

Introduction

When I was twenty years old I received as a gift, in honor of my forthcoming overseas trip, a copy of Gershom Scholem's *Zohar, The Book of Splendor: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah*. Sitting in distant Norway, I read in English a passage from the Zohar's opening to Genesis. I did not even know then in what language the Zohar had been composed. All I knew was that I wanted more. Since then—and now for many years, both within the gates of the Hebrew University and without—I have been blessed with the opportunity to study the Zohar with wonderful teachers and students alike. Like many other readers across the generations, I too have been seduced by the charm of this book. Indeed, as the years go by, I have become more and more attuned to the music of the wondrous world that emerges from its pages.

The Zohar is the jewel in the crown of Jewish mystical literature. It is unparalleled in terms of its acceptance, sanctity, and influence on the consciousness of generations of Jews—and all this despite its apparently sudden appearance toward the end of the thirteenth century. Its mysterious style, and the unique mystical-religious dimension it offered Jewish life, quickly captured the hearts and minds of its readers. The mythical-erotic creativity that burst forth from its pages turned the Zohar into a world

unto itself. Its surprising interpretations of biblical verses resonated in the souls of many, along with its deep insights into the human psyche—in both joy and grief.

Yet perhaps above all else, it was the worldview of the Zohar—through its establishing a reciprocal relationship between the world of humanity and the world of divinity—that left an indelible impression on the hearts of its readers. In this ever-changing, constantly evolving relationship, the divine flow seeks to be revealed and to saturate the world of humanity; and humanity, for its part, seeks to attain, to take part in, and to cleave to the divine world. Indeed, the Zohar created a view of reality that bestows upon humanity the ability and the responsibility to rectify, constitute, and beautify over and over again the figure of the Godhead—and in so doing, itself and the world.

The Zohar invites the reader on a journey through diverse secret worlds, a complicated game of hide-and-seek—pleasurable to be sure, yet requiring from the reader great effort to reveal its moves. Indeed, this invitation accounts in no small part for the Zohar's charm. The hero of the composition—Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai—became, both in the consciousness of the Zohar's readers and in Jewish popular consciousness, a mythological figure. His image as the great teacher, the mysterious man of God who reveals the light of secrets to the world, has served as a source of inspiration for creative minds, and for lovers of Torah and God alike.

The Structure of This Book

This book seeks to understand the special mystical dimension of the Zohar. *Mysticism* is a general term used for phenomena found in all the world's religions (and indeed outside of them). It refers to the human endeavor to develop ways of life and special practices in order to make present in one's life the unmediated experience of the holy or of God. In mystical documents from different religions, we encounter the conscious effort to experience dimensions of reality unattainable through the ordinary states of consciousness in everyday life. These modes, and the experiences that accompany them, are not usually the norm in the religious culture to which

the mystic belongs. Jews who live according to the norms of their religion—like Moslems, Christians, or Hindus—are not obligated by this more intensive form of religious life; the decision to adopt this life has been the heritage of individuals alone. In the Jewish tradition, this trend is known as the “secret way,” the “way of truth,” and it is hidden under the shroud of mystery. Yet Jewish literature has bequeathed us testimonies, from the Bible to our own day, about special people who in their lives fulfilled the desire for a special intimacy with the divine, and who left us accounts of their experiences.

The Zohar is not a theoretical book about the essence of Jewish mysticism. Rather, the Zohar is a mystical composition, parts of which were surely written in heightened states of consciousness, and parts of which seek, to my mind, to awaken the reader to a change in consciousness. The Zohar does not present us with a systematic presentation of mystical consciousness and mystical language. No invisible hand appears to guide the reader systematically through the chambers of divine wisdom. Nor can a teacher direct the new reader to a particular page of the zoharic text so as to learn “the mystical teaching of the Zohar.” The mystical aspect of the Zohar is made manifest among a collection of literary forms and expressions. It shines among them. In order to enter gently into the zoharic world—unparalleled in its richness and complexity—this book is divided into four parts, each of which endeavors to answer one of the following questions:

1. Who are the heroes of the Zohar?
2. What do they do?
3. Why do they do it?
4. What is the nature of their mystical experience?

