

# **Jewish Mythicism:**

A Study of Creative Language and Mythmaking in  
Selections of the *Zohar*

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My interest in Jewish mysticism traces back to my high school days. Though it began with an admittedly superficial appreciation of the more fantastic elements of *Kabbalah*, my first year in rabbinical school helped to mature my understanding of the complexities inherent within the *sefirotic* system. As such, I could not pass up the opportunity to immerse myself in the *Zohar* for serious study. My goal for this study was to explore the world of the *Zohar* directly in order to see what I may glean from it regarding Jewish ethics, practice, and thought.

In my first paper, I carefully examine *Zohar* I.2b-3b, a *midrashic* interpretation of *Breishit* in which the personified letters of the *alef-bet* come to life before God, each in turn making a case for the Holy One to create the world through it. I study this account in comparison with *Otiyyot d'Rabbi Akiba*, an earlier *midrash* upon which the *Zohar* bases its interpretation. In considering the two texts together, I highlight the approach that the *Zohar* takes to all of its material, weaving rabbinic tradition into a *Kabbalistic* narrative and embracing the generative power of language.

In my second paper, I study *Zohar* I.169b-171b, which deals with the account of Jacob wrestling a stranger in the night from *Parashat Vayishlach*. This selection serves as an illustrative example of how the *Zohar* rebuilds mythology into a monotheistic tradition. Identifying the stranger as a combination of Samael and Lilith, demonic agents of the *sitra ahra*, the selection reveals how the *Zohar* confronts the problem of evil, sexual ambivalence, and critiques of 13<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish society in Spain.

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## I.

### The ABC's of Creation:

#### A Comparison of *Zohar* I.2b-3b and *Midrash Otiyyot d'Rabbi Akiba*

Within Judaism, and especially within Jewish mysticism, the Hebrew language serves as the basic building blocks of not only Creation but of the creative endeavor itself. Jewish tradition abounds with reminders that God created the very world through speech.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in true *imitatio dei*, the keepers and pioneers of Jewish tradition have similarly relied on language to create everything they need, from legal framework to fantastical flights of fancy. As Art Green explains, the second commandment's prohibition against graven images meant that "All those creative energies that in other contexts might have sought to reify sacred myth in painting, sculpture, manuscript, illumination, or stained glass had instead focused on the word."<sup>2</sup> Language, then, is a generative opportunity within Judaism, and for the Jewish mystic, it can literally create entire worlds. Yet, in order to distinguish between communicative language and generative language, "the mystic needs to struggle against the barriers of language, perhaps by stretching the ordinary discursive vehicle to new poetic heights, perhaps by discovering within language a previously untapped symbolic stratum."<sup>3</sup>

Luckily, Jewish mysticism has a rich history of language from which to draw. Rabbinic hermeneutics in particular pays great attention to biblical language, both aural and graphic, in order to mine the holy text for the full depth of its interpretive

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<sup>1</sup> Among numerous other examples, consider: the literal text of Genesis 1's account of Creation, as well as the opening blessing of *Psukei d'Zimra* in the morning *shacharit* prayer service: ברוך שאמר והיה עולם – Blessed is the One who spoke, and the world came to be.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Green, *A Guide to the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 4

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 7-8.

possibilities. The Babylonian Talmud records a well-known conversation between Moses and God in which the Holy One describes Akiba ben Joseph, “שעתיד לדרוש על” כל קוץ וקוץ תילין תילין של הלכות – who in the future will expound from every jot and tittle mounds of *halachot*.<sup>4</sup> Thus, not only the words and letters written, but the very shapes of these letters, contain hidden meanings. The rabbis felt comfortable taking such an expansive approach to reading the biblical text because they believed in the Torah’s divine origins, and God’s language was not limited like human speech.<sup>5</sup> Indeed,

It should come as no surprise, then, when the more mystically-inclined approaches to Judaism tease out the generative power of language quite directly. The esoteric *Sefer Yetzirah*<sup>6</sup> posits quite clearly that God created the world through the combination and permutation of different letters of the Hebrew alphabet. As such, rabbinic play with language becomes a form of *imitatio dei*. More experientially inclined mystical works—such as the *Sefer Yetzirah*, early *Heikhalot* literature, and the prophetic Kabbalah of Abraham Abulafia—lay out specific directions for how a disciple might utter and meditate upon Hebrew letters in such a way as to create a golem, transcend the physical world, or otherwise achieve ecstatic reverie. Other (often later) mystical works focus less on experiential “magical” contents.<sup>7</sup> Instead, they “were concerned with the

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<sup>4</sup> BT Menachot 29b

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say Rabbi Akiba’s approach was universally accepted. Rabbi Ishmael made a point of teaching that the Torah was given to human beings in “the language of man,” cf. *Sifre Bamidbar* 112.

<sup>6</sup> Critical scholarship has yet to reach consensus on the exact dating of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. Haman and Y. Dan argue the base text was composed in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century; other scholars date it to 8<sup>th</sup> century. (Sharon Koren, March 4, 2012.)

<sup>7</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 51

unique, unchangeable messages to be extracted by the means of eccentric hermeneutics precisely from the written form of the Torah.”<sup>8</sup>

It is two of these medieval mystical works that serve as the central focus of this paper: the *Midrash Otiyyot d’Rabbi Akiba* (“The Letters of Rabbi Akiba”) and *Hakdamat HaZohar* (literally translated as “The Introduction to the *Zohar*,” though it by no means serves as an actual introduction to the rest of the *Zohar*).<sup>9</sup> Among numerous reflections riffing on the hidden meaning of the opening verse of Genesis and its account of creation, *Hakdamat HaZohar* explores an *midrashic* account of the pre-mundane world in which the anthropomorphized and anthropopathized letters of the Hebrew alphabet come before God individually in order to make a case for why the Holy One should create the world through that letter in particular. As Daniel C. Matt notes, numerous parallel *midrashim* exist recounting the same story, but the *Zohar* bases itself primarily off the *Midrash Otiyyot d’Rabbi Akiba*.<sup>10</sup>

Before comparing the two accounts directly, it would be prudent to say a word or two about the greater context and dating of each work. Though the *Otiyyot d’Rabbi Akiba* (heretofore referred to by the abbreviation ORA) is by no means an esoterically unknown work in textual circles (copies are available at mainstream locations like the

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<sup>8</sup> Moshe Idel, “Midrash vs. Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics: Some Comparative Reflections” in ed. Michael Fishbane, *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 50.

<sup>9</sup> The *Zohar* itself is often known as *Sefer HaZohar*, or the Book of the *Zohar*. This is a misnomer. Only publishers, centuries later, assembled what we now know as a collected work that is the *Zohar*. What we today call *Hakdamat HaZohar* is a collection of Kabbalistic traditions (which were contemporary to the teachings that would become *Guf HaZohar*, or the Body of the *Zohar*) dealing with a range of interpretations on *Breishit*, gathered by later editors and positioned at the beginning of *Sefer HaZohar* as its “introduction.”

<sup>10</sup> Daniel C. Matt, trans. *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. 1* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 11, note 80.

annual Yeshiva University *Seforim* Sale, and the *midrash* has its own Wikipedia page<sup>11</sup>), surprisingly little has been written that devotes more than a passing mention to the work. One notable exception to this can be found in the work of Michal Oron, who published a more extensive piece on the ORA in *מחקרי ירושלים במחשבת ישראל*, an Israeli research journal.<sup>12</sup> Christian Ginsburg notes that ORA “alternately treats each letter of the Hebrew Alphabet as representing an idea as an abbreviation for a word...and as the symbol of some sentiment, according to its peculiar form, in order to attach to those letters moral, theanthropic, angelological and mystical notions.”<sup>13</sup> While Ginsburg accurately describes the ORA, it must be noted that the *midrash* has been recorded in two quite different recensions, and Ginsburg’s description seems a more apt fit for the first. It is the second recension (נוסח ב, found within the collection *בתי מדרשות*) that serves as the basis for the *Zohar*’s take.

Though earlier scholars, such as Gershom Scholem, associated ORA with a second stage of *Merkavah* mysticism,<sup>14</sup> more recent findings have added significantly greater nuance. Moshe Idel describes ORA as “preserv[ing] views and materials from the *Heikhalot* literature.”<sup>15</sup> However, Idel further complicates the situation by pointing out the relative lack of hermeneutics within *Heikhalot* literature: “the *Heikhalot* authors were relatively indifferent to most parts of the Bible as major sources of inspiration or,

<sup>11</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphabet\\_of\\_Akiba\\_ben\\_Joseph](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphabet_of_Akiba_ben_Joseph)

<sup>12</sup> אורון, מיכל, “סיפור האותיות ומקורותיו עיון במדרש הזהר על אותיות אלף-בת” *מחקרי ירושלים במחשבת ישראל* ג, א-ב (תשמ”ד), עמ’ 97-109.

<sup>13</sup> Christian Ginsburg, *The Kabbalah: Its Doctrines, Development & Literature* (New York: Kessinger Publishing, 2003), 184.

<sup>14</sup> Scholem describes two stages of *Merkavah* mysticism, identifying the first stage with the “Greater” and “Lesser” *Hekhalot* and noting, “The second includes the numerous texts of the ‘Midrash of the Ten martyrs’ and the ‘Alphabet of Rabi Akiba.’” Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Moshe Idel, *Absorbing Perfections* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 208.

alternatively, as texts to comment on.”<sup>16</sup> Peter Schäfer goes so far as to argue that “the *Heikhalot* literature appears to be basically independent of the Bible...[even] autonomous.”<sup>17</sup> If this is the case, then the ORA both does and does not resemble other *Heikhalot* literature. The ORA demonstrates not only a willingness to engage in, but even a certain mastery over, the biblical text. It provides multiple verses as prooftexts for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet, justifying the symbolic values they represent. However, the verses are clearly used in service to a pre-existing agenda and theology (a hallmark of non-*midrashic* medieval literature<sup>18</sup>). The Hebrew Bible serves less as inspiration for the ORA than it does as an extensive grab-bag of potential evidence to defend a mystical understanding of the Hebrew language; one need merely reach in and grab a verse starting with the letter at hand.

Precise dating of *Heikhalot* literature remains academically controversial, and so it is difficult to pin down with any certainty the composition of ORA. Gershom Scholem favored a redaction for much *Heikhalot* material in the fourth or fifth centuries,<sup>19</sup> though the ORA demonstrates enough familiarity with the Talmud to cast aspersions as the accuracy of such dating. For my purposes, it is sufficient to note that Rashi (1040-1105) may have known ORA<sup>20</sup>; his grandson, Rabbeinu Tam (1100-1171), certainly did.<sup>21</sup> As

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<sup>16</sup> Idel, “Midrash vs. Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics,” 56, note 2.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Schäfer, “The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism. Gershom Scholem Reconsidered” in *Hekhalot-Studien* (Tuebingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988), 290.

<sup>18</sup> Idel, “Midrash vs. Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics. Cf. p. 52: “the superimposition of elaborated theologies (be these Aristotelian [sic], neoplatonic, or theosophic) is characteristic of most of medieval hermeneutics.”

<sup>19</sup> Schäfer, Peter. “The Aim and Purpose of Early Jewish Mysticism. Gershom Scholem Reconsidered,” 279.

<sup>20</sup> In his commentary on Numbers 14:4, Rashi connects the phrase *לשון עבודה זרה* to *נתנה ראש* – language of idolatry. The ORA similarly reads *ראש* as a reference to idolatry during its discussion of the letter *reish*. However, it’s entirely possible both Rashi and the ORA draw on a parallel source, such as the centuries earlier *Mekhilta* (*Vayassa* 1:22).

<sup>21</sup> Ephraim Kanarfogel, in his most recent book, notes that “Rabbenu Tam cites *Otiyyot de-R. Aqiva* only in halachic contexts (e.g., as a source for the technically correct writing of *sifrei Torah*), with no concerns for

such, we can conservatively assume the ORA was transmitted and sufficiently known in the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, well before the emergence of the *Zohar* a century after Rabbeinu Tam's death. I make this point only to emphasize that the *Zohar* knowingly bases its account on ORA rather than vice versa.

While ORA roots itself in *Merkavah* mysticism and *Heikhalot* literature, the *Zohar* remains the paradigmatic text of medieval Kabbalah. Though purported to be the work of *tannaitic* sage (and *Zoharic* protagonist) Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, most scholarship attributes the *Zohar*, or at least the main body of the *Zohar*,<sup>22</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> century Spanish *Kabbalist*, Moses de Leon. Like many pseudepigraphic works, the *Zohar* recognizes the need to superficially resemble the time period of its supposed origin. As such, the *Zohar* displays “a deep affinity with the rhetorical strategies of the old Midrash.”<sup>23</sup> This, however, is by no means a perfect replica of 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century rabbinic literature; the *Zohar* cannot help but betray its historical influences (some subtle, others not). Idel captures its approach quite nicely:

“Indeed, what seems to be most characteristic of the *Zoharic* theology, and to a certain extent also of other segments of theosophical-theurgical Kabbalah, is the fusion between the static and the anthropomorphic theology of the *Heikhalot* literature, on the one side, and the more dynamic, powerful and personalistic attitude of *midrashic*-talmudic thought on the other.”<sup>24</sup>

The comparison of the ORA's account of the Hebrew alphabet to *Hakdamat HaZohar* (heretofore referred to as simply “the *Zohar*”) should shine a light on this complex fusion of influences. This comparison will begin with some of the superficial differences

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or interest in its mystical aspects and implications.” Cf. Kanarfogel, *The Intellectual History and Rabbinic Culture of Medieval Ashkenaz* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 449.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 166.

<sup>23</sup> Idel, “Midrash vs. Other Jewish Hermeneutics,” 55.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



between the two texts (language, presentation, and general style) before entering a more direct textual analysis.

The most immediate difference between the *Zohar* and ORA is the language of composition. The ORA, like most *Heikhalot* literature, is a Hebrew text. The *Zohar*, by contrast, was purposely composed in Aramaic, likely imitating the vernacular that a first century *tannaitic* mystic would have spoken in *eretz Yisrael*.

Another notable difference between the two texts lies in their chosen orators. The ORA begins as a statement made by, fittingly enough, Rabbi Akiba: אָמַר רַבִּי עֲקִיבָא אֱלֹו – Rabbi Akiba said: These 22 letters, etc.<sup>25</sup> In the *Zohar*, however, the tale of the *alef-bet* is accredited to Hamnuna Saba (also known as Hamnuna the Elder and Hamnuna II), a mid-third century *amora*. Rabbi Akiba certainly makes for a logical choice for a rabbinic figure to present a mystical *midrash* on the letters of the alphabet. After all, Akiba has not only traditionally been associated with the mystical tradition,<sup>26</sup> he's also known for deriving meaning from even the crowns of the letters (as mentioned earlier). However, Akiba, known as Shimon bar Yochai's teacher, does not appear in the pages of the *Zohar*. As such, the Kabbalistic authors instead present the *midrash* through the words of Rav Hamnuna Saba. Though Hamnuna Saba is not one of the members of Rashbi's innermost circle, he remains a critical figure throughout *Zoharic* literature as a stranger encountered during their travels. He astounds the circle with his unexpected wisdom. In fact, he is one of two figures in the *Zohar* who "are not really alive, but...their souls have left the Garden of Eden and have donned corporeal form in

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<sup>25</sup> For my study of the *Otiyyot d'Rabbi Akiba*, I relied on the edition printed within the *midrashic* compilation *בתי מדרשות ורטהימר*, כתב וספר: 1968, ע"שצו-תד) בתי מדרשות (ORA myself.

<sup>26</sup> The origins of such an association can be found in the story of the four who entered the *pardes* (Hagigah 14b).

order to reveal secrets of the Torah.”<sup>27</sup> Who better, then, to reveal the secrets of divine letters, used to literally give shape to the concrete universe, than an ethereal figure who himself has donned a physical form, as if by magic?

