

Three Essays on Communion with the Divine in Jewish Mysticism

Andrue Kahn

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Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion
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Advisor: Dr. Sharon Koren

Summary of Three Essays on Communion with the Divine in Jewish Mysticism by Andy Kahn

My text immersion project on Jewish mysticism in general and the Zohar in particular is made up of three chapters. Chapter One, God Immanent and Transcendent: Medieval and Contemporary Theological Approaches, addresses the differences between Rashi and Ramban in their understanding of the role of the *Mishkan* as an intermediary between God and Israel, and compares their differences to the theologies of Rabbi Dr. Art Green and Rabbi Dr. Irving “Yitz” Greenberg. Chapter Two, “Therefore Joshua heard, and not Moses...”’: Gender relations, Divine Unification, the Na’ar, and transiting realms in the Zohar, investigates the role that gender plays in the Zoharic understanding of an intermediary between the World Above and the World Below. Chapter Three, Metatron, Rung of the Righteous Redeemer in the Zohar, addresses the role of Metatron in particular in the Zohar, and the way in which this “rung” functions in relation to transiting between the World Below and the World Above.

The goal of this text immersion was to familiarize myself with the ideas and language of Jewish mysticism in general and the Zohar, as a foundational text within the Jewish mystical corpus, in particular. In so doing, I strove to not only bring about my own understanding of the texts, but to also provide a Progressive Jewish context for understanding these complex and often extremely difficult ideas. To this end, I not only referenced the original of the Zohar, but made use of Daniel Matt’s translation and notation, as well as the extensive scholarship done over the past few decades by Dr. Elliot Wolfson, Dr. Moshe Idel, Dr. Daniel Abrams, and, of course, the founder of the academic study of Jewish mysticism, Dr. Gershom Scholem.

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God Immanent and Transcendent: Medieval and Contemporary Theological Approaches

The *Mishkan*, and the Ark of the Covenant within, were central pieces of Ancient Israelite religion. Great detail is attended to in the description of the portable building and its accoutrements. Throughout the history of Jewish thought and Biblical studies, many theories have been put forth as to the goal and purpose of the building. The core, basic reading of the purpose of this structure is its ability to act as a conduit between God and the Israelites. As God states, “And you shall make me a sacred space, so that I shall dwell amongst them.” (Ex. 25:8)

From the points of view of Rashi and Ramban, the necessity for this sacred space comes from two different angles. As a contemporary Jew, each of these angles speak to a different aspect of Jewish theology today as well. While many Jews seek tangible, close contact with the Divine, there are an abundance of explanations as to why these contacts no longer happen, just as there are explanations as to how to have these experiences personally. Rashi and Ramban are still represented in the Jewish world today from its various points of view. In particular, Rashi’s sentiments are echoed in the Holocaust Theology of Rabbi Irving Greenberg, while Ramban’s are represented in the Neo-Hasidic realm of Modern Jewish thought through Rabbi Arthur Green.

Rashi and Ramban both attempt innovative explanations at the purpose of and impetus for the *Mishkan*. Their distinct perspectives on this issue offer two very different understandings not only of the *Mishkan* itself, but of the relationship between God and the people Israel. Rashi’s perspective attempts to unwind a linear trajectory of God’s increasing distance from the Israelites as they progress through their trials and travails in

the wilderness. Ramban, on the other hand, views the *Mishkan* as a sign of the opposite, and instead tracks the relationship between God and the Israelites throughout the rest of the *Tanakh* based on his reading of Sinai, and the *Mishkan*, being the genesis of God's immanence within the Israelites. Rashi's close reading, dependent upon rabbinic tradition in dating the events of the Exodus, provides a theology of sin that leads to God needing a barrier between God's self and the Israelites. Ramban's wide-ranging inner-biblical exegesis, on the other hand, provides a theology of divine interaction, with the *Mishkan* acting as a conduit for God's presence, and more importantly voice, throughout Jewish history.

Rashi's interpretation of Shemot 31:18 rewrites the story of the Israelites in the wilderness based upon the rabbinic principle "אין מוקדם ומאוחר בתורה," through which he is able to rearrange the narrative by tracking the historical rabbinic dating of the events in the story which are said to correspond with Jewish holidays that led up to the creation of the Golden Calf. This new narrative serves to create a specific sin-based context for the *Mishkan*. According to Rashi, the creation of the Golden Calf preceded the commandment to build the *Mishkan* by many days. He goes on to say that Moses' breaking of the first set of tablets in anger at the construction of the Calf occurred on the seventeenth of *Tammuz* (which begins the three-week mourning period of the Second Temple, leading up to *Tisha b'Av*), and that on Yom Kippur (the 10th of *Tishrei*, 81 days later) the Israelites and God began to be reconciled. The following day, according to Rashi, the gifts for the *Mishkan* began, and on the first of *Nisan* the *Mishkan* was erected.

Rashi constructs a narrative of fall and reconciliation between God and Israel with the *Mishkan* itself as a symbol of this reconciliation. By tracking the progression of these events through traditional time markers of their occurring, as opposed to the narrative structure of the Torah in which the details of the *Mishkan* are laid out for Moses well before the sin of the Golden Calf, Rashi rearranges the story to both match rabbinic tradition and rabbinic theology. The bringing of the gifts of the *Mishkan* is framed as a response of attempted reconciliation between God and the Israelites. God prescribes a specific set of gifts required for this reconciliation, and the Israelites oblige dutifully, showing their obedience and regret for their mistake. Through this process, according to Rashi's timeline, it takes nearly 6 months to finish compiling these gifts into the full *Mishkan*.

Rashi's narrative construction produces a theology of God's judgment as central to the covenant, and the onus being on the Israelites to live up to the covenant or be punished. The sin of the Golden Calf becomes a turning point in this relationship which leads to the *Mishkan* needing to be constructed as Israel's mode of connection to God, rather than an intermediary being unnecessary, and therefore alludes to the *Mishkan* as a symbol of punishment and repentance. By correlating the moment of the sin of the Golden Calf with the mourning of the destruction of the Temple, Rashi creates a scarlet thread through time directly linking these two events. This time in the annual Jewish calendar becomes the locus for the continual failure of the Israelites, and later Second Temple Jews, in relation to God. In their erring, each of these events caused the destruction of a communication structure that had been established. Further, the collapse

of the old mode of communication and its replacement by a lesser, newer structure is a rationale for the continual growth of distance between God and the Israelites throughout history.

The beginning of the construction of the *Mishkan* on the day after Yom Kippur implies a level of punishment, or at the very least a less-than-ideal mode of connection, as represented by the *Mishkan*. Prior to this, God was on Sinai willing to communicate directly with the Israelites. Although they preferred Moses as an intermediary (Ex. 20:19), their relationship to God was still much more imminent, and did not require a physical intermediary to separate themselves from God. God had descended directly onto the mountain in the full view of the Israelites. Now, in Rashi's reading, due to the sin of the Golden Calf, the *Mishkan* needed to be constructed in order for God to be able to dwell with the Israelites at all. The *Mishkan*, then, represents a fall - a barrier to direct connection between the Israelites and God, in the same way that the destruction of the Temple led to the end of prophecy altogether.¹

This action, of a continually changing and falling connection to God throughout the course of history, also underlies Rabbi Irving Greenberg's Holocaust Theology. Greenberg's response to the Holocaust highlights the issue of theodicy within the Jewish worldview. He reads the modern historical tragedy as impacting directly upon the relationship between God and the Jewish people, just as Rashi reads the mythical and ancient historical tragedies as doing the same. Greenberg traces this decline in connection between God and the Jewish people through secular history. Rather than beginning with

¹ BT Sanhedrin 11a

mythical historical examples such as the Golden Calf, Greenberg begins with the destruction of the First Temple, in which the Israelites were focused on a theology of divine punishment, to the destruction of the Second Temple, in which the Rabbis saw that the way forward was more as partners with God in co-creation of the covenant.² For Greenberg, the Holocaust marked the third turning point in which the covenant itself had become completely optional, as, “After the Holocaust, it is obvious that [the role of witness to the world] opened the Jews to a total murderous fury from which there was no escape...Morally speaking, then, God can have no claims on the Jews by dint of the Covenant.”³

Further, Greenberg interprets the holiday cycle of the Jewish people as pointing towards this inevitable conclusion in history, and views *Yom haAtzmaut* as a new mode of celebrating the Jews building their own, self-directed future through the creation of the State of Israel. For Greenberg, the State of Israel represents the Jewish choice to continue the Covenant in their own way, and by the work of their own hands, rather than relying upon God as co-creator or even punisher. In this new paradigm, free will is the ultimate mode of sacred interaction allowing for the Jews to express their own covenant with God on their own terms.⁴

Seen in relief to Rashi’s own version of the purpose of the *Mishkan*, Greenberg’s theology appears as a continuation of the same trajectory, but with a different value judgment attached. For Greenberg’s narrative, the State of Israel is parallel to the

² Katz, Steven T., *Interpreters of Judaism in the Late Twentieth Century*, B’nai Brith, (Washington, DC: 1992), p. 73.

