

Preface

This volume covers the last third of the *Zohar*'s commentary on the book of Leviticus and the first third of its commentary on the book of Numbers. Among the notable passages is the discussion of the scapegoat on Yom Kippur, bearing Israel's sins, which is to be sent off *to Azazel into the desert* (Leviticus 16:10). Azazel is likely the name of a demon. Drawing on a midrashic source, the *Zohar* teaches that something must be offered to demonic powers in order to assuage them. Ignoring or simply opposing such negative forces is not always effective.¹

Leviticus includes a detailed list of the holidays. In discussing the festival of *Sukkot* (Booths), the *Zohar* introduces the custom of inviting *ushpizin* (holy "guests") into the sukkah. On each successive night of *Sukkot*, a different guest is invited: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, Joseph, and King David. These biblical heroes represent respectively the seven lower *sefirot* (divine qualities), from *Hesed* through *Shekhinah*. But unless one also invites a poor or needy person into his sukkah, the holy guests flee.² Based on the *Zohar*, the custom of inviting the *ushpizin* spread to wider circles under the influence of Lurianic Kabbalah and has become an integral part of the celebration of *Sukkot*.

Toward the end of this volume appears a famous passage about the apparent meaning of Scripture as opposed to its deeper layers. Although this is a frequent theme in the *Zohar*, here we find a particularly radical formulation in the name of Rabbi Shim'on: "Woe to the person who says that Torah intended to present a mere story and ordinary words! For if so, we could compose a Torah right now with ordinary words, and more laudable than all of them." Of course, Rabbi Shim'on proceeds to explain that beneath the superficial sense of Scripture lie countless hidden secrets. But even so, it is startling to hear him say that, were this not the case, he and his associates could write a better Torah.³

1. See *Zohar* 3:101b–102a; below, pp. 145–50.
2. See *Zohar* 3:103b–104a; below, pp. 163–68.
3. See *Zohar* 3:152a; below, pp. 518–22.

The most remarkable section of this volume is *Idra Rabba* (The Great Assembly), extending over nearly 150 pages. In this dramatic narrative, Rabbi Shim'on and his nine Companions gather to explore the deepest secrets of God's nature. Taking turns, they describe two divine configurations: *Arikkh Anpin* (the Compassionate One) and *Ze'eir Anpin* (the Short-Tempered One). There is a state of emergency, because due to human misconduct the world is vulnerable to divine wrath. The mystical heroes set out on a dangerous mission to restore the balance in the upper worlds. By penetrating the hidden realms and conveying their insights, they seek to enhance God Himself. They aim to stimulate a radiant flow from the Compassionate One, which can soothe the aroused and irascible divine force and thereby save the world. The quest is perilous, and three of the Companions tragically perish.

The *Idra Rabba* is filled with descriptions of the divine face: the forehead, ears, eyes, nose—and especially the beard. Appropriately, this section appears in *Parashat Naso* of the *Zohar*, immediately after a discussion of the Nazirite. According to the Bible, a male Nazirite was forbidden to cut his hair or trim his beard. This emphasis on the beard reflects the fact that in many cultures it represents masculine beauty and virility. According to the Talmud, “The glory of a face is the beard.” Based on the *Zohar*'s extended description of the divine beard, kabbalists (and subsequently Ḥasidim) insisted on not trimming their own beards at all—or even removing a single strand—since the human beard symbolizes the divine beard, each strand of which conveys the flow of emanation.⁴

The detailed descriptions of the divine face and beard can be seen, in part, as a reaction against Maimonides, who insisted on God's incorporeality and tried to explain away the numerous anthropomorphisms in the Bible. For the kabbalist, Maimonides' God has become too abstract. The author of *Idra Rabba* seeks “to restore God's face.” Yet, at the same time, this mystical writer is indebted to Maimonides—for example, in equating God's eyes with divine providence. This unique and challenging Zoharic composition combines abstract philosophical insights with graphic physical depictions. At times, the depictions seem intended to outdo—or perhaps to parody—those of *Shi'ur Qomah*, the ancient portrayal of the divine body.⁵

4. On the location of *Idra Rabba* immediately after the discussion of the Nazirite, see *Zohar* 3:127b; below, pp. 316–17, and nn. 82–84. In fact, some kabbalists refer to *Idra Rabba* as *Idra de-Nazir* (*Idra* of the Nazirite). See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 121.

On the beard's significance, see below, pp. 346–47, n. 82; pp. 349–50, n. 99. The Talmudic statement on the glorious beard appears in BT *Shabbat* 152a, in the name of Rabbi Yehoshu'a son of Korḥah.

5. On the element of parody, see Volume 5, p. xii. On restoring God's face, see Liebes, “Lehahazir la-El et Panav.”

Regarding Maimonides, one could argue conversely that he actually *freed up* the kabbalists to use vividly graphic descriptions of God, because—in light of his explanations of meta-

Kabbalists and scholars have wrestled with *Idra Rabba* ever since it first emerged over seven hundred years ago in medieval Spain. I have borrowed freely from their insights and commentaries, to which I often refer in the notes to this volume. The work of Yehuda Liebes has once again proven invaluable, especially because he has often focused on this astonishing narrative.⁶

Dr. Melila Hellner-Eshed generously shared with me her current research on *Idra Rabba*, which includes a forthcoming annotated Hebrew translation (co-authored with Avraham Leader) and an accompanying analytical study. These have deepened my understanding of the text and its significance. Sitting with her both in Jerusalem and in Berkeley, delving together into *Idra Rabba*, was a joy.⁷

I wish to thank Professor Ronit Meroz of Tel Aviv University, whose work has dramatically advanced the study of the manuscripts of the *Zohar*. She 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 on the manuscripts, helping me to determine their reliability.

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.

I want to thank Dr. Jonatan Benarroch for preparing digital copies and precise lists of numerous *Zohar* manuscripts.

The critical Aramaic text corresponding to the first eight 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.⁸

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phoric imagery—the new descriptions would be understood as no more or less literal than the biblical ones. In effect, Maimonides gave license to such artistry: “Every mention of seeing, when referring to God, . . . refers to intellectual apprehension. . . . If, however, an individual . . . consider[s] that all the [figures in the Bible] . . . are indicative of sensual perception . . . , there is no harm in his thinking this.” (*Guide of the Perplexed* 1:4–5). I would like to thank Rabbi David E. S. Stein for this insight.

6. For surveys of modern research on *Idra Rabba*, see Sobol, “Ḥativat ha-Idrot be-Sifrut ha-Zohar,” 4–9; and the first chapter of Hellner-Eshed, *Qeri’ah ba-Idra Rabba*.

7. In the notes I refer to the annotated Hebrew translation as “Hellner-Eshed and Leader, *Idra Rabba*,” and to the analytical study as “Hellner-Eshed, *Qeri’ah ba-Idra Rabba*.” Both of these titles are tentative.

8. 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, pp. xv–xviii.