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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. 116

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." 117 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 colors flashing, disappearing. Those rays of color do not wait to be seen; they merge into the fusion of zohar."118

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."119

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 sefirot.120

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.”121

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.122 The kabbalists insisted that Ein Sof and the sefirot formed a unity “like a flame joined to a coal.”123 “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.124 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." Sefirotic imagery is intended to convey something of the beyond; worshiping 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. 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 sefirot, coeternal with Ein Sof. It represents that aspect of the Infinite that turns toward manifestation and is therefore called Kason, 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." No differentiation or individuality exists in Keter, no "thingness." From this sefirot all emanation flows. First the primordial point of Hokhmah (Wisdom) shines forth. Though it is the second sefirot, Hokhmah is called Beginning because Keter is eternal and has no beginning.

The point expands into a circle, the sefirot 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." She is also "the world that is coming," constantly coming and flowing.

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 Yesod (Love) and Din (Judgment). This pair of sefirot is also called Gedulah (Greatness) and Gevurah (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 sefirot, Tiferet (Beauty), also called Rahamin (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.  

Tif’eret 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 Hokhmanah and Binah.

The next two sefirot are Nechad (Endurance) and Hod (Majesty). They form the right and left legs of the body and are the source of prophecy. Yisud (foundation) is the ninth sefirot 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.” Yisud is the axis mundi, the cosmic pillar. The light and power of the preceding sefirot are channeled through Him to the last sefirot, Malkhut.

Malkhut (Kingdom) is also called Shekhinah (Divine Presence). The term Shekhinah appears frequently in earlier rabbinic literature, where it signifies God’s Presence and Immanence. In Kabbalah it takes on a new ancient mythological meaning. Shekhinah is the daughter of Binah, the bride of Tif’eret. The joining of Tif’eret and Shekhinah becomes the focus of religious life. Human righteous action stimulates Yisud, the Righteous One, and brings about the union of the divine couple (Zohar 3:119a). Human marriage symbolizes divine marriage. Sabbath Eve is the weekly celebration of the biarn ginos, the sacred wedding. This is the ideal time for mystics to make love.

The tenth sefirot appears under many other names: Earth, Moon, Maravita, 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.” She is also known as Yisur Vistra’s, 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. She prevents the masculine aspect of God from punishing Her children, though at other times She Herself administerles punishment. Shekhinah is personally threatened by human sin because it taints Her and ruins Her union with Tif’eret. “When the powerful serpent up above is aroused by the sins of the world, it joins with the feminine [Shekhinah] and injects venom into Her.” The Male [Tif’eret] separates from Her because She has been defiled” (1:79a).

The union of Tif’eret and Shekhinah gives birth to the human soul, and the mystical journey begins with the awareness of this spiritual fact of life. Can a human being experience Shekhinah directly? The Talmud has posed this question rhetorically: “Is it possible for a human being to walk behind Shekhinah?” “Is it possible to cleave to Shekhinah?” No. Rather, one should engage in good deeds and thus imitate God. Kabbalah is more daring. In the words of Joseph Gitatilla, 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 Shekhinah? ‘It certainly is possible!’”

Shekhinah 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 wholesomeness is achieved by meditating on the qualities of each sefirot, 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. From the Other Side, demonic forces threaten and seduce. Contemplatively and psychologically, evil must be encountered, not evaded. By knowing and withstandng the dark underside of wisdom, Abraham was refined.

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.

In the depths of Binah lies Hokhmanah, Wisdom. The mystic is nourished from this sphere. 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.”

Beyond Hokhmanah is the Nothingness of Keter, the Annihilation of Thought. In this ultimate sefirot, 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.
and visualization. Successful prayer draws forth the flow of divine blessing.\textsuperscript{116} 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.\textsuperscript{117} Souls of the living who succeed in prayer delight in palaces below Shekhinah. If especially devout, they may be raised to the level of Yeshod or attain a sefirotic vision,\textsuperscript{118} 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.”\textsuperscript{119} 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?\textsuperscript{120}

Rabbi Shin'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 Shin'on said
“So it is, for one who has entered and emerged.\textsuperscript{121} 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.

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!’\textsuperscript{122}

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

Zobar, 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 Gilgal to Dan.
But when the Blessed Holy One saw
that three wicked generations would arise:
the generation of Enoch, 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 34:6).
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"
even 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 97:1).
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.
Thence 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!!"