

Translator's Introduction

DANIEL C. MATT

SEFER HA-ZOHAR (The Book of Radiance)¹ has amazed and overwhelmed readers ever since it emerged mysteriously in medieval Spain (Castile) toward the end of the thirteenth century. Written mostly in a unique Aramaic, this masterpiece of Kabbalah exceeds the dimensions of a normal book; it is virtually a body of literature, comprising over twenty discrete sections. The bulk of the *Zohar* consists of a running commentary on the Torah, from Genesis through Deuteronomy. This translation begins and focuses there—in what are projected to be ten volumes; two subsequent volumes will cover other, shorter sections.²

Arthur Green's introduction to this volume traces the development of Kabbalah and discusses the historical and literary context of the *Zohar*, its style, the complex question of authorship, and the symbolism of the ten *sefirot* (various aspects of the divine Self). Here I wish to treat several topics directly related to this translation and commentary.

Establishing the Text of the Zohar

This edition reflects a newly constructed, precise text of the *Zohar*, based on original manuscripts. Why was the creation of such a text necessary? All previous translations of the *Zohar* are based on the standard printed editions, which nearly all derive from the Mantua edition (1558–60), supplemented by variant readings from the Cremona edition (1559–60). At first I intended to

1. The title derives from the word זָהָר (*zohar*) in Daniel 12:3: *The enlightened will shine like the zohar, radiance [or: splendor], of the sky.*

2. On the various sections of the *Zohar*, see Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 214–19; Isaiah Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:1–7. All of these sections are written in Aramaic, except for *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, which is written in Hebrew and Aramaic.

The following sections are scheduled to be translated as part of the running commentary on the Torah, as in the standard editions of the *Zohar*: *Raza de-Razin*, *Sava de-Mishpatim*, *Sifra di-Tsni'uta*, *Idra Rabba*, *Idra Zuta*, *Rav Metivta*, and *Yanuqa*. The two subsequent volumes will include *Midrash ha-Ne'lam*, *Matnitin*, *Tosefta*, *Sitrei Torah*, *Heikhalot*, *Sitrei Otiyyot*, "Vision of Ezekiel," *Qav ha-Middah*, and *Zohar to Song of Songs*. Two sections identified as imitations written by a later kabbalist, *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* and *Ra'aya Meheimna*, are not planned to be included.

follow the same procedure, but upon examining many of the original manuscripts of the *Zohar* dating from the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, I discovered a significant number of superior readings that had been rejected or revised by editors of the first printed editions.

Upon further examination, I noticed something more intriguing—a phenomenon familiar to scholars of medieval texts. Within the manuscripts themselves were signs of an editorial process: revision, reformulation, and emendation.³ After careful analysis, I concluded that certain manuscripts of older lineage reflect an earlier recension of the *Zohar*, which was then reworked in manuscripts of later lineage.⁴

I realized that I could no longer rely on the printed versions of the *Zohar*, since these obscured earlier versions. So I took it upon myself to reconstruct a new-ancient version of the Aramaic text based on the manuscripts, one which could serve as the foundation for this translation.

If I could have located a complete, reliable manuscript of the *Zohar*, this would have provided a starting point. Unfortunately no such manuscript exists anywhere in the world; in all likelihood it never did, since from the start the *Zohar* was circulated in sections or booklets. Probably no single complete *Book of the Zohar* existed until it was printed nearly three hundred years later in the sixteenth century, collated from various manuscripts.⁵

xvi

3. See Ernst Goldschmidt, *Medieval Texts and Their First Appearance in Print*; Malachi Beit-Arié, "Transmission of Texts by Scribes and Copyists: Unconscious and Critical Interferences"; Israel Ta-Shma, "The 'Open' Book in Medieval Hebrew Literature: The Problem of Authorized Editions"; Daniel Abrams, introduction to *Sefer ha-Bahir*, edited by idem, 8–14; idem, "Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature."

