EATING FROM THE TREE OF LIFE:

A COURSE ON THE ZOHAR

Justin Jaron Lewis

2001

EATING FROM THE TREE OF LIFE: A COURSE ON THE ZOHAR

FOREWORD

The Zohar, the Book of Radiance, is revered, even feared, but rarely studied. Yet it is an exhilirating and challenging text, as compelling today as when it became known in thirteenth-century Spain. This course is an invitation to explore the Zohar from a liberal Jewish religious perspective. It includes introductory essays on Zohar study, and a selection of texts translated from the Zohar, with brief commentaries, as well as recommendations for further reading. You are invited to begin with either the introductory material or the texts, and move back and forth between them. There is also a bulletin board for your questions and insights.

BIO

Justin Jaron Lewis is the rabbi of Congregation Iyr Ha-Melech (Reform) of Kingston, Ontario, and has taught Torah and told Jewish stories across North America, from Cape Breton to New York to Whitehorse. He is completing his rabbinical studies at the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York City, the only inter-denominational rabbinical school, and writing a PhD thesis at the University of Toronto on Hasidic stories. Justin has been studying and teaching Zohar for years, and identifies with the saying of the Hasidic Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz, "The Zohar has kept me Jewish."

EATING FROM THE TREE OF LIFE: A COURSE ON THE ZOHAR

INTRODUCTORY ESSAYS

WHAT THE ZOHAR IS

Reading the Zohar is entering a dream-world where boundaries shift and dissolve, an exploration of the self and of reality itself which can be both disturbing and exhilirating. While advocating a traditional Jewish life of learning and observance, it challenges our most basic assumptions about Judaism or any conventional religion. We will approach the Zohar as a high point of the traditions of Midrash (imaginative Biblical interpretation) and mysticism, and as a resource for our own questing and creativity.

The Zohar is the central book of Kabbalah, a Jewish mystical tradition which also has Christian and occult offshoots. But it is more than that, and it is possible to be nourished by the Zohar without being interested in Kabbalah or deeply knowledgeable about Judaism.

The word *zohar* is Hebrew for "radiance" or "splendour" or perhaps "enlightenment". The Zohar, the book, is a long work -- at least three large volumes, more than a dozen when a commentary is included. It is a kind of midrash, an imaginative commentary on the Torah, in which any verse or word can inspire pages of teachings and stories. It has also been called the first modern novel, because its interpretations of the Torah are placed in the mouths of characters, a circle of rabbis, and interspersed with stories about the rabbis and their travels and adventures. (* Reference 1: Scholem, 157; Mystical Tales from the Zohar)

The language of the Zohar is not the Hebrew of the Bible and most Jewish books, but a simple form of Aramaic, the language of the Talmud. The grammar is iffy, and the vocabulary is mixed with medieval Hebrew and occasionally Spanish, which have helped academic scholars make their case that the Zohar was written in Spain, where it first became known, in the late 1200s. Traditional Kabbalists, nevertheless, believe that it was written more than a thousand years earlier, by the rabbis mentioned in it, whose names are known from the Mishnah and Talmud.

Since its first appearance in Spain the Zohar has been associated with a rabbi named Moshe de Leon. Skeptics in his own time, and scholars more recently, have considered him to be the author. A more recent theory, developed by Yehudah Liebes, helps to make sense of the disagreements and divergent points of view found in the Zohar (* Reference 2: Liebes). The theory is that de Leon belonged to a fellowship of Kabbalists, who wrote the Zohar together as a literary version of their own adventures and Torah discussions.

The Zohar circulated at first in manuscripts, with no fixed order; it was finally arranged according to the weekly portions of the Torah and put into print toward the end of the 1500s. Bit by bit, it had been accepted as a holy work, because it was thought to be ancient and because of the power of its dreamlike images and radical ideas. It became the central text of the Kabbalistic tradition; great Kabbalists such as the Ari (Rabbi Isaac Luria, 16th century) presented their new ideas in the form of commentaries on the Zohar. Christian and occultist students of Kabbalah celebrated it as well. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Zohar was accepted by many Jews as a holy book on the level of the Bible and the Talmud. Its prestige declined with the wave of rationalism in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries. Still, today, the Zohar is revered in many traditional religious communities, especially among Sephardim and Hasidim. In liberal communities, more and more people are discovering the Zohar as a spiritual treasure.

A LIBERAL PERSPECTIVE

From a liberal (non-Orthodox) Jewish perspective, in which truth is not easily pinned down, no book, not even the Bible, has absolute authority for us. This course will not claim that the Zohar is true, and you are invited to feel free to disagree with it. At the same time we will try to follow a great principle of all serious study, which I learned from my teacher Rabbi Michael Skobac: you don't have to agree with the text, but you do have to try to understand it.

Actually, knowing that we do not have to agree with something frees us to truly understand it. We are all attached to our own ideas and outlooks, and it is a great temptation to misread texts, or people, as if they are only telling us what we already believe. Therefore, finding that you disagree with a text is often a good sign that you are understanding it correctly, and not forcing it into your own perspective.

My teacher Rabbi David Greenstein points out that the communities which revere the Zohar rarely study it in its own terms. In some communities, there is a spiritual practice of chanting the Zohar without attempting to understand its words; in others, it is studied only through the commentaries of later Kabbalists who overlaid it with their own ideas. Paradoxically, since we approach the Zohar with less reverence, with the freedom to disagree,

we can try to read it on its own terms, to understand what it actually says.

At the same time, we want the Zohar to be useful to us, as a resource for our own lives, a model for our own quest. Therefore, we will feel free to reinterpret it, to build ideas on its ideas, to rework its ideas and images to make them meaningful to us. Ideally, understanding the text comes first, then reinterpreting and working with it. In practice, the two processes inevitably go on simultaneously and get mixed up, but it is useful to at least be aware that both are going on. The best moments of study happen, unpredictably, when both come together, when a sound grasp of what the text is actually saying opens new doors for us to go through on our own.

THE ZOHAR AND KABBALAH

Kabbalah is many things: oral traditions, rituals, meditations, magical practices, books of philosophy and theology, stories...It could be a lifetime of learning. The Zohar is part of the Kabbalistic tradition; it was written by Kabbalists and has been studied in depth mostly by Kabbalists. Yet, because Kabbalah is taught in many ways, having learned a little of it does not necessarily help in understanding the Zohar; and I would argue that you do not have to be interested in Kabbalah to appreciate and explore the Zohar.

The Zohar's purpose is not to teach us Kabbalah; it assumes that we know Kabbalah. Other Kabbalistic books, even when they speak in hints rather than openly, tend to be fairly systematic expositions of ideas. (Two accessible examples, rewarding to study, which are available in English translations, are The Palm Tree of Deborah by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero

[16th century], and Gates of Light by Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla, who may have been one of the authors of the Zohar.) Such books do mean to teach you Kabbalah. The Zohar starts with Kabbalah and wants to take you further. For this reason, it is anything but systematic; its ideas are expressed as challenges and paradoxes, and it is mostly a work of images and stories.

The Kabbalistic commentators on the Zohar approach it as a work to be decoded: its symbolism needs to be translated into theological ideas. The Zohar itself invites this decoding, but, as one of the early commentators, Rabbi Shim'on Lavi, already recognized, the result of a completely successful decoding would be a constant repetition of a few key ideas, which the Zohar returns to over and over again (* Reference 3: Ketem Paz book). If the purpose of the Zohar were to teach Kabbalah, it could have been ten pages long, not thousands. Further, completely successful decoding has turned out to be impossible, so that the great commentators offer contradictory interpretations of the same passages, because the Zohar deliberately teases and frustrates the interpreter. At the same time that the Zohar works with Kabbalah, it is also undermining it, in order to take us beyond.

Kabbalah is part of the raw material which the authors of the Zohar were working with. They were steeped in its concepts and built on them. Yet they drew at least as much on the Bible; on midrashic literature; on their own physical lives and experiences. Knowing about early Kabbalah can help us to understand the Zohar, but so can knowing Scripture or, especially, being aware of our own physical and emotional being. In the words of my teacher, David Greenstein, "the Zohar succeeds in reinventing kabbalistic consciousness by restoring its connection to lived reality."

CRASH COURSE IN KABBALAH

Since knowing some specific details about Kabbalah can be a help in understanding the Zohar, here are a few remarks on two Kabbalistic key-words: "secrets" and "Sefirot".

Secrets

The Zohar often introduces its teachings as "secrets" and "mysteries". This is a stylistic feature which it shares with other Kabbalistic books. Kabbalah as a whole is often referred to as "*nistar*" or "*chokhmat hanistar*" -- "the mystery" or "the secret wisdom". It presents itself as esoteric lore, only for the initiated. Kabbalistic books emphasize that they are based on secret traditions passed on orally from one initiate to another, and that the authors know some things that are too secret to put into writing at all. It is often not clear how much of the secrecy is real. In the Middle Ages, as today, mysterious depth and secrecy had an appeal and were paradoxically a tool for attracting more students and readers (* Reference 4: article "The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar"). Typically, the Zohar will be very un-secretive about advertising its secrets. To paraphrase my teacher Rabbi David Greenstein's way of paraphrasing it: "There's a secret coming! A BIG secret! ... Did you catch that secret?" On the other hand, the authors of the Zohar will sometimes slip in something truly esoteric, truly radical, without labelling it as a secret at all -- which is one of the most effective ways of hiding it.

What can the whole idea of "secrets" mean to us? There is a Hasidic teaching which

looks at this from a spiritual-devotional standpoint. Although this is probably not what the authors of the Zohar had in mind, I find it very helpful:

> I heard from the holy mouth of Rebbe Menachem Mendl (of Premishlan) of blessed memory: A mystery is something that a person cannot communicate to another person. It is like the taste of food: it is impossible to describe it to a person who has never experienced that taste, impossible to explain to him in words its quality or its essence. Such a thing is called "a mystery". So it is with love and fear of God: it is impossible to explain to another person the quality of the love in your heart. It is called a mystery.
>
> But as for calling the wisdom of the Kabbalah "mystery" (*nistar*) -- how is it a mystery? Anyone who wants to learn it can look in a book. If they do not understand, they are no different from people who cannot understand the Talmud or the commentary of the Tosafot -- does that make those works "mystery"? No, the essence of all the mysteries in all of the Zohar and the writings of the Ari is clinging to God (*devekut*)...
>
> Yosher Divrei Emet, section 22
>
> (R. Meshullam Feivish of Zabriza, 1740-1795)

In other words, the real "secrets" or "mysteries" of the Zohar are the inexpressible moments of connection to God which it can awaken for us, each of us in our own way.

Sefirot

One of the most well-known Kabbalistic teachings today, and a key part of most Kabbalistic theology, is the idea of the ten forces or essences called Sefirot. (The singular of Sefirot is Sefirah; originally the word meant "counting" or "number".) There are different ideas in Kabbalah about what the Sefirot are: are they parts of God, separate beings like angels, basic elements of creation? Although these questions are controversial in later Kabbalah, the Zohar assumes that the Sefirot are divine. They are aspects of God, and when we talk about the Sefirot, it is God we are talking about.

The Sefirot are often diagrammed with set names in a set order, like this (note that the numbers go from right to left):

1. Keter (Crown)

3. Binah (Understanding)	2. Chochmah (Wisdom)
5. Gevurah (Power) also called Din (Judgment)	4. Chesed (Lovingkindness)

6. Tif'eret (Beauty)

8. Hod (Splendour, or Acknowledgement)	7. Netzach (Eternity, or Victory)

9. Yesod (Foundation)

10. Malkhut (Dominion)

Lewis, Zohar intro, 9

Before and beyond the Sefirot, and beyond our understanding, is the hidden inwardness of God, called *Eyn Sof* (Limitless).

There is a flow of divine power and blessing from one Sefirah to another, finally reaching Malkhut, which is the presence of God in the world.

In some ways the Sefirot are independent beings or forces, which interact with each other in various ways. For example, Chesed and Din are opposing forces; Tif'eret and Malkhut are sometimes close to each other and sometimes distant.

In later Kabbalistic teachings the system becomes much more complex. There are Sefirot within Sefirot; there are configurations of Sefirot, called Partsufim (Faces); there are four worlds or levels of reality which each contain ten Sefirot, and so on. Most of these ideas, however, were developed after the time of the Zohar and are not important for understanding the Zohar.

Reflections on the Sefirot

Several of the Sefirot are highlighted in the texts we will be studying. As a preliminary guide, the following are some impressions about them that emerge from my readings of the Zohar.

I will begin with Binah. In the Zohar's theology, Keter and Chochmah are too hidden to say much about; in the texts in this course there is nothing about them -- unless it is so hidden that I haven't noticed it.

Binah is the hidden source within God. Our texts allude to Her a few times. In the

Zohar's imagery She is a great river from which all streams flow out; She is the mother or grandmother of everything. Her name means "Understanding" and is also connected with ideas of making a distinction between things (*bein* ="between") and building (*banah*). Within and beyond Her is unfathomable unity; out of Her emerges everything we can understand, the built-up world of distinct entities. Thus Binah is also the beginning of judgment. Before Binah, as far as anything can be perceived at all, it is all love and compassion. With Binah comes the beginning of difference, conflict and limitation, which are necessary for the world as we know it to exist, and the beginning of necessity itself as opposed to freedom.

