

Preface

This volume opens in the middle of Exodus immediately following the revelation at Mount Sinai. The first chapter features a famous narrative about Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose, and an old donkey-driver they encounter while journeying on the road. This old man seems like a complete ignoramus, who pesters those around him with nonsensical riddles, but he turns out to be a sage in disguise, conveying mysteries about the journey of the soul, especially reincarnation.

The wise donkey-driver discovers these secrets by decoding the biblical laws of slavery in the Torah portion *Mishpatim*. As he probes and penetrates the verses of *Mishpatim*, the old man plunges into profound depths of meaning and finds himself struggling to comprehend and expound: “Oh, old man, old man! What have you gotten yourself into! You have entered the great sea—you must row and escape from there!” Later, he expresses ambivalence about revealing the precious secrets he has retrieved. “Now what should I do? If I speak—this hidden mystery must not be revealed. If I do not speak, these worthy ones will be left orphaned of this mystery.”¹

In the midst of their adventure, the old man enthralls the rabbis with a lyrical, troubadour-like parable about Torah, which he depicts as a beautiful maiden hidden in her palace. A devotee lovingly circles the palace and catches a glimpse of Torah as she peeks from her window. Gradually she reveals more of herself, and their intimacy grows.²

The entire splendid narrative became known as *Sava de-Mishpatim*—Old Man of (Torah portion) *Mishpatim*—and it forms an independent composition, distinct in both style and content from the bulk of the *Zohar*. Its account of the theory of *gilgul* (reincarnation or transmigration of the soul) represents the first extensive treatment of the subject in Jewish literature. Here, based on earlier kabbalistic tradition, the old man links *gilgul* with the biblical law of

1. See below, pp. 29, 46.
2. See below, pp. 33–36.

levirate marriage (*yibbum*). At times, his interpretive acrobatics become so complex that they seem to parody the notoriously difficult Talmudic tractate *Yevamot*, which is devoted to *yibbum*.³

The rest of this volume focuses mostly on the Dwelling (or *mishkan*), the portable sanctuary built by Moses and the Israelites in the Sinai Desert. For the authors of the *Zohar*, the *mishkan* symbolizes *Shekhinah*, the feminine presence of God who “dwells” on earth. The construction of the *mishkan* is intended to ensure Her intimacy with the people, and especially with Moses; thus She becomes known as *Kallat Moshe*, Bride of Moses.⁴

The authors are inspired by the colorful, sensuous array of raw materials listed for the Dwelling: *gold, silver, and bronze; blue, purple, and crimson, linen and goat hair; reddened ram skins, tanned-leather skins, and acacia wood; oil for lighting, spices for the anointing oil and for the aromatic incense; carnelian stones and stones for setting* (Exodus 25:3–7). Each of these elements symbolizes an aspect of divine being, all reflected in *Shekhinah*. Since Her Dwelling was the center of worship, the *Zohar* explores the theme of prayer and expounds not only biblical verses but also the text of various prayers, especially from the Sabbath liturgy. The individual words and even letters of such prayers correspond to spiritual potencies, which are stimulated and activated only by heartfelt human utterance. (One of these Zoharic passages would eventually be introduced into the Sephardic liturgy for Sabbath eve, where it became known by its opening word, *Ke-Gavna*.⁵)

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The volume concludes with *Sifra di-Tsni'uta* (the Book of Concealment), a brief, enigmatic, and poetic composition that includes a veiled description of God's body. Its six Aramaic pages convey the basic principles of Kabbalah in a highly condensed form, focusing on emanation, the delicate balance between male and female, and the process by which divine breath animates all.

Readers are advised to venture slowly into the Book of Concealment, which is both dense and cryptic. As the author concludes, “Until here, sealed and crowned is concealment of the King. Happy is one who has emerged, knowing its paths and ways!”⁶ The rich language requires such extensive interpretation that any commentary threatens to overwhelm the text. To enable readers to encounter the Book of Concealment on its own, unencumbered by numerous notes, I have first presented the translation alone, followed by the same text with commentary.⁷

3. On levirate marriage and reincarnation, see below, p. 38 and n. 108.

4. See below, pp. 291–92.

5. See below, pp. 251–52. *Ke-gavna* means “Just as [they unite].”

6. See below, p. 586.

7. The plain text of the Book of Concealment begins on p. 535. The text with commentary begins on p. 545.

The unique styles of both *Sava de-Mishpatim* and *Sifra di-Tsni'uta* remind us that the *Zohar* is not really a book, but rather a compilation of books—a body of literature comprising over twenty discrete sections written in a circle (or circles) of authors over many years, then gradually revised, edited, and compiled into what became known as the *Zohar*. In a genuine sense, the *Zohar* only became a book when it was printed in Italy in the sixteenth century.⁸

Professor Ronit Meroz of Tel Aviv University, whose work has dramatically advanced the study of the manuscripts of the *Zohar*, has generously shared with me the data that she has collected relating to hundreds of these manuscripts, along with her analysis. Her research has provided me with a panoramic perspective of the manuscripts, helping me to determine their reliability. She has also provided me with her list of manuscripts for each *parashah*. For all this, I thank her deeply.

The critical Aramaic text of the *Zohar* that underlies this translation can be found on the website of Stanford University Press.⁹

D.C.M.

8. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 85-138; Meroz's studies listed in the Bibliography; Huss, *Ke-Zohar ha-Raqi'a*, 43-139; Abrams, "The Invention of the *Zohar* as a Book"; Wolfson, "The Anonymous Chapters of the Elderly Master of Secrets."

9. The site is www.sup.org/zohar. For my methodology in constructing this text, see the website and Volume 1, Translator's Introduction, xv-xviii.