4. Among the manuscripts reflecting an earlier recension are the following: Cambridge, University Library, MS Add. 1023; Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Cod. Hebr. 217; New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, MS 1761; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 1564; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. 779; Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, MS 2971; Toronto, University of Toronto, MS Friedberg 5-015; Vatican, Biblioteca Apostolica, ebr. 206, 208. Manuscripts resembling (and perhaps underlying) the Mantua edition include: London, British Museum, MS 762; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. 781; Parma, Perreau 15/A.

A list of eighty-four *Zohar* manuscripts (assembled by a team working under Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer) was published by Zvia Rubin in "Mif'al ha-Zohar: Mattarot ve-Hessegim," 172–73. Ronit Meroz of Tel Aviv University is conducting a systematic analysis of over six hundred extant manuscripts and fragments of the *Zohar*. In her extensive research she has identified numerous examples of editing and revision. While the discovery noted here of earlier and later recensions of the *Zohar* is my own, I have benefited from discussions with her and wish to thank her for sharing her insights with me. See her article "Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations" and her other studies listed in the Bibliography.

For further information on the manuscripts of the *Zohar*, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:99–101; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 236–37; and the comments of Malachi Beit-Arié, cited by Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigleh she-ba-Nistar*, 103–4.

5. See Abrams, "Eimatai Ḥubberah ha-Haqdamah le-Sefer ha-Zohar?"; idem, "Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship of Jewish Mystical Literature," 61.

This situation left me with two choices. I could select the best manuscript for each individual Torah portion of the *Zohar* and produce a “diplomatic” text, an exact reproduction of the original. Or, I could fashion a critical text, selecting from a wide range of variants in different manuscripts.

After consulting with members of our Academic Committee for the Translation of the *Zohar*, I chose to compose a critical text, based on a selection and evaluation of the manuscript readings. The primary reason was simply that even for individual sections of the *Zohar* there is no one “best” manuscript: each has its own deficiencies and scribal errors. Back in the sixteenth century, the editors in Mantua and Cremona also fashioned critical texts, the former drawing on ten manuscripts, the latter on six.⁶

For the first two volumes of the translation, I identified approximately twenty reliable manuscripts, based on the criteria of provenance, age, lack of scribal errors, and legibility. The originals are preserved in the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Paris, Munich, Rome, the Vatican, Parma, Toronto, and the Jewish Theological Seminary, while microfilm copies are available in the Institute for Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, in the Jewish National and University Library on the campus of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem.⁷

It is appropriate to describe more fully the methodology used in this scholarly undertaking. My research assistant meticulously combs through about half of these manuscripts and prepares a list of variant readings. For particularly difficult words or phrases, we check additional manuscripts. In addition to the manuscripts, my assistant lists variants from the Mantua and Cremona editions of the *Zohar*, as well as the edition used by Moses Cordovero in his sixteenth-century commentary, *Or Yaqar*.⁸

My procedure for establishing the Aramaic text is as follows. I begin with Reuven Margaliot's edition of *Sefer ha-Zohar*,⁹ based on the Vilna edition, which in turn is based on the Mantua edition. This represents a relatively reliable starting point. In front of me I have the list of variants prepared by my research assistant, photocopies of the original manuscripts, and other witnesses referred to previously.¹⁰ I peruse the variants line by line. Some of these are

6. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:98. For an enlightening comparison of diplomatic and critical editing, see Chaim Milikowsky, “Further on Editing Rabbinic Texts.”

7. See the list of *Zohar* manuscripts in the Bibliography, and above, note 4. Bound copies of nearly all of these manuscripts are housed in the Gershom Scholem Collection, Jewish National and University Library.

8. I also check readings in other sources including: Menaḥem Recanati, *Peirush al ha-Torah*; Joseph Angelino, *Livnat ha-Sappir*; Abraham Galante, in *Or ha-Ḥammah*; Shim'on Lavi, *Ketem Paz*; Abraham Azulai, *Or ha-Levanah*; Joseph Ḥamiz, ed., *Derekh Emet* (a list of emendations to the Mantua edition); Shalom Buzaglo, *Miqdash Melekh*; Yehudah Ashlag, *Peirush ha-Sullam*; and *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar*. See the Bibliography.

9. *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ed. Reuven Margaliot.