Despite its fantastical interests, the *Zohar*’s *midrashic* approach provides a more grounding context. *Hakdamat HaZohar* is composed, essentially, of a series of various interpretations of the first verse of Genesis (namely, 'בראשית ברא אלהים וכו'). The *Zohar* explores an interpretation offered by Shimon bar Yohai and another offered by his son, Eleazar, before introducing Rav Hamnuna Saba’s story of the alef-bet; once Hamnuna’s interpretation comes to an end, the *Zohar* swiftly moves on to Rabbi Yudai’s take. The ORA, by contrast, floats as an island of its own, without preceding or subsequent *midrashim* to frame it. In the classical *midrash*, one might sense an editor’s careful hand in the selection of the order that various material follows; the redacted order serves as a sort of commentary on the meta-meaning. The *Zohar* clearly follows this approach. As Art Green puts it:

“The *Zohar* wants to take the reader inside the divine life. It wants ever to retell the story of the flow of the *sefirot*, their longings and union, the arousal of love above, and the way in which that arousal causes blessing to flow throughout the worlds. This is the essential story of Kabbalah, and the *Zohar* finds it in verse after verse, portion after portion, of the Torah text. But each retelling offers a new and often startling different perspective on this essential truth. *The Zohar is ever enriching the kabbalistic narrative by means of retelling it from the vantage point of still another hermeneutic insight. On each page another verse, word, or tale of the Torah is opened or ‘uncovered’ to reveal new insight into the great story of the Zohar*, that which it proffers as the truth of the Torah, of the cosmos, and of the reader’s soul.”<sup>28</sup> (Emphasis added)

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<sup>27</sup> Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar, Vol. 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 65.

The *Zohar* aims to do far more than *Kabbalistically* amplify the Alphabet of Rabbi Akiba with a few hermeneutical changes; it wishes to integrate the *midrash* fully into the greater Kabbalistic narrative. The mystical symbolism of the letters is subsumed completely by the larger stories of divine union and creation.

This is why the *Zohar* bookends the actual parade of all the letters with musings on the *rashei teivot* of the first four words of Genesis 1:1 – בראשית ברא אלהים את – *bet, bet, alef, alef*. First, the *Zohar* rather cleverly connects this biblical repetition of letters to the rigid, yet necessary backwards structure of the ORA. Given that the Torah starts with a *bet*, the ORA has no other way to frame its narrative than to begin with the last letter of the alphabet, *tav*, and work its way back to the *bet*.<sup>29</sup> The ORA attempts no reason or explanation for this reverse treatment of letters.

Enter the *Zohar*. The *Zohar* recognizes that the content of the ORA deals with creation, and so it wisely opens that story with the first verse of the creation story. Conveniently (or perhaps intentionally), the first verse of Genesis also presents letters in a reverse order, namely the *bet, bet, alef, alef* mentioned above. As such, the *Zohar* points this curiosity out directly: אֶשְׁכֶּחַן אֶתֶּן בְּהִפּוּכָא – we find the letters backwards.<sup>30</sup> Though seemingly commenting on Genesis 1:1, the *Zohar* has successfully seeded the notion of exploring the alphabet in reverse, foreshadowing the entire *midrash* to unfold.

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<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that א נוסח of ORA treats each letter in proper alphabetical order, starting with *alef* and moving to *tav*. In addition, once ב נוסח makes its way back to *alef*, it then switches directions to ask questions about the shape of each letter.

<sup>30</sup> הקדמת הזוהר, ע"ה. For all of my *Zohar* text study, I used a *menukad* (vocalized) edition with side-by-side Aramaic text and Hebrew translation (1998: יריד הספרים). In addition, I consistently referenced The Pritzker Edition of the *Zohar*, translated by Daniel C. Matt. All English translations of the *Zohar* within these essays have been based on Matt's work, though I have on occasion emended his translation to suit my own purposes (often guided by the *loshen kodesh*).

More impressively, the *Zohar* moves on to explain why the letters might not appear in the proper order. It provides the explanation that when God wished to create the world, *כָּל אֲתֵנָן הָיוּ סְתִימִין* – all the letters were hidden [away]. The implication is that the letters lacked a proper, revealed order before Creation. The genius lies in a careful reading of ORA, in which Rabbi Akiba describes the twenty-two letters *והן חקוקין בעט* – and they were engraved by a flaming pen upon the awesome and frightening **crown** of the Holy One, blessed be He [emphasis added]. *Keter* (or “crown”) is the first of the ten *sefirot*, the unknowably sublime beginning of the godhead. *Keter* is the most hidden of hidden things, so when a Kabbalist reads in the ORA that the letters were engraved *על כתר* – upon the *keter* – he understands that the letters were engraved deep within an unknowable aspect of the godhead. No wonder the *Zohar* describes the letters as *סְתִימִין*. The letters, hidden in such a place, must have lacked order, an order only bestowed upon them following creation (therefore, they continue to lack their proper order throughout the entire *midrash*, which precedes creation).<sup>31, 32</sup>

As the *Zohar* proceeds with its account of each letter presenting its case before God, the rest of the *sefirot* slowly unfold into creation. It does not follow a straightforward or logical path, from first to last, as that is not how the *Zohar* operates.

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<sup>31</sup> One cannot help but feel the influence of the *Sefer Yetzirah* on the *Zohar* at this point. As Moshe Idel articulates, the author of *Sefer Yetzirah* felt that “the free state of the alphabet and all the possible mathematical combinations that may result from the Hebrew letters are imbued with magical powers... The Torah would thus be, for the author of *Sefer Yetzirah*, a rather limited, historical, and ritualistic condensation of potentialities inherent in the Hebrew alphabet” (Idel, “Midrash vs. Other Jewish Hermeneutics,” 48). In the Kabbalistic worldview, it seems the Hebrew alphabet existed in a great deal of possible combinations until the creation of Torah and the world.

<sup>32</sup> Additionally, the first *mishna* of *Sefer Yetzirah* reads: *בשלושים ושנים נתיבות פליאות חכמה חקק יי* – With thirty-two mystical paths of Wisdom, engraved Yah, the Lord of Hosts... (Text and translation from Aryeh Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah: The Book of Creation: In Theory and Practice* (York Beach: Samuel Weiser, Inc., 1990), 5).

No, the *sefirotic* symbolism of the *Zohar* flows more than it develops, resembling a waterfall designed by M.C. Escher, cascading from one level to the next, defying the rules of logic as Escher's paintings defy gravity. As such, only brief glimpses of the *sefirotic* unfolding can be gleamed: the gathering of *hesed*, *gevurah*, and *tiferet* together into the *shin* (שׁ)<sup>33</sup>, the identification of *yesod* with the *yod* (י)<sup>34</sup>, the description of the *tzadi* (צ) as a *nun* (נ) and a *yod* (י) back-to-back to represent incomplete primordial divine union<sup>35</sup> while the *tet* (ט) represents the same combination facing each other.<sup>36</sup>

The alphabetic inquiry concludes, as it must, with *alef*, which God identifies as a symbol of oneness and divine union: לֵית בִּי יְחִידָא אֱלָא בְּךָ...וְכָל יְחִידָא לָא הִוֵּי אֱלָא בְּאַתְּ לֵית בִּי יְחִידָא אֱלָא בְּךָ – “I have no union except through you...and no union is realized except through the letter *alef*.” In serving as the first letter, *alef* becomes a direct symbol for *keter*; its numerical equivalent is also one, thus strengthening the connection. Why, though, would the *Zohar* emphasize *alef* and its numerical value of one as *union*, rather than merely prelude?

The answer lies in the ORA, of course! When God questions the shy *alef* as to why it did not make a case like the other letters (in fact, the letter עמד לו לצד אחר ושתק – “it stood off to the side and was silent”), the *alef* explains that if felt bashful because of its low numerical value; the other letters במנין מרובה מתחשבין – “are taken into consideration in large number.” God encourages the *alef* not to feel shy, as all of the following items are called one (אחד\ת, or א): God, the *alef*, the Torah, and Israel. In a

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Matt, Daniel, *The Zohar: Pritsker Edition*, p. 12, note 87.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 13, note 89.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.* note 92.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* note 94.

mystical framework, one can easily read the fact that all four are individually called “one” as an indication that the four unite together to make one (I’m sure it was not lost on the Kabbalists either that four is a significant number, always relating to the Tetragrammaton). Rather than list the individual elements, the *Zohar* summarizes the ORA by emphasizing the unity found in the oneness of an *alef*. It also plays with the idea that the *alef* is the head of the entire alphabet, much like the first *sefira*. In some ways, then, it might seem the *Zohar* has made no progress at all, ending with the same *sefira* (*keter*) with which it began.

However, Rav Hamnuna Saba’s interpretation ends as follows: וְעִבֵּד קֹדֶשׁא בְּרִיךְ – “and the Holy One, blessed be He, arranged the great letters above and the small letters below.” The implication is that God created letters in both the supernal, heavenly realm and on the mundane, earthly realm, each influenced by the other. The *Zohar* clarifies by returning to its opening comment on two *bets* and two *alefs*. The reason for their duality, then, is that Genesis hints at their existence on both planes, above and below. As Daniel Matt notes, “The first of each pair derives from *Binah*, the higher world; the second of each from *Shekhinah*, the lower world.”<sup>37</sup> The *Zohar* seems to imply a difference between the higher letters of the pre-mundane Torah and the earthly letters of the written Torah; however, וְכֻלָּהוּ בְּחֶדָא הוּא – “all of them were as one.” The story of divine unity can be found even in the letters of the alphabet, even in the alliterative doubling of Genesis 1:1. The alphabet begins in hidden disarray, but it concludes in oneness and unity.

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 17, note 111.

What, though, is the importance of identifying *alef* with all of these Kabbalistic symbols? Is there any deeper meaning attached to *alef*'s association with *keter* and oneness? An answer starts to form when one pays careful attention to *alef*'s distinguishing characteristics, within the story and as a letter. Within both the *Zohar* and the ORA, *alef* stands out from among the other letters not by what it says, but by what it does not say. The ORA lays it out most explicitly: וַיְשַׁתֵּק – “and it was silent.” It cannot be coincidence that the one letter of the Hebrew alphabet that lacks vocalization is characterized as silent.<sup>38</sup> Though *alef* does not make any sound of its own, it does respond to God in both texts at the Holy One's urging (almost as though God *drashes* some meaning out of it). Fittingly, *alef* speaks in a rather humble voice, not wishing to challenge God's decision to create the world through the *bet*. Its reward is to appear quite close to *bet* in the Torah, as well as to precede all other letters, as has been established.

Let us consider the *alef*'s sound a little longer, however. What does it mean for a silent letter to both precede the rest of the alphabet and to represent a sort of divine unity? It seems that the *Zohar* may be making a statement on the value of silence; it is silence that precedes sound, the generative act *par excellence*. In silence, one finds potential, a bubbling up of possibilities. From silence, any sound may result, just as all of creation may emerge from *keter*.<sup>39</sup> If God actually creates the world through *chochmah* and *binah*,<sup>40</sup> then *keter* is the mysterious process that precedes even thought and conception.

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<sup>38</sup> While many modern students of Hebrew today may claim the *ayin* is silent as well, that is erroneous. The *ayin* is a guttural letter, making a rather distinct throaty sound.

<sup>39</sup> This is not infinite silence. Rather, *alef* here resembles the silence of an open mouth yet to utter a sound, though sound will surely emerge.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it should be noted that the *Zohar* commonly reads בְּרֵאשִׁית as “in wisdom,” representing *chochmah*, the second of the *sefirot*. In fact, Rabbi Yudai's interpretation, which follows the alphabet

*Keter*, and silence by extension, is the primordial soup from which thought develops, the moment just before a neuron activates a concrete thought. It is the gathering of potential long before it has taken form, even before it has taken on the inkling of a direction in which to take form.<sup>41</sup> A distinction must be drawn between *keter*—the mysterious and ethereal first *sefira*— and *ein sof*— the great unknown that remains entirely beyond all forms of understanding. *Ein Sof* is a sort of contradictory nothingness that somehow also manages to be everything, the lack of being that somehow gives rise to being. By the time of *keter*, nothing has already transformed into something. *Keter* is like a ring of vapor, capable of expanding in so many possible directions. For the sake of completing the metaphor, *chochmah* may be described as that ring of vapor starting to take on a particular shape, while *binah* is the process through which the vapor begins to solidify into corporeal form.

Ironically, the Hebrew language begins with inaudible sound, just as the *sefirotic* system begins with that which lies at the edge of comprehension. Yet, that lack of sound contains all possible sounds within it—united, undifferentiated, much like a white light actually contains the full spectrum of colors. Perhaps this is why *bet* had to start creation (and the Torah) – the silent unity of *alef* is a signifier of all that which precedes what is. Creation, by definition, exists as the concrete. That which is pre-mundane remains in the abstract.

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story, emphasizes this very interpretation. Once again, as Art Green pointed out, the different *drashes* found within the *Zohar* manage to comment upon each other, each one adding a new perspective to the same essential narrative. Further, אֱלֹהִים is the name of God commonly associated with *binah*, the third of the *sefirot* and the “mother” which gives birth to creation. Thus, it is with wisdom and understanding that God can create the world and continue to unfold into the other *sefirot*.

<sup>41</sup> I cannot help but find myself thinking of the practice of theatrical improv. Often the best scenes result not when an improviser has an idea, but when s/he walks onto stage with no idea as to what will develop. It is in this liminal space, before a scene takes shape, that the improviser must trust in whatever lies in the air that night, between performer and audience, to create something. That moment of uncertainty and infinite possibility is *keter*.



Following a rather brusque introduction to the twenty-two letters, the ORA slavishly follows the inverse order of the Hebrew alphabet. It not only steadily works its way through the letters, one by one without exception, but it follows a rather rigid formula:

1. It introduces the next letter before God: ועמד לפני הקדוש ברוך \_\_\_\_ וכנס – “Afterward, \_\_\_\_ entered and stood before the Holy One, blessed be He”
2. The letter petitions for the Holy One to create the world through it because of some virtue that starts with the particular letter: ואמר רבונו של עולם רצונך – “and it said, ‘Master of the Universe, may it be Your will that You create Your world through me, for I...’”
3. The letter provides a proof-text to support its point: שנאמר – “as it is said”
4. God rejects the petition: השיב הקדוש ברוך הוא ואמר לו לא – “The Holy One, blessed be He, responds and says to it, ‘No.’”
5. The letter questions God’s decision: אמר לו למה – “It said to Him, ‘Why?’”
6. God explains how that letter is bound to be caught up in some terrible experience like death or idolatry: אמר לו מפני שבך עתידין – “[God] said to it, ‘Because through you, it is bound [to happen that...]’”<sup>42</sup>
7. The letter departs: מיד יצא מלפניו בפחי נפש – “Immediately, it departed from before Him in disappointment.”

The cited formula is used for all twenty-two letters, with the minor exception of *bet* (which takes a different course starting with step 4, when God accepts the petition) and the more significant exceptions of *tav*, *kaf*, and *alef* (fittingly, the first and last letters with which the text deals, as well as the middle letter). I will shortly examine these exceptions, *tav* and *kaf* (as I have already addressed *alef* in the *Zoharic* frame story), followed by an analysis of several other key letters. First however, I wish to make some general statements about how the *Zohar*’s approach differs from the ORA.

<sup>42</sup> Minor variants can be found, such as the singular מפני שעתיד or the more nuanced מפני שאני עתיד – “Because I in the future will” (such as the case for *nun*, *yod*, *tet*, *het*, *vav*, and *gimmel*). The letter *shin* remains an outlier in this aspect.

The *Zohar* retains a certain predictable pattern of behavior, copying much of the ORA's formula, though I would like to cover two important differences. The first difference is that the *Zohar* seeks to eliminate unnecessary elaborations of the narrative. As such, it skips step five (the letter's questioning) entirely, instead choosing to allow God to immediately explain the rejecting. Since the account of the alphabet is merely one *drash* among many in the *hakdamah*, it makes sense that the *Zohar* would attempt to streamline the telling. The *Zohar* also frequently skips quoting a direct proof-text to support each letter's claim; instead, it focuses more on inherent linguistic connections or implied verses. Biblical verses and even Talmudic *midrashim* often rest just beneath the surface of a *Zoharic* statement,<sup>43</sup> but true to form, the mystical text allows the source to remain hidden. In so doing, the *Zohar* resembles later medieval *midrashim*, such as the *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, which smoothly integrate references, paraphrases and direct quotes into its main body of material without always calling attention to the process via introductory term (such as **שנאמר** or **וכתיב**). The second difference in the *Zohar*'s presentation of the story is an extension of the first; the *Zohar* is so expedient in briskly clipping through the alphabet that it jumps at opportunities to eliminate groups of letters all together, rather than one at a time (i.e.: *kuf* and *reish* with *shin*; final *kaf* and *lamed* with *mem*; *ayin* with *pei*; *het* with *tet*; and *dalet* with *gimmel*).