The first polarities of existence to emerge from Binah are Chesed and Gevurah. They are polarities we can find in ourselves and in our experience of the world; their imagery builds on a tradition found in the Talmud and Midrash which finds them in God. That midrashic tradition speaks about the *midat ha-rachamim* -- God's attribute of compassion -- and the *midat ha-din*, God's attribute of justice. The midrashic texts see these "attributes" as polarities of God's personality and even as separate beings competing for God's attention: love on one side, justice on the other side, making irreconciliable demands. The imagery of Chesed and Gevurah also draws on the key Jewish experiential concepts of human love and fear of God. The attribute of compassion, and Chesed, stir our feelings of love; the harshness of the attribute of justice, Gevurah, is frightening. The fear of God as the Zohar understands it is not just about awe or reverence; it includes terror, and it is a realistic response to a terrifying reality. The Zohar sometimes dwells on this fear response and celebrates it, without sugar-coating it in any way. (* Reference 5: Rabbi Neal Goldstein's recent book ** is an

interesting restatement of later, Hasidic, thought about the fear of God presented by a Reform thinker who himself is fascinated with the topic.)

Imagistically, Chesed, lovingkindness, is white like mother's milk. It is everything flowing, giving and accepting -- everything in us and the world that says "yes". Gevurah, power, or Din, judgement, is red like blood. It is everything that sets limits, judges, or fights -- everything that says "no". Either can go too far on its own, both are necessary together; always saying yes and always saying no will both get you in trouble.

Netzach and Hod are not connected with very much specific imagery in the Zohar and, like Keter and Chochmah, are not specifically alluded to in the texts in our course as far as I know. They are the mysterious sources of the inspiration of prophecy, and so it seems appropriate for them to remain in the background.

Yesod is alluded to a few times in our texts. Its imagery is often sexual: it is the circumcised penis, that is, the sanctified channel of uniting and creative energy. Yesod is called "tzaddik" ("righteous person") and there are texts in which the Kabbalists particularly identify themselves with Yesod. Perhaps the experience of flowing with creative, erotic energy was dear to them. Much later in Jewish history the Baal Shem Tov boldly taught that a righteous person is compared to Yesod because of the intense pleasure they experience in spiritual life.

Yesod is the link between Tif'eret and Malkhut, the "masculine" and "feminine" poles of divine life. Tif'eret is the Zohar's main image for what is traditionally meant by the word "God", especially in traditional Jewish prayers, in which God is most often called "Father" and "King" and seems to be far beyond us, Someone to reach out to and yearn for.

Malkhut is more connected with a type of image of God that many people today find more comfortable: the presence of God in us and around us. Malkhut is also called Shekhinah, but this is a name which has other meanings in other contexts. In older Midrash, "Shekhinah" is sometimes simply a name for God (not for a particular aspect). In some Jewish feminist thought today, Shekhinah has feminine attributes that make sense to contemporary women, which may be very different from those imagined by the medieval Kabbalists (* Reference 6: see Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb's book She Who Dwells Within). In order to avoid confusion we will not use the term "Shekhinah" for Malkhut in this course. The Zohar itself rarely uses either name; as with all the Sefirot, it prefers an array of images.

Malkhut is closer to us than the transcendent, out-there-beyond-us aspect of God; therefore, She is also more mingled with all the ups and downs of our lives and deaths. We can call on God beyond us, Tif'eret, to save us from trouble; from Malkhut, we can only ask that She remain with us in our trouble. Yet because Malkhut is the aspect of reality which we encounter, She includes everything in the world that is terrifying as well as everything good. She is strongly connected with Gevurah and shares its frightening aspect. See, in this course, "The Wisdom of Solomon". Everything good and everything bad in the world "feeds into" her, and she straddles all kinds of borderlines. Therefore there are many possible images of her and ways of thinking about her. Nearly every text in this course has something new to offer about Malkhut; as you read the texts, I invite you to be open to learn something new each time about this way of perceiving how God is present to us.

Gershom Scholem, the founder of the academic field of Kabbalah study, once

expressed his personal opionion that "the doctrine of emanations [Sefirot] is the great misfortune of the Kabbalah" (* Reference 7: 10 Unhistorische Sätze...). Perhaps what he meant is that the system of Sefirot gives the illusion of being a complex enough scheme to really capture reality, but in fact it ends up, like any other system, presenting a very limited picture.

As for the Zohar, it works with this structure, but also works against it -- for example, now and then changing the standard order of the Sefirot, or their set characteristics, to remind you that no system is equivalent to reality. To study Zohar, it is helpful to memorize the standard diagram of the Ten Sefirot -- and then let it slip to the back of your mind.

IMAGES

Many people feel that Judaism is lacking in images of God -- ways to imagine the divine. When we open a traditional prayer book we quickly find God called King, Father, Lord; other metaphors or images are rarer. Lacking a wider range of images can impoverish our feelings and ideas about the divine, and leave us with very limited access to the fullness of reality in all its holiness. There is a particular sense of lack especially of images incorporating the body and the natural world. Various teachers today are working to fill this lack; recent contributions include Marcia Falk's Book of Blessings and the Reconstructionist prayerbook, Kol HaNeshamah.

In our traditional literature, the Zohar is the richest collection of images and stories of God. The Midrash is filled with wonderful images and stories, many of which the Zohar

includes or adapts. Often, though, images that are folkloric in the Midrash have become mythic in the Zohar. For example, the compassionate gazelle in the Midrash is an animal such as we meet in fairy tales, but in the Zohar she is Malkhut, the divine presence (see "The Gazelle of the Dawn" in this course). In general, a key to almost any passage of the Zohar is to know that all the images and stories are about God.

The following is a list of just a few (seventy) of the Zohar's images of God. I have deliberately not grouped them according to the Kabbalistic system of Sefirot, but mixed them up because they are all images of the divine.

God is all. God is an angel. God is an apple orchard. God is a beggar. God is the beginning. God is a breastfeeding mother. God is breath. God is concealed and totally unknown. God is clouds. God is crowns. God is the days of Creation. God is death. God is desire. God is an eagle. God is the earth. God is eyes. God is faces. God is fear. God is purple silk. God is fire. God is a flowing gushing stream. God is the Garden of Eden. God is gateways. God is a gazelle. God is holiday guests. God is the Holidays. God is Jerusalem. God is a lion. God is love. God is matzah. God is a menorah. God is mirrors. God is the moon. God is a mountain of darkness. God is the name of God. God is night. God is Noah's ark. God is North, South, East, West. God is nothing. God is a nursing child. God is olive oil. God is the oldest of the old. God is a palace. God is peace. God is prayer. God is a rainbow. God is rivers of balsam. God is a rose. God is a sealed secret. God is shadow. God is a shofar. God is a silkworm. God is silk. God is silver. God is skies. God is a snake. God is Song. God is the soul of the soul. God is sparks. God is the sun. God is a

tent. God is time. God is the Torah. God is a tower that flies in the air. God is the Tree of Life. God is voices. God is wine. God is wind. God is Who? God is Words.

PLURALITY AND UNITY

One way to understand the system of Sefirot is as an attempt to map the variety of ways in which we experience God. For example, we may feel the presence of God in nature, or in Torah study; at times God may feel very close and at others, hidden and distant. We can look at the array of images in the Zohar in a similar way: each image relates to a different way of perceiving the divine reality. Joseph Campbell titled a book on mythological images "The Masks of God". One person can wear many masks, and one God can be experienced or perceived in many different ways.

The Zohar means more than this, however. The Sefirot are not called God's masks, but they are called God's faces. A mask is not part of the real person, but a face is. A person can wear many masks -- and many facial expressions -- but has only one face. God has more. More than that, God's faces look at each other and sometimes kiss each other or quarrel with each other. If this metaphor feels strange, it is because when we think about God in human images we tend to think of one person. But the Zohar often imagines God as a whole family.

The Zohar shares this vision of plurality in God with other Kabbalistic works. However, in many other Kabbalistic writings the Sefirot are like the parts of a machine. They have different functions, and interact in different ways, but it's all one structure that works

automatically and predictably. It is possible that, from a theoretical perspective, the Zohar shares this point of view. However, in its imagistic and storytelling approach to talking about God, there is a feeling of freedom and unpredictability about how the Sefirot act and how they interact with each other.

Many rabbis and teachers, including Kabbalists, have found this imagery of the Sefirot as separate, interacting beings to be uncomfortably close to the Christian idea of the Trinity, or to polytheism. Indeed the Zohar purposely challenges the assumptions of monotheism -- see, in this course, the passage "Hear, O Israel".

The fact that the Zohar differs from conventional monotheism need not lead us to reject it out of hand, however. There is no word in pre-modern Hebrew for "monotheism". Instead, religious works spoke about the "yichud" of God. "Yichud" can mean "unity" but it can also mean "union" -- a coming together.

Religion becomes hard to sustain when it is divorced from experience. For many of us, our experience of the presence of God in our lives includes plurality. One sign of this is the recent popularity of books, TV shows and meditation practices about angels. It can be easier to relate to a variety of angels than to one God. Some courageous thinkers have addressed this religious issue. Jewish-American poet Allen Ginsberg wrote: "Why, in the name of All that's holy, must God be one?" A Canadian teacher of students for Christian ministry writes:

> At a recent conference on biblical studies and theology I tried to introduce into current "god-talk" the polytheism option... One way of reading the postmodern scene is

in terms of the failure of myths of singleness... it seems high time to listen to the wisdom of polytheism.

(David Jobling, 1 Samuel, pp. 297-298.
Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998.)

The Zohar is not a polytheistic work, but it does envision God as plural as well as singular. In so doing it may be truer to experience, and possibly just truer, than other theologies which insist on simple, unchanging oneness.

EVIL

The Zohar is true to experience in its understanding of evil, too. To many religious thinkers, evil is only an illusion, or only a lack of good, with no power of its own. God is always good and always present to us. The devil or Satan is nonexistent, a metaphor, or at most a servant of God, as in the Bible. The authors of the Zohar understood life very differently. They experienced evil as real and powerful. Their Satan is not a mere servant of God, but a threatening, powerful counterforce. They sensed that evil originates in God, and expressed this radically; see, in this course, "Jacob and Esau". Also, there is a split, a gap, in the divine, between the Sefirot of Tif'eret and Malkhut, and there are times where we experience that gap as an absence of God. One of my teachers was once lighting Shabbat candles by the window of her apartment, on a high floor of a building. She looked up from blessing the candles, looked out over the city, and saw a city empty of God. It was a vision

of the split, the absence. The Zohar's vision of the reality of evil and divine absence is not true to everyone's experience and it may be too depressing to be spiritually useful for many of us. Still, in our times, in a world of emotional bleakness in many people's inner lives and devastation outside, it is compelling.

CHRISTIAN IDEAS

Some of these ideas and images may sound "Christian". Many of us tend to respond to unfamiliar religious ideas with the reflex thought that they must be Christian, not Jewish. Unfortunately, our spiritual identity as North American Jews is often so tenuous that it comes down to a stubborn insistence on not being Christian. One of the results of this is that Jewish theological discourse becomes impoverished because we are so afraid of sounding Christian.

The authors of the Zohar were far from friendly to Christianity. Yet, in Christian Spain, they were surrounded by Christian imagery and ideas. Charles Mopsik has pointed out that the Catholic Church in Spain in the 1200s was missionizing to Jews as never before (* Reference 8). Jews were compelled by government authority to listen, in the synagogues, to sermons by Christian friars who were experts both in theology and in persuasive speaking. These efforts were not wasted; there were Jews who converted to Catholicism. The majority who remained Jewish were still exposed to high-level Christian religious thought perhaps more than any Jews before them. The Zohar's response, according to Mopsik's analysis, was not to shut out Christian influences but, on the contrary, to take them in, rework and re-imagine them, and create a theology deeply rooted in Jewish sources but incorporating

whatever they found compelling in Christianity. Of course this task was made easier by the fact that many Christian ideas were rooted in Jewish sources to begin with. Jews who accepted the Zohar would not be seduced away from Judaism by Christian theology because they would find the richest aspects of that theology avaialable to them in Jewish form and in a way that reinforced -- as the Zohar constantly does -- traditional Jewish life and learning.

Today, at a time of unprecedented friendship between Jews and Christians and our communities, I believe we could benefit from this kind of theological cross-fertilization much more than from fearfully fleeing anything that sounds "un-Jewish".

THE SELF AND THE OTHER

The Zohar itself, however, does manifest intense hostility to the non-Jewish world. This is the moment to sound a warning: the Zohar is compelling, and it is easy to come away from studying it with a feeling that everything in it is true. Please do not be drawn into believing everything it teaches!

One way that the Zohar envisions the world is in concentric circles. At the centre is the pure holiness of God, which is all love. The further we get from the centre, the more ambiguous things become. The harsh qualities of power and judgment become stronger and stronger. Furthest outside is the evil demonic realm. Sometimes there is a sense that all of this is really part of one picture and even all divine; more often there is a sense of tension and conflict between one layer and another.