10. See above, note 8.

simply scribal errors or glosses, but some represent what appear to be better readings. When I identify an apparently better reading, I check if it is shared and confirmed by several reliable manuscripts and witnesses. If it is, I consider substituting it for the printed text.

Over the centuries, *Sefer ha-Zohar* has been revised by countless scribes and editors who tried to smooth away the rough edges of the text by adding an explanatory phrase, correcting an apparent syntactical mistake, or taming a wild neologism by substituting a more familiar, bland term. Often, relying on the variants, I decide to remove these accumulated layers of revision, thereby restoring a more original text. I seek to recover the *Zohar's* primal texture and cryptic flavor.

If the early manuscripts preserve unusual, striking wording that is revised or “corrected” by several later manuscripts and the printed editions, I tend to go with the older reading. Often, according to the more reliable manuscripts, a Zoharic rabbi creatively paraphrases a Talmudic saying. Some of the later manuscripts and the printed editions may then restore this saying to its exact Talmudic form. In such cases I emend the printed text in favor of the *Zohar's* original formulation—original in both senses: older and creative. In the commentary I cite the Talmudic saying on which the paraphrase is based, so that readers can see the transition and trace the imaginative process.

I do not claim to be fully restoring “the original text of the *Zohar*.” There may never have been any such thing, since the text probably emerged over many years, written and distributed piecemeal. However, through painstaking analysis of the variants, I am able to scrape away some seven hundred years of accretion and corruption, and at least approach that elusive, hypothetical original. This Aramaic text of the *Zohar*, the basis of my translation, is available for study and scholarly examination.¹¹

Translation and Commentary

All translation is inherently inadequate, a well-intentioned betrayal. In the words of the second-century sage Rabbi Yehudah, “One who translates a verse literally is a liar; one who adds to it is a blasphemer.”¹² Furthermore, the *Zohar* is notoriously obscure—perhaps the most difficult Jewish classic to translate. It was composed in Castile mostly in Aramaic, a language no longer spoken in medieval Spain.¹³ The author(s) concocted a unique blend of Aramaic out of traditional sources, especially the Babylonian Talmud and *Targum Onqelos* (an

11. At the website of Stanford University Press: www.sup.org/zohar.

12. BT *Qiddushin* 49a.

13. On the *Zohar's* Aramaic, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 226–29; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:64–68.

Aramaic translation of the Torah). This unparalleled neo-Aramaic is peppered with enigmatic expressions, puns, outlandish constructions, puzzling neologisms, solecisms, and traces of medieval Hebrew and Castilian.

The *Zohar's* prose is poetic, overflowing with multiple connotations, composed in such a way that you often cannot pin down the precise meaning of a phrase. The language befits the subject matter, which is mysterious, elusive, and ineffable; words can merely suggest and hint. An unfathomable process may be stated, then immediately denied: "It split and did not split its aura."¹⁴ Occasionally we encounter oxymorons, such as "new-ancient words," alluding to the dual nature of the *Zohar's* secrets, recently composed yet ascribed to ancient sources.¹⁵ The first impulse of divine emanation is described as *בוצינא דקרדינותא* (*botsina de-qardinuta*), "a spark of impenetrable darkness,"¹⁶ so intensely bright that it cannot be seen.

Through the centuries, the potency of the *Zohar's* language has mesmerized even those who could not plumb its secrets. While kabbalists delved deeply, the uninitiated chanted the lyrical Aramaic, often unaware of its literal meaning. In the words of an eighteenth-century mystic, "Even if one does not understand, the language is suited to the soul."¹⁷

XIX

No doubt it is risky to translate the *Zohar*, but it would be worse to leave these gems of wisdom buried in their ancient Aramaic vault. So I have plunged in, seeking to transmit some of the *Zohar's* magic. The previous English translation (composed in the 1930s by Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul Levertoff) reads smoothly but often misunderstands the text.¹⁸ Its genteel prose is more a paraphrase than an accurate translation—avoiding unfamiliar terms, censoring erotic material, skipping difficult passages and even entire sections. The English flows too fluently compared to the original, subduing the unruly Aramaic, failing to render its untamed vibrancy. Moreover, since the translation is unaccompanied by a commentary, the symbolism remains impenetrable.

