

Two Introductions

Studying the Zohar: A Unique Book and a Unique Motif

The *Zohar* is a work of radiant illumination and murky mysteriousness. It is unarguably the most precious and significant work of Jewish mysticism, but it has undergone periods of both prominence and obscurity. As Gershom Scholem noted, its “place in the history of Kabbalism can be gauged by the fact that alone among the whole of post-Talmudic rabbinical literature it became a canonical text, which for a period of several centuries actually ranked with the Bible and the Talmud.”¹ Yet, from the beginning, it has encountered skepticism and opposition as well as homage and reverence. Its very origins are disputed. Even the most traditional view sees the *Zohar* as a text that was lost or hidden for over a thousand years before it miraculously reappeared in late thirteenth-century Spain. And the *Zohar* went into another period of eclipse during the modern period, only to enjoy a renewed upsurge of devoted attention and study, by various groups and individuals with varying interests and agendas, in our own time.²

We are privileged to live at a time of flourishing scholarly attention to this great work. The *Zohar* is being studied for its theosophical teachings, its literary qualities, its approach to mystical experience and thinking, its psychology and anthropology, its hermeneutics, its halakhah, and its historical references. It has been or is in the process of being translated and retranslated into Hebrew, European languages, and English. No other kabbalistic classic has elicited so much devoted and intensive study.

The purpose of this book is to focus on a unique feature—for a kabbalistic work—of this unique composition: it introduces its teachings with statements such as: “Rabbi A and Rabbi B were walking along the road. Rabbi A opened: . . .” What follows is the disclosure of the zoharic teachings that

are the basic substance of all study and research into the *Zohar's* treasures. But why does the *Zohar* choose to present its teachings in this seemingly unnecessary way? What is the function or meaning of its recurrent “stories” of this kind?³

To a degree, this question is related to the issue of the role of narrative in the *Zohar*. Alongside of and interwoven with its mystical teachings, it contains many strange, moving, and enchanting stories. Why are they included? One of the first to notice this question was Rabbi Judah Aryeh de Modena (1571–1648), who suggested that the stories be read as “entertainments,” intermezzos partaking of the aesthetic and the humorous. They afford some relief from the intensity of the *Zohar's* more profound concerns. Of the author and composition of the *Zohar*, de Modena wrote:

I mean that he acted shrewdly [*hithakem*] so that the reader would not get fed up with the heavy riddles and mysteries bound and bunched together. Therefore, he mixed in with these . . . stories to no purpose, such as Rabbi Pinḥas and Rabbi Shim'on were walking on the road, they came to a field, they saw an animal, they saw a snake, and many miracles and wonders—not that the matter is unworthy of being believed—that God did wondrously for His devotees in what happened. . . . How beautiful, how pleasant they are! So that I therefore praise and extol the composition of the *Sefer ha-Zohar* as to its style over everything composed in our nation from three hundred years ago until now. Indeed, they show and inform everyone that they are not the work of either Tannaites or Amoraites, but rather are by a sage, beloved later stylist.⁴

While this comment is fascinating as an example of de Modena's talent for ambiguity, inasmuch as he succeeds in both praising and diminishing the stature of the *Zohar* at the same time, what is of interest for the present are his two insights: he is perhaps the first clearly to express the idea that the narrative approach of the *Zohar* is a problem for critical readers, and he intuits that understanding this problem can shed light on the question of the composition of the *Zohar*.⁵ For him, the introduction of this playful element is a sure indication of the late composition of the work.

Let us focus on de Modena's first insight. It is important to appreciate that by saying that the stories of the *Zohar* are a problem, he is not making an obvious claim. In the history of the study of the narrative portions of the

Zohar, and of the walking motif in particular, the explicit questions: “What are these stories and narrative fragments *doing* in this mystical text? Why are they there?” are conspicuously absent.

Of course, many zoharic stories have been noticed and commented on. But it must be said that the fact that the *Zohar* is, in its narrative proclivities, very different from other mystical works, whether prior, roughly contemporary with it, or even subsequent, was not regarded as a concern by traditional commentators. When we turn to modern scholarship, we see that it has only gradually put the issue of the zoharic narratives on its agenda. Scholem was interested in the matter for the evidence that it might give regarding the *Zohar*’s knowledge of Israel and its place of composition. Otherwise, he was content to subsume the issue under the topic of pseudepigraphy—a common tack taken by esoteric writers; it was thus not to be considered a problem at all.