Part I presents the world of the heroes of the Zohar—the great teacher Rabbi Shim'on bar Yoḥai and the circle of students around him. Together they are known as the Companions—in Aramaic, *Hevraya*. These chapters explore the way in which the Zohar depicts them, and also the way that they understand themselves as figures who together constitute the ideal mystical society.

Part II describes the life of the Companions and explores their distinctive life-style. Here we encounter the fact that in the Zohar the mystical dimension transpires and is experienced in the context of a group—not of a lone individual. We also analyze the Companions' two main spiritual practices: walking together on their way, with the special scriptural exegesis that accompanies such travels; and also the creative Torah study undertaken from midnight to dawn. Additionally, we explore the meaning of the appearance of wondrous characters as a means of generating mystical experience, and the collective journey of the entire mystical circle into different dimensions of reality and consciousness.

These first two parts, taken together, familiarize us with the heroes of the Zohar and with their unique life-style and practices. Only then will it be possible to turn to the major questions that this work seeks to explore.

Part III deals with the heart of the zoharic enterprise and with its essential aims. Three main issues are discussed here:

1. *The "secret" and its diverse meanings in the zoharic world.* Here we explore the structure of the zoharic homily that grants access to the "secret" dimension, and the nature of creativity from within this dimension.
2. *Awakening and arousal.* The greatest wish of the Zohar is to awaken the sleeping consciousness of humanity, and to arouse it to a more expansive and divine perception of reality. Such awakening in the Zohar is presented in various terms: as erotic arousal, as a longing to know the divine reality and to take part in (and to influence) this reality, and as the founding logic of the interrelationship between the human and divine worlds. Here we describe the means employed by the Zohar, both implicit and explicit, to call the reader to awaken.
3. *The zoharic understanding and interpretation of one biblical verse, "A river flows from Eden to water the Garden . . ." (Genesis 2:10).* This verse, I suggest, is a zoharic code, encapsulating a conception of the dynamic structure of divinity and consciousness. The purpose of this code is to signify to the reader how to awaken the special consciousness that the Zohar seeks to generate.

Part IV focuses on mystical experience itself and the language of its expression in the Zohar. Here I offer a detailed exposition of the language of mystical experience, the emotional and physical phenomena accompanying such experiences, as well as powerful testimonies of these extraordinary events. I discuss the main forms, metaphors, and symbols employed by the Zohar to describe mystical experience, the sources of this descriptive language, and their place and function within this experience. This analysis focuses on the expression of the experience as well as a discussion of its essence, out of the assumption that language and experience influence each other in a dynamic way.¹

This part builds to a climax: a model of the three main states of consciousness that underwrite zoharic mysticism and language, and that constitute the building blocks for the Zohar's experiential world.

I conclude the book with two chapters on related themes. One chapter explores the (im)possibility of expressing in language a personal encounter with aspects of divinity. The last chapter engages the zoharic dialectics around the question of writing, and on the constraints when moving from an oral world of mysteries into writing.

Methodological and Personal Reflections

The Zohar's literary style shuns systematic and didactic presentation. The authors of the Zohar chose to take existing kabbalistic ideas and experiences, already crystallized by their time into stable concepts and terms, and to melt them down anew—through a special mystical poetics—into a multivalent, flowing state. My exploring the mystical language of the Zohar, however, necessitated a process of isolation, classification, and definition of the different categories within this language. At times, this process aroused within me a sense of betrayal vis-à-vis the unique qualities of my subject matter. If indeed this flowing quality of mystical poetics characterized the Zohar (and it was this quality that aroused my deep fascination with the Zohar), then this research was likely to find itself working against the grain of the text! In order to avoid this pitfall, the

words of Michel de Certeau, the well-known researcher of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Christian mysticism, were never far from my mind:

The color overflows its designated space . . . [and] mocks my efforts to delineate, in the thicket of our data and analytic apparatus, the sequence of a narrative account whose subject is Christian mystics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Nevertheless, a demarcation is necessary, if only so that what overflows its borders may become visible. . . . The organization of a space, though necessary, will be seen to be unable to “stop” the subject matter. It places mystic speech within a set of codifications that cannot contain it. It is a form whose matter overflows.²

In this work, I have indeed isolated sparks and crystals from the zoharic river, but only to then allow them to be reintegrated into this river’s flow, hopefully without losing their original vitality. I hope that I have succeeded in this endeavor.