Despite its shortcomings, I have learned much from consulting this translation, along with others.¹⁹ But my approach is significantly different. Though I wish to make the *Zohar* accessible, I also want to convey its strangeness,

14. *Zohar* 1:15a. Citations of the *Zohar* refer to the standard Aramaic pagination (based on the Mantua edition of 1558–60), which in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* is indicated in the running head on each page.

15. See Daniel Matt, "New-Ancient Words': The Aura of Secrecy in the *Zohar*."

16. *Zohar* 1:15a.

17. Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto, in his preface to *Qelal Pitḥei Ḥokhmah*, cited by Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:29.

18. This five-volume edition is entitled *The Zohar* (see Bibliography). Scholem remarks (*Kabbalah*, 241) that it "suffers from incomplete or erroneous understanding of many parts of the kabbalistic exposition."

19. I have also consulted four different Hebrew translations, by Yehudah Ashlag, Daniel Frisch, Yehudah Edri, and Yechiel Bar-Lev; Charles Mopsik's French translation, *Le Zohar*;

potency, and rich ambiguity. Here the commentary is essential. When the translation cannot adequately express a multifaceted phrase, I unfold the range of meaning in the commentary. When the translation is as cryptic as the original Aramaic, the commentary rescues the stranded reader.

My style of translation is literal yet poetic. I am convinced that a literal rendering of the *Zohar* is not only the most accurate but also the most colorful and zestful—the best way to transmit the lyrical energy of the Aramaic. Still, at times, the multivalent language invites a certain freedom of expression. Let me cite two related examples. In *Zohar* 1:83a, Rabbi Shim'on describes the night-time journey of the soul, soaring skyward from her sleeping body: “Flying, she encounters those קומרין טהירין (*qumrin tehirin*) of defilement.”

What does this bizarre term mean? The Sperling-Simon translation renders it as “certain bright but unclean essences.”²⁰ The English translation of Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar* reads: “the deceiving lights of uncleanness,”²¹ while Tishby's original Hebrew translation reads a bit differently: קימורי נגוהות (*qimmurei negohot*)—roughly: “vaulted splendors”—though in his note he acknowledges that the meaning is “doubtful.”²² I render the sentence as follows: “Flying, she encounters those hooded, hunchbacked, dazzling demons of defilement.” The accompanying commentary explains that these are malevolent forces who block the ascent of an unworthy soul. *Qumrin* derives via rabbinic usage from the Greek *qamara*, “arched cover,” while *tehirin* is a cognate of the Aramaic *tihara*, meaning “brightness, noon.” One class of demons is named *tiharei*, “noonday demons.”

The virtuous soul who evades these demons reaches heaven and receives a divine message. According to another Zoharic passage (1:130a), while descending back to her sleeping earthbound body, the soul is assailed by חבילי טריקין (*havilei teriqin*). The Sperling-Simon translation renders this phrase as “malignant bands.”²³ The English translation of Tishby's *Wisdom of the Zohar* reads: “ill-intentioned destructive powers.”²⁴ I render it as “ravaging bands of truculent stingers.” The commentary explains that *havilei* derives from either *hevel*, “band, group,” or the verb *hvl*, “to injure, destroy.” *Teriqin* derives from the root *trq*, “to sting, bite.”

the Hebrew anthology by Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, and its English version, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. David Goldstein; and the recent English translation edited by Michael Berg, *The Zohar by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, which, however, is based not on the original Aramaic but on Ashlag's Hebrew translation. For details on all of these, see the Bibliography.

20. *The Zohar*, trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon, 1:277.

21. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. Goldstein, 2:818.

22. Idem, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 2:134. He concludes by saying that the phrase may mean: “delusive lights.”

23. *The Zohar*, trans. Sperling and Simon, 2:19.

24. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. Goldstein, 2:813.

