 34, 44
- Sophia, myth of 288–89 n41

golden calf, sin of 27 n105

- Graetz, Heinrich 211 n7, 212 n17, 213 n22
- Green, Arthur 53 n42, 254–55 n26, 287 n33, 293–94 n93
- Gruenwald, Ithamar 117, 138 n37, 138 n39
- Guide of the Perplexed* 45 n2, 96, 99 n5, 105 n108, 109 n180

H

- Habad Hasidism 97
- halakhic practice 144
- Hamnuna the Elder, as prototypical ecstatic 122–23
- Heidegger, Martin xvii, 224 n106, 252 n7
- Ḥemdat Yisra'el* 175 n44
- Heschel, Abraham J. 139 n42, 172 n17, 173 n19, 174 n32
- Ḥesed* (lovingkindness) 2, 13, 24 n68, 25 n75, 26 n93, 28 n111, 76, 150, 163, 176 n47, 255 n34, 265–66
- hieros gamos*
 - King and Matrona, uniting of 129–30, 135 n17, 168, 169, 246
 - and redemption 236
 - Sabbath as 147, 223 n98
 - Shekhinah*, exposure of 274
- Hoffman, Lawrence 221 n75, 286 n24
- Hokhmah* 3, 152–53, 155, 165, 179 n60, 180 n68, 181–82 n80
- holy of holies
 - and ascent of *Shekhinah* to *Binah* 240–43
 - and giving-before 247–48
- homoeroticism 146, 171–72 n15, 246, 256 n49, 263, 285 n20, 287 n35
- Horowitz, Isaiah ben Abraham 96–97
- human perfection, ideal of
 - demonic, containment of in the divine 37–43
 - descent, as spiritual perfection 34–36
 - evil, problem of 29–30
 - gnostic influence 31–34
 - light through darkness 44–45
- humanity and divinity, double mirroring of 144–45

hyperliteralism 70–71, 80–83

I

- Ibn Eskira, Elḥanan ben Abraham 104 n90
- Ibn Ezra, Abraham 90, 109 n170, 231
- Ibn Gaon, Shem Tov 24 n54
- Ibn Sahula, Meir 24 n54, 49 n15, 49–50 n16
- Idel, Moshe 20 n19, 27 n95, 27 n96, 49 n15, 50 n28, 51 n31, 51–52 n34, 68, 69, 94, 99 n4, 100 n20, 100 n22, 102 n39, 102 n41, 102 n46, 102 n47, 103 n51, 103 n64, 103 n77, 110 n186, 110 n193, 111, 117, 134–35 n2–6, 138 n32, 138 n41, 139 n42, 139 n43, 141 n71, 142 n103, 170 n3, 172 n15, 177 n57, 211 n6, 213 n23, 220 n70, 282 n4, 282 n5
- identity
 - and difference xvi–xvii
 - Jewish 185–86, 187
- idolatry 4, 7, 51 n32, 189, 195, 215 n33, 289 n44
- Iggeret ha-Qodesh* 149
- imagination, and visionary ascents 116–17
- Imma 155–58, 174 n31, 178 n59
- interpretation
 - anagogic 108 n151
 - as appropriation 76
 - see also *pardes*; *peshat* and *sod*, in zoharic hermeneutics
- Irigaray, Luce 257 n59, 284 n12, 286 n26, 291 n63
- Isaac, R. 8, 14, 19 n15, 38, 191
- Isaac ben Jacob ha-Kohen, R. 17 n6, 18 n10, 19 n15, 20 n21, 22 n43, 32, 49 n14, 50 n20, 51 n31, 211 n14
- Isaac of Acre 24 n54, 24 n58, 24 n66, 25 n73, 48 n14, 49 n15, 69–70, 103 n75, 104 n89, 179 n61, 183 n87
- Isaac the Blind 27 n96, 49 n14, 49 n15, 49–50 n16, 64, 116

J

- Jacob 47 n6, 91, 132, 177 n58, 257 n63
- Balaam contrasted with 215 n36
- blessing of Joseph's sons 195
- cunning of 19
- Edom subjugated to 209
- and Esau 50 n29, 52 n34, 190–91, 193–94, 217 n46, 218 n49, 269
- kissing Rachel 154–55
- rectified sin of Adam and Eve 191
- as second Adam 192–93

