

Maintaining God's Living Reality Through Images of the Torah in the Zohar

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In his book On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, Gershom Scholem writes that "to preserve the purity of the concept of God without loss of His living reality - that is the never-ending task of theology" (89). The Zohar, particularly in its imagery of the Torah, helps in this 'task of theology'. The Zoharic world is not the Biblical world of will, but rather one of balance, harmony, and analog. To strive after Torah is to cleave to God and to harmony in both the supernal realms and on earth. The Torah is one image which the Zohar believes helpful in the human desire to know God. The striking love-ridden and organic images which the Zohar conjures up bring God to a vibrant and living immediacy in the world we know. There is no sacrifice of purity, says the Zohar, if through mythical language man is brought to a deeper understanding of God. True righteousness is the seeking after a God who is seen as the vital creator of the world, and in whom one truly sees one's self.

The Zohar structures its imagery around a system of ten elements called *sefirot*. Various descriptions of dimensions of divine vitality or emanations of God's energy, they are all ways of expressing and describing the 'inner life' of God in its actualization and its coming out of the hidden divine realms into varying degrees of revelation to the human world. They are all in God, of God, and all together, in a sense, they *are* God. They are a unity, and though one may describe one or several separately, one may never make a mental separation between them as they are coterminous aspects of the same divine unity. To focus on any one *sefirah* as distinct and discrete would be a breaking up of the unity of God, and would be an idolatry of sorts. To this end, the images of Torah and the accompanying *sefirotic* parallels should not be thought of as a discussion of an independent aspect of divinity, but rather as one facet inextricably bound up with the meaning of the entire system.

"The Torah is conceived as a vast *corpus symbolicum* representative of that hidden life in God which the theory of the Sefiroth attempts to describe."¹ The two *sefirot* which provide the majority of imagery for this symbolical body are *Tiferet* and *Malkhut/Shekhinah*. *Tiferet*, when considered on the bodily diagram of the sefirotic world, is represented by the torso, or axial spine. It is the mediating principle between the *sefirot* Din and Hesed - judgement and mercy. It is represented as written Torah. *Malkhut*, however, is often referred to as the feminine element. Corporeally, it is the mouth, but elsewhere it is the queen, the mother, the daughter, and other female images such as these. It is birth, or when speaking in the language of divinity, the outlet of the divine spirit to the world. It is represented as oral Torah.

Studying images of the Torah is very important because it gives one a special perspective on the ethos of the Kabbalistic project involved in writing the Zohar. Throughout the Zohar, in its very tone and particularly in its many imported images from the Song of Songs, one finds a certain 'eros of discovery' which drives the meditations onward. There is a passionate fascination with discovering the truths of the

divine realms which ought not be overlooked in the reading of the Zohar. Hence one finds no systematic presentation of ideas, but rather a flood of widely varied and rich descriptions and images all intending to give the reader a way not only of conceiving of the godhead, but of involving one's self with it. And it is here that the sefirotic images of the Torah are important. Torah is conceived as an expression of God's living reality which is mirrored in the *Shekhinah's* as God's living presence and imminence.

The imagery of love, or eros, is crucial for a discussion of *Shekhinah*. Eros implies a yearning for unity, harmony, and completion. *Shekhinah* is the aspect which receives an impulse from its masculine counterpart, *Yesod*, and engages in the creative activity of harmonization. It is a mystical marriage bringing balance to the world. This marriage is God's call to Himself in a transfiguration of His harmony in love. One important principle in Zoharic thought is man's role in maintaining the *sefirotic* balance. What is found in heaven is found in transfigured parallel in the world. The actions of man affect sefirotic harmony, balance, and wholeness. In following Torah, one influences one's sefirotic counterparts, thereby helping to keep the divine realms in harmony.

In this regard, the Zohar says, "Everyone who studies the Torah sustains the world and maintains every individual thing in its proper form. For every part that exists in man there is a corresponding element created in the world...Everything is patterned on the Torah, for the Torah is all limbs and joints, and they are positioned one above the other, and when they are all arranged they become a single body."² This passage goes further in explaining why looking at images of the Torah is so important. Here, 'everything' refers to all that is knowable to man and as a result, everything that man seeks to cling to. Clinging to Torah, therefore, is clinging to all which we yearn for (where yearning also plays a part in the eros of discovery). As well, this passage strengthens the assertion of the important parallel between the human and divine realms.

