Iconicity of the Text: Reification of the Torah and the Idolatrous Impulse of Zoharic Kabbalah

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> "Among the precepts of Mosaic religion is one that has more significance than is first obvious. It is the prohibition against making an image of God, which means the compulsion to worship an invisible God. … If this prohibition was accepted, however, it was bound to exercise a profound influence. For it signified subordinating sense perception to an abstract idea; it was a triumph of spirituality over senses; more precisely, an instinctual renunciation accompanied by its psychologically necessary consequences."
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> Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*

In a diary entry dated January 16, 1922, Franz Kafka described his writing as "an assault upon the border," which "might have developed quite easily into a new esoteric doctrine, a Kabbala."[1] Several scholars, including Gershom Scholem, have examined Kafka's penchant for the paradoxical nature of language and experience from the particular vantage point of the history of kabbalah,[2] but none has captured the matter as well as Kafka himself in the aforementioned passage. Our task is not

[1] Text cited in Judith Glatzer Wechsler, "Eli Lissitzky's 'Interchange Stations': The Letter and the Spirit," in *The Jew in the Text: Modernity and the Construction of Identity*, edited by L. Nochlin and T. Garb (London, 1995), p. 190. Karl E. Grözinger, *Kafka and Kabbalah*, translated by S. H. Ray (New York, 1994), uses this citation from Kafka's diaries as the opening quote of his book.

[2] For a review of the scholarly discussion surrounding this issue, see Philip Beitchman, *Alchemy of the Word: Cabala of the Renaissance* (Albany, 1998), pp. 159–164. See also Grözinger, *Kafka and Kabbalah*, pp. 187–188. On the link between the symbolic nature of language in kabbalah and the symbolism of Kafka, see the remark of Adorno to Scholem in a letter dated April 4, 1939, cited in Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, edited by Rolf Tiedemann, translated by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, 1998), p. 245 n. 305.

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to dwell on the literary works of Kafka, but to think through the image of assaulting the border in an effort to understand the phenomenological texture and the hermeneutical presuppositions of the kabbalah. More specifically, we will be examining the question of assault on the border from the perspective of the iconicity of the text and the idolatrous impulse to reify the Torah as the incarnate form of the divine.[3] This particular example will afford us the opportunity to evaluate Kafka's insightful remark concerning the essential connection between kabbalah as a cultural phenomenon and the attack on the borders of tradition.

Before proceeding to this issue let me make a preliminary observation with respect to the taxonomy of the term "kabbalah." In the study of the multifaceted forms of esoteric wisdom and praxis that converged and surfaced in the High Middle Ages, one must surely be on guard against reductionism. A monolithic reading that flattens all differences will not do justice to the rich legacy of kabbalists through the ages. There is a tendency in contemporary scholarship, which is a further development of the previous generation of scholars, to emphasize two main typological categories, theosophic and ecstatic, in order to control the overwhelming number of texts that one must study in the pursuit of understanding the nature of this complex phenomenon.[4] I surely would not deny the need to be mindful of concrete details in the study of kabbalah, and thereby avoid the temptation to speak of abstract generalities. I am reminded of the contrast that Abraham Isaac Kook made between "rationalist contemplation," which submerges particularities within the "universal insight," and "esotericism," which seeks to penetrate into the most minute details of the particularities.[5] Leaving aside the cogency of the distinction between philosophy and mysticism, one familiar with kabbalistic compositions cannot argue with Kook's depiction of exacting quality of esotericism, *ha-raziyyut ha-peratit*.

Notwithstanding this cautionary stance, I would argue that it is still possible, indeed necessary, to isolate structural elements that are not only recurrent through generations, but which cut across typological

[3] It is of interest to recall here the discussion in Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, translated with an introduction by Ann Smock (Lincoln and London, 1982), pp. 82–83, regarding the nexus between art and idolatry, which is understood as the struggle against the imaginary, in the work of Kafka.

[4] The typological classification was employed by Gershom Scholem and it has been developed further by Moshe Idel. See Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, "Continuity and Revision in the Study of the Kabbalah," *AJS Review* 16 (1991): 174–176.

