

Preface

This volume covers more than half of the *Zohar*'s commentary on the book of Leviticus. How does the *Zohar* deal with a biblical text devoted largely to animal offerings, grain offerings, and priestly ritual? Here these ancient laws and procedures are spiritualized—transformed into symbols of God's inner life. For example, the ascent offering, which was totally consumed on the altar, is known in Hebrew as *olah* (literally, "that which ascends"). In the *Zohar*, this symbolizes *Shekhinah*, last of the ten *sefirot* (divine potencies), who ascends to unite with Her beloved, the blessed Holy One.

The biblical narrative describes how two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, *offered alien fire before YHVH* and were immediately consumed in a divine blaze. Rabbinic tradition suggested various reasons why they were killed: they lacked the proper priestly garments, or had not ritually washed their hands and feet, or were drunk, or had refused to marry. For the *Zohar*, marriage enables one to imitate the divine union of male and female, and to stimulate that union above. By not marrying, Nadab and Abihu remained incomplete and unfulfilled. According to a related Zoharic passage, their ritual act failed because in their contemplation of the divine qualities they did not include *Shekhinah*. Without Her, God is incomplete.

One of the famous sayings attributed to the *Zohar* is "The blessed Holy One, Torah, and Israel are all one." As Isaiah Tishby has demonstrated, this precise wording never appears in the *Zohar*. However, included in this volume is a similar formulation: "There are three rungs, interlinked—the blessed Holy One, Torah, and Israel."¹

Also included in this volume is the remarkable image of the golden cord (or rope or chain), supposedly attached to the leg of the high priest before he entered the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur. At this crucial moment, the priest undertook the mission of securing atonement for the entire people. If he

1. *Zohar* 3:73a. See below, p. 490, n. 431. The three elements of this saying can appear in various sequences.

proved unworthy or performed the ritual improperly, he might die in the inner sanctum. In case he did, his fellow priests could drag him out by the golden cord without having to enter themselves, which was normally forbidden. However, the high priest's golden cord is never mentioned anywhere in the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, or any other extant source before the *Zohar*. Based on the *Zohar* (or on oral legend), this colorful motif entered Jewish folklore and became widely accepted; it also found its way into medieval art.²

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. For this, I thank her deeply.

I am grateful as well to Merav Carmeli, who continues to comb Aramaic manuscripts of the *Zohar*, preparing lists of variants. This precious material enables me to establish a critical Aramaic text, upon which this translation is based.

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I want to thank Dr. Jonatan Benarroch for preparing digital copies and precise lists of numerous *Zohar* manuscripts. My learned daughter, Michaella Matt, has offered invaluable assistance by conducting research in the Jewish National and University Library in Jerusalem. As with the preceding six volumes, Rabbi Joe Blair has composed the Index of Sources with meticulous care.

The critical Aramaic text corresponding to the first seven volumes of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* is available on the website of Stanford University Press. My brother, Rabbi Jonathan Matt, has kindly and meticulously edited a user-friendly version of this text.³

D.C.M.

2. See *Zohar* 3:67a; below, p. 444, n. 266.

3. The site is www.sup.org/zohar. For a description of the various online versions of the critical text, see the website. For my methodology in constructing this text, see the website and Volume 1, Translator's Introduction, xv–xviii.