Let me now begin my analysis of *tav*, one of the aforementioned exceptions to the ORA's otherwise constant formula. When the ORA introduces *tav*, it justifies its petition

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<sup>43</sup> For example, when the *Zohar* addresses *gimmel* and *dalet* together, it reads them as a unit saying to perform acts of charity for the poor (גמל דלים). This viewpoint, and much of the *Zohar*'s commentary on the shape of the letters, comes from BT Shabbat 104a, wherein children provide *hiddushim* for the entire aleph-bet.

as the letter through which Torah is given to Israel (תורה צוה לנו משה).<sup>44</sup> The choice in proof-text is convincing enough; not only does *tav* start the word Torah, the verse in question also asserts that Moses transmitted the Torah to them (presumably from God). But it should be noted that the ORA places an oddly particularistic verse in *tav*'s mouth when it argues for the universal honor of creating, well, the universe. What this says about the *midrash*'s authors and their relation to the non-Jewish world around them is a topic that remains well outside the scope of this analysis.

Regardless, God rejects *tav*'s petition, and the ORA proceeds to offer its first and longest reason for that rejection. The crux of this account lies in a reading of Ezekiel 9:4: ויאמר יי אלו עבור בתוך העיר בתוך ירושלים והתוית תו על מצחות האנשים הנאנחים – “And the Eternal said to him, ‘Pass through the city, through Jerusalem, and set a mark upon the foreheads of the people sighing and crying over the abominations done in its midst.’” The ORA reads תו (mark) as the letter תי"ו (*tav*). It then imagines God instructing an angel to place a *tav* of ink on the foreheads of the righteous (to indicate תחיה, that you shall live) and a *tav* of blood on the foreheads of the wicked (to indicate תמות, that you shall die). The ORA cleverly explains that *tav* is the chosen sign פורעניות מכל מיני פורעניות – “in order to teach you that the Torah saves a person from all sorts of trouble.” This ethical statement plays upon the *tav*'s earlier petition, acknowledging the link between *tav* and Torah.

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<sup>44</sup> Deuteronomy 33:4

If this level of insight and creativity feels surprising given the rather dry account of the ORA expressed elsewhere in this analysis, one might begin to see why the letter *tav* is the exception that proves the rule. In truth, almost the entirety of the ORA's explanation for *tav* is based upon BT Shabbat 55a, in which Rabbi Acha ben Hanina interprets this particular verse of Ezekiel. The most classically *midrashic* interpretation found within the text, it turns out, has been borrowed from a classical Talmudic *midrash*. Though differences certainly exist between the two accounts, they are merely formal as opposed to functional, stylistic rather than essential.

Within the ORA, the attribute of justice (מדת הדין) approaches God to argue that even the righteous should perish for not rebuking their wicked neighbors. God sends six angels of destruction to raze the city, and the letter *tav* becomes responsible for the death of innocents in the lead up to the first exile from Jerusalem.

The *Zohar*, familiar with both Shabbat 55a and the ORA's account, sets about its work of hiding the extensive details in the background. The *Zohar* actually foreshadows God's rejection of *tav* by alluding to another part of Shabbat 55a in order to recommend

*tav*. *Tav* requests to be used for creation דְּאֵנָּה חוֹתֶמָּה דְּגִיּוּשׁ פְּנִיקָא דִּילָךְ אֱמִ"ת וְאַנְתָּה

וְאֵנָּה חוֹתֶמָּה דְּגִיּוּשׁ פְּנִיקָא דִּילָךְ אֱמִ"ת וְאַנְתָּה – “for I am the completion of Your seal, Truth, and You are called

Truth.” Compare this with Shabbat 55a, which reads: וְרִישׁ לָקִישׁ אָמַר תִּיּו סוֹף חוֹתֶמּוֹ שֶׁל

וְרִישׁ לָקִישׁ אָמַר תִּיּו סוֹף חוֹתֶמּוֹ שֶׁל – “Reish Lakish said, “*Tav* is the end

[completion] of the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He,” as Rabbi Hanina said, “The seal

of the Holy One, blessed be He, is truth.” The *Zohar* simultaneously associates the letter

*tav* with a large, vital concept such as truth and seeds the knowledgeable reader, who may

already remember the negative use of *tav* to come. It certainly doesn't hurt that the

*Zohar* will also label *shin* as a letter of truth (את קשׁוּט), linking the letters conceptually as well as alphabetically. Finally, the *Zohar* refers to truth (אמת) as one of God’s names, subtly alluding to Jeremiah 10:10.<sup>45</sup>

Having set up the pieces, the *Zohar* then swiftly eliminates *tav* from contention. First, it acknowledges *tav* as יְאוֹת...וְנִפְאָה – “seemly and worthy.” It then presumes a familiarity with the extended interpretation of Ezekiel, commenting only that those who die by the mark of *tav* יִבְרְכוּ מֵאַלְף וְעַד תּוֹ – “fulfilled the Torah from *alef* to *tav*.” Interestingly, the *Zohar* uses a merism involving the same alphabet it’s slowly making its way through. This reminds the perceptive reader that *tav* is the last letter of the alphabet. One might find it logically jarring to create the world from its endpoint. In fact, the *Zohar* magnificently emphasizes the *tav* as ending throughout this brief account: it’s the last letter of the alphabet; it’s used to mark someone for the *end* of his/her life (and interestingly, one must recall that in the ancient Hebrew script, a *tav* resembled an English “x”);<sup>46</sup> rather than selecting an attribute that starts with *tav*, the *Zohar* offers one that *ends* with *tav*; *tav* is described as חֹתֶמָּה, a seal, implying a certain finality for whatever is being closed up. The *Zohar* then has only to drive the point home: וְעוֹד דָּאֲנָהּ – “and furthermore, you are the completion [seal] of death.” The letter *tav* literally ends the Hebrew word for death (מוֹת) and it serves as a seal made in blood to mark the righteous for death in the hidden story of Shabbat 55a.

In the Kabbalistic mindset, *tav* quite clearly represents completion. If the silent *alef* marked the infinite possibilities contained within potential, then *tav* denotes the full

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<sup>45</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. 1*, 12, note 82.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* note 83.

actualization of the creative process. *Tav* is in some ways Shabbat (labor and effort coming to a stop), and in other ways, it is the end times (the Messianic final era that marks the reunification of the *sefirot*). Therefore, though *tav* may be the goal to which God aims, it cannot be the starting point for creation. The *Zohar*'s narrative, then, seems to caution us: don't attempt to build from your end design. Allow your plan to unfold as it must, for to jump prematurely to that end point could mark you for death (or, framed in less ominous language: what remains for any of us upon the completion of so many projects in our lives other than an ending?). The creative process has a definitive beginning, and it comes to a definitive ending. In between these points, however, lie the great opportunities to make meaning, find unity, and bask in the effluent flow of divinity that guides us from *alef* to *tav*.

One of the letters that lies in the flow between those two alphabetic extremes (in fact, one of the literal two midpoint letters) is *kaf*. As previously mentioned, the ORA's treatment of *kaf* is quite atypical, presenting a rather dramatic account that breaks the formula to which it more typically holds. The ORA takes the time to explain that the *kaf* descends from כתר נורא של הקדוש ברוך הוא, נכנס ועמד לפני כסא הכבוד ונתרעש הכסא – וגלגלי מרכבה אחזו רעדה – the awesome crown of the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, and it entered and stood before the Throne of Glory, and the Throne made a great hullabaloo, and the Wheels of the Chariot were overcome by trembling. The ORA describes *kaf* as possessing world-shaking power (but what else is to be expected from the letter that starts כח?). It seems to possess a certain audacity, entering deep into the heart of *kise hakavod* rather than merely presenting itself before God like the other letters. In some ways, the *kaf* almost resembles the mystical adept himself, traveling from an edge of God's realm

(in this case, literally *above* the Throne, though clearly below the throne in the case of the mystic) to the most central interior. That the Wheels of the Chariot are present strengthens the ORA's connection to *Heikhalot* literature, which is based upon *Merkavah* (chariot) mysticism. Why else would *gilgalei hamerkavah* be present? Neither of the two words starts with a *kaf*, and so there is no linguistic connection. Clearly, this draws upon the viewpoint of *Heikhalot* literature, for which both the chariot and the divine throne play a central role.

God almost humorously plays the role of an aggravated parent, demanding to know the reason behind the loud ruckus that the Throne and the Chariot are making. They quickly note *kaf*'s presence, explaining *שכל כבודנו ויקרנו לא נקרא אלא בו* – that all of our glory and our precious honor exists only through him. Curiously, they then provide a number of prooftexts to justify their fear of *kaf*, resembling a more traditional rabbinic *midrash*. The prooftexts include: *כסא כבוד מרום מראשון* – the Throne of Glory is on high from the beginning (Jeremiah 17:12, implying the *kaf* not only predates creation, but that it should be *above* the first created thing – this seems to be part of the Throne's anxiety over *kaf*'s presence within rather than above); *יהי כבוד יי לעולם* – May the Eternal's glory continue forever (Psalms 104:31, suggesting that though the Throne may last forever, it clearly starts with *kaf*); and *וכבוד יי עליך זרה* – the glory of the Eternal has risen upon you (Isaiah 60:1, again suggesting that the proper place for *kavod* is above all other things, and one may assume that its first letter rests above it all). Interestingly, *kise hakavod* somehow disassociates itself from the letter which starts it, as all of the prooftexts which should support the Throne's own might instead serve to extol only the *kaf*.

An element of formula starts to reenter the narrative when God asks the *kaf* what it desires. Naturally, the *kaf* wishes for creation to happen through him, arguing שבי נקרא כסאך וכתרך וכבודך בי – that through me, Your throne and Your crown and Your glory are called [into being], through me. The repetition of בי (through me) at both the beginning and the ending of the list of *kaf* words is curious, and it allows the reader to parse the sentence in multiple ways. Perhaps *kaf* means to say that that God’s throne and crown are called into being through *kaf*, and God’s glory resides *within kaf*. Perhaps it sets to serve as foreshadowing for God’s eventual rejection (more on that momentarily). Regardless, the *kaf* provides three prooftexts, one for each of the three mentioned items. First, the *kaf* establishes that it does indeed precede Creation (נכון כסאך מאז – Your throne is established of old),<sup>47</sup> though the entire *midrash* occurs before Creation, so this point seems almost redundant.<sup>48</sup> Next, the *kaf* claims its association with God’s crown with the curious verse: בי מלכים ימלוכו – through me shall kings reign.<sup>49</sup> Here, I am truly baffled, as a *kaf* fails to start any word within the verse. Furthermore, it is taken from a chapter of Proverbs dealing with wisdom, none of whose many names (*chochmah*, *binah*, *tushia*, even *Torah*) start with *kaf*. The only possible explanation I can offer is that *kaf*, the middle letter of the alphabet, appears in the middle of the Hebrew plural for kings – מלכים. Could this be a clever play on the fact kings rule “through me,” that is, through the letter in their midst, which would be *kaf*?

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<sup>47</sup> Psalms 93:2

<sup>48</sup> The truth is, I’ve had a great deal of difficulty trying to understand what the ORA is up to with these verses. They sometimes seem to be nothing more than examples of verses containing the three words that, self-evidently, start with *kaf*. I would hope someone is one day able to ascertain some deeper logic or meaning here, as I am dumbfounded.

<sup>49</sup> Proverbs 8:15



Such a possibility would certainly work well with *kaf*'s final prooftext regarding God's glory: מלא כל הארץ כבודו – the whole earth is full of His glory.<sup>50</sup> *Kaf* wishes to be at the center of creation, as evidenced by its eventual position in the alphabet and its intrusion into the center of *kise hakavod*. Perhaps it strives to find proof that it rightly belongs at the center of creation: in the middle of the kings, filling all of the earth. If so, then *kaf* seems to enter into a great argument with *kise hakavod* and the Wheels of the Chariot, who claim that *kaf*'s position is *above* them, not within them.

Unfortunately for *kaf*, the Holy One rejects it like all the other letters, though the ORA demonstrates true brilliance with its reasoning. God argues that *kaf* is bound up with God striking the earth: שבך אני עתיד להכות כפי אל כפי – that through you, I am bound to smite my palm against my palm, implying a destructive act. The prooftext provided uses this exact phrase, adding that it will satisfy God's anger.<sup>51</sup> While the repetition of *kaf* in both *l'hakot* and *kapi* is certainly nice, the real genius lies in pronouncing the *kaf*, which the orally based culture from which the ORA emerged would certainly do. The name of the letter, *kaf*, IS the Hebrew word for one's palm, and כפי (my palm) can be understood as “my *kaf*.” In other words, God will strike *kaf* against *kaf* in order to smite the world. Despite some uncertain prooftexts, the ORA considers *kaf* in a *midrashically* extraordinary way.

What, then, will the *Zohar* do with such a dramatic setup? Surprisingly, the *Zohar* favors a quick treatment over expansive *midrash*, but, as with *tav*, it clearly holds the ORA in mind as background to its choices. Unlike the other letters that all rise up

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<sup>50</sup> Isaiah 6:3

<sup>51</sup> Ezekiel: 21:22

before God, the *kaf* descends: כִּהְיָא שְׁעָתָא נִהְתָּא מִן קַדְמוּהִי אֵת כ' מַעַל כּוּרְסֵי יְקָרָה – At that same time, the letter *kaf* descended from atop the throne of [God's] glory, shook, and said before [God]... Clearly the *Zohar*, influenced by the ORA, means to signal that *kaf* is in some way special. Keep in mind, however, that the *Zohar* established all the letters were hidden. That the *kaf* descended from the Throne of Glory suggests it was not hidden. But let us take a moment to play out the directional dynamics. Other letters rise up to God, and these letters often represent various *sefirot*. If *kaf* descends, then it could really only come (or emanate) down from one *sefira*: *keter*, the great and mysterious crown. Though the *Zohar* never mentions *keter* explicitly, it does indeed start with a *kaf*. Further, the ORA made it a point that the *kaf* did in fact descend from God's awesome crown (כתר נורא).

I would suggest that *kaf* here descends from deep within the mystery of *keter*, a mystery too powerful to create the world directly (hence the reason that *keter* has to continue unfolding into the other nine *sefirot*, coming closer and closer to terrestrial creation in the process). The *Zohar*, likely inspired by ORA, does record that אֲדִעְזְעוּ – 200,000 worlds trembled, the Throne trembled, and all of the worlds shook near collapse. The fact that worlds exist (a couple hundred-thousand of them!) suggests that this narrative predates only the physical world's creation by two thousand years. God has clearly emanated out to a full *sefirotic* system, and the alphabet exists, though it has not yet settled into the fixed order that it will possess in the physical world. However, these creations (presumably non-corporeal) still shook at *kaf's* movements. I would argue this supports the idea that *kaf*

descends from too early (and too powerful) an emanation of God. It is also worth noting that the *kaf* itself trembles and shakes, perhaps capturing that sense of movement that surely permeates the unknowable (and therefore non-static) *keter*.

The *Zohar* quite quickly calls out the notion it's already implicitly building: *kaf* seems more suited to destruction than creation. God quite expressly states: תִּיב לְאַתְרָךְ – return to your place, for within you is destruction, a decree of destruction is heard.<sup>52</sup> Witnessing the way even pre-creation shakes in its presence, God acknowledges that *kaf* means destruction. However, God still approaches *kaf* with a playful, gentle nature, as the first words God speaks to the letter are כ"ף כ"ף – *kaf, kaf*. If God was an aggravated parent in the ORA, then here God is presented as quite a wise, gentle one. Most wonderfully, the repetition of *kaf* pays the subtlest of allusions back to the ORA, hinting at the Ezekiel text that has God strike כפי אל כפי.

Having acknowledged all the breaks in the ORA's formula, I would now like to consider a number of other letters in order to give the reader a sampling of the concepts at play in both mystical commentaries on the alphabet. In the ORA, the *shin* feels it is worthy for creating the world because it starts God's interpreted name from Exodus 3:15: שְׁבִי נִקְרָא שִׁמְךָ מְפֹרֵשׁ שֵׁנֶאמַר זֶה שְׁמִי לְעוֹלָם. This is a strong example of the questionable prooftexting that the *Heikhalot* literature resorts to. If the *midrash* quotes this particular verse because of the statement זֶה שְׁמִי ("this is My name"), it seems like rather weak reasoning. Couldn't any reference of the Hebrew word *shem* ("name") have done? Although the moment of God's revelation to Moses is indeed a significant one, the verse cannot help but carry with it the influence of Exodus 3:14, God's well-known

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<sup>52</sup> The *Zohar* quotes Isaiah 10:23.

declaration אהיה אשר אהיה – “I am that I am.” Any knowledgeable reader of the Torah would question why *shin* is the operative letter here rather than *alef* (even in 3:15, the letter *alef* appears frequently, with every mention of the forefathers as ‘Elohei X-Y-Z). Perhaps the *midrash* means to refer to the active verb, שלחני אליכם – “has sent me unto you,” which precedes the part of the verse actually quoted. Regardless, it comes as no surprise that the *midrash* feels the need to supplement its reasoning without resorting to proof-text, adding that *shin* begins one of God’s names, שדי.

