

7 Fore/giveness on the Way: Nesting in the Womb of Response

Seit menlich böser Geist sich
Bemächtigt des glücklichen Altertums, unendlich,
Langher währt Eines, gesangsfeind, klanglos, das
In Maasen vergeht, des Sinnes gewaltsames. Ungebundenes aber
Hasset Gott.

Friedrich Hölderlin, *Der Einzige*¹

Time Of Forgiveness In The Giving Before Time

“To Err is *Human*, to Forgive, *Divine*,”² in this relatively simple, albeit strikingly incisive, couplet, Alexander Pope offered the world one of the most memorable and oft-cited reflections on the constitutional difference between human and divine nature. But what does it mean to speak of forgiveness as a distinctive character trait of godliness in contrast to the all too human propensity to stray from the path of righteousness? To apprehend the signification of a forgiving God, indeed a God whose very way of being in relation to the world is to forgive, we must chart three conditions contained analytically in the concept of forgiveness. We may call these conditions necessary, but not sufficient, that is, the saying of forgiveness implies that each of these conditions be met, but for there to be the forgiving of the other who is forgiven, something more than these conditions must come to play. The conditions set the logical parameters of the experience, but the experience itself exceeds the parameters in which it allows itself to be present and verbally apprehended.

In the first instance, I note that forgiveness should be clearly demarcated from forgetfulness. Here I would take issue with a

commonplace perception about the causal relationship between the two, which has been expressed by no less a figure than Shakespeare through the mouth of King Lear, "Pray you now, forget and forgive."³ I do not think that forgiveness is consequent to forgetfulness; on the contrary, it seems reasonable to assume that the two are mutually exclusive, for if a matter is forgotten, there is no need for it to be forgiven. The consciousness we attribute to God does not forget; it forgives; it gives before there is forgetfulness. To give before, to fore/give, is precisely not to forget, for one who forgets cannot forgive. Forgiveness demands to come before forgetfulness.

The second condition is a correlate of the first: if forgiveness is predicated on the absence of forgetfulness, it presupposes the act of memory. For something to be forgiven, it must be remembered. Forgiveness demands. It entrusts the other by commissioning from the other, laying claim on one to respond to the other without an exchange of goods. Forgiveness bears within itself the limit of its own delimitation, by assuming the laying-at-hand of that which is remembered, that which proceeds (or slips) from the past into the present, and thereby is anticipated in the future, the retrieval of that which is momentary, the return of that which is to come. Forgiveness happens in time, forgetfulness is the obfuscation of time. Forgiveness ensues from the mediated sense of time's immediacy, indeed from the experience of time as the immediate and irreducible possibility of there being something, even if that something is nothing; forgetfulness holds sway when there is no more to become, when the light of there-being is veiled in the darkness of being-there. Forgiveness is the giving-before that grounds the fecundity of temporality in the *nunc stans*, forgetfulness the taking-away that extirpates the possibility of the present without which there is neither remembrance of the past nor expectation of the future. In the moment of forgiving, time endures, and no more turns into not yet, but in the standstill of forgetting, time withdraws, and not yet becomes no more.⁴

The third condition involves the axiological mechanism by means of which forgiveness is assured in God's relationship to human beings. Here the discourse turns to the culturally specific formulation, which may indeed have a more universalist application but which is nevertheless experienced as part of the foundation of the particular ethnic identity. The focus of my reflections henceforth refers to descriptions of God's unique relation to the Jewish people.

In this case, forgiveness has been traditionally linked to the symbol of the covenant. Beyond the legalistic background of this ancient phenomenon, the covenant assumed semiological significance in the course of the religious history of Judaism: covenant is the sign that brings forth to memory, that which calls to mind, and thus breaks open the path to forgiveness. The resonance of what is unsaid in this saying can be heard best if we again contrast forgiveness and forgetfulness. Forgiveness is the presence of the sign, inscription, the cutting of the covenant upon the rock; forgetfulness the absence of the sign, erasure, the depositing of the trace beneath the rock. To erase that trace is the mark of humankind, to give before, to fore/give, that of transcendence. In forgiving, one gives before, participating in the dialogue that releases the tension of the moment; by forgetting, we remain submerged in the oblivion of the past, the silent speech of senseless chatter, the emptiness that is full.

Return of Daughter to Mother's Womb: Ontological Condition of the Turn

Having established some of the contours of forgiveness as it takes shape within a specific cultural matrix, I will set out to examine this phenomenon from the even more limited vantage point of the medieval kabbalistic tradition, and even here my scope is far more narrow, since I will look at the symbolic depiction of forgiveness as this affectivity is refracted through the prism of the complex aggregate of textual units that we call *Sefer ha-Zohar*, the “zoharic literature,”⁵ which in all likelihood assumed literary shape, more or less, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries in Castile. To lay out even more precisely the trajectory of my thinking, I will focus on the symbol of Yom Kippur, which is one of the standard names employed by kabbalists to delimit the third of the ten divine potencies, *Binah*, understanding, which is also referred to as the mother, the womb, the place of return, *teshuvah*, the retracing of the way to return to origin, the world of the masculine, the world that is coming, and a myriad of other poetic tropes. Yom Kippur, the day of atonement, is the day of amends, that is, the day on which there is the mending of that which is torn. The reparation (*tiqqun*) comes by way of the return of the lower seven emanations to the womb of the mother whence they

emerged, a restoration that anticipates the state of union achieved in the eschaton.⁶ By thinking philosophically about forgiveness and atonement, we set out to capture the mythic import of Yom Kippur, especially as it relates to the symbol of the mother in the esoteric tradition. In listening to the word communicated by the poetic utterance, we hear again that which has been uttered before, but never in the precise way that it is heard in this moment.⁷ In that respect, we follow as we lead.

I begin with a zoharic text, an explication of the verse, *tiq'u va-ḥodesh shofar ba-keseh le-yom ḥaggenu*, “Blow the ram’s horn on the new moon, on the full moon for our feast day” (Ps. 81:4), interpreted rabbinically as a reference to Rosh ha-Shanah, the new-year festival celebrated on the first day of the seventh month, the festival that occurs when the moon is new, that is, when it is hidden, as opposed to the middle of the month, on the fifteenth, when the moon is full. The Hebrew rendered as “full moon” is *keseh*, a term that is explicable (as medieval commentaries such as Abraham Ibn Ezra and Rashi duly noted) from the occurrence of the expression *le-yom ha-keseh* in Proverbs 7:20, which seems to refer to the middle of the month, used there to signify the appointed time when the man returns home from his business trip. The rabbinic reading not only ignores the *peshat*, the contextual sense, but turns the text against itself, for the term *ba-keseh* is understood as the time when the moon is hidden, that is, at the beginning of the month when the moon is renewed, rather than the middle of the month when it is full.⁸ The mystical reading proffered in the following passage builds upon this interpretative foundation:

R. Eleazar said: It is written, “on the full moon for our feast day” (Ps. 81:4) ... [*ba-keseh*] with [the letter] *he*, for the moon is concealed (*de-itkasya sihara*) ... Come and see: On that day the moon is hidden, and she does not shine until the tenth of the month when Israel all repent in a perfect repentance, and the supernal mother returns and illuminates her. On that day she takes the illumination of the mother, and joy is found in everything. Thus it is written, *yom ha-kippurim hu* (“This is the day of Yom Kippur”) (Lev. 23:27). It should have been *yom kippur* [in the singular]. Why is it *yom ha-kippurim* [in the plural]? To indicate that two lights are illumined as one, the upper radiance

shining upon the lower radiance. On that day she shines from the supernal light and not from the light of the sun. Therefore it is written “on the full moon for our feast day.” R. Abba sent [a question] to R. Simeon: What is the [appropriate] time for the copulation of the Community of Israel and the holy king? He responded to him [with the words of Abraham]: “And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s daughter; and she became my wife” (Gen. 20:12) ... R. Hiyya said to R. Abba: What did he say in his response to you? He said that the coupling of the king and the queen is certainly only at the time that she is illumined from the supernal father, for when she is illumined from him they call her “holy” (*qodesh*), for she takes from the house of the father, and they are united as one, for the king is called “holy,” as it is written, “Israel is holy unto the Lord” (Jer. 2:3), for he takes from the place that is called “holy.” Consequently, “she is my father’s daughter though not my mother’s daughter,” for this name [*qodesh*] is from the house of the father and not from the house of the mother. And thus “she became my wife,” to unite as one at that time and not another time, at the time she takes from the house of the father and not at the time she takes from the house of the mother. The day of Yom Kippur proves the point for sexual intercourse is forbidden, for the coupling does not take place since she takes from the house of the mother rather than from the house of the father.¹⁰