It is not necessary here to review the important contributions of such scholars as Yehuda Liebes, Ronit Meroz, Michal Oron, Mordekhai Pachter, Naomi Tene, Isaiah Tishby, Aryeh Wineman, and Elliot Wolfson to the study of zoharic narratives. The fundamental discoveries and insights of these scholars notwithstanding, none of them has given sustained attention to the commonest, best-known element of zoharic narrative—its recurrent use of the walking motif. The element of recurrent “walking stories” occupies a paradoxical place in studies of the *Zohar*. Everyone knows that it is there, but no one until now has subjected the phenomenon to sustained interrogation. The motif has been taken for granted. In general, it can be said that traditional and critical readers of the *Zohar* have shared the assumption that the meaning of the walking motif is to be found within the array of the *Zohar*’s pietistic and theosophical concerns.

Undoubtedly, these are the important concerns of the *Zohar*. But, in addition, Yehuda Liebes has highlighted the celebratory approach of the *Zohar* toward innovation and creativity. And contemporary scholars such as Daniel Matt and Arthur Green have emphasized the vitality expressed through the walking motif. It is seen as indicative of the *Zohar*’s delight in elusive creativity and openness to spiritual inspiration from all sources. In a way this

approach can be seen as a more sophisticated and internalized application of de Modena's entertainment model.

These valuable scholarly interpretations should be taken primarily as appreciations of the walking motif rather than as analyses of it.⁶ The motif has not been isolated as a problem, but has been subsumed within the known agendas of the *Zohar*.

But when we turn our attention to the motif itself, we cannot escape its paradoxical and problematic nature. In order to properly analyze this motif in the *Zohar*, we must ask certain fundamental questions: How should the motif be defined? How many times does it occur? Where in the *Zohar* is it found?

To better understand what we are looking for, it may be helpful to begin with stating what we are *not* looking for. For example, a text that tells us, "Rabbi A went to see Rabbi B and heard some teaching there," is not relevant to our topic.⁷ The walking serves to get us somewhere. This is a conventional literary device and is not problematic. Our concern is aroused when this motif appears even though it could just as well not be there.⁸ Then we encounter the paradox of the insistent presence of a literary gesture that seems to have no meaning. In a certain sense, the presence of the walking motif as a meaningless element has contributed to its invisibility; once it is noticed, its apparently meaningless presence is all the more troubling.

In this light, it is paradoxical to call the walking motif a "motif" at all. Consider the work done in folklore studies regarding motif categorization. Stith Thompson describes what makes for a motif: "A *motif* is the smallest element in a tale having a power to persist in tradition. In order to have this power it must have something unusual and striking about it."⁹ How special is the act of walking? By this criterion, can it be a motif? What salience endowed it with significance and led it to be retained as a narrative element in the *Zohar*? Thompson says:

It must be more than commonplace. A mother as such is not a motif. A cruel mother becomes one because she is at least thought to be unusual. The ordinary processes of life are not motifs. To say that "John dressed and walked to town" is not to give a single motif worth remembering; but to say that the hero put on his cap of invisibility, mounted his magic carpet, and went to the land east of the sun and west of the moon is to include at least

four motifs—the cap . . . , the carpet . . . , the magic air journey . . . , and the marvelous land. . . . Each of these motifs lives on because it has been found satisfying by generations of tale-tellers.¹⁰

Thompson explicitly rules out “walking to town” as a motif because it is too commonplace an activity. Why would anyone feel the need to preserve such a superfluous detail in a larger narrative?¹¹ For example, there are many places where the *Zohar* emphasizes how important it is to learn Torah while on the road. Yet the Torah that is taught “while Rabbi A and Rabbi B were walking on the road” is more often than not isolable and quotable without any reference to the walking itself.

The walking motif is thus fraught with paradox. It really should not be a motif at all. And it really should not be in the *Zohar* in the first place. Still, the zoharic authorship insists on employing this negligible motif over and over. Furthermore, the “walking stories” are not really stories or narratives either. As we shall see, they do not commonly function to further the instruction or the plot of the drama being told. To be precise, to refer to the *Zohar*’s “walking stories” is not to refer to a collection of narratives, but to narrative shards or slivers found liberally embedded throughout the main body of the *Zohar* (the *guf ha-Zohar*). By embedding these storytelling phrases in its chain of mystical homilies and discourses, the *Zohar* turns the latter into speeches embedded in these “walking stories,” rather than free-standing teachings. Are these narrative fragments to be seen as alien trace elements in this strange corpus of works called the *Zohar*, or are they integral to defining it? By inadvertence or intention, readers have often ignored or even dislodged these slivers from the zoharic body, apparently without concern for causing pain or damage to it. But, in doing this, can we be sure that no injury has been inflicted, or that something vital has not been lost?