The Zohar reads the Torah itself as a symbolic text in whose every letter there is a reflection of the divine mystery. Truth and divinity are in each letter: "How beloved are the words of Torah, because every single word contains supernal mysteries, and the Torah is called the supernal principle (*kelal*)."³ This is the general principle, namely that everything is in Torah. To express this idea more fully and with all of its attendant nuances (with which it abounds), the Zohar employs a variety of images. The primary image is that of the human body alluded to earlier. The Zohar expands widely on this image. In keeping with its portrayal as an organic being, the Torah is described as having a soul. This soul yearns, much as in the traditional description of the human soul, to return to God and to be redeemed. The Zohar says, "this is the structure of the human body: the spirit (*ruah*) comes from the holy spirit [*Shekhinah*], the soul (*neshamah*) from the Tree of Life [*Tiferet*]."⁴ These are the sefirotic emblems of the Torah which live in just this way.

Such a rendering of the Torah was not without a certain tension between schools of thought on how to treat mystical knowledge. According to one school, not that of the Zohar, the Torah is nothing but the name of God in hidden permutation and linguistic manifestation. The understanding of so divine a thing ought and must be kept secret and pure. As a result, their mystical understandings were kept only for some sort of spiritual elite. The writer(s) of the Zohar agreed with the first premise "for the whole Torah is the name of the Holy One, blessed be He."⁵ Scholem states the position of the contending school of

mysticism in saying that "the Torah is interpreted as a mystical unity, whose primary purpose is not to convey a specific meaning, but rather to express the immensity of God's power, which is concentrated in His 'Name'."6 Here we see a focusing of attention on the expression of that aspect of God's being which is presentable to us. Scholem goes on to point out that "the Torah, as the Kabbalists conceived it, is consequently not separate from the divine essence, not created in the strict sense of the word; rather, it is something that represents the secret life of God."7 To be sure, the Torah is the name of God, but that emphasis has shifted to attempting to understand God's living reality; the secret of His presence in man's life.

Such a monumentally symbolic text whose subject is the life of the divine world seems to require an immense deal of interpretation. The Torah is seen to work on a number of levels. There are, according to Scholem, four basic layers of meaning to which the Kabbalists referred. First, the literal meaning, followed by the homiletical and instructional level, which in turn is followed by the allegorical. The fourth level, the mystical level, the ('mystery of faith'), was the goal of the mystic(s) who composed the Zohar: "The 'mystery' in every case concerns the interpretation of the Biblical word as a symbol pointing to the hidden world of God and its inner processes."8 The symbolic, mystical level of the text requires interpretation. In this way, Torah guides and changes the soul, the imagination, so that one might clear an avenue of access to God, refine one's self, and bring one's self closer to the divine.

In their book Idolatry, Halbertal and Margalit maintain that "although the claim that God has no image is considered by Maimonides as a principle of faith, it is not so clear that it is accepted in the Bible or in the rabbinic traditions. In the Bible it seems that God does indeed have an image, except that it is forbidden to represent this image in any way"9. The Bible sees it as important to hold that God has some kind of a visible image or impression, and that man is created in that image. The importance rests in the insistence on a vital *relational* link between man, the world, and God. This mystical bodily image of God is reflected equally in the bodily parallel of the Torah. As was said before, the Zohar stresses the organic imagery associated with these depictions. The body is the literal level, and the living soul is the secret level accompanying the literal one.10

Like the play within a play in "Hamlet," there is the image of Torah as a body within a body, and equally as striking, as a tree within a tree (which is to say the tree of the sefirot). "Every single day, dew trickles down from the Holy Ancient One to the Impatient One, and the Orchard of Holy Apple Trees is blessed. Some of the dew flows to those below; holy angels are nourished by it...Israel ate of that food in the desert. Rabbi Shim'on said 'Some people are nourished by it even now! Who are they? The comrades, who engage Torah day and night.'"11 And it is this nourishing power which appears again in the constant reference to Torah as the Tree of Life. These sorts of images have had deep spiritual resonances throughout the ages.