The secret unique to Yom Kippur is related to a theosophic process that unfolds therein, the ontological reality that yields the existential meaning associated with this particular moment in time. An analysis of the role of time in kabbalistic ontology obviously lies beyond the circumscribed boundaries of this study, but it is necessary to make a preliminary observation about the texture of time,¹¹ for without a working hypothesis with respect to this matter, we cannot comprehend the theosophic mystery distinctive to the time of Yom Kippur. In general terms, we may say that for the medieval kabbalists, time is not dependent on the motion of bodies in space, nor is it conceived as the fleeting shadow of the eternal forms in the world of matter. Indeed, time is not dependent on physical existence at all, for it is of the very essence of the sefirotic potencies, which

constitute the mystical shape of the Godhead. Time, therefore, is not extrinsic to God; on the contrary, it is the very pulsation of the divine energy.¹² To the degree that this energy is configured in the symbolic imagination of the kabbalists as consciousness, it follows that temporality is essentially indistinguishable from consciousness. Moreover, just as the consciousness of God is infinite in its extensionality, so too is the duration of time potentially infinite, an infinity that is expressed in the ceaseless cycle of renewal and regeneration of the moment.

The kabbalistic perspective is expressed succinctly by Moses Cordovero: "Time is the secret of the rotation of the emanations (*sod gilgul ha-sefirot*), during the day this particular emanation, during the night this particular emanation, and on Sabbath this particular emanation. The time that was from the day that the world was created and the emanations rotated is not the time that evolves from now and forward, but rather there are new aspects, for the succession of time (*sefer zemanim*) that is before him has no boundary and no end."¹³ Cordovero relates this ever-changing aspect of time to the phenomenon of new interpretations of Torah: there is always a novel explanation to be drawn forth from the text, since the Torah is the manifestation of the divine essence that is infinite. Cordovero's linkage of innovative explications of Torah and the ever-changing nature of time is a fascinating idea worthy of further exploration, but what is most important for my purposes is his formulation that time is the secret of the rotation of the sefirotic emanations.¹⁴ This underscores the point that time is the very essence of the divine nature and not something extrinsic to it. Moreover, inasmuch as the divine nature is limitless, it follows that each moment of time, which is the very expression of that nature, will be unlike that which has preceded it. From the perspective of kabbalistic theosophy, the element of time that is most real is the present, which is perhaps best captured by the Bergsonian idea of the *élan vital*, the ever-gushing stream of temporality that flows without pause, although never in the same manner. The present alone possesses ontic reality in the prehension of consciousness, for only the presence of the moment makes possible the remembrance of the past and the anticipation of the future.

With this brief introduction to the kabbalistic understanding of time, we may return to the specific example of Yom Kippur. This holiest day on the Jewish calendar assumes a particular

theosophic significance, which in turn has an impact on the practitioner's liturgical experience of time. The mystery is laid bare by heeding the philological concealment unveiled in the utterance of the festival's biblical name, *yom ha-kippurim*, literally, the "day of atonements." The plural form of this expression is decoded symbolically by the zoharic authorship as an allusion to the fact that on that day the supernal radiance, *Binah*, the third of the ten emanations, shines upon the lower radiance, *Malkhut*, the tenth emanation, an illumination that can be conveyed as well by the anthropomorphic image of the mother casting her light upon the daughter, which in another passage is depicted as the illumination of the lower mother by the supernal mother.¹⁵

The reunion of mother and daughter is also described as the time that the daughter takes from the house of the mother rather than from the house of the father. The incestuous relationship implied in the image of the daughter taking from the father is utilized by the author of the zoharic passage to depict symbolically the emanation of the lower wisdom, often referred to as the wisdom of Solomon (*hokhmat shelomo*), from the upper wisdom, or the wisdom of God (*hokhmat elohim*).¹⁶ On the day that the daughter receives from the father, the daughter and the son unite in holy matrimony.¹⁷ The incestuous mating of father and daughter facilitates the second incestuous relationship between sister and brother by means of which they adopt the personae of king and queen. Not only is there an astonishing use of incestuous relations by kabbalists to characterize intra-divine processes, but it is precisely the cohabitation of father and daughter, on the one hand, and that of son and daughter, on the other, that convey the notion of sacred sexuality, the theosophic symbol that underlies the pietistic ideal of spiritual eros.¹⁸ The point is underscored in the aforecited zoharic text by the claim that the word *qodesh*, "holy," applies to the father, the son, and the daughter, which correspond, respectively, to the second, sixth, and tenth emanations, *Hokhmah*, *Tif'eret*, and *Malkhut*. In this context, as elsewhere in the Zohar, the word *qodesh* is related specifically to the sacral dimension of sexual matters, for the operative notion is that holiness is attained not by sexual abstinence, but through the proper mental intentionality that purifies the act of intercourse.¹⁹ In this particular setting, the point being made is that holiness consists of the son and the daughter, *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, the holy King and

the Community of Israel, receiving the overflow from the father, *Hokhmah*, which facilitates the union of the king and the queen.²⁰

By contrast, on Yom Kippur, when the daughter is illumined by the mother, the union between *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut* is forbidden. The theosophic secret is related sacramentally to the ritual prohibition of sex between a husband and his wife on that day. The temporary ascetic renunciation below symbolically reflects the ontological condition above, for the union of mother and daughter precludes the possibility of the union between daughter and son.²¹ The reparation on the day of atonement, therefore, involves not the heterosexual image of the king cohabiting with the queen, but the presumably asexual image of the mother radiating upon the daughter, which is also portrayed as the return of the daughter to the mother's womb. It must be noted, however, that in some passages, the zoharic authorship utilizes images of a decidedly erotic nature to depict the lower world of *Malkhut* receiving the blessing from the upper world of *Binah*. For instance, in one text, the relationship of these sefirotic gradations on Yom Kippur is described as the visitation of the mother to the palace of the daughter, which results in the radiation of the face (*nehiru de-anpin*), a trope often used in zoharic texts to convey the sense of joy related to the overflow of the divine efflux, which on occasion is expressed in terms of the erotic union that binds together the different aspects of being.²²

Come and see: The lower world exists to receive constantly, and it is the precious stone, and the supernal world only gives her in the manner in which she exists ... In the manner in which the lower world is crowned she draws from that which is above ... When does she exist in the supernal light? I would say on Yom Kippur, for on Yom Kippur that precious stone shines with the supernal light from the light of the world-to-come ... When the supernal mother, the world-to-come, comes to dwell in the palace of the lower world, so that there will be an illumination of the face ... it emits all of the blessings and it shines on everything, and all that freedom is found and Israel takes from those blessings. When the world-to-come enters the palace of the lower world, the lower rejoices with her children in that supernal meal. The table is then blessed and all of the worlds are blessed, and all joy and all the illumination of the face are found there.²³

In the complex symbology embraced by the Castilian kabbalists who lie behind the fictional personae of the zoharic narrative, a variety of different unifications characterize the intra-divine processes. In general, most scholars have focused on the heterosexual motif of the *hieros gamos* that occurs between the sixth and the tenth emanations, *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, the holy King and his Matrona, as the central form of unity. There is certainly justification for this emphasis insofar as the kabbalists themselves often privilege heterosexual union as the most appropriate image to convey the ideal state of harmony and perfection that will be realized in the messianic age. Exile is marked by the separation of male and female, whereas redemption entails the reunification of the two. The eschatological goal of *tiqqun*, therefore, involves the repairing of male and female so that the primordial state of wholeness will be retrieved. In addition to the heterosexual image of union, however, there is incontrovertible evidence in kabbalistic writings for a paradigm of same-sex unions within the Godhead, either male–male or female–female. To be sure, these homosexual relationships are transmuted into heterosexual terms such that the active partner is portrayed as male vis-à-vis the passive partner who is female. In the specific case of the relationship between *Binah* and *Malkhut*, the former is depicted as the “world of the masculine” and the latter as the “world of the feminine,” even though female images are clearly assigned to both of these gradations in the symbolic imagination of the kabbalists.²⁴ Thus, the two *sefirot* are respectively imaged as mother and daughter, or alternatively as supernal mother and lower mother, as well as the two sisters, Leah and Rachel.²⁵