My attempt to explore the mystical language of the Zohar required that I pay particular attention to the way in which the Zohar expresses its daring world of religious experience in its own unique language, and without the use of terms from the fields of religion and philosophy—such as mysticism, theosophy, theurgy, phenomenology, and ecstasy. I present the results of my research both in terms of the internal language of the Zohar and in terms of the language of the critical research of mysticism, both Jewish and general.

From a methodological perspective, I have been aided by phenomenological and historical models in translating the concealed concepts and encoded language of the Zohar. In so doing, however, I have sought to maintain a level of caution so as not to fall into the trap of reductionism by imposing existing models on my subject matter.³ The difficult task before me, therefore, was to find the appropriate language, which on the one hand would illuminate the text using conceptual tools derived from critical research, yet on the other hand would neither violate nor conceal the Zohar’s unique language—whose power is derived precisely from its enigmatic form.

An additional task that lay before me arose from my desire to mediate the zoharic text—not merely to engage in interpretation. The Zohar invites mediation; its structure frustrates any who would seek out a coherent teach-

ing. Further, Aramaic, the language of its composition, is unknown to most people. Even with the help of Hebrew translations, the reader still finds herself before a complex structure of expressions and difficult-to-decipher symbols. One who is well versed in reading the Zohar knows that it speaks in a coherent manner, yet this is often concealed from the unseasoned reader.

In much of this book, I have sought merely to translate into contemporary language that which the Zohar conveys in its own words much better than I ever could. It was by no means easy to mediate the Zohar without adding description or interpretation to excess, especially considering the Zohar's invitation to taste—and drown in—its honey. This book reflects my attempt to understand and describe the zoharic text not merely as the carrier of ideas, but also as a work of art. In my endeavor to convey that which is hidden in the Zohar, the words of the essayist Susan Sontag were particularly inspiring:

The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art—and by analogy our own experiences—more, rather than less real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is, even that it is what it is*, rather than to show what it means. . . . In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of arts.⁴

The desire to mediate the Zohar also informed my decision to quote many zoharic texts in the body of this work, and to present them so that the reader may encounter them in a clearer fashion than via the Zohar's standard printed editions.

Years of careful Zohar study have led me to be amazed at the manner in which its heroes read the Torah. The complex and subtle play between the close reading of verses on the one hand, and an unbridled mystical, interpretive creativity that knows no bounds on the other, has no peer in the Jewish tradition. Sometimes, after reading a zoharic interpretation of a particular biblical verse, my understanding of that verse—even in its original biblical context—changes completely.

The question of how the Companions read the Torah, what they saw in it, what they heard from among its pages, and perhaps above all, how they gave themselves the freedom to interpret from its verses the ever-changing

world of divinity, was always before me. In order to better understand the zoharic art of reading Scripture, one must develop a broad and deep familiarity with the storehouse of Jewish literature preceding the Zohar: with the philosophical and kabbalistic thought of the Middle Ages, and more importantly with classical rabbinic literature—in whose form the Zohar is written, and which the heroes of the Zohar seamlessly assimilate into their own world. The reader of the Zohar must, however, be able to identify when the Companions are creating a standard kind of rabbinic midrash, and when they are boldly opening new paths of their own, in order to return afresh to view the words of Scripture from within their own unique horizon.

My desire to mediate the Zohar raised a particular problem with the syntax of my work. In addressing the density of Zoharic style, Moshe Idel has pointed out that the Zohar is a *symbolic composition* rather than merely a work that uses symbols,⁵ and Yehuda Liebes has shown how the relatively limited vocabulary of zoharic Aramaic contains a vast range of meanings functioning in diverse ways in different interpretive registers.⁶ I often found myself writing long sentences filled with secondary clauses, as I sought to highlight and explain the multiple realities represented by a given zoharic symbol. The endeavor to unfurl the zoharic map of symbols and referents revealed itself as nearly impossible. Perhaps this is how it should be. The syntactical awkwardness of parts of this work, therefore, reflects the inherent difficulty in clearly articulating the simultaneous multiple fields of meaning encoded in the Zohar's words.