As a picture of the impersonal spiritual realm, this has no more problems than any

other attempt to schematize the multifaceted reality of life. Things become uglier when the Zohar correlates different kinds of people with different positions in this picture, by implication or explicitly. At the centre are the authors of the Zohar themselves, and presumably other Jewish male Kabbalists. Further outside are Jewish men who are observant but not involved in Kabbalah; further yet, those who neglect observance. Jewish women are even further outside; like their divine archetype, Malkhut, they overlap the border between the holy and the demonic. Finally, non-Jews are in the demonic realm.

This is an ugly picture of reality and a false one. Please don't be drawn into such a view through the Zohar or through other texts or teachers with similar views!

It is worth thinking about this picture further. The Zohar's hatred for non-Jews, which goes well beyond traditional ideas of Jewish chosenness, is not hard to understand. It is a reaction to persecutions and pressures from the non-Jewish world, and the counterpart of medieval anti-Jewish prejudice in which many Christians saw Jews as animalistic and demonic. Similar conditions have provoked bloody revolts in other times and places, as the oppressed sought revenge. The authors of the Zohar took their revenge only in words and ideas.

Today, though, such ideas must be rejected. Already early in the twentieth century, one of the great Orthodox mystics, Rav Kook, chief rabbi of the Jewish settlements in the Land of Israel, denounced in the strongest terms the attitude that sees goodness and holiness only within the Jewish people. Today in the twenty-first century, in a time of friendship and free exchanges of ideas between Jews and others, we know from experience that there is no difference in essence between Jews and other people, and our religious thinking has to take

this into account.

Kabbalistic elitism, in which the Kabbalists see themselves as essentially superior to other Jews, is not as consistent in the Zohar as the demonization of non-Jews. For example, the Zohar teaches that poor people in general manifest the presence of Malkhut and are worthy of devoted attention. Kabbalistic elitism is also less likely to be a dangerous temptation for us non-Kabbalists. However, it highlights the core problem of the Zohar's outlook, and what we can learn from it.

For most of us, it is easy and natural to feel that the universe is revolving around us, that life is a story with us as the hero and everything else in a supporting role. Although the authors of the Zohar were exceptionally daring in facing reality, in this respect they did not get beyond what comes easily. In their picture of reality they were at the centre and those who were peripheral to them were at the periphery. We can learn from their mistake.

Their mistake would not have occurred, however, had they not been exceptionally grounded in their own experience. For too many of us, religious or spiritual life is a matter of taking in teachings from the outside -- doing things others tell us to do, believing things others tell us to believe. By contrast, the authors of the Zohar wanted to know reality, and they sought reality through their own lives, their own learning and experience, their own selves. Their mistake was in failing to correct adequately for the self's skewed sense of where the centre of the universe is. Yet, if we do try to make that correction, their approach to reality can be a deep and challenging model for us.

FEMALE AND MALE

We live in interesting times for thinking about gender; some communities fiercely uphold defined, limited roles for men and women, while in other circles growing acceptance of gays and lesbians, bisexuals, and trans-gendered people signals an opening up of all definitions. To some thinkers, gender differences are a key to understanding the world; to others, they are an illusion.

It is easy to study Kabbalah a little, enough to notice that it has a mythology of masculine and feminine, and miss the fact that its assumptions are often the opposite of our own. Here in North America today we typically characterize "the feminine" as being about compassion, gentleness, and the flowing creativity that we association with the right brain; and "the masculine" as about power, control, and the logical thinking we associate with the left brain. The standard Kabbalistic system, reflected in the Zohar, is exactly the opposite. Power, control and logic are feminine qualities; compassion, gentleness and creative flow are masculine. If nothing else, this is a good reminder that ideas about gender are not natural and universal.

As in other areas, the Zohar enjoys undermining its own assumptions. For example, the passage "The Gazelle of the Dawn", included in this course, stresses the compassion of the feminine presence of God -- the opposite of its own standard system. (For another example, where the masculine is aligned with control and the feminine with compassion, see * Reference 9 in Matt **.) Since it polarizes gender but also undermines that polarization, since it explores male and female and then insists "all is one", the Zohar can be seen as a

resource for trans-gender exploration. An interesting article on this topic can be found in Nashim (* Reference 10).

The most provocative academic studies of gender in the Zohar have come from Elliot Wolfson, who argues that the mystical experiences which the Zohar celebrates are focused on male sexual energy, on erotic (though presumably non-physical) bonding between male Kabbalists and between them and God, who when all is said and done is male in their eyes; in this context, the role of women is utterly secondary.

I think that Wolfson's studies perhaps overestimate the importance of sexuality as a key to understanding the Zohar, and certainly pay too little attention to the rich and varied imagery of the divine feminine in the Zohar. It is true that there are many statements in the Zohar, drawing on medieval philosophy, asserting that the masculine is higher and the feminine lower, the masculine active and the feminine only receptive, the masculine primary and the feminine secondary. Yet there is a vast range of imagery of the feminine in the Zohar, and much of it is about power, compassion and autonomy. (In this course, see especially the texts "The Wisdom of Solomon" and "The Gazelle of the Dawn".) This imagery simply doesn't fit any sense of masculine primacy, even if that was what the authors believed. Either the authors of the Zohar were not as limited in this area as they sometimes sound, or their imaginations carried them beyond whatever their ideas and outlooks were. Since they chose to write a book of imagery, not ideology, I see no reason for us to hold back from drawing on their imagery, regardless of their ideas.

At the same time, Wolfson's studies point to other ways in which the Zohar can be useful to our explorations. Traditional Jewish sources, while condemning sexual activity

between men, celebrate passionate attachment between men who learn together. A liberal Jewish outlook celebrates openly erotic, sexual love between men (and between women) as well. Yet there is pain for gay and lesbian Jews in the hostility or silence toward them in traditional texts. It is important to discover what traditional sources can contribute to a gay-positive Judaism. The Zohar may be an important resource in this area.

If erotic male bonding really is at the centre of the authors' outlook, that is more testimony to how thoroughly they approached reality through their own selves and their own experiences. They were not disconnected from their bodily selves; they saw their bodily and emotional selfhood, as Jewish males, as a path to God. In Wolfson's analysis, they made the mistake, once again, of seeing themselves as the centre of the universe and everything else, women included, as secondary. But if we could avoid that mistake, how inspiring and challenging their model is, of seeking the divine through who we are, physically, emotionally and in every other way.

THE ZOHAR AS A RESOURCE AND MODEL

"God desired...to make Torah great and glorious (* Reference 11, verse). Part of what makes Torah -- the whole sum of Jewish teachings and traditions -- great and glorious is that it becomes more varied and rich with the contributions of each one of us. All of us are involved in making the Torah greater, enlarging and shaping the Judaism of today and the future. Not that any of us can decide what we want Judaism to look like, and then make it so; time and the whole Jewish people will decide. But in many ways -- how we practice

awkward sentence grammatical

Judaism, how we think, how we teach children, how we do creative work with Jewish content, how we live as Jews -- we are creating the possibilities that the Judaism of our time and the future will emerge from. We may choose to be involved in this process with more or less awareness or deliberateness, but we are all involved in it.

The authors of the Zohar took a deliberate and conscious role in shaping Torah for their time and the future. In a number of ways, their work can be a resource and model to us in making our contribution to Torah -- first of all, as a model of the holy chutzpah, the holy boldness, to realize that we also have Torah to contribute. They presented their work as a holy book -- as Torah -- and the generations after them accepted it.

They were fearless in their quest for reality. We have mentioned their use of Christian ideas, something that is still frightening to many Jews today; their confrontation with the reality of evil; their willingness to see God as many as well as one. Whether or not we agree with their view, their fearlessness in facing reality and expressing what they saw is a model for us.

The flip side of this boldness is that the authors of the Zohar were not starting from scratch. They were truly immersed in Torah study. They lived in the verses of the Bible, in the stories of the Midrash. Their dreams, their free associations, were woven out of the Torah they learned. Our contributions to Torah, too, will usually be richer and truer if we are immersed in the Torah of those who have gone before.

At the same time, what the authors of the Zohar created was far from being a copy or repetition of what had gone before. Something new was created by their encounter with Torah, because they brought to Torah all of themselves. They met Torah with everything

they had learned, from within and outside of Judaism, and with the wholeness of their own selves, including their physicality and sexuality, and their own experience of life. They show a way to know God through knowing your self, your friends, your life however it looks and however it feels. They did not submit themselves to Torah, and they did not make Torah submit to them; there was a meeting between Torah and their whole selves, and from that meeting came something new, challenging, and nourishing.

HOW TO STUDY ZOHAR

It can be frustrating to read a selection from the Zohar; it is likely to seem obscure in so many ways that understanding it intellectually or emotionally or any way at all seems remote and not worth bothering. If you persevere, however, the riches of the Zohar will begin to open up to you.

Every passage of the Zohar incorporates and interprets verses from the Bible. The interpretations usually have little to do with the literal meaning of the verse -- although looking up a verse will often show that its context is relevant to what the Zohar does with it.

The Biblical verses are interpreted in an imaginative way, based on verbal and imagistic associations. In doing this kind of interpretation the Zohar is building on earlier Jewish texts, found in the Talmud and in books of Midrash. Very often much of the Zohar's interpretation of a verse is taken directly, or with slight changes, from these earlier sources; I have sometimes, though not always, indicated this in the commentary.

The Zohar sometimes refers to other interpretations, using expressions which I have

translated as "this has been established" or "the friends" -- that is, the fellowship of scholars -- "have established..."or "we have provided a foundation for the words". Sometimes these expressions are a way of acknowledging that there is a well-known non-mystical interpretation, before presenting a mystical one. At other times they are to alert us that the Zohar itself touches on the same theme elsewhere. Often, they are a way of saying that something bold and controversial is really nothing new; in such cases there sometimes really is an earlier source, and sometimes the Zohar just wants us to think there is.

To the tradition of Midrash the Zohar brings its own flowing, dreamlike approach to imagery, its taste for mythological drama and radical ideas, and the theology of the Sefirot. Arthur Green points out that the varied images of earlier Midrash become, in Kabbalah, "symbol clusters" associated with each of the Sefirot (* Reference 12). Thus part of understanding a Zohar passage is the task of connecting each of the symbols to the appropriate cluster, to the Sefirah that it represents -- and letting your understanding of that Sefirah grow with each new symbol.

As you look at the selections from the Zohar in this course or in other books, or, ultimately, when you begin studying the Zohar in the original, I suggest the following approach, whether you are studying alone or with others:

Before consulting any commentary, read the passage from the Zohar as you might read a poem, rereading it several times and trying to understand it in an intuitive kind of way.

You might want to follow these steps:

First read the passage all the way through, not trying at all to understand it, but being

alert to any feelings or associations that any words or images in the passage evoke for you.

Read it again more slowly, trying to understand it on the simplest literal level -- the simple meanings of the words, how the sentences hang together. This is a good time to look up the verses from the Bible which it quotes, and read a little of their context.

Pause for a while to reflect on the images, ideas and feelings the passage evokes for you.

Read it again, this time connecting the literal meanings with the feelings and images they evoke. Remember that just about anything in the Zohar is an image of God. (If you're uncomfortable thinking about "God", substitute "reality" or "your self".) On this reading, try to understand the text in as much detail and depth as you can. If you know some Kabbalah, decoding which Sefirot and intersefirotic processes the text is referring to is part of this process of understanding -- but only part.

Remember that you may not agree with the text, and that it may give you ideas that go beyond what it originally meant.

Finally, look at a commentary (such as the comments in this course, or in books on the reading list) to see what the commentator thinks about how the text relates to Kabbalistic concepts, to earlier sources, or to other passages in the Zohar. Don't be intimidated by the commentary; if you had a different idea, you may well be right! But do be open to any new insights.

Last of all, before you go on to another passage, reflect on what this passage of the Zohar means to you, and what (if anything) you can do with it in your own spiritual practice, thinking, creating, work. You might even want to offer a prayer of thanks.

AND SO...

Here is a selection of my favourite texts from the Zohar. Most of them are not found in the anthologies of selections from the Zohar which I have recommended for further reading.

I have followed the text of the Zohar in the Ashlag edition (HaSulam), which often mentions small variations in the text found in different manuscripts and editions, and also consulted the text in the edition with Rabbi Moshe Cordovero's commentary. Since there is no standardized text of the Zohar I have sometimes chosen a variant reading that struck me as making the most sense in context.

In the translations, "YHVH" stands for the name of God, written with the Hebrew letters Yud Hei Vav Hei but pronounced "Adonai" or "HaShem" (The Name). "The Blessed Holiness" is the translation of Aramaic *Kudsha Brikh Hu* or Hebrew *HaKadosh Barukh Hu*, the most common Rabbinic way of referring to God. It is often translated, "the Holy One, blessed be He", but I am following a scholarly view that *Kudsha* here means "the Holiness". Still, the Zohar imagines "the Blessed Holiness" as masculine, most of the time.

For each text there is an introduction, a commentary afterwards, or both, to help with part -- but only part -- of the work of understanding; and examples of possible questions for further study and discussion.

Welcome, enjoy, and keep your seatbelts fastened!