- symbolic of *Tiferet* 193
 unified with Rachel 181 n68
 unified with the throne 191
- Jacob, R. 186
- Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen 62
- Jacob ben Raphael of Poznan 169
- Jacob the Nazir 49 n15
- Jerusalem
 - elevated above rest of the world 272
 - feminine hypostasis of wisdom 177 n57
 - as midpoint 176 n56, 176 n57, 179 n62
 - symbolic of *Shekhinah* 285 n20
 - walls of 41
- Jesus
 - and Adam, Pauline typology of 192–93, 218 n52, 218 n54
 - and Balaam 189–90
 - and blood of menstruation 213 n23
 - corporeality of 213 n23
 - incarnation of Samael 213 n20
 - and magical practices 189–90
 - as *novus Moses* 218 n52
 - parentage of, assaults on 216 n39
 - resurrection of 192
- Jewish-Christian polemics
 - Christians, as embodiment of demonic impurity 187–88
 - circumcision, theme of 196–98
 - narrative of creation 194
 - theological doctrine, unholiness of 188–89
- Jewish identity 185–86, 187
- Jewish Orientalism 172 n15
- Job, sin of 22–23 n45, 28 n111, 37–38, 41, 45
- Joseph
 - blessings of his sons 195
 - departure of 158, 204
 - dream of 203
 - knowledge of the demonic 4
 - placement of in coffin 226 n121, 280–81
 - righteous status of 203–5
 - spouse of 225 n114
 - the supernal covenant 204
 - symbolically corresponds to *Yesod* 203
- Joseph of Hamadan 135–36 n17, 148
- jubilee, and redemption 243–44
 - symbolic of *Binah* 181 n80, 243–44, 256 n49, 257 n63
- Judah, R. 191
- Judah ben Samuel the Pious 89
- judgment 2–3, 6–8, 10–11, 18 n10, 20 n20, 23 n54, 24 n58, 24 n59, 32–34, 40, 44, 50 n29, 50 n30, 53 n46, 54 n56, 147, 150, 152, 180 n67, 180 n68, 189, 195, 202, 208, 219 n61, 223 n102, 238, 248, 257 n65, 279, 290 n53
- K
- Kamin, Sarah 101 n25, 101 n30, 218 n48
- Katz, Jacob 48 n11, 110 n192
- Keter* 72, 83, 108 n152, 163, 164, 183 n97, 245, 257 n53
- Keter Shem Tov* 24 n54
- Kimḥi, David 104 n91
- King and Matrona 129–30, 135 n17, 145, 169, 227 n128, 236, 246, 251, 273–74
see also hieros gamos
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. ix–xii, 182 n84
- L
- Lacan, Jacques 207–8, 281, 286 n23
- Language, Eros, and Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (Wolfson) xiii, xvi
- language, eros of 240
 - in kabbalistic sources 175 n43
 - mystical experience and the passion of 287 n32
 - poetry and mystery 285 n16
- Leah 236, 257 n63
- leaven, symbolism of
 - evil inclination 7, 15, 24 n60
 - Pentecost, and bringing of leavened bread as first fruits 42–43
- left and right
 - Amaleq, war with 12
 - demonic realm, as parallel to divine 1–3, 4
 - exile in Egypt 3–5
 - left, containment of within right 13–15, 17
 - Moses, and conversion of Jethro 12–13
 - Sinaitic revelation 11–16
- leil shimmurim* 7–8
- lekha dodi* 169
- Leviathan 22 n43, 32, 224 n104
 - castration of 224 n104
- Lieberman, Saul 19 n18, 107 n142, 107 n150, 109 n168, 135 n10
- Liebes, Yehuda xiii–xiv, 17 n1, 19 n16, 20 n20, 22 n45, 48 n14, 50 n30, 51 n34, 53 n52, 93, 100 n22, 104 n92, 105 n107, 106 n107, 109 n182, 118, 133, 135 n11, 135 n17, 136 n18, 137 n21, 137 n23, 138 n36,

Liebes, Yehuda (*cont.*):

138 n37, 141 n80, 142 n106, 143 n112,
171–72 n15, 181 n79, 210 n6, 211 n7,
212 n15, 212 n17, 213 n22, 217 n41,
219 n58, 219 n65, 220 n71, 221b78,
222 n84, 224 n103, 225 n117, 282 n4,
283 n11, 287 n35, 288 n39, 291 n54,
291 n55, 291 n56, 292 n75

Lifschuetz, Jacob Koppel 184 n106

Lilith 2, 19 n15, 22 n43, 23 n48, 32, 93,
194–95, 290 n53

Liqqūtei Torah (Shneur Zalman) 110 n194,
110 n191

Liqqūtei Torah (Vital) 180 n68, 181 n71

Livnat ha-Sappir 136 n18, 140 n57, 143 n110,
285 n20

Loewe, Raphael 101 n24, 101 n30, 107 n150

Luria, Isaac 34, 44, 106 n111, 110 n195, 134,
142 n106, 156–58, 160–62, 172 n15,
175 n39, 175 n44, 179 n60, 180 n67,
184 n107, 220 n71, 261

Luzzatto, Moses Ḥayyim 178 n59, 217 n41

M

Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut 149, 174 n36, 175 n37
magic

and Balaam 19 n18, 21 n40, 23 n45, 189,
215 n36

Egyptian 3–4, 20 n28, 22 n41, 53 n43
and the feminine 21 n31

and Jesus 189–90

knots and bonds 19 n16, 21–22 n40,
139 n48

menstruant, association with 189–90
versus theurgical knowledge 20 n18

Maimin, Abraham 184 n107

Maimonides 45 n2, 57, 61, 65, 96, 99 n5,
105 n108, 109 n180

Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism (Scholem)

