

Introduction

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I

THE *ZOHAR* IS the great medieval Jewish compendium of mysticism, myth, and esoteric teaching. It may be considered the highest expression of Jewish literary imagination in the Middle Ages. Surely it is one of the most important bodies of religious text of all times and places. It is also a lush garden of sacred eros, filled to overflowing with luxurious plantings of love between master and disciples, among the mystical companions themselves, between the souls of Israel and *Shekhinah*—God’s lovely bride—but most of all between the male and female elements that together make up the Godhead. Revered and canonized by generations of faithful devotees, the *Zohar*’s secret universe serves as the basis of kabbalistic faith, both within the boundaries of Judaism and beyond it, down to our own day, which has seen a significant revival of interest in Kabbalah and its teachings.

The *Zohar* is a work of sacred fantasy. To say this about it is by no means to impugn the truth of its insights or the religious profundity of its teachings. The Middle Ages are filled with fantasy. Angels and demons, heavenly principalities, chambers of heaven and rungs within the soul, secret treasures of the spirit that could be seen only by the elect, esoteric domains without end—all of these were to be found in the writings of Jewish, Christian, and Islamic authors throughout medieval times. All of them partake of fantasy. It may be said that all theological elaborations, insofar as they are allowed to become pictorial, are fantasy. They depict realities that have not been seen except by the inner eye of those who describe them, or by their sacred sources.

In the case of Judaism, prohibitions derived from the second of the Ten Commandments forbade the depiction of such sacred realms in any medium other than that of words. Perhaps because of this, the literary imagination became extraordinarily rich. All those creative energies that might in other contexts have sought to reify sacred myth in painting, sculpture, manuscript illumination, or stained glass here had to focus on the word—especially on the timeless Jewish project of commentary and exegesis. In this sense the *Zohar*

may be seen as the greatest work of medieval Jewish “iconography”—one that exists only in the words of the written page, thence to be distilled in the imagination of its devoted students.

Written in a lofty combination of Aramaic and Hebrew, the *Zohar* was first revealed to the world around the year 1300. Those who distributed it, orally and in small written fragments, claimed that it was an ancient text they had recently rediscovered, and that it had been composed in the circle of those described within its pages—Rabbi Shim’on son of Yoḥai and his disciples, who lived in the land of Israel during the second century of the Common Era. The obscurity of the *Zohar*’s origins combined with its unique language and its rich poetic imagination to lend to the work an aura of unfathomable mystery. While a few of the more critical spirits in each century doubted the *Zohar* and questioned its authority, the great majority of readers, and later of Jewry as a whole, believed in the *Zohar* and venerated it, considering it a holy revelation and a sacred scripture that was to be ranked alongside the Bible and the Talmud as a divinely inspired source of religious truth. Only in modern times, and largely for apologetic reasons, was the *Zohar* deleted from the canon of what was considered “mainstream” Judaism.

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Translation of the *Zohar* into Western languages began as early as the fifteenth century, when passages were rendered into Latin for use by Christian devotees of esoteric lore in Renaissance Italy. In the twentieth century, various translations of the *Zohar*, or at least of most sections of it, appeared in German, French, and English. The previous standard English translation is that of Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, published in 1931–34 by the Soncino Press.

The present translation and commentary by Daniel Matt reflect the high standards of *Zohar* scholarship that have been achieved in recent decades. These are the result of the new attention paid to Kabbalah in academic circles, largely thanks to the writings of Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) and the cadre of scholars he and his successors have trained within the Israeli universities. The first to bring Scholem’s approach to kabbalistic studies to North American shores was Alexander Altmann (1906–1987) at Brandeis University, whose students include both the translator of these volumes and the author of this introduction. Further discussion of the translation and the principles underlying it may be found in the Translator’s Introduction.