[5] Abraham Isaac Kook, *Orot ha-Qodesh*, edited by David Kohen (Jerusalem, 1969), 1: 105.

boundaries as well.[6] Hereuistically, it has been beneficial to both professors and students to adopt the typological distinction between theosophic and ecstatic kabbalah, but careful study of the relevant material suggests that this classification may collapse under the weight of its own textual specificity. This is surely the case with respect to the focus of this study. I will be concentrating on zoharic literature, considered the classical example of theosophic kabbalah, which in all likelihood began to crystallize in the last decades of the thirteenth century and in the early decades of the fourteenth, but I am of the opinion that with respect to the issue before us, we can speak of an orientation shared by theosophic and ecstatic kabbalists, not to mention countless other mystics and masters of secret doctrine who do not fit neatly into either of these scholarly categories. To grasp the impulse for idolatry and the reification of Torah as an iconic object of visual contemplation is a key to appreciating the religious sensibility that informed the kabbalistic masters behind the composition of zoharic literature.

What, then, do I mean by the idolatrous impulse? Clearly, by the time classical works of kabbalah were being composed and redacted, idolatry in the technical scriptural sense of worshipping material images of other or strange gods was of no great concern; nor was the more specific rabbinic application of this term to worship of images of the stars and constellations a burning issue.[7] This is not to deny that medieval astrological ideas, and even the more pertinent astral magic, were influential in the ideational development of kabbalah.[8] Indeed, in the opinion of several medieval rabbinic authorities, which were undoubtedly known by the kabbalists, magical practices of this sort were considered idolatrous and therefore prohibited by biblical law.[9] My point is, however, that the

[6] For further elaboration, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia – Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles, 2000), pp. 1–8. The typological classification between ecstatic and theosophic kabbalah has also been challenged by reference to specific issues in the work of Haviva Pedaya. See, for instance, "'Possessed by Speech:' Towards an Understanding of the Prophetic-Ecstatic Patterns among Early Kabbalists," *Tarbiz* 65 (1996): 565–636 (in Hebrew); idem, "The Divinity as Place and Time and the Holy Place in Jewish Mysticism," in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land: Proceedings of the International Conference in Memory of Joshua Prawer*, edited by Benjamin Z. Kedar and R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Hampshire and London, 1998), pp. 84–111.

[7] See José Faur, "The Biblical Idea of Idolatry," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 69 (1978–79): 1–15; Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," *Israel Exploration Journal* 9 (1959): 149–165, 229–245.

[8] For a comprehensive study of this topic, see Dov Schwartz, *Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan, 1999), pp. 125–144 (in Hebrew).

[9] Schwartz, *Astral Magic*, pp. 24, 68–72, 94–103, 136, 177–178.

issue of *avodah zarah*, "foreign worship," was not related primarily to astral magic in the minds of kabbalists from the period of the composition of *Zohar*.

By the term "idolatry" I wish to convey the figural envisioning of the divine, and especially the configuration of God in anthropomorphic images.[10] My assessment of zoharic texts leads me to the conclusion that for kabbalists in this Castilian fraternity "idol" may refer to an image, an abstract, immaterial likeness, rather than a pictorial representation or sculpted form.[11] Many scholars have noted the centrality of anthropomorphism in kabbalistic lore, which in great measure is indebted to older esoteric sources wherein the corporeal depiction of God is discernible.[12] My own contribution to this discussion has been the attempt to articulate in somewhat more elaborate phenomenological terms that the locus of these images is the human imagination.[13] That is, from the kabbalists' perspective, the divine anthropos is a symbolic image envisioned within the imaginative faculty. Just as the specular image seen in the mirror is not identical to the object of which it is an image, so the intangible image of God seen in the mirror of imagination is not

[10] See Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry*, translated by Naomi Goldblum (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992), pp. 37–66; Kenneth Seeskin, *No Other Gods: The Modern Struggle Against Idolatry* (West Orange, 1995), pp. 31–49.

[11] On the relationship between immaterial images and idolatry, see the pertinent remarks of W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London, 1986), pp. 31–36.

[12] I will not cite here all of the relevant sources, but let me mention the still valuable essay on the anthropomorphic depiction of God in the history of Jewish mysticism by Gershom Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, translated by Joachim Neugroschel, edited and revised by Jonathan Chipman (New York, 1991), pp. 15–55. The extent to which the anthropomorphic symbolism of the medieval kabbalah, which is based in great measure on the older *shi'ur qomah* speculation that attributed corporeal dimensions to the divine form, continues to vex the minds of contemporary scholars can be gauged from Moshe Hallamish, *An Introduction to the Kabbalah*, translated by Ruth Bar-Ilan and Ora Wiskind-Elper (Albany, 1999), p. 141: "The fact that the Kabbalists frequently felt compelled to defend the institution of *shi'ur komah* indicates that they had not abandoned the possibility of anthropomorphization. Thus, without believing in it, the Kabbalists present extensive descriptions and fantastic images of the Divine based upon parts of the human body." Why must we assume that the kabbalists did not believe in the anthropomorphic descriptions of the divine that they actively promoted? Surely, what Hallamish intended was that we could not say that the kabbalists believed that God literally has a physical body. His formulation reveals the persistent difficulty in dealing with this salient part of the tradition. The notion of the imaginal body that I have employed offers a way to get beyond the dichotomy of allegorically removing the force of the anthropomorphic speculations, on the one hand, and naively accepting them at face value, on the other.