17 n1, 17 n3, 19 n18, 47 n7, 47 n8, 47 n9,
51 n32, 52 n35, 99 n8, 99 n10, 110 n187,
114–15, 137 n24, 137 n27, 137 n28,
139 n42, 143 n115, 170 n1, 182 n85,
211 n14, 217 n47, 218 n47, 252 n5

Malkhut 3, 84, 155–56, 158, 177 n58,
181–82 n80, 184 n107

ascends as a crown 165, 183 n97, 184 n106
and the *atarah* 164, 183 n92

and *Binah* 234–37, 239, 240–46,
253 n15, 255–56 n37, 256 n49

conjunction of with the three Patriarchs
150, 167

and the day of atonement 233–35,
245–46

demonic, containment of in the Divine
14–15, 39–40

depicted as black fire 27 n96

designated as the crown of the phallus
164

designated as the king 239–40

elevation of 158–62, 167, 183 n97, 237
garment of 84, 166

point of 180 n68

relation to hearing 160–61

and Sabbath eve 180 n68

source of evil 52 n37

and the supernal Garden of Eden 265

and the symbol of the rainbow

224–25 n114, 225 n117

and *Tiferet* 2, 5, 6, 8, 14, 25 n81,

27 n96, 39, 139 n41, 161, 191, 234–36,
242, 249

two aspects of 167

and *Yesod* 195, 202, 225 n114, 256 n49

see also corona, *Nuqba*, *Shekhinah*

Matt, Daniel 21 n35, 54 n71, 136 n18, 170 n3,
212 n17, 213 n22, 215 n36

Mavo She'arim 180 n67

Melchizedek 238

memory and forgetfulness

Christianity, as lure of oblivion 204, 209

covenant, forgetfulness of 203

and forgetfulness 185, 200–201, 203–4

history, construction of 185–86

and Joseph 203–4

masculinity, and secret of the covenant
198–201

peqidah and *zekhirah*, and feminine and
masculine 202

rainbow (*qeshet*), and messianic

redemption 204–9

zakhir (male) and *zekher* (memory), link
between 198–200

menstruation

Christianity, impurity of 188–89

and doctrine of virgin birth 213 n23

and magic 189–90

and sexual intercourse 190

midnight

David rose to utter hymns at 142 n89

God takes delight with the righteous
126, 130

killing of firstborn at 24 n59

north wind stirs at 128–29, 142 n87

of Sabbath 123–24
 study at 126–33, 186, 211 n11
Mishneh Torah 105 n108
 monasticism, Christian 202, 224 n103
 Mopsik, Charles xiv, 171 n3, 173 n27,
 174 n34, 182 n80, 254 n20
 Moses 39, 64, 80, 86–87, 161
 Bride of 177 n58
 and conversion of Jethro 12–13
 and demonic power of Pharaoh 5, 38
 departed on Sabbath 158
 entry into the cloud 105 n94
 and flaming thorn-bush 36
 garbed the rainbow 105 n94
 inscriptions on 89
 Jesus, as *novus Moses* 218 n52
 and knowledge of evil 38
 law given to at Sinai 64
 letters inscribed upon 89
 lifting of the hands 26 n88
 merited the aspect of *Binah* 177 n58
 prayers arranged by 119
 received tradition from God 64
 symbolic of *Tiferet* 80
 voice of 80
 Moses of Burgos 1, 17 n6, 18 n10, 31–32,
 50 n17, 50 n20, 211 n14
 mother and daughter, union of 234–35,
 242–43
 mysticism
 as *disembodied x*
 kabbalistic xi–xii
 postmodern interpretations xi
 myth, and ritual 144–45

N

Nahmanides 8, 23 n54, 24 n54, 24 n58,
 24 n65, 24 n67, 25 n73, 25 n77, 27 n96,
 49 n15, 61–67, 79, 90, 101 n28, 101 n29,
 101 n32, 101 n33, 102 n41, 104 n88,
 109 n170, 149, 174 n33, 213 n20,
 291–92 n64
 neo-Platonism
 being, continuity of 33
 contemplative ascent 118
 imagination, faculty of 117
 reality of evil, denial of 29–30
 world of ideal forms 149
 Neumann, Erich 219 n57, 220 n74
 Neusner, Jacob 214 n26, 215 n33
 nocturnal ascent
 kabbalist, divinization of 126–27, 133

mystical rites 133–34
 study at midnight 126–33
Nuqba 155–56, 158, 174 n31

O

Other Side (*Siṭra Aḥra*)
 appeasement of 218 n49
 chariots in the mystery of 6
 convert separates from 267
 divine, parallel to 1–3, 4, 32–33
 and Egypt 11, 21 n35
 and the evil inclination 7
 and forces of king and priest 12–13
 incorporation of 34
 and the nations of the world 213 n22
 and the refuse of thought 51 n32
 removal of 48 n12
 rules over the holy land 268
 Shekhinah, submission of 23 n46, 23 n48
 and the sin of Job 22 n45, 28 n111, 37
 subduing of 36
 symbolized by the leaven 7, 43