³ *ibid.*, p. 74

⁴ *ibid.*, 78.

Mishkan - both are created by the effort of the Israelites as a new form of Jewish expression - but stand at a polar opposite end. Unlike with the *Mishkan*, though, the state of Israel is not a punishment or act of repentance on the part of the Jewish people. Instead, it is a forging ahead in a new way of the Jewish people's choosing. If the *Mishkan* is an Israelite response of repentance to the great sin of the Golden Calf, then the state of Israel is the response of free will and resolve in the face of God's great sin of the Shoah. These two theologies, then, act as a connector across time, Greenberg's building on the foundation of Rashi's viewpoint.

In stark contrast, Ramban's read of the *Mishkan* is quite the opposite of the narrative in which God becomes increasingly distant throughout the progress of history. Ramban views the *Mishkan* as, instead, the beginning of an even closer relationship between Israel and God. Rather than tracking the narrative leading up to the construction of the *Mishkan* based on the rabbinic calendar, Ramban tracks the image of the Ark of the Covenant itself throughout the *Tanakh*. His inner-biblical exegesis reveals a far more positive and radical view of the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

In Ramban's introduction to chapter 25 of Shemot, he recounts the many times in which God spoke to the Israelites, and the glowing way in which God spoke of them. By recounting the revelation of the ten commandments through the Deuteronomic version, in which God speaks face to face with the Israelites, he begins framing a theology of love between Israel and God which is manifested by the *Mishkan*. For Ramban, the *Mishkan* is a fitting sanctuary for God's indwelling (*Shekhinah*) to remain amongst the Israelites.

The central object of the *Mishkan*, then, is to be a place for the *Shekhinah* to rest - which is to say, the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark is the seat of the *Shekhinah*, but that is not all. Ramban's further exegesis explores a more secretive aspect of the indwelling upon the Ark - that of the *kavod* of God that spoke to the Israelites from Mt. Sinai. In Ramban's interpretation of the purpose of the Ark, and the *Mishkan*, the *kavod* continued to speak to Moses from the *Mishkan* after its construction. This *kavod* always originated in the Heavens, but sounded out to the Israelites from between the two *keruvim* atop the Ark.

According to Ramban's exegesis, the *kavod* is also referred to throughout the *Tanakh* as "*Elohei Yisrael*," or God of Israel. This designation clarifies the role that the *kavod* plays - that of a personal God to the people of Israel. This aspect of God is the one who commands from the Heavens, but dwells between the *keruvim*. Ramban sees a reference to the revelation at Sinai in King Solomon's benediction at the construction of the Temple, in which he refers to God as "*YHWH Elohei Yisrael*." Evoking this name of God at this moment in which the Ark itself is finding the new, static home of the Temple in Jerusalem signifies a transfer of the particular role that the *kavod* played from travelling with the Israelites to being located in one particular space. These separate names for God become a mode of connecting the God above (YHWH) with God's indwelling below as the *Shekhinah*, *kavod*, and *Elohei Yisrael*.

By drawing the through-lines of using these specific names of God from Mt. Sinai to the Temple, Ramban is showing the continuous presence of God's indwelling with the Ark as not only being a sign of God having been present for the Israelites in the

wilderness with the Tabernacle, but also being with the Israelites after the construction of the Temple. This continuous indwelling of God as *Elohei Yisrael* between the *keruvim* is not, though, a lesser or minor form of God, but is the conduit from which the fullness of God above (Adonai) expresses itself to the Israelites, and through which the Israelites can express themselves to God.

A further piece of Ramban's interpretation of the presence of *Elohei Yisrael* also rests upon another mode of the Israelites' direct encounter with God. In Exodus 24:9, the priests, the elders, and Moses encounter God, under the moniker "*Elohei Yisrael*," seated upon a throne above a sapphire floor. These leaders of the people of Israel all directly see *Elohei Yisrael* in this scene, and feast with him. Ramban picks up on the theme of the direct encounter with as it is hinted at later in the *Tanakh*, with another mention of *Elohei Yisrael* and a floor like sapphire: Ezekiel 10-11.

By placing the passage recounting Ezekiel's vision of the chariot in the context of the rest of the references to *Elohei Yisrael* and the *keruvim*, Ramban is connecting the chariot of Ezekiel's vision to the Ark itself. The presence of *Elohei Yisrael* between the *keruvim* in both instances, especially as this presence continually speaks to Ezekiel and others from the midst of the *keruvim* in the Heavens, brings the theological ramifications of the indwelling amidst the *keruvim* in the *Mishkan*, and the Temple, to a new level. The Ark's mobility during the days of the Israelites in the wilderness, moved about by the Levites as a transient dwelling place for God amidst the nomadic tribes, is evoked in Ezekiel's post-Exilic vision of the Ark-as-chariot. Upon the fall of the Temple, the chariot has become a method of transportation for *Elohei Yisrael*. This heavenly chariot

carries *Elohei Yisrael*, the personal God that speaks to Israel, from the land of Israel even as far as the Chebar Canal in Babylonia, where we first meet Ezekiel.

The literal chariot of God as we see it in Ezekiel is further referenced in the historical books of the *Tanakh* in relation to the Ark and the Temple. From the books of Kings, Chronicles, and Samuel, Ramban provides examples of references both to God dwelling between the *keruvim*, as well as in the Heavens. This parallel of God on earth and in the Heavens, but in both places mounted upon *keruvim*, is a recurring theme throughout the rest of Ramban's exegesis of the *Mishkan*. Of particular interest is his reference to 1 Chronicles 28:18, where the *keruvim* on the Ark are referred to as the structure of the chariot itself. To drive his point home, Ramban again quotes 1 Kings 8:23-61 extensively, the benediction given by Solomon at the building of the Temple.

This benediction lays out a theology of God being both in the Heavens and on earth, and mirrors Ramban's earlier designation of the Ark being a device through which humans communicate to God, and God communicates to humans. Throughout the benediction it is made strikingly clear that to communicate with God, one must make use of the newly-constructed Temple, either in person, or, by praying towards it from whatever distance. This supports and expands the earlier designation Ramban made between the Ark in the *Mishkan*, where *Elohei Yisrael* (the *shekhinah* and the *kavod*) dwells as a conduit for the voice from the Heavens which was present on Mt. Sinai.

Further, we may see the piece of Solomon's prayer referenced at the end of Ramban's exegesis in II Chronicles 6:18 as broadening out the communication channel between God and the Israelites even more widely. In this verse, Solomon prays that no

matter where the one who prays stands, that as long as their prayer is directed towards the Temple, the dwelling place of the *Elohei Yisrael*, the lines of communication are open to God in Heaven.

Ramban's exegesis on the *Mishkan* continues in Exodus 25:21, when he focuses more directly on the appearance of the Ark of the Covenant in comparison to the Chariot, and the rationale for the *Eidah* that is placed in the Ark of the Covenant. This exegesis, which explains that the Ark of the Covenant mirrors the Chariot, and that the *Eidah* within is akin to the witnessing God does from above, paints a holographic or fractal vision of the relationship between the Ark of the Covenant and *Merkavah*. On a slight aside, Ramban notes that the Rabbis in BT Hagiga 13 claim that the *keruvim* appear as young humans. He goes on to note that they are facing each other, and from between them the word of God goes out, and that the *Eidah* within the Ark is a letter from God. Remaining cryptic, he concludes by citing a verse from Ecclesiastes (5:9) that illustrates his holographic vision, and ends this exegesis with "the enlightened will understand."

Although quite cryptic, the images he interprets, the *keruvim* as appearing as people and facing each other around the letter from God within the Ark, may be pointing metaphorically towards the continual revelation of God through human interaction around the word of God. This continual revelation from "between the *keruvim*" can then be actualized within Jewish practice of focusing the mind on the Other, as well as the Torah. Ultimately, we can derive from this a theology that allows continual revelation to occur for those with the minds and the hearts to engage Torah and each other.

This path of communication stands in direct contradiction to that of Rashi and Greenberg. Not only is God not growing farther away, God is in fact growing more personal - the *kavod* of God made manifest at Sinai continues to open itself to the Israelites writ-large. One only need turn their hearts and minds to the dwelling place of the God of Israel, between the *keruvim* where the *Eidah* rests, and one's prayers will be heard in Heaven.

A strikingly similar theology is present in the work of Rabbi Dr. Art Green. His neo-Hasidic theological take on the Jewish relationship to God, presented in depth in *Radical Judaism*, continues the theme of mystical communication as a basis for the connection between contemporary Israelites and the God of our ancestors. Green phrases his theology as foundationally mystical panentheism, which is to say that God is accessible and in a constant mode of revelation to all humans who open their minds to access this revelation.⁵ This vision echoes the final step of Ramban's theological trajectory from Sinai to the Temple and beyond via the Chariot and the *Eidah*.

