

CHAPTER ONE



The Way of the *Zohar*

When you study, study by a river, so as the waters flow, your teachings may flow.

—Babylonian Talmud, *Horayot* 12a

The *Zohar* is a curious book, if we can even call it that. *The Book of Radiance*, the great work of the Spanish Kabbalah, defies simple classifications. Part commentary on the Torah, both conventional midrashic and kabbalistic, and part narrative, although the stories found throughout the *Zohar* are in no particular order, the *Zohar* is unlike any other work in the Jewish canon. Written in the main in an enigmatic yet strangely poetic Aramaic, the *Zohar's* thousands of pages tell two stories simultaneously. The first tale—magical and enchanted—is the story of the Companions, the wandering mystics headed by the grand master, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai. As Gershom Scholem noted long ago, the *Zohar* is a “proto-novel” and recounts the adventures of ten itinerant sages as they wander across the landscape of the second-century land of Israel. By a brook, under the shade of a tree, in the inner recesses of a cave, or just on the road, these wandering mystic masters walk and talk, and together pour forth the deepest secrets and mysteries of the Torah, the cosmos, and God. On their many journeys, some of which seem to have no particular destination, the Companions encounter anonymous donkey drivers and small children, as well as an extended cast of liminal types who themselves turn out to be the bearers of profound mystical teachings. The narratives recounting this mystical

epic are surely among the great accomplishments of medieval Jewish literature, and artfully fuse humor, adventure, desire, irony, and pathos. The second tale recounted by the *Zohar* is equally extraordinary—the story of God. Employing an impressive array of kabbalistic symbolism, the *Zohar* reads the verses of the Torah according to the “mystery of faith,” *raza de-mehemenuta*, a figural mode of reading whereby the Torah is transformed from a book of narratives and laws into a story relating the deepest life of divinity. Under their loving gaze, the words of scripture are read by the Companions as signifying the ultimate reality of God in all its complexity and wonder. From the primal breakthrough, as divinity bursts forth from its own nothingness to bring forth the incredible diversity of being, to the erotic relations between the male and female elements of the divine, the *Zohar* delights in reading the words of Torah as nothing less than the continually unfolding biography of God.

Yet beyond recounting these two tales—which are invariably interwoven on every page—the *Zohar* invites the reader to actively participate in its mythical adventure. This active participation sometimes takes the form of direct calls to awaken to the reality of divinity and the divinity of reality, while other times, our participation as readers is more subtle, arising through the difficult work of interpreting the *Zohar*’s symbolic network and interpretative moves. Whatever the strategy, the *Zohar* has the unique capacity to draw us into its world and, most importantly, to bring us into contact with and consciousness of the flow of divinity. This performative aspect is pivotal, for the *Zohar* is not merely a work about Jewish mysticism but is a work written from within the horizons of mystical experience that aims to regenerate our mystical awareness of God, Torah, and reality as a whole.

That reading, or more precisely, interpreting, might have the power to bring about revelatory experience is in fact one of the central assumptions of classical rabbinic culture. A short tale appearing in *Song of Songs Rabbah*, a late midrashic compilation from the Talmudic era, presents what might best be described as a rabbinic or Jewish account of reading as the experience of revelation:

Ben Azzai was sitting and interpreting and the fire surrounded him.

They went and told Rabbi Akiva: Rabbi, Ben Azzai is sitting and interpreting and the fire is burning around him.

He went to him and said to him: I have heard that you were interpreting and the fire was burning around you.

He said to him: Indeed.

He said to him: Perhaps you were occupied in the study of the chambers of the chariot?

He said to him: No, but I was sitting and stringing together words of Torah, and words of the Torah to the Prophets, and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as joyous as when they were given from Sinai, and they were as sweet as their original giving. Were they not originally given in fire, as it is written, *The mountain was ablaze with flames to the heart of the heavens* (Deut. 4:11)?

—*Song of Songs Rabbah* 1:10¹

Here, Ben Azzai, one of the “four who entered the orchard” (BT *Hagiga* 14b), is able to attain an experience comparable to the original Sinaitic moment, though significantly he does so not through any esoteric practice but merely through the normative act of studying the Torah. The great bead game of *midrash*, which as Elliot Wolfson reminds us has a numerical value equaling the word *niftehu*, “were opened,” from the phrase in Ezekiel, “the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God” (Ezek. 1:1), is thus capable of bringing us to the same experiential space as the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.² In my view, the *Zohar* accomplishes this midrashic-mystical quest like no other work before it or indeed since.

