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unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended, as he could do with the other sciences whose teaching is generally recognized. Rather, there will befall him when teaching another that which he had undergone when learning himself. I mean to say that the subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again, as though this were the nature of this subject matter.<sup>116</sup>

Such is the nature of Torah, according to the Zohar: "Torah removes a word from her sheath, is seen for a moment, then quickly hides away. . . . She does so only for those who know her intimately."<sup>117</sup> The Zohar does the same. It hides more than it reveals; only the careful, devoted reader can learn from it. It is a common experience to read several lines of Zohar, or an entire passage, and then wonder what the message was. Cascading imagery overwhelms coherent teaching. But that is the nature of the subject matter: ". . . the whole spectrum of color's flashing, disappearing. Those rays of color do not wait to be seen; they merge into the fusion of *zohar*."<sup>118</sup>

The Zohar yearns to reveal the divine light permeating Torah, but since that dimension of meaning is beyond words, words are employed as symbols. Torah becomes a treasure house of symbols, pointing to that which cannot be expressed. Imagination guides the Zohar's reading of Torah and is essential to the reading of Zohar. God can only be "known and grasped to the degree that one opens the gates of imagination."<sup>119</sup>

The imagery and symbolism are rich and fluid, but they follow a pattern, the pattern of the *sefirot*. The Zohar rarely describes the entire sefirotic system. It even avoids the term *sefirot* and instead speaks of lights, levels, links, roots, garments of the King, crowns of the King, and dozens of other images for the individual *sefirot*. The reader must interpret the symbolism and identify the corresponding *sefirah*.<sup>120</sup>

As noted above, the term *sefirot* originally meant "numbers" or numerical potencies, but in medieval Kabbalah the *sefirot* became stages of God's being, aspects of divine personality. Their pattern and rhythm inform all the worlds of creation. Prior to the emanation of the *sefirot*, God is unmanifest, referred to as *Ein Sof*, Infinite. God as Infinity cannot be described or comprehended. A fourteenth-century kabbalist writes: "*Ein Sof* . . . is not hinted at in the Torah, the Prophets, the Writings, or the words of our Rabbis, may their memory be a blessing; but the Masters of Service [the kabbalists] have received a little hint of It."<sup>121</sup>

Critics charged that the theory of *Ein Sof* and the *sefirot* was dualistic, that by positing and describing ten aspects of Divinity, Kabbalah verged on polytheism.<sup>122</sup> The kabbalists insisted that *Ein Sof* and the *sefirot* formed a unity "like a flame joined to a coal."<sup>123</sup> "It is they, and they are It" (Zohar 3:70a). "They are Its name, and It is they" (3:11b). From the human perspective, the *sefirot* appear to have a multiple and independent existence. Ultimately, though, all of them are one; the true reality is the Infinite.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, the mythological character of the system cannot be denied; it is a prominent feature of the Zohar.

The *sefirot* are often pictured in the form of Primordial Adam or as a cosmic tree growing downward from its roots above. As the kabbalists were quick to point out, these images should not be taken literally; they are organic symbols of a spiritual reality beyond normal comprehension. At the start of one of his most anthropomorphic descriptions, Rabbi Shim'on cites a verse from Deuteronomy: "Cursed be the one who makes a carved or molten image, the work of the hands

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of an artisan, and sets it up in secret."<sup>125</sup> Sefirotic imagery is intended to convey something of the beyond; worshipping its literalness prevents profound communication.

According to Genesis 1:27, the human being is created in the image of God. The *sefirot* are the divine original of that image. As Primordial Adam, they are the mythical paragon of the human being, our archetypal nature. The human race has lost this nature, but if one were to purify himself, he would reconnect with the *sefirot* and become a vessel for them.<sup>126</sup> This is what the Patriarchs attained and, to a greater degree, Moses. The *sefirot* generate the ultimate confusion of identities: human and divine. Such sublime confusion catalyzes the process of enlightenment.