EATING FROM THE TREE OF LIFE: A COURSE ON THE ZOHAR * * * TEXTS

THE ROSE

The first words of the printed Zohar (Zohar 1a, Hakdamat HaZohar)

Rabbi Chizkiyah [*in some manuscripts,* Rabbi El'azar] opened:

It is written:

"Like a rose among the thorns" {* Reference 13: Song of Songs *}

Who is the rose?

She is the Community of Israel,

because there is a rose and there is a rose.

Just as the rose, who is among the thorns,

has in her red and white,

so the Community of Israel has in her

justice and compassion.

Just as the rose has in her thirteen leaves (petals),

so the Community of Israel has in her

thirteen measures of compassion,

which surround her from all sides.

So *Elohim* here, from the moment it is mentioned,

puts forth thirteen words, to surround the Community of Israel

and to guard her.

And afterwards it is mentioned another time.

Why is it mentioned another time?

In order to put forth five strong leaves

which surround the rose.

And these five are called

y'shu'ot (deliverances, salvations)

and they are five gates.

Concerning this mystery it is written:

Kos y'shu'ot esa (I will lift the cup of deliverances),

which is the cup of blessing.

The cup of blessing needs to be on five fingers and no more,

in the likeness of the rose

which rests upon five strong leaves,

the pattern of the five fingers,

and the rose is indeed the cup of blessing.

From the second *Elohim* to the third *Elohim*, five words.

From here on: the light which was created and hidden

and contained in that *brit* (covenant)

which enters into the rose and puts forth seed into her.

And this is called:

"Tree making fruit, whose seed is in it."

And this seed exists

through the actual mark of the covenant.

And just as the image of the covenant

sows that seed in forty-two couplings,

so the engraved, explicit Name sows

in forty-two letters of the Work of Creation.

COMMENTS: THE ROSE

This is the beginning of the Zohar as we know it, as a printed book. Before it was printed, the Zohar was read in bits and pieces, in different hand-written sections, and there is no way of knowing what was meant as the beginning. But this beginning is appropriate in many ways. It is even appropriate that we're not sure which character is speaking, because there are different versions of the text which name different rabbis, Rabbi Chizkiyah or Rabbi El'azar. In this way the Zohar opens with an unsolvable riddle.

The Zohar is a work of Midrash, imaginative interpretation of the Bible. This text, like many others in the Zohar, is in a particular form of Midrash, a kind of sermon, called a "petichta", an "opening". There are many examples of petichta in older books of Midrash. A typical petichta is "about" one verse in the Bible, often the beginning of a weekly Torah reading, but it begins by quoting a different verse from somewhere else in the Bible altogether. It takes a lot of time interpreting the verse from "somewhere else" but finally

links it up to the verse that it is really "about". A petichta entertains the reader or listener by how ingeniously it links up the two verses and brings out new meanings from them. When the Zohar says that Rabbi Chizkiya (or Rabbi El'azar) "opened", it means that he began a petichta. At the same time, we can understand it to mean that he "opened" the hidden meanings of the verses he quotes from the Bible, or "opened" our imaginations to understand the verses in new ways.

This petichta is "about" the first couple of verses of the Bible, the beginning of the creation story in Genesis, but it begins with a verse about the rose from the Song of Songs. The creation story and the Song of Songs are favourite Biblical passages for the Zohar. They are filled with a sense of creative power, imagery of nature, sexuality.

The rose (*shoshanah*) is a wonderful image for the Zohar to begin with, because it appeals to the senses in so many ways. A rose is beautiful to look at, intensely fragrant, and its petals are pleasant to touch. It is a flower of romance, and in the Song of Songs it is an image for the beloved woman. The Zohar, written in Spain in a time when troubadors were singing of love, often appeals to sensual and romantic imagery.

Who is the rose? The Zohar tells us: she is the Community of Israel. By interpreting itself in this way, the Zohar invites decoding, and all the classic commentators take up this invitation and try to resolve its images into Kabbalistic concepts. Yet the imagery soon becomes so lush and opaque that the commentators come to completely different conclusions about its meanings; the Zohar is telling us that it is not meant to be read exclusively by decoding after all.

The Community of Israel, in the Zohar, is Malkhut, the presence of God in this world,

because Malkhut is the divine aspect of the Jewish people. One way of understanding this is to remember that in Judaism the connection to God is a collective one. The Torah is addressed to the whole Jewish community, Jewish prayers are in the plural, asking for what everyone together needs, the holidays recreate moments of the Jewish people's history, and so on. So for each person there is a connection to God through the whole community. In the Zohar's understanding this means that the whole people together manifests the presence of God.

Malkhut brings together the polarities of existence -- justice and compassion, red and white; see the introductory essay on Sefirot.

The Torah begins: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, and the earth was formless and empty, with darkness on the face of the deep, and a breath of God hovering on the face of the water. And God said 'let there be light' and there was light." In Hebrew: "*Bereshith bara Elohim et hashamayim v'et ha-aretz, v'ha-aretz hayta tohu vavohu v'choshech al p'nei t'hom, v'ruach Elohim m'rachefet al p'nei hamayim. Vayomer Elohim y'hi or, vay'hi or.*" The Zohar begins by focusing on the word "God" -- Elohim -- and counting the rest of the words. The meanings of the words don't matter here, only how many there are. Between the first occurrence of "Elohim" and the second, there are thirteen words, between the second mention and the third there are five words. After the third time, the Torah begins to speak about light.

The Zohar turns these words about the creation into a picture, in which the words are also the petals and leaves of the rose. It is a picture of God and the spiritual worlds. The first word Elohim is the divine womb, Binah, the depths of God which everything comes

from. From Binah unfold the thirteen measures of God's compassion to surround Malkhut and protect Her.

These thirteen measures or attributes (midot) are an old and well-known concept, very important in the traditional prayers of Yom Kippur. In Exodus 34:6-7, God speaks to Moses in response to Moses' plea to know God more closely. A Midrashic interpretation says that God appeared to Moses wrapped in a tallit, showing Moses how to pray in order to stir God's compassion {* Reference 14}. The words God spoke to Moses -- abridged to end on a positive note -- are therefore an important component of Jewish prayers for forgiveness. They are also sung when the Torah is taken out of the Ark on festivals. These words, "*Adonai, Adonai, El rachum v'chanun, erekh apayim v'rav chesed ve'emet, notser chesed la'alafim, noseh avon vafesha v'chata'a v'nakeh*" (God, God, God of compassion and grace, patient, great in lovingkindness and truth, keeping lovingkindness for thousands [of generations], bearing with sin and transgression and error, and forgiving) are understood to describe thirteen ways in which God is compassionate and forgiving. (According to some Kabbalistic traditions there are also thirteen higher, more hidden attributes of compassion, alluded to in Micah 7:18-20, verses which are also chanted on Yom Kippur. The Palm Tree of Devorah, by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero [1500s] includes an explanation of these higher thirteen attributes and how we can aspire to live by them.) Here in the Zohar, what is striking to me is the merging between this well-known theological idea, the words of the story of Creation, and the petals of the rose. Different kinds of perception shift and fuse into each other.

Not everything in this passage is clear even to the great Kabbalists, which should make us feel better if we find it difficult. The commentaries disagree about what the other two

mentions of Elohim mean and what the five words/gates/leaves are. However it is clear that the Kiddush cup, in which wine is blessed on Shabbat and holidays, is an image of Malkhut. There is a tradition of holding the cup on the palm of the hand with the fingers around it, like the five leaves of the rose. It is important for the Zohar that the rituals we do are images of what is going on in the deeper, invisible reality.

In the Torah's creation story, light is created on the first day but the sun and stars not until the fourth day. A well-known midrashic resolution to this contradiction is that the light of the first day was supernatural light, which was hidden away to become a heavenly reward for the righteous (tzaddikim). In Kabbalah, the word "tzaddik" (righteous) also means the Sefirah Yesod, "foundation"; a Biblical verse says "the righteous is the foundation of the world" {* Reference 15, verse}. In the body-based imagery of Kabbalah, Yesod is the circumcised penis, bearing the mark of the *brit* -- the covenant. Yesod unites the masculine Sefirah, Tif'eret, with the feminine Malkhut, bringing the flow of divine blessing into Her. The pink folds of the rose here become a vulvic image, taking in Yesod and receiving its semen-seed. The seed is the light of divine blessing -- "Light is sown for/by the righteous" (* Reference 16, verse). The early commentators say that the forty-two letters are simply the first forty-two letters of the Torah. You may find other possibilities if you count letters of the beginning of the creation story in different ways. The Name is either a particular combination of forty-two letters, known to the Kabbalists from traditional writings, or the name "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*", "I Am that I Am", which comes out to 42 in gematria (each Hebrew letter is also a number; adding up the number value of the letters of a word gives its gematria). In any case, the letters of the creation story have become moments of sexual union

within the divine life.

The Torah's creation story has often been understood by modern interpreters as an austere alternative to earlier non-Jewish myths of creation. In those myths the gods are included in the process of creation, and creation is often, naturally enough, a sexual process. The Torah instead has God completely outside the creation, creating the world in a completely non-sexual way, through words. If the Torah's creation story was indeed intended to "demythologize" creation in this way, the Zohar has completely undone its work. This entire passage describes a process of creation inside God, in which the verbal is sexual, in a context of sensual imagery. Thus the Zohar begins by doing something characteristic and radical: re-mythologizing the Torah.

THE ROSE: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

As sometimes happens in dreams, images in the Zohar tend to flow into each other; one thing becomes another unexpectedly or is several disparate things at the same time. What examples can you find in this passage? What are some messages of the shifting, flowing nature of the imagery?

In a way this Zohar passage is a re-telling of the beginning of the Creation story. For you as the reader, how is the experience of reading this passage different from reading the beginning of the Torah? Reading the two together, how do they enrich each other?

TREES OF THE GARDEN

Zohar I (Bereshith) 35a f.

Rabbi Abba said: Why is it written, "The tree of life in the middle of the garden, and the tree of knowing good and bad..."{Genesis 2:9}.

The tree of life: We have learned that it is a five-hundred-year journey (high, or around), and all the waters of creation divide from beneath it.

Truly, the tree of life is in the middle of the garden. It receives all the waters of creation, and they divide from beneath it. The outward-flowing river dwells above the garden and enters into it, and from there its waters divide in many directions.

The garden receives them all, and then they flow out from it, and divide into many streams below, "[gushing forth in torrents, making their way between the hills] for all the living creatures of the field to drink" {Psalm 104:11}. Just as they flow out from the world on high, and water the high mountains of pure balsam, so, after coming to the tree of life, they divide from beneath it to every place, each in its own way.

"And the tree of knowing good and bad": why is it called that, when this tree is not in the middle? "The tree of knowing good and bad" -- what is it?

It suckles from both sides and knows them, like someone suckling sweet and bitter, and because it suckles from both sides, and knows them and dwells between them, it is called this, "good and bad".

And all the other plants dwell above it.

And all the other plants on high are joined to it.

And they are called "the cedars of Lebanon". What are the cedars of Lebanon? They are the six days on high, the six days of creation which we speak of, the "[trees of YHVH which drink their fill], cedars of Lebanon which He planted" {Psalm 104:16} -- they really are plants, they continue to endure.

From here on, the letter *samekh* [whose name means "sustaining"] begins to appear. What does it mean? "[God] sealed [*vayisgor]* the flesh in her place" {Genesis 2:21, the first appearance of the letter *samekh*}. She had been in his side; one was in the side of the other. Indeed, the Blessed Holiness uprooted them and transplanted them to another place, and turned them face to face, so they would endure. That is how worlds are sustained. The Blessed Holiness uproots them and plants them in another place, and they endure in completeness.

Rabbi Abba said: How do we know that Adam and Eve were plants? It is written: "the sprout of My planting, the work of My hands in which I take pride" {Isaiah 60:21}. Truly "the work of My hands" -- no other creations worked on them. It is also written, "On the day you plant, you see it grow [...a day of illness and mortal suffering]" {Isaiah 17:11} -- on the same day that they were planted in the world, they became corrupt.

We have learned: the plants were like the antennae of grasshoppers, and their light was faint, they did not shine. When they were planted and healed, they grew in light, and were called cedars of Lebanon. Adam and Eve too -- until they were planted they did not grow in light, and they gave off no fragrance, until they were uprooted and transplanted and healed appropriately.

"YHVH God commanded the human [saying: from all the trees of the garden eat, yes,

eat]" {Genesis 2:16}. We have learned {* Reference 17, Talmud}: "Command" can only refer to [the prohibition of] idolatry; "YHVH" -- this [forbids] 'blessing [euphemism for "cursing"] the Name'; "God" [*Elohim*] -- these are the judges [*elohim* also means "judges"; a society must have a system of justice]. "To the human" -- this [forbids] bloodshed; "saying" -- this [forbids] prohibited sexual relations; "from all the trees of the garden" [means] not to rob; "eat, yes, eat" [means] not to eat a limb from a living animal. -- This is well said.

"From all the trees of the garden eat, yes, eat" -- (Adam) were permitted all, to eat from them as one. For we see that Abraham ate, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets ate, and they lived. But since this tree is the tree of death, anyone who takes it by itself dies, since they have taken the poison of death. And so, "on the day you it from it you will die, yes, die" {Genesis 2:17} -- because you have separated the plants.