As befits a work of great mystery, the origins of the *Zohar* are shrouded in legend, rumor, and enigma. While the *Zohar* presents itself as a work from the second century of the Common Era, setting itself within the tannaitic landscape of the sages of the Mishnah, scholars today are unanimous in their view that the composition is the product of thirteenth-century Spain. In fact, ever since its first appearance there have been those—both opponents of the *Zohar* and its devotees—who have questioned the second-century provenance of the work. Thanks largely to the pioneering efforts of Gershom Scholem and more recently Yehuda Liebes and Ronit Meroz, we now have a picture, still fuzzy in parts but visible nevertheless, of the origins of this masterpiece of mystical literature. While the precise details of the authorship of the *Zohar* remain a matter of debate, there seems little doubt that the major portion of the work we call *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Radiance) is to be associated with the Castilian kabbalist, Rabbi Moses de Leon. Although we do not know as much about this important figure as we would like, we do possess a number of his Hebrew writings, which treat all manner of kabbalistic themes and which, importantly, bear striking resemblance to passages in the *Zohar*. Indeed, Gershom Scholem was of the opinion that the entirety of the *Zohar*, excluding only the later strata, was to be

attributed solely to de Leon. Recent scholarship, however, while accepting the centrality of Moses de Leon in the zoharic enterprise, has suggested instead that we view the *Zohar* as the work of numerous hands and perhaps even numerous generations, a kabbalistic school or group, not unlike the Companions themselves, who may well be a fictional representation of an actual kabbalistic fraternity from late thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Spain.³ Whatever the case—and part of the joy of the *Zohar* is that we just don't know—the composition is clearly a pseudo-epigraphy, a work from one historical epoch (in this case, thirteenth-century Spain) that claims to hail from another (in this case, second-century Palestine). That the work is a pseudo-epigraphy does not of course make it a “great lie” or a “pious fraud,” as Jewish historians of the nineteenth century maintained. In setting their masterpiece in the world of the rabbis, whoever it was that wrote the *Zohar* was certainly not trying to pull the wool over our eyes. Modern notions of authorship are very different from medieval and ancient notions of authorship and the literary strategy of placing one's new words in the mouth of someone old—new/ancient words as the *Zohar* would say—has a long history in Jewish literature. In fact by placing their words in the world of the Mishnah, the authors of the *Zohar* make a bold comment about their own work, equal in authority to the founding document of rabbinic Judaism. As Yehuda Liebes has suggested, this literary choice reveals a certain renaissance attitude and indicates the zoharic authors' desire to reconnect with the creative spirit of the giants of the Mishnah.⁴ As one cannot but notice upon beginning to read the composition, the *Zohar* is not a humble work but boldly proclaims its teachings, aware of its own originality and brilliance, and dares to claim as much authority as the Mishnah and even the Torah itself.

Happy is the generation in which Rabbi Shimon abides. Happy is its portion in the upper and lower worlds.

About him it is written, *Happy are you O land for your king is a free man* (Eccles. 10:17).

What is a *free man*? One who lifts his head to reveal and interpret things and does not fear, like one who is free and says what he pleases and does not fear.

What is *your king*? This is Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, the master of Torah, the master of wisdom!

—*Zohar* 3:79b

Rabbi Shimon said: All you luminaries, Companions who enter the holy circle, I call to witness the highest heavens and the

highest holy earth that I now see what no man has seen since Moses ascended Mount Sinai for the second time.

For I see my face shining like the powerful light of the sun

...

And what's more, I know that my face is shining, while Moses did not know, nor did he contemplate, as it is written, *Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was shining* (Exod. 34:29).

—*Zohar* 3:132b

Far from undermining our estimation of the *Zohar*, the fact that its authors were able to convince generations of readers who thought the work an authentic document of the second century is testament to the literary and spiritual genius of the composition.

The *Zohar*, it should be remembered, was by no means the first kabbalistic work. By the time it appears in the mid-1280s, Kabbalah and the kabbalistic way of thinking and speaking about God had already captivated the hearts and minds of Provençal and then Spanish rabbinic elites. While the origins of Kabbalah remain shrouded in mystery, scholars today have a fairly good understanding of the spread of this revolution within rabbinic Judaism. From *Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Brilliance), which first appeared toward the end of the twelfth century, to Nahmanides' famous yet cryptic Torah commentary "according to the way of truth," to a variety of kabbalistic circles active in Gerona and Castile in the middle and later parts of the thirteenth century, the classical Kabbalah had already crystallized for nearly one hundred years before the arrival of the *Zohar*.⁵ The *Zohar* thus inherited a language and a way of thinking and reading derived from the great works of the earliest phase of the Spanish Kabbalah. It is to these works that we owe the kabbalistic conception of God, at once hidden and inscrutable, beyond the horizons of human cognition and experience—*Ein Sof*, the infinite One—the God known only through negation, as well as a God seeking intimacy with humanity and the world, a God complex in nature, comprising ten powers or aspects—the sefirot—yet whose complexity is somehow close to our own human nature.

While the *Zohar* never employs the word *sefirot*, preferring instead more colorful designations such as "levels," "rungs," "colors," "lights," and so forth, sefirotic language lies at the heart of the *Zohar* and its conception of divinity. Like the kabbalists before them, the authors of the *Zohar* experienced God as a complex and dynamic mystery. In addition to *Ein Sof*, the hidden One, "the God beyond god" to borrow Meister Eckhart's phrase,⁶ the kabbalists of the *Zohar* spoke

about divinity as a complex being. In contrast to Maimonides' absolute unity (see *Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:10), the *Zohar* understands divine being to be comprised of ten powers or hypostases. These powers, it should be stressed, are not merely the means through which divinity engages with the world but constitute, rather, the divine organism itself. These ten sefirot (the word derives from *Sefer Yetsirah*, an ancient work of Jewish mysticism where it means "number" or "cipher") are gendered and dynamic and it is their interrelations, figured in part as a love story full of desire, union, and separation, which drives the great drama of God. Although sefirotic language and sefirotic thinking enable an exciting and challenging way of speaking about divine reality, the language of Kabbalah can be quite complicated, especially to the neophyte.⁷ It can take years of study before one cultivates an intuitive understanding of this unique mode of thinking about God without the technical details of this formal yet fluid language getting in the way. While there are any number of ways one can think about the sefirot, it can be helpful to conceptualize them as both different aspects of the divine personality (just as we are complex beings with different parts to our psyche and consciousness), as well as different moments in the passage from infinity to finitude. The sefirot thus mark the various stages in the divine unfolding, from pure infinity and nothingness into differentiated reality.