Although the *Zohar's* basic vocabulary is limited, its roots generate a rich variety of meanings. For example, the root תקן (*tqn*) spans the following range: “establish, institute, mend, restore, correct, perfect, prepare, arrange, array, adorn.” The root סלק (*slq*) can mean: “rise, raise, culminate, attain, surpass, depart, disappear, die, remove, postpone, reserve, emit (fragrance).” In normal Aramaic and Hebrew, the specific verbal conjugation determines which meaning of the root applies, but the *Zohar* ignores or flouts rules of grammar—confusing the conjugations, playing with multiple meanings, often leaving the reader stumped and wondering.

Mysticism strives to penetrate a realm beyond distinctions, but this mystical masterpiece demands constant decision making, challenging the reader or translator to navigate between conflicting meanings and determine the appropriate one—or sometimes to discover how differing meanings pertain simultaneously. The frequent dilemmas of interpretation suggest that in exploring the *Zohar*, linguistic search and spiritual search go hand in hand.

Especially puzzling, though charming, are the neologisms strewn throughout the *Zohar*, intended to bewilder and astound the reader.²⁵ Some derive from rare Talmudic terms, which the author refashions by intentionally misspelling or by inverting letters; some derive from Greek, Latin, or Castilian; some appear to be pure inventions. These nonce words often contain the letters ט (*tet*), ס (*samekh*), פ (*pe*), ק (*qof*), and ר (*resh*) in various combinations: קוספיתא (*quspita*), קטפירא (*qatpira*), קירטא (*qirta*), קסירא (*qesira*), קוסטרא (*qustera*), טופסרא (*tufsera*). *Qustera* derives from the Latin word *castrum* (plural, *castra*), “fortress, castle.” *Qatpira* and its variations mean several things, including “knot” (based on Aramaic קטרא [*qitra*]) and “waterskin.”²⁶

One newly coined noun, טיקלא (*tiqla*), is particularly versatile. In various contexts it can mean “scale, hollow of the hand, fist, potter’s wheel, and water clock.” This last sense refers to a device described in ancient and medieval scientific literature, which in the *Zohar* functions as an alarm clock, calibrated to wake kabbalists precisely at midnight for the ritual study of Torah.²⁷ A similar device was employed in Christian monasteries to rouse monks for their vigils. How appropriate to invent a word for an invention!

Often, by pondering the context, comparing Zoharic and rabbinic parallels, and scouring sundry dictionaries and lexicons, one can decipher or at least conjecture the meaning of these weird terms, but some remain as perplexing as originally intended.²⁸

25. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:66–67.

26. See Yehuda Liebes, *Peraqim be-Millon Sefer ha-Zohar*, 349–54.

27. See *Zohar* 1:92b and my commentary.

28. After wrestling with Zoharic neologisms for years, I no longer share Tishby’s view (*Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:66) that “only rarely is it possible to determine their meaning from the context, while for the most part it is difficult even to guess what the author had in

In translating biblical citations, I have consulted various translations but generally composed my own.²⁹ Sometimes, in quoting a verse, the *Zohar* intends a meaning different from that conveyed by any known translation. In such cases I usually translate the verse as the *Zohar* understands it and then explain the difference in the commentary.

The main purpose of the commentary is to clarify the dense symbolism and unique terminology. Here I seek to elicit the meaning of the text, drawing it forth from the *Zohar*'s own language without being heavy-handed—without ruining the subtlety and ambiguity of the original. Remember that the *Zohar* was not intended to be easily understood but rather to be deciphered. I want to allow and compel the reader to wrestle with the text. Over the centuries, the tendency has grown to overinterpret, with commentators often insisting on assigning sefirotic significance to nearly every image and metaphor. I have resisted this tendency, while still identifying sefirotic correspondences when they are called for. Often a phrase or passage implies more than one meaning; the reader is encouraged to ponder various possibilities.