God turns the *shin* down because it also starts שוא (falsehood) and שקר (lie). The *midrash* then leans on Shabbat 104a to assert that “שקר אין לו רגלים אף את אין לך” – “[just as] a lie lacks legs [on which to stand], so too do you lack legs; how can I create the world through a letter that cannot stand?” The *midrash* makes a strong point; the world would not be able to stand were it founded on lies and falsehoods. The ORA then rejects *reish*—because it starts wickedness (both רע and רשע) and is associated with idolatry—and *kuf*—since it is the first letter of a rather obscure verse from the book of Job that references punishing (literally *cursing*) the generation of the Flood.

The *Zohar*, aware of all of these variables, simplifies the process. It offers only one explanation for *shin*’s worthiness: דְּבִי אֶתְקַרִי שְׁמִי שֵׁדִי – “through me, You are called by Your name *Shaddai*.” No proof-text is required, as the association with the name suffices. Further, the name *Shaddai* is associated Kabbalistically with the *sefira* of *Yesod* (“foundation”). So convincing is the statement that, in the *Zohar*, God does *not* find any fault in the *shin*: יְאוֹת אֶנְתָּ וְטַב אֶנְתָּ וְקָשׁוּט אֶנְתָּ – “You are worthy and good, and

you are true.” The Holy One actually lauds *shin* for its many positive qualities, going so far as to call it true (and it must be noted that אמת, or truth, is similarly associated with *yesod*). God further expands upon the *shin* as a true letter: אֵת קִשּׁוּט דְּאַבְרָהָם דְּיִצְחָק דְּבָרָה: – “a true letter in which our patriarchs were united.” The *Zohar* here plays with the physical shape of the *shin*, acknowledging its three prongs as Abraham (*hesed*), Isaac (*gevurah*), and Jacob (*tiferet*).<sup>53</sup>

Incredible! The *Zohar* must have the prooftext of the ORA in mind, as Exodus 3:15 reads: אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב...זֶה שְׁמִי לְעוֹלָם – “the God of your forefathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob...this is My everlasting name.” The *Zohar* again expertly weaves an allusion to its source inspiration into its ongoing narrative; the rather weak prooftext from the ORA becomes the background of a Kabbalistic insight. The *shin*, then, is associated not only with the three patriarchs, but with *four sefirot*.<sup>54</sup> What possible reason would God have for rejecting a letter that, by all rights, should serve as the foundation of the world?

The Holy One cautions that אֲתֵּן דְּזִיּוּפָא נִטְלִין לָךְ...דְּלֹא אֲתֵּקִים שְׁקֵרָא אֵלָא אֵי יִטְלִין – “letters of deceit take you...for a lie cannot exist [or stand] unless *kuf* and *reish* take you.” The *Zohar* seems to deliver a moralistic lesson: bad neighbors (the seemingly wicked letters *kuf* and *reish*) can latch onto even the pure *shin* in order to create lies in the world. Cleverly, the *Zohar* is aware that *reish* and *kuf* are the next two letters to come in the alphabetical order, hence its preference for שִׁקֵּר over שׂוֹא.

<sup>53</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. 1*, p. 12, note 87

<sup>54</sup> It is interesting to note that Rabbi Shimon’s interpretation, found early in the *Zohar*’s introduction, explains that the patriarchs (as נִצְבִּים, or sparks of light) were hidden within Joseph, who is associated with—what else?—*yesod*. It is only when Joseph is buried in the land of Israel (*shekhinah*) that the hidden light is revealed. Thus, the *shin* seems to be associated with this same permutation of *sefirot*, which, though impressive, are not yet complete.

The *Zohar* is aware of both the ORA and Shabbat 104a, but it makes a stronger statement than either of them. The *shin* does not start a lie; it is the piece of truth on which a particularly damaging lie is founded. The *Zohar* goes on to add: מֵאֵן דְּבַעֵי לְמִימָר – “whoever wishes to speak a lie will first take a foundation of truth and after establish the lie.” Compare this statement with Rashi’s comment on Numbers 13:27<sup>55</sup> – כֹּל דְּבַר שֶׁקֶר שֶׁאֵין אוֹמְרִים בּוֹ קֶצֶת אֱמֶת – “any lie in which there cannot be said a little truth at the beginning cannot be maintained in the end.” The *Zohar* plays both with the ORA’s concept that a lie has no legs on which to stand and Rashi’s comment, but it enhances them both via the Kabbalistic narrative. It *cannot* be ignored that the *Zohar* mentions יְסוּדָא דְקִשּׁוּט – a foundation (*yesod*) of truth. Were God to have created the world through any of the patriarchs (meaning through grace/mercy, through strength/judgment, or through splendor), were God to have created the world with a foundation of pure truth (represented by light), it would have been far too susceptible to evil forces (and the *Zohar* readily describes *kuf* and *reish* as being עַל סְטֵרָא בִּישָׁע – on the evil side). This is the reason for the *or zarua*, the light that is hidden, or sealed, away for the righteous in the World-to-Come. Though a noble virtue, truth cannot serve as an actual foundation for creation, for it is too easily corrupted.

At this point in the *Zohar*, the *shin* takes its leave of the Holy One. Unlike in the ORA, however, the *Zohar* then moves on to *tzadi*; the *Zohar* already conveniently dealt with *reish* and *kuf* in the midst of *shin*’s turn. Hamnuna Saba’s treatment of *tzadi* is one of the richest for illustrating the many tools that *Zohar* uses to examine the letters (using

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<sup>55</sup> Itself a paraphrase of BT Sota 35a.

prooftexts, *sefirotic* symbolism, and even graphic recognition). However, I would like to first briefly consider what the ORA has to say about the letter.

Fascinatingly, ORA only refers to *tzadi* by its alternative name: *tzadik* (צדי"ק). Immediately, one should call to mind the concept of righteousness, as a *tzadik* is also the Hebrew word for “righteous person.” While I hesitate to read too much meaning into this choice, I would like to posit that the pronunciation *tzadik* may reflect an oral culture, as a quick recitation of the Hebrew alphabet would render *tzadi-kuf-reish* (which could easily be heard as *tzadik/uf-reish*).<sup>56</sup> Regardless, the *tzadi* vouches for itself שבי נאמר בעתיד – since through me Your righteousness is bound to be stated every day. The ORA then provides three different prooftexts connect God to righteousness or a love of righteousness.<sup>57</sup> God, however, rejects the *tzadi* because it also starts צרה, or sorrow, for Israel.

While the ORA finds perfectly competent examples to fit *tzadi* into its formula, the *Zohar* chooses a strikingly different tactic. Naturally, the *tzadi* still makes its case via an association to the *tzadik*: דאנא בי חתימין צדיקים ואנא דאתקריאת צדיק בי רשעים – for the righteous are sealed by me, and You, who are called Righteous, are signified by me. The *Zohar* then even uses one of the three prooftexts offered by ORA! So far, so standard.

God’s response, however, completely changes the formula. Rather than associate the *tzadi* with a negative aspect (like sorrow), God praises it entirely: צדי צדי אנא וצדיק

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsade#Name>

<sup>57</sup> While three verses certainly help ground the point textually, I do wonder why the ORA felt the need to cite all three examples. Was it attempting to build to a larger point by its selection of verses? Or did it simply collect as many examples as possible? This latter possibility certainly wouldn’t be unheard of in Jewish tradition, as biblical commentators often provide exhaustive lists of examples when trying to prove a point.

אֲנִי – *Tzadi*, you are *tzadi* and you are righteous (*tzadik*). The repetition of *tzadi* implies a tone of warmth and consolation. I can almost hear God sweetly calling *tzadi* by name like a parent lovingly speaking his/her child's name. There will be no denigration of the letter here. Yet, the *Zohar* displays incredible cleverness. On one level, God identifies the letter by name (*tzadi*) and by character (*tzadik*, a righteous letter). On another level, however, God hints at the fact that the letter actually has two names – it is called both *tzadi* and *tzadik*. In a way, God says, “You are *tzadi*, you are *tzadik*.” Not only does this intrinsically connect the letter to righteousness, it serves as foreshadowing for the secret behind *tzadi*: it has two faces. The *Zohar* goes on to explain that the *tzadi* is a hint to the fact that כֹּד בָּרָא קְדוּשָׁא בְרִיךְ הוּא לְאָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן דּוּ פְּרָצוּפִין בָּרָא – when the Holy One, Blessed-be-He, created Primordial Man, [He] created him with two faces. This, of course, picks up on a *midrash* (likely inspired by Platonic thought) that envisions God creating the first human being as an androgynous male-female with two faces, sharing a back.<sup>58</sup> Quite cleverly, the *Zohar* hides a hint to this creation in the way God speaks to *tzadi*.

But that's not all! The *Zohar* seriously imbues the *tzadi* with two faces, reading it as the joining together of a *nun* and a *yod* (compare יָ to צ). The *Zohar* describes *tzadi* as a *nun*, though אֲתִיָּא י' דְּשִׁמְא דְּבְרִית קְדִישָׁא וְרָכִיב עָלֶיהָ וְאִתְאַדָּד בְּהָדָא – *yod* comes from the name of the holy covenant and rides on her and is united with her. The sexual imagery is intentional: the *Zohar* speaks now on a *sefirotic* level. As Daniel Matt points out, *nun* represents the feminine *shekhinah*, while *yod* is a symbol of *yesod*, the divine phallus.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Cf. *Breishit Rabbah* 8:1

<sup>59</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. 1*, 13, note 89.



One would be tempted to claim, based on this text, that a *tzadik* (a righteous person) is someone who manages to bring these two elements of the Godhead together. However, the *Zohar* stresses that the *nun* and *yod* were not turned face to face (and unfortunately, I cannot replicate here the most helpful visual representation found in printed editions of the *Zohar*, which offer what a *tzadi* might look like with the two letters face-to-face). There is something incomplete about their union, just as there was something incomplete about the androgynous Primordial Man. The *Zohar* adds that the *yod* אֶסְתַּכְּלָא אֶסְתַּכְּלָא לְתַתָּא – look upward...[and] looked downward. *Yesod* yearns to realize proper union with *shekhinah*, so it turns every which way in an attempt to find her. Back-to-back, however, the lovers cannot properly come together.

Due to the secret hidden within its shape, God makes a curious recommendation to *tzadi*: אֲנִי צָרִיךְ לְמַהְיֹי טְמִירָא...בְּגִין דְּלֹא לְמִיָּהֵב פְּתֻחוֹן פֶּה לְעֵלְמָא – you need to remain hidden...so as not to give the world an opening to speak [against Me]. God wishes to keep *tzadi* hidden lest it provide the world פְּתֻחוֹן פֶּה. Though the phrase literally means “an opening of the mouth” (figuratively: an opportunity to speak), it is commonly understood to hold a negative connotation, suggesting a פְּתֻחוֹן פֶּה is actually an opening for critique or slander.<sup>60</sup> Why, we must ask, would common knowledge of Primordial Man formed back-to-back allow people an opportunity to call God into question? One possibility is that the Kabbalists were concerned that others would accuse them of integrating Platonic myth into monotheism, but that seems unlikely in my eyes. I believe the key hides in the fact that, according to other parts of the *Zohar*, the *sitra ahra* is also

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Rashi’s commentary on Genesis 29:34, in which Rashi places the phrase in Leah’s mouth to indicate Jacob will no longer find fault with her.

made back-to-back.<sup>61</sup> This suggests that even the righteous *tzadi* has a little bit of evil in her. This should come as no surprise; the *nun* of which she is composed is *shekhinah*, and *shekhinah* has always been susceptible to evil forces from both within the *sefirotic* godhead (*gevurah*) and from the external *sitra ahra*. The implication, however, holds a great weight. What does it mean that *tzadi*, a symbol of righteousness, actually contains an element of evil within it? What does it suggest about God that the initial attempt to unite *yesod* and *shekhinah* must have failed, unable to produce offspring while back-to-back? Surely this opens the door to suggest it was a failing within the godhead that led to evil's existence in this world. This must be the פתחון פה of which God speaks.

Further insight can be gained from the writings of an earlier Kabbalist, Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquières (not to be confused with the contemporary Spanish Kabbalist Abraham ibn Daud, with whom he shares the acronym RABaD):

The secret of *du-partzufin* refers to two matters: first, it is well known [*ki yadu 'a*] that two opposites were emanated, one of them being stern judgment, and its counterpart, complete mercy. And were they not emanated [*ve- 'illu lo' ne 'etzlu*] [*as*] *du-partzufin*, and [*if*] each were to work out its actions [*separately*] according to its characteristic, it would be possible to see [*them*] as two powers acting [*separately*], without any connection with its partner and without its assistance...<sup>62</sup>

The RABaD suggests that *gevurah* and *hesed* had to be created *du-partzufin*, with two faces, lest human beings understand them as separate, perhaps opposing powers.

Monotheism itself is at stake! The question, however, is whether these two *sefirot* are *du-partzufin* face-to-face or back-to-back? It seems to me a quite reasonable step of logic to worry that, back-to-back, *gevurah* and *hesed* might not be able to recognize each other,

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. *Zohar* II.244b.

<sup>62</sup> English translation found in Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 62.

and so they would still appear as separate forces. One could easily apply this analysis to *yesod* and *shekhinah*.

I feel compelled to share one last thought on the nature of what it means to be *du-partzufin*. It seems to me that the best support for the superiority of a face-to-face union can be found in the cherubim that are decoratively placed outside both the *mishkan* and the *heikhal*. The cherubim, one male and one female, are established face-to-face, and it is from the space between their faces that God's voice emerges.<sup>63</sup> In addition, they are entangled in each other to suggest that Israel's love before God resembles the love of male and female.<sup>64</sup> These biblical and Talmudic points suggest that when man and woman face each other, the Divine Presence rests upon them, that one's ability to recognize another is tied into one's ability to sense God's presence in this world (certainly Martin Buber would agree). Moshe Idel confirms the importance of the cherubim as a symbol for proper union. He adds: "The cherubim turn toward each other when Israel performs the commandments, but when they sin the cherubim turn their faces away from each other."<sup>65</sup> This beautifully sums up the various elements that make up the backdrop to the *Zohar*'s comments.

Before God dismisses the *tzadi* entirely, the Holy One assures her: תִּבְּרָא זְמַיִן לְנִסְרָא – turn around, for I am bound to split you and [re]make you, face-to-face. While the split clearly refers to God's separation of Primordial Man into two gendered beings, the face-to-face recreation actually alludes to the letter *tet* (notice

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Exodus 25:22

<sup>64</sup> Cf. BT Yoma 54b

<sup>65</sup> Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 31.

how ט represents a backward *nun* facing a *yod*). So how does the *du-partzufin* fare the second time around when *tet* presents its case to God?

Unsurprisingly, God still rejects *tet*, even though the union of *yesod* and *shekhinah* has been rectified. *Tet* makes its case: אֶתְקַרֵּאת טוֹב וְיָשָׁר – for through me You are called *good and upright*.<sup>66</sup> God immediately turns *tet* down: טוֹבְךָ סְתִימִים בְּגִנּוֹךְ וְצִפּוֹן בְּגִנּוֹךְ הִדָּא הוּא דְכְתִיב מָה רַב טוֹבְךָ אֲשֶׁר צִפְנָתָ לִירְאִיךָ – your goodness is hidden and concealed within you, as it is written: *How abundant is Your goodness that You have hidden for those who fear you*.<sup>67</sup> The hidden goodness must be a reference to the rewards that await good people in the World-to-Come (and indeed, the *Zohar* goes on to express just that). The line also calls to mind the concept of the *or zarua*, the redemptive light sewed away for the righteous at the end of time.

The *Zohar*'s rejection of *tet* can only really be appreciated, however, when studied alongside ORA. In ORA, *tet* uses the very same proof-text (Psalms 31:20) to explain why it *should* serve as the start of creation: שְׁבִי צִפְנָת טוֹבְךָ לְצַדִּיקִים לְהַנְחִיל לָהֶם – for in me You have hidden away Your goodness for the righteous, to bestow upon them in the time to come. *Tet* in ORA views this as an honor, excitedly housing goodness until the world is ready. The *Zohar* proceeds to flip this notion on its head: if the goodness hidden in *tet* cannot be revealed until the World-to-Come, what possible reason does *tet* have to create *this* world?! Ever keen to play with physical shapes, the *Zohar* also literalizes the proof-text by pointing out that the upper right corner of the *tet*

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<sup>66</sup> Psalms 25:8

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* 31:20

curves inward, thereby hiding within itself.<sup>68</sup> The *Zohar* takes a simple proof-text form earlier *midrash* and embodies it within the letter itself. Clearly this is a mark that the *Zoharic* author(s) was more familiar with written Hebrew, as the work keeps their physical shapes so readily in mind.