As we shall see repeatedly throughout this book, the *Zohar* understands God as a dynamic being, constantly in the process of becoming. Not unlike contemporary cosmology that views the Big Bang as an ongoing event, the God of the *Zohar* is always emerging, seeking to flow out of itself into our reality. Indeed, one of the great accomplishments of sefirotic language is precisely its ability to bring us into an awareness of the becoming of being. While we tend to think of reality as fixed and ready-made, the *Zohar* insists that God, and by extension being, is always and continuously generated from nothingness.

Lest these ideas remain abstract and mystifying, let us consider by way of example two short passages:

Rabbi Shimon opened: *The House, in its being built, was built of stone dressed in the quarry, so no hammer, axe, or any iron tool was heard* (1 Kings 6:7) . . .

When it arose in the will of the Blessed Holy One to fashion glory for Its glory, from the midst of thought a desire arose to expand—expanding from the site of concealed thought, unknown, expanding and settling in the larynx, a site continuously gushing in the mystery of the spirit of life.

When thought expanded and settled in this site, that thought was called *Elohim Hayyim*, Living God: *He is Living God* (Jer. 10:10).

It sought to expand and reveal Itself further; thence issued fire, air, and water, merging as one. Jacob emerged, Consummate Man, a single voice issuing audibly. Hence, thought, having been concealed in silence, was heard, revealing itself.

Thought expanded further revealing itself, and this voice struck against lips. Then speech issued, consummating all, receiving all. It is perceived that all is concealed thought, having been within, and all is one.

Once this expansion ripened, generating speech through the potency of that voice, then, *The House in its being built*.

The verse does not read, *when it was built*, but rather, *in its being built*, every single time.

—*Zohar* 1:74a (Matt, *The Zohar*)

Here, Rabbi Shimon, the grand master of the zoharic mystical fraternity, outlines the structure of divine being (i.e., the sefirot) and its expansion out of its own nothingness. The *Zohar* delights in telling this never-ending story, and repeatedly throughout the *Zohar* we find accounts of the “birth of God” as knowable divinity emerges out of the inner recesses and depths of its own nothingness. Rather than employing the formal names of the sefirot (*Hokhmah*, *Binah*, *Tiferet*, *Malkhut*, etc.), the *Zohar* here prefers their symbolic designations, Thought, Voice, and Speech, to convey the emergence of the House of God and the House of Being. While not always the case, the sefirotic symbolism informing this passage can be easily decoded. From concealed thought (*Hokhmah*), to the site continuously gushing (*Binah*), to Voice (*Tiferet*), and finally on to Speech (*Malkhut*), the sefirotic codes are precise and clear. The “accomplishment” of this passage, however, does not lie merely in the formal sefirotic information it conveys, but rather in its ability to help us understand the key process and dynamic of divinity—its continuous emergence and manifestation from concealment. Just like our own thinking processes that we might imagine as beginning mysteriously in the unconscious before moving to consciousness, then undergoing finer and finer articulation from voice to communicable speech, so the divine being moves from a state of mysterious concealment to actualization. This movement, our passage notes through a close reading of the verse describing the construction of the temple of Solomon that employs an unusual verbal form in the continuous present (“in its being built”), is not a singular event. It is not that divinity and reality

are “born” once and for all. The mystical process of becoming, rather, is ongoing, happening here and now. As we shall see on numerous occasions in this book, the zoharic quest and the Companions’ contemplative mystical goal is precisely to attain in thought and come into live contact with this quality of the becomingness or unfolding of reality.

The *Zohar* is a work of exegetical or interpretative genius, much of whose charm, besides its profound religious insights and touching narratives, lies in the way the Companions find in the verses of the Torah this extraordinary tale of divinity. It must not be forgotten that the *Zohar* is a commentary on the Torah, and the Companions uncover the hidden life of God through creative and virtuoso interpretations of scripture. Even verses seemingly devoid of mystical content are readily transformed by the wandering sages into vehicles bearing the flow of divinity. Under the Companions’ “open-eyes” the verses of scripture undergo what Moshe Idel has termed a process of dynamization,⁸ as static verbal combinations are enlivened, and assume a dynamic and at times quite erotic signification. Indeed the experience of understanding the *Zohar*’s reading of a particular verse is one of the great joys awaiting the *Zohar* reader. Before our very eyes the words of scripture open to a different dimension of being and grant us access to the realm of divine unfolding. The experience is a bit like looking at a computer-generated “hidden image stereogram,” where at first you can’t see the image that is hiding in the background, but then, when you attune your gaze (actually one needs a soft gaze or soft consciousness and this is not unlike reading the *Zohar*) you encounter a hitherto hidden world. The following more complex passage, one of hundreds that we might have chosen, illustrates this quality of zoharic interpretation:

Rabbi Aḥa was walking on the way and Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose met him.