COMMENTS: TREES OF THE GARDEN

Again, drawing on the Torah and earlier Midrash, the Zohar conjures up a rich, complex image of God. The image is more consistent than in the previous passage, which mixed botanical, sexual and verbal imagery. Here there is a cosmic landscape of primordial trees, water, mountains and plants, and all of them are aspects of God. Some of the symbolism is spelled out clearly for readers who know other passages of the Zohar. For example, the Cedars of Lebanon are the six days of Creation, which elsewhere in the Zohar are correlated with the first six Sefirot after Binah (the seventh day, Shabbat, is Malkhut). Some of the imagery is not explained and some of it may not have an explanation; it may

simply be evocative. The overall picture is most important: God is a flowing, living, yet grounded and enduring world.

The Tree of Life is the Sefirah Tif'eret, God beyond us, the object of yearning. He is "in the middle" as the unifying centre of the Sefirot. The Tree of Knowing Good and Bad (or "Knowledge of Good and Evil") is Malkhut. She is "not in the middle" in the same way, but she is between good and bad, present with us on the borders of existence.

The mistake of Adam and Eve disrupted the wholeness of the garden world which this passage begins with, leaving the broken world we know and live in. What was their mistake? The Zohar is reticent about this. It even camouflages what it is going to tell us by first quoting from the Talmud a legalistic interpretation of the commandment not to eat from the tree, which relates the words of the commandment to the seven "Noachide Laws", which are said to apply to all civilized human beings. The Zohar can admire such an interpretation ("this is well said") but that is not its real interest.

According to the Zohar, we misunderstand what was expected of Adam and Eve if we think they were not supposed to eat from the Tree of Knowing. They <u>were</u> supposed to eat from it -- God said, "from all the trees of the garden, eat"! They were supposed to eat from it, because eating from the Tree of Knowing is intimacy with Malkhut, which our holy ancestors and prophets experienced. But they were not to eat from the Tree of Knowing by Herself -- only together with the Tree of Life, Tif'eret. Their sin was tearing apart these Trees, these aspects of the divine, and focusing on one only.

This is a deep and challenging idea. One way of thinking about monotheism is that there may be a variety of powers, but we owe our worship to only one of them, God. The

Zohar's view is almost the opposite. God includes a variety of powers; to worship only one of them is the greatest mistake. The Zohar depicts God in terms of plurality, but it is a plurality that is a unity. To look for a simpler unity by concentrating on part of that plurality tears apart the plurality into disunity. And to the Zohar, this disunity is not just an illusion, but real: Adam and Eve actually caused a rift in the divine.

Adam and Eve's mistake was to worship Malkhut, the divine presence. It could be argued that the more common mistake of religion in the generations preceding ours was to worship only Tif'eret, the aspect of God imagined as distant and as male. This text can be read as a warning to us to try to right the balance rather than tipping things all the way in the other direction.

The Trees are torn apart by Adam and Eve, but in the imagery of the Zohar Adam and Eve are also trees -- "how do we know that Adam and Eve were plants?" and they, like the two Trees, are Tif'eret and Malkhut. Adam and Eve's tearing apart of the two Trees has a creative counterpart in God's work of uprooting Adam and Eve themselves. The Zohar accepts the midrashic view {* Reference 18} that when the Torah says "God created humans...male and female" {* Reference 19 Gen 1:*} this is referring to an androgynous Adam and Eve, joined side to side like Siamese twins. Later in the story, what is separated from Adam is not a rib but, in an equally sound translation of the Hebrew, a side, a half. Eve and Adam are torn apart and become two separate beings -- but beings who can face each other, and who can come together in intimate union. Here there is a positive change from undifferentiated unity, through separation, into unity in plurality.

TREES OF THE GARDEN: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

What are the implications of the Tree of Life being Tif'eret, rather than Malkhut? If you were writing the Zohar would you have chosen this correlation?

The image of uprooting and transplanting is a powerful and disturbing one. From your own reading of this passage, can you suggest more about what it means and how we might be able to work with it?

INTRODUCTION: JACOB AND ESAU

Before reading this passage, you might want to reread the stories of Jacob and Esau in Genesis {* Reference 20}. In midrashic tradition, Jacob, the ancestor of the tribes of Israel, represents the Jewish people. His first-born twin brother Esau represents the oppressive non-Jewish world, especially the Roman Empire, and in medieval times the Catholic Church. Seeing Esau as the wicked oppressor fits only awkwardly, however, with the Biblical stories. After all, Isaac, Jacob's father, who is also the ancestor of all Jews, loves Esau best. And while Esau is a hunter and becomes a chieftain and ancestor of kings, he does not do Jacob any harm; it is Jacob who outwits his brother several times and takes the birthright and blessing away from him. Indeed Jacob's name, which comes from the word for the heel of the foot, also has a connotation of trickery.

"In the Bible deceit is an accepted means for the underdog to {* complete quotation and add Reference 21, Ora Horn-Prouser article}. Jacob is the underdog because he is the second-born, and in the Biblical story the expectation of society is for the first-born to get the best of everything; also, in typical fairy-tale fashion the Torah introduces Jacob as a fool ("*ish tam*", * Reference 22, Genesis **), whose resourcefulness comes as a surprise. Later interpreters, however, seeing Jacob as a Jewish role model rather than an archetypal trickster, were morally troubled by his story.

The Zohar responds to these dilemmas by transposing the human drama to the cosmic level, with challenging results. This is a complex text and one that should be studied both before and after reading the commentary which follows it.

JACOB AND ESAU

Zohar I (Toledot) 137b f.

...The boy, Rabbi Yehudah's son, said: If so, why did Isaac not love Jacob as much as Esau, since he knew that he would establish twelve tribes from him?

(Rabbi Yehudah) said to him: You have spoken well. The answer is that every species loves its own species; a species is drawn after, and follows, its own species.

Come and see! Esau emerged red, as it is written: "The first came out all reddish [like a hairy garment, and they called him Esau]" {Genesis 25:25}. And that is the species of Isaac, who is harsh judgment on high. Esau, who is harsh judgement below, emerged from him, looking like his own species.

And every species goes to its own species, and because of this (Isaac) loved Esau more than Jacob, as it is written, "Isaac dearly loved Esau because of his trapping food for him" {Genesis 25:28}. It is written here, "because of his trapping food for him" and it is written there, "so it is said, 'Like Nimrod, a mighty man of trapping before YHVH'" {Genesis 10:9}.

Rabbi Yitzchak said: It is written, "The children were crushing inside her, and she said, 'If so, what am I for?' and she went to inquire of YHVH" {Genesis 25:22}. (To what place did she go? To the study-house of Shem and Ever.)

"The children were crushing inside her" {Genesis 25:22} -- because there that wicked Esau was waging war against Jacob. "Crushing" -- they were breaking, as in our expression: "[If you meet the best of serpents] crush its brain" {* Reference 23, Yalkut, Kings 218 and

Isaiah 273 or other source}. They broke with each other and separated.

Come and see: that side rides on the serpent, and this side rides on the complete, holy throne -- on the side of the sun [*shamsha*], to make love [*l'shamsha*] with the moon.

And come and see: Because Esau was drawn after that serpent, Jacob dealt with him crookedly, like the serpent, who is wise and deals crookedly, as you say, "the serpent was cunning..."{Genesis 3:1} -- wise. So Jacob's actions toward him were like a serpent to him.

And it was necessary for him to do this, in order to draw Esau after that serpent, so that he would separate from him and not have a portion with him in this world or in the world to come. We have learned: "Someone is coming to murder you -- you kill him first!" {* Reference 24}

It is written, "In the womb he took his brother by the heel" {Hosea 12:3} -- he threw him down below by that heel. As it is written, "His hand was clinging to Esau's heel" {Genesis 25:26} -- he put his hand on that heel, to overturn him.

Another interpretation of "his hand was clinging..."-- he could not get away from him altogether, but "his hand was clinging to Esau's heel". Because of this it was necessary for him to go with him with wisdom, in order to push him down below, for him to adhere to his place.

"He called his name Jacob". Truly, the Blessed Holiness called him Jacob. Come and see: it is written: "Is this why he called his name Jacob..."{Gen 27:36}. "He was called Jacob" is not written, but "<u>He</u> called his name." "...[Because]he has got me under his heel...?"{Gen 27:36 cont:} -- truly. The Blessed Holiness saw that the primordial snake was wise in doing evil. When Jacob came, He said, "indeed, he is correspondingly wise" -- and

therefore He called him Jacob.

We have established that an anonymous "he called", wherever it occurs, is the last level, as it is written, "He called to Moses [and YHVH spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting]" {Leviticus 1:1}. And here, "He called his name Jacob". Wherever his name was called, it was not by a human being. Elsewhere, what is written? "He called him 'God, the God of Israel'" {Genesis 33:20 -- usual translation: "He (Jacob) called it (an altar) 'God is the God of Israel'"}. The Blessed Holiness called Jacob God. He said to him: I am God on high and you are God below.

And come and see: Jacob knew that Esau would adhere to that crooked snake, and because of this, in all his actions, he was drawn upon him like another crooked snake, with wisdom, with crookedness, and this was necessary.

So it comes out as Rabbi Shim'on has said: What is written? God created the great sea-serpents" {Genesis 1:21} -- they are Jacob and Esau. "And all the breathing life that crawls" {ibid.} -- these are the rest of the levels between them.

Truly, Jacob made himself wise, as much as that other snake, and this was necessary.

COMMENTS: JACOB AND ESAU

The Zohar's answer to the moral dilemmas of the Jacob and Esau stories depends on a set of correspondences that are simple but have startling implications. In a common theme of the Zohar, which is not unrelated to the Christian idea of Jesus as an incarnation of the second person of the Trinity, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob manifested the Sefirot of Chesed, Gevurah and Tif'eret. Abraham is Chesed, Isaac is Gevurah, Jacob is Tif'eret, which emerges from Gevurah as one Sefirah unfolds from another. As mentioned earlier, Tif'eret in many respects is the "God" of traditional prayers. (Already an earlier Midrash {* Reference 25}, quoted by the Zohar here, said that God called Jacob God.) Esau, the wicked brother in midrashic tradition, is Sama'el, the devil.

The Zohar's vision of reality as a plural unity tests its own limits when it touches on demonic forces. As noted in our introduction, it sees these forces as very dangerous and real. In many respects Sama'el is an independent force, an enemy of God. Yet from another perspective he too is part of the divine unity, and the Zohar shows this by including him in the genealogy of the family of Genesis, which embodies the divine emanation, the unfolding of one Sefirah from another.

Each of these aspects of spiritual reality has a feminine counterpart. The counterpart of Tif'eret is Malkhut; besides the human imagery, She is the throne and He is the king who rests on Her, or She is the moon and He is the sun whose light She absorbs and reflects. The feminine counterpart of Sama'el is sometimes called Lilith; here, she is the serpent from the Garden of Eden story. The serpent also represents the role or place of Sama'el himself.

(Somewhat similarly, "The Blessed Holiness" is usually a name for Tif'eret; in this passage it refers to His feminine counterpart, Malkhut, "the last level".) The serpent is the place to which Sama'el must be confined; if he were to take this serpent energy beyond certain boundaries it would be deadly.

This passage does not develop a specific role for Rivkah (Rebecca), Esau and Jacob's mother. Essentially she is merged with Isaac as the source of Esau and Jacob. The only comment on her in herself is a quotation from earlier Midrash, a good example of how the Sages saw Biblical history as part and parcel of rabbinic Judaism: when Rivkah had a question to ask, she went to the rabbis in the yeshivah run by the son and grandson of Noah, the earliest ancestors of the Jewish people, Shem and Ever, who were still alive at this time according to the Biblical chronologies of their ages.

It makes kabbalistic sense that Esau is the beloved son of Isaac, because the demonic forces primarily come from Gevurah. This is why the Torah emphasizes Esau's red colour; red is the colour of Gevurah, as mentioned in our first text, The Rose. Gevurah is harshness, strictness, saying no. When this energy goes a little too far it becomes a no to life, utter destructiveness, evil. In the unfolding of the Sefirot, the energy of Isaac/Gevurah grows in two ways. At first, it presses on in its own direction, outward, over the edge, and becomes Sama'el, represented by Esau, the first-born. Then Gevurah's energy collects itself and refocuses toward the centre, balancing with Chesed, and becomes Tif'eret, Jacob. Tif'eret is about a blending of Gevurah with Chesed, but Sama'el is pure unmitigated Gevurah. Therefore it makes sense that Gevurah loves Sama'el, that Isaac loves Esau. It also makes sense -- startling as it is -- that the Devil is the <u>older</u> brother of God, in God's central

manifestation as Tif'eret.

The identification of Isaac with Gevurah may seem surprising because Isaac is noteworthy for his receptive, passive role in the Biblical stories. One way of looking at this is that Gevurah can be inward-focused -- in self-restraint and self-control -- or outward-focused in restraint and control over others. Isaac manifests the former and Esau, the hunter, the latter. (The Zohar juxtaposes Esau with Nimrod to suggest that his aggressive hunting energy was felt in the human realm as well. Nimrod is mentioned in the Torah only as a great hunter but in midrashic tradition was the first tyrannical king, and tried to kill Abraham.)