Just as King Solomon of II Chronicles prayed that Israelites (and non-Israelites) anywhere turning their hearts to the Temple would be heard and have their prayers accepted, Green sees the omnipresent God available to those who turn their hearts towards the oneness of all Creation. The accessibility of God is the direct corollary here, especially in contrast to the inaccessibility of God in the theologies of Rashi and Greenberg. Rather than relegating God to the transcendent, unknowable workings of Creation which are ultimately beyond human ken, Green allows for a continued

⁵ Green, Arthur, *Radical Judaism*, 2010, p. 18.

revelation through personal connection to God via Creation, and more specifically, via God's speech.

This connection to God happens internally, in mystical mental states in which a person is able to actively hear the Oneness of God say, "I am."⁶ This hearing is not done with one's ears, nor is the speaking done with God's mouth, but instead the mental state attained allows for the individual to experience themselves as part of, as well as distinct from, this aspect of God Green refers to as "Being." This experience as a part of Being is the root from which other anthropomorphizations and framings of God stem. In essence, the parallel between Green and Ramban of direct communication with God has one distinct difference - while Ramban sees the *keruvim* as the continual dwelling place of God's presence, Green sees it within humanity.

Much like Ramban's cryptic exegesis of the Chariot and *keruvim*, Green goes on to locate the specific version of revelation achieved between Israel and God as located in Torah. He describes the wisdom of the other nations, *hokhmah*, as being valid for both non-Jews and Jews alike, but appends a special quality to Torah that sets it apart from the *hokhmah* of other nations. This special quality is its divine manifestation as revelation between God and Israel.⁷ In this formulation, Torah does not refer to the Pentateuch alone, but the continual transmission of particularly Jewish wisdom from God to Israel, and from Israel back to God - an ever-unfolding conversation that began at Sinai and continues to this day.

⁶ Green, 19.

⁷ Green, 86.

This unfolding conversation is God's continued speech. For Green, "God is the underlying One behind and within all existence. Torah is the underlying One behind and within all language."⁸ Like the *kavod* speaking from between the *keruvim*, the Torah is analogous to the speech of *Elohei Yisrael* in Ramban's exegesis, continuing to echo the Oneness of God in Heaven by speaking to Israel. In fact, Green goes even further, stating that the Torah given by God is, in fact, "God's own Self, but now in verbal form, so that we mortals may 'read' God in the garb of language."⁹

The Torah itself, according to Green, can be read as containing the meeting place for God and the Israelites as well. As the *Mishkan* is also called the Tent of Meeting, within the Torah we have revealed the *mitzvot*. The word and concept of *mitzvah* is seen in a Hasidic exegetical reading as meaning "'a place of encounter,' a form through which the divine and human meet and are joined together."¹⁰ By 'reading' God in language, and embodying what is read through the acts of practicing *mitzvot*, the individual becomes the dwelling place, the *Mishkan*, of God, both through language and behavior. Green's theology, placing the human infused with and engaged with Torah as the Chariot itself, elucidates the underlying thread of Ramban's two pieces of exegesis on Exodus 25, and provides us a clear and practicable understanding of the arcane and mystic mode of Ramban's thinking.

The conflict inherent to these two theological threads - the transcendent, distant God of Rashi and Greenberg, and the immanent, mystically close God of Ramban and

⁸ Green, 92.

⁹ Green, 119.

¹⁰ Green, 97.

Green - speak to two different approaches to Judaism and God in general. The two approaches offered are equally necessary, as each person encountering the Jewish tradition will have his or her own take on the role the Divine plays in the world around them, and their relationship (or lack thereof) to that Divine. These voices echoing throughout history, and throughout Torah, offer their own entry points for individuals to engage in the continual unfoldment of Torah regardless of theology, be it through the work of their own hands as a mode of re-covenanting on their own terms, or through the embodiment of a mystical panentheist God working through them.

“Therefore Joshua heard, and not Moses...”

Gender relations, Divine Unification, the Na’ar, and transiting realms in the Zohar

In the Zohar’s telling of the Exodus from Egypt, the Israelites are in constant danger of being attacked and defiled by the *Sitra Ahra*, often referred to as, or represented by the, Serpent. The battle against this Serpent takes place on two levels, above and below, and in these conflicts Moses and Joshua are separately in charge of waging this war on these two levels. Within the Zohar’s cosmology they each can be understood as being mirrored in the *sefirot* above, or as incarnating aspects of the *sefirot* below. Due to the gendered nature of the *sefirot*, and the sexual imagery involved with the conjunction of some of the *sefirot*, this creates a challenge for the Kabbalists. The way in which the gender of the *sefirot* and the relationship between Moses and Joshua play out prepares fertile ground for the mystical midrashists of the Zohar to weave a complex cosmology.

One of the most virulent incarnations of the Serpent in the tangible world is Amalek. After escaping the *Sitra Ahra* of Egypt, the Israelites are attacked by the Serpent in the form of Amalek. We find in Exodus 17:8-9, “Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. Moses said to Joshua, ‘Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand.’”

This moment in the Israelites’ escape from Exodus takes on a cosmic dimension in the Zohar’s retelling. Not only is it a moment in which the promise of earthly redemption becomes threatened by the Amalekites attacking the Israelites, but as is true with Zoharic cosmology in general, this conflict is also occurring in the celestial realm.

The Zohar takes the image of Moses on top of the hill and with Joshua battling below to also represent the spiritual status of the two leaders. As Rabbi Shimon interprets, “Moses said, ‘I will prepare myself for the battle above, and you, Joshua, prepare yourself for the battle below.’...Moses removed himself from the battle below, in order to gird himself for the battle above, which would be won through him...[Moses] saw Samael descending from the aspect above to assist Amalek below. Moses said, ‘Surely, the battle is fittingly so!’”¹¹

Rabbi Shimon’s analysis of the battle describes Moses and Joshua occupying two separate rungs within the *sefirot*. The paralleling of Moses on the hill, and Joshua in the valley, provides a strong basis to extrapolate their *sefirotic* placement. The appearance of Samael, too, brings new dimensions to the battle of the Torah. Not only is this a fight for the life of Israel, it is a fight for the continued perseverance of the Divine versus the *Sitra Ahra*. Samael’s descent from on high (this demonic character is usually considered the *Sitra Ahra*’s equivalent of *Tiferet*)¹² to below in order to aid Amalek requires he battle on the earthly plane, which then requires a parallel warrior on Israel’s side. Joshua fulfills this role, and due to the in-between nature of Samael in this instance, Joshua’s *sefirotic* status becomes clarified.

For the rabbis of the Zohar, the direct engagement between Samael and Joshua immediately calls into question which *sefirotic* rung Joshua is occupying. If he is on the earthly plane, and able to engage the *Sitra Ahra* there, what is his *sefirotic* analogy? If he

¹¹ Zohar 2:65b, Matt, Zohar IV p. 358

¹² Wolfson, Elliot, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics”, in *AJS Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), p. 30

is still able to communicate with Moses, who has ascended to *Tiferet*, how is he able to face Samael and Amalek on the earthly plane? Further, does this ability not hint at Joshua as somewhat tainted, as the ascended Moses is untouchable by the *Sitra Ahra*? This intermediary role that Joshua inhabits is embodied in the Kabbalistic Jewish cosmology by Metatron, the Youth.

Metatron, the transmogrification of Enoch into an angel, plays a key role in early Jewish mysticism which carries the character forward into the cosmology of the Zohar. Sometimes referred to as the small YHWH, or younger YHWH, Metatron stood as an intermediary between the often difficult-to-conceive-of transcendent God and humanity. From his roots as a human being, he ascended into a combination of angel and human, allowing him a different, elevated status amongst the celestial beings - a being not purely one or the other, and so capable of traversing both the earthly and the celestial realm.

The Zohar picks up on this, framing Metatron as a link between the *Shekhinah* and the earthly plane.¹³ Even more, Metatron stands as a link between the *Sitra Ahra* and the *sefirot*, a being able to stand at the center of all of these many realms and act as a shepherd through them.¹⁴ Joshua, in the *Tanakh*, other rabbinic literature, and in the Zohar, is often referred to as *na'ar*, or youth. In mystical writing prior to the Zohar, Metatron is also referred to as *na'ar*. This provides a very clear linguistic link between the two characters, and gives us greater clarity as to why Joshua occupies this role in the *sefirotic* field.

¹³ Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar, Vol. II*, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 629.

¹⁴ Tishby, p. 630.

Elliot Wolfson further uncovers the tension in the dualistic tendency within Zoharic moral cosmology that allows Joshua to both inhabit the earthly realm and be on a higher rung than the regular Israelite. In the Zohar, the ideal is not simply to be puritanically unmarred by the *Sitra Ahra*, but instead the cosmology avoids purist dualism due to the monotheism of the writers. According to Wolfson, “the apparent tension is resolved by a proper understanding of the dialectical relation between the demonic and the divine. That is, the subjugation of the unholy left is accomplished by means of the divine left, which, unlike the former, is contained within the right.”¹⁵ Joshua’s role as a warrior for Moses, according to this understanding of the relationship between the left and the right, shows that his ability to face and battle Samael requires that he not only be associated with the divine, but also contains the divine right within the divine left. Similarly, perfection of gender in the Zohar (as the sides of the divine are also gendered) requires a balance, rather than an exclusion of one or the other.