[13] Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, 1994).

identical to God. In the latter case, however, the matter is rendered far more paradoxical by the fact that for kabbalists the image is of that which has no image.[14] To say, therefore, that for kabbalists it is only through the imagination that the image of the divine anthropos is perceived is to indicate that, epistemologically, they occupy a position between the extremes of naive realism (God is literally a body) and allegorical reductionism (in no way can we meaningfully attribute corporeality to God). God is a body paradigmatically, that is, the body in which God can be imaged is the hyperliteral pattern of the corporeal body, a body composed of the letters of the name YHWH.

It would be well to recall that in one context Scholem, reflecting both the influence of the positive philosophy of mythology enunciated by Schelling[15] and the thinking-in-images (*Bilddenken*) of Benjamin,[16] remarked that there is an inescapable conflict between "conceptual thinking" and "symbolic thinking" based on concrete mythical images. In the history of kabbalah, one can find evidence of both modes of thought, although, according to Scholem, the primary and dominant phenomenon is the latter. As he puts it, "The discursive thinking of the Kabbalists is a kind of asymptotic process: the conceptual formulations are an attempt to provide an approximate philosophical interpretation of inexhaustible symbolic images, to interpret these images as abbreviations for conceptual series. The obvious failure of such attempts shows that images and symbols are nothing of the sort."[17] In another context, Scholem similarly speaks of two basic tendencies in the kabbalah, the "mystical direction expressed in images and symbols whose inner proximity to the realm of myth is often very striking," and the "speculative"

[14] For a fascinating psychoanalytic study on the image of the mirror as mediating symbol, see Pierre Legendre, *Dieu au miroir: étude sur l'institution des images* (Paris, 1994), and the relevant material extracted from this work in *Law and the Unconscious: A Legendre Reader*, edited by Peter Goodrich, translated by Peter Goodrich with Alain Pottage and Anton Schütz (New York, 1997), pp. 211–254.

[15] See Edward A. Beach, *The Potencies of God(s): Schelling's Philosophy of Mythology* (Albany, 1994), pp. 1–2, 6–13, 25–45, 226–230. On the role of imagination in Schelling's privileging of the mythopoeic over the philosophical, see John Llewelyn, *The HypoCritical Imagination: Between Kant and Levinas* (London and New York, 2000), pp. 50–68.

[16] See Sigrid Weigel, *Body- and Image-Space: Re-reading Walter Benjamin*, translated by Georgina Paul with Rachel McNicholl and Jeremy Gaines (London and New York, 1996), pp. ix–xvii, 8–11, 21–22, 49–60, 80–83. The influence of both Schelling and Benjamin on Scholem has been noted by Andreas Kilcher, *Die Spachtheorie der Kabbala als Ästhetisches Paradigma: Die Konstruktion einer Ästhetischen Kabbala Seit der Frühen Neuzeit* (Stuttgart and Weimar, 1998), pp. 45–46.

[17] Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, translated by Ralph Manheim (New York, 1969), p. 96.

attempt to assign "ideational meaning to the symbols." Regarding the latter, Scholem writes:

> The speculative expositions of kabbalistic teaching largely depended on the ideas of neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophy, as they were known in the Middle Ages, and were couched in the terminology customary to these fields. Hence the cosmology of the Kabbalah is borrowed from them and is not at all original, being expressed in the common medieval doctrine of the separate intellects and the spheres. Its real originality lies in the problems that transcend this cosmology.[18]