Moreover, not only is it the case that the upper female is valorized as male in relation to the lower female, but the latter is itself transformed into a male by virtue of its union with the former. This is precisely the import of the symbol of the mother as it emerges from the zoharic material and related kabbalistic sources: although we rightly assume that motherhood is a biological function of the female sex, from the perspective of gender as it is constructed in the relevant works of theosophic kabbalah, the role of mothering is decidedly masculine, indeed phallic, in its nature.²⁶ Hence, in one passage, the zoharic authorship describes the transformation of the daughter into the mother in terms of the image of *Binah* bestowing her garments on *Malkhut* such that the latter is vested in the form of the Israelite

males.²⁷ Yom Kippur itself is a symbolic embodiment of this transformation, which is portrayed either as the ascent of *Malkhut* to *Binah* or as the descent of *Binah* to *Malkhut*. In the final analysis, both processes signify the metamorphosis by means of which the lower female assumes the role of the upper female, which is to say, the lower female is masculinized and adopts the persona of the mother who bestows blessings of sustenance upon her offspring.²⁸ On Yom Kippur, the *Shekhinah* is thus marked by a double movement: the ascent to the mother above and the overflowing to Israel below. The zoharic symbolism is well summarized by Moses de León:

Yom ha-kippurim: All beginnings are difficult in their inception, but in the end they are well grounded [literally, “they stand in their property”]. The gradations revolve and rotate, each one according to its measure, one atop the other, and the higher one atop both of them [based on Eccles. 5:7]. Indeed, her beginning is difficult in its inception, but in her end she dwells in the house of her mother, and her mother crowns her and adorns her, and she takes for her “seal and cord” (Gen. 38:25), “lighting oil and incense” (Num. 4:7), as her foundation, to illuminate the side of her face [based on Exod. 25:37]. She is called by the name of her mother in the splendor of her radiant face, *Yom ha-kippurim*, for the mother shines her face upon her, “and she said to her, ‘I must seek a home for you, where you may be happy’ ” (Ruth 3:1). Israel, the holy nation, have repented from their ways ... Forgive your nation, Israel ... all the faces are illuminated in relation to them ... How good and pleasant is it when Israel are in their proper order, and “the mother sits over the fledglings” (Deut. 22:6). They are all holy, and the Lord is in their midst, “they are the seed the Lord has blessed” (Isa. 61:9). For you must know that when Israel arouse the repentance, and they come before the Lord, blessed be he, in love, and they turn from their evil ways, they are called children of the blessed Holy One, as it says, “You are children of the Lord your God” (Deut. 14:1). He placed his *Shekhinah* over them, to guide them, to discipline them, and to lead them, like a mother that disciplines her children, as it says, “the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son” (ibid. 8:5). Thus when the blessed One places his fear upon them, they return to him and they distance

themselves from their evil ways. Consequently, the blessed One forgives them, and his *Shekhinah* returns to them, they are radiant and they are forgiven.²⁹

De León appropriates the rabbinic maxim that “all beginnings are difficult”³⁰ in order to characterize the nature of the *Shekhinah* at the beginning of the year, that is, on Rosh ha-Shanah, the day of judgment, *yom ha-din*. Kabbalistically understood, this implies that the attribute of judgment, which is the *Shekhinah*, has dominion on that day. By contrast, her end is related to Yom Kippur, for on that day the judgmental aspect of the *Shekhinah* is ameliorated and transformed by her ascent to and reintegration in the womb of *Binah*, which is metaphorically depicted as the stability that she achieves when she comes to dwell in the house of her mother. On Yom Kippur, the *Shekhinah* is crowned and glorified by the illumination of *Binah*, and thus she assumes the name of her mother, for she is endowed with the properties of motherhood in relation to the people of Israel who have atoned for their sins and who have been forgiven by God. In her role as the mother sustaining her children in the hour that they have been forgiven, the *Shekhinah* is transformed from judgment to mercy, a transformation that implies as well the masculinization of her femininity. The point is underscored in the following zoharic passage wherein several interpretations of the verse “And Melchizedek, king of Shalem,” *u-malki tsedeq melekh shalem* (Gen. 14:18), are proffered:

Melekh shalem precisely, the king that rules in perfection (*bi-shelemo*). When is he the perfect king (*melekh shalem*)? On Yom Kippur for all the faces are illuminated ... Another interpretation: “And Melchizedek,” this is the final world, “king of Shalem,” this is the supernal world, for the one is crowned in the other without separation, two worlds as one.³¹

The cryptic biblical reference to Melchizedek is decoded as a symbolic allusion to the *Shekhinah*,³² who is called by this name because this attribute is the “perfect king,” *melekh shalem*, but she achieves this masculine status only on Yom Kippur when all of the sefirotic gradations radiate upon her as a result of her union with the supernal world of *Binah*. In the day of Yom Kippur, therefore, the

heterosexual bonding of son and daughter, or king and queen, is transcended for the sake of the higher unification between the two female configurations, which is expressed in the above passage as the mutual crowning of the “final world,” the *Shekhinah*, and the “supernal world,” *Binah*. The unity of the two worlds entails the masculine transposition of the feminine character of the divine, which is depicted paradoxically by the convergence of the symbols of mother and king. As I noted above, this theosophic process is reflected in the traditional injunction to abstain from sexual intercourse on Yom Kippur. The ritual prohibition to engage in coitus reflects the ontological fact that above there is a union between the lower and the upper females, which results in the transformation of the daughter into the mother, a process that bestows upon the former the title of king, which is associated with the latter. The application of the symbol of the king to *Binah* and *Malkhut* denotes the quality of overflowing that is associated with both attributes in relation to what is beneath them. The point is disclosed in the following zoharic passage: “There is a king above, which is the mystery of the holy of holies ... and there is a king below, which is in the likeness of that supernal king, and it is the king over everything that is below.”³³ When the female adopts the posture of that which emanates, the status of the masculine is conferred upon her.³⁴ On occasion, the authorship of a particular zoharic text reflects an awareness of the complexity of the gender valence implied by the attribution of the title “king” to divine potencies that are ostensibly female. To cite one illustration of this phenomenon:

“The house of the king” (*beit ha-melekh*) (1 Kings 9:1), this refers to the holy of holies, which is the inwardness of everything. “The king,” this refers to the king in general (*setam melekh*). Even though this is the supernal king, it is female in relation to the supernal point, the concealed of everything, but even though it is female, it is male in relation to the king below.³⁵

The fluidity of gender attribution is well captured in this passage: *Binah*, which is designated the “supernal king,” is female in relation to *Hokhmah*, the masculine potency depicted as the “supernal point,” but she is male in relation to the king below, which is *Malkhut*. Although it is not stated explicitly in this context, it is not inaccurate

to say (based on other zoharic passages) that *Malkhut* itself is called “king” as well because she is masculine in relation to the forces that exist beneath her insofar as they are sustained by the overflow of the divine pleroma that emanates upon them through her channel.³⁶ The critical point for this analysis is that the transposition of the female gender is actualized particularly on Yom Kippur, for on that day, the daughter receives the illumination from the mother and thereby assumes the function and the name of the latter.³⁷

Concealment of Ascent: Forgiveness and the Eschatological Overcoming of Eros

The erotic texture of the merging of these two potencies, the revealed world (*alma de-itgalya*) of the lower feminine and the concealed world (*alma de-itkasya*) of the upper feminine,³⁸ is disclosed in the fundamental paradox of veiling and unveiling, which is in fact the basic structure of the symbol in kabbalistic lore in virtue of which one can justly speak of the eros of language. In the context of describing the last of the seven holy palaces (*heikhalot*), which are chambers within the *Shekhinah* that parallel the lower seven emanations in the sefirotic pleroma, and thus serve as a bridge that links the divine and the mundane realms,³⁹ the zoharic authorship offers an elaborate account of the homosexual bonding of *Binah* and *Malkhut*, the upper and the lower *Shekhinah*, albeit couched in heterosexual terms:

The seventh palace: In this palace there is no actual image; everything is in concealment ... Thus this palace is called the holy of holies. The holy of holies is a place that is prepared for that supernal soul, the principle of everything, the world-to-come in relation to this world. When all the spirits are united one with the other, and they are perfected through one another, as is appropriate, then the supernal spirit, the soul of everything, is aroused in relation to that which is above, the concealed of all the concealed ones, so that it be aroused upon everything, to illuminate them from above to below, to perfect them, to kindle the lights. When all is perfected through the illumination of everything, and the supernal light descends, then

this seventh palace is the concealed palace in the concealment of everything, to receive that holy of holies, the light that descends, and to be filled from there like a female that is impregnated from a male. It is filled only from that palace that is prepared to receive that supernal light. This mystery is: The seventh palace is the place of the union of the intercourse, to join together the seventh with the seventh, so that everything is one perfection, as is appropriate. Fortunate is the lot of the one who knows how to bind together this unity, he is beloved above and he is beloved below.⁴⁰

It appears that in this passage the seventh palace is identified as the *Shekhinah*,⁴¹ which is designated as the holy of holies.⁴² The latter expression is generally applied in the zoharic corpus to *Binah*,⁴³ but it is here associated with the *Shekhinah*, for she is the palace that is prepared to receive the luminous overflow of *Binah*, which is referred to as well as the supernal soul and the world-to-come. From several other passages in the zoharic corpus the theosophic significance of this title is related more specifically to the ascent and union of the *Shekhinah* to *Binah*. Thus, for example, this mystery is linked exegetically (through the persona of R. Eleazar) to the verse “Who is she who comes up from the desert?” (Song of Songs 3:6): “‘Who is she’ (*mi zo’t*), the containment of the dual holiness of the two worlds in one unity and in one bond. ‘Who comes up’ (*olah*), verily, to constitute the holy of holies, for the holy of holies consists of ‘who’ (*mi*) joined to ‘she’ (*zo’t*), so that she will be the burnt offering (*olah*), which is the holy of holies.”⁴⁴ The holy of holies, therefore, denotes the ascent of the *Shekhinah* (signified by the feminine demonstrative pronoun “this,” *zo’t*) to *Binah* (signified by the interrogative pronoun “who,” *mi*). The ascending *Shekhinah* is also related to the mystery of the burnt offering, the *olah*, whose lexical meaning denotes both the proper name of the sacrifice and more generically “she that rises.”⁴⁵ The intricate weaving of the different symbolic threads is beautifully expressed in a second passage:

He began his exposition, “This is the teaching regarding the burnt offering. This is the burnt offering” (Lev. 6:2) ... The burnt offering (*olah*) is the ascent and the binding of the Community of Israel above, and her conjunction within the

world-to-come, so that everything will be one.⁴⁶ The burnt offering is called the holy of holies, and therefore she is called *olah*, for she ascends and she is crowned, so that all will be unified in one joyous bond. On account of the fact that she ascends ever higher, it is written, “This is the teaching regarding the burnt offering,” *zo’t torat ha-olah*, the secret of male and female as one, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. The burnt offering (*ha-olah*), for she ascends within the world-to-come, to be bound within that which is verily called the holy of holies, and the burnt offering, too, is the holy of holies.⁴⁷

The mystical significance of the burnt offering (*olah*) is related symbolically to the ascent of the *Shekhinah* to her source in *Binah*, the world-to-come, which entails the masculinization of the feminine. The gender transformation is realized initially through the union of the female (*Malkhut*) and her masculine consort (*Tiferet*), but it is ultimately and most fully achieved when the lower female (*Malkhut*) is restored to the upper female (*Binah*), a restoration that is conveyed in the symbol of the holy of holies.⁴⁸ This symbolic intent underlies the zoharic description of the seventh palace cited above. This palace assumes the name “holy of holies” on account of the fact that it receives the illumination of *Binah*, which is recurrently designated by this very term. In receiving the light of *Binah*, moreover, the seventh palace is described as the female who is impregnated by the male, even though the union occurs between two females, *Binah* and *Malkhut*. The elusive remark that the “seventh palace is the place of the union of the intercourse, to join together the seventh with the seventh,” must be decoded as a reference to the union of mother and daughter, for both *Binah* and *Malkhut* are referred to as the seventh, which relates as well to the application of the symbol of Sabbath to each of these gradations.⁴⁹ This pairing of the two female configurations can be depicted in heterosexual terms insofar as the former is masculine in relation to the latter.

The term “holy of holies” thus connotes the union of mother and daughter, a connotation that further illuminates something fundamental about the nature of secrecy. Indeed, the hermeneutical structure of the secret as that which is unveiled in its veiling and veiled in its unveiling is alluded to in the return of the daughter to the womb of the mother, which is also expressed as the entry of the

mother into the palace of the daughter. In a parallel passage to the one cited above that describes the seventh palace, the zoharic authorship articulates this point more clearly by drawing a connection between three words, *olam* (“world”), *olim* (“ascending”), and *illum* (“concealment”),⁵⁰ in an effort to elucidate the nature of the *Shekhinah* in her ascent to *Binah*: “This palace is called the holy of holies, the place to receive the supernal souls that are called here in order to arouse the world-to-come in relation to her. This world is called *olam*, for *olam* refers to the ascent (*seliqa*), for the lower world ascends to the supernal world, and it is hidden within her and concealed therein, revealed in the concealment (*itgalya vi-setirah*).”⁵¹ The transformation of the daughter and her being uplifted to the status of the mother are predicated on her attaining the paradoxical posture of being revealed in the concealment. Precisely this form of union provides the model by which kabbalists understood the symbolic import of the traditional notion of redemption. To be redeemed entails the theosophic process by means of which the feminine presence is restored to her source, the attribute of the divine that corresponds to the jubilee and to the world-to-come, two symbols that convey the idea of eschatological emancipation.

The symbolism posited in the main body of the Zohar is formulated succinctly by the Spanish kabbalist, Joseph Gikatilla, a likely member of the fraternity that produced the zoharic composition:

On occasion this emanation is called jubilee. I have already informed you that all types of freedom and redemption are dependent on this emanation ... When the lower emanations hold on to the emanation of the jubilee and draw down the efflux of her blessing below, then all types of freedom and redemption are found in all the emanations and in all things sustained by means of the emanation of *Malkhut* who receives the overflow of the blessing from them. Know that in a future time the righteous will ascend until they hold on to the emanation of *Binah*, which is the secret of the world-to-come. Then all types of destruction and all types of calamity will be liberated and redeemed ... The secret of *Binah* is called the jubilee because through it everything is liberated. The reason is that he who merits to be conjoined to her never sees any worry or any deficit ... and he who is conjoined to the jubilee is redeemed, for there

is nothing surrounding the jubilee that can be harmful ... And this emanation is called in the language of our rabbis, blessed be their memory, repentance. The reason is that the souls (*neshamot*) emanate from this place, the spirits (*ruḥot*) from *Tif'eret*, and the souls (*nefashot*) from *Malkhut*, and they are all bound to one another to the point that they merit to be united in the emanation of *Binah* ... and this is the secret of repentance ... Thus contemplate that repentance is the secret of the world-to-come. And after we have explained to you this great secret, we must again inform you of the order of the gradations of repentance. For everyone of Israel has a way of returning after he has been sold, “redemption shall be his and he will be released in the jubilee” (Lev. 25:31), and it says, “In the year of the jubilee, each man shall return to his holding” (ibid., 13). Through the secret of the emanation of *Binah* the soul can return and hold on to the place whence it was taken. This is [the meaning of] what is said, “each man shall return to his holding” (*tashuvu ish el aḥuzzato*) – the expression of holding (*aḥizah*).⁵²