Where are these narrative shards located? As a body of work, the *Zohar* should be thought of as a library, rather than as a book. It comprises many literary units whose delineation, correlation, and composition into “the *Zohar*” is a matter of continuing scholarly discussion.¹² In cataloguing the walking texts throughout the *Zohar*, it becomes clear that there are certain gaps in its pages, where the motif is not found. These gaps include some of

the most significant sections of the *Zohar*. Stories of traveling associates do not appear in the *Idrot*, the *Sifra de Tzeni'uta*, the *Heikhalot* sections, *Raza de Razin*, *Rav Metivta*, or the *Sabba de Mishpatim* sections.¹³ The many walking texts of the *Zohar* are thus concentrated in only a few of the literary units that comprise the zoharic library. Chiefly, they are found in the main body of the *Zohar*. But they are also found in relative abundance in the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* and other sections in *Zohar Hadash*. In that volume the walking narratives are absent from the sections on the Chariot Vision and the Song of Songs, *Qav ha-Middah*, and *Sitrei Otiyyot*.

The paradoxical nature of the motif, its ubiquity and invisibility, is reflected in this pattern of its distribution. The *Sifra de Tzeni'uta*, *Idrot*, and *Heikhalot* texts have been seen as the defining sections of the zoharic project.¹⁴ Yet the motif is absent from these most significant, profound, and central portions of the *Zohar*. On the other hand, the motif is centrally located as a constant element in the main body of the *Zohar*, and its presence is already abundant in the earliest layer of the *Zohar*, the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*. This dichotomy conveys a message about the place and meaning of the walking motif. When dealing with the most sensitive and esoteric theosophical teachings, especially those bearing on the divine image and structure, the zoharic authorship has no use for the walking motif. But the use of the motif is frequent and abundant outside of these sections. Furthermore, the hypothetical separation between the *Zohar's* mystical content and the walking motif is strengthened when we notice that the motif is common in the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, the early layer of *Zohar*, which is characterized by a less mystical approach than later strata. This would indicate that the impulse to use this motif does not initially come from a desire to attach it to the transmission or experience of esoteric theosophical or theurgical truths. Perhaps, then, the inclination to subsume the walking stories into the known concerns of this mystical encyclopedia should be resisted.

If this is so, what alternative truths, great or small, are we meant to discover when we delicately examine the zoharic corpus for these glancing slivers of narration? Toward what new apprehension, prosaic or sublime, might we be led if we follow these shards along the way?

*Spatiality and the Zohar:
Places, Spaces, and Movement in and through Them*

Rabbi Isaac of Acre, an early kabbalist, came to Spain in 1305.¹⁵ He heard of the recent appearance of a wondrous work, purportedly by the second-century sage Rabban Shim'on bar Yoḥai, but copied by Rabbi Moshe de Leon. Rabbi Isaac tells us that his attempt to see the manuscript was thwarted by the demise of Moshe de Leon. He reports that another person who had desired to acquire the original manuscript subsequently told him that de Leon's widow had denied that it was a copy of a book by Rabban Shim'on, saying:

Thus and more may God do to me if my husband ever possessed such a book! He wrote it entirely from his own head. When I saw him writing with nothing in front of him, I said to him, "Why do you say that you are copying from a book when there is no book? You are writing from your head. Wouldn't it be better to say so? You would have more honor!" He answered me, "If I told them my secret, that I am writing from my own mind, they would pay no attention to my words, and they would pay nothing for them. They would say: 'He is inventing them from his own imagination.' But now that they hear I am copying from Rabbi Shim'on son of Yoḥai through the Holy Spirit, they buy these words at a high price, as you see with your very eyes!"¹⁶

This work has become known as *Sefer ha-Zohar*—The Book of Splendor. It seems from Rabbi Isaac's story that the *Zohar* has been a book of magnetic attraction and mysterious elusiveness from the outset, and it remains one to this very day. But this story tells us even more. Various scholars have probed it for whatever it may say about the identity of the *Zohar*'s author. But that is not my interest. Neither is my focus, as it has been for some scholars, on the nature of Rabbi Moshe de Leon's act of writing. Was it some kind of mystical act of automatic writing or prophecy?¹⁷ Or was the reproduction of the ancient sage's words a task of sacred discipleship? Or was the dull work of copying from one page to another a daily act of drudgery? It will have to suffice simply to note the questions.

For our purposes, the interesting aspect of this story is what it suggests about the spatial world inhabited by the thirteenth-century mystic Rabbi Moshe de Leon, since he was regularly engaged in what was very possibly a profound religious and mystical experience.