Based on Joshua’s role in these battles, and the nature of gender dynamics in the *sefirotic* cosmology, the immediate assumption would easily be to identify Joshua with *Shekhinah*. Indeed, the Zoharic midrashists allude to Joshua’s embodiment of the *Shekhinah* through relating him to the moon,¹⁶ but with further investigation it becomes clear that Joshua analogizes to a different space in the celestial realm. Not quite in the place *Shekhinah*, but not only earthly, Joshua’s ability to bridge the gap between the

¹⁵ Wolfson, Elliot, “Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics”, in *AJS Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), p. 45.

¹⁶ Matt, Daniel, *The Zohar: VI*, p. 110, n9.

celestial and the earthly places him in the realm of the intermediary, the role of *na'ar* and Metatron.

Following Moses' dispatching of Joshua to battle the Amalekites on the earthly plane while he battles the spiritual taint of the Serpent above, Rabbi Shi'mon reveals that Joshua's spiritual attainment was not in *Shekhinah*, but Metatron:

Joshua at that time occupied a very high rung. Now, if you say that he was situated in *Shekhinah* at that time-not so, for she was married and joined to Moses; consequently, Joshua was joined beneath him. How? Rabbi Shim'on said, "By that place called Youth."¹⁷

Not only is the difficulty that Joshua occupies the space between planes, but Moses' location in the *sefirotic* realm problematizes Joshua as occupying *Shekhinah*. Moses being in the space of *Tiferet* means that the *Shekhinah* has ascended to *Tiferet* as well, and that the two of them are married in this conjunction. As Moses is engaged in marriage with the *Shekhinah*, his attention is fully taken up by his consummation of the syzygy between the divine feminine and masculine. Culminating in this relationship is Joshua as the offspring, or *na'ar*, of the celestial marriage.

Metatron, and therefore Joshua, fills the role of divine child of the *Shekhinah* and *Tiferet*. As the son and warrior of the *Shekhinah*, Metatron is outfitted in warrior's attire by *Shekhinah*, who also provides him with an entourage in the battle against the *Sitra Achra*.¹⁸ In the earthly realm, Joshua fulfills the role of *na'ar* warrior to Moses, outfitted as a warrior and accompanied by a regiment of soldiers. This parallel places Amalek as the earthly embodiment of the *Sitra Ahra*, who is also being accompanied by Samael,

¹⁷ Zohar, 2:65b, Matt, Daniel, Zohar IV, p. 359.

¹⁸ Tishby, p. 628.

akin to the Israelite warriors being accompanied by Joshua-as-Metatron. Moses is then the divine husband, *Shekhinah* the divine wife, and Joshua the divine son. This trinity of Male-Female-Male becomes quickly complicated by the roles each aspect plays according to the Zoharic understanding of gender in relation to the spiritual realm.

The gendered aspect of the male-female dichotomies within the Godhead becomes particularly complex with Joshua-Metatron brought into the mix. No longer is there a clear divide between masculine and feminine. The male (*Tiferet*) and female (*Shekhinah*) of the divine realm have been conjoined in order to bring about Metatron, the one who is able to cross all boundaries, from left to right, and above to below. Metatron, as the offspring of the syzygy between *Shekhinah* and Moses-*Tiferet*, affects a potent change in the *Shekhinah*. The Zoharic understanding of the nature of many of the acts traditionally understood to be within the realm of a mother greatly shifts the gender dynamics of the *sefirot*.

In his book *Circle in the Square*, Wolfson addresses the complex question of gender dynamics in Zoharic cosmology, but leaves Metatron out as a piece of the puzzle. Wolfson writes:

only when the distinctive bodily characteristics of the woman are subjugated by the spirit that is related to the masculine can she receive the overflow (or the Holy Spirit) from the divine realm. Ironically enough, according to the complex gender system of theosophic kabbalah, conception, pregnancy, giving birth and nursing are all seen as male traits. A perfect homology thus exists between the divine and the mundane spheres: just as the divine feminine can assume the qualities of the male, so too the earthly biological woman can be gendered as masculine. One may speak, therefore, of a kind of spiritual transvestism that is logically implied by kabbalistic myth: a woman actualizes her fullest potential *qua* human when she is adorned with the qualities of the male, realized principally through conception and procreation.¹⁹

¹⁹ Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 104.

Motherhood, then, takes on a masculine quality. As *Shekhinah* morphs into the masculine through her conception and bearing of the *na'ar*/child, Moses-as-*Tiferet* and *Shekhinah* are subsumed into the newly unified set correlation. The *Shekhinah*'s gender-flip affects multiple changes. As conjuncted with Moses in this instance, the *Shekhinah* does not change Moses' gender, but rather, through the act of conception and birth, comes to conform to Moses' gender. As Wolfson writes, "The divine anthropos consists of the unity of the masculine and the feminine, but the latter is portrayed as an aspect of the former; that is, the two comprise the singular image of the body of the King."²⁰

The masculocentric view of Zoharic Kabbalism forces the traditional male-female gender relations of *Shekhinah-Tiferet* to break down. In order to maintain this distinctly gendered hierarchy which necessitates the masculine as progenitor, provider, and connector between the Divine and the mundane, the *Shekhinah* must become male. This agrees with the Kabbalistic conception of the masculine/male, circumcised anthropos as the conduit for connection between the celestial and earthly.²¹ Our once male-female-male triad of *Tiferet-Shekhinah*-Metatron becomes the Unified male-female into male, birthing and suckling the third male aspect. The relationship between the Metatron-*Shekhinah-Tiferet*, becomes fully masculinized.

Joshua-Metatron as the divine son and warrior also requires that he traverse both the left and right side, the evil and the good, the *Sitra Ahra* and the Divine realm. In order

²⁰ Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 82.

²¹ Wolfson, Elliot, "The Body in the Text," in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 95.3 (2005), p. 487.

to do battle with the *Sitra Ahra*, he must be able to encounter it, whereas Moses who is fully present in the Divine realm as *Tiferet* can not be tainted, in this moment, by an encounter with the *Sitra Ahra*. Joshua-Metatron's ability to traverse, and maintain, the boundaries fulfills a particular role within the Kabbalistic cosmology unmet elsewhere. These boundaries becoming malleable and traversable, though, also mean that the clear lines of masculinity and femininity become less clear for the character of Joshua-Metatron.

Metatron's status as the child of *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah* is the catalyst for *Shekhinah*'s transformation from female to male. In this conjunction, Metatron initially embodies the outcome of the union of opposites. This is to say that in *Tiferet*-Moses and the *Shekhinah*'s union is the combination of male and female. In their productive relations, the *Shekhinah* is transformed to male in order to bear the union's offspring - a balance of male and female, right and left, up and down; one able to traverse through the many different aspects of the celestial and earthly realms rather than being relegated to one portion. Metatron's status as in-between-all-things allows him to traverse the lower and upper worlds, and as embodied in Joshua, allows Joshua to be able to both communicate with Moses, be in tune with the goings on in the physical realm, and to battle the *Sitra Ahra*-as-Amalek and Samael.

Moses being in *Tiferet*, and the *Shekhinah* rising to join him, also creates a union of these many different emanations, but this union is purely in the celestial realm. This celestial union is different from Metatron's ability and role. Moses' occupying a higher rung precludes him from truly interacting directly with the physical world, or with the

Sitra Ahra, as we will see below. Joshua-as-Metatron's capacity to traverse through the physical world, the *Sitra Ahra*, and the divine *sefirotic* realm allows him to receive Moses' commands and to enact them on the physical plane. The necessary disconnect Moses undergoes in order to be united with *Tiferet* problematizes his ability to actually lead the Israelites, and Joshua's role as Metatron once again comes in handy when the Israelites' behavior has lowered them below Moses' ability to perceive due to the influx of the *Sitra Ahra* into the *Shekhinah*, and therefore the Israelite camp.