My analysis of the self-reflexive dimensions of the Zohar, and the search for clues that might shed light on the world of its authors, necessitated a hypercritical reading of the text. If at times I may have looked for hints where none were to be found, I did so with a view to exploring one of the Zohar's most seductive aspects, its self-reflexivity. It seems to me that more was gained in this endeavor than was lost.

All researchers have a personal and intellectual biography and cannot but speak from within their own horizon—a horizon that greatly influences their relationship to the subject matter. The history of academic research in the field of Jewish Thought attests to this fact.⁷ Not only do I not assume

the possibility of a “pure objectivity” between researchers and their subject matter, but rather I am deeply interested in the way in which researchers’ personal and intellectual worlds are revealed between the lines of their scholarship. I therefore feel compelled to outline some of my premises regarding my object of study.

I have a deep, personal interest in mystical experience and the hidden potential of human consciousness. The extraordinary endeavor of mystics across the generations to seek out an enhanced human consciousness—experientially, sensorially, and emotionally—has long inspired me. I am particularly interested in the attempt to document mystical consciousness as it is expressed in the language of the Jewish tradition. The Zohar is a spiritually inspired work of the highest order, and to my mind the world it describes is neither closed nor lost nor confined to the Middle Ages. I experience its insights as a living invitation to a special religious consciousness as well as to exegetical, cultural, and religious creativity. In the Zohar I find spiritual possibilities that are capable of redeeming aspects of the Jewish tradition—of which I am a part—from fossilization.

Both as a woman and as a Jew who does not live according to *halakhah* (traditional religious practice and law as interpreted by Orthodox rabbis), I am excluded from the possibility of harmoniously—and uncritically—integrating into the world of the kabbalists. I am aware that this prevents me from hearing aspects of the Zohar’s musical rhythm, yet I have found this “limitation” to be fruitful in important ways. My stance vis-à-vis the text enables me to choose those elements of the Zohar with which I identify and reject others entirely. The texts I research are not authoritative in the sense that they require me to adopt a particular ideological position or necessitate any particular action on my part. In other words, I stand outside the boundaries of the “traditional participant” in this body of knowledge. I am free from having to submit to the power of the Zohar’s traditional authority.

I am well aware that the Zohar was written—as most Jewish cultural documents have been—by Jewish men for Jewish men. Yet, I find in it deep human wisdom that transcends boundaries of time, religion, and gender. I

have tried to approach the world of the Zohar on its own terms. That is, I give precedence to its voice over what I, from the standpoint of my contemporary worldview, might sometimes wish it would say. Only then have I wished to draw out, and carefully so, its contemporary relevance.

I engage the Zohar with great love and respect, yet I acknowledge that the historical-cultural horizons within which it was created are not my own. I come to the flowing river of the Zohar; and to use a biblical expression, I hope that I am bringing forth “living waters.”

The Basic Structures of the Composition and Its Performative Aspects

An essential feature of the Zohar is its desire to awaken a mystical-religious consciousness, more intense and different in kind from ordinary religious-spiritual experience. Even in those parts of the Zohar where we encounter detailed theosophical expositions on the structure of divinity and its dynamic being, such knowledge is not presented as theory alone. Rather, it is intended to enrich the life of the mystic.⁸ The desire to awaken such a mystical-religious consciousness is not directed solely at human beings for their own sake; rather the broader purpose of this awakening is to affect readers’ influence on the divine world, and to increase within this world the qualities of harmony and peace. This theurgic tendency—namely, the conscious intention of the human being to influence the world of the divinity through deeds and consciousness—works for the mystic in several ways at once:

- to satisfy a personal longing to actualize unmediated experiential contact with the divine;
- to fulfill a desire to participate in the great work of rectification (*tikkun**) of the world of humanity, and its redemption through the rectification of the divine world; and
- to satisfy an ambition to increase the fullness of divine light in the world.

* In the Zohar, the abstract Hebrew noun *tikkun* spans a range of meanings: adorning, arraying, garbing, installing, healing, rectifying, and restoring. The Companions’ expositions are often referred to as *tikkunim* (plural of *tikkun*).