Rabbi Aḥa said: Certainly we are three and are now fit to receive the face of *Shekhinah*.

They joined as one and walked on.

Rabbi Aḥa said: Let everyone say a word of the knot of Torah while we walk.

Rabbi Ḥiyya opened, saying: *Pour down, O heavens, from above. Let the skies rain down righteousness. Let the earth open up and salvation sprout and let righteousness spring up together* (Isa. 45:8).

This verse is a mystery of wisdom that we have learned from the Holy Luminary . . .

Pour down, O heavens, from above—it is written, *from above*. From *above* indeed! From the Holy Ancient One does it come, and not from the site called *heavens* . . . but from *above*, precisely.

Let the skies rain down (yizlu) righteousness—when the *heavens* receive from *above*, from the supernal site that abides above them, then *the skies rain down righteousness*.

What are *the skies*? The site where they grind manna for the righteous . . .

For whom? For the site called *Righteous One*, for they grind the manna that comes from *above*, and all the goodness is gathered in them to bestow it on the rung of *Righteous One*, so that *Righteousness* will be blessed from their flow (*nezilu*) . . .

Who are the righteous? This is *Righteous One (Tzaddik) and Righteousness (Tzedek)*, Joseph and Rachel, for when they unite as one, they are called righteous (*tzaddikim*) . . .

Then, *let the earth open up*—below,
and salvation sprout—for the people of the world.

And let righteousness (tzedakah) spring up together—all love and all the goodness of the world increase and human-kind's nourishment abounds in the world. Then joy is added to joy and all the worlds are blessed.

Rabbi Aḥa said: Had I come only to hear this, it would be enough!

—*Zohar* 3:25b–26a

In this brief exegetical narrative we find once again the story of the downward flow of divinity—from *above*, the Holy Ancient One, the most recondite aspect of divinity, through the *heavens*, the sefirah *Tiferet*, onward to the *skies*, the sefirot *Nezah* and *Hod*, into *righteous one*, the divine phallus and conduit of the divine flow, and finally, into *righteousness*, the last sefirah *Malkhut*, from which the divine being pours down into our reality. This outpouring of divinity is also erotic, predicated on the sexual union of Joseph and Rachel, the male and female aspects of God. The beautiful verse from Isaiah—“Pour down O heavens from above, let the skies rain down righteousness”—thus becomes for Rabbi Ḥiyya a portal into a dynamic and erotic realm, recounting the flow of being through the various grades of divinity and on to humanity below. Like Rabbi Aḥa the reader too is overwhelmed by the ingenuity of Rabbi Ḥiyya's exegetical craft.

If the *Zohar's* interpretations of Torah are brilliant and daring, its broader literary setting—a group of sages wandering across the landscape—is equally original and exciting. One of the exceptional features of the *Zohar* is without doubt the location of its many narratives and homilies. Not even once throughout its more than a thousand folio pages do we encounter the Companions in a traditional Jewish setting—the house of study or the house of prayer. Rather, we find the Companions in one of two situations—studying Torah from midnight till dawn or walking on the way. *Zohar* scholars have analyzed this curious literary choice—to set the deepest mysteries of Torah away from the key institutions of Jewish life—from numerous perspectives.⁹ Some have seen in this literary strategy a critique of the kind of text study and Jewish learning regnant in the *Zohar's* day—legalistic, confined to the *beit midrash*, and devoid of real contact with life, the world and God—while others have viewed the recourse to the way as a literary analogue to the *Zohar's* interpretive and religious spirit—wandering, open to innovation and surprise, fluid and dynamic. Although the *Zohar* is certainly the first Jewish work to celebrate the way or the journey as *the* primary locus for mystical knowledge and insight, there is, nevertheless, a Jewish prehistory to this idea. The *Shema*, the Jewish catechism and proclamation of divine unity recited twice daily, already contains the injunction to speak words of Torah “when you sit in your house and when you walk on the way” (Deut. 6:4–9), to which the rabbis of the Talmud added their own distinctive formulations.¹⁰ The prototype for the zoharic journey narrative, however, is to be found in a well-known tale appearing in the Babylonian Talmud in tractate *Hagiga* (14b), in the chapter describing the “Work of the Chariot” and the “Work of the Beginning,” the rabbinic terms for esoteric mystical teachings. In this short and wonderful account, we find many of the characteristics of the mystical narratives as they will appear in the *Zohar*—two or more sages on a journey, Torah learning that brings about the presence of the *Shekhinah*, as well as considerable pathos.

Our rabbis taught: A story of Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai who was riding on a donkey when going on a journey, and Rabbi El'azar ben Arakh was driving the donkey from behind.

[Rabbi El'azar] said to him: Master, teach me a chapter of the Work of the Chariot.

He said to him: Have I not taught you thus: Nor the Work of the Chariot in the presence of one, unless he is a sage and understands of his own knowledge?

[Rabbi El'azar] said to him: Master, permit me to say before you something that you have taught me.

He said to him: Say.

Immediately Rabbi Yoḥanan dismounted from the donkey and wrapped himself [in his prayer shawl] and sat upon a stone beneath an olive tree.

[Rabbi El'azar] said to him: Why did you dismount from the donkey?