Amazingly, the perhaps too-clever interpretation of *tet* actually fits in beautifully with Rabbi Shimon's *drash* on creation from earlier in *Hakdamat HaZohar*. Shimon examines a verse from Song of Songs referring to buds. He interprets these buds (נצנים) as the patriarchs (as well as the *sefirot* they represent). The patriarchs are then concealed (מְסֻמְרִים) within Joseph until he can be buried in the land of Israel, where the buds will reveal themselves.<sup>69</sup> What's important for our sake is to understand the *sefirotic* symbolism within Shimon's interpretation: Joseph is *yesod*, the divine phallus, and the land of Israel is *shekhinah*, which means his burial in the land is the joining of the two *sefirot*. Furthermore, recall that *yesod* is *yod* and *shekhinah* is *nun*, the same exact letters that face each other to form a *tet*. Since they face each other, a complete divine union is possible, meaning that Joseph's burial in the land is equivalent to the divine phallus entering the feminine *shekhinah*, and the "buds" that sprout from their union are messianic redemption. This means that the goodness hiding within the *tet* on a textual and literal basis has been absorbed into the larger *Zoharic* narrative of divine union! Neither the inward facing *yod* of the *tet* nor Joseph will reveal what's hidden inside of them until messianic redemption, and for that reason, God cannot create the world through *tet*.

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<sup>68</sup> As pointed out by Daniel Matt, who points the reader to *Zohar* I.30b. (Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Vol. I, 15, note 100).

<sup>69</sup> Cf. *Zohar* I.2a

When the *Zohar* eliminates *tet* from contention, it simultaneously eliminates *chet*.

וְתוֹ דְּחֵ' לְקַבֵּלְךָ וְכֵד תִּתְחַבְּרוּן בְּחֻדָּא הָא תִּ"ט – also, *chet* faces you, and when you join together as one, it is *chet* [sin]. Though the Hebrew word for sin is spelled with a silent *alef* at the end, this homonym is sufficient. While it's possible the *Zohar* simply could not pass up the opportunity to point out this pun, I do wonder whether ORA plays any part in this. The reason that God rejects *tet* in ORA is because it stands for טמא – being impure. A correlation has long existed in Judaism between sin and impurity, so could this be the source of the *Zohar*'s wordplay? I also cannot ignore the fact that the divine union of *yesod* and *shekhinah* to make the *tet* mimics and parallels an actual erotic union between human beings. The Kabbalists felt great ambivalence towards their sexuality, and they certainly associated certain acts (masturbation and nocturnal emissions among them) with sin and evil.<sup>70</sup> Improper sexual release most assuredly leads to impurity. Could it be that the Kabbalistic anxiety towards mundane, erotic union in imitation of the divine *sefirotic* union—given that erotic union could easily veer towards impurity through should a mystic hold improper intentions—found its expression in the *Zohar*'s pun on חטא? I remain unconvinced, but I feel enough evidence exists that it must at least be considered.

Having spent so much time considering the *yod* as part of both *tzadi* and *tet*, it only feels appropriate to now consider how both ORA and the *Zohar* treat this significant letter. In many ways, *yod* serves as a paradigmatic case in which to observe the differences in the approach that ORA and the *Zohar* take. In ORA, *yod* presents three arguments for earning the honor of God creating the world through it. First, it argues that

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<sup>70</sup> See the second paper of my text immersion, which deals more directly with the *Zoharic* attitude towards sexuality and its relationship with demons.

through it נקראת יה יי צור עולמים – You are called *Yah*, the Eternal, an everlasting rock.<sup>71</sup> While one might think the ORA wishes to emphasize that God’s name starts with *yod*, it actually seems to emphasize the greater context of the verse it paraphrases.<sup>72</sup> The verse in question encourages the audience to trust in God, emphasizing God’s trustworthiness.

This leads into the *yod*’s second point: שבי יודוך על כל מעשיך בכל יום כל באי עולם – that through me, You shall be acknowledged for all of Your deeds every day by ever [creature] that comes to be in the world. The *yod* makes a reference to the tenth verse of Psalm 145, an alphabetic acrostic recited as part of the daily morning liturgy (and indeed, this very prooftext is provided). In Wertheimer’s notes upon the ORA,<sup>73</sup> it connects this reasoning to a Talmudic statement: כל האומר תהלה לדוד בכל יום שלש – everyone who recites *a praise to David* [Psalm 145] three times every day is guaranteed [or can trust] that he [will be] a denizen of the World-to-Come.<sup>74</sup> The theme of trusting, then, permeates the ORA’s treatment of *yod*, as God’s trustworthiness is the reason that human beings can trust in God. In fact, the key term in the Talmudic statement, מובטח – can trust, shares a root with the imperative verb of the first prooftext from Isaiah, בטחו – trust [in God].

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<sup>71</sup> Isaiah 26:4

<sup>72</sup> I say paraphrases for two reasons. Firstly, the *midrash* rather deftly includes the verse in the natural flow of its narrative rather than signaling its intrusion via a *v’ne’emar*. Secondly, the latter half of the verse fully reads: כי ביה יי צור עולמים. That the *midrash* cut off כי and the first half of the verse preceding it is customary. Yet, it also cuts off the prefix *bet*. While the original verse is actually quite difficult to translate (Anchor Bible suggests several emendations to the word order. Cf. Trans. Joseph Blenkinsopp. *The Anchor Bible, Vol. 19: Isaiah 1-39*. New York: Doubleday, 2000. P. 361, note *t*), ORA establishes a pattern of attempting to start all of its prooftexts from the letter in question exactly. I imagine the opportunity for two *yod* words in a row – both names of God! – was too good for the author to pass up, prefix be damned.

<sup>73</sup> As found in his collection *Batei Midrashot*, in which the text of the ORA is contained.

<sup>74</sup> BT Brachot 4b

The *yod* then makes its final point: שבי תחילת שמך נקרא יחיד – that through me is the start of Your name called One [alone, only]. Once again, the ORA seems to argue the importance of *yod* starting God’s name. However, this point is secondary to the fact that God is considered *yachid*, one alone, another term starting with *yod*. God then rejects the *yod* due to the fact that it also starts the term יצר הרע – the evil inclination. This, for me, best illustrates the limitations of the ORA’s slavish commitment to formula. The ORA chooses several prooftexts that allude not only to beneficent divine qualities (viz., trustworthiness), but it also dances around the fact that *yod* quite clearly starts multiple divine names. However, *yod* also starts a negative term, and so these two facts somehow cancel each other out. As such, it feels especially arbitrary that *bet* successfully “earns” the honor of creation, as the *midrashic* author(s) could easily have found numerous examples of negative words starting with *bet* as well (i.e.: בוגד – traitor, בטול – nullification, בוז – scorn, etc.). While one could argue that the idea that God implants the *yetzer hara* within human beings contradicts with the trustworthiness that the ORA worked so hard to establish (and points towards a duality in humanity as contrasted with the unity of God’s name), such logic would also ultimately undercut the *midrashic* endeavor. Does the text really mean to imply that God is not, in fact, trustworthy or one alone? Though the ORA hints at some insightful readings of the *alef-bet*, it is simply not skilled enough to cover up the seams of its own structure.

The *Zohar* considers the *yod* in a rather different way: without any prooftexts, delving into the *sefirotic* system, and responding directly to *yod*’s prominent position within the Tetragrammaton. The *yod* makes a simple, direct appeal to God: אָנָּא שְׂרִיטָא – I am the beginning of the Holy Name. Whereas ORA seemed somehow



reluctant to make comments on the significance of *yod*'s role in the Divine Name, the *Zohar* shows no hesitation. I imagine it quite knowingly responded to the earlier *midrash*'s ambivalence.

Within the context of the *Zohar* itself, the *yod* still represents *yesod*, which is often reread as *yesh sod* – there is a secret. It is this secret through association that is the key to unlocking the meaning behind God's rejection of *yod*: דַּי לָךְ דְּאַנְתָּ חֲקִיק בִּי וְאַנְתָּ יְיָ לְךָ רְעוּתָא דִּילִי בְּךָ סִלִּיק לִית אֲנִת יְאוּת לְאַתְעֵקְרָא מִן שְׁמִי – it is enough for you that you are engraved within Me, and you are inscribed in Me, and all of My desire culminates in you; it is not fitting for you to be uprooted from My name. What does it mean that the *yod* is both engraved and inscribed in God? Recall that *yesod* is the divine phallus, and so it also stands as a symbol of the covenant (or *brit*).<sup>75</sup> Since this is the *Zohar*, one can anticipate that the *brit* between God and Israel equals the sign of that covenant: namely, the *brit mila*. This fits in nicely with the image of *yesod* as the divine phallus, which I now must note is a circumcised phallus. Suddenly, God's words to *yod* take on a whole new level of meaning! *Yod*, which is *yesod*, is quite literally engraved into God's *sefirotic* body, representing something that has been carved into the Godhead.<sup>76</sup> Engraving connotes a sense of permanence, far greater than merely writing something. The circumcision is an intractable aspect of the Godhead, just as physical circumcision cannot be undone (epispasm<sup>77</sup> notwithstanding). Clearly God cannot envision separating *yod* from God's name (here used as metonymy for God's "body").

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<sup>75</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 1, 13, note 89.

<sup>76</sup> For a more detailed analysis of *yod*'s role as a mark of divine circumcision, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 78 (1987): 77-112.

<sup>77</sup> Epispasm is a modern surgical technique for replacing the foreskin removed by circumcision.

Additionally, it is helpful to keep both supernal and terrestrial attributes of the phallus (divine or otherwise) in mind. God's statement that כָּל רְעוּתָא דִּילִי בְּךָ סָלִיק (all My desire culminates in you) works on various levels, each of which serves to reinforce the others. Since *yesod* operates as *tiferet*'s divine phallus, the union of *yesod* with *shekhinah* represents the culmination of God's initial plan – namely, a properly operating *sefirotic* system in which all of God's emanations have united together in wholeness. Similarly, the male phallus is indeed the location of one's physical and sexual desire, from which that desire "culminates" via ejaculation. This quite masculine emission certainly does play a role in the process of procreation, so one can see how *yod/yesod* would make a compelling argument for serving as the agent of creation. Despite the crucial role that the masculine aspect plays by providing seed for insemination, the *Zohar* recognizes that life ultimately enters the world through the feminine. This is why *binah*, the supernal mother, and *shekhinah*, the lower daughter, are both feminine and the agents through which all life comes to be. The feminine aspects, which receive masculine flow from above, are the ones that birth both the heavenly and earthly realms.

I would like to make one last note about *yod*'s role in the generative process. While *yod* clearly represents *yesod*, it also serves as a symbol of *chochmah* in a separate symbolic framework, namely the *sefirotic* meaning of the Tetragrammaton. The particular *yod* that begins the Holy Name, as opposed to the general letter *yod*, stands as *chochmah*, the beginning of God's process of emanation (following the mystery of *keter*). Since the *yod* of the basic *alef-bet* identifies itself as the *yod* that begins the Tetragrammaton, the *Zohar* cleverly links the upper *sefira* of *chochmah* to the lower *sefira* of *yesod*. This lofty idea can be understood with just a little knowledge of the

medieval understanding of anatomy. According to the medieval understanding, semen actually originated in a man's brain before descending to the phallus. Therefore, the *sefirotic* system once again aligns with the earthly world, as the seed of creation starts with *chochmah* (wisdom) located in God's "brain" before culminating in the divine phallus of *yesod*.

It's truly incredible to consider that the *Zohar* managed to densely pack so much symbolism and information into so few lines of text. In fact, the *yod* receives one of the *Zohar*'s briefest treatments out of all the letters. The *Zohar* masterfully manipulates its symbolic systems, yet it never conforms to a standard formula in the way that the ORA does. As has been established, the *Zohar* is willing to ignore prooftexts, study the physical shape of the letter, and even disregard letters entirely.

*Mem*, which I shall address only in the briefest of fashions, serves as another example of the *Zohar*'s willingness to skip over certain letters of the alef-bet. The *mem* is proud to start מלך, God's title. But as so much of Jewish tradition taught, the *Zohar* repeats that one cannot be a king without first having a kingdom. Kabbalistically, of course, the kingdom—or *malchut*—is the tenth of the *sefirot*, *shekhinah*. The implication, it seems, is that God could not start creation through its end result; creation must unfold to *shekhinah*, but it cannot start there. Put another way, a *melech* often serves as a symbol for God's presence on earth, in the lower realm; how could the terrestrial *mem* create the cosmic heavens above it? When the *mem* departs, the *Zohar* skips over the other two letters in מלך (namely, *lamed* and final *kaf*).

As discussed earlier, however, despite skipping over final *kaf*, the *Zohar* does allow *kaf* to make its case before God (and how could it not, given the striking *midrash*

provided in ORA?). The *Zohar*, as I have established, takes many opportunities to knock out two or three letters at time during its expedient review of the *alef-bet*. By all rights, *kaf* should have been one of the letters skipped over, since the *Zohar* already tied it up with *mem* and *lamed*. What truly impresses me about the *Zohar* is the way it effortlessly resolves the tension between playing by its own rules (which would suggest it should skip over *kaf*) and addressing the demands of its source material (*kaf* clearly merits individual attention, both based on the ORA *midrash* and its prominence in Hebrew language). The *Zohar* cleverly picks up on the fact that *kaf* has both a standard and final form, and it is this final form that appears in the word מֶלֶךְ. Why, then, should it *not* distinguish between the two? The final *kaf* departs with *mem* and *lamed*, satisfying the patterns established within the *Zohar*. And the standard *kaf* remains to make a case before God, allowing the *Zohar* to play in arguably the most dynamic sandbox of its source material.

The *Zohar* clearly worries much less about the rigid structure that the ORA forces itself to follow. Part of this is assuredly due to the fact that the Kabbalistic system is loose to begin with. In addition, as I have demonstrated throughout this analysis, the *Zohar* almost seems to just have more *fun* with its telling of the alphabet. While I would normally worry such a phrasing may sound too colloquial, the *Zoharic* text itself actually supports this statement. While the twenty-two letters arrange themselves before God in the ORA at the moment the Holy One wishes to create the world, the *Zohar* teases out the scene a bit more. Embracing the idea that the Torah preceded creation by 2000 years,<sup>78</sup> the *Zohar* proclaims: הָיָה מִסְתַּכֵּל לְדַשָּׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא וְאִשְׁתַּעֲשָׂא בְּהוּ – “the Holy One, blessed be He, looked upon them [the letters] and played with them.” Just as God saw that

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<sup>78</sup> Cf. *Breishit Rabbah* 8:2

Creation was good in the biblical account, the Kabbalistic authors of the *Zohar* recognized that playing with language was quite fun. The Kabbalists were expert readers of text, keenly perceptive to the way ideas could be connected and folded into each other. Their alphabetic *midrash* was by no means dry; instead, they used the power of language to truly vivify the letters through dynamic interpretations. I imagine that they viewed their enterprise as one fully in God's image, contemplating the Hebrew letters in order to play with them.

## II.

### Wrestling with the Other Side:

#### Using Mythology to Consider Issues of Evil, Sexuality, and Society

*Parashat Vayishlach* has long captivated me in a way no other weekly Torah portion has managed. Though both Jacob's dramatic reunion with his brother, Esau, and the controversial episode surrounding Dina and her brothers are ripe for insightful analysis, the nighttime encounter between Jacob and a mysterious stranger near the river Jabbok remains the central draw of *Vayishlach*. Over the centuries, many commentators have attempted to identify just who wrestled with Jacob that fateful night. Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, Radak, and Sforno, among others, declare the stranger to be an angel.<sup>1</sup> Louis Ginzburg pulls together numerous traditions identifying the stranger as not just an angel, but the archangel Michael of God's right side.<sup>2</sup> There even exists a non-Jewish tradition that the figure did not wrestle *against* Jacob, but alongside him.<sup>3</sup> And various modern commentators have read the battle through a psychological lens, deeming that Jacob wrestles only with himself.