P

parallelism 18 n12
pardes (fourfold interpretation)
 allegorical/tropological interpretation
 57
 exegetical methods 57
 literal interpretation (*peshat*) 57, 59, 60
 midrashic interpretation 57
 mystical reading, as supplanting literal
 sense 57–60
 theosophical system, application of 57
 Passover 7, 15–16, 42, 255 n28
 Pentecost 255 n28
 and bringing of leavened bread as first
 fruits 15–16, 42–43
 and nocturnal study rites 133,
 136–37 n21, 142 n97
Peri Ets Hayyim 106 n116, 181 n68
Perush Sefer Yetsirah (Barzillai) 104 n91
Perushei ha-Torah 23–4 n54, 24 n58, 24 n65,
 24 n67, 25 n73, 25 n77, 101 n28, 174 n33
peshat and *sod*, in zoharic hermeneutics
 and Abraham Abulafia 68–69
 beautiful maiden with no eyes, parable of
 93–94
 contextual meaning, and esoteric lore
 61–62
 exoteric and esoteric meaning 56,
 69–70

- pasha* and *sod*, in zoharic (*cont.*):
 hierarchical approach, evidence of 71–72
 hyperliteralism 70–71, 80–83
 innovative hermeneutics *versus* received tradition 63–65
 and Isaac of Acre 69–70
 and Jacob ben Sheshet 63–67
 literal sense 73–74, 92–94, 104 n90
mammash and *dayqa* 80–83
 meaning, multivalent levels of 97–98
 and Menaḥem Recanaṭi 69
 midrashic reading 80–82
 mystical literalism 77–78
 and Naḥmanides 61–67
 narratives, *versus* laws 72
 organic unity of 65–67, 69–70, 74–76, 95–96
pardes (fourfold interpretation) 56–60
pasha 70–71, 75–76, 77, 79–80, 83, 91–92, 94–95
petah einayim, symbolic meaning of 78–79
 reading, as constitutive of meaning and text 93–94
 simple meaning, as basis for truth 88–92
 textual plane, as symbolic of upper realm 66–67
 Torah, in preremptive state 76–77
- phallus
 androgynous nature of 195, 202, 220 n74, 225 n117, 252–53 n12
 comprehends all of the body 198, 200
 concealment of 262, 284 n11
 corona of 164–65, 170, 175 n36, 177–78 n59, 183 n92, 194, 196, 262
 counterpart in female anatomy 153, 179 n61
 covenantal incision on 199
 and the crown 162
 crown of 164
 and the demonic 195
 and divine zeal 214 n31
 exposure and veiling of 262, 284 n11
 female transformed into 168, 170, 207, 279, 281
 gender hierarchy, reversal of 163–64
 holy 160–61, 195–96, 199–200
 and the image of the rainbow 206–7, 224 n111, 225 n117
 and the image of the serpent 194–95
 in Lacanian theory 207–8, 281, 286 n23
 locus of memory 200, 201, 202, 222 n89
 locus of the secret 262, 264, 276
 mystery of Torah localized in 280
 and the nature of time 252–53 n12
 personified by Joseph 280
 phallogocentric imagery 207–8, 262–63, 281
 and the point of Zion 160
 rectification of 194
 and the righteous 146, 280
 and the *Shekhinah* 166, 224 n111
 as sign of the holy covenant 81, 280
 as signifier 286 n23
 site of mystical vision 81, 284 n11
 and the sixth day 160
 and tree of life 193
 urobolic nature of 220 n74
 and virility of the Jew 209
 and *Yesod* 130, 193, 203, 264
- Pharaoh 4–7, 13, 23 n45, 38, 203
 daughter of 88
 designated the great crocodile 22 n42
 as magician 19 n18, 22 n41
- Philo 24 n60, 46 n5, 109 n177
 philosophy, and Zohar 51 n32
 plagues 4, 6–8, 23 n54, 24 n59
 Plotinus 45 n2
 pneumatic body, of Christ 218 n53
 poetry, and language of mystery 285 n16
 point
 androgynous nature of 152–54
 ascent and coronation of 151–52
 Jerusalem, as midpoint 179 n62
Shekhinah as 277–78
 as sign of the covenant 179 n61
 prayer 26 n88, 67, 69, 70, 118–21, 123, 124–26, 130, 132–33, 140 n55, 141 n70, 141 n80, 150, 154, 157, 159, 180–81 n68, 200, 225 n116, 255 n28, 256 n37
 Provençal kabbalists 49 n15, 118
 Pseudo-Clementine literature 52 n34, 173 n19
 purgation 30, 34–35
- Q
- Qumran community 30, 46–47 n6
- R
- Ra'aya Meheimna* 24 n104, 51 n34, 59, 76–77, 95, 100 n17, 106 n113, 108 n156, 164, 173 n20, 175 n42, 176 n54, 183 n85, 184 n98, 216 n40, 216–17 n41, 220 n71,