In *parashat Vayekhel*, the different rungs occupied by Joshua and Moses generate a gap of perception between the two of them. Moses' occupying the higher rung of *Tiferet* disconnects him both from the lower realm of the earthly plane and from the ability to perceive the impact of the *Sitra Ahra* on both the earthly and *sefirotic* realm. In this moment of the *Sitra Ahra*'s influx, we see the nature of removal caused by Moses' occupying the higher rung of *Tiferet*, and the ability for Joshua to not only interact more directly, but perceive and communicate more effectively from the lower to the higher:

[D]id Joshua hear and Moses not hear? Rather, until now Joshua did not know, whereas Moses did. If so, what is ברעה (be-re'oh), *as it shouted*? Well, it is spelled ברעה (be-re'oh), with a ה (he), for that sound was on the Other Side. And Joshua, who was the face of the moon, perceived that the sound was on the side of (ra'ah), evil; immediately, he said to Moses, 'A sound of war in the camp!' ... Come and see: In the four directions of the worlds, at the turn of the four seasons, a voice arises, and by that voice is aroused an arousal of the Other Side. That arousal of the Other Side interposes between one voice and another, and light of the voice below darkens, because light of the voice above does not reach the voice below. Then that arousal interposing between one and the other is called Serpent who seduces the woman, and it seizes the light. And that voice is *a sound of war*, קול רעה (qol ra'ah), an evil sound, and this is ברעה (be're'oh). Therefore Joshua heard, and not Moses, because that evil had seized light of the moon, to which Joshua was linked; whereas Moses, who was linked to the sun, did not hear. The light of all Israel darkened because of that evil clinging to them.²²

²² Zohar 2:195a-b, Matt, Daniel, Zohar VI, pp. 109-110

In this segment the relationship between Joshua, Moses, and gender becomes far more impactful, as it directly affects the ability of the characters to interact with the world and each other. Moses, at this time conjoined with *Shekhinah* in *Tiferet*, loses *Shekhinah* to the Serpent. Joshua, who is still “linked” to the moon, meaning *Shekhinah*, is able to transit from the lower to the higher to reach Moses. His role as *na'ar*/Metatron, the traverser of all, allows him to both hear the “sound of war,” which was echoed throughout the feminine (represented by the *he* of *be-re'oh*), and to perceive the Serpent which has infiltrated via the feminine. The Serpent’s ability to seduce the woman/feminine (*Shekhinah*) away from *Tiferet*/Moses relies upon a return to the “natural” gendering of *Shekhinah* as female.

The Serpent’s seduction “weakens” *Shekhinah* from her earlier masculinized concatenation to *Tiferet* and Metatron. This shift in her gender and role leads her to be disconnected from her rightful place in unification and conjugation with *Tiferet*. Secondly, Joshua has individuated as Metatron, no longer reliant upon *Shekhinah* for sustenance, and is identified as the “face of the Moon,” a much closer relationship to, and possibly embodiment of *Shekhinah*. No longer continuing to be identified solely as “*na'ar*,” Joshua’s connection to the *Shekhinah*’s masculinized role as breastfeeding the *na'ar* has shifted, and her masculinity had passed. Joshua’s individuation as the offspring of this conjugation allows him to be sensitive to but unaffected by the *Shekhinah*’s departure. Joshua-as-Metatron’s ability to unify the right and the left through his having been partially tainted also gives him insight into the *Sitra Achra*’s actions.

Due to the sound echoing throughout the *Sitra Ahra*, and Joshua's ability to traverse through both sides as Metatron, Joshua is not only able to perceive the danger, but is also able to traverse the gap between the *Sitra Ahrah* to *Tiferet* in order to alert Moses to the issue in the camp. His role as Metatron has not completely slipped away as the conjunction between Moses and *Shekhinah* has, but instead his role becomes all the more important. Now that Moses/*Tiferet* and *Shekhinah* have parted ways, Moses no longer has his connection to the lower realm, and is existing primarily in the higher realm.

Moses' having linked with the higher rung of *Tiferet* causes him to be caught unawares by the *Shekhinah*'s departure and the *Sitra Ahra*'s arrival. Joshua's ability to remain grounded in the earthly plane, while still being in contact with Moses and the *Shekhinah*, affords him knowledge unavailable to Moses. As the "face of the Moon," Joshua occupies a spot between the upper realms and the lower realm, and is similarly sensitive to the influence of the *Sitra Ahra*, as it enters into the world through its interaction with *Shekhinah*. Because of Moses' higher state, he is unable to hear the voice of evil below - that is, his notice of the sin of the Golden Calf is only brought about by Joshua calling attention to it, and calling him down from his higher realm to witness the debauched affair going on below.

The *Sitra Ahrah*'s interposition between the two planes blocks out the transmission of communication between the two planes, and in particular deafens Moses' ears to the goings on below. Yet Joshua, because of his intermediary placement and his relationship with the *Sitra Ahra* as Metatron, is able to both hear the din of evil below,

and to rise up to communicate the happening to Moses. The *Sitra Ahra*'s manifestation of the Serpent impacts the capacity for Moses and *Shekhinah* to remain conjoined, and therefore blocks Moses' ability to hear the sound in the camp. Further, Israel herself is darkened by the arrival of the Serpent, meaning that in that moment, Moses was left completely unattached to Israel. Joshua's intermediary position allowed him to both hear the cry and alert Moses to it.

Joshua-as-Metatron's ability to traverse all aspects of the Kabbalistic cosmology gives him extra access to portions even invisible to Moses. This does not, then, mean that his power becomes greater than Moses - Moses' purity within *Tiferet* clearly raises him above - but his usefulness in this role of conjoined offspring, is based in his ability to traverse and transcend the many realms. This is augmented by the gender dynamics inherent to the Zoharic reading of the relationship between male and female within *sefirotic* conjunctions. Metatron, and therefore Joshua's, role as the intermediary between good and evil, upper and lower, and masculine and feminine, is necessary in order for there to be movement within the plot of the story, as well as movement amongst the different realms. Without a conduit for blending the different, separate aspects laid out in the Zoharic cosmology, the strict divisions between these realms would make it impossible for them to interact, or at least to interact as fully and with such complexity as they do in the above selections. They would also be more likely to lend themselves towards a dualism inherently opposed to the underlying monotheistic theology.

This necessity for blending in order to interact underlies the main thrust of Wolfson's understanding of both gender and the relationship between the right and the

left in the Zoharic hermeneutic. Although Wolfson does not touch upon Metatron's role in his unpacking of the Zohar's tension between dualism and monism, Metatron plays a significant part in the relationship between gender and the various realms depicted within the Zohar. Metatron's role within the Zohar's cosmology will be further investigated in my next essay.

Metatron, Rung of the Righteous Redeemer in the Zohar

The Zohar's Kabbalistic pleroma of the *sefirot* is the cornerstone of its hermeneutical approach. These ten *sefirot* are established and accepted, as is their counterpart in the *Sitra Ahra*, yet an extra piece of this pleroma remains outside of the orbit of these divine aspects - Metatron. Metatron, an entity which has floated in and out of Jewish cosmologies and mysticisms since the Classical period, finds a new space within the mystical Jewish tradition based in the Zohar's understanding of the relationship between the World Above and the World Below. Using Moshe Idel's understanding of sonship, and applying it to the texts of the Zohar addressing Metatron, this paper will investigate the rung of Metatron as a space or role inhabited by many different characters within the Zohar, and the implications of this on the relationship between the World Above and the World Below.

Metatron's role in relation to the *sefirot* has been of difficulty since the two ideas came in contact. Even prior to the Zohar's deeper development of the *sefirotic* tree, Metatron was given a liminal position between the world and the *sefirot*.²³ The difficulty Judaic thought has had with Metatron's position can be traced back to the Talmud. In the famous rabbinic journey to Pardes, Rabbi Elisha Ben Abuya enters the courtyard of God in the heavens, and is said to "cuts the shoots," generally assumed to have something to do with him becoming an apostate.²⁴ The Talmud elaborates upon this phrase, claiming that the "cutting of the shoots" was Ben Abuya's belief that upon entering the courtyard,

²³ Abrams, Daniel, "The Boundaries of Divine Ontology: The Inclusion and Exclusion of Metatron in the Godhead," in *Harvard Theological Review* 87:3, (1994). p. 310; 312

²⁴ BT Hagigah 14a

he saw Metatron sitting, causing him to view Metatron and God as separate powers in heaven. This misunderstanding led to his apostasy, and Metatron's punishment.²⁵ Daniel Abrams views this scene of conflict as underlying the difficulty and care with which many mystical thinkers in the Jewish tradition dealt with Metatron, and led to his finding a space between the more established ten sefirot and the lower world itself, in order to avoid others making the same mistake as Ben Abuya, that there were "two authorities in heaven."²⁶

Moshe Idel takes the problematic issue of Metatron's place in the cosmos and frames it in another light - that of sonship. For Idel, Metatron plays a role in the relationship between God and humanity as a "theophoric mediator,"²⁷ which is to say a conduit between the divine and the earthly. In essence, Metatron stands as a heavenly role which the righteous can attain in order to both raise themselves up to a higher level of divinity, and to bring the divine down to them.²⁸ In doing so, the righteous individual attains what Idel refers to as sonship, "the attainment of closeness to the divine realm (as represented sometimes by a hypostatic son, or even sometimes as someone who brings the divine upon him/herself, establishing a contact), through either righteousness, or intellection, or by performance of rituals (understood as magical or as theurgical). Sonship also stands for forms of intimacy, of what Peter Brown felicitously called

²⁵ BT Hagigah 15a

²⁶ Abrams, p. 298

²⁷ Idel, Moshe, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, Bloomsbury Academic; (April 20, 2008) p. 18

²⁸ Idel, pp. 125, 129-30

‘mystical solidarity’, or even for the union of a dimension of human personality to the supernal realm.”²⁹

By combining these two understandings of Metatron’s role in the cosmos of Jewish mysticism, we find a mode of ascension available to the righteous. If, as Abrams asserts, Metatron assumed a place slightly below that of the lowest *sefirah* as the one who receives the efflux of the *sefirot*, which continues to link him to the rest of the Godhead, and, as Idel asserts, Metatron is in itself a role inhabited by others, namely righteous human beings who have achieved ‘mystical solidarity’, this means that the rung of Metatron within the divine pleroma is a place reachable by humans that shepherds their ascent into divinity. That is, by taking on the role of Metatron, the righteous can both ascend to higher heights within the pleroma and channel the efflux of the divine realm into our own realm. This understanding of the rung of Metatron plays a diverse role in the Zohar. By investigating the way in which the Zohar both explains the genesis of Metatron and the impacts those taking the role have had on history, and will have on the future, we will outline the nuances of the Zohar’s use of the role of Metatron within its cosmology.