He answered: Is it proper that while you are expounding the Work of the Chariot and the *Shekhinah* is with us and the ministering angels accompany us, I should ride on the donkey?!

Immediately Rabbi El'azar began his exposition of the Work of the Chariot and fire came down from heaven and encompassed all the trees in the field that burst into song . . .

Rabbi Yoḥanan ben Zakkai rose and kissed him on his head and said: Blessed be the Lord, God of Israel, who has given a son to Abraham our father, who knows to speculate upon, to investigate, and expound the Work of the Chariot!

In setting their own esoteric lore on the way, the authors of the *Zohar* thus position themselves within the oldest mystical tradition of Judaism, a tradition extending back to Yoḥanan ben Zakkai, the founder of Rabbinic Judaism, about whom it is written that he knew “the speech of the ministering angels and the speech of the palm trees” (BT *Sukka* 28a).

Whatever the origins of this literary motif, it is, as Melila Hellner-Eshed has so beautifully observed, the consciousness of the way that is decisive.¹¹ According to the *Zohar*, the world is best experienced from the changing vantages of a wanderer. Only the traveler has the fresh eyes, the unique perspective, from which the deepest dimensions of reality and Torah can be fathomed. One must know how to read the Torah *be-orah keshot*, according to the true way, and to do so, one must *azil be-orha*, walk the way. Not unlike a thirteenth-century *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, the *Zohar* encourages us to step out, open our eyes, and experience the diversity of being. A well-known passage presents this experiential manifesto of the *Zohar* most beautifully:

But the path of the righteous is like radiant sunlight, ever brightening until noon, the way of the wicked is all darkness (Prov. 4:18–19) . . .

The path of the righteous—what is the difference between path and way?

They have already clarified the matter, but a path is that which has just now been opened and revealed, and was made in that place a path, where no feet have trodden before.

Way (*derekh*), as it is written, *as one who treads (dorekh) in the winepress* (Isa. 63:1), where the feet of all who wish tread.

That is why where the righteous walk is called *path (orah)*, since they were the first to open that place. And even when others, the people of the world, walk in that place, now that the righteous walk there it becomes a new place, for now that place is new as though never trodden on by any before, because the righteous invigorate that place through the sublime words in which the Blessed Holy One delights.

And what's more, the *Shekhinah* goes in that place, which was not the case before. And that is why it is called *the path (orah) of the righteous*, because the sublime holy guest (*oreah*) visits there.

—*Zohar* 2:215a

Unlike the biblical verse that is built on the opposition between the righteous and the wicked, Rabbi Shimon's exposition turns on his distinguishing between path (*orah*) and way (*derekh*). Where the wicked walk the road more traveled, the righteous—the mystics—are trailblazers who seek interpretative and experiential originality. God, according to this text, delights in newness and innovation and the mystical-creative task is thus "to boldly go where no one has gone before." Our creativity, the "sublime words" we innovate on the way, brings about the indwelling of the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence in the world. As expressed in the beautiful formulation of this passage: we walk the path (*orah*) to bring about the presence of the guest (*oreah*). We are thus the means through which the divine acquires new knowledge and experience of being. We are, as it were, the eyes of God.

In addition to the setting of the *Zohar*'s many narratives, the formal structure of these compositions also plays an important role in conveying the *Zohar*'s mystical goals. As we shall see, although *Zohar* narratives are frequently surprising and the homilies contained within them playful, even improvisational, zoharic narratives do, nevertheless, follow a tight structure. The classical zoharic narrative, of which there are dozens if not hundreds, conventionally begins with two or more of the Companions walking on the way. Either in response to some event that befalls them on their journey or, more simply, in the course of their wanderings, one of the sages invites his fellow traveler to "engage

words of Torah, words of the Ancient of Days” as one passage puts it. The Companions then begin to discuss Torah, examining and interpreting her verses in new and surprising ways. Usually, after a series of expositions, the Companions chance upon another wanderer, in the main not associated with the zoharic fraternity. Be it an encounter with an old man, a donkey driver, a desert hermit, some traveling merchants, or even, as happens on numerous occasions, a young child, *Zohar* narratives are punctuated by a key turning point where some “external” force enters the back and forth of the Companions’ expositions and alters the course of the unfolding interpretative events. The Companions, for their part, usually greet these anonymous wandering types with scorn and derision, assuming that they cannot possibly have anything to learn from anyone outside their own elite circle. It is then—on cue every time—that the tables are turned and, in what has been aptly described as a carnivalesque switch, the outsiders become the masters, revealing a new insight, more subtle and profound than that uncovered by the Companions themselves. As readers we await and then delight in this narrative twist, sharing the Companions’ response of surprise as we too experience the new apprehension of the verses or themes being discussed. Zoharic narratives thus possess a structure of intensification, a deepening, an “aha” moment, as along with the Companions and thanks to the outsider, we see something we didn’t see before. By way of example, let us consider a short narrative unit, which aside from demonstrating the format and mode of zoharic narrative, also presents the central theurgic task to adorn and beautify God through mystical-poetic creativity.

Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Hiyya were walking on the way and a donkey driver was goading behind them.

Rabbi Yose said to Rabbi Hiyya: We should engage and ply words of Torah, for the Blessed Holy One goes before us; therefore it is time to make an adornment for Him with us on this way.