- 221 n75, 222 n91, 226 n119, 257 n67,
291 n56
- Rachel 154–55, 177 n58, 180 n68, 236, 265 n37
- rainbow (*qeshet*)
adorned in the colors of the bride 204,
206–7
androgynous nature of 175 n42,
225 n117
covenant of 175 n42, 204–5
God's looking at 207–8
liminal symbol 206–7
and messianic redemption 204–9
phallic aspect of 205–6
prohibition to look at 174 n36, 206, 208,
225 n116
seen by Noah 205–7
- Recanati, Menaḥem 23 n50, 24 n56, 24 n66,
25 n73, 26 n88, 69, 102 n46, 102 n47,
108 n158, 135 n9, 176 n56
- redemption
from Egypt 6–7, 8–9
feminine, concealment of 272
hieros gamos 236
and jubilee 243–44
left, containment of within right 9–11
male and female, unification of 7–11
miracle at the sea 9–10
as restoration of original situation
155–56
Sabbath as moment of 146–47, 150
“the great Hand”, *Shekhinah* as 9–10
as union and consummation 147
- repentance 139 n42, 231, 237, 244–45,
248–51, 268
- Ricoeur, Paul 76
- ritual
ablution, Sabbath eve 122
and myth 144–45
and sacrament 144–45
- Roitman, Betty 71, 103 n80, 107 n149,
108 n151
- Rosh ha-Shanah 231, 238
- S
- Sabbath
and augmentation of the soul 148–49
desecration of 153–54
feminine and masculine aspects of
146–47, 168
and gender transformation 150–52, 153
as *hieros gamos* 144, 223 n98
injunction to remember 199–200
as moment of redemption 146–47, 150
as quaternity 152
and sacralization of heterosexuality 161
- Sabbath bride, coronation of 144–70
- Sabbath eve
and consciousness for *Malkhut* 180 n68
and Sabbath bride 145–46
standing prayer, goal of 180–81 n68
as time for sexual intercourse 147–50
and visionary ascent 122–23
- Sabbatian theology 34
- sacrifices, as “giving the devil his due” 37
- Sadducees 61
- Samael
depicted as the castrated god 290 n53
domination of *Shekhinah* by 5
encroachment of the feminine by 273
the evil man 291 n56
the great crocodile 22 n43
as guardian angel of Esau 190–93
and Ishmael 216 n41
Jesus, the incarnation of 213 n20
and Jewish-Christian polemic 187–98
and Lilith 2, 19 n15, 22 n43, 32, 93, 195
rides upon the serpent 21 n33, 190–91,
195–96
- Schechter, Solomon 27 n105, 47 n6, 55 n72
- Scholem, Gershom xiv, xv, 17 n1, 17 n3, 17 n4,
17 n5, 17 n6, 18 n7, 18 n8, 19 n15, 19 n18,
20 n18, 20 n23, 22 n43, 23 n54, 26–27 n95,
26 n88, 27 n96, 31, 47 n7, 47 n8, 48 n12,
49 n15, 51 n32, 52 n35, 52 n37, 52 n42,
58, 99 n6, 100 n20, 102 n39, 102 n48,
103 n51, 103 n59, 109 n182, 110 n187,
114–16, 118, 134, 135 n9, 135 n17, 137 n24,
137 n27, 137 n28, 138 n32, 138 n34,
139 n42, 140 n59, 140 n61, 143 n114,
143 n115, 170 n1, 170 n2, 172 n15, 172 n17,
175 n40, 176 n55, 181 n80, 182 n85,
187, 211 n11, 211 n12, 211 n13, 212 n17,
217 n46, 217 n47, 220 n74, 223 n101,
226 n120, 252 n5, 252 n12, 258, 282 n4,
282 n5, 290 n53, 291 n64
- secrecy
body of 264, 278, 281
dialectic of 249
and empowerment 261
erotic imagery, and the sacred 261–64
fascination with 259
genealogy of 262
kabbalah, as esotericism 258–59
mirror/garment paradox 260