XXII

To clarify the context, I cite sources and parallels from the Bible, rabbinic literature, and the *Zohar* itself, with occasional references to secondary literature. The aim is not to overwhelm the reader by citing everything conceivable, but rather to provide what is needed to make sense of this enigmatic work of art.³⁰

In composing the commentary, I have drawn on numerous traditional and modern *Zohar* commentaries, especially those of Moses Cordovero, Shim'on Lavi, Ḥayyim Vital, Abraham Galante, Shalom Buzaglo, Yehudah Ashlag, Charles Mopsik, and Daniel Frisch.³¹ Other valuable resources include the annotations of Reuven Margalioṭ (*Nitsotsei Zohar*) in his edition of the *Zohar*, Isaiah Tishby's monumental *Mishnat ha-Zohar* (*The Wisdom of the Zohar*), *Gershom Scholem's Annotated Zohar*, and Yehuda Liebes's eye-opening *Peraqim be-Millon Sefer ha-Zohar* (*Sections of the Zohar Lexicon*).

A glossary, bibliography, and an index of biblical and rabbinic citations are appended to each volume. A diagram of the ten *sefirot* appears on page xi of

mind." Still, I can appreciate the confession of David Goldstein (translator of *Wisdom of the Zohar*), who, after rendering several obscure lines directly from the Aramaic, writes (*ibid.*, 106, n. 16): "The English translations given are purely hypothetical."

29. Translations I have consulted include the King James Version, New International Version, New Revised Standard Version, the *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh*, Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses*, and Richard Elliott Friedman's *Commentary on the Torah with a New English Translation*.

30. I have tried to follow the sage advice of Samuel Sandmel, who years ago warned scholars about the dangers of "parallelomania." See his presidential address of that title delivered to the Society of Biblical Literature and Exegesis and published in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 81 (1962): 1–13.

31. See the Bibliography.

this volume. The standard Aramaic pagination of the *Zohar* is indicated in the running head on each page (e.g., 1:34b).

How to Read the Zohar

There is no single right way to read and proceed through the *Zohar*, but I can point out certain features and suggest several guidelines.

First of all, the *Zohar* is dynamic—full of surprises. Typically we find that “Rabbi Ḥiyya and Rabbi Yose were walking on the way,” wandering through the hills of Galilee, sharing secrets of Torah—but also moving from one dimension to another, accompanied by *Shekhinah*, the Divine Presence Herself. Who knows whom they will encounter on the road? A child amazes them with wisdom, a beggar enriches them with precious teachings, a cantankerous old donkey-driver turns out to be a sage in disguise.

You are about to enter an enchanted realm. Still, although the *Zohar* sometimes reads like a mystical novel, remember that this is fundamentally a biblical commentary. It's helpful to have a Bible at hand to check the original context, to see how a particular verse becomes a springboard for the imagination. Every few pages we read: “Rabbi Ḥiyya opened,” “Rabbi Yose opened,” signifying that he is opening not only his exposition but also the verse: disclosing new layers of meaning, expanding the range of interpretation. The reader of the *Zohar* should be open, too—open to new ways of thinking and imagining. As the *Havrayya* (Companions) continually exclaim, “Come and see!”

The *Zohar* is firmly rooted in tradition but thrives on discovery. “This verse has been discussed, but come and see!” “This verse has been established, but come and see!”³² “Innovations of Torah are required here!”³³ Innovation emerges through scrutinizing the biblical text, so questioning becomes a supreme value. After Rabbi Ḥizkiyah asks Rabbi Abba a challenging question, we are told that “Rabbi Abba came and kissed him.”³⁴ Why? Because, as one commentator notes here, “The question is half the answer; without a question, there is no reason for an answer.”³⁵

Even when the meaning of a verse is perfectly clear, the *Zohar* may question its structure, sometimes probing so deeply that the reader is stunned. To take an extreme example, come and see how Rabbi El'azar deals with the concluding verse in the story of the Garden of Eden, which could hardly be more explicit: *He drove out Adam*.³⁶ “We do not know who divorced whom: if the blessed

32. *Zohar* 1:56b, 112a, 136a, and frequently.

33. *Ibid.*, 155b.

34. *Ibid.*, 155a.