The purpose of this introduction is to equip the reader to better appreciate the *Zohar* text. The translation before you is one that takes full cognizance of the poetic spirit in which the *Zohar* was composed and especially of the elevated tone achieved by its unique use of language. To appreciate these in the fullest sense, it must be said, the *Zohar* needs to be read, indeed studied, in the original. Like most of the kabbalistic tradition within which it stands, the *Zohar* is entranced with the mysteries of language, in both its oral and written forms. No translation could do justice to the *Zohar*’s rich and creative appro-

priation of the nuances of Hebrew and Aramaic speech, its startling transformation of countless biblical verses, and the frequent subtle rereadings of the Talmudic/midrashic legacy that together comprise much of the *Zohar's* charm and genius. Nevertheless, a great deal can be gained through carefully reading and studying the *Zohar* in translation. For this to be possible, however, the reader needs to be initiated into the symbolic language in which the work was written.¹ Although the *Zohar's* poesis often transcends the symbolic conventions, they are always present in the background of the writers' imagination. So too, it was assumed, would they be present in the mind of the reader. The *Zohar* was composed in the hope that it would be passed on and studied within circles of initiates, as indeed it was for many generations.

To appreciate the *Zohar*, you will also need to know something of the historical and literary context in which it appeared. The *Zohar* made use of a very wide selection of Jewish texts that preceded it, ranging from the Torah itself to legal, mystical, and philosophical works that were written just shortly before its appearance. It reflected on all of these and used them freely as inspiration for its own unique sort of innovative and sometimes even playful religious creativity. It is also much concerned with the Jews and their history: that recorded in Scripture, the present exile, and the dream of messianic redemption. These, too, form part of the background needed to understand the *Zohar*.

This introduction will begin by outlining the development of Kabbalah in the century leading up to the *Zohar*, considering also the use made in Kabbalah of prior Jewish sources. We will then turn to the *Zohar* itself, discussing in turn its style of thought and exegesis, its narrative modes, and the question of the *Zohar's* appearance and authorship. Because this essay serves as an introduction to the entire *Zohar* text, we will not quote passages to exemplify the analysis offered. We hope that the reader will proceed from this introduction to a careful reading of the text and commentary, finding ample passages throughout the *Zohar* against which to test the claims offered in this brief introductory essay.

The "tall order" detailed in the preceding paragraphs requires a disclaimer. Monographs and learned articles have been written on each of the subjects just mentioned. Some of them have been the subject of entire books. This introduction does not seek to break new ground in most of them. It is rather a digest of what the writer considers to be the finest scholarship and deepest

1. A much expanded version of this introduction to the *Zohar* is to be found in my *Guide to the Zohar*, also available from Stanford University Press. There the symbolic language of Kabbalah (i.e., the sefirotic system) is more fully outlined and discussed. The most comprehensive introduction to the subject is the three-volume *Wisdom of the Zohar* by Isaiah Tishby, originally written in Hebrew. The English translation by David Goldstein offers a thorough historical analysis of many topics covered by the *Zohar*, followed by selected passages. Although the Hebrew version was published in 1949–61 and thus predates much of current *Zohar* scholarship, Tishby's work remains an invaluable source of knowledge.

insights regarding the *Zohar* that have been written since Scholem began the era of modern Kabbalah scholarship. While responsibility for any misunderstandings or omissions in this introduction are entirely my own, I wish to acknowledge fully that the insights contained within it are those of three or four generations of scholars who have labored hard as today's *mehatstsedei haqla*, "reapers in the field," of *Zohar* scholarship. Many of these are members of the Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, and their names are listed at the front of this volume. I am grateful to each of them for their contributions to our collective efforts to understand even "a drop in the sea" of the *Zohar*'s profound secrets.

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Jewish mysticism in the Middle Ages is a rereading of earlier Jewish tradition, including both the Bible and the corpus of rabbinic literature. It has to be understood in the context of the great project of medieval Jewry as a whole, the interpretation of a received, authoritative, and essentially complete body of normative Jewish teaching. This body of teaching, canonized in the Gaonic age (eighth–tenth centuries), nominally commanded the loyalty of all Jewry, with the exception of a Karaite minority. But the deeper attachment of Jews to this tradition had to be re-won constantly, especially in the face of both Christian and Muslim polemics against Judaism, ever the religious culture of a minority living in the shadow of one or the other of its giant offspring. Increasingly, various new intellectual currents that came into fashion among the Jews also occasioned a need for defense or reinterpretation of the tradition. These included Mut'azilite Philosophy, Neoplatonism, and Aristotelianism. The classic form for such reinterpretation of authoritative texts was the commentary, whether on one or more books of the Bible or on a part of the Talmudic legacy. Kabbalah, a new sort of mystical-esoteric exegesis first appearing in the twelfth century, may be seen as another medieval rereading of the received Jewish canon.