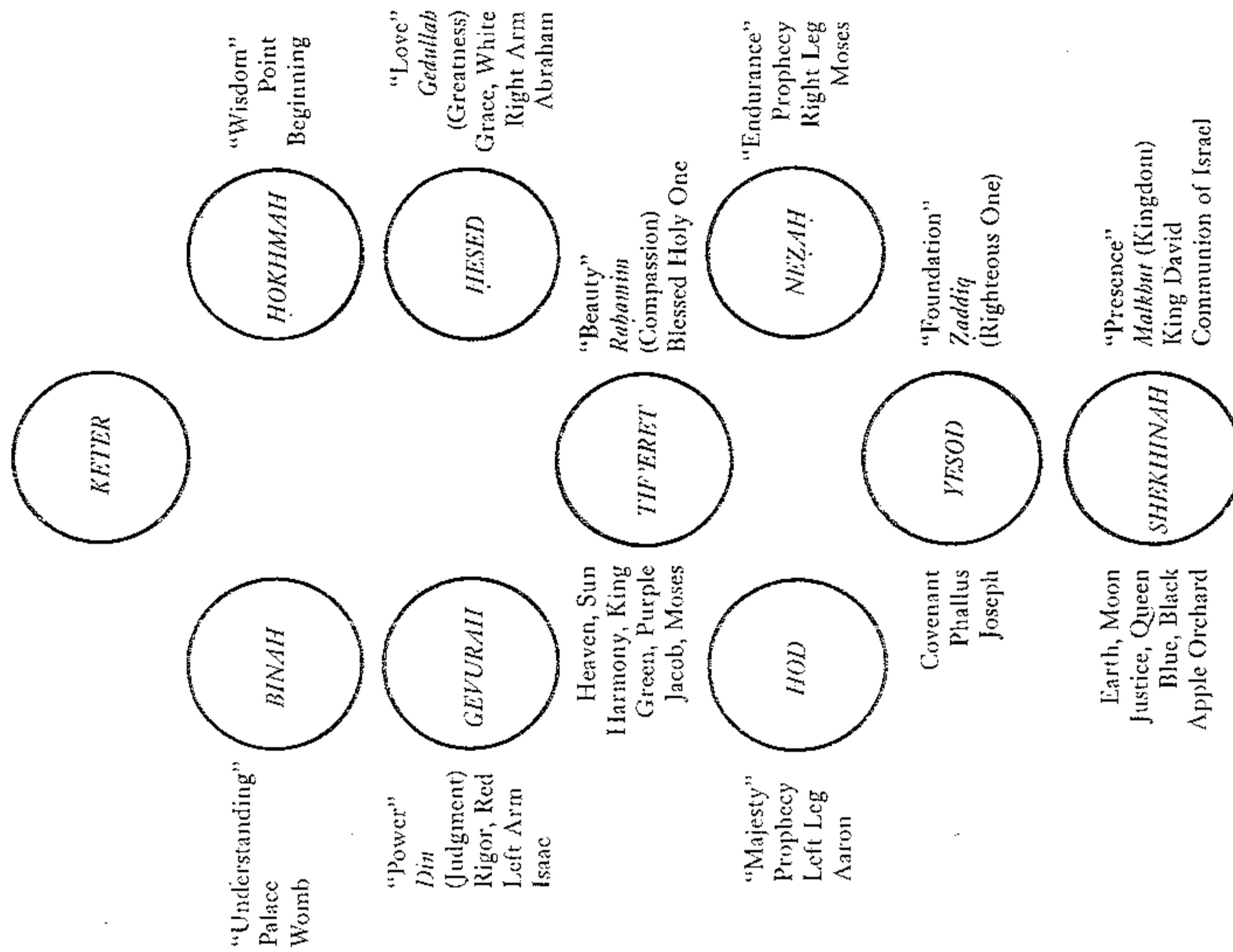
From above to below, the *sefirot* enact the drama of emanation, the transition from *Ein Sof* to creation. From below to above, they are a ladder of ascent back to the One.

*Keter* (Crown) is the first *sefirah*, coeternal with *Ein Sof*. It represents that aspect of the Infinite that turns toward manifestation and is therefore called *Razon*, Will. It is also known as *Ayin*, Nothingness, "having more being than any other being in the world, but since it is simple and all other simple things are complex compared with its simplicity, in comparison it is called Nothing."<sup>127</sup> No differentiation or individuality exists in *Keter*; no "thingness." From this *sefirah* all emanation flows. First the primordial point of *Hokhmah* (Wisdom) shines forth. Though it is the second *sefirah*, *Hokhmah* is called Beginning because *Keter* is eternal and has no beginning.