- secrecy (*cont.*):
 and modesty 275–76, 293 n81
 paradoxical nature of 261
 path of 281
 phallogocentric nature of 262, 264, 278–80
 and the pretense of not-showing 264
 revelation and concealment, interplay
 between 242–43, 249, 259–61
 and sexuality 262
 triadic structure of 285 n18
 and veil of femininity 264–71
 see also feminine, enclosure of
- Sefer ha-Bahir* 18 n8, 25 n76, 25 n77, 25 n80,
 26 n88, 26 n90, 31, 49 n15, 49 n16, 65,
 117, 172 n12, 173 n19, 199, 217 n42,
 223 n90, 227 n128, 252 n12, 256 n50,
 290 n53, 291 n64, 293 n79
- Sefer ha-Emunah we-ha-Bittahon* 24 n58, 64,
 102 n43, 102 n46, 102 n47, 102 n48,
 103 n49, 103 n53, 103 n56, 108 n158
- Sefer ha-Mishkal* 55 n72, 105 n104, 140 n56,
 142 n105, 143 n109, 173 n18, 175 n45,
 176 n56, 184 n103, 221 n75, 222 n87,
 223 n100, 224 n113, 289 n46, 291 n56
- Sefer ha-Mitswot* 61, 65
- Sefer ha-Shem* 163
- Sefer Meshiv Devarim Nekhojim* 64, 102 n45,
 102 n46, 102–3 n48, 103 n55
- Sefer Yesod Olam* 104 n90
- Sefer Yetsirah* 25 n77, 139 n50
- sefirot* ix, 1–4, 7, 10, 18 n13, 19 n16, 22 n43,
 23 n46, 24 n58, 24 n68, 25 n77, 25 n80,
 31, 48 n14, 58, 69, 70, 79, 80, 90, 91, 113,
 115, 116, 117, 139 n42, 139 n50, 157, 166,
 202, 233, 236, 256 n49
- Segal, Alan 47 n6, 52 n34, 54 n57, 215 n37,
 218 n54, 221 n79
- Septimus, Bernard 62, 101 n34, 102 n36
- serpent, symbolism of 194–95
 primordial serpent 21 n33
 serpent, as androgynous 195–96
- sexual intercourse
 between Jewish man and Christian
 woman 265–66
 as masculinization of the female 226 n122
 with menstruous woman 188–89
 as redemptive act 246
 and Sabbath eve 147–50
- sexual modesty (*tсени'ut*) 227 n128, 275–77
- Sforino, Obadiah 90, 109 n170
- Sha'ar ha-Haqdamot* 95, 100 n17, 106 n116
- Sha'ar ha-Kawwanot* 141 n68, 174 n31,
 175 n44, 178 n59, 179 n60, 180 n64,
 180 n68, 181 n77, 184 n103, 255 n37
- Sha'ar ha-Pesuqim* 180 n68
- Sha'ar Ma'amerei Rashbi* 177 n58, 179 n60,
 179 n61, 181 n70, 181 n74, 181 n76,
 182 n82
- Sha'arei Orah* 20 n22, 24 n58, 28 n111,
 108 n158, 173 n24, 177 n59, 217–18 n47,
 252–53 n12, 256 n49, 256 n52, 283 n8
- Shakti 220 n74
- Shekhinah*
 ascent and overflowing, double
 movement of 237–38
 ascent to *Binah* 150–51, 152, 157–59,
 162, 240–41
 and assembly of the Tabernacle 114
 assimilation into *Yesod* 165–66, 168, 201
 as body beneath garment 72
 as celestial beast 154
 and concealment of the moon 193–94
 concealment of within rebuilt Temple
 274–75
 and connotation of “sister” 84–85
 defilement of 190
 demonic and divine, struggle between
 35–36
 domination by Samael 5
 dual nature of 6–7
 eschatological moment, symbolic intent
 of 155
 exile of 23 n46, 204, 209 n64, 220–21 n74,
 225 n119, 227 n128, 277, 290 n53,
 292 n64
 female gender, transposition of 238–40
 and forgetfulness 200–201
 and Holy Spirit 196
 judgment, transformation of to mercy
 238
 as night 24 n55
 and the Patriarchs, fourfold unity
 between 24 n68, 150–51, 152, 166–67
 petah einayim, symbolic meaning of
 78–79
 point, androgynous nature of 152–53
 purification of 35–36
 and redemption 150, 156–58
 Sitra Ahra, submission to 23 n46, 23 n48
 as the “great Hand” 9–10
 and *Tiferet* 89, 90–91, 146
- Sheqel ha-Qodesh* 19 n18, 23 n53, 25 n83,
 176 n54, 179 n60, 181 n80, 213 n23,
 215 n33, 215 n36, 219 n60, 219 n64,

220 n69, 222 n85, 222 n87, 224 n109,
227 n128, 254 n20, 254 n21

Shiva 220 n74

Shushan Edut 23 n54, 24 n55, 182 n80,
219 n60, 224 n113, 225 n116, 227 n127

Sifra di-Tseni'uta (Book of Concealment)
75–76, 261, 285 n16

signification, Lacan's theory of 207–8, 281

Sifra Ahra, parallel to divine 1–3, 4, 31–33
see also Other Side

Smith, Jonathan Z. 143 n115

Smith, Morton 215 n37, 216 n39

Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah 219 n60, 222 n85

Solomon 23 n45
hidden book of 125
secret of the median line 153
wisdom of 234, 292 n64