In order to understand the ways in which Kabbalah, and particularly the *Zohar*, finds its home within the earlier tradition, we need to distinguish five elements that are present in the legacy that medieval Jews had received from the Judaism of late antiquity or the Talmudic age. Although these five are not at all equal either in the amount of text devoted to them or in the degree of formal authority with which they are accredited, each was to play an important role in the new configuration of Judaism that Kabbalah represents.

First of the five is *aggadah*, the narrative tradition, contained in the Talmud and the various works of Midrash. Midrash is a hermeneutical term, renderable both as "inquiry" and "homiletics," indicating a way of delving into Scripture that tended toward fanciful and extended rereadings. Much of *aggadah* is legendary in content, expanding biblical history and recreating the biblical

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Kabbalah represents a radical departure from any previously known version of Judaism, especially in the realm of theology. While kabbalists remained loyal followers of normative Jewish praxis as defined by *halakhah*, the theological meaning system that underlay their Judaism was reconstructed. The God of the kabbalists is not primarily the powerful, passionate Leader and Lover of His people found in the Hebrew Bible, not the wise Judge and loving Father of the rabbinic *aggadah*, nor the enthroned King of Merkavah visionaries. The kabbalists' God also differs sharply from the increasingly abstract notions of the deity created by Jewish philosophers in the Middle Ages, beginning in the tenth century with Saadia Gaon and culminating in the twelfth with Maimonides—whose work often stands in the background as the object of kabbalistic polemics. The image of God that first appears in *Sefer ha-Bahir*—to be elaborated by several generations of kabbalists until it achieved its highest poetic expression in the *Zohar*—is a God of multiple mythic potencies, obscure entities eluding precise definition but described through a remarkable web of images, parables, and scriptural allusions. Together these entities constitute the divine realm; “God” is the collective aggregate of these potencies and their inner relationship. The dynamic interplay among these forces is the essential myth of Kabbalah—the true inner meaning, as far as its devotees are concerned, both of the Torah and of human life itself.

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In describing the God of the kabbalists as a figure of myth, we mean to say that the fragmented narratives and scriptural interpretations found in the *Bahir* and other early kabbalistic writings refer to a secret inner life of God, lifting the veil from the ancient Jewish insistence on monotheism and revealing a complex and multifaceted divine realm. In sharp contrast to the well-known ancient adage of Ben Sira (“Do not seek out what is too wondrous for you; do not inquire into that which is concealed from you”), these writings precisely seek to penetrate the inner divine world and to offer hints to the reader about the rich and complex life to be found there. Of course, outright polytheism (like that of the pagan Gnostic groups of late antiquity) is out of the question here at the heart of a medieval Jewry that defined itself through proud and devoted attachment to the faith in one God. What we seem to discover in the early Kabbalah are various stages of divine life, elements within the Godhead that interact with one another. In the *Bahir*, these potencies relate quite freely and mysteriously with one another; a fixed pattern of relationships is somehow vaguely in the background, but not clearly presented. In the century of development following the *Bahir*'s publication (1150–1250), the system comes to be quite firmly fixed. It is that pattern that lies behind the fanciful and multi-layered creativity of the *Zohar*.

What we are speaking of here is the realm of divine entities that are called *sefirot* by early kabbalistic sources. The term originates in *Sefer Yetsirah*, where

it refers to the ten primal numbers which, along with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, comprise the “thirty-two wondrous paths of wisdom” or the essential structure of existence. For the kabbalist, it is these forces and the dynamic interplay among them that constitutes the inner life of the Godhead. To know God, a necessary condition of proper worship (on this point the kabbalists agree with the philosophers), one must understand the symbolic language of the *sefirot*. To be a kabbalist is to contemplate the flow of energy among the *sefirot* and reflect upon their ultimate unity.