To begin the investigation of Metatron in the Zohar, we will attempt to compile a comprehensive mytharc used to describe the cosmological origins and significance of Metatron. In 2:277a,³⁰ the Zohar teaches that Metatron is the axis for holy offerings being raised from above and below, and that his secret origins are based in his being a cover, compared to the *kapporet* in the *Mishkan*, between the two realms. He is framed as the

²⁹ Idel, p. 67.

³⁰ All translations used from Matt, Daniel C., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009.

link between the supernal heavens issuing from *Binah* and culminating in *Malkhut*, and existing as the *kapporet* between the *sefirot* above and the world below.

This is the first hint of Metatron's redemptive nature within the mytharc of the Zohar. The *kapporet* itself is the locus for rituals designed for the redemption and purification of sin,³¹ and placing Metatron as the supernal *kapporet* locates him as the conduit for redemption, the "theophoric mediator" between God and humanity in relation to sin. In this passage, the name "Metatron" is spelled two ways - one with a *yod* and one without. The one with the *yod*, according to the passage, refers to "a spread," concealing the supernal six *sefirot*, and linking them below. According to Matt, in this passage, "This alternate spelling apparently alludes to Metatron as an embodiment or manifestation of *Shekhinah*, while the shorter spelling alludes to the transformation of Enoch (who is "linked below") into Metatron."³² These two separate referents unite to create two ends to the same extension from above to below, defining Metatron as not only a character, but as a mode of transmission of redeeming overflow from the union of the *sefirot* above, and of transporting the righteous up into the *sefirot* as well. This understanding of Metatron as redemptive conduit becomes clearer as we step into the midrashic reading of Metatron into the Biblical narrative.

The beginning of the need for Metatron's role is situated in the sin of Adam. Earlier on in the Zohar, when Rabbi Shim'on teaches, in reference to the story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, that, "When Adam

³¹ Matt, Daniel C., *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009, Vol V, p. 346-7, n. 444.

³² Matt, Vol. 5, p. 348, n. 449.

sinned by eating from the tree, he transmogrified that tree into a universal source of death; he caused a defect, separating the Woman from Her Husband. The fault of this defect stood out in the moon, until Israel stood at Mt. Sinai, when that defect disappeared from the moon, enabling Her to constantly shine.”³³

The separation of *Shekhinah* from *Tiferet* here creates a space for the necessity of a Metatron. As we will see below, the defect in the moon (meaning *Shekhinah*) is a point of reference often associated with Metatron. Similarly, Metatron is referenced and active throughout the narrative portion surrounding the revelation at Mt. Sinai, when the defect disappears momentarily, prior to the sin of the Golden Calf. His relationship to the *kapporet* of the Ark of the Covenant comes into play, and gives Rabbi Shi'mon another chance to elucidate the Companions about the nature of Metatron.

As Rabbi Shi'mon is addressing the building of the *Mishkan*, he returns to the story of the genesis of Metatron by referencing Adam's sin, and beginning the trek towards redemption. We read, “Through awe of walking in truth on earth, [Enoch] found the radiance that Adam lost, a radiance concealed in the Garden of Eden. It rose above and did not settle in its place, not being complete on all sides - perfection below was lacking, lost through the sin of Adam. Descending below, it was concealed in the trees of the Garden, spreading there to all sides of the Garden, until Enoch son of Jared was born. When he was born, he was located near the Garden, and that radiance began to shine within him; he grew in holy anointment, and this sparkling radiance settled upon him. He

³³ 1:53a-1:53b

entered the Garden of Eden and found there the Tree of Life and its boughs and fruit; he scented it and grew tranquil in the spirit of radiant life.”³⁴

In this beginning of the retelling of the Metatron story from earlier literature, we note the necessity of a link between the lower and upper realms. Due to the defect caused by Adam in the lower realms, the perfection below that would allow direct transmission between the realms was lost. In order to regain this link, a new entity had to be made - Metatron, who would serve as the “*kapporet*” between the upper realms and lower realms. Enoch, who has traditionally been associated with Metatron, is the locus of the development of this link, which will be aided on high by not only God, but also the angels.

The Zohar continues: “Messengers, heavenly angels, came and taught him supernal wisdom. They gave him a book that had been hidden in the Tree of Life, and learning from it, he came to know the ways of the blessed Holy One and devoted himself to Him, as is written: *Enoch walked with God* (Genesis 5:24), [277b] until that radiance was perfected within him. Once the radiance was perfected below, it sought to ascend to its place and to manifest that perfection in the mystery of Enoch.”³⁵

After having begun the process of redeeming the world through rediscovering the Garden of Eden, the radiance therein, and not erring by eating of the fruit, Enoch has started not only his own ascension into Idel’s sonship but the creation of a new rung: that of Metatron. His ability to walk in the ways of God, and the teachings which he received from the angels, help him to gain the perfection lost in the sin of Adam, and to rebuild the

³⁴ 2:277a

³⁵ 2:277a-b

link between God and humanity. He reaches the ideals of sonship by gaining closeness to God through his righteousness in walking in the garden without eating the fruit, his intellection of the book found therein, and in devoting himself to the ways of God, which may be a reference to ritual action. In other words, Enoch's attainment opened a gateway between the lower and upper realms that had been severed by Adam's sin, and will, as we will see below, transform him from man into the concatenation of Metatron - a human become divine:

“One day he entered the Garden of Eden and was shown secrecies of the Garden. He left that book, and all that he saw, outside; it is concealed among the Companions. Afterward the radiance clothed itself within that garment to be revealed above, to be an embarrassment to all those who had antagonized their Lord, insisting that the human being should not be created in the world. As is written: *and he was no more, for God took him* (Gen. 5:24) - *and he was no more* in this world; *and he was no more* as he was in this world. *For God took him* - in another image, in which he is constantly (*na'ar*), a youth. This mystery we have already established: (*Hanokh la-na'ar*), *Train the youth, according to his way* - to conduct all of the worlds. *Even when he is old, he will not swerve from it* (Prov. 22:6) - for it is constantly inside him and he turns back into *na'ar*, youth. For *Hanokh*, Enoch, is interwoven in the image of the hidden world; he is within the Throne of his Lord, carrying out missions in the worlds. When the world is under Judgment, he emerges and is called Metatron, master over all supernal powers. The old man is a youth, entering from world to world, and wrath subsides.”³⁶

³⁶ 2:277b, cf. 1:37b; 1:57a

In this segment we are given the full apotheosis of Enoch into Metatron. By ascending from his human state to his divine state, Enoch creates a conduit between the worlds allowing for the rung of Metatron to persist. Enoch becomes the head angel, transformed into a new, heretofore unseen being, or rung, that bridges the gap between angels and humans.³⁷ Although he is ancient, he remains a youth. The association he has with youth will be the cornerstone upon which the Zohar rests its development of Metatron, based in earlier mystical texts which identify Metatron with youth. This also helps to provide a biblical connection between Enoch and Metatron, as is suggested in the quotation from Proverbs. We are also given a clear aspect of his role: bringing redemption from the powers of *Din*, Judgment, in his wake as he accompanies God and blunts the edge of God's judgment. The *Shekhina* is known to be susceptible to the powers of *Din*, which allow the *Sitra Ahra* to flourish through her.³⁸ Below, as we continue, we will see Metatron as the aspect of the *Shekhina* that can ward off the influx of *Din*.

In this telling of the ascension of Enoch and the formation of Metatron, we have a clear example of Idel's view of sonship. The righteous one is adopted by God, and is granted ascendancy and an appearance and role close to that of God. As the *kapporet*, the limen between the upper and the lower that aids in redemption, Metatron's role comes into formation. Having succeeded in redeeming the sin of Adam, and gaining the role of Metatron, Enoch affects a phase change in the arrangement of the heavenly beings. Humanity now has a representative above, which in and of itself brings shame to the

³⁷ Matt, Vol. 5, p. 350, n. 453

³⁸ Green, Arthur, *A Guide to the Zohar*, Stanford University Press, 2004, pp. 50-51.

angels. This role, though, is not filled only by Enoch, and has other attributes attached to it which we will discuss below. First and most importantly, we must investigate the relationship between Metatron and *Shekhinah*.