Where are such experiences meant to take place? Traditionally, they are located in the real or imaginal Temple, in the *beit midrash* (house of study), the master's private room, near a natural or artificial body of water, on a mountain, or in a secluded spot in the forest. We are used to thinking about these intense experiences as "taking" place in—that is, gravitating toward or producing—sacred spaces.

Yet, as described in this story, Moshe de Leon's practice of writing out the *Zohar*—whether as a boring pecuniary act, or as the exalted expression of mystical illumination—took place in the de Leons' cramped apartment, while Mrs. (not Ms.) de Leon did the cooking and the cleaning. A different spatial reality is presented here. We are forcibly reminded that mystics live in real time and space. While we are convinced that the essential thrust of mystical thought and practice is to transcend, sanctify, or transform mundane reality, this scenario reminds us that Moshe de Leon's activity was undertaken within the familiar domestic world of clutter and grime, of clearing away a clean space for writing against the encroachments of one's own stuff and that of others. Moreover, this is a space that is hardly imbued with a sacred aura. Instead, it is filled with conversations and even arguments and misunderstandings between the writer and his spouse. The subjects of their disagreements were not theological doctrines and the kabbalist's desire for *unio mystica*. They were the very mundane issues of reputation and finances, themselves perhaps expressions of more intimate frustrations, disappointments, and exasperations.¹⁸

The story serves here to trigger consideration of a question regarding religious and mystical cultures in general, and specifically the religious culture exemplified by the *Zohar*.¹⁹ Is it possible for such cultures to account—to themselves—for the vast realm of human experience that is not controlled by religious values—the realm of the mundane as such? And if it is possible, in what ways might they do this? This is a serious question for a religious culture, because it is in the nature of a religious culture such as mystical Judaism to conceive of itself as containing the true and all-encompassing understanding of and relationship to reality—that is, the total truth about all reality.

Another way to ask this question is to explore the ways in which such a religious culture might account for the spatial dimension of living. Mircea

Eliade proposed that religions map out space in a very specific way. He conceived of all truly religious experience as definitive and transformative of space and gave us the very powerful model of the sacred center:

When the sacred manifests itself in any hierophany, there is not only a break in the homogeneity of space; there is also revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the unreality of the vast surrounding expanse. The manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world. In the homogeneous and infinite expanse, in which no point of reference is possible and hence no *orientation* can be established, the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center.²⁰

This is counterposed to profane experience, described by Eliade in this way:

The profane experience, on the contrary, maintains the homogeneity and hence the relativity of space. No *true* orientation is now possible, for the fixed point no longer enjoys a unique ontological status; it appears and disappears in accordance with the needs of the day. Properly speaking, there is no longer any world, there are only fragments of a shattered universe, an amorphous mass consisting of an infinite number of more or less neutral places in which man moves, governed and driven by the obligations of an existence incorporated into an industrial society.²¹

Eliade thus contrasts the premodern religious person with the modern profane person, “*living in a desacralized cosmos.*”²² While the latter moves about among neutral places, *homo religiosus* desires “to move about only in a sanctified world, that is, a sacred space.”²³

This has been a useful and very influential conceptualization of the spatial orientation of religious people, but it is patently inadequate as a description of historical religious experience. Every person, no matter how religious or mystical, cannot help but live in the homogenized, desacralized cosmos of mundane space. Though such a situation may be explicitly viewed as a scandal to be overcome, or, perhaps, simply as an existential perversity better skipped over in silence, it never does go away. Is there, then, even in the totalizing project of the religious mystic, room for an acknowledgment of the vast stretches of nonsacralized, homogeneous, humdrum space that we all live in.

It cannot be easy for a religious culture such as that of the Spanish Jewish mystics to sustain such an acknowledgment for any length of time. This is because, given their totalizing thrust, cultures such as this will try either

to co-opt such spaces or to expunge them. Mundane space is both ontologically unreal and temporally fleeting. The eschatological dream is for the disappearance of the horizontal dimension of mundane space—or its collapse—into the sacred center, along with the further collapse of this sacred vertical axis into a point. The end result of this tendency is the necessary abolition of the horizontal and, finally, of spatiality itself. It would require an exceptional religious culture to allow for the mundane horizontal to coexist with the sacred vertical dimension. Indeed, in Eliade's model this would seem to be impossible.