In the Zohar's interpretation of the conflict between Jacob and Esau, Jacob/Tif'eret, aware of the evil power of Esau/Sama'el, proactively responds in kind, fighting fire with fire. This provides a mystical understanding of Jacob's morally unacceptable trickery. It was necessary to use evil means in order to defeat the power of evil and keep it in its place. Yet, while the ends justify the means, the means still have consequences. Jacob/Tif'eret is tainted by the conflict with Esau/Sama'el. He remains stuck to him -- "he could not get away from him altogether, but his hand was clinging to Esau's heel". He is more like him than he, or we, may find comfortable. "The great sea-serpents" of the beginning of Genesis are Jacob and Esau; the verse goes on to mention "all the breathing life that crawls" which, the Zohar says, covers all the divine and demonic powers surrounding them, without distinction.

The distinction between the demonic and the divine is blurred in a different way in our next selection.

JACOB AND ESAU: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

The Zohar's picture of the place of evil in the realm of the divine is somewhat unsettling. In principle, the Kabbalists could have followed many other theologians in seeing God as completely removed from evil, or evil as a mere illusion, or both. What do you think the Zohar gains by taking its complex stand?

What are the implications of the Zohar's choice to have this passage spoken by a father (Rabbi Yehudah) in response to his son's question?

INTRODUCTION: THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

This passage begins with a scene of the rabbis travelling together. (They are going to Lud from Kapotkia, a Galilean village whose name seems to be based on a misunderstanding of a Talmudic reference to Cappadocia in Asia Minor {* Reference 26: Scholem, Major Trends, **}. Rabbi Abba sees his teacher Rabbi Shim'on as embodying the presence of God. This is a typical narrative episode in the Zohar, which may give us a glimpse of how the authors of the Zohar would spend time together, going on hikes in the Spanish countryside while talking about the mysteries of the Torah.

This scene of motion leads into a praise of calm settledness as a way to wisdom, which could be read in reference to sitting in meditation. Then a mystical discourse begins which invokes images that are anything but peaceful, as the hunger for wisdom grows to include the most frightening aspects of spiritual reality.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Zohar I (Vayechi) 223a-b

It is taught: One day Rabbi Shim'on was going from Kapotkia to Lud, and Rabbi Abba and Rabbi Yehudah were with him. Rabbi Abba was exerting himself, running after Rabbi Shim'on, who was riding.

Rabbi Abba said, "Truly, 'They will go after YHVH, who will roar like a lion.'" {Hosea 11:10}

Rabbi Shim'on descended, and said to him, "Truly, it is written: 'I settled on the mountain forty days and forty nights' {Deuteronomy 9:9}. Truly, wisdom does not become settled except when a person is settled, not going, but founded on his foundation {cf. Eruvin 64b, Megillah 21a}. The words (recorded elsewhere) about why it is written 'I settled' are well founded. Now the word depends on calm."

They settled themselves.

Rabbi Abba said, "It is written, 'The wisdom of Solomon grew from [*or* "beyond"] all the wisdom of the Children of Before [*or* "of the East"] and from all the wisdom of Egypt.' {I Kings 5:10} What really is the 'wisdom of Solomon'; what really is the 'wisdom of Egypt'; what really is the 'wisdom of the Children of Before'?"

(Rabbi Shim'on) said to him:

Come and see! We have established, in many contexts, this name of the Moon when she is blessed by all. It is written that she "grew" in the days of Solomon, because she increased and was blessed and remained full.

We have been taught: A thousand mighty mountains, in front of her, are just one bite for her. She has a thousand great rivers -- she swallows them in one gulp.

Her fingernails clutch a thousand and seventy shores, her hands grasp twenty-four thousand shores. Nothing can get away from her to this side, nothing can get away from her to another side.

Thousands and thousands of shields are tangled in her hair.

One youth, whose measure is from the height of the world to the end of the world, emerges between her legs. He is clothed in sixty lashes of fire. This is his appearance when he is appointed over those below on (all) four sides. This is the lad who holds six hundred and thirteen exalted keys from the domain of Mother, and all these exalted keys hang on the point of the sword girded to his belt. This lad is called Enoch [*Chanoch*] son of Yered in the Baraitot; as it is written, "'Enoch' refers to the 'lad', in accordance with his way" {Proverbs 22:6 -- usual translation, "train (*chanoch*) the lad, in accordance with his way"}. And should you say it is a mishnah and not a Baraita: we have established these things in our Mishnah, and this has been stated, and they all contemplated one thing.

Under him shelter the living things of the field.

Come and see: just as holy Israel on high is called the son of his mother, as it is written, "For I am a tender son to my father and the only one of my mother" {Proverbs 4:3}, and it is written, "Israel is my firstborn son" {Exodus 4:22} -- so too below, this one is called his mother's lad, as it is written, "Israel is a lad and I love him" {Hosea 11:1}. And in many aspects he is called the son of Yered, and this has been established, but come and see: he really is the son of Yered, as we have been taught: "With ten *yeridot yarda*, descents descended, the Shekhinah to earth" {Pirqei Rabbi Eliezer 14 and parallels}, and the friends have established them all, and this has been stated.

And below this stand many living things, who are called the living things of the Field, itself.

Below these living things, the hairs of the Moon are tangled with each other. They are called shooting stars -- they do indeed shoot. Lords of strife, lords of weighing in the balance, lords of harshness, lords of arrogance; all of them are called hairs of royal purple.

Her hands and her feet seize hold, like a powerful lion that seizes its prey. About this it is written, "it tears and none can rescue" {Micah 5:7}.

All her fingernails call to mind the debts of human beings, writing and inscribing their debts with the authority of harsh judgement. About this, it is written, "The sin of Judah is written with an iron pen, with a fingernail of *shamir*" {* Reference 27, Jeremiah 17 **; *shamir* is sometimes translated as "diamond"}. What is *shamir*? That which inscribes and pierces stone {see the legend of the stone-cutting worm which helped build the Temple, Talmud Sotah 48b} -- splitting it in all directions.

The dirt under her fingernails is all those who do not cling to the body of the King, and suckle from the domain of uncleanness, when the Moon is waning.

And because King Solomon inherited the full Moon, he wanted to also receive her in her waning, and so he set to work acquiring knowledge of spirits and demons, to receive the Moon in all her aspects.

And in the days of King Solomon the moon shone over all. As it is written, "The Wisdom of Solomon grew" -- indeed grew.

"From all the Children of Before" -- this is an exalted mystery, as it is written, "These are the kings who ruled in the land of Edom [before there was any king in Israel]." {Genesis 36:31} So they are called the Children of Before, since none of them endured, except for the

one that includes male and female, called Hadar, as it is written, "And Hadar ruled after him [and the name of his city was Pa'u, and the name of his wife was Mehitabel daughter of Matred daughter of Mei Zahav]" {Genesis 36:39}

And we have been taught that even though the Moon shone, she did not shine in her fullness until Solomon arrived, who was her fitting counterpart, as we have established, because of which his mother was Bathsheba (daughter of Seven).

"And from all the wisdom of Egypt" -- this is the lower wisdom, called "the maidservant behind the millstones". All was included in the Wisdom of Solomon -- the wisdom of the Children of Before and the wisdom of Egypt.

Rabbi Abba said: Blessed is the Compassionate, that I asked this question before you, that I have been privileged to all these words!

COMMENTARY: THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON

Malkhut is called "Wisdom" because she receives from the Sefirah Chokhmah (Wisdom); "Moon" because she receives the light of the Sun, Tif'eret; the "Field" because she is sown with seed from above; but in this passage, though all these names are used, it is not Her receptiveness that is celebrated, but Her terrifying power. Her description, with Her giant size, voracious appetite, grasping claws, and fierce personified hair, recalls the Hindu iconography of the goddess Kali. Kali is typically coloured pitch black, with a red tongue and white fangs, wearing a necklace of skulls, holding weapons in Her many hands and

dancing on a living or dead male body. This kind of goddess imagery arises from intense male emotional experiences of simultaneous attraction to, and fear of, women, extended to reality as a whole in all its beauty and terror. This is a vision of reality which does not expect it to behave well. As one of my teachers notes concerning the ancient Sumerian myths of Inanna, another warrior goddess, "the Goddess doesn't have to be any more moral or less arbitrary than nature is. In fact she shouldn't be, because then she would reflect nature less accurately."

Born to this fierce goddess ("emerging between Her legs") is Metatron, the greatest and most powerful angel. The sixty lashes of fire allude to the punishment that Metatron received when the great Sage Elisha ben Avuyah saw him and heretically thought that he must be a second God {* Reference 28}. Metatron as son of the Shekhinah (Malkhut) may be a deliberate reworking of Christian imagery of Jesus as the son of God and son of Mary. "Holy Israel on high" is Tif'eret, the son of Binah; there is a parallelism between Him and Metatron, and a blurring of distinctions between Metatron and the Jewish people.

Six hundred and thirteen is the well-known traditional number of commandments in the Torah. At this moment in the Zohar's vision of reality the mitzvot have a rather secondary place, as keys hanging from the sword of an angel -- greatest of all angels though he be.

"Baraitot" are teachings from around the time of the Mishnah (c. 200 C.E.) which were not included in the Mishnah itself. The Zohar is alluding to somewhat later mystical texts such as Pirke Hekhalot; calling them Baraitot enhances their authority. Enoch, son of Yered, is mentioned in Genesis 5:18-24; reporting the end of his life, the Torah says {Gen

5:24} "and he was not, for God took him." The Hekhalot texts explain that he did not die but was physically taken into Heaven and transformed into Metatron, who is paradoxically called "the lad". The Zohar claims that the Mishnah says the same thing. There is no such teaching in the Mishnah as we know it, but the Zohar often alludes to a mystical Mishnah, and suggests that it sees itself as a commentary, a Talmud, to this hidden Mishnah. "Mishnah" is also a name of Malkhut and perhaps Baraita is a name of Metatron, as if coming from "bar" meaning "son".

"The dirt under her fingernails" (another translation would be "the edges of her fingernails") means demonic forces, connected to Malkhut. Solomon wants to know them in order to know Her better, to know Her "waning" as well as Her "shining". There are many Jewish and Muslim legends of Solomon communicating with demons. Kabbalists did so as well; Moshe Idel (a leading scholar on Kabbalah today) quotes a text that proudly says, "all our Rabbis of Castile [Spain] have served in the palace of Sama'el" {* Reference 29, if I can find it}.

According to the context in the Zohar and the great commentary of Rabbi Moshe Cordovero, "the wisdom of Egypt" is the wisdom of the demonic powers. On the other hand, the Children of Before, the kings who ruled in Edom, are from the deepest divine levels, but they are divine emanations that returned to nothingness. They are connected with midrashic imagery of God creating and destroying worlds until this one was created, and God intending to create the world purely with the power of judgment but finding that it could not endure that way. "The one that includes male and female" is an aspect of divine Wisdom that is the foundation of all the male and female polarities and unions among the Sefirot. So Malkhut

includes everything -- from the deepest divine wisdom to the wisdom of the demonic forces.

Solomon, the wisest king, is the son of Bathsheba, BatSheva, whose name means "daughter of seven". This is a name of Malkhut, who is the "daughter" of the seven Sefirot before her, counting from Binah. So Solomon, like Metatron, is the son of Malkhut, able to be at home with her, to know Her as she really is.

This whole passage shows the fearlessness of the authors of the Zohar in facing spiritual reality as they saw it, with all its attractions and terrors.

THE WISDOM OF SOLOMON: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

I mentioned my sense of goddess imagery as drawing on male fear of and attraction to women, but of course women also worship, or work with imagining, goddesses. I am particularly curious about how women taking this course respond to the imagery of Malkhut in this passage.

The nineteenth-century Hindu mystic Sri Ramakrishna was once meditating on the bank of a sacred river when he saw a beautiful, pregnant woman emerging from the water. She gave birth, and tenderly held and nursed her baby. Then, as he looked on, she became a terrifying monster, devoured her child, and sank back into the river. Sri Ramakrishna bowed his head and worshipped, knowing that he had seen the Goddess, the divine personification of nature, which constantly brings life into being and destroys it.

What strike you as significant similarities between this Hindu text and the one from the Zohar? As significant differences? Do you think the religious experiences underlying these texts are fundamentally different?

HEAR, O ISRAEL...

Zohar III (Vayikra) 7b

[Rabbi Abba] opened again and said: "*Hinei ma tov uma na'im shevet achim gam yachad* -- Behold, how good and how pleasant for siblings to dwell, also, together" {* Reference 30, Psalm 133:**}. Privileged are Israel, for the Blessed Holiness has not given them to a ruler, or to an emissary. Israel cling to Him, and He clings to them.

And because of love for them, the Blessed Holiness calls them "servants". As it is written, "For the Children of Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants" {* Reference 31, verse}. Going further, He calls them children, as it is written, "You are children of YHVH your God" {* Reference 32, verse}. Going still further, He calls them siblings, as it is written, "For the sake of my siblings and friends..."{* Reference 33, verse}. And because He calls them siblings, He wanted to place His dwelling with them, and never depart from them. So it is written, "Behold, how good and how pleasant for siblings to dwell, also, together."