The Zohar tells us that Metatron has another aspect - that of the son of *Shekhinah*.

It reads:

“A single youth, extending from one end of the world to the other, emerges from between Her legs with sixty strokes of fire, decked in his colors. This one is empowered over those below in Her four directions. This is the youth who holds 613 supernal keys from the side of Mother, dangling from the flaming sword girded on his loins. That youth is called (*Hanokh*), Enoch, son of Jared in those *baraitot*, as is written: (*Hanokh*), Train, the youth in the way he should go (Proverbs 22:6)...In various nuances he is called *son of Yeredi*, *Jared*, as we have established. But come and see! *Son of Yered*, literally, for we have learned: Ten *Yeridot*, descents, *Shekhinah* made to earth - all established by the companions. Beneath this one stands *heivat bara*, beasts of the field- beasts outside, precisely!”

³⁹

This semi-apocalyptic vision of *Shekhinah* giving birth to Metatron is told by Rabbi Shi'mon to his disciples in reference to the full splendor of *Shekhinah* being revealed during the time of Solomon's reign. We see Metatron literally becoming the son of *Shekhinah*, holding the keys to heaven, and the flaming sword (a reference to the sword guarding Eden). Here, though, we gain another aspect of his role. Not only is he the son of *Shekhinah*, and the ascended Enoch, but he is the referent for the aspect of God, and *Shekhinah*, which descended fully to earth ten times in rabbinic tradition: “(1) Once in the Garden of Eden; (2) once at (the time of) the generation of the Dispersion; (3) once at Sodom; (4) once at the thorn-bush; (5) once in Egypt; (6) once at Sinai; (7)

³⁹ 1:223b

once at the cleft of the rock; (8) and (9) twice in the tent of Assembly; (10) once in the future.”⁴⁰

Each of these instances involve an act of the limen between the worlds being traversed - with the sin of Adam, with God intervening to destroy the Tower of Babel, with God intervening to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, with God intervening to call to Moses from a miraculous, never-consumed bush aflame, with God personally stepping in to enact a plague, with God revealing his full glory to the people Israel, with God revealing his personal body to Moses, with God dwelling in the tent of Assembly (there is some debate as to which two instances this refers to), and once in the future, meaning the messianic era. The reference in the above passage to his relationship to the supernal beasts below him is also echoed at another point in the Zohar, in which he is described as being the figure Ezekiel sees moving to and fro above the beasts and the wheels.⁴¹ Although this is not referenced as one of the *yeridot*, it is another clear example of a moment in which the divine realm crosses over into the common realm so as to be personally identifiable and experienced by a human.

In each of these, the divine-human boundary is crossed by God in order to take actions, many of which are wrathful, and therefore from the side of *Din*. Similarly, in each instance God is referred to in the masculine. It may be that these ten descents of the *Shekhinah* are interpreted to include Metatron either due to the gender difficulties of the grammar, or with these gender difficulties being used as a jumping off point by the

⁴⁰ Pirkei de Rebbe Eliezer, Ch. 14:1, trans. Gerald Friedlander, London, 1916, via Sefaria.org

⁴¹ 1:21a

Zoharic midrashists in order to further cement the role of Metatron. Either way, we see here the blending and obscuring of the difference between the *Shekhinah* and Metatron, first by identifying him as emerging from between her legs and therefore granting him sonship and inclusion within the oneness of the *sefirotic* tree that must remain a single entity, and second by mixing the *yeridot* as having been undertaken by both.

The relationship between the *Shekhinah* and Metatron is one that is fraught with a confusion of the boundaries between the two. Within the difficulty the Zohar has with delineating one from the other we find an echo of the issue described out above through Daniel Abrams, in that the Zoharic authors struggle with maintaining a unity of God amidst a diverse *sefirotic* pleroma. This struggle becomes all the more powerful when Metatron, a character with a history of creating confusion about the nature of Jewish monotheism, is involved. His identification with the *Shekhinah* gives the authors of the Zohar a symbolic palette to paint with, though, allowing for a method of describing the existence of Metatron without “cutting the shoots.”

In order to maintain Metatron’s connection to and reliance upon a higher deity, and therefore keeping him within the overarching union of the one divinity, the Zohar’s authors identify Metatron and *Shekhinah* as in relationship in a way similar to, but not identical to, *Tiferet* and *Shekhinah*. Rabbi Shi’mon shares with his disciples, “This is the youth who is *a poor child*, possessing nothing of its own. Why is he called *youth*? Because he is renewed, for the moon renews herself constantly, and he is constantly youthful. *Poor* - as we have said, *And wise* - because Wisdom dwells within him.”⁴²

⁴² 1:179b

Interpreting this passage, Dr. Daniel Matt writes, “Metatron shares this designation of *Shekhinah*; both are empty or poor until filled from above. Metatron depends entirely upon *shekhinah*, while She too has nothing of Her own but absorbs and reflects the light of *tif’eret* and the entire array of higher *sefirot*, as the moon reflects the sun. But Metatron and Shekhinah are not simply parallel; Shekhinah manifests as Metatron.”⁴³

Here we see the relationship between *Shekhinah* and Metatron blending the figures once again, the designations of the *Shekhinah* of possessing nothing of her own, and being constantly renewed are also projected upon Metatron. This identification goes even further, stating that *Shekhinah* dwells within Metatron, creating a twofold reflection of *Tiferet* from *Shekhinah* into Metatron.

Matt’s view that *Shekhinah* manifests as Metatron takes the blending of the figures to an ultimate conclusion: Metatron is a hypostasis of *Shekhinah*, manifested in the lower realm, inheriting his light from above via *Shekhinah*. If we are to accept this interpretation, the above understanding of Metatron as a role occupied by the righteous gains a new valence. In the description of Enoch’s transformation, we find that his path towards ascension was found through the cultivation of a radiance within himself, the radiance cast off by Adam when he sinned, and which led to the separation of the divine masculine and feminine. We find here, in Metatron’s formulation as a manifestation of *Shekhinah*, a reimagining of the original ascension. The radiance which Adam cast down, and which Enoch discovered and manifested within himself, is identified as the

⁴³ Matt, Vol. III, p. 86-87, n. 9

Shekhinah herself. Metatron, then, becomes not a vague concatenation of human and divine, but instead a human who has embodied the *Shekhinah*. The terminology within the Zohar's view of the Enochic ascension, that of the garment, is found throughout the body of Jewish mystical literature when describing embodiment.⁴⁴ Therefore in this aspect Metatron may be viewed as the role, title, or rung of a human being who has embodied *Shekhinah*.

Attaining the role of Metatron is not static, though. Metatron, rather than a role one only attains and inhabits, may be seen as a pipeline between the divine and the earthly realms, not unlike other forms of sonship identified by Idel in later mystical writings inspired by the Zohar.⁴⁵ We learn that Moses and Aaron both inhabited this place, but continued ascending, while Samuel never rose above the rung of Metatron, implying he, too, was one of the righteous who embodied the *Shekhinah*, but was unable to continue the ascension through Metatron into the higher rungs of the *sefirot*.⁴⁶ This embodiment takes place multiple times throughout the the Zohar in more explicit terms with a number of characters, beginning with Enoch, hinted at in Jacob, and culminating again in Joshua.

Jacob, although eventually attaining the rung of *Tiferet*, passes through the rung of Metatron. In this instance of attaining Metatron, Jacob is compared to Adam, and just as Enoch before him, redeems the world from Adam's sins. This continuum from Adam to Enoch is noted by Idel,⁴⁷ and in the Zohar through Jacob is included due to his

⁴⁴ Idel, *Ben*, p. 60

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 426; 440-445

⁴⁶ 2:148b

⁴⁷ Idel, *Ben*, p. 414.

resemblance of Adam. In retaining the blessings from Isaac, he overwrites the curses God placed upon Adam and Eve. His act of righteousness and redemption brings about the unification of Divine Male and Female, “from above and below in a single bond.” This reunification brings Jacob into the role of Metatron as he ushers in these blessings, bridging the divide between the Lower and Upper worlds.⁴⁸ Jacob becomes the limen of above and below, the one who is able to traverse the two realms and bring blessings across the boundary. He continues rising above, though, to embody the realm of *Tiferet*, rather than staying in the rung of Metatron.⁴⁹ Jacob is propelled towards the work of ultimate unification and redemption via the rung of Metatron. This trajectory does not stand alone as a mere example of ultimate righteousness. Seeded in Jacob’s achievements the Zohar tracks the eventual redemption through the Messiah,⁵⁰ another aspect of the role of Metatron which we will address later. Jacob’s continued ascension leads to the full unification of the pleroma,⁵¹ but the attainment of the rung of Metatron can lead to lesser sefirotic rungs as well. As we will see with Joshua, one of the key characters associated with Metatron in the Zohar, the role can be a redemptive one in and of itself.