Repentance is interpreted theosophically in light of the symbol of freedom, which in turn is equated with the mystical notion of conjunction with the world-to-come. The soul that repents, therefore, returns to the ontic source whence it derived. As Gikatilla notes, the secret of this ideal of conjunction is alluded to in the expression *aḥizah*, literally, “holding,” utilized in the verse that describes the restoration of property to its original owner in the jubilee. Kabbalistically understood, redemption (*ge'ulah*) entails the return of the soul to its portion in the world-to-come. Just as no economic transaction can erase the memory of originary ownership, no barter of the soul can eliminate its sense of belonging to the womb of the mother whence it came into being. This belonging is the ultimate, and indeed the only genuine, sense of possession. *Teshuvah*, repentance, is the re/turn of the soul to its source, which occasions the sense of freedom bestowed on the one who is conjoined to the world-to-come. The esoteric significance of Yom Kippur is related to the fact that this day is marked essentially by the path of return of the repentant soul. The atonement granted this soul is explained theosophically in terms of the union of *Binah* and *Malkhut*, which results in the purification of the stains imparted to the latter as a

consequence of the sins of Israel by means of the former. *Binah* draws her power of atonement from the fact that she is united to the world of mercy, that is, the first emanation, *Keter*, which is entirely white (*lavan*),⁵³ and thus she is designated by the name Lebanon (*levanon*) and she is described as the one that “purifies the transgressions of Israel” (*melavenet avonotan shel yisra’el*). As a result of this purification, *Malkhut* is transformed, for she is restored from her displacement and exile brought about by the sinfulness of Israel to a state of adornment and reunification with the upper divine emanations. In Gikatilla’s own words:

On account of his mercy and lovingkindness the Lord, blessed be he, instituted for Israel one day during the year to purify them from their impurities and to cleanse them, and he called it *yom ha-kippurim*. The reason it is called *yom ha-kippurim* in the plural is because these two emanations are united on that very day, the emanation of *Binah* and the emanation of *Malkhut*. Thus, the emanation of *Binah* purifies and cleanses every kind of filth and dirt that Israel bestowed on the emanation of *Malkhut*. When these two emanations are united to reverse [the judgments] to the merits of Israel and to purify their dirt, they are called accordingly *yom ha-kippurim*. Thus I will provide an allusion: “If your sins are like crimson, they will be whitened like snow” (Isa. 1:18). The supernal one is called Lebanon, and the lower one is garbed in a garment of crimson. Israel must transform the crimson garment into white, and therefore it is called *yom ha-kippurim* ... Since these two emanations, which correspond to one another in the secret of the supernal mother and the lower mother, are involved on this day in the purification of Israel, sexual intercourse is prohibited on Yom Kippur, even though it is permissible on Sabbaths and Festivals. The secret is known to those who know the esoteric lore. “And besides, she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s daughter; and she became my wife” (Gen. 20:12). This is the secret of its being called *yom ha-kippurim*. Understand this well.⁵⁴

Transgression creates a blemish above, which results in the separation of the male and female aspects of the divine. It stands

to reason, therefore, that the first phase in the rectification of this condition calls for the re/pairing of the King and his Matrona. This unification is facilitated, moreover, by righteous action below, especially by those who engage in conjugal sex with the right intention. For the kabbalists themselves, intercourse was ideally limited to the Sabbaths, some of the Festivals, and other exceptional times that were endowed with the spiritual significance of holy days, such as the first night after a woman was cleansed from her menstrual cycle or the night after a man returned from a trip.⁵⁵ In spite of this rather austere lifestyle, which might strike the contemporary ear as severely constricting, it is correct to assert that kabbalists ascribed positive value to coitus as a redemptive act. Most scholars have affirmed this dimension of the kabbalistic attitude toward sexuality. This, however, is only part of the story. Beyond the fulfillment of sexual desire in the sacred coupling of husband and wife, there is a return to ascetic denial, a refraining from engaging in physical sex, which mirrors an ontic state above whereby the divine forces are united in a manner that precludes the act of intercourse below. Yom Kippur is a ritual enactment of the alternative paradigm that needs to be considered carefully in an attempt to comprehend the soteriological teaching embraced by the kabbalists, particularly as it relates to the value assigned to sexual behavior. That is, the complete repair of the rupture in the Godhead exceeds the model of heterosexual bonding. The reunion of mother and daughter, or the upper and lower mothers, which occurs on Yom Kippur, the day of the great Sabbath, signifies the homoerotic mating that transcends male–female intercourse. The injunction to refrain from sex on Yom Kippur underscores the belief that ascetic renunciation provides the means by which the higher modality of union is achieved.

Heterosexuality serves as the intermediary step that leads from exile to redemption, from the state of separation to one of integration. In the redemptive process, the *Shekhinah* is transformed into *Binah* as a result of her union with the male *Tif'eret*. In a particularly poignant passage from one of the most recondite sections of the zoharic corpus, the *Sitrei Otiyyot*,⁵⁶ which deals with the mysteries of the letters of the Tetragrammaton, the transformation of the lower female feminine into the upper masculine feminine is expressed in terms of the metamorphosis of the letter *he*, which is also identified as the *kaf*, into the final letter *mem*; the former

represents the half-circle, or the partially eclipsed moon, and the latter the full circle, or the moon in its complete illumination. The process by means of which the half-circle is completed is related more specifically to the image of the point that exists in the middle of the *kaf*. Utilizing the geometric conception that the circle is formed from its midpoint, the zoharic authorship asserts that the point in the middle of the lunar disk, which is gendered as feminine, receives the light of the masculine sun. As a result of this illumination, the open side of the *he*, whose function is related to the reception of the male, is closed, and the letter itself is transformed into the final *mem*, which is sealed on all four sides. The midpoint, as is attested in other zoharic texts, corresponds to the vagina or the uterus, the part of the female that corresponds to the penis.⁵⁷ That the midpoint, which is also identified as the pupil of the eye, completes the circle by means of its receiving the light of the male signals the transmutation of the open vagina into the closed womb, a process that entails the masculinization of the feminine. The eschatological dimension of this transformation is highlighted by the fact that the final *mem* is associated orthographically with the words *le-marbeh ha-misrah*, “in token of abundant authority” (Isa. 9:6), an expression that has obvious messianic implications.

Fore/giveness and the Concealment of the Mother's Nakedness

In the coupling of mother and daughter, moreover, lies the secret of forgiveness, the giving before that engenders being in the concealment of its disclosure. The paradox is alluded to in the image of the holy of holies, the innermost secret whence all secrets are secreted in the fore/giving. In this space, memory is perfectly sealed, nothing is forgotten, only fore/given. When forgiveness is granted below, the primordial act of fore/giveness is reenacted, an act that results in the opening of the path that leads to the holy of holies, the womb that holds the many in the diversity of its unity. This bond of mother and daughter, which is theurgically realized on Yom Kippur through the ritual acts of the Community of Israel, signifies the ultimate oneness to which all things strive. It is a union that transcends heterosexual eros, an ideal unity that bespeaks the eschatological vision of the kabbalists. The union that is attained in the end is predicated on the

sense of forgiveness, which is experienced as the liberation of the soul from the constraints of time and as the release from the chain of desire.

The giving-before of fore/giveness is occasioned by the act of repentance, the turning back to the source, which is further characterized as the amelioration of the forces of judgment and the consequent dominion of the attribute of mercy such that each of the emanations is accorded its proper place. As a result of this realignment in the sefirotic realm, *Binah* is called the “complete repentance and the world is atoned, for the mother dwells in complete joy, as it is written, ‘as a happy mother of children’ (Ps. 113:9), and then it is called *yom ha-kippurim*, concerning which it is written, ‘to purify you from all your sins’ (Lev. 16:30).”⁵⁸ Significantly, the return to origin is marked by the uncovering of that which is hidden. To the degree that the source whence all things return is characterized by the quality of hiddenness – as I have noted above, one of the designations of *Binah* in the zoharic corpus is the “concealed world” – the uncovering can never assume the form of revealing a reified and static essence. On the contrary, inasmuch as the disclosure is always of that which is concealed, the uncovered withholds its own presence in the moment of its uncovering. What is revealed, therefore, is an absence that is present only as that which shows itself as concealed. The union of mother and daughter, which is the symbolic import of Yom Kippur, embodies the paradox of the exposure of the withdrawal that is manifest as the withdrawal of the exposure. This paradox is conveyed philologically in the biblical expression *mi zo’t*, which is not read by the zoharic authorship as a question, but rather as an assertion. That is, *mi zo’t* means not “who is she?” but “who is she,” that is, the concealed world of *Binah* is the revealed world of *Malkhut*.