And the Holy Lamp [Rabbi Shim'on] said as follows: "Behold, how good and how pleasant...". It is as when you say: "If a man marries his sister [...it is *chesed*]" {Leviticus 20:17; in this verse *chesed* probably means "shameful", not "lovingkindness"}. According to the Book of Rav Yeiva Saba: "If a man" -- that is, the Blessed Holiness, "marries his sister" -- that is, the Community of Israel -- what is the reason for this? "...it is *chesed*". It is indeed *Chesed*, and we have established this.

And so, "Behold, how good and how pleasant for siblings to dwell, also, together" -- the Blessed Holiness and the Community of Israel. "Also" is to include Israel below. As we have said: When the Community of Israel is in oneness with the Blessed Holiness, Israel below dwell in joy, they too, with the Blessed Holiness. And therefore it is written, "also, together".

And according to the Book of Rav Hamnuna Saba: "Also, together" is to include the Righteous with her, with the Community of Israel, since they are one couple. And these words are all one.

And we have learned, on the passage *"Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* -- Hear, O Israel, YHVH our God, YHVH is One": What is "One" (*Echad*)? It is the Community of Israel clinging (*achid*) to the Blessed Holiness.

As Rabbi Shim'on has said: The coupling of male and female is called One. Where the female dwells, it is called One. For what reason? Because male without female is called half a body, and half is not one. But when they join as one, two halves of a body become one body, and then it is called One.

But now the Blessed Holiness is not called One. The mystery of this word: the Community of Israel is in exile, and the Blessed Holiness has gone up, higher and higher; the couple has separated, and the holy Name is not in completeness, and is not called One. When will it be called One? When the Lady is found with the King, and they couple as one. As it is written, "And dominion shall be YHVH's." Who is "dominion"? It is the Community of Israel, for dominion is linked to her. Then, "*Bayom ha-hu yih'yeh Adonai echad ush'mo echad* -- On that day, YHVH shall be One and his Name One" {* Reference 34, verse;

Aleinu}. This is the meaning of "Behold, how good and how pleasant for siblings to dwell, also, together".

COMMENTS: HEAR, O ISRAEL...

This passage looks at several of the best-know Biblical verses, which many of us know by heart in Hebrew: The Shema *(Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad)*, the verse sung at the end of Aleinu, *ba-yom ha-hu yih'yeh Adonai echad ush'mo echad*, and the popular song lyric taken from Psalms, *hinei ma tov uma na'im shevet achim gam yachad*. Drawing on some classic Midrashim (and on the fictional Books of Rav Yeiva Saba and Rav Hamnuna Saba) and taking their ideas further, the Zohar discovers unexpected meanings in these verses.

Following the method of other midrashim, the Zohar begins by paying close attention to the actual words of the verses. For example, in the verse *Hinei ma tov...*,the word *"gam"*, which means "also", seems extra. The verse is usually translated "Behold, how good and how pleasant for siblings to dwell together" but it literally says "...for siblings to dwell, also, together". What does the "also" imply? The Zohar suggests several possibilities. (A different translation question is the word *achim*, often translated "brothers" instead of "siblings". Both are possible; "siblings" is how the Zohar understands it.)

My teacher Joseph Cohen of Toronto once defined Kabbalah as "a science that takes punning seriously." The Hebrew word *echad*, as in the Shema, spelled Aleph, Chet, Dalet,

means "one". The Zohar's choice of verses suggests a connection between this word and *achim* (siblings) which also begins Aleph Chet. Another punning connection is essential. There is an Aramaic verb, *achad* or *achid*, which means "to hold on" or "to cling". It is the Aramaic equivalent of the Hebre *achaz*, which also means "to hold on"; Aramaic often has a Dalet (d) where Hebrew has a Zayin (z). However, the Zohar derives surprising meaning from the fact that the Aramaic *achid* has the same root letters, Aleph, Chet, Dalet, as the Hebrew *echad,* One.

Another verse which the Zohar works with is not so well-known but has attracted many different interpretations because of its strange wording. It is a verse in the incest laws in Leviticus: "If a man marries his sister...it is *chesed...*" {Leviticus 20:17}. *Chesed* is ordinarily translated as "loving-kindness" (or "loyalty") and has very positive connotations. In Kabbalah, it is the name of the Sefirah that manifests God's love and generosity. But the rest of the verse, and the entire context, make it clear that intimacy between a brother and sister is absolutely forbidden. Historically, the word *chesed* in this verse probably has a negative meaning, like the related Aramaic word *chisuda*, which means "shame". But the Zohar prefers the provocative paradox of reading the word as a reference to the Sefirah Chesed.

This passage refers to various Sefirot by their most standard Zoharic names. Tif'eret, the God of prayer, is called "the Blessed Holiness" or "the King"; Malkhut, the divine presence, is called "the Cǒmmunity of Israel" as in our first text (The Rose), or "the Lady"; Yesod, which links them in union, is called "the Righteous" (tzadik). The exile of Malkhut is a common theme in the Zohar. It is based on a theme of earlier Midrash, the exile of the Shekhinah: when we go into exile, when we suffer, the Shekhinah is with us. In the Midrash

this is a way of saying that God shares our suffering; in the Zohar it is more complex, because Tif'eret remains in heaven, so to speak, while Malkhut is in exile with us. Rereading this text, you may find it among the easiest passages in the Zohar to understand -- and one of the most challenging to think about.

HEAR, O ISRAEL: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION:

Gershom Scholem writes about the Zohar: "It is sometimes difficult to avoid the impression that the author was acting on the good old principle of *épater le bourgeois* ['shocking the bourgeois, the establishment']" (Major Trends, p. 167). Which ideas in this text could be included in this category? In what ways are they shocking from the perspective of more conventional Jewish teachings?

What might it mean for a religious outlook to internalize the idea that God is not, at present, one?

INTRODUCTION: DOING AND MAKING

Philosophers in our own time have given a lot of attention to the connection between language and reality. Building on the teaching of the Torah and Midrash that the universe was created through God's words, the Zohar blurs any distinction that may exist between language and reality (my teacher Elliot Wolfson has emphasized this point). In this passage, for example, speaking about God's name is the same as speaking about God. (It's interesting that in Jewish parlance we often call God "HaShem", which means "the Name.")

Like the previous text, this one depends on the seriousness of punning. At one point the Zohar plays with the words *otam*, "them", and *atem*, "you". Usually these words have the same letters (Aleph, Tav, Mem) except that there is a Vav after the Aleph in *otam*, indicating the O sound; occasionally the Torah leaves out the Vav, and so *otam* can be read as if it were *atem*. More importantly, this whole passage plays with the double meaning of the Hebrew word *asah*, which means both "to do" and "to make". (In the verses quoted here, the form is *va'asitem*, "and you do" or "and you make".) The Zohar opens new meanings by understanding the verb as "to make" in contexts where it is conventionally translated as "to do".

The term "Oral Torah" (*torah she-b'al peh*) used in this passage is a common one. On the literal level it refers to the Mishnah and Talmud, and more generally to all Jewish teachings outside the Bible, which are considered to go back to teachings given by God to Moses by word of mouth. The "Written Torah" (*torah shebikhtav*) is the Bible and specifically the five books, the Sefer Torah. Here, of course, both are names of Sefirot.

A variety of names of the Sefirot are involved in this passage and "decoded" in the comments afterwards. As usual, it is worth reading the passage first before looking at the comments.

DOING AND MAKING

Zohar III (B'chukotai) 113a f.

Leviticus 26:3, beginning of parshat B'chukotai:

Im b'chukotai teileichu v'et mitzvotai tishmoru va'asitem otam

If in My rules you walk and you keep My commandments and do/make them...

Leviticus 25:18

Va'asitem et chukotai v'et mishpatai tishmoru va'asitem otam...

And you shall do/make My rules and keep My judgments and do/make them...

"If in My rules you walk..."

"If in My rules..."-- This is a place, the place on which the decrees of the Torah depend, as when you say, "you shall keep My rules" {Lev. 19:19}. It is Rule (*Chok*) that is referred to like this. And the decrees of the Torah are included in her.

"And you keep My judgments..."

"My judgments" -- that is another place on high, to which this Rule (*chukah*) clings, and they are joined, one with the other.

For those on high and those below, and all the instructions of the Torah and all the decrees of the Torah and all the holinesses of the Torah, cling to these (two). Because this one is the Written Torah and this one is the Oral Torah.

Therefore, "If in My rules..."-- (namely) all those decrees and laws and punishments and instructions that are in that place, which is called Oral Torah, Rule (*Chukah*).

"And you keep My judgments..."-- in that place which is called Written Torah, as when you say, "Judgment of the God of Jacob (*mishpat lelohei Yaakov*)" {Psalm 81:5}.

This clings to that, and that to this, and all is one, and that is the completeness of the holy Name. And someone who transgresses the ordinances of the Torah is, as it were, marring the holy Name. For Rule and Judgment (*Chok uMishpat*) are indeed the Name of the Blessed Holiness.

Therefore, "If in My rules you walk..."-- this is the Oral Torah. "And you keep My judgments" -- this is the Written Torah. And this is the completeness of the holy Name.

"And you do/make them" -- What is "and you make them?" Since it says "walk" and "keep", why "and you make them"?

The resolution is that someone who does the instructions of the Torah and walks in its ways, so to speak, as it were, makes that on high. The Blessed Holiness says: "As it were,

he has made Me (*k'ilu asa'ani*)". This has already been established. Therefore, "and you make them".

"*Va'asitem atem* -- and you make them" is written, truly, since when they are aroused by you to join with each other, so that the holy Name exists as is fitting, "you make them", truly.

Correspondingly, Rabbi Shim'on said: "And David made a name (*vaya'as David shem*)" {II Samuel 8:13}.. Did David make it?! The resolution is that because he walked in the ways of the Torah and did the instructions of the Torah, and conducted the kingdom (Malkhut) as is fitting, so to speak he made a Name on high.

And there was no king in the world who merited this as David did, since he would get up in the middle of the night and be praising the Blessed Holiness, until the holy Name rose to its throne at the time when the light of day rises. So to speak, he actually made a Name. As when you say, "the son of an Israelite woman pierced the Name and cursed" {Leviticus 24:11; "pierced" is usually translated "blasphemed"}. Therefore "David made a Name".

And so "you make them" is written: If you occupy yourselves with making them, to arrange the holy Name as is fitting, all the blessings of on high will be with you in their arrangement (*tikkun*), as is fitting.

"I will give your rains in their time [and the land will give her produce, and the tree of the field will give his fruit]" {Leviticus 26:4} -- every single one will give its power to you.

What are they? The arrangement (*tikkun*) that you made, which is the holy Name.

Correspondingly, it is written, "They will keep the way of YHVH, making tzedakah [righteousness or charity] and judgment (*la'asot tz'dakah umishpat*)" {Genesis 18:19}. When it is written, "they will keep the way of YHVH", why "making tzedakah and judgment"? The resolution is that someone who keeps the ways of the Torah, so to speak makes Tzedakah and Judgment. And what is Tzedakah and Judgment? The Blessed Holiness.

Rabbi Shim'on wept and said: Woe to those people who do not know, and do not watch over the glory of their Master. Who makes the holy Name every day? You must say: One who gives tzedakah to the poor.

Come and see: this is well founded, thus it is. The poor person clings to Justice (*Din*) and all his nourishment is through Justice, which is the place called Tzedek (righteousness). As when you say, "A prayer of the poor person who is faint..."{Psalm 102:1}. This prayer (tefillah) is the tefillah (singular of tefillin) of the arm; so we have provided a foundation to the words.

And someone who gives tzedakah to the poor person makes the holy Name on high, complete, as is fitting. Because tzedakah is the Tree of Life, and by giving Tzedakah to Tzedek, when he gives it to Tzedek, this joins with that and the holy Name is complete. Someone who makes this arousal below truly, as it were, makes the holy Name in completeness. Corresponding to what he makes below, so is there arousal on high.

About this it is written, "Happy are those who keep judgment, making tzedakah at all

times" {Psalm 106:3}. "Making Tzedakah" -- that is the Blessed Holiness; so to speak, one makes Him.

Come and see! It has been said what the place of the poor person is. What is the reason? Because the poor person has nothing at all of his own, only what people give to him. And the moon has no light of her own, only what the sun gives to her.

Come and see! Why is "a pauper considered as dead" {* Reference 35}? For what reason? It is because of that place, because he is found in the place of death, and so he is called dead. But when someone takes care of him, and gives him tzedakah, the Tree of Life dwells over him, as when you say, "Tzedakah saves from death" {Proverbs 10:2}.

Corresponding to what a person makes below, so too he actually makes on high. Privileged is the portion of one who merits to make the holy Name on high. Because of this, Tzedakah ascends above everything. And the expression "*Tzedakah lishmah*" ("tzedakah for its own sake" or literally "...toher name") is because one arouses Tzedakah toward Tzedek, to join them as one, for all to be the holy Name, as is fitting. For Tzedek is not perfected, is not completed, except with Tzedakah. As it is written, "You shall be built with tzedakah (righteousness)" {Isaiah 54:14}, and this is said to the Community of Israel. So it is said, "And you shall make them..."