Solomon ben Isaac of Troyes (Rashi) 21 n34,
89, 90, 109 n170, 231

Sophia myth 289 n41

Stroumsa, Gedaliahu G. 46 n3, 52 n34,
285 n18

T

Talmage, Frank 49 n15, 104 n82, 104 n91,
282 n4

Temple
building of 41–42, 273–74
destruction of 227 n128, 273
dwelling of *Shekhinah* 275
sacrificial cult of 274
stone of 283 n7

Tetragrammaton 207, 246, 285 n20
corresponds to *Tiferet* 91, 284 n13
equated with Torah 283 n8
feminine, transformation of into
masculine 246–47
letter *he* as symbol for *Shekhinah* 53 n45,
177 n59
letters of united on Sabbath 147
multiple vocalizations of 64, 67
as ultimate garment 283 n8
see also YHWH

textual communities, and elitist rabbinic
groups 185–86

theosophical monism 44

theurgical *versus* magical knowledge 20 n18

Tiferet 2, 5, 6, 8, 14, 23 n48, 25 n81, 26 n93,
27 n96, 32, 39–40, 43, 72, 80, 86–91,
139 n41, 146, 16–62, 177 n58, 191, 193,
219 n64, 234–36, 242, 244, 246, 249,
284 n13

time
and androgynous phallus 252–53 n12
texture of 232–33

Tiqunei Zohar 51–52 n34, 59, 76, 77, 95,
99–100 n17, 105 n109, 106 n113,
108 n156, 112, 125, 135 n8, 164, 173 n21,
179 n61, 179 n62, 180 n64, 182 n83,
184 n98, 216 n40, 217 n14, 224 n112,
225 n119, 227 n128, 291 n56, 292 n66,
293 n77

Tishby, Isaiah 18 n9, 18 n11, 18 n12, 20 n19,
20 n23, 22 n43, 23 n45, 23 n46, 23 n50,
23 n54, 25 n80, 25 n83, 27 n107, 28 n111,
30, 34, 36, 47 n9, 48 n10, 48 n11, 50 n20,
50 n26, 52 n41, 52 n42, 53 n45, 53 n48,
53 n51, 54 n59, 54 n71, 55 n74, 59, 98 n1,
99 n15, 100 n19, 117, 138 n41, 140 n52,
140 n56, 140 n60, 141 n64, 142 n99,
170 n3, 172 n16, 172 n17, 173 n18,
176 n48, 194, 212 n17, 213 n, 214 n26,
217 n41, 217 n42, 217 n46, 219 n66,
220 n71, 220 n73, 220 n74, 222 n90,
224 n105, 224 n114, 227 n128, 253 n15,
253 n16, 256 n38, 256 n39, 256 n41,
282 n4, 289 n51, 290 n53

Torah
all matters hidden within 73
antidote to the evil inclination 15–16,
193
balance between right and left 26 n93
beautiful maiden without eyes 93–94,
264–65, 278–79
black fire on white fire 14
bread as symbol for 16, 43, 105 n108
called freedom 15, 42
compared to a nut 71
compared to wine and water 69
comprises 613 commandments 15
concurrently revealed and disclosed
259–60
containment of left in the right 13–14
corpus symbolicum 58
crown of 164–65, 183 n92
described as a tree 71, 86–87, 193,
285 n20
the divine image 60
embodies masculine and feminine
14–15
and the exile of the divine 271,
291–92 n64
expression of divine will 110 n195
external and internal dimension 56–70

Torah (*cont.*):

- female image of 94, 137 n21, 291–92 n64
 - four types of meaning 71–72
 - garments of 73, 76–77, 98, 100 n17, 104 n89, 265, 288 n38
 - given in the desert 21 n35, 36
 - hidden and revealed 78–79, 96, 259, 279
 - hides the secret it hides 271
 - hiding of secrets in 73, 265, 269–70, 271
 - identical with the name 64, 67, 71, 75, 78, 98, 259, 279, 283 n8
 - light of 72, 100 n17
 - manifestation of the divine essence 233
 - as medicine 43, 55 n72
 - midnight, as propitious time to study 129–30
 - mysteries of 69, 114, 259, 280
 - mystic unites with 73–74
 - new interpretations of 233
 - in preredemptive state 76–77
 - primordial 14
 - secrets, cloaking of in letters of 98, 270
 - secrets of 73–74, 85, 97, 100 n17, 113, 137 n21, 143 n110, 226 n121, 265, 274, 280
 - seventy aspects of 66, 77
 - Shekhinah*, incarnation of 292 n64
 - study of 125–33, 136–37 n21, 142 n87, 186, 223 n97, 226 n119
 - and *Tiferet* 86, 88
 - union with 111, 142 n94
 - unvocalized status of 67
 - and visionary ascent 125–26
 - wheat, as symbol for 75–76, 99–100 n17, 106 n113
 - Written and Oral 14, 27 n96, 94–95, 99 n17, 242
- Trinity 19 n16, 222 n82
- Tsevi, Sabbatai 216–17 n41
- tsimsum*, Lurian doctrine of 180