It seems curious that so many commentators insist on viewing the stranger as a means of divine intervention, or even assistance. After all, the set up for the situation almost demands that the reader view the combatant as an opponent: Jacob prepares to

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<sup>1</sup> Many of them provide proof texts, such as Daniel 9:21, to show that the Torah often speaks of an angel as an *ish*, or (hu)man.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Louis Ginzburg, "Jacob Wrestles with the Angel," in *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1968), 384-388.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Origen, *On First Principles* 3.2.5, quoted in James L. Kugel, *The Bible As It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 227.

encounter his brother Esau, whom he has not seen since stealing their father's blessing for the firstborn from him. Messengers have informed Jacob that Esau approaches with an entourage of four-hundred men, almost assuredly an army.<sup>4</sup> Jacob voices his concern that Esau may smite his encampment,<sup>5</sup> attempts to pacify Esau's anger with gifts,<sup>6</sup> and sends his family across the river from him, seemingly to either protect them at night or to settle into his own thoughts and preparation without disturbance.<sup>7</sup> Surely the stranger who wrestles with Jacob must be an advanced scout of Esau's, or perhaps Esau himself, there to deliver the first strike!

At least one tradition does pick up on such reasoning: in *Genesis Rabbah*, a midrash identifies the stranger as שָׂרֹן שֶׁל עֵשָׂו – Esau's prince (or guardian).<sup>8</sup> Though Rashi mentions this tradition in his own commentary, I marvel at the fact that he walks a far less-traveled path.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the *Zohar* runs contrary to the standard interpretation, instead expounding quite elaborately upon *Genesis Rabbah*. The *Zohar* shares the *midrash*'s interpretation of the stranger as Esau's prince, whom it considers to be Samael, a fallen angel and chief of the demons.<sup>9</sup> In so doing, it transforms an encounter into the mythical, paradigmatic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil within the *sefirotic* system, establishing a gnostic element deep in the heart of monotheistic

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<sup>4</sup> Genesis 32:7

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 32:9

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 32:14-19

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 32:23-24

<sup>8</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 77:3, 78:3

<sup>9</sup> Throughout *Zoharic* literature, Samael appears frequently as a symbol of the forces of evil, or the *sitra ahra*. Art Green identifies Samael as a demon (cf. Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 120); the *midrashic* work *Pirke d'Rabbi Eleazar* (PRE), a mystically-inclined text which the *Zohar* likely knew, labels Samael as הַשָּׂרֹן הַגָּדוֹל שֶׁבַּשְּׁמַיִם ("the great prince of heaven") (cf. PRE, chapter 13).

Judaism. The *Zoharic* authors were unafraid to confront the problem of evil head on, acknowledging it as a very real force in their world. Yet, as is characteristic of the *Zohar*, its various *drashes* on this struggle operate at multiple levels, each of the voluminous layers of symbolism enhancing and commenting upon the other. Thus, in examining the role and methods of evil, the Kabbalists revealed a number of their daily anxieties, including their ambivalence towards sexual intercourse and a sense of alienation from their fellow Jews. Though the *Zoharic* interpretation plays out on an epic stage, it reveals deeply human concerns. The *Zohar* clearly held an agenda to rebuild myth out of monotheism, perhaps in order to give expression to so many of the contradictory urges and experiences that are incontrovertibly part of the human endeavor. My goal is to provide a careful, though by no means exhaustive, analysis of the *Zohar's* take on this particular narrative, highlighting the way it handles the reality of evil, its association with the sexual act, and the underlying desire to build myth out of monotheism.

The *Zohar* starts with a bit of an odd opening verse: **לֹא תֵאֵנָה אֵלֶיךָ רָעָה וְנֹגַע לֹא** – no evil shall befall you, nor shall plague near your tent (Psalms 91:10). At first glance, this actually seems to be a highly inaccurate verse, given that the reader knows it's meant as a commentary on the fact Jacob has been left alone by the river Jabbok. To the astute reader, the tent must be associated with Jacob directly, as in the well-known blessing **מֶה טֹבוֹ אֹהֶלֶיךָ יַעֲקֹב** – how good are your tents, O Jacob (Numbers 24:5). The association is only strengthened further into the *Zohar's* commentary when it brings in Bilam, the very prophet who uttered the just-quoted blessing. So Rabbi Hiyya starts his *drash* by claiming no plague (נגע) shall near your tent (which is associated with Jacob), and yet Genesis 32 ends with the phrase **כִּי נָגַע בְּכַף יָרֵךְ יַעֲקֹב** – for he *touched* the



hollow of Jacob's thigh. The Hebrew verb for touch used in this verse, נָגַע, shares the exact same Hebrew letters as the word for plague, נִגַּע. In the story, Jacob is indeed touched (or perhaps plagued), so why would Rabbi Hiyya begin with a verse stating the opposite?

I believe such an oddity reflects the tension at work in the *Zohar* regarding the problem of evil. Evil exists in the world, and it quite often befalls the Jewish people, even in their tents. Within the *Zoharic* narrative, however, good ultimately overcomes that evil. The *Zohar* attempts to simultaneously acknowledge the reality of evil and provide some consolation in the firmly held theological view that, eventually, good wins out and tips the scales to the side of the Divine. Rabbi Hiyya hints that, even in the midst of the calamity that will certainly occur, there always exists the possibility of redemption. This theme appears and reappears throughout this section of the *Zohar*, ultimately crescendoing with Rabbi Yehuda's description of messianic redemption following the darkness of exile. Perhaps that is why Rabbi Yehuda compares such eventual redemption לְמֵאן דְּאִתִּי אִסּוּתָא – to one to whom healing comes;<sup>10</sup> recovery from a plague (נִגַּע) is indeed possible.

It also seems worthwhile to review some of the context from which the opening verse comes. Psalm 91 focuses on God's ability to protect faithful believers from harm. It reads in verse 5: לֹא תִירָא מִפֶּחַד לַיְלָה מִחֶץ יְעוֹף יוֹמָם – Fear not the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day. Clearly the verse speaks to Jacob, who has to fear a stranger

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<sup>10</sup> For all of my *Zohar* text study, I used a *menukad* (vocalized) edition with side-by-side Aramaic text and Hebrew translation (1998: יריד הספרים, בלשון הקודש, ספר הזוהר מנקד בלשון הקודש). In addition, I consistently referenced The Pritzker Edition of the *Zohar*, translated by Daniel C. Matt. All English translations of the *Zohar* within these essays have been based on Matt's work, though I have on occasion emended his translation to suit my own purposes (often guided by the *loshen kodesh*).

in the night and the possibility of war with his brother by daybreak. Further, the *Zohar* continues to play with the theme of nighttime dangers, most especially demonic forces [as I shall examine starting in the next paragraph]. So it seems especially poignant that verse 6 continues: **מְדַבֵּר בְּאֶפֶל יְהֵלֵךְ מִקֹּטֵב יִשׁוּד צְהָרִים** – nor of the pestilence that stalks in darkness, nor of the scourge that ravages at noonday. Though none of the demons considered by the *Zohar* for this section of *Parashat Vayishlach* are named *dever* (pestilence) or *ketev* (scourge), such terms may very well have been references to demons.<sup>11</sup> Like any good *midrash*, the *Zohar* selects its biblical citations based not only on each verse's content but also due to its relevant context. As such, any student of the *Zohar* familiar with Psalm 91 would already be keyed in to many of the themes to follow.

Whatever the larger intent of Rabbi Hiyya's opening gambit, he develops the quote from Psalm 91 to reveal that his true concern, for the moment, is evil personified as seductive spirits. He begins right at the source, during the Creation story. In the background is clearly a well-known *midrash* from BT Hullin 60b, in which the moon complains about having to share **כֶּתֶר אֶחָד** (one crown) with the sun and so is diminished in size and grandeur. Rabbi Hiyya then applies a perceptively clever eye to both *midrash* and source text (Genesis 1:16). The moon is associated Kabbalistically with *shekhinah*, while the sun represents *tiferet*. As such, it would seem that *tiferet* and *shekhinah*, when all is proper and the two are joined in *sefirotic* union, share one crown in ruling over the world (fittingly, that means they descend from one source – *keter*, the first of the *sefirot*). However, Rabbi Hiyya notes that God created **סִיְהָרָא חֲסֵר** -- a deficient moon. The *shekhinah*, only able to receive divine flow from the *sefirot* above her but lacking the

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. *The Jewish Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1386, note on verses 5-6.

ability to bestow such flow onto others, can indeed be considered deficient (or המאור – the lesser light, as Genesis reads).

This all stands as mere prelude to what Rabbi Hiyya pulls out next: ובגין דאיהי מארת חסר וא"ו, אתיהיב דוכתא לשלמא כל רוחין ושדין ועלעולין ומזיקין וכל רוחי מסאבי – since [the moon/Shekhinah] is lights [מארת], lacking *vav*, a space was provided for all spirits, demons, whirlwinds, ghouls, and all spirits of defilement. Let's take a moment to unpack this. Rabbi Hiyya notes that in the Genesis text, the word for lights is written as מארת, lacking a *vav* as part of its pluralizing ending (it should be written מארות). This holds great significance, for the letter *vav*—one of the four letters of the Tetragrammaton itself!—is associated with the *sefira* of *tiferet*. This means that God created the lights without *tiferet*, the main body of the entire *sefirotic* tree. So the moon, or *shekhinah*, was created outside of her union with *tiferet*, leaving her vulnerable and deficient.

While this fits into the mythic narrative of the unfolding of the *sefirot*, it also serves as a *Zoharic* commentary on the world as it is: the moon only ever provides light for the world when it reflects the sun, so it truly is otherwise deficient, dwelling in darkness. Since the moon can occasionally be seen during the daytime, that is considered the time of *tiferet*, a time of its union with *shekhinah*. During the day, when people feel safe because the sun's light allows them to see clearly, all is proper within the divine workings of the Godhead; at nighttime, however, when darkness leaves people vulnerable to danger (whether demonic or all too human), the *shekhinah* is considered to be removed from her proper place within the *sefirotic* system, and she remains just as vulnerable as

we human beings do. Here, the *Zohar* describes the inner workings of God in a way that mirrors and supports the fears that human beings feel in the world.

The linguistic coup-de-grace of Rabbi Hiyya's interpretation lies in playing further with the Hebrew word מארת. Despite the feminine ending, מאורות comes from the masculine singular מאור. But what if the singular were indeed grammatically feminine (after all, the *shekhinah* is the feminine aspect of the Godhead)? Why, then one would get מארה, or "curse." Rabbi Hiyya then goes on to elaborate on the curse of the nighttime – it is a time for spirits and demons.<sup>12</sup>

Interestingly, the *Zohar* explains that these demons בעלמא לאסטאה – float through the world in order to seduce. These are not (yet) angels of physical destruction; their purpose seems to be to lure human beings into defilement, seducing them away from the upright path of God and Torah. No wonder Rabbi Hiyya goes on to compare the defiling spirits to the snake who tempted Adam in the garden! Just as *midrashic* literature goes on to show Adam can perform *teshuvah* for his sin in the garden,<sup>13</sup> so too does the *Zohar* assure the reader that when a person chooses purification over such defilement, יהוה רוח מסאבא אתכפיה קמה ולא יכיל לשלטאה עלוי – that very same impure spirit is overturned before him, and it cannot dominate him. This is the intent behind Rabbi Hiyya's verse from Psalm 91: since purification and repentance are always possible, seductive spirits cannot bring any actual harm to you. These demonic forces are

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<sup>12</sup> Rabbi Hiyya bases this concept on various aspects of Jewish tradition, which recognize the evening as a time for roaming spirits, such as in Pesachim 112b.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 20

understood as spirits lacking physical forms; similarly, their evil lacks lasting, embodied consequences.

Again, Rabbi Hiyya's perspective reveals the tension prevalent throughout the *Zohar* regarding forces of evil. Building off a Talmudic base, the Kabbalists certainly took demonic spirits quite seriously, but they never allowed their viewpoint to drift too far into the world of Gnosticism. Evil, though seductive, must remain subservient to the triumphant powers of the good. Given the emphasis on purity, it may be the case that Rabbi Hiyya actually provides a rather nuanced reading of Psalm 91:10. Demonic forces lack the corporeal form to cause harm in the world, but they can certainly convince very physical human beings into harming themselves, the world, and even the Godhead. It may very well be the case that plague shall near one's tent, but perhaps one will release the plague from within.

Rabbi Hiyya's expounding places agency in very human hands. Human beings have the ability to choose to follow the tantalizing words of demons; in so doing, they bring evil, in a concrete form, into this world. Surely this is why the *Zohar* also associates the wicked spirits with *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination that lies within all of us.<sup>14</sup> As Art Green puts it, "it is only through the energy released to [these forces] in acts of human transgression that they receive the life-energy they need to sustain themselves."<sup>15</sup> Demonic forces exist as if on a continuum, but human action can guide them closer to corporeal reality. Though the *Zohar* crafts an epic mythology full of

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<sup>14</sup> Isaiah Tishby highlights this connection even further, noting of male and female evil: "It is they that arouse anger and cause man to shed blood and perform other evil deeds. It is the male that impels man to kill in passion, while the female inflames hatred and causes wars." See Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. 2, trans. David Goldstein (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 461.

<sup>15</sup> Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 120

fantastic elements waging war, it ultimately places decisive power in human hands.

Yehuda Liebes emphasizes the ability of the Jewish people to affect cosmic harmony by commenting on how the classical *Zohar* downplays the role of the Messiah: “his advent merely symbolizes the accomplishment of the *tikkun*,”<sup>16</sup> he is not a savior from on high, but rather a marking of human success. Human beings can assist God in reuniting the *sefirot*, or they can perform evil and give strength to that which was formless. What a powerful tool to encourage ethical behavior and compliance with the *mitzvot*.

The *Zohar* next attempts to identify exactly which demonic forces are at play.

Rabbi Yose identifies רעה (evil) as Lilith, a female demon, while נגע (plague) is שאר מזיקין (the other demons). Rabbi Eleazar provides a different explanation, warning that a person should not go out alone at night,<sup>17</sup> during the time of the deficient moon, due to these forces.<sup>18</sup> He, however, identifies רעה as חויה בישא (the evil snake) and נגע as מאן דרכיב על חויה (the one who rides upon the snake). Associatively, we can determine that the *Zoharic* tradition views Lilith as the evil snake. Lilith, then, is a feminine temptress, the one who ultimately convinced Adam to sin in Gan Eden.<sup>19</sup> Who, though, is the rider?

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<sup>16</sup> Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. Arnold Schwartz (New York: State University of New York Press, 1993), 3. Liebes goes on to note that the Messiah is primarily associated with *malkhut*, thereby signifying his relative passivity.

<sup>17</sup> The striking similarity in Aramaic roots between Lilith (לילית) and night (ליליא) should not be overlooked.

<sup>18</sup> Surely he bases this concept off of Pesachim 112b, which warns מפני שאגרת בת מחלת אל תצא יחידי בלילה... מפיני שאגרת בת מחלת – היא ושמונה עשרה רבוא של מלאכי חבלה יוצאין – do not go out alone at night...for Agarar bat Machalat, her and eighteen myriads of angels of destruction go out...

<sup>19</sup> And similarly, *midrashim* exist in which Samael his snake-bride in order to seduce Eve directly (*Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*, Ch. 13). Curiously, this section of the *Zohar* does not mention Eve during its discussion of the Gan Eden incident. It seems that either Lilith/Samael possessed Eve at the time of Adam's temptation, or Eve is removed from the equation entirely, so it is Lilith who seduces Adam (while Samael has intercourse with Eve).

At this point, the *Zohar* clearly deals with the same traditions found within the mystically-inclined *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer*.<sup>20</sup> In chapter 13 of the *midrashic* work, Samael, the great prince in heaven, descends to the earth and encounters the snake: וְהָיָה דְמוּתוֹ כְּמִין גָּמֶל וְעָלָה וּרְכַב עָלָיו – and [the snake's] appearance resembled a sort of camel, so [Samael] mounted and rode upon it. Prior to its divine punishment for tempting Adam and Eve, the snake had legs, and so the tradition envisions it as a sort of large, reptilian camel (likely due to the shared elongation of the snake's body and a camel's neck). Samael rides upon the snake, which is also Lilith.<sup>21</sup>

Clearly, the reader must pick up on a sexual undertone to the entire matter at hand, which Rabbi Eleazar makes explicit. I cannot stress enough the importance of his next comment: רָעָה וְנָגַע כְּחֶדָּא אֶחָד – evil and plague are as one. On one level, Eleazar clearly posits an image of sexual union. On a *midrashic* level, he opens the door to numerous possibilities, allowing the ever-fluid *Zohar* to play with even greater flow, as discussions surrounding Samael can suddenly shift to Lilith and vice versa.<sup>22</sup> And on a *sefirotic* level, Eleazar calls to mind the familiar language of various *sefirot* uniting in a pantomime of erotic coitus (or perhaps erotic coitus is a pantomime of the divine union!). This is no mistake, for Lilith serves as an evil counterpart to the feminine *shekhinah* (which will be addressed more directly later on) while Samael is an agent of the *sitra ahra* seeking to replace *tiferet*.