The day of atonement, therefore, is endowed with eschatological significance, for it is the time in which the supernal union of mother and daughter is realized. In that respect, Yom Kippur proleptically anticipates the utopian restoration of the lower female to the upper female, which entails the masculine transvaluation of the feminine. From one perspective, the actualization of this union is predicated on the uncovering of that which is concealed, indeed the exposure of concealment as such. On the other hand, inasmuch as that which is revealed is hidden, and the presence is always a presence

of an absence whose absence is only reinforced by the presencing of that which is present in its absence, disclosure itself is a form of concealment.⁵⁹ In the theosophic symbolism adopted in the zoharic texts discussed in this study, the mother re/presents the absence in the presence, which is the engendering dialectic of secrecy, that is, the veil that sets the limit of the ocular gaze and the contemplative vision, just as the placenta and the amniotic fluid delimit the boundary of the first dwelling place to which the child perpetually seeks to return. The zoharic authorship artfully expresses this aspect of the concealed disclosure on Yom Kippur in the following passage:

R. Isaac said: It is written, “as a happy mother of children, Hallelujah” (Ps. 113:9). The mother is known, but who are the children? R. Simeon said: It has been taught that the blessed Holy One has two children, one male and the other female ... and the mother hovers over them to nourish them. Thus it is written, “do not take the mother together with the children” (Deut. 22:6). It has been taught that people should not multiply their sins below for this results in the removal of the mother from her children. It is written, “She is your mother – do not uncover her nakedness” (Lev. 18:7). Woe to one who uncovers the nakedness! When people of the world repent and increase the merits before the blessed Holy One, and the mother returns and covers her children, then she is called “repentance” (*teshuvah*). What is *teshuvah*? *Teshuvah* consists of the mother returning to her station, and then it is written, “as a happy mother of children,” the mother of the children most certainly. Therefore a person is not exempt from the obligation to procreate until he begets a son and a daughter.⁶⁰

In this context, Yom Kippur is depicted symbolically in terms of the union of the mother with her two children, the son and daughter, which correspond, respectively, to *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. The esoteric significance of *teshuvah*, therefore, is not simply the entry of the daughter (or even the son and daughter) back into the womb, but it is related to the repositioning of the mother as the one that hovers over her children in order to sustain them. Sin severs the bond of the mother and her children, a bond predicated on the covering up of her genitals in the moment that she nourishes them.

Exposure of the genitals results in the removal of the mother from the children, which is related to the biblical injunction of *shiluah ha-qen*, driving away the mother bird from the nest (Deut. 22:6–7). The kabbalistic interpretation reverses the contextual meaning of the text, for the dislodging of the mother is portrayed negatively as the uncovering of her genitals, rather than as a positive act of mercy. Through the act of repentance, by contrast, the nakedness is re/covered and the mother is returned to her place.⁶¹ To cite another zoharic passage where the matter is fully articulated:

R. Yose said: It is written, “The nakedness of your father and the nakedness of your mother you shall not uncover” (Lev. 18:7), and it is written, “she is your mother – do not uncover her nakedness” (ibid.). It has been taught that she is certainly your mother. Thus if you uncover her nakedness, you must certainly restore her so that there will be repair ... It is written, “do not uncover,” for when the matter is repaired, it is repaired corresponding to the one who uncovers, and this is called *teshuvah*. R. Isaac said: All the sins of the world are connected to this until the point that the mother is revealed on account of them. When she is revealed all the children are revealed, and it is written, “do not take the mother together with the children” (Deut. 22:6). When the world below is repaired all is repaired until the repair rises to the holy mother, and she is repaired and concealed from that which has been uncovered. Thus it is written, “Happy is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered up” (Ps. 32:1). Then she is called *teshuvah*, *teshuvah* certainly, and then she is called *yom ha-kippurim*, as it is written, “from all your sins you will purified before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30). R. Judah said: When is she called *teshuvah*? When the mother is concealed and she exists in joy over the children, as it is written, “as a happy mother of children” (Ps. 113:9), and she returns to her position. The one that is closed returns to its place.⁶²

The eschatological restoration, which is dramatized in the liturgical rites of Yom Kippur, is linked to the setting of the proper boundaries established by returning the mother to her children. This return entails the covering of the genitals of the mother that were uncovered as a result of acts of transgression.⁶³ Repentance is

identified theosophically with the attribute of *Binah*, which is described as the “hidden place that is above, the depth of the well ... the depth of the depths.”⁶⁴ The way to access that place is through fore/giving, the giving-before that occasions the fecundity of time as it materializes in the habitation of space. Redemption, therefore, is characterized by the reversal of the erotic stimulus, the withholding of the impulse to extend, the concealment of the projection in the inner sanctum where the secrets are secreted. In the transition from the mundane to the sacred, from the weekday to Sabbath, heterosexual eros is necessary to overcome the fragmentation. The will to bestow is incited by the desire to receive.⁶⁵ But as the Sabbath progresses, the erotic passion itself dissipates as it gives way to a higher bond that relates more specifically to the elevation of the *Shekhinah* and her restoration to *Binah*.⁶⁶ This dynamic typifies as well Yom Kippur, which is indeed the great Sabbath. In the union of mother and daughter, the erotic yearning of the male for the female and the female for the male yields to the bond that is beyond desire, the world-to-come that comes beyond time in the giving before there is receiving. “The one who returns in repentance is as one who restores the blessed Holy One and the *Shekhinah* to their place, and this is the secret of redemption.”⁶⁷ In the end – not the chronological terminus, but the ontological purpose – heterosexual eros is overcome, for son and daughter, the King and the Matrona, are restored to their place of origin by the one who repents. The mystical efficacy of repentance is such that it is indistinguishable from redemption, for both terms signify the ultimate reintegration of the gender binary in the womb of the mother.

Notes

1. Friedrich Hölderlin, *Poems and Fragments*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press: 1980), p. 459:

For since evil spirit
Has taken possession of happy antiquity, unendingly
Long now one power has prevailed, hostile to song, without resonance,
That within measures transgresses, the violence of the mind. But God hates
The unbound.

2. Alexander Pope, *Essays on Criticism*, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London: Methuen, 1963), p. 525.

3. William Shakespeare, *King Lear* IV:vii, in *The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 84.
4. My discussion of time here reflects the influence of Hannah Arendt's Heideggerian interpretation of the Augustinian notion of memory as the vast spaces of the inner life, which makes possible the recollection of the past as well as the anticipation of the future. See Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 144–146.
5. I borrow this term from Scholem, *Major Trends*, p. 159.
6. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 102–103.
7. My thought in this matter has been influenced by Martin Heidegger. For instance, consider his formulation in *Parmenides*, p. 12: “The poetry of the poet or the treatise of a thinker stands within its own proper unique word. It compels us to perceive this word again and again as if we were hearing it for the first time. These newborn words transpose us in every case to a new shore ... Only if we are already appropriated by this transporting are we in the care of the word.”
8. The rabbinic perspective is captured succinctly in the Targum, which renders the term *ba-keshet* as *be-yarḥa de-mitkasei*, “when the moon is hidden.” See Babylonian Talmud, Beitsah 16b.
9. In a copy of the Zohar (Amsterdam, 1715) with variant readings supplied by R. Jacob Vilna, which was recently purchased by the library at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, there is here added the words, *we-if'ahed qodesh be-qodesh*, “and holiness unites with holiness,” a reading that underscores the erotic connotation of “holy” in this context.
10. Zohar 3:100b.
11. It is still my hope to write a comprehensive study of the ontology of time in kabbalistic sources. For preliminary reflections, which capture some of the drift of my thinking, see Elliot R. Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text: Time, Memory, and Narrativity in Kabbalistic Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Judaism in a Postmodern Age*, ed. Steven Kepnes (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 145–178; idem, “The Face of Jacob in the Moon: Mystical Transformations of an Aggadic Myth,” in *The Seduction of Myth in Judaism: Challenge and Response*, ed. S. Daniel Breslauer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), pp. 235–270, esp. 253–254 n. 4.
12. In “From Sealed Book to Open Text,” I argued that for the kabbalists, generally speaking, temporality is localized in *Yesod*, the phallic gradation of the divine. I suggested, moreover, that time is correlated with the masculine and space with the feminine. In a more extensive discussion of the phenomenology of time in kabbalistic symbolism, I hope to elucidate this point. I do want to note, however, that ostensibly there are exceptions to the paradigm I suggested. Consider, for example, the linkage of time, or more specifically the moment (*et*), to the feminine potency of the *Shekhinah* in Joseph Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:135–136. According to Gikatilla, the attribute of Adonai, which is one of the designations of the *Shekhinah*, is called *et*, and when she is conjoined to *Yesod*, she is called *et tovah*, the “time of goodness,” whereas when she is conjoined to the demonic force that lies outside the divine realm, she is called *et ra'ah*, the “time of evil.” The symbolic nexus between time and the *Shekhinah*, based on a passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, is suggested by Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, p. 196. See, however, Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 86–87, where I argue that implicit in this bahiric text is the notion of time ensuing from the androgynous phallus. That is to say, time is marked by the