The point expands into a circle, the *sefirah* of *Binah* (Understanding). *Binah* is the womb, the Divine Mother. She receives the seed, the point of *Hokhmah*, and conceives the seven lower *sefirot*. Created being too has its source in Her; She is called "the totality of all individuality."<sup>128</sup> She is also "the world that is coming," constantly coming and flowing.<sup>129</sup>

The three highest *sefirot* represent the head of the divine body and are more hidden than the offspring of *Binah*. She gives birth first to *Hesed* (Love) and *Din* (Judgment). This pair of *sefirot* is also called *Gedullah* (Greatness) and *Ge'urah* (Power). They are the right and left arms of God, two sides of divine personality: free-flowing love and strict judgment, grace and limitation. Both are necessary for the world to function. Ideally a balance is achieved, symbolized by the central *sefirah*, *Tiferet* (Beauty), also called *Rabamim* (Compassion). However, if Judgment is not softened by Love, *Din* lashes out and threatens to

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destroy life. This is the origin of evil, called *Sitra Agra*, the Other Side. From a more radical perspective, evil originates in divine thought, which eliminates waste before emanating the good. The demonic is rooted in the divine.<sup>130</sup>

*Tiferet* is the trunk of the sefirotic body. He is called Heaven, Sun, King, and the Blessed Holy One, the standard rabbinic name for God. He is the son of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*.

The next two sefirot are *Nezah* (Endurance) and *Hod* (Majesty). They form the right and left legs of the body and are the source of prophecy. *Yesod* (foundation) is the ninth sefirah and represents the phallus, the procreative life force of the universe. He is also called *Zaddiq* (Righteous One), and Proverbs 10:25 is applied to Him: "The righteous one is the foundation of the world."<sup>131</sup> *Yesod* is the *axis mundi*, the cosmic pillar. The light and power of the preceding sefirot are channeled through Him to the last sefirah, *Malkhut*.

*Malkhut* (Kingdom) is also called *Shekinah* (Divine Presence). The term *Shekinah* appears frequently in earlier rabbinic literature, where it signifies God's Presence and Immanence. In Kabbalah it takes on new-ancient mythological meaning. *Shekinah* is the daughter of *Binah*, the bride of *Tiferet*. The joining of *Tiferet* and *Shekinah* becomes the focus of religious life. Human righteous action stimulates *Yesod*, the Righteous One, and brings about the union of the divine couple (*Zohar* 3:110b). Human marriage symbolizes divine marriage. Sabbath Eve is the weekly celebration of the *bieros gamos*, the sacred wedding. This is the ideal time for mystics to make love.<sup>132</sup>

The tenth sefirah appears under many other names: Earth, Moon, *Matronita*, Mirror, Rose, Throne of Glory, Justice, Garden of Eden, Holy Apple Orchard. She reflects all aspects of Divinity and sustains all the worlds below, though "She has nothing at all of Her own."<sup>133</sup>

*Shekinah* is also *Kenest Yisra'el*, the mystical Community of Israel. All of Israel are Her limbs (*Zohar* 3:231b). She symbolizes the people's intimate connection with God and accompanies them in exile.<sup>134</sup> She prevents the masculine aspect of God from punishing Her children, though at other times She Herself administers punishment.<sup>135</sup> *Shekinah* is personally threatened by human sin because it taints Her and ruins Her union with *Tiferet*: "When the powerful serpent up above is aroused by the sins of the world, it joins with the Feminine [*Shekinah*] and injects venom into Her."<sup>136</sup> The Male [*Tiferet*] separates from Her because She has been defiled" (3:79a).

The union of *Tiferet* and *Shekinah* gives birth to the human

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soul,<sup>137</sup> and the mystical journey begins with the awareness of this spiritual fact of life. Can a human being experience *Shekinah* directly? The Talmud had posed this question rhetorically: "Is it possible for a human being to walk behind *Shekinah*?" "Is it possible to cleave to *Shekinah*?" No. Rather, one should engage in good deeds and thus imitate God.<sup>138</sup> Kabbalah is more daring. In the words of Joseph Gikatilla, a friend and colleague of Moses de León, "As to what the Rabbis have said: 'Is it possible for a human being to cleave to *Shekinah*?' it certainly is possible!"<sup>139</sup>