<sup>20</sup> The Eleazar speaking within the *Zohar* is the son of Shimon bar Yochai. The titular Eliezer of *Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer* is the formerly heretical Eliezer ben Hyrcanus. The fact that the former would “build” upon the *midrash* of the latter is a rather amusing coincidence.

<sup>21</sup> Lilith, as a dark analogue to *shekhinah*, also serves as the opposite of the divine throne (כִּסֵּא הַכְּבוֹד). The image of Samael riding upon the serpent, then, is a twisted perversion of the divine king (*tiferet*) sitting upon the Throne of Glory (*shekhinah*).

<sup>22</sup> Indeed, this quite literally occurs in *Sitre Torah Zohar* I.147a, in which Lilith transforms into Samael right before Jacob's eyes.

The stakes, then, are quite high, for if the lustful union of Samael and his consort Lilith successfully replaces *tiferet* and *shekhinah*, their demonic impurity could infect the entire *sefirotic* Tree of Life, transforming it into a Tree of Death and giving it over to the hands of the *sitra ahra*. Keep in mind, the moon (a symbol of *shekhinah*) is deficient, leaving her vulnerable for such demonic take-over. Within the Kabbalistic narrative, then, Jacob serves as *shekhinah*'s heroic champion, the last defense against the forces of evil. Jacob becomes the mythical hero *par excellence*, a Jewish Odysseus who must resist the siren's call and battle the Cyclops.

But what happens when we continue to read for our sexual subtext? Immediately after acknowledging the union of Samael and Lilith, Rabbi Eleazar acknowledges another interpretation of *nega*:

אלין נגעי בני אדם דנפקו מאדם דהא כל אנון שנין דלא קריב אדם עם אתתה רוחי  
מסאבי הוו קא אתין ומתחממן מנה ואולידין מנה והני אקרון נגעי בני אדם.

These [are] plagues of *b'nei adam* [humans] – that issued from Adam. For all those years that Adam did not approach his wife, impure spirits came and were inflamed by him, spawning from him. And these are called plagues of the children of Adam.

The *Zohar* here references a rather common *midrashic* tradition that, following the expulsion from the garden, Adam and Eve distanced themselves from each other for many years, but in that time, gendered spirits slept with each of them in order to birth demonic progeny.<sup>23</sup> It plays on the idiomatic phrase *b'nei adam* (human beings) by reading it literally as “children of Adam.” The idea that Adam could (perhaps) unwittingly impregnate female spirits gives new meaning to God's assertion: **לֹא טוֹב הָיִיתָ**

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Tanhuma (Buber) Breishit 26, Genesis Rabbah 20:11.



הָאָדָם לְבַדּוֹ – it is not good that man [Adam] should be alone.<sup>24</sup> The mystical tradition seems to read God's statement as a warning, that evil things (which are quite literally *lo tov*, or not good) can befall a man when he is alone. Paradigmatic Adam serves as a cautionary tale for the rabbinic world. Empty, deserted places (especially at night) are the province of the *sitra ahra*: sexual danger lurks there at night, striking when a man finds himself alone. And it is this aloneness that keeps this origin of demonic forces from being completely incidental to the Jacob narrative. Recall that this episode begins with the statement וַיֹּתֶר יַעֲקֹב לְבַדּוֹ – and Jacob was left alone. Jacob prepares to face the same dark forces that aroused Adam's passions; Adam's prototypical narrative serves as the archetypal failure that Jacob, as mythical hero, must overcome.

Between these two larger-than-life figures, however, lies the student of the *Zohar*, traditionally a male who found himself in a world beset by the same problems. This is exactly where Rabbi Eleazar goes next:

דְּהָא לִית לֵךְ מֵאֵן דְּנֵאִים בְּלִילִיָּא בְּעֵרְסָה דְּלֵא טַעִים טַעְמָא דְּמוֹתָא וְנִפְקֵת נִשְׁמַתָּה מִנָּה  
 וְכִיּוֹן דְּאִשְׁתָּאֵר גּוֹפָא בְּלֵא נִשְׁמַתָּא קְדִישָׁא רוּחַ מִסַּבָּא זְמִין וְשָׂרִיא עֲלֵהּ וְאִסְתָּאֵב.  
 For there is no one who sleeps at night on his bed without tasting a taste of death:  
 his soul departs from him. And since his body remains without a holy soul, an  
 impure spirit, poised in wait, rests upon him, and he is defiled.

Finally! The sexual anxiety is made clear: the Kabbalists clearly demonstrate a great concern regarding nocturnal emissions [or *keri*]. The *Zohar* starts with the common rabbinic understanding that sleep is one-sixtieth of death,<sup>25</sup> acknowledging that man's

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<sup>24</sup> Genesis 2:18

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Brachot 57b.

soul leaves his body every night.<sup>26</sup> What the *Zohar* adds is that this leaves a spiritual vacancy within the “shell” that is the now empty body. The implication seems to be that a spirit (which I earlier established lacks concrete form) can either fill the body (possessing it), or it can arouse the body, which still responds mechanically, in order to inseminate itself. Suddenly, sleep as a taste of death takes on an added layer of meaning. Earlier, the *Zohar* established that when spirits seduced primordial man, גרים מותא לכל – עלמא הכי נמי אסטי להו לבני נשא וגרים לון לאסתאבא death to all the world, so too it seduces human beings, causing them to defile themselves. Sexual impurity has been established as a minor reenactment of Adam’s sin, which led to the loss of his immortality. A man’s seed has long been understood as containing his essence, and so each ejaculation was a loss of life to some degree. Should one experience a nocturnal emission during sleep, that person loses a degree of vitality, thereby “tasting” death.<sup>27</sup>

Clearly, the *Zohar* posits a great deal of anxiety towards sexual impurities originating with *keri*. Whereas the Talmud viewed *keri* as a simple impurity, the *Zohar* attributes them to sexual encounters with demonic forces. The fact that such encounters occur after the soul has departed is rather telling: the Kabbalists view sexual acts based primarily on bodily needs as a sort of defilement, a flirtation with one’s evil inclination at best and terrible demons at worst. Masturbation, nocturnal emissions, and potentially just

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<sup>26</sup> This, of course, is the reason for reciting אלהי נשמה in the morning liturgy, vocalizing gratitude that God returned one’s soul safely in the morning upon waking. If life consists of body and soul intertwined and the rabbis believed the soul departed every night, then it becomes clear why they thought of sleep as a small taste of death.

<sup>27</sup> I cannot help but think of the idiomatic French for an orgasm, *le petit mort* (literally “the little death”). While the *Zoharic* authors could not have possibly known such a phrase, I do feel it provides an added layer of richness to its narrative.

acting on base sexual desires all lack the spark of holiness that Kabbalists feel must be present in all one's actions. Sex is intended for procreation, so it comes as no surprise that sex that isn't rooted in holiness can birth only plagues and evil. The Kabbalists were clearly weary of sex, yet they did not embrace a fully celibate lifestyle, for they still valued sexual intercourse with (and only with) proper intention. The Kabbalistic compromise consisted of engaging in marital intercourse only on Shabbat, and "the two sides of this doctrine attest to a powerful ambivalence about sexuality and a desire to reconcile the attraction of celibacy with marital obligations by subsuming the physical act of sex into a mystical theology."<sup>28</sup>

Part of the *Zohar*'s brilliance lies in the way that it understands human beings as a microcosm of the working of the *sefirot*. While this often suggests theurgic activities in which human beings can engage in order to assist the divine, it also provides an opportunity for the Kabbalists to project some of their own concerns onto the Godhead. Nocturnal emissions were a concern chiefly because they led to impurity, and that impurity could spread throughout the entire body or even to other objects that an impure person touches. This is most assuredly why the *Zohar* makes it a point to warn its readers not to bring their hands to their eyes in the morning before washing them, lest an impurity spread. Amazingly, this logic can extend even to the divine realm. Samael and Lilith seek to replace *tiferet* and *shekhinah* within the *sefirotic* system; should they succeed they would be able to overtake it in its entirety. Since Samael and Lilith are engaged in coital union, it seems clear that *yesod*, the divine phallus of the *sefirotic* tree, would also be contaminated by their impurities. The evil influence would then spread

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<sup>28</sup> David Biale, *Eros and the Jews* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 111.

upward through the remaining *sefirot*. Picture the *sefirot* as a series of interconnected pipes helping the flow of a water system. If one were to replace two of these pipes with contaminated water, the contamination would quickly spread throughout the entire structure.

Jacob, as a representative of *tiferet*, must stave off this impurity. The *Zohar* acknowledges that despite the fact that the Holy One loves Jacob dearly, בגין דאשתאר – since he remained alone, an alien spirit poised to couple with him. Much like Adam, Jacob serves here as a paradigmatic figure. Hullin 91a already comments on Jacob’s wrestling: מכאן לתלמיד חכם שלא יצא יחידי – from here [we learn that] a Torah scholar should not go outside alone at night. The *Zohar* holds Jacob accountable to the same rules as anyone else. Jacob remains alone (which one shouldn’t do), at night time (which is a particularly dangerous time), presumably to sleep (so his soul may well depart from him) – of course a female spirit would attempt to seduce him into coupling!

Jacob, however, is the best champion a Torah scholar could ask for in such a situation. After all, Abaye once commented: אטו כולי עלמא יעקב אבינו הואי דכתיב ביה – is everybody in the world like Jacob, our father, about whom it is written [*Reuben, you are my firstborn, my strength and my initial vigor* [Gen. 49:3], that Jacob never saw a seminal discharge in all his days?<sup>29</sup> Abaye carefully reads the words of Jacob’s deathbed blessing to his firstborn son. He interprets “my strength and my initial vigor” as referring to Jacob’s first ejaculation, in line with the

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<sup>29</sup> BT Yevamot 76a

association mentioned earlier. Jacob never lost an ounce of his vitality via seminal discharge until he fathered Reuben. Though one could argue that Jacob encountered the stranger at the Jabbok well after all his children were born, Abaye specifies that Jacob never saw *keri* in *all* his days. The *Zohar* surely had such a teaching in mind when pitting Jacob against the seductress Lilith; Abaye's statement serves as proof that Jacob never stood at risk of giving into Lilith's temptations (*sefirotically*, it reassures that *tiferet* will united only with its proper partners: *shekhinah*, or Rachel, and *binah*, or Leah).

Once the seduction and attempted foreplay is over, however, only the battle remains. Here is where Daniel Matt points out the great cleverness of the *Zohar*, acknowledging that לאזדווגא “means primarily ‘to couple, join,’ but also ‘to join battle, attack.’”<sup>30</sup> With one word, the *Zohar* hints at Jacob's simultaneous confrontation with both Lilith and Samael, the former through sexual seduction and the latter through brute force. They together join [in battle] with Jacob because they are, as already established, like one. Isaiah Tishby adds, “Their strength depends on their intercourse. Only when they are attached to one another can they act with success.”<sup>31</sup>

The *Zohar* questions the nature of the struggle by asking what, exactly, ויאבק means. Rabbi Shimon plays the obvious linguistic connection, linking ויאבק (“and he wrestled”) to אבק (dust). The word play is quite typical of rabbinic punning, but it also serves as setup for Shimon's next point, which reinterprets אבק as “ash”:

אבק טפל לעפר. מה בין עפר לאבק? דא אבק דאשתאר מן נורא ולא עבד איבין לעלמין, עפר דכל איבין נפקי מנה ואיהו כללא דלעלא ותתא.

<sup>30</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 3, 27, note 182.

<sup>31</sup> Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. 2, 461.

Ash is subordinate to dust. What's the difference between dust and ash? Ash is what remains from fire, and it cannot ever produce fruit; dust, from which all fruit yields, is the totality of above and below.

Shimon speaks *sefirotically*, for “dust” is none other than the *shekhinah*; fittingly, that makes “ash” a symbol for Lilith. In comparing the two, Shimon makes a theological point in line with everything the *Zohar* has presented thus far: Lilith, hailing from *sitra ahra* (the alien other side), though she remains a threat, ultimately exists only as a subordinate to the *shekhinah*. Shekhinah is particularly susceptible to various forces since she is dependent on the higher *sefirot* (for example, should *din* wield too strong an influence over *shekhinah*, it can push her in the direction of *sitra ahra*, as she would be overwhelmed by strict judgment). Lilith, however, is subordinate even to *shekhinah* (though she can still possess her, especially at moments when *sitra ahra* as a whole is strongest).<sup>32</sup> She, like most spirits, lacks a physical form, while *shekhinah* is, among other things, God's presence in the physical world.

Shimon also reveals significant differences between the seemingly similar dust and ash. Ash is an end product of sorts, for nothing can possibly grow from its charred remains (save the mythical phoenix, but that's neither here nor there).<sup>33</sup> The implication held is that Lilith is barren. Whether this means she cannot conceive even demons (implying other female spirits can grow pregnant from sleeping men but not Lilith) or just

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<sup>32</sup> Consider Tishby's comments on the monstrous snake in *Zohar* III, 119a-119b, “in which his head is the *Shekhinah* and his tail is ‘the other side’... The description of this kind of relationship between the *Shekhinah* and ‘the other side’ is meant to obviate any suspicion of duality between good and evil. *Sitra ahra* is joined to the *Shekhinah* and is subordinate to her, and even when it is dominant it depends upon her for its power.” (Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vol. 2, 469.)

<sup>33</sup> As the *Zohar* itself notes, ash originates in fire. I have struggled to determine what must be the fire from which Lilith emerged. Perhaps the fire is *sitra ahra* itself, a burning force seeking to eradicate through fire. Perhaps the fire comes from the passion aroused in men's loins (after all, the *Zohar* continues to describe impure spirits with the phrase *מתהממן מנה* – growing *inflamed* by him). Of course, this could also refer to Holy One in general, as God is frequently described as a fire. If so, it would reveal acknowledgment within the *Zohar* that even evil originates from God.

that demonic offspring don't qualify as fruit is unclear; regardless, Lilith lacks *shekhinah*'s ability to bestow all that which she receives from above to the physical world below. Keep in mind that *shekhinah* is still part of God's generative process, the final gate through which life and creation comes into being. This is why all fruit yields from her; all divine emanations enter the created world through *shekhinah*. The other nine *sefirot* are above her (דלעלא), and she passes their emanations onto all life below (תתא). Fittingly, Shimon then brings in the well-known verse: הכל היה מן העפר והכל שב אל – everything comes from dust, and to dust everything shall return.<sup>34</sup>

Dust, then, is generative, or at least full of such a possibility; ash marks a destructive act. Again, the *Zohar* seems to reveal something of the Kabbalists' attitude towards sex. Its purpose is procreation, and so conjugation with one's wife is acceptable, as it draws the *shekhinah* down to the act. Sexual lusts and impurities are potentially destructive, even literally: wasted seed represents the loss of potential life.

The *Zohar* next moves onto a somewhat circuitous riff based on עלות השחר (the rising of the dawn), and how the stranger demands he be freed because of dawn's rise. Just as the rising of dawn takes place slowly over an extended period of time, so too does the *Zohar* note a number of instances in which something positive develops over time: the gradual strengthening of Jacob to overcome Samael, the end of the Jewish people's exile and the shining of the messianic light of redemption, and even recovery from illness. Rather than analyzing each piece of this circular narrative, I would like to make some general comments on this process.

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<sup>34</sup> Ecclesiastes 3:20

The *Zoharic* commentary on *Parashat Vayetzei*, the Torah portion preceding *Vayishlach*, opens with Ecclesiastes 1:5: זורח השמש ובא השמש ואל מקומו שואף זורח – the sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries to the place where he rises. On a *sefirotic* level, the sun (*tiferet*) rises up to the supernal *binah*, receiving her outpouring efflux. When the sun sets, it hurries to its place (מקום), which is a common name for God; as such, מקום represents the *shekhinah*. Daniel Matt points out that the sun shines (זורח) on the moon at night in order to illuminate *shekhinah*.<sup>35</sup> I would read the sun's shining as not only illumination, but as its way of bestowing divine efflux onto *shekhinah*. *Tiferet* receives emanations from *binah* above when the sun rises, then shares those emanations with *shekhinah* below once it has set.