The non-*Bahir* writings of early Kabbalah add an important new element to this picture. Here the term *Ein Sof* begins to appear as the hidden source from which the ten *sefirot* emerge. Originally part of an adverbial phrase meaning “endlessly,” *Ein Sof* is used in this context in a nominal sense to designate “the Endless” or “that which is beyond all limits.” *Ein Sof* refers to the endless and undefinable reservoir of divinity, the ultimate source out of which everything flows. *Ein Sof* is utterly transcendent in the sense that no words can describe it, no mind comprehend it. But it is also ever-present in the sense of the old rabbinic adage “He is the place of the world.” To say that *Ein Sof* is “there” but not “here” would entirely falsify the notion. Nothing can ever exist outside of *Ein Sof*. It is thus not quite accurate to say that the *sefirot* “emerge” or “come out of” *Ein Sof*. Within the hidden reaches of infinity, in a way that of necessity eludes human comprehension, there stirs a primal desire, the slightest rippling in the stillness of cosmic solitude. That desire (not a change, the more philosophically-oriented kabbalist hastens to add, but an aspect of reality that has been there forever) draws the infinite well of energy called *Ein Sof* toward self-expression: a becoming manifest or a concretization that begins with the subtlest of steps, moves toward the emergence of “God” as divine persona, manifests its spectrum of energies in the “fullness” of the ten *sefirot*, and then spills over with plentitude to create all the “lower” worlds, including—as its very lowest manifestation—the material universe. The *sefirot* are thus a revelation, a rendering more accessible, of that which has existed in *Ein Sof* all along.

We are now ready to trace the pattern of the *sefirot* and the essential symbols associated with them. The description in the following paragraphs does not summarize any particular passage in a single kabbalistic text, but attempts to offer a summary understanding of the *sefirot* as they were portrayed in the emerging Castilian Kabbalah of the late thirteenth century. (See the Diagram of the Ten *Sefirot*, above, page xi.)

The highest *sefirah* represents the first stirrings of intent within *Ein Sof*, the arousal of desire to come forth into the varied life of being. There is no specific “content” to this *sefirah*; it is a desire or intentionality, an inner movement of the spirit, that potentially bears all content, but actually none. It is therefore often designated by the kabbalists as “Nothing.” This is a stage of reality that lies between being wholly within the One and the first glimmer of separate existence. Most of the terms used to describe this rather vague realm are

apophatic in nature, describing it negatively. “The air [or: ether] that cannot be grasped” is one favorite; “the hidden light” is another. The prime pictorial image assigned to it is that of the crown: *Keter*, the starting point of the cosmic process. Sometimes this rung of being is referred to as *Keter Elyon*, the Supreme Crown of God. This image is derived partly from a depiction of the ten *sefirot* in anthropic form, that is to say, in the image of a human being. Since this personification is of a royal personage, the highest manifestation of that emerging spiritual “body” will be the crown. But we should also recall that the more primary meaning of the word *keter* is “circle”; it is from this that the notion of the crown is derived. In *Sefer Yetsirah* we are told that the *sefirot* are a great circle, “their end embedded in their beginning, and their beginning in their end.” The circularity of the *sefirot* will be important to us further along in our description.

Out of *Keter* emerges *Hokhmah*, the first and finest point of “real” existence. All things, souls, and moments of time that are ever to be, exist within a primal point, at once infinitesimally small and great beyond measure. (Like mystics everywhere, kabbalists love the language of paradox, a way of showing how inadequate words really are to describe this reality.) The move from *Keter* to *Hokhmah*, the first step in the primal process, is a transition from nothingness to being, from pure potential to the first point of real existence. The kabbalists are fond of describing it by their own reading of a verse from Job’s Hymn to Wisdom: “Wisdom comes from Nothingness” (Job 28:12). All the variety of existence is contained within *Hokhmah*, ready to begin the journey forward.

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But *Hokhmah*, meaning “wisdom,” is also the primordial *teaching*, the inner mind of God, the Torah that exists prior to the birth of words and letters. As being exists here in this ultimately concentrated form, so too does truth or wisdom. The kabbalists are building on the ancient midrashic identification of Torah with primordial wisdom and the midrashic reading of “In the beginning” as “through Wisdom” God created the world. Here we begin to see their insistence that Creation and Revelation are twin processes, existence and language, the real and the nominal, emerging together from the hidden mind of God. As the primal point of existence, *Hokhmah* is symbolized by the letter *yod*, smallest of the letters, the first point from which all the other letters will be written. Here all of Torah, the text and the commentary added to it in every generation—indeed all of human wisdom—is contained within a single *yod*. This *yod* is the first letter of the name of God. The upper tip of the *yod* points toward *Keter*, itself designated by the *alef* or the divine name *Ehyeh*.