35. Abraham Galante, in *Or ha-Ḥammah*, ad loc. On questioning in the *Zohar*, see Matt, “New-Ancient Words,” 198–99.

36. Genesis 3:24. Literally, *He drove out the human*.

Holy One divorced Adam, or not.”³⁷ As the rabbi demonstrates by exegetical artifice, the mystical meaning is the shocking alternative lurking within that bland phrase, “or not”: Adam *drove out*, divorced *Shekhinah*, splitting Her from Her divine partner, *Tiferet*, and from himself. Once, as Adam, humanity was wedded to God. The original sin lies in losing intimacy with the divine, thereby constricting unbounded awareness. This loss follows inevitably from tasting the fruit of discursive knowledge; it is the price we pay for maturity and culture. The spiritual challenge is to search for that lost treasure—without renouncing the self or the world.

As you read, see how the *Havraya* coax new meaning out of a biblical verse, phrase, word—or even letter. Often, they rely on standard rabbinic techniques of interpretation, such as verbal analogy: “Here is written: [such-and-such a biblical expression], and there is written: [an identical (or nearly identical) expression],” implying a close link between the two expressions.

The hermeneutical leap may be long, far from the literal meaning, but sometimes a verse is read “hyperliterally,” ignoring idiomatic usage in favor of a radically spiritual sense. For example, when God commands Abraham, לך לך (Lekh lekha), *Go forth, . . . to the land that I will show you* (Genesis 12:1), Rabbi El’azar insists on reading the words more literally than they were intended: *Lekh lekha, Go to yourself!*³⁸ Search deep within to discover your true self.

XXIV

Another startling illustration is the *Zohar’s* reading of the opening words of the Torah, traditionally rendered: *In the beginning God created*. Everyone assumes the verse describes the creation of the world, but for the *Zohar* it alludes to a more primal beginning: the emanation of the *sefirot* from *Ein Sof* (“Infinity”). How is this allusion discovered, or invented? By insisting on reading the Hebrew words in their precise order: בראשית ברא אלהים (*Be-reshit bara Elohim*), construed now as *With beginning, It created Elohim*—that is, by means of *Hokhmah* (the *sefirah* of “Wisdom,” known as *beginning*), *It* (ineffable *Ein Sof*) emanated *Binah* (the *sefirah* of “Understanding,” known by the divine name *Elohim*).³⁹ *God*, it turns out, is the object of the verse, not the subject! The ultimate divine reality, *Ein Sof*, transcends and explodes our comfortable conception of “God.” The *Zohar* dares us to confront this reality, as it transforms the familiar story of Creation into divine biography.

So, as you undertake this adventure, expect to be surprised—stay alert. The *Zohar’s* teachings are profound and intense; one who hopes to enter and emerge in peace should be careful, persevering, simultaneously receptive and active. The message is not served to you on a platter; you must engage the text

37. *Zohar* 1:53b.

38. *Ibid.*, 78a.

39. *Ibid.*, 15a.

and join the search for meaning. Follow the words to what lies beyond and within; open the gates of imagination.

Above all, don't reduce everything you encounter in these pages to something you already know. Beware of trying to find "the essence" of a particular teaching. Although usually essence is the goal of mystical search, here essence is inadequate unless it stimulates you to explore ever deeper layers, to question your assumptions about tradition, God, and self. In the words of a Zoharic parable:

There was a man who lived in the mountains. He knew nothing about those who lived in the city. He sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw. One day he entered the city. They offered him good bread. The man asked, "What's this for?"

They replied, "It's bread, to eat!"

He ate, and it tasted very good. He asked, "What's it made of?"

They answered, "Wheat."

Later they offered him thick loaves kneaded with oil. He tasted them, and asked, "And what are these made of?"

They answered, "Wheat."

Later they offered him royal pastry kneaded with honey and oil. He asked, "And what are these made of?"

They answered, "Wheat."

He said, "Surely I am the master of all of these, since I eat the essence of all of these: wheat!"

Because of that view, he knew nothing of the delights of the world, which were lost on him. So it is with one who grasps the principle but is unaware of all those delectable delights deriving, diverging from that principle.⁴⁰

40. *Zohar* 2:176a–b. The wheat and its products (kernels, bread, cake, and pastry) may symbolize four levels of meaning in Torah: simple, homiletical, allegorical, and mystical. See Matt, *The Essential Kabbalah*, 207.