J. Z. Smith has challenged Eliade's religious typology and topography. Instead of limiting the sense of the sacred to a vertical axis, Smith suggests that we distinguish

between those cultures which affirm the structures of the cosmos and seek to repeat them; which affirm the necessity of dwelling within a limited world in which each being has its given place and role to fill, a centrifugal view of the world which emphasizes the importance of the "Center" as opposed to those cultures which express a more "open" view in which the categories of rebellion and freedom are to the fore; in which beings are called upon to challenge their limits, break them, or create new possibilities, a centripetal world which emphasizes the importance of the periphery and transcendence . . . between a *locative* vision of the world (which emphasizes place) and a *utopian* vision of the world (using the term in its strict sense: the value of being in no place).²⁴

According to Smith, there is a more complicated play between notions of the sacred and the spatial dimensions of horizontal and vertical. Locative cultures work with sacred centers, but they operate horizontally. Meanwhile, the vertical thrust is powerfully evident in utopian cultures that do not privilege a sacred center. They express discomfort with orderliness and definitive placement. Instead, they valorize the adventurous, the disruptive and, ultimately, the explosion of all limitation, including, indeed, the cosmos itself.

Just as Smith denies that the concern for defining sacred spaces must derive from an exclusively vertical orientation to the sacred, he also allows the horizontal experience of everyday life to play a more positive function in constituting ritual.

For Smith, the significance of ritual is not, as Eliade thought, that it creates an opening to the realm of the sacred, the real and the powerful. Smith's notion of power is much more problematized: "Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the perceived fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be actualized."²⁵ Ritual does not connect its practitioners and spectators with a truer realm of power. Rather, ritual serves, by antithesis, to open up a more focused, attentive way of experiencing the significance of the mundane and the ordinary, "a significance which rules express but are powerless to effectuate."²⁶ Ritual is not an erasure of the profane, but its displacement: "*ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment where the variables (i.e., the accidents) of ordinary life may be displaced precisely because they are felt to be so overwhelmingly present and powerful.*"²⁷

This dimension of ritual that provokes consideration and thinking about the limits of mundane existence is characterized by Smith as "gnostic."²⁸ This suggests the possibility that salvation may be found, not necessarily in either the security of location or the excitement of escape, but in a combination of the two. The locative view of salvation seeks to confer on its perceived limits a quality of finality and stasis. The utopian view of salvation depends on the outright denial of limitation and stasis in the name of total freedom. The gnosis of ritual is in the untrammled contemplation of difference, of the limits of possibility. Rightly, I think, Smith perceives that if the elements of paradox, of absolute puissance and flat-footed impotence, are essential to ritual, then the realm of ritual must be understood to be closely related to the realm of the joke.

The question is whether this alternative conception can have any relevance to understanding a serious and intense mystical culture such as that which produced the *Zohar*? I would venture to say that most understandings of the religious aspects of zoharic culture—its theosophy, cosmogony, ritual theory, ethics, and so on, have been dominated by an Eliadian approach. The realia of the lives and actions of the *hevrayya* (fellowship)—their gatherings,²⁹ learning,³⁰ ways of speech,³¹ or eating³²—have been shown to have multiple

associations with the deepest esoteric concerns of the *Zohar*, so that all these actions have been conceived of as rituals of illumination, of ascent, of unification and theurgy. These studies and insights are compelling, even revelatory. But is it possible that there is something else involved as well? I ask this question specifically regarding the walking motif of the *Zohar*.

In discussing one instance of this motif, Noami Tene, in her study of zoharic narrative, offers a nuanced version of Eliade and speaks of the transcendence of the horizontal through ascent into the vertical. She writes:

The action in the fellowship takes place while walking together in the paths of the Torah. "Being on the way" is the main existence of the figures in the *Zohar's* stories, and is the great topic of the stories. The road is the main fabulatory thread of the stories, the mission and the destination both, in the sense of "way-arousal-fellowship." Much beyond the picaresque element, walking on the road facilitates the encounter with matter and its elevation . . . as an encounter without separation from the world.

The "road" cuts across accepted coordinates of space and time; for the figures live a priori in a reality with a dual foundation: in this world and, withal, in the upper worlds. For a brief moment the human is detached from earthly existence and passes over to survey the upper worlds with his body or his soul.³³

While this analysis is a valuable beginning, it makes assumptions that need to be questioned. It assumes that the roads walked by the Companions can be accurately labeled and valorized as "paths of Torah." It assumes that the walking motif alludes to a metaphorical situation of "being on the way," and it assumes that the walking is for the purpose of detachment from and transcendence of this world. It is through such assumptions that readers of the *Zohar* have tended to try to place the walking of the Companions into the category of mystical ritual practice. But what if their walking signals a utopian resistance to such a placement? Let us examine the plentiful, if fragmentary, material of the walking stories by dispensing with those assumptions and by beginning with a much simpler one: walking is our primary means of moving physically through space. Before it may become anything else, walking is a spatial practice. If we proceed with that premise as our guiding assumption, it is my hope, our journey will take us to new understandings.