This journey from inner divine Nothingness toward the beginning of existence is one that inevitably arouses duality, even within the inner realms. As *Hokhmah* emerges, it brings forth its own mate, called *Binah*, “understanding” or “contemplation.” *Hokhmah* is described as a point of light that seeks out a grand mirrored palace of reflection. The light seen back and forth in those

countless mirrored surfaces is all one light, but infinitely transformed and magnified in the reflective process. *Hokhmah* and *Binah* are two that are inseparably linked to one another; either is inconceivable to us without the other. *Hokhmah* is too fine and subtle to be detected without its reflections or reverberations in *Binah*. The mirrored halls of *Binah* would be dark and unknowable without the light of *Hokhmah*. For this reason they are often treated by kabbalists as the primal pair, ancestral *Abba* and *Imma*, Father and Mother, deepest polarities of male and female within the divine (and human) Self. The point and the palace are also primal Male and Female, each transformed and fulfilled in their union with one another. The energy that radiates from the point of *Hokhmah* is described chiefly in metaphors of flowing light and water, verbal pictures used by the mystics to speak of these most abstract levels of the inner Mind. But images of sexual union are never far behind these; the flow of light is also the flow of seed that fills the womb of *Binah* and gives birth to all the further rungs within the ten-in-one divine structure, the seven “lower” *sefirot*.

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This first triad of *sefirot* together constitutes the most primal and recondite level of the inner divine world. It is a reality that the kabbalist regularly claims is quite obscure and beyond human ken, although the many references to *kavvanah* reaching *Keter* and to the union of all the *sefirot* with their source undercut such assertions. But for most passages in the *Zohar*, *Binah* stands as the womb of existence, the jubilee in which all returns to its source, the object of *teshuvah* (turning, returning)—in short, the highest object of the religious quest to return to the source. Out of the womb of *Binah* flow the seven “lower” *sefirot*, constituting seven aspects of the divine persona. Together these comprise the God who is the subject of worship and the One whose image is reflected in each human soul. The divine Self, as conceived by Kabbalah, is an interplay of these seven forces or inner directions. So too is each human personality, God’s image in the world. This “holy structure” of the inner life of God is called the “Mystery of Faith” by the *Zohar* and is refined in countless images by kabbalists through the ages. “God,” in other words, is the first Being to emerge out of the divine womb, the primal “entity” to take shape as the endless energies of *Ein Sof* begin to coalesce.

These seven *sefirot*, taken collectively, are represented in the spatial domain by the six directions around a center (in the tradition of *Sefer Yetsirah*) and in the realm of time by the seven days of the week, culminating in the Sabbath. Under the influence of Neoplatonism, the kabbalists came to describe the *sefirot* as emerging in sequence. This sequence does not necessarily have to be one of time, as the *sefirot* comprise the inner life of *YHVH*, where time does not mean what it does to us. The sequence is rather one of an intrinsic logic, each stage a response to that which comes “before” it. The structure consists of two dialectical triads (sets of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis) and a final vehicle of reception that also energizes the entire system from “below,” corresponding to *Keter* at the “upper” end.

First to manifest is *Hesed*, the grace or love of God. The emergence of God from hiding is an act filled with love, a promise of the endless showering of blessing and life on all beings, each of whose birth in a sense will continue this process of emerging from the One. This gift of love is beyond measure and without limit, the boundless compassion of *Keter* now transposed into a love for each specific form and creature that is ever to emerge. This channel of grace is the original divine *shefa*, the bounteous and unlimited love of God. But the divine wisdom also understands that love alone is not the way to bring forth “other” beings and to allow them their place. Judaism has always known God to embody judgment as well as love. The proper balance between these two, ever the struggle of the rabbis themselves (loving the people as well as the law), is a struggle that Jewish sources have long seen as existing in God as well. *Hesed* therefore emerges linked to its own opposite, described both as *Din*, the judgment of God, and *Gevurah*, the bastion of divine power. This is a force that measures and limits love, that controls the flow of *Hesed* in response to the needs, abilities, and deserts of those who are to receive it.