The arboreal imagery is continued in the Zohar's distinctions between Tiferet and Shekhinah. In Scholem's book On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, this is given a very thorough treatment. The distinction is made between *Tiferet* as the written Torah and *Shekhinah* as the oral Torah. He speaks of a very old distinction between the two in saying that "the written Torah is the text of the Pentateuch. The oral Torah is the sum total of everything that has been said by scholars or sages in explanation of this

written corpus."¹² They are coextensive and inseparable conceptions. They are, in a sense, each other's 'completion'. The written Torah is the Tree of Life. It is the absolute and indelible principle. The oral Torah is the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It "deals with the modalities of the Torah's application to the earthly world."¹³ When referring back to the corporeal conception, one sees the written Torah, *Tiferet*, as the heart. It is that which is 'at heart' and essential in the Torah. The oral Torah, *Shekhinah*, is the mouth. It is the avenue of all commentary and living interpretation of the text. Scholem excerpts a passage from the Zohar describing Rabbi Isaac's description of the 'two Torahs' as black and white flames, black fire on white fire. The white flame is the written Torah whose letters are only discernible through the black (i.e. the oral Torah). The written Torah relies completely on the oral Torah for its physical reality. Written Torah can only be understood through oral Torah.¹⁴ For human beings, then, "*there is only an oral Torah*: that is the esoteric meaning of these words, and the written Torah is a purely mystical concept."¹⁵

This discussion of written and oral Torah is not purely descriptive. It is indicative of a kind of prescription. "'[If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them,] then I will give your rains in their season...' (Leviticus 26: 3-4). Each one will bestow its power upon you. Which are they? They are the restoration that you have made, which is the holy name."¹⁶ Restoration here connotes balance and harmony. Through following Torah (akin to affirming God's 'name') one brings Tiferet and Shekhinah into balance, thus sustaining God's name. 'Your rain in their season' is the reward for abiding by the commandments, and is very similar to the dew spoken of earlier in the passage from Matt's translation.

It is not only the keeping of the divine commandments which the Zohar sees as essential. As was alluded to earlier, it is also interpretation which is absolutely vital in the endeavour to maintain balance. Interpretation is likened to creation and it is through this that the Zohar fashions a new understanding of what spiritual creation means. The general idea is that God looked into the Torah's hidden wisdom, God's first creation, and then created the world. Scholem describes "the revelation of the Torah as the organ of creation."¹⁷ The Zohar says that "every new interpretation of the Torah that is originated by someone who studies Torah makes a firmament."¹⁸ New interpretations, spanning the spectrum from more literal to more mystical (supernal) create "new heavens" and a "new earth." Through new interpretations of Torah, new possibilities of manifestation of the divine reality are created. An example of what this kind of interpretation means is given later on in that same passage: "'And say to Zion: You are My people (*ami*)' (ibid.). 'And say' to the gates and things that are distinguished above others, 'You are with Me.' Do not read *ami* (My people) but *imi* (with Me). Be a partner with Me."¹⁹ One way of cleaving to God is in study of Torah and the creation of new interpretations. Later on in that passage it states that "with the Torah the Holy One, blessed be He, created the world. And they have already explained this from the verse 'Then I was by Him as a nursling, and I was daily all delight' (Proverbs 8: 30)."²⁰ Not only does this present another palpably vivid organic image, that of the Torah suckling from God, but it suggests that without interpretation the Torah is neither alive nor animated. Any act of reading a text, and subsequently acting upon that understanding, is an act of interpretation. "And He studied it [Torah] once, twice, three and four times, and after this He spoke the words, and then He did the deed."²¹ God studied the Torah and His subsequent proclamation of it and His setting the world into being were results of *His* interpretation. Man's interpreting of Torah is the analog of the divine act.

