

1

Tiqqunei ha-Zohar and Ra'aya Meheimna in Context

The enlightened will shine like the brightness of the firmament (Daniel 12:3). *The enlightened* are Rabbi Shimon and his companions, *will shine* when they gathered together, they were permitted an audience with Elijah, all the souls of the academy and all the hidden and cerebral angels. And the Most Transcendent permitted all the holy names and beings and all the signs to reveal their hidden secrets to them, every name on its own level, and the ten *sefirot* were permitted to reveal to them secrets hidden until the advent of the Messiah.

—*Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* 1a

The main sections of the Zohar were composed informally, based on (the sages') discussion when they had completed studying the intricacies of the laws of the Torah. But for *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* and *Ra'aya Meheimna*, the Song of Songs, *Piqqudim* and the *Idra*, they truly put everything aside for the present text, for these compositions complete the others. In it, they delved into the secrets that came forth to them, of the *shining of the firmament* . . .

—Moshe Cordovero¹

The purpose of this study is to examine two works of an anonymous medieval Jewish mystic: *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* (also called the *Tiqqunim*) and *Ra'aya Meheimna*. Both works are included in the *Zohar*, the classical work of Jewish mysticism. The author of the *Tiqqunim* was one of the last of the circle of scholars who composed the *Zohar*. This mystic's expressive style and theological ideas stand out from the rest of the *Zohar*. His works have a particular understanding of the mystic's role in society. The author of the *Tiqqunim* and *Ra'aya Meheimna* was very conscious of the tensions inherent in the mystic's relationship to Jewish law and society. When considered together, the works of this mystic have a coherent and unified theological position that encompasses the dominant themes of Jewish mysticism up to his time and presage its subsequent historical development. This study will examine this obscure figure and show his effect on subsequent Jewish spirituality.

The *Zohar* literature is the strongest expression of the medieval Jewish mysticism that is commonly called *Kabbalah*. The Hebrew word *kabbalah* means, literally, "that which is received." This emphasis on reception reflects a tension between adherence to traditional religious structures and lore, on the one hand, and the renewal of the tradition through creative reinterpretation, on the other.² Kabbalists reviewed the vast exoteric Jewish tradition and understood its inner dynamics in novel and compelling ways. The legal (*halakhic*) and homiletic (*aggadic*) structure of Rabbinic Judaism provided Kabbalah with its imagery, whereas its religious practices defined the parameters of the kabbalist's experience. The strength of the Kabbalah lay in its perceived authenticity, in its evocation of the spirit of the law. Its theorists generally adhered to the most pious belief and practice. Kabbalistic truths, therefore, are best understood in the context of their source tradition, for Kabbalah is the product of a reconsideration of the universe of symbols provided by classical Judaism.

Although reinforcing the values and piety of Rabbinic Judaism, Kabbalah expressed the mystical desire for renewed experience of the transcendent and for the metaphysical understanding of reality. Kabbalists claimed to experience the

metaphysical ultimates as well as the historical realities of Judaism. Kabbalah portrayed itself as the inner component of Judaism, the resolution of its underlying paradoxes and contradictions.

The Zohar is the preeminent text of the theosophical Kabbalah, the first great work of genius in this tradition. The Zohar is not a single work, but a collection of some two dozen separate compositions, constituting, in published editions, over 2,000 pages of closely printed Aramaic text. These various compositions experiment with a number of writing styles and rabbinic literary forms. Such stylistic variety may be either the result of multiple authors and strata of composition or the attempt of a single author to find his literary muse.³ Because of the sophistication of their ideas and their late setting, *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* and *Ra'aya Meheimna* probably make up the latest chronological stratum of the Zohar.

Critical Zohar studies, to date, have concentrated on the main body of the Zohar, which is generally understood as having been compiled by R. Moshe Ben Shem Tov de Leon, of late thirteenth century Guadalajara, Spain. Contemporary scholars of Kabbalah, such as Gershom Scholem, Isaiah Tishby, and Yehudah Liebes have posited a process of literary development that can be charted within the confusion of the Zohar's structure. According to this "documentary hypothesis," the mysticism of the Zohar developed from a system based in philosophy to one based in theosophy. *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, which Scholem and Tishby considered the earliest material, presents the idea of communities of mystic rabbis. In later compositions, the mise-en-scène became more detailed, while the theosophical nature became more pronounced, so that the strongest literary compositions were those in which the mystical ideas were most clearly and daringly formulated. The culminating texts of the Zohar are the *Idrot*, which describe convocations in which several of the participants reveal anthropomorphic visions of the Godhead and perish in mystical ecstasy.⁴

The literary style and language of the Zohar are unique. Its structure, like other late midrashim such as *Pirqei de-Rabi Eliezer* and *Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu*, shows the unifying vision of a

single hand.⁵ Often, a section will commence with a homiletic proem based on the static imagery of the Bible's Wisdom literature. In a juxtaposition common to midrashic and medieval homiletical literature, a Pentateuchal exegesis will then be linked to this homily. This proem form was a movement away from the simple exegesis of a proof text toward the discussion of the interaction of the religious symbols in their own right. Although the Zohar's central pretense is that it is a Tannaitic midrash, its rambling, lengthy form and idiosyncratic Aramaic are unlike any other rabbinic creation.