Joshua, referred to as a youth in the *Tanakh*,⁵² and therefore easily associated with Metatron, is a defining embodiment of Metatron during the story of the Exodus. Joshua is tasked with the role of Metatron by Moses in the battle against Amalek. In this role, Joshua becomes the warrior, protecting the *Shekhinah* from below, while Moses couples

⁴⁸ 1:143a

⁴⁹ 1:143b

⁵⁰ 1:144a

⁵¹ 2:176a

⁵² Ex. 33:11; Num. 11:28

with her above. This revelation of embodiment leads to a battle to be unrivaled in history until the coming of the Messiah, and will change the shape of the character of Joshua, who will from this time on play the role of both attendant in the *Mishkan*, and therefore in constant connection with the *Shekhinah*,⁵³ and also continue his role as the warrior to reconquer the land of Israel, a redeemer of the people who will re-fashion the covenant between Israel and God through a re-circumcision of the Israelites.⁵⁴

As the *Mishkan* was finished, and the *Keruvim* constructed, the role of Metatron passed from Joshua to the *Keruvim*, who themselves are considered “youths,” male and female, balancing the gender of Metatron and *Shekhinah* on earth and bringing about divine favor.⁵⁵ Joshua, having attained the role of Metatron in the time in which Moses needed him as representative of *Shekhinah* in the battle against Amalek, and further in response to the sin of the Golden Calf, moves on from the rung of Metatron to attain the rung of *Hod*.⁵⁶ This movement of the righteous through Metatron continually fills the pleroma with these righteous souls, with the rung of Metatron conveying their spirits above. Along with this, we see the rung or role of Metatron as conveying down the *Shekhinah* to be embodied within the righteous, who then inevitably through their righteousness ascend reunifying the pleroma by transiting up the Tree of Life and carrying the *Shekhinah* with them.

As the embodiment of *Shekhinah*, Metatron serves multiple roles both heavenly and earthly. As the heavenly Metatron he serves as the watchman or guard over the

⁵³ 2:65b-2:66a; cf. 2:143a; 2:278a

⁵⁴ 1:95b

⁵⁵ 2:278a-b

⁵⁶ 1:21b

Shekhinah, which he has embodied in the lower realm. As the embodiment of *Shekhinah*, often identified with the moon, he rules the night,⁵⁷ and also acts as a *hazan* to Israel, calling Israel to prayer.⁵⁸ In these instances, Metatron dwells above, rather than below, awaiting a place to be prepared for him below. Becoming the locus for his embodiment is accomplished by the first person to appear in the synagogue in the morning, who then “stands on the rung of the Righteous One together with *Shekhinah*...[and] attains a high ascension.”⁵⁹

This description of the relationship between *Shekhinah*, the earthly Israel who is called to prayer, and Metatron plays out in the time of the Zohar and ostensibly in our time today, as opposed to being a retroactive mystical *midrash* cast upon the Biblical story. Metatron is awaiting the day of the final *yeridah* - the coming of the Messiah and his final unification of the sefirot - which itself is described in great detail within the Zohar.

The Zohar reads: “Once the Temple was destroyed, light darkened: the moon is not illumined by the sun; the sun withdraws from her, so she is unillumined...But of that time when the time arrives for the moon to shine, what is written? See, My servant *yaskil*, shall shine.”⁶⁰

Since the destruction of the Temple, the *Shekhinah* has been withdrawn, or defective, in comparison to the time of the Temple. This passage correlates the *Shekhinah*'s waxing to a new embodiment of Metatron, often referred to as servant. The

⁵⁷ 2:131a

⁵⁸ 2:131b

⁵⁹ 2:131a

⁶⁰ 1:181a-b

passage continues to describe Metatron's role as the servant as the conduit for resurrection of the dead, a signifier of the coming of the Messiah.⁶¹ Through Metatron's actions on earth as Messiah, cultivating the righteous souls for resurrection, "The world will be renewed, as originally, and of that time it is written *YHVH will rejoice in His works* (Psalms 104:31)."⁶²

From his beginnings as the radiance cast off by Adam and rediscovered by Enoch, through his active participation in the final redemption of the world, Metatron plays a central position in the mythical history of the Zohar. As with all symbols in the ever-flowing Zoharic corpus, fully identifying Metatron is challenging. His role as character and as conduit, as personality and station, weaves throughout the corpus of the Zohar from Creation to The World that is Coming. In essence, Metatron stands in as a symbolic referent for the passage between humanity and the divine; for the ability of the earthly to become divine, and vice versa. Metatron in the Zohar, then, is a clear example of sonship as delineated by Idel.

As a final note, it would be negligent to not mention the relationship between Jesus and Metatron. The two divine-human redeemers occupying the role of son contain many similarities that could be quite difficult for a contemporary Jew to reckon with. The truth of the relationship between the two is anything but clear. According to Idel, the idea of Jesus as the incarnation, or embodiment, of God is rooted in Jewish sources of sonship prior to the Jesus movement, which came to be projected upon the historical figure of

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² 1:182a

Jesus.⁶³ In contradistinction, Peter Schafer suggests that Metatron, especially that of 3 Enoch, written many centuries before the Zohar, may have been a Jewish response to the Christian Jesus-as-God-embodied.⁶⁴ He continues on to state that, in fact, the figure of Metatron allowed for a vision of future Messianic divine redemption by a man imbued by God without having to give credence to the Christological idea of a man born of virgin birth by God. The conception of Metatron allows for a human (namely, Enoch in this instance) to ascend to divinity as a representative of humanity in Heaven to eventually also redeem humanity as the Messiah.⁶⁵ Daniel Boyarin writes on the subject that, “As opposed to Enoch, who will be in those last days the Messiah Son of Man, Jesus already is. As opposed to the Son of Man flying on the clouds who is a vision for the future, Jesus has come, declare the Gospels and the believers.”⁶⁶

The Zohar’s presentation of Metatron combines these three different takes on the relationship between Metatron and Jesus. As with Idel’s view, the Zohar harkens back to traditions predating Christianity in 1 Enoch. The idea of Enoch ascending and taking on the form of Metatron certainly predates Christianity, but it is impossible to suggest that the Zohar’s view of Metatron is unaffected by its authors’ thoroughly Christian surroundings. As Rabbi Dr. Arthur Green points out, the Zoharic view of the *Shekhinah* is clearly influenced by the Christian understanding of the Virgin Mary.⁶⁷ If this is so, how could these same Kabbalists not also be influenced by Jesus as a reference point for

⁶³ Idel, *Ben*, p. 25.

⁶⁴ Schafer, Peter, *The Jewish Jesus*, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 143.

⁶⁵ Schafer, pp. 148-9

⁶⁶ Boyarin, Daniel, *The Jewish Gospels*, p. 101

⁶⁷ Green, Arthur, *Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflections on a Kabbalistic Symbol In Its Historical Context*. AJS Review, 26, p. 49.

Metatron? In particular, the Zoharic imagery of Metatron “constantly suckling” at the *Shekhinah*⁶⁸ clearly evokes the Medieval imagery of Jesus nursing at Mary’s breast.

Similarly, Idel points out that it is on Jesus’ face that the glory of God is reflected in early Christian sources,⁶⁹ which is mirrored in the Zoharic statement that “Joshua was entirely the face of the moon, in all its mysteries.”⁷⁰ Further, the similarity between Jesus’ Hebrew name (Yeshua) and Joshua’s (Yehoshua), who serves as the example par excellence of Metatron in the Zohar, can not be ignored.

As Progressive Jews often for whom the red line of insider and outsider in a community is belief in Jesus, how are we to understand the role of a figure so similar to, and even inspired by, Jesus? The Zohar gives us a different mode of relationship with our particularly Jewish human-like embodiment of Divinity than that of the Christian Jesus. Rather than belief in Metatron being a central piece of his relationship to humanity, as belief in Jesus as the Messiah is for Christians, (or in belief in any individual who has already come as the Messiah, as Boyarin so clearly states), we may view Metatron as a state of attainment, more than a deity to stand in relation to. Though there is a hint of historical Jewish worship of and prayer to Enoch and Metatron,⁷¹ we need not think of that as the only, or even the typical, mode of relation. Instead, based on the Zohar’s presentation of Metatron, we find that each of us has the capacity for righteousness that may lead us into taking the rung of Metatron the redeemer for ourselves.

⁶⁸ 2:66a

⁶⁹ Idel, *Ben*, p. 25

⁷⁰ 2:278b

⁷¹ Idel, *Ben*, p. 653

Beyond the development of Metatron as inhabited by multiple acknowledged righteous individuals from Biblical history, the Zohar's presentation of Metatron as attainable by the righteous today is striking. For the mystics of the Zohar, Metatron was not merely a character or figure in the past, like Jesus, allowing for the likes of Enoch, Jacob, Joshua and others to attain higher heights. Rather, we today, through acts of piety such as arriving early at synagogue, can work to attain these heights as well. In doing so we not only live up to the examples set by those who came before us, but pave the way for the coming of the Messiah by ushering Metatron into our world. The hopefulness for humanity contained within this character and station is singular, and can be inspirational even today to those seeking a direct relationship with God and Jewish history in their own lives.