A paradigmatic example of many of the themes presented in the discussion thus far is the very famous and oft-cited allegorical pericope concerning the beautiful maiden in the castle and her lover. In brief, a beautiful maiden sits in her hidden chamber in the castle, knowing that her lover waits at the gate for her. She briefly reveals her face to him from out her room, but quickly conceals it once more. He alone notices, and the fire of his love is fanned even more greatly. The Torah is likened to a "beautiful and stately maiden" whose palace is presumably the realm of the sefirot. It is important that it be a woman in that the Shekhinah is the feminine dimension, but also the oral Torah which is all that a human, represented by the lover, has access to. The lover is he "who understand[s] her and follow[s] her precepts." "A small door" indicates both the secretiveness and narrowness of the Torah's embouchure to the world of those who truly seek her. "For a moment reveals her face" is a very important gesture. The lover gains a fleeting glimpse of her true identity. "But he is aware it is from love of him that she has revealed herself to him for that moment" shows that the Torah has an insurmountably powerful attraction to convey love in a glance, not to mention the striking parallels to the notion of eros spoken of earlier. The act of "thrusting open the door" is an article of faith that she knows the heart of her lover. It ends by saying that "in this manner, the Torah, for a moment, discloses herself in love to her lovers, so as to rouse them to renewed love." In a sense, this is a most pregnant assertion. It sets out a very important theme, that of love. It is the Torah's love for her lovers, and by natural extension (given the sefirotic equation), it is God's love for those who accept His Torah. Man's relation with God is in no way abstract and faceless, but a living and Romantic inter-relation based on mutual love. God and His people are paramours.

One of the primary uses of such vivid organic and spiritual imagery of the Torah is to convey what it means to cleave to God and how God's living reality is maintained in this world. A very curious passage in the Zohar says "one must use [one's molars] to grind the words of Torah until they are like fine, pure flour, and [one must use] a sieve, the lips, in order to remove the waste matter, the husks of the Torah, until one uncovers the law, the finest flour."²³ Working on Torah, studying it, interpreting it, is nourishment for the soul. Since Torah is God's name, its 'ingestion' is an image of a kind of clinging to God in an important and naturalistic sense (which is to say, like eating, it is an essential element for life itself).

All of what has been said of the imagery of the Torah in the Zohar has been inextricably bound up with its use of mystical language. The symbolism of the Zohar 'represents' God. In the book Idolatry, attention is paid to the reasons for the proscriptions against divine iconography. "First, the gap between the god and the world is blurred by the representation that possesses the features of the god itself. Second, this creates a very deep fear of substitution, in which the idol takes the place of the god in the eyes of the worshiper."²⁴ The second problem is resolved in the Zohar by referring to the sefirotic world and maintaining that there is no one image which can be substituted for the entirety. As was said at the outset, it *is* a kind of idolatry not to keep in mind the fundamental unity and equality of the sefirotic world. It is something the author(s) of the Zohar knew well. The first problem, though, is no problem at all for the Zohar. In many respects, that is what the Kabbalah wants to accomplish, namely, that through the 'blurring of the gap' there is an increase in God's living reality and closeness. Kabbalistic imagery brings this about in large part using the language of mythification. Again, "the concrete and pictorial

language of myth in its descriptions of primeval situations is what creates the feeling of greater closeness to the forces of nature than to civilized states."²⁵ The Zohar's description of the godhead through the sefirotic imagery is a mythical description of the most primeval of situations - creation itself. Yet, there is a tension described here in this passage. On the one hand, there are the 'forces of nature' (the forces of God) which are like the emotional nature (including love and eros) endowed to men by God. On the other hand, there are the 'civilized stated' which are marked by rational philosophy, insisting on the purity of the concept of God and, as a result, His abstraction. His living reality is mitigated if not completely dissolved.

In light of the idea of the preceding paragraph, the Zohar speaks of how the Torah known to us is but a terrestrialization of "exalted and supernal mysteries," in order that through their study men might have some spiritual entree to God. How does one know this? This is known because as the trappings of the Bible are stories and narrative, the Zohar claims that if this were the true end of the Torah, "we ourselves at the present time could make a Torah from the words of commoners and do much better."²⁶ Reading and studying Torah, then, become the fastening of one's self to the divine insofar as the act of reading and studying Torah re-enact God's gift of the Torah. The Torah, in this new way, again becomes a body: "The value of the garment resides in the body, and the value of the body resides in the soul. Similarly, the Torah has a body. The commandments of the Torah are the bodies of the Torah. The body is clothed in garments, which are the narratives of this world."²⁷ The value of the commandments is in the soul of the Torah, the 'true' Torah, which is what the wise seek. This soul consists of supernal mysteries, the pursuit of which, in the eros of discovery, helps to harmonize the sefirotic world - the divine world - and this world. This is very well expressed by one passage in the Zohar which states, "Indeed, He is known in the gates. He is known and grasped to the degree that one opens the gates of imagination! the capacity to connect with the spirit of wisdom, to imagine in one's heart-mind - this is how God becomes known."²⁸