duality of darkness and light, which correspond, respectively, to the feminine and the masculine attributes of the divine. The ontological root for both of these elements is the phallic potency. See *ibid.*, pp. 201–22 n. 31, where I discuss this matter in more detail and provide some other texts to illustrate my thesis. In my opinion, the relevant discussion in Gikatilla is also predicated on a similar notion. That is, even though time is related to the feminine *Shekhinah*, the bestowal of temporality on her is due to the influence she receives from the male. If she receives from *Yesod*, then it is a time of goodness, and, conversely, if she receives from the demonic force, it is a time of evil. That time is ultimately related to the phallic potency is underscored in Gikatilla's comment, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:134–135: "Know that when the attribute of *zakhor* [the masculine] is united with [that of] *shamor* [the feminine], all of the world is complete and perfect. The secret is [alluded to in the verse] 'All that he does is appropriate to its time' [*et ha-kol asah yafeh ve-itto*] (Eccles. 3:11), for the attribute of *zakhor* is called by the secret of 'all' (*kol*) and the attribute of *shamor* is called 'time' (*et*). When *zakhor* and *shamor* are united as one, in the secret of *kol* and in the secret of *et*, then it says, *et ha-kol asah yafeh ve-itto*. The secret [of the word *itto*] is *et waw*." The expression *itto*, "its time," can be decomposed into the word *et* together with the letter *waw*. The former stands symbolically for the feminine potency and the latter for the masculine. In the word *itto*, therefore, is an allusion to the mystery of the divine androgyne, the union of male and female in the Godhead. It is this union that underlies the kabbalistic understanding of time. Gikatilla also refers to this union as *et ratson*, the "time of favor." The application of the word *et* to the feminine, therefore, is dependent on her union with the attribute that corresponds to the phallus, for the latter is the ultimate generative source of being/consciousness, which is the essence of time.

13. *Zohar in Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1987), 15:89.
14. This is not the context to provide a detailed account of the evolution of this idea in kabbalistic sources that may have influenced Cordovero. Let me simply state that kabbalists from an earlier period already identified the sefirotic emanations as the succession of time, *seder zemannim*. For instance, see Azriel of Gerona, *Perush Eser Sefirot*, printed in Meir ibn Gabbai, *Derekh Emunah* (Warsaw, 1890), 3d–4a.
15. Zohar 3:102a: "On that day two lights shine as one, the supernal mother illumines the lower mother, and thus it is written *yom ha-kippurim* as has been said." See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1246–1247. On the image of two mothers, which correspond respectively to *Binah* and *Malkhut*, see Zohar 2:22a.
16. On the disproportionate love of the father for the daughter portrayed in the zoharic symbolism, which on occasion is described as provoking the jealousy of the mother, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 299.
17. According to other zoharic passages, the union of father and mother serves as a catalyst for the union of son and daughter or brother and sister. See Zohar 3:61b–62a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 299.
18. On the use of incestuous relations as the most appropriate means to convey the sacred coupling of divine potencies, see Wolfson, "Hebraic and Hellenistic Conceptions," pp. 147–178. On the ambiguous relationship of the son to the mother, see Zohar 3:15b–16a, cited in note 62. In the Indian esoteric tradition as well both brother–sister copulation and father–daughter incest are used as a symbolic means to convey processes among the deities. See Sadashiv Ambadas Dange, *Sexual Symbolism from the Vedic Ritual* (Delhi: Ajanta, 1979), pp. xvi–xvii, 117–159.

19. See Wolfson, "Eunuchs," p. 154.
20. The point is particularly underscored according to the reading that I mentioned in note 9. In a similar vein, in the Zohar and related Hebrew theosophic works of Moses de León, *Binah* is called *heikhal ha-qodesh*, the "holy palace," or *qodesh qodashim*, the "holy of holies," inasmuch as it receives the seminal overflow from *Hokhmah*, which is identified as *qodesh*, "holiness." Regarding these symbolic images, see *R. Moses de Leon's Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. Charles Mopsik (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), pp. 24–25, and other references in nn. 205–210.
21. According to Zohar 2:185b, the prohibition of sexual intercourse on Yom Kippur corresponds to the gradation of *Yesod*. See the parallel to this text in *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. Mopsik, p. 26.
22. Zohar 1:70a, 71a; 2:135b, 259a, 271b. Another important connotation of the term *nehiru de-anpin* is the state of mystical ecstasy, which is applied more specifically to the priest who unifies the divine name by carrying out his sacrificial rites. See Zohar 3:39a, 89b, 241a. In one context, 3:146a, the zoharic author uses the expression *anpin nehirin*, "illuminated face," to describe the ecstatic condition of the priest, which is based on the Hebrew phrase *panim me'erot* connected to the priestly blessing in *Numbers Rabbah* 11:6. See *Book of the Pomegranate*, p. 254, where the zoharic expression is rendered as *panim me'irim*.
23. Zohar 2:184b–185a.
24. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 89, 99, 103, and the reference to Scholem's study cited on p. 205 n. 47.
25. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 295.
26. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 98–106. Arthur Green, "Kabbalistic Re-vision: A Review Article of Elliot Wolfson's Through a Speculum that Shines," *History of Religions*, 36, 1997, p. 270, claims that my understanding of gender symbolism in the theosophic kabbalah has set aside "the truly important role occupied by the female, especially in the Zoharic sources." He then proceeds to offer a litany of images used to characterize the *Shekhinah*, including, queen of the lower worlds, hind of the dawn, mother who nourishes the universe, city, temple, holy of holies, kingship (*malkhut*, which Green perplexingly renders as the decidedly neutral term "realm") that exerts dominion, governance, and judgment over existence. After going through this list, Green concludes, "The Zohar is at least as fixed with celebration of the female as it is with the male ... Wolfson's dismissal of this entire world of symbols through his single insight concerning *atarah* ... produces a significantly distorted picture of kabbalistic eros." The charge that I have dismissed the entire world of symbols characterizing the *Shekhinah* as feminine is simply inaccurate and unfair. The real contribution of my work, which is ignored by Green, is the recognition that the positive characteristics of the *Shekhinah* are predicated on an androcentric axiology that kabbalists shared with other medieval men, enhanced as well by biblical and rabbinic sources. Hence, as I have documented in detail, activities that clearly must be attributed to the female body, such as childbearing and lactation, are valenced as masculine in the symbology of the kabbalists. That is, when a woman gives birth or breast-feeds, she assumes the gender value of a male. The masculine appropriation of female biological traits is the most revealing sign of the extent of the androcentricism that characterizes this tradition. I have not ignored the feminine depictions of the *Shekhinah*, as Green claims, but what I have done is contextualized them in a more nuanced gender analysis that is predicated on a clear distinction between gender as a