*Shekinah* is the opening to the Divine: "One who enters must enter through this gate" (*Zohar* 1:7b). Once inside, the sefirot are no longer an abstract theological system; they become a map of consciousness. The mystic climbs and probes, discovering dimensions of being. Spiritual and psychological wholeness is achieved by meditating on the qualities of each sefirah, by imitating and integrating the attributes of God. The path is not easy. Divine will can be harsh; Abraham was commanded to sacrifice Isaac in order to balance love with rigor.<sup>140</sup> From the Other Side, demonic forces threaten and seduce. Contemptively and psychologically, evil must be encountered, not evaded. By knowing and withstanding the dark underside of wisdom, Abraham was refined.<sup>141</sup>

Near the top of the sefirotic ladder, meditation reaches *Binah*. She is called *Teshuvah*, Return. The ego returns to the womb of being. *Binah* cannot be held in thought. She is called Who. Who is that? An intuitive flash illuminating and disappearing, as sunbeams play on the surface of water.<sup>142</sup>

In the depths of *Binah* lies *Hokhmah*, Wisdom. The mystic is nourished from this sphere.<sup>143</sup> It is so profound and primal that it cannot be known consciously, only absorbed. Isaac the Blind, one of the earliest kabbalists (ca. 1160-1235), says: "No creature can contemplate [the wondrous paths of Wisdom] except one who sucks from It. This is meditation through sucking, not through knowing."<sup>144</sup>

Beyond *Hokhmah* is the Nothingness of *Keter*, the Annihilation of Thought.<sup>145</sup> In this ultimate sefirah human consciousness expands, dissolves into Infinity.

The Zohar is rarely explicit about the ascent. In Kabbalah meditation often takes place during ritual prayer; so the Zohar correlates blessings and individual words of the liturgy with specific sefirot. The goal is to unify the various aspects of God through focused awareness

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and visualization. Successful prayer draws forth the flow of divine blessing.<sup>146</sup> The ecstasy of sefirotic contemplation, however, seems reserved mostly for souls who have departed this world or for the high priest on the Day of Atonement.<sup>147</sup> Souls of the living who succeed in prayer delight in palaces below *Shekinah*. If especially devout, they may be raised to the level of *Yesod* or attain a sefirotic vision,<sup>148</sup> but the highest *sefirot* are considered unapproachable. In fact the Zohar forbids contemplation of *Binah* and what lies beyond Her. Deuteronomy 22:7 is cited as the proof text: "Let the mother go; the children you may take."<sup>149</sup> The Divine Mother is a cosmic question; Her children, the seven lower *sefirot*, would seem more attainable. However, even concerning these rungs of meditation, the Zohar offers little direct guidance. The Patriarchs and other biblical heroes who mastered individual *sefirot* serve as archetypes, but to the uninitiated, they are awesome. Sefirotic imagery abounds, but the reader must decipher the allusions, be open to the power of the symbol, and join the search.

Zohar is an adventure, a challenge to the normal workings of consciousness. It dares you to examine your usual ways of making sense, your assumptions about tradition, God, and self. Textual analysis is essential, but you must engage Zohar and cultivate a taste for its multiple layers of meaning. It is tempting and safe to reduce the symbols to a familiar scheme: psychological, historical, literary, or religious. But do not forfeit wonder.

What is the Concealment of the Book?<sup>150</sup>

Rabbi Shim'on said

"Five chapters in a great palace; they fill the whole world."

Rabbi Judah said

"If so, they are the best of all."

Rabbi Shim'on said

"So it is, for one who has entered and emerged."<sup>151</sup>

For one who has not entered and emerged, it is not so.

A parable.

There was a man who lived in the mountains.

He knew nothing about those who lived in the city.

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He sowed wheat and ate the kernels raw.

One day he entered the city.

They brought him good bread.

He said, 'What is this for?'

They said, 'Bread, to eat!'

He ate, and it tasted very good.

He said, 'What is it made of?' They said, 'Wheat.'

Later they brought him cakes kneaded in oil.

He tasted them and said, 'And what are these made of?'

They said, 'Wheat.'

Finally they brought him royal pastry made with honey and oil.

He said, 'And what are these made of?' They said, 'Wheat.'

He said, 'I am the master of all of these,

for I eat the essence of all of these: wheat!'<sup>152</sup>

Because of that view, he knew nothing of the delights of the world; they were lost to him.