COMMENTS: DOING AND MAKING

Yes, this text really does say that we make God!

As to the details: the general term for the Sefirot here is "places"; the "rains" in one of the verses quoted are probably also the Sefirot in general. Malkhut is *Chok* or *Chukah*, both meaning "Rule" or "a law that has no rational explanation"; the Oral Torah; the land; *Tzedek* (righteousness, justice); the throne; the place of the poor person; *Din* (Justice) -- also the name of the Sefirah Gevurah, with which She is closely connected; the tefillah worn on the arm; the moon; the place of death; and the Community of Israel. Elsewhere in the Zohar, She is identified with the final letter Hei in the Name of God, Yud Hei Vav Hei (YHVH). Tif'eret is identified elsewhere with the letter Vav of the Name. Here He is called Judgment (*mishpat*) or Judgments; the Written Torah; the tree of the field; the Tree of Life; Tzedakah (a fuller form of the word *tsedek*); the Blessed Holiness; and the holy Name. (Take some time, if you can, to reflect on all these associations, to let them sink in!)

Both "the Blessed Holiness" and "the holy Name" can also mean the totality of God, with Tif'eret as the unifying centre. Both senses occur in this passage; "the Blessed Holiness" at least the first couple of times it occurs, and "the holy Name" most of the time, simply mean God.

Together, Malkhut and Tif'eret complete the holy Name. I think that this text does not assert that we make Malkhut and Tif'eret in and of themselves; what we do is to bring them together, thereby "making" each of them as they should be, and making, i.e. completing, the holy Name, God. This is the Kabbalistic meaning of *tikkun* or *tikkun olam*, "arranging the

(divine) world". If this reading is correct then the Zohar is not going so far as to say that we make God from scratch, so to speak. But it is quite radical nonetheless.

DOING AND MAKING: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION:

I have asserted that "making God" refers to bringing Malkhut and Tif'eret together. There are sentences in this text that could imply a more radical understanding, that we make the individual Sefirot themselves. What are those sentences? How do you understand them in context?

Reviewing the details of this passage, what are we told about <u>how</u> we make God?

What are the ethical/political implications of the section about "the poor person"?

On the previous passage, I asked, "what would it mean for a religious outlook to internalize the idea that God is not, at present, one?" How does this passage (Doing and Making) provide an answer to this question?

INTRODUCTION: THE GAZELLE OF THE DAWN

Like our first text (The Rose), our final text is a petichta, a sermon which begins with a verse from the Torah, then goes into a verse from elsewhere in the Bible in depth and finally returns to the first one. "The first month" to which the opening verse refers is the Jewish month of Nisan, the month of the Exodus, of Passover, and, according to some traditions, of the messianic redemption in the future. Our passage is appropriately permeated with a sense of urgency and ends on a note of hope.

This text is a rich example of how the Zohar works with and transforms earlier writings. The ayelet -- the female gazelle or deer, whose name is also given to the morning star, ayelet ha-shachar -- is the subject of several biblical verses and midrashic legends. Some of them are so strange in their imagery that they seem to have come from much more ancient myths. The authors of the Zohar, immersed in the words of the Torah and Midrash, weave together strands from these earlier texts and accentuate their strangeness and their mythic dimension. In the Zohar the gazelle who is described in such emotional and human-like terms is Malkhut, also called the Glory of God. (To Her is applied a verse from "Eshet Chayil", a passage from Proverbs in praise of a capable woman, sung at the table on Friday night in praise of both the woman of the house and Malkhut.) Different sayings about the gazelle have been combined and added to, to make one continuous story about Malkhut. It is a story that lends itself to visualization or guided meditation. The meanings of the story -- for example, where Her journey takes Her and what the powers are that she encounters -- are not clear, and the commentators disagree. But Her strength, compassion and courage shine through very

clearly.

You are invited to read the selection of early sources which the Zohar draws on, and then read the passage from the Zohar itself.

SOURCES: THE GAZELLE OF THE DAWN

[God] has made my feet like gazelle and made me stand on my high places. (II Samuel 22:34 and Psalm 19:34, cf. Habakuk 3:19)

For the Conductor, on "the gazelle of the morning", a Psalm of David. My God, my God, why have you abandoned me? Far from my salvation are the words I groan... (Psalm 22:1-2)

The voice of God causes gazelle to give birth and strips bare the honeycombs; and in [God's] sanctuary everything says: "Glory!" (Psalm 29:9)

As a gazelle moans for streams of water so my being thirsts for You, God. (Psalm 42:2)

A beloved gazelle, a graceful mountain-goat; let her breasts satisfy you at all times, be infatuated with love of her always. (Proverbs 5:19 -- interpreted as praise of the Torah by many sayings of our Sages)

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by ts'va'ot or by the gazelle of the field, lest you wake

up or arouse love before its pleases. (Song of Songs 2:7 and 3:5. Ts'va'ot can either be a name of God, "Lord of Hosts", or a word for deer.)

Another interpretation of "For the conductor, on 'the gazelle of the morning', a Psalm of David". Rabbi Yehudah son of Rabbi Shim'on said: If there are snakes in a house, we bring the horn of a gazelle and burn the inside of it to fumigate the house, and immediately the snake flees. And you will find that the gazelle, when she is thirsty, digs a hole, and enters her horns into it and lows, and immediately the Deep raises water to her. As it is said, "As a gazelle moans for streams of water". And our Rabbis have said that she is the kindest of the animals, and she has more compassion than she has children. When all the animals are thirsty they gather around her, she they know her kind deeds, so that she will raise her eyes on high, and the Blessed Holiness will have compassion for them. What does she do? She digs a hole and enters her horns into it and lows, and the Deep raises water to her, as it is said, "As a gazelle moans for streams of water". When David saw how the Blessed Holiness answers her, he began the arrangement of a psalm with her: "For the conductor, on 'the gazelle of the dawn'." (Midrash Tehillim 22:14)

"For the Conductor, a wisdom-song of the children of Korach... As a gazelle [ayal] moans [ta'arog] for streams of water". Why "as a gazelle [m.] moans [f.]?" It does not say "as a female gazelle (ayelet)" but "as a gazelle [m.] moans [f.]" -- male and female. Just as the female gazelle, when she is in labour, is in pain and moans to the Blessed Holiness, and He answers her, so the children of Korach cried out from trouble to the Blessed Holiness, and He

answered them. So it is said "as a gazelle moans" [with the verb in the feminine]. (Midrash Tehillim 42:1)

** Added text here and Reference 36: midrash on how the gazelle gives birth

And one source text that is not about the gazelle:

** Added text here and Reference 37: midrash on Moses striking the rock

THE GAZELLE OF THE DAWN

Zohar III (Pinchas) 249a-b

"And in the first month"...{Numbers 28:16}.

Rabbi Abba opened: "*K'ayal ta'arog*... As a gazelle moans for streams of water, so my soul moans for You, God" {Psalm 42:2}.

The meaning of this verse has been established. It is written here *ayal* (male gazelle) and it is written elsewhere *ayelet* (female gazelle) because there is masculine and there is feminine, and even though there is masculine and feminine, all is one. This *ayal* -- he is called masculine, and he is called feminine, since it is written "as a gazelle *ta'arog*" (with the verb in the feminine) and it is not written *ya'arog* (with the verb in the masculine). And all is one.

"*Ayelet hashachar* -- the gazelle of the dawn, the morning star" {Psalm 22:1}. What

is the gazelle of the dawn? She is a single animal who is compassionate; among all the animals in the world, none is compassionate like her. Because, at a time when time is pressing on her and she needs to feed herself and all the animals, she goes into the distance, by a distant path, and brings food. And she does not want to eat until she comes back and returns to her place. Why? Because the rest of the animals are gathered to her, and she divides that food for them. When she comes back, all the rest of the animals are gathered to her, and she stands in the middle and distributes portions to each and every one. A reminder of this is: "She gets up while it is still night and gives food to her household..." {Proverbs 31:15; *Eshet Chayil*}. And from what she distributes to them, she is satisfied, as if she had eaten more food than all of them.

And when morning is coming -- which is called *shachar*, "dawn" (or "blackness" or "searching") -- the agonies of exile come to her. That is why she is called the gazelle of *shachar* -- because of the blackness of the morning, because she experiences agonies like one who is giving birth. As it is written, "like a pregnant woman, close to giving birth, who begins to cry out in her agonies [so we have been before Your face, YHVH]" {Isaiah 26:17}.

When does she distribute portions to them? When the morning wants to come, while it is still night; when the blackness is rising to give light. As when you say, "She gets up while it is still night and gives food to her household..." When the morning gives light, all are satisfied by her food.

Then a single voice is aroused in the middle of the sky and calls out loudly, "Those who are near, come to your places. Those who are far, go away. Let each and every one be gathered to its own place." As it is written, "[The young lions roar for their food, to ask God

for their nourishment.] When the sun rises, they are gathered [and go to lie down in their dens]" {Psalm 104:21-22}.

And she goes in the day, and is revealed at night, and distributes portions by morning. That is why she is called the gazelle of the dawn. Afterwards, she strengthens herself like a hero, and goes, and she is called *ayal* (male gazelle).

To what place does she go? She goes two leagues from the place from which she emerges, and enters the mountain of darkness, and from there she goes on a journey for food.

As she goes within that mountain of darkness, a single crooked snake makes its way to her feet, and goes to her feet.

But she goes up from there onto a mountain of light. When she reaches it, the Blessed Holiness prepares, for her, another snake; it emerges and one attacks the other, and she is rescued.

And from there she takes food and returns to her place in the middle portion of the night. And from the middle portion of the night, she begins to distribute portions until the blackness of the morning rises. When the day gives light, she goes, and she is not seen, as has been said.

And at a time when the world needs rain, all the rest of the animals are gathered to her, and she goes up to the peak of a high mountain, and conceals her head between her knees and cries out with cry after cry. And the Blessed Holiness hears her voice and is filled with compassion, and saves the world. But she descends from the peak of the mountain and runs and hides herself. And all the rest of the animals run after her, but they do not find her. As it is written, "As a gazelle moans for streams of water." What is "for streams of water"?

For water from those streams which have dried up, and the world thirsts for water -- then she moans.

At the time when she is pregnant, she is closed up, and when her time comes to give birth, she cries out and raises her voice, voice after voice, up to seventy voices, like the number of words in "May YHVH answer you on the day of trouble..."{Psalm 20}, which is the song of this pregnancy.

And the Blessed Holiness hears her, and makes preparations for her. Then a certain mighty snake emerges from inside the mountains of darkness, and comes between the mountains, its mouth licking at the dust. When it reaches that gazelle, it comes and bites her in that place, two times.

The first time, blood flows out, and it licks it.

The second time, water flows out, and all the cattle of the mountains drink. And she is opened and gives birth. A reminder of this is: "and he struck the rock with his staff, twice", and it is written, "the community drank, and their cattle" {Numbers 20:11}.

At that time, when the Blessed Holiness saves her by the work of that serpent, what is written? "The voice of YHVH makes the gazelles give birth; it uncovers honeycombs [and in his palace all says 'Glory']" {Psalm 29:9, translated according to the Zohar's understanding of the somewhat obscure Hebrew}.

"The voice of YHVH makes the gazelles give birth" -- those agonies and suffering were to arouse those seventy voices.

Immediately, "it uncovers honeycombs" to arouse that serpent -- and to reveal that animal among the others, to go on.

"And in his palace" -- what is "and in his palace"? In the palace of the Blessed Holiness, all those multitudes open their mouths and say "Glory"! What is Glory? "Blessed is the Glory of YHVH from its place!" {Ezekiel 3:12, *Kedushah*}.

"And in the first month..."-- what is "the first month"? It is the month in which that animal is revealed and in which she is strengthened and emerges into the world.

THE GAZELLE OF THE DAWN: QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

This is an interesting text with respect to gender, since it explicitly addresses questions of what masculine and feminine mean. As noted in the introduction, its stress on the Gazelle's compassion undermines the gender stereotype of the kabbalistic system -- though not that of North American society. What do you find in the text that reinforces gender stereotypes (theirs or ours)? What can you find that can support questioning or undermining of stereotypes?

The introduction mentioned the Zohar's appropriation of Christian imagery. In addition to the midrashic source for the blood and water which flow from the gazelle, it is possible that the authors of the Zohar had in mind this well-known moment in the story of the crucifixion of Jesus, from the Gospel of John: "When (the soldiers) came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already...one of the soldiers, with a spear, pierced his side, and immediately there came out blood and water" {John 20:33-34}. If so, what have they accomplished in reworking this imagery?

CONCLUDING QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION:

Looking back on all the passages we have studied, with all their images and ideas, how would you sum up what the Zohar has communicated to you about:

the presence of God, Malkhut?

the God of traditional prayer, Tif'eret?

the nature of reality?

our place and task in the world?

RECOMMENDED READING

You are strongly encouraged to continue learning Zohar. This is a task to be undertaken carefully because Zohar and Kabbalah are taught from a variety of perspectives. The following recommendations will support a liberal approach to the Zohar similar to the one offered in this course. Enjoy your further learning, and unfasten your seatbelt when you're ready to fly the plane!

** List of books to be added.