U

- Urbach, Ephraim 27 n105, 47 n6, 54 n57, 54 n58
- uroborus, symbolism of 220 n74

V

- Venturing Beyond – Law and Ethics in Kabbalistic Mysticism* (Wolfson) xiii
- visionary ascent
 - anthropology of experience 112
 - anthropos*, and visualization of divine 117

- ascent experience 123–24
- astral body 121
- celestial palaces 119–21
- coronation motif 131
- devequt* (union), and faculty of imagination 116–17
- divine pleroma, transportation to 118–19
- ecstasy, nature of 112–13
- experiential and interpretive modes, interdependence of 111–12
- Hamnuna the Elder, as prototypical ecstatic 122–23
- kabbalistic sources 118
- prayer, and mystical illumination 119–20, 124–25
- soteriological framework 121–22, 124
- souls, rotation of 123–24
- Torah, study of 125–26
- see also* nocturnal ascent
- Vital, Ḥayyim 95–96, 100 n17, 106 n116, 110 n195, 141 n68, 155–56, 158–59, 163–64, 174 n31, 175 n44, 177 n58, 177–78 n59, 179 n60, 179 n61, 180 n67, 181 n71, 196, 220 n71, 255–56 n37
- Vital, Samuel 175 n44

W

- Wedderburn, A.J.M. 221–22 n80
- Weiss, Joseph 52 n42, 110 n193
- wheat, as symbol for Torah 75–76, 99–100 n17
- Wijnhoven, Jochanan H. A. 142 n104, 288 n40, 289 n443
- Wolfson, Elliot R. ix–xii, 24 n58, 48 n10, 48 n12, 50 n26, 50 n27, 51 n32, 52 n37, 101 n28, 103 n78, 105 n109, 107 n142, 109 n179, 110 n189, 135 n6, 137 n23, 138 n33, 138 n40, 140 n53, 140 n54, 142 n103, 170 n3, 171 n5, 171 n11, 171 n12, 171 n14, 171 n15, 173 n18, 173 n26, 174 n36, 175 n43, 176 n55, 177 n57, 178 n59, 179 n61, 179 n62, 180 n63, 181 n78, 182 n80, 183 n65, 183 n93, 184 n99, 184 n104, 212 n18, 213 n23, 214 n26, 214 n31, 220 n69, 220 n74, 223 n97, 223 n100, 225 n114, 226 n121, 226 n122, 226 n125, 252 n6, 252 n11, 252 n12, 253 n18, 254 n24, 254 n26, 257 n55, 257 n61, 257 n66, 282 n1, 282 n4, 283 n8, 284 n13, 285 n20, 286 n20, 286 n25, 287 n27, 287 n28, 287 n34, 291 n64, 292 n65, 292 n68, 293 n79, 293 n81, 294 n93, 2212 n78

- Y
- Yesod* 81, 82, 93, 131, 133, 151, 160, 163,
175 n44, 179 n61, 179 n62, 184 n106,
200, 202, 206, 224 n113, 254 n21,
255 n36, 256 n49, 279
assigned the name “peace” 169
corresponds to the *membrum virile* 94,
104 n88, 131
crown on the head of the righteous
163–64
and divine *anthropos* 131
female, transformation into 163–64
and the image of the rainbow 225 n117
kabbalists in the position of 129–32
and the letter *zayin* 165
locus of secret 104 n88
Malkhut beneath 166–67, 181 n68
phallic status of 130, 161–62, 168–69,
180 n80, 195, 198, 200–1, 203, 208,
252 n12, 265
Shekhinah, assimilation into 165–66,
168, 201, 225 n114, 252–53 n12
and tree of life 193, 219 n60
- YHWH
and Adonai 259
attribute if mercy 40
both hidden and revealed 259–60
and Elohim 39–40, 90–91
- Yom Kippur
and *Binah* 233–35
concealment, exposure of 248–49
- eschatological significance of 248–51
genitals of mother, recovering 250–51
hieros gamos motif, and redemption 236
homosexual relationships 236
incestuous relations, and sacred sexuality
234–35
king and queen, union of 234–35,
245–46
mother and daughter, reunion of
234–35
mother and two children, reunion of
249
mothering role, as masculine 236–37
reparation, and return to womb 230–31
and repentance 244–45, 251
time, texture of 232–33
- Z
- Zaehner, Richard C. 46 n3, 47 n6
Zalman, Shneur 97–98, 110 n195
Ze’eir Anpin 155–58, 174 n31, 178 n59,
180 n68, 255–56 n37
Zimmer, Eric 141 n71, 141 n79
Zohar
authorship theories xiii–xv
experiential dimension 115–16
as Jewish theosophy 111–12
practical means for achieving state of
ecstasy 112–13
Zoroastrianism 45–46 n3, 46–47 n6
Zurvan 50 n28