Rabbi Hiyya opened, saying: *Time to act for YHVH, they have violated Your Torah* (Ps. 119:126). This verse has been established by the Companions.

But, *Time to act for YHVH (et la-asot le-YHVH)*—whenever Torah abides in the world and human beings engage her, the Blessed Holy One, so to speak, rejoices in the work of His hands, and rejoices in all the worlds, and heaven and earth abide in their place.

What's more, the Blessed Holy One assembles His entire court and says to them: Look at the holy people I have on the earth, for My Torah is adorned by them. Look at the work of My hands, about whom you said, *What is man that You are mindful of him?* (Ps. 8:5).

And these, when they see the joy of their Master in His people, immediately open and say, *Who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth!* (2 Sam. 7:23).

But when Israel desists from Torah, His strength, so to speak, is weakened, as it is written, *You have weakened the rock that bore you* (Deut. 32:18) . . . and therefore, *It is time to act for YHVH*.

The remaining righteous must gird their loins and perform good deeds so that the Blessed Holy One will be strengthened through them . . . What is the reason? Because *they have violated Your Torah*, and the people of the world do not engage her fittingly.

The donkey driver who was goading behind them said to them: If it pleases you, there is one question I wish to know.

Rabbi Yose said: Certainly the way is adorned before us! Ask your question.

He said: Regarding this verse, were it written *one must act or we will act*, I would say so. But what is *time [to act for YHVH]*?

Furthermore, *to act for YHVH*? It should have said, *before YHVH*. What is the meaning of *to act for YHVH*?

Rabbi Yose said: With numerous hues the way is adorned before us! First, for we were two and now are three and the *Shekhinah* is included with us. Second, for we thought that you were nothing but a parched tree, yet you are fresh like an olive. And third, for you have asked fittingly, and since you have begun a word, say on.

He opened, saying: *Time to act for YHVH, they have violated Your Torah*.

Time to act for YHVH (et la-asot le-YHVH)—there is a time and there is a time, *a time to love and a time to hate* (Eccles. 3:8). There is a time above, and this time is a mystery of faith, and it is called, *a time of favor (et ratzon)* (Ps. 69:14). And this is that a person is required to love God constantly, as it is said, *And you shall love YHVH your God* (Deut. 6:5).

Therefore, *a time to love*, this is the time that a person is required to love.

There is another time that is the mystery of other gods that a person is required to hate, and his heart should not be drawn after it. Therefore, *a time to hate*. And because of this it is written, *Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come at any time into the sanctuary* (Lev. 16:2).

When Israel engage Torah and the commandments of the Torah, this *time*, the mystery of holy faith, is arrayed in her arrayal and adorned in perfection as is fitting.

And when Israel desist from Torah, this *time*, so to speak, is not arrayed and does not abide in perfection and light, and then, *Time to act for YHVH*.

What is *to act for (la-asot)*? As it is said, *that Elohim created to make (la-asot)* (Gen. 2:3). What is *to make*? The bodies of the demons remained, for the day had been sanctified and they had not been made, and they remained *to make*, spirits without bodies. So here, *time to act* remains un-arrayed and without perfection. What is the reason? For *they have violated Your Torah*—because Israel desisted below from words of Torah; because this *time* abides, either ascending or descending, on account of Israel.

Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Ḥiyya came and kissed him on his head.

Rabbi Yose said: Certainly it is not right that you goad behind us! Blessed is this way that we merited to hear this! Blessed is the generation in which Rabbi Shimon abides, for even among the mountains wisdom is found!

Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Ḥiyya dismounted and the three of them walked on the way . . .

—*Zohar* 2:155b–156a

This particular narrative, which in fact extends beyond the portion we have excerpted here, begins in classical zoharic fashion. Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose, two of the more colorful characters in the mystical fraternity, are walking on the way accompanied by an anonymous donkey driver to whom they of course pay no attention. The invocation to ply Torah is here embellished with the additional mystical-mythical expression of providing an adornment, a *tikkun*, for the Blessed Holy One. The word *tikkun*, now part of contemporary Jewish language through the expression *tikkun olam*, healing the world, means something quite different in the *Zohar* where its semantic range spans adornment,

garment, arrayal, and rectification. The Companions' central preoccupation throughout the *Zohar* is to bring about the unification of the male and female aspects of divinity, a task they accomplish primarily through their interpretations of Torah. Exegesis in the *Zohar* is a creative affair and the Companions seek not only to create new Torah, to uncover hidden dimensions in her verses, words, and coronets, but also to create an adornment, to array and beautify *Malkhut*, the *Shekhinah*, the female aspect of God, in preparation for union with her partner the Blessed Holy One, the male grade of divinity. According to the *Zohar*, the Companions' mystical-poetic creativity actually impacts upon the divine world and stimulates the sexual union of the male and female within God. That human beings have the capacity (and responsibility) to influence divinity is one of the radical innovations of kabbalistic thought. Far indeed from the God of Maimonides who, like Aristotle's unmoved mover, is not influenced one jot by the affairs of humanity—"for all beings are in need of Him, but He, blessed be He, is not in need of them"¹²—the God of the *Zohar* is intimately involved with our lives and in fact depends on humanity for perfection, union, and actualization. The divine destiny is in our hands and astonishingly depends on our literary creativity and ingenuity for its fulfillment.