Hesed represents the God of love, calling forth the response of love in the human soul as well. *Gevurah* represents the God we humans fear, the One before whose power we stand in trembling. The kabbalists saw *Hesed* as the faith of Abraham, described by the prophet as “Abraham My lover” (Isaiah 41:8). Abraham, the first of God’s true earthly followers, stands parallel to *Hesed*, the first quality to emerge within God. He is the man of love, the one who will leave all behind and follow God across the deserts, willing to offer everything, even to place his beloved son upon the altar, for love of God. *Gevurah*, on the other hand, is the God called “Fear of Isaac” (Genesis 31:42). This is the divine face Isaac sees when bound to that altar, confronting the God he believes is about to demand his life. Isaac’s piety is of a different quality than his father’s. Trembling obedience, rather than love, marks his path through life. In the *Zohar*, the “Fear of Isaac” is sometimes depicted as a God of terror.

The linking together of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* is an infinitely delicate balance. Too much love and there is no judgment, none of the moral demand that is so essential to the fabric of Judaism. But too much power or judgment is even worse. The kabbalists see this aspect of the divine and human self as fraught with danger, the very birthplace of evil. *Gevurah* represents the “left” side of the divine as the *sefirot* emerge in humanlike form. The *Zohar* speaks of a discontent that arises on this “left” side of God. *Gevurah* becomes impatient with *Hesed*, unwilling to see judgment set aside in the name of love. Rather than permitting love to flow in measured ways, *Gevurah* seeks for some cosmic moment to rule alone, to hold back the flow of love. In this “moment,” divine power turns to rage or fury; out of it all the forces of evil are born, darkness emerging from the light of God, a shadow of the divine universe that continues to exist throughout history, sustained by the evil wrought by humans below. Here we have one of the most important moral lessons of Kabbalah. Judgment

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not tempered by love brings about evil; power obsessed with itself turns demonic. The force of evil is often referred to by the *Zohar* as *sitra aħra*, the “other side,” indicating that it represents a parallel emanation to that of the *sefirot*. But the origin of that demonic reality that both parallels and mocks the divine is not in some “other” distant force. The demonic is born of an imbalance within the divine, flowing ultimately from the same source as all else, the single source of being.

The proper balance of *Hesed* and *Gevurah* results in the sixth *sefirah*, the center of the sefirotic universe. This configuration represents the personal God of biblical and rabbinic tradition. This is God seated on the throne, the one to whom prayer is most centrally addressed. Poised between the “right” and “left” forces within divinity, the “blessed Holy One” is the key figure in a central column of *sefirot*, positioned directly below *Keter*, the divine that precedes all duality. The sixth *sefirah* is represented by the third patriarch, Jacob, also called Israel—the perfect integration of the forces of Abraham and Isaac, the God who unites and balances love and fear.

Nonpersonal designations for this sixth *sefirah* include *Tif'eret* (Beauty, Splendor), *Rahamin* (Compassion), *mishpat* (balanced judgment), and *emet* (truth). The three consonants of *emet* represent the first, middle, and last letters of the alphabet. Truth is stretched forth across the whole of Being, joining the extremes of right and left, *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, into a single integrated personality. Thus is the sixth *sefirah* also described as the central “beam” in God’s construction of the universe. Adopting a line from Moses’ Tabernacle (Exodus 26:28), depicted by the rabbis as reflecting the cosmic structure, Jacob or the sixth *sefirah* is called “the central beam, reaching from one end unto the other.”

In Jacob or *Tif'eret* we reach the synthesis that resolves the original tension between *Hesed* and *Gevurah*, the inner “right” and “left,” love and judgment. The “blessed Holy One” as a personal God is also the uppermost manifestation called “Israel,” thus serving as a model of idealized human personality. Each member of the house of Israel partakes of this Godhead, who may also be understood as a totemic representation of His people below. “Jacob” is in this sense the perfect human—a new Adam, according to the sages—the radiant-faced elder extending blessing through the world. This is also the God of *imitatio dei*. In balancing their own lives, the people of Israel imitate the God who stands at the center between right and left, balancing all the cosmic forces. That God knows them and sees Himself in them, meaning that the struggle to integrate love and judgment is not only the great human task, but also a reflection of the cosmic struggle. The inner structure of psychic life is the hidden structure of the universe; it is because of this that we can come to know God by the path of inward contemplation and true self-knowledge.