This is why Samael demands that Jacob let him go once dawn has risen. Though Samael and Lilith may be able to interrupt *tiferet*'s union with *shekhinah* during the night time, which is their demonic domain, once *tiferet* has reached up to *binah*, they are powerless to stop it. Notice that *tiferet* (and by extension Jacob and the sun) can stand its own ground even under Samael's dominion; Samael, however, loses all power once *tiferet* has overtaken him. Similarly, the light of the sun still impacts us during the night time, reflecting off the moon (though it depends each night on the moon's shape); the moon however—even though it can be seen on occasion by day—seems to have no impact on the daylight.

The *Zohar*, then, associates all of the following: Samael, Esau, the darkness of night, and the contemporary enemies of Israel. It comments about all of them that they

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<sup>35</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 2, 320, note 5.



appear to be quite strong, holding the advantage. Yet, it is only a matter of time before *tiferet* overcomes Samael, Jacob rises above Esau, the slightest glimmer of light breaks through and overtakes the darkness, and Israel itself inherits מלכותא ושלטנא ורבותא די – kingdom, dominion, and grandeur of the kingdoms under all of Heaven.<sup>36</sup> The *Zohar* lauds Israel's patience by comparing it to a rising sun, assuring them that they will one day reach peak intensity. It would seem, then, that the author(s) of the *Zohar* must have had various critiques of 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, since it was likened to nighttime and the dominion of Samael.

Dr. Sharon Koren, building off the research of Yom Tov Assis and Yitzhak Baer, confirms that great tension existed in 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain between religious Jews and the social elite, who were “bound up with money and lifestyle, rather than religion.”<sup>37</sup> Unsurprisingly, much of this tension revolved around sexual impropriety (though I shall touch on the subject of wealth on page 67). Koren notes: “Many of the moneyed elite publicly flouted Jewish norms and led lives devoted to sensual pleasures. They ignored traditional sexual taboos, disregarded family purity laws, and engaged in extramarital relations.”<sup>38</sup> Such blatant disregard for religious practice would surely not sit well with the Kabbalists, who read cosmic significance into even the most minor *mitzvot*. Their frustrations with society clearly seeped into their work, and the *Zohar* is no exception. Notice, however, how cleverly the *Zohar* once again links all of the pieces: since sexual impurity is the societal problem, society is labeled as a time of night, which falls under

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<sup>36</sup> Daniel 7:27, as quoted in the *Zohar*

<sup>37</sup> Sharon Koren, “The symbol of Rebekah in the *Zohar*,” *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies* 6 (2014). Koren was herself using research from Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, 1 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1961), 28, 240.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* Koren footnotes her statements to Yom Tov Assis, *Golden Age of Aragonese Jewry* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2008).

the dominion of the wicked Samael and the sexual temptress, Lilith. Imagine the pain a Kabbalist have felt every time he witnessed another Spanish Jew engaging in an affair of some kind – he must have seen his society as strengthening the forces of darkness on a regular basis.

The *Zohar* expresses its love for the slow victory by interpreting Song of Songs 6:10: מי זאת הנשקפה כמו שחר, יפה כלבנה, ברה כחמה, אימה כנדגלות -- who is this looking forth like the dawn, fair like the moon, clear like the sun, awesome as a bannered army? The *Zohar* cleverly reads this verse as the archetypal pattern for gradual build-up of redemption's light. The light starts כמו שחר דאיהי אוכמא – like the dawn, which [glows] black. Though written in Aramaic, the *Zohar* here makes a pun based on the Hebrew; the Hebrew word for black (שחור) greatly resembles the word for dawn (שחר). As such, the *Zohar* defines dawn as the very first sign of light in the sky, when the faintest of glows appears on the horizon, just starting to illuminate the sky. This is how the *Zohar* believes redemption begins, this slowly. But the light then grows brighter, יפה כלבנה – as fair as the moon. The moon remains a symbol of the night time, so it's possible at this point that the forces opposing Israel still seem rather strong at this point.

Though the moon's light is still soft, the light slowly builds in intensity until it is ברה כחמה – as bright as the sun. This is the point at which *tiferet* has reclaimed dominion over the situation, Israel has the upper hand, and the darkness of exile starts to come to a close. Interestingly, the *Zohar* had singled out the sun as also being made from dust, using the same term, חמה, for the sun. It seems, then, that the ultimate redemption of Israel can only come when *shekhinah* is also free (which means *tiferet*, the sun, can

rise out of her like fruit growing from the earth). The final step of the process is also the brightest, **אימה כנודגלות** – awesome as a bannered army. The military language used in this last stage only serves to further highlight its intensity. In the Kabbalistic account of creation, God had to hide away the divine light (making it an **אור זרוע**), lest the light destroy the world. The use of **אימה** (“awesome,” but also “terrible”) and references to marching armies suggests that such a powerful light may return to the world. This time, it would destroy only that which was wicked and undeserving (namely, Esau and the oppressive forces of evil).

Unfortunately, the messianic redemption is delayed, as the crafty Samael strikes at Jacob’s thigh, a dastardly move that has great repercussions (to be discussed). The *Zohar* itself acknowledges that had Jacob not been weakened by Samael, he would have withstood the attack entirely, **ואתבר חילא דעשו לעלא ותתא** -- and Esau’s power would have been destroyed, above and below. It seems to me that this is another point at which the *Zohar* has to acknowledge reality while building its mythology. If Jacob overcame Samael and the other impure spirits, should the problem of evil not be resolved? That certainly seems to be the implication; had Samael not attacked Jacob at the sinew of his thigh, it seems redemption could have come early (after all, Jacob as *tiferet* represents the ideal balance between his fathers, *hesed* and *gevurah*). But Israel finds itself still besieged by forces both external and internal, so the mythic narrative cannot resolve itself entirely. The *sefirotic* system has not yet unfolded into complete perfection; rather, it still awaits our assistance.

So what exactly did Samael damage when he struck at Jacob's thigh? On the *sefirotic* level, Samael struck at the legs of the Godhead: *netzah* and *hod*. As Daniel Matt points out, these two *sefirot* are the sources of prophecy.<sup>39</sup> As such, שאר נביאי הו' נפלי – על אנפיהו ואתחלש חילא דילהון ולא הו' יכלי לקימא על בוריה דמלה – the rest of the prophets [except for Moses], fell on their faces, their strength weakened, and they could not comprehend the clarity of the word. The *Zohar* uses this explanation to point out why another prophet like Moses never again rose in Israel. It seems possible, however, to also read it as support for the eventual end of prophecy. Samael and the evil forces damaged the lower *sefirot* of *netzah* and *hod* too badly, leaving the *sefirotic* Godhead to “limp,” unable to clearly communicate prophecy to the Israelites. Such a reading points to a sort of cosmic failure in the movement of the *sefirot*; perhaps it was not part of the divine plan for prophecy to end. The *Zohar* acknowledges that something went horribly awry, interfering with our ability to sense God properly. But if our actions really have a theurgic effect on the Godhead, then in following the *mitzvot*, the *Zohar* seems to suggest that we may hear God more clearly. Is that not, in some ways, the point of all religion? Do we not always hope that in every religious step we take, ranging from ethical actions to ritual reenactments, we might finally succeed in more clearly sensing the divine in our world?

The *Zohar* then plays with the concept that Torah is another symbol for *tiferet*. Imagine the Torah in place of *tiferet* on the *sefirotic* body. When the body is harmed at the legs, it's possible to imagine it falling to its knees, limping. The legs cannot function, not only to walk, but also to steadily hold up the rest of the body. This is what the *Zohar*

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<sup>39</sup> Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Vol. 3*, 32, note 220.

picks up on: the damaged support for the Torah (and by extension, Torah study). The *Zohar* bemoans: ומאן דלעי באוריתא ולית מאן דסמיך לה – the one who labors in Torah has no one to support him. One can feel the Kabbalists' alienation in this short, simple line. They engage in a true labor of love, for to be able to seek out and expound upon secret interpretations of the Torah, one needs to be truly immersed in its words. And though the circle of the *Zohar* and its followers can certainly lean on each other for encouragement, they felt cut off from other elements of their society (whether that was actually the case or merely an extreme viewpoint adopted by the *Zohar* is beside the point). To really drive the point home, the *Zohar* continues: ולא אשתכח מאן דאטיל מלאי לכיסה לאתתקפא – no one is found who places profit in his pocket to strengthen him. The complaint of the *Zohar* is chiefly a financial one. Torah study seemed underfunded, denied sufficient economic support. This confirms the tension mentioned earlier that existed between the circle of the *Zohar* and the economic elite of 13<sup>th</sup> century Spain, as the former felt that the latter could and should have done far more financially to support their endeavors rather than the treasuries of foreign Esau (and thus, Samael).

It is at this point that the creativity of the *Zohar* converges with its critique of non-Torah based culture, resulting in a wonderfully dense but powerful piece of *Zoharic midrash*. Having established that Samael weakened the supportive legs of Torah study, the *Zohar* describes the consequences of sin: דבגין דלית מאן דאסמיך לאוריתא כדקא יאות -- since there is no one who properly supports the Torah, these supporters are weakened, and they cause the one who lacks legs and feet to stand upon to be strengthened. The one without

legs to stand upon must be the same wicked creature that has recurred throughout this chunk of the *Zohar*: namely, the snake (or Lilith). Although the snake resembled a camel in the Garden of Eden, God punished it by forcing it to crawl on its belly, its legs chopped off.<sup>40</sup> Yet in failing to support Torah, the Jewish people actually unintentionally support this snake! There is no neutrality within the *Zohar*, as it truly seems to embrace an attitude of “if you aren’t with us, you’re against us.” Insufficient support for Torah study not only weakens Torah’s strength, but it actively supports seductive evil.

The serpent regaining its legs is a foreboding omen. First, it indicates that Lilith (and by extent, Samael) has regained strength. Lilith, as already discussed, is one of many spirits, creatures lacking a body. That the sinners help provide legs for her serpentine form suggests that sins start to actually create a physical form for Lilith; the more the Israelites sin, the more real their enemies become. Second, the supportive legs that sins build for the snake help to restore it back to its full form, as described in *Pirke d’Rabbi Eliezer*, but this goes against God’s decree that the snake must crawl on its belly. What does it say about the balance of forces of good and evil if God’s decree can be reversed? Finally, one must remember that Samael damaged the *sefirotic* legs so badly, they could not support the rest of the Godhead. His bride, Lilith, however, rests upon the support that was meant for Torah. It’s almost as though the demonic couple successfully infiltrated the lower half of the *sefirot*, replacing *netzah* and *hod* with sin. Meanwhile, Samael, riding upon his serpentine consort, is raised up into the position of *tiferet* as the snake stands upon its newly restored legs.

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<sup>40</sup> Genesis 3:14

The image of Samael and Lilith starting to actually replace several of the *sefirot* works beautifully with the next proof text that the *Zohar* brings in: הקל קול יעקב והידים – the voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.<sup>41</sup> Samael, Esau's heavenly prince, seeks to replace Jacob, thereby ensuring that the hands are the hands of Esau. However, אסתכל לכל סטרין לאבאשא לה ליעקב ולאפסקא קלה וחמא לה – [Samael] looked to all sides to harm Jacob and to interrupt his voice, but he saw that he was fortified through and through. It seems slightly strange that the narrative would claim Jacob was protected all around, as the reader knows Samael will successfully strike Jacob at the thigh. Yet, the text goes on to specify the sides that Samael verified: דרועין מסטרא דא ומסטרא דא דאנון תקפין – the arms of this side and that side were strong. *Sefirotically*, Jacob's arms would be his father, Isaac (*gevurah*), and his grandfather, Abraham (*hesed*). Again, the *Zohar* presents a narrative in which, though evil makes for a considerable adversary, good will triumph in the end. The higher *sefirot* are too well guarded for Samael to strike through them, which is incredible, given *gevurah's* predilection for the *sitra ahra*. The very fact that the *sefirot* successfully unfolded onto Jacob, whose *tiferet* marks the ideal balance between his fathers, might be what marks those higher *sefirot* as nigh-invulnerable.

Given the tendency of the *Zohar* to emphasize the eventual triumph of good, it feels fitting to bring this analysis to a close with a look at Jacob's demand for a blessing from the stranger. With the rising dawn, Samael recognizes that his time of dominion has come to an end, and so he agrees to the blessing in order to escape from Jacob's sure

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<sup>41</sup> Genesis 27:22

grasp. Of course, Samael offers Jacob his new name of Israel: **לאו יעקב בעקימו אלא** **לך** בגאותא ותקפא דלית מאן דיכיל לך – not Jacob, with deception, but proud and strong, for no one can overcome you. How wonderful that the meaning of Jacob’s name truly comes into play here. The *Zohar* links the name Jacob to **עקימו**, deception. Incredibly, the same word is used to describe how *yetzer hara* will attempt to deceive human beings in order to lead them astray. The *Zohar*, then, perceptively picks up on the fact that Jacob’s many negative qualities (a keen eye for manipulation, a certain selfishness, etc.) suggest that he has a substantial amount of evil, or at least trickery, within him. It’s all too fitting that contained within his name is **עקב** (heel). Jacob held onto his brother’s heel at birth, only for his brother’s guardian to strike at his thigh. Yes, Jacob’s leg is his weak point, for the leg will always link him to the dirtier tactics of his youth.

However, Samael declares that he is Jacob no more, elevating his opponent to Israel. Israel, as a term for the entirety of the people, is one with the *shekhinah*, indicating a fuller union between *tiferet* and *shekhinah*, now unimpeded by the deceit dragged along at Jacob’s heels. Jacob has excised himself of such elements. In changing his name so as to have less in common with Samael, Jacob seems to close the door on the possibility of Samael being able to take his place. In fact, Rabbi Shimon emphasizes Jacob’s regal qualities in order to connect **ישראל** to **שררה**, meaning “princeliness.”<sup>42</sup> But it was Samael who was frequently referred to as Esau’s prince. Now a prince, united with his consort just as Samael and Lilith were one, it seems that *tiferet* stands ready to

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<sup>42</sup> Cf. Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Vol. 3, 34, note 236.



take Samael's place. The sun has risen. Good has triumphed. And mythical hero Jacob has ascended to a higher, more secure level, establishing hope for all of us.

### III.

#### Concluding Remarks

The texts studied for this immersive experience have been but a slight taste of the esoteric wisdom held within the whole body of *Sefer HaZohar* and its associated literature. Yet, even that small sampling has revealed a great depth of material that will surely influence the teachings in my rabbinate for years to come. The *Zohar*, as Art Green has suggested, manages to stretch traditional Jewish text study and *midrash* to dazzling new creative heights.<sup>1</sup> It reads a densely-packed symbolic system into what was already a canonical, sacred literature. In some ways, the *Zohar* combines artful poetry with strict, almost-mathematical logic. The reader constantly flips from one layer of meaning to the next, resulting simultaneously in deep appreciation and dizzying befuddlement. This immersion experience has been a bit like wading through a surrealist dream, following its own set of responsive rules.

The most comparable reading experience I can think of for the contemporary reader would be the 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist masterpiece, *Ulysses*. Yes, the *Zohar* is like a 13<sup>th</sup>-century, Jewish-Spanish version of Joycean literature. Even if someone knows every word in a sentence, that person still may have no idea of its meaning. The *Zohar* relies on a great number of allusions, and the more familiarity a reader has with the wider breadth of biblical, Talmudic, and *midrashic* corpus, the more that reader is rewarded.

I myself found that the *Zohar* consistently opened itself up in new ways once I compared it to *midrash Otiyyot d'Rabbi Akiba*. Somehow, each of the selections I chose managed to impact and relate to my understanding of the other. How could I read about

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<sup>1</sup> Green, *A Guide to the Zohar*, 7-8

the demonic she-snake standing upon false legs, stolen from the *sefirot* of *netzah* and *hod*, without recalling the Holy One's warning to *shin* that all lies build their foundation on truth? Lilith and Samael's perverted union seemed to wonderfully echo the flawed *tzadi*'s back-to-back shape, an allusion to the not quite complete union of *tiferet* and *shekhinah*.

Ultimately, I found that the *Zohar* rewarded creative thinking. The more I allowed myself to reflect on a particular sentiment, the more I attempted to connect various dots, the more I saw that my interpretations already fit quite snugly into the *sefirotic* system. This, I believe, is one of the *Zohar*'s primary messages to its readers. Though it speaks in riddles and secrets, its epic, mythology of the emanation of the divine into our universe is simultaneously the story of our lives. It recognizes the universal challenge of what it means to be human and encourages a sense of personal responsibility, viewing individual human lives as microcosms of the divine. Like all of the best poetry, the *Zohar* succeeds both through what it says and what it does not say. It captures truth in words that keep slipping between one's fingers. But when we read them seriously, we cannot help but feel stirred.

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