Following the opening narrative frame, Rabbi Ḥiyya begins his exposition, taking as his verse, "time to act for YHVH, they have violated Your Torah" (Ps. 119:126). This verse has a fascinating history. It was expounded by the rabbis to permit the violation of the Torah under certain circumstances—"time to act for YHVH, violate Your Torah!"—and was even used by Maimonides in the introduction to *The Guide of the Perplexed* to justify his disclosure of concealed matters.¹³ In fact, in the *Idra Rabba* (*Zohar* 3:127b), the pinnacle moment of the entire *Zohar* narrative, when the Companions all assemble for a never to be repeated disclosure of mysteries, Rabbi Shimon too begins his address with the same stirring verse. Rabbi Ḥiyya's interpretation, however, pursues a different tack and takes us to the heart of the mutually dependent relationship between God and the people of Israel, as God both delights in and is strengthened by the act of Torah study below. In the theurgic language of our passage, "heaven and earth abide in their place," signifying both the maintenance of the cosmos as a whole as well as harmony between the male and female elements of divinity. One must thus act *for* YHVH, because divinity is dependent on humanity and in particular on our Torah adornments. Not to do so, to *violate Your Torah*, is to weaken and detract from the divine essence. Indeed, it is because the majority of the world "does not engage her fittingly" and she, the Torah, lies unadorned that Rabbi

Hiyya and Rabbi Yose must now *act for YHVH*. While theurgy—the idea that what we do below impacts on high in the divine realm—is often thought of as a kabbalistic innovation, we can find fragments of this mythological view in the world of rabbinic culture. As Moshe Idel has convincingly demonstrated, the rabbis too, on occasion, understand their actions to influence the divine destiny.

Rabbi Azariah said in the name of Rabbi Yehuda bar Simon: So long as the righteous act according to the will of heaven, they add power to the Dynamis, as it is written, *And so, let the Lord's power, pray, be great* (Num. 14:17). And if they do not act accordingly it is as if *you have weakened the Rock that formed you* (Deut. 32:18).

—*Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* 26¹⁴

In the *Zohar*, of course, this view becomes central and the idea that the destiny of God lies in our hands runs through the entire composition.

Although Rabbi Hiyya's opening exposition is neat and nice and even very zoharic it is by no means dazzling. Aside from conveying the important zoharic principle of human-divine interdependence mediated by our mystical-poetic creativity, there are no astonishing insights into the words of the verse he expounds. It is then to the donkey driver that the deepest revelations and innovations belong. Overhearing the sages' mystical discourse, the donkey driver interjects and insists on an explanation for the precise wording of the verse just expounded. Why does the verse, he asks, use the expression *to act for* and why the word *time*? There must be a deeper meaning to this arrangement. The donkey driver's exposition is, as we come to expect, surprising, innovative, and exegetically precise. In fact, by the time he completes his thought, we have an entirely new appreciation of the verse from Psalms, which we now understand refers to subtle processes within the Godhead. The word *time*, *et / תע*, the donkey driver says, is "a mystery of faith," by which he means that it symbolizes a particular sefirah within the divine being. As we find elsewhere in the *Zohar*, *time* is one of the key designations for *Malkhut*, the partner of *Tiferet* symbolized chiefly through the epithet *YHVH*, and Israel's theurgic task is none other than to array and adorn this *time*, the *Shekhinah*, through Torah study and performance of the commandments. (Paralleling this *time to love*, that is the time that we are commanded to love, is a *time to hate*, the shadowy evil double of the divine—"other gods"—the realm of the demonic and impure.) The last of the sefirot and the aspect of divinity with which the human being most readily comes into contact, the *Shekhinah/Malkhut*

is the great heroine of the *Zohar*, and it is her existential situation spanning desire, delight, union, longing, exile, alienation, and pain that perhaps marks the central drama in the composition. Positioned at the limits of divinity, the divine female is the most dynamic (and interesting) aspect of God. Like the ever changing moon, which possesses no light of its own but reflects the brilliance of the sun, *Malkhut* is dependent on the influx of the sefirot above her for illumination. She is also dependent on the mystics below, “her handmaidens” as one text calls them, to protect, sustain, and beautify her in preparation for her union with *YHVH*, the Blessed Holy One, the male face of divinity. It is she that the Companions must always tend to and *act for* and it is she who is referred to by the word *time* in the verse from Psalms.

Having uncovered the deeper meaning of the opening word in Rabbi Hiyya’s verse, the donkey driver proceeds to explain the mystical significance of the expression, *to act for, la-asot*. Like the word *time*, this word has a mystical signification, and in explicating it the donkey driver sends us to a well-known verse from Genesis recounting the completion of creation: “And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it He ceased from all His work that God created to make (*la-asot*)” (Gen. 2:3). While the verse from Genesis is well known and is recited as part of the Friday night Kiddush ceremony, the verse is actually quite enigmatic. The last word, *la-asot*, to make, seems out of place, superfluous, and incomplete. The rabbis of late antiquity also noticed this oddity from which they derived the following fascinating mythical theme:

It is not written here, *that God created and made*, but rather *to make* (Gen. 2:3), for the Sabbath came first, with the work not yet completed.