The key dialectical triad of *Hesed-Gevurah-Tif'eret* is followed on the kabbalistic chart by a second triad, that of the *sefirot* *Netsah*, *Hod*, and *Yesod*, ar-

ranged in the same manner as those above them. Little that is new takes place on this level of divinity. These *sefirot* are essentially channels through which the higher energies pass on their way into the tenth *sefirah*, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, the source of all life for the lower worlds. The only major function assigned to *Netsah* and *Hod* in the kabbalistic sources is their serving as the sources of prophecy. Moses is the single human to rise to the level of *Tif'eret*, to become “bridegroom of the *Shekhinah*.” Other mortals can experience the sefirotic universe only as reflected in the *Shekhinah*, the single portal through which they can enter. (This is the “formal” view of the kabbalists, though it is a position exceeded by a great many passages in the *Zohar* and elsewhere.) The prophets other than Moses occupy an intermediate position, receiving their visions and messages from the seventh and eighth *sefirot*, making prophecy a matter of participation in the inner sefirotic life of God.

The ninth *sefirah* represents the joining together of all the cosmic forces, the flow of all the energies above now united again in a single place. In this sense the ninth *sefirah* is parallel to the second: *Hokhmah* began the flow of these forces from a single point; now *Yesod* (Foundation), as the ninth is called, reassembles them and prepares to direct their flow once again. When gathered in *Yesod*, it becomes clear that the life animating the *sefirot*, often described in metaphors of either light or water, is chiefly to be seen as male sexual energy, specifically as semen. Following the Greek physician Galen, medieval medicine saw semen as originating in the brain (*Hokhmah*), flowing down through the spinal column (the central column, *Tif'eret*), into the testicles (*Netsah* and *Hod*), and thence into the phallus (*Yesod*). The sefirotic process thus leads to the great union of the nine *sefirot* above, through *Yesod*, with the female *Shekhinah*. She becomes filled and impregnated with the fullness of divine energy and She in turn gives birth to the lower worlds, including both angelic beings and human souls.

The biblical personality associated with the ninth *sefirah* is Joseph, the only figure regularly described in rabbinic literature as *tsaddiq* or “righteous.” He is given this epithet because he rejected the wiles of Potiphar’s wife, making him a symbol of male chastity or sexual purity. The *sefirah* itself is thus often called *tsaddiq*, the place where God is represented as the embodiment of moral righteousness. So too is *Yesod* designated as *berit* or “covenant,” again referring to sexual purity through the covenant of circumcision.

But there is more than one way to read these symbols. The ninth *sefirah* stands for male potency as well as sexual purity. The kabbalists resolutely insist that these are ideally identical and are not to be separated from one another. Of course sexual transgression and temptation were well known to them; the circle of the *Zohar* was quite extreme in its views on sexual sin—and on the great damage it could cause both to soul and cosmos. But the inner world of the *sefirot* was completely holy, a place where no sin abided. Here the flow of male energy represented only fruitfulness and blessing. The fulfillment of the

entire sefirotic system, especially as seen in Castile, lay in the union of these two final *sefirot*. *Yesod* is, to be sure, the agent or lower manifestation of *Tif'eret*, the true bridegroom of the Song of Songs or the King who weds the *matronita*—*Shekhinah*—as the grand lady of the cosmos. But the fascination with the sexual aspect of this union is very strong, especially in the *Zohar*, and that leads to endless symbolic presentations of the union of *Yesod* and *Malkhut*, the feminine tenth *sefirah*.

By far the richest network of symbolic associations is that connected with the tenth and final *sefirah*. As *Malkhut* (Kingdom), it represents the realm over which the King (*Tif'eret*) has dominion, sustaining and protecting her as the true king takes responsibility for his kingdom. At the same time, it is this *sefirah* that is charged with the rule of the lower world; the blessed Holy One's *Malkhut* is the lower world's ruler. The biblical personage associated with *Malkhut* is David (somewhat surprisingly, given its usual femininity), the symbol of kingship. David is also the psalmist, ever crying out in longing for the blessings of God to flow from above. While *Malkhut* receives the flow of all the upper *sefirot* from *Yesod*, She has some special affinity for the left side. For this reason She is sometimes called "the gentle aspect of judgment," a mitigated version of *Gevurah*. Several *Zohar* passages, however, paint Her in portraits of seemingly ruthless vengeance in punishing the wicked. A most complicated picture of femininity appears in the *Zohar*, ranging from the most highly romanticized to the most frightening and bizarre.