Yet this 'knowing' of God brings one back to that tension of which mention was made previously. This is the tension between purity and revivification of living reality. Traditional Jewish thought, represented by the Rabbinic tradition, opposed the perceived mythification of God, the cosmos, and man. The separations were regarded as unfordable rivers. Myth, where it remained, was permitted only in a metaphorical sense. Rabbinic Judaism wanted to maintain the purity of the concept of God in response to the perceived "assaults" on it by myth. This "tended to empty the concept of God"²⁹ because the more one tries to deny the application of earthly images to God (i.e. those images which are comprehensible in the sensible human realm) "the less you can say about God."³⁰ It was clear to the writers of the Zohar that "the price of God's purity is the loss of his living reality."³¹ God is a living God for men just in the case that He is involved in the world and that men see Him as such. Scholem contends that Rabbinic Judaism "divorced the Law from its emotional roots."³² The Law, the Torah, becomes in that case a glorified history and loses its cultic mythicism. Kabbalah, and the Zohar in particular, saw a need for the reinstatement of mythical figurations in order to effect a revivification of the idea of God. The Torah is a very apt and powerful symbol of this act. The Zohar sets up the "myth of the Torah as an infinite symbol, in which all images and all names point to a process in which God communicates Himself."³³

The Rabbinic tradition perceived idolatry in any representation of God other than allegorical. It is said

that Biblical 'pictures' (capturing the sense of *figurative* language) of God were only bodily because the majority of men could understand nothing but images framed by human references. This is an unsatisfying account because when one then hears God spoken of, the implication is that it is not God at all that is being talked about, or that if it *is* God, then we are talking about it in a way which has no meaning or relevance to us. Halbertal and Margalit assert that in portraying God's supremacy, authority, and attributes to that effect, there are two ways of bringing about that end. "One is to distribute pictures of the king everywhere, and the other is to prevent anyone from seeing the king."³⁴ The Zohar in a sense comes at the problem not by the second method, but by the first. It incessantly repeats the 'image' of God in the sefirot in endless assortments and variations thus 'distributing His picture everywhere.' This is no more boldly seen than in the palpable imagery describing Torah and its host of associations. The Zoharic 'myth' converts the symbols into firm mental objects by establishing narrative, dramatic, and organic relations between the symbols.³⁵ What more pithy way to emphasize the living reality of God?

Notes

- 1 Gershom Scholem, Major Trends, 209.
- 2 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, I 134a-135a, 1123-1124.
- 3 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, III 149a-149b, 1124-1125.
- 4 *ibid.*, III 170a, 794-795.
- 5 *ibid.*, III 13b-14a. 1179.
- 6 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 40.
- 7 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 41.
- 8 Gershom Scholem, Major Trends, 210.
- 9 Moshe Halbertal, Idolatry, 45-46.
- 10 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 45.
- 11 Daniel Chanan Matt, Zohar, 113-116.
- 12 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 47.
- 13 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 68.
- 14 *ibid.*, 49.

15 *ibid.*, 50.

16 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, III 113b, 1190.

17 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 73.

18 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, I 4b-5a, 1127-1131.

19 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, I 4b-5a, 1127-1131.

20 *ibid.*, I 4b-5a, 1127-1131.

21 *ibid.*, I 4b-5a, 1127-1131.

22 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 55-56.

23 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, III 227a-227b, 493-494.

24 Moshe Halbertal, Idolatry, 40-41.

25 Moshe Halbertal, Idolatry, 81.

26 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, III 152a, 1126-1127.

27 Isaiah Tishby, Wisdom, III 152a, 1126-1127.

28 Daniel Chanan Matt, Zohar, 66.

29 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 88.

30 Gershom Scholem, On the Kabbalah, 88.

31 *ibid.*, 88.

32 *ibid.*, 95.

33 *ibid.*, 95.

34 Moshe Halbertal, Idolatry, 47.

35 Moshe Halbertal, Idolatry, 97.

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