- cultural construct and a biological sex. This is the point that is consistently missed by critics such as Green, but it is precisely with respect to this matter that the paradigm shifts as a result of my work. It is not sufficient to cite the presentation of the supposedly feminine traits of the *Shekhinah* in the work of a scholar like Tishby, since the latter had no way of analyzing the use of gender in a sophisticated manner. To cite one of many possible examples, in *Wisdom*, pp. 379–381, Tishby discusses the attribution of the symbol of the mother to the *Shekhinah*, but he nowhere notes that this very symbol involves the depiction of the feminine in terms that are clearly masculine according to the gender valuation accepted by medieval kabbalists like the author of the zoharic text. I fear that Green's reliance on Tishby as an authority to level a criticism against me is easily disposable.
27. Zohar 1:2a, translated and discussed in Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 104–105.
 28. The masculinization of the lower female through her ascent to the upper female is connected in Zohar 2:182b–183a to the ritual practice of standing during the blessing and counting the forty-nine days of the *omer* between Passover and Pentecost: “When the house of the Matrona is sanctified, she ascends above to be bound to those supernal days above. Thus we stand when we count, for those are the supernal days, and whenever a person enters those supernal days, whether in prayer or in praise, he must stand on his feet ... to stand as a male who stands in his strength and not as a female whose way it is to sit ... Since this is the mystery of the masculine, women are exempt from this computation ... in the manner of ‘all the males shall appear’ (Exod. 23:17), men and not women, for the mystery of the covenant is in the masculine and not in the feminine.” Cf. Zohar 3:97b: “Since those days are days of the world of the masculine, this enumeration is given only to men, and thus this enumeration is accomplished in a standing posture.” See the parallel in *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 137–138.
 29. *Ibid.* pp. 162–163.
 30. *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael*, 2:203.
 31. Zohar 1:87a.
 32. Cf. Zohar 3:193b
 33. Zohar 2:67b.
 34. The point is stated clearly in Zohar 1:163a: “Why is [*Binah*] called *ḥasidah* [derived from Ps. 104:17]? Even though this supernal world is female, she is called male when she emanates all beneficence and all light emerges from her. Therefore she is called *ḥasidah*, for mercy (*ḥesed*), which is the primordial light, emerges from her.” The feminine *Binah* assumes the name *ḥasidah* when she functions as the male that overflows and the attribute of *ḥesed* issues forth from her.
 35. Zohar 2:4a.
 36. See Zohar 1:47b: “Who is the king? This is the Community of Israel, for he bestows upon her all the pleasures of the worlds, and all of the holy forces that issue from above go out from this place.” The emanative capacity of *Shekhinah* is derived from the phallic potency of *Yesod* through which the supernal influx overflows to Her. The procreative connotation of the term “king” when it is attributed to the *Shekhinah* is also made explicit in other zoharic passages. See, for instance, Zohar 1:122a, 235b, 246a.
 37. The zoharic interpretation of Yom Kippur is well summarized by Vital, *Sha‘ar ha-Kawwanot*, 102b–c: “On this day *Malkhut*, which is the feminine of *Ze‘eir Anpin*, receives all of these aspects from the supernal mother herself and not

through her husband *Ze'eir Anpin*. It is called *yom ha-kippurim* in the plural, and this is the matter of Rachel, the feminine of *Ze'eir Anpin*, who ascends on this day until the supernal mother herself ... and the two of them are united ... All of the prayers on Yom Kippur are for the sake of constructing Rachel, the main feminine of *Ze'eir Anpin*, so that she will be crowned and adorned by means of the supernal mother.” Needless to say, many more examples could have been cited, but for the purposes of this study this one text will suffice to make the point.

38. Zohar 1:152a (*Sitrei Torah*), 154a–b, 158a–b, 259a, 2:29b; Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 295.
39. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 591–54.
40. Zohar 1:45–a–b.
41. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 613 n. 183.
42. On the use of the term “holy of holies” as a designation of the mystery of the womb related to the *Shekhinah*, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 381.
43. Zohar 2:4b, 67b. See note 20.
44. Zohar 1:10a.
45. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 883, 923–924.
46. Cf. Zohar 2:239b: “[The *Shekhinah* is called] the burnt offering (*olah*), for she ascends and is crowned above, to be bound, as is fitting, until the place that is called the holy of holies.”
47. Zohar 2:238b.
48. See *ibid.* 1:70a; 3:107b.
49. On the attribution of the term “seventh” to *Binah*, see *ibid.* 2:184a: “All mysteries and all of the precious holy ones are dependent on the seventh, and that seventh is the supernal world, which is called the world-to-come.” See also *Zohar Hadash*, 29a: “The great Sabbath is also called the seventh from below to above.” Related to this symbol is the application of the image of the seven days (Zohar 3:89b) or that of the seven years (2:31a) to *Binah*. See Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 2:46: “Know that in every place that you find in the Torah a sevenfold calculation, such as seven years, seven times, it refers to the secret of the *sefirot* from *Yesod* to *Binah*, and in some contexts from *Binah* to *Yesod*.” The *Shekhinah* similarly is referred to throughout the zoharic corpus as the “seventh” insofar as this is the last of the lower seven emanations of the divine pleroma. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, p. 613 n. 183, which interprets the zoharic remark that the seventh palace is the place of the union of the seventh with the seventh as a reference to the intercourse of *Yesod* and *Malkhut*. This interpretation privileges the heterosexual and obscures the female homoeroticism, which is related to the reunion of the mother and the daughter. Also relevant here is the attribution of the symbol of the seventh year, *shemittah*, to *Malkhut* and the seven cycles of seven, the jubilee, to *Binah*; see Zohar 1:22a, 50b, 95b, 147a, 147b, 153b, 154a, 183a, 240b, 251b; 2:22a, 85b, 114a, 121a; 3:97b, 108a, 110b, 115a, 180b. In that respect as well, we can meaningfully speak of the attribution of the term “seventh” to both *Binah* and *Malkhut*.
50. The word *le-olah* is vocalized as *le'alem* in several rabbinic texts, often associated with Exod. 3:15. See Palestinian Talmud, Yoma 3:7, 40d; Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 71a; *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 3:11; *Midrash Konen* in *Beit ha-Midrash*, 2:24. See also the play on words between *ha-olah* and *he'lem* in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 10. Most of the aforementioned rabbinic sources were noted by Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir*, p. 11 n. 1.
51. Zohar 2:258b.
52. *Sha'arei Orah*, 2:59–61.

53. See *ibid.* 126. In that context as well, Gikatilla enunciates the point that the power of forgiveness derives from the whiteness of *Keter*, the world that is complete mercy, which illuminates *Binah* on the day of Yom Kippur.
54. *Ibid.* 64–65.
55. See Wolfson, “Eunuchs,” pp. 158–160. The comparison of the night of ritual immersion as well as the night that a man returns from a trip to that of the eve of Sabbath is implied in Zohar 1:50a, which influenced numerous subsequent kabbalists.
56. *Zohar Hadash*, 5b–c.
57. See Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 316–324.
58. Zohar 3:15b.
59. Here my discourse is indebted to Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, trans. Gillian Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), pp. 30–33. The striking difference between Irigaray’s discourse and the standard kabbalistic symbolism is that she posits the image of the womb as a counterpoint to the phallic bias of the Freudian approach. To the degree that kabbalists interpret the womb in phallic terms, there may be a greater affinity between their symbolism and Freudian concepts. I have nevertheless availed myself of Irigaray, for she has articulated in a profound way the convergence of absence and presence as it relates to the mother.
60. Zohar 1:219a.
61. This is the mystical rationale for the liturgical act of reading the laws pertaining to illicit sexual relations (Lev. 18) during the afternoon service of Yom Kippur. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 102–103, and sources cited on pp. 219–220 nn. 127–128.
62. Zohar 3:15b–16a.
63. The sensitivity of the issue of the mother–son relationship, and the specific problem of uncovering the genitals of the mother, is emphasized in the interpretation of Gen. 29:31 in Zohar 1:154a–b. I will cite here only a portion of this psychologically astonishing exegesis: “The jubilee is always the concealed world and all of its matters are not revealed. Therefore all of its actions are hidden from Jacob. Come and see: The lower world is revealed, and it is the beginning of everything to ascend in its gradations. Just as the supernal wisdom is the beginning of everything, so too the lower world is wisdom and it is the beginning of everything. Therefore it is called ‘you’ (*attah*), for it is the sabbatical year, and it is revealed. The supernal world, which is the jubilee, is called ‘he’ (*hu*), for all of its matters are concealed. The secret of the matter is related to Leah, as it is written, ‘And he lay with her that night’ (Gen. 30:16) ... The supernal world is always concealed, and Jacob was conjoined through his will only to that which is revealed, and the secret of this is what is written, ‘and he clings to his wife’ (Gen. 2:24). ‘The Lord saw that Leah was unloved’ (*ibid.* 29:31): From here [it is deduced that] a man despises the nakedness of his mother, and thus one can unite with his mother in every place without any apprehension. Thus they said that a son joins with his mother [cf. Mishnah, Qiddushin 4:12]. All was hidden from Jacob for the supernal world was not revealed at all.”
64. Zohar 3:70a.
65. That is, the female or the left side of judgment (or limitation) is considered to provide the stimulus for the male or the right side of mercy (or expansion) to project forward in the act of intercourse. See Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 300–301.
66. See Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 325–343.
67. Zohar 3:278a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*).

LUMINAL DARKNESS

Imaginal Gleanings
from Zoharic Literature

Elliot R. Wolfson



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O X F O R D