LII

The last *sefirah* is also called *Shekhinah*, an ancient rabbinic term for the indwelling divine presence. In the medieval Jewish imagination, this appellation for God had been transformed into a winged divine being, hovering over the community of Israel and protecting them from harm. The *Shekhinah* was also said to dwell in Israel's midst, to follow them into exile, and to participate in their suffering. In the latest phases of midrashic literature, there begins to appear a distinction between God and His *Shekhinah*, partly a reflection of medieval philosophical attempts to assign the biblical anthropomorphisms to a being less than the Creator. The kabbalists identify this *Shekhinah* as the spouse or divine consort of the blessed Holy One. She is the tenth *sefirah*, therefore a part of God included within the divine ten-in-one unity. But She is tragically exiled, distanced from Her divine Spouse. Sometimes She is seen to be either seduced or taken captive by the evil hosts of *sitra ahra*; then God and the righteous below must join forces in order to liberate Her. The great drama of religious life, according to the kabbalists, is that of protecting *Shekhinah* from the forces of evil and joining Her to the holy Bridegroom who ever awaits Her. Here one can see how medieval Jews adapted the values of chivalry—the rescue of the maiden from the clutches of evil—to fit their own spiritual context.

As the female partner within the divine world, the tenth *sefirah* comes to be described by a host of symbols, derived both from the natural world and from the legacy of Judaism, that are classically associated with femininity. She is the

moon, dark on her own but receiving and giving off the light of the sun. She is the sea, into whom all waters flow; the earth, longing to be fructified by the rain that falls from heaven. She is the heavenly Jerusalem, into whom the King will enter; She is the throne upon which He is seated, the Temple or Tabernacle, dwelling place of His glory. She is also *Keneset Yisra'el*, the embodied "Community [or: Assembly] of Israel" itself, identified with the Jewish people. The tenth *sefirah* is a passive/receptive female with regard to the *sefirot* above Her, receiving their energies and being fulfilled by their presence within Her. But She is ruler, source of life, and font of all blessing for the worlds below, including the human soul. The kabbalist sees himself as a devotee of the *Shekhinah*. She may never be worshiped separately from the divine unity. Indeed, this separation of *Shekhinah* from the forces above was the terrible sin of Adam that brought about exile from Eden. Yet it is only through Her that humans have access to the mysteries beyond. All prayer is channelled through Her, seeking to energize Her and raise Her up in order to effect the sefirotic unity. The primary function of the religious life, with all its duties and obligations, is to rouse the *Shekhinah* into a state of love.

All realms outside the divine proceed from *Shekhinah*. She is surrounded most immediately by a richly pictorialized host. Sometimes these surrounding beings are seen as angels; at others, they are the maidens who attend the Bride at Her marriage canopy. They inhabit and rule over variously described realms or "palaces" of light and joy. The *Zohar* devotes much attention to describing seven such palaces with names that include "Palace of Love," "Palace of the Sapphire Pavement" (alluding to the vision of God in Exodus 24:10), "Palace of Desire," and so forth. The "palaces" (*heikhalot*) of the Zoharic world are historically derived from the remains of the ancient Merkavah or Heikhalot mysticism, a tradition that was only dimly remembered by the *Zohar's* day. In placing the *heikhalot* beneath the *Shekhinah*, the kabbalists mean to say that the visionary ascent of the Merkavah mystic was a somewhat lesser sort of religious experience than their own symbolic/contemplative ascent to the heights of the sefirotic universe, one that ascended with the *Shekhinah* as She reached into the highest realms. While the inner logic of the kabbalists' emanational thinking would seem to indicate that *all* beings, including the physical universe, flow forth from *Shekhinah*, the medieval abhorrence of associating God with corporeality complicates the picture, leaving Kabbalah with a complex and somewhat divided attitude toward the material world. The world in which we live, especially for the *Zohar*, is a thorough mingling of divine and demonic elements. Both the holy imprint of the ten *sefirot* and the frightening structure of multilayered *qelippot*, or demonic "shells," are to be found within it.