Tiqqunei ha-Zohar (possibly "Infrastructures⁶ of the Zohar") is structured around seventy lengthy exegeses of the first sentence of the Bible.⁷ Additional sections of *Tiqqunim* were collected and published in the *Zohar Ḥadash*, an anthology of texts that were not included in initial editions of the Zohar.⁸ The main text of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* is more powerful and coherent than the material in the *Zohar Ḥadash*, which might have been considered secondary by the earliest editors, if not by the author himself.⁹ *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* was first published in Mantua in 1658. The Orta Koj edition (1719) represents editorial decisions originating in the school of the great theorist of Lurianic Kabbalah, Hayyim Vital, by way of his student Hayyim Alfandari. This edition has served as the basis for most use of the *Tiqqunim* in subsequent Jewish intellectual history. Its dominance is even more complete than that of the Mantua-Vilna edition of the Zohar. Even so, it is clear that the Orta Koj edition is full of additions by later editors.

The *Tiqqunim* themselves are monographs that flow into one another. Each *Tiqqun* is a homily that begins with the Hebrew *Bereshit*, or "In the Beginning." A given *Tiqqun* may veer off in a number of directions or exhaustively explore one subject.¹⁰ The *Tiqqunim* abandon the format of the "mystical novel,"¹¹ employed by the most literarily successful sections of the Zohar, in favor of an unstructured associative method. The author sometimes seems to delight in his opaque style, in which the logical connections between subjects are often unclear. His cascade of images often resembles a process of free association. The *Tiqqunim* present a fevered melange, whose symbolic

elements are drawn from mythic *aggadot*, philosophical terms, Divine names, linguistic mysticism, and rabbinic legal dicta. As scraps and fragments of these various traditions are invoked and discarded, the reader is obliged to reconstruct the nuances of the associative flow. This associative method underscores the author's spiritual obsessions, as he returns repeatedly to the themes that preoccupy him.

The second treatise by the author of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* is called *Ra'aya Meheimna*, or "The Faithful Shepherd." The *Ra'aya Meheimna* is composed in the form of a "book of commandments" (*sefer miẓvot*), a popular genre of medieval Jewish writing. Books of commandments were produced by such seminal figures as Maimonides, Nahmanides, and Menahem Recanati. They commonly listed the commandments in the Torah and divulged their inner nature. In accordance with the conventions of this genre, every section of the *Ra'aya Meheimna* is centered around a particular commandment.¹² The "faithful shepherd," Moses, is exhorted by the members of the celestial academy to explain the mystical nature of the commandments, particularly, in the extant sections, the commandments regarding the sacrificial cult. This text has a more coherent literary structure than the rambling, associative *Tiqqunim*.¹³

The dialogues recorded in *Ra'aya Meheimna* and the *Tiqqunim* take place after the deaths of Shimon bar Yoḥai and his companions, in the heavenly academy. Participants include, among others, the prophet Elijah, Moses, the incarnate *Shekhinah*, and God. There are references to the specific lore of the Zohar: to persons such as the legendary Rabbi Cruspedai,¹⁴ to the events of the *Idrot*,¹⁵ and to the revelation of the *Zohar*.¹⁶ The author clearly intended to continue the romantic tradition of the Zohar and subsequent works such as Joseph of Hamadan's *Sefer Tashaq*.

The author of the *Tiqqunim*, unlike the author of the Zohar, makes little effort to portray himself as anything but a medieval figure.¹⁷ His attempts at pseudepigraphy are half-hearted, so that the *Tiqqunim* and *Ra'aya Meheimna* are riddled with anachronisms. The author often refers to texts that were plainly composed after the era of Shimon Bar Yoḥai. He makes anach-

ronistic references to the *targumim* of Onkelos¹⁸ and Jonathan Ben Uzziel.¹⁹ His references to "Ben Sira"²⁰ seem to refer to the medieval *Alpha-Beta de-Ben Sira*. A characteristic anachronism, impossible in the Tannaitic period, is the expression *esh nogah*, "glowing light," literally the Spanish *sinagoga*, *synagogue*.²¹ The text also makes references to the Zohar²² and to itself.²³

The *Tiqqunim* are, by their own definition, secondary and accessory to the Zohar. Nonetheless, they are important as a bridge between the internal development of the Zohar and the interpretive systems of subsequent kabbalists. As an early reader of the Zohar and as a theorist in the same tradition, their author embodied the values of reception and development inherent in the Kabbalah. Motifs and ideas that are secondary or unstressed in the *Tiqqunim*, thus gaining prominence in the subsequent development of Kabbalah. It has long been customary to deprecate the *Tiqqunim* as inferior, both literarily and theologically, to the rest of the Zohar. It is the aim of this study to show that the *Tiqqunim* played an important part in the acceptance of the Zohar as canonical literature.