Rabbi Benaya said: This refers to the demons, for He created their souls, and as He was creating their bodies, the Sabbath day was hallowed. He left them and they remained soul without body.

—*Tanhuma* (Buber), Genesis 17¹⁵

The rabbis thus find in the “dangling” and incomplete *la-asot* a reference to the incompleteness of creation—creation is a task to be completed by us—as well as more specifically a reference to demons, who are themselves understood as a kind of incomplete creation, souls without bodies. In a display of exegetical ingenuity, the donkey driver connects this notion of *la-asot* as incompleteness and that which remains to be done with *time*, the sefirah *Malkhut*, herself incomplete and un-

arrayed, dependent on the people of Israel for her perfection, “because this *time* abides, either ascending or descending, on account of Israel.” The verse from Psalms, “time to act for YHVH,” having been adequately expounded by Rabbi Hiyya, is now revealed to contain something more, encoding the mystical quest to array and beautify *time*, the *Shekhinah*, who on account of her imperfection and incompleteness needs to be *acted for* to bring her into union with the Blessed Holy One, YHVH. The donkey driver thus takes our understanding to another level—zooming in on a detail that we previously did not notice, and before our eyes the verse morphs and is revealed to contain a profound secret. This structure of intensification is repeated hundreds of times throughout the *Zohar* and is one of the key performative strategies of the composition, reminding us as readers of the ever present possibility of a deeper consciousness and apprehension of both the verses of the Torah and reality as a whole.

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The *Zohar* is a work of great beauty, of spiritual subtlety, depth, and abiding relevance, yet it remains largely unknown and inaccessible beyond the confines of the academic world. There are good reasons for this. The *Zohar* is, as we have begun to see, an extremely complex work, written in a specialized symbolic language that treats of the greatest mysteries of God and the Torah. Deciphering a *Zohar* passage requires a deep familiarity with the Bible, rabbinic literature, and medieval Jewish thought, not to mention an intuitive and hard-won familiarity with kabbalistic language. That the *Zohar*’s teachings should remain solely in the scholarly domain is a great shame, as the *Zohar* offers us today, as it has to its readers for more than seven hundred years, a view of religious life unrivaled (at least in the Jewish canon) in its imagination, daring, and insight. Although the *Zohar* has been blessed with an awesome cadre of commentators—both medieval and modern—the general reader has nearly no way of accessing this mystical classic, despite some notable exceptions.¹⁶ *Zohar* scholarship, which has attracted some of the greatest minds in Jewish studies, has not concerned itself with making its insights and discoveries amenable to a general readership and has been concerned instead with the kinds of questions that are quite properly the focus of academic work. This book seeks to redress this void and aims to open the mysterious, wondrous, and at times bewildering universe of one of the masterpieces of world mystical literature. Given the great luminaries who have explicated the world of the *Zohar*, it is not the intention of this study to present any radically new thesis about the *Zohar*. My aim, rather, is to mediate the

Zohar itself, as well as the body of fascinating scholarship surrounding it—a body of literature beginning with the pioneering works of Gershom Scholem and Isaiah Tishby and continuing in our days with the works of Moshe Idel, Yehuda Liebes, Elliot Wolfson, and my teacher Melila Hellner-Eshed. My focus on zoharic exegetical narrative with particular emphasis on the literary and performative elements of the composition does, however, offer a new mode of *Zohar* analysis and has the additional advantage of providing nonspecialists a much clearer view into the world of the *Zohar* than is currently available.¹⁷

That spiritual seeking ought to be mediated by critical scholarship might seem puzzling to some. Religion is often hostile to such scholarship, which tends to historicize, categorize, and relativize religious texts, often at the expense of the wonder that lies at the heart of the spiritual life. We are, as Nietzsche said, “by nature winged creatures and honey-gatherers of the spirit,”¹⁸ and we need spiritual guides and spiritual works. Spiritual heights, however, especially when they border on the super-rational, must be mediated by responsible and critical scholarship. Religious life need not be naïve but can and ought to be informed by the best of scholarly research, just as the wonder of the cosmos is intensified by the dazzling discoveries of scientific research. Of course, scholarship can get in the way and religious insights—philosophical and mystical—are all too often hidden and buried in scholarly literature. Yet the attempt to produce readings informed by critical-historical scholarship, but which seek, nevertheless, to access the profound teachings found in religious texts strikes me as more important now than ever before. It is this sense of a mystery without mystification that this book seeks to present.

More than fifty years ago the great scholar-mystic-activist Abraham Joshua Heschel reminded us, as Plato already said, that everything begins or ought to begin in wonder.¹⁹ To be authentic and alive religious life must, he argued, find its way back to the sense of mystery and radical amazement at being. According to Heschel, modern man is in a state slumber—“sleep is in their sockets,” as the *Zohar* says—and the need of the hour is to awaken and arouse to the primal mystery of reality. For many Jews, and I suspect for many non-Jews raised with traditional religious upbringings, religion, at least the way we encounter it in school, the synagogue, church, or mosque, is devoid of wonder and mystery. Religions tend to present themselves as ready-made truths, static statements of belief, and inflexible codes of action. But religious life is a journey, full of surprise and wonder. More than any Jewish work I know, the *Zohar* has the capacity to open us to these dimensions of experience. As the *Zohar* says repeatedly, “the world abides because of the mystery.”