So it is with one who grasps the principle and does not know all those delectable delights deriving, diverging from that principle."

## THE CREATION OF ELOHIM

### *In the Beginning*

When the King conceived ordaining  
He engraved engravings in the luster on high.  
A blinding spark flashed  
within the Concealed of the Concealed  
from the mystery of the Infinite,  
a cluster of vapor in formlessness,  
set in a ring,  
not white, not black, not red, not green,  
no color at all.  
When a band spanned, it yielded radiant colors.  
Deep within the spark gushed a flow  
imbuing colors below,  
concealed within the concealed of the mystery of the Infinite.  
The flow broke through and did not break through its aura.  
It was not known at all  
until, under the impact of breaking through,  
one high and hidden point shone.  
Beyond that point, nothing is known.  
So it is called Beginning,  
the first command of all.

"The enlightened will shine like the *zohar* of the sky,  
and those who make the masses righteous  
will shine like the stars forever and ever"  
(Daniel 12:3).

*Zohar*, Concealed of the Concealed, struck its aura.  
The aura touched and did not touch this point.  
Then this Beginning emanated  
and made itself a palace for its glory and its praise.  
There it sowed the seed of holiness

to give birth  
for the benefit of the universe.  
The secret is:  
"Her stock is a holy seed"  
(Isaiah 6:13).

*Zohar*, sowing a seed for its glory  
like the seed of fine purple silk.  
The silkworm wraps itself within and makes itself a palace.  
This palace is its praise and a benefit to all.

With the Beginning  
the Concealed One who is not known created the palace.  
This palace is called *Elohim*.  
The secret is:  
"With Beginning, \_\_\_\_\_ created *Elohim*"  
(Genesis 1:1).

## THE HIDDEN LIGHT

*God said, "Let there be light!" And there was light.*  
(Genesis 1:3)

This is the light that the Blessed Holy One created at first.  
It is the light of the eye.

It is the light that the Blessed Holy One showed the first Adam;  
with it he saw from one end of the world to the other.  
It is the light that the Blessed Holy One showed David;  
he sang its praise:

"How great is Your good that You have concealed for those who fear  
You!"

(Psalms 31:20).

It is the light that the Blessed Holy One showed Moses;  
with it he saw from Gilead to Dan.

But when the Blessed Holy One saw  
that three wicked generations would arise:

the generation of Enosh, the generation of the Flood,  
and the generation of the Tower of Babel,

He hid the light away so they would not make use of it.

The Blessed Holy One gave it to Moses

and he used it for the three unused months of his gestation,  
as it is said:

"She concealed him for three months"

(Exodus 2:2).

When three months had passed, he was brought before Pharaoh  
and the Blessed Holy One took it away from him  
until he stood on Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah.

Then He gave him back that light;

he wielded it his whole life long

and the children of Israel could not come near him

until he put a veil over his face,

as it is said:

"They were afraid to come near him"

(Exodus 34:30).

He wrapped himself in it as in a *tallit*, as it is written:

"He wraps Himself in light as in a garment" (Psalms 104:2).

"Let there be light! And there was light." Every subject of the phrase "And there was" exists in this world and in the world that is coming.

Rabbi Isaac said,

"The light created by the Blessed Holy One in the act of Creation flared from one end of the world to the other and was hidden away.

Why was it hidden away?

So the wicked of the world would not enjoy it and the worlds would not enjoy it because of them. It is stored away for the righteous, for the Righteous One!

As it is written:

"Light is sown for the righteous one, joy for the upright in heart" (Psalms 97:11).

Then the worlds will be fragrant, and all will be one. But until the day when the world that is coming arrives, it is stored and hidden away. . . ."

Rabbi Judah said

"If it were completely hidden the world would not exist for even a moment!

Rather, it is hidden and sown like a seed that gives birth to seeds and fruit.

Thereby the world is sustained.

Every single day, a ray of that light shines into the world and keeps everything alive,

for with that ray the Blessed Holy One feeds the world.

And everywhere that Torah is studied at night one thread-thin ray appears from that hidden light and flows down upon those absorbed in her, as it is written:

'By day YHVH will enjoin His love; in the night His song is with me' (Psalms 42:9), as we have already established. . . .

Since the first day, it has never been fully revealed, but it plays a vital role in the world, renewing every day the act of Creation!"