Bracketing the validity of Scholem's attempt to contrast medieval Jewish philosophy and kabbalah on these grounds, it is instructive that he expressed himself here, in contrast to other places in his work,[19] in such a way that images are privileged in the kabbalistic orientation. I have expanded this approach by arguing that, by and large, kabbalists considered imagination the divine element of soul that enables one to gain access to the invisible by transferring or transmuting sensory data and/or rational concepts into symbols. The primary function of imagination may be viewed as hermeneutical. Through images within the heart, the locus of imagination, the divine, whose pure essence is incompatible with all form, is nevertheless manifest as an imaginative presence. The enduring legacy of the prophetic tradition that has informed and challenged Judaism as a religious culture through the ages is that the God who cannot be depicted iconically appears to human beings in multiple images, including, most significantly, that of an anthropos. Moreover, the role of the imaginal, which serves as a symbolic intermediary allowing for the imaging of the imageless, is a tradition that has its roots in biblical and rabbinic texts, although it is developed and articulated most fully in the various strands of medieval mystical literature, including the esoteric works of the Rhineland Jewish Pietists,[20] the theosophic kabba-

[18] Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 87–88. See ibid., p. 117, where Scholem concludes that the philosophers did not deal at all with the divine emanations, although the kabbalists were influenced by philosophical cosmology when discussing the world below the last of the *sefirot*. This statement must be qualified, however, in light of the fact that some of the early kabbalists identified either the *sefirot* collectively with the separate intellects or one of the *sefirot* (usually the second or the tenth) with the Active Intellect.

[19] See, for instance, *Kabbalah*, p. 370, and discussion in Wolfson, *Through the Speculum that Shines*, pp. 278–279.

[20] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 188–269; idem, "Sacred Space and Mental Iconography: Imago Templi and Contemplation in Rhineland Jewish Pietism," in *Ki Baruch Hu: Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Judaic Studies in Honor of Baruch A. Levine*, edited by Robert Chazan, William W. Hallo, Lawrence H. Schiffman (Winona Lake, 1999), pp. 593–634.

lah, especially zoharic literature,[21] and the prophetic kabbalah elaborated by Abraham Abulafia and his disciples.[22] The enduring quest to attain a vision of the image of that which has no image may be termed the impulse for idolatry. This impulse has been fed by the paradox that the God seen is the invisible God.[23]

Iconic Visualization of God in Theosophic Kabbalah

Due to the limitations of space, I cannot enter into all of the complex issues related to the iconic visualization of God in the varied currents of Jewish mysticism, let alone in the more limited history of the trend of mystical speculation known in scholarly parlance as theosophic kabbalah. As I have already intimated, I am focusing on these matters as they are treated in the main body of zoharic literature, itself an immense undertaking that cannot be dealt with adequately in an essay of this length. To speak in a generalization that seems to me textually warranted, central to zoharic kabbalah is the ecstatic experience of enlightenment, that is, the visual contemplation of the divine in imagistic pictures related symbolically to the *sefirot*, the ten luminous emanations. The term *sefirot*, first employed in *Sefer Yeṣirah*, whose provenance is still a matter of scholarly dispute, is notoriously difficult to translate. Indeed, there is no consensus regarding the lexical meaning of the term. Etymologically, one may presume that the word *sefirot* derives from the root *sfr*, which can be vocalized as *sefer*, "book," but it also may be associated with the word *sappir*, "sapphire." Additionally, the root *sfr* can be vocalized as *safar*, "to count." No single word in English can adequately account for the range of semantic meaning linked to the term *sefirot*, which denotes concurrently luminosity (*sappir*), speech (*sefer*), and enumeration (*sefar*). The ecstatic experience attested in kabbalistic sources is marked by the convergence of these three fields of discourse: The divine potencies are visualized as translucent letters enum-

[21] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 326–392.

[22] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1954), pp. 138–142; Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, 1988), pp. 95–105, 116–119; Wolfson, "Sacred Space," pp. 599–600 n. 15; idem, *Abraham Abulafia,* pp. 207–209.

[23] The paradox is well captured by Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, vol. 2, translated by Rosemarie Waldrop (Hanover and London, 1991), p. 277: "God is invisible. I have often seen Him such as He could appear to me. All appearance manifests something invisible at the edge of horizons, which we seize by its legitimate desire to be."

erated within the book written by God. This book, which is identified further as the most sacred of divine names, YHWH, is the text that can also be envisioned as limbs of the divine body. Alternatively expressed, the Torah, which is composed of multiple names contained within the one name, is the mirror in which the image of the imageless God appears as it is reflected in the mirror of the mystic's imagination.[24] The double mirroring aptly describes the hermeneutical condition that oriented the zoharic kabbalists on the path of poetic thinking: The text is a mirror that reflects the translucency of the reader's imagination and the reader's imagination a mirror that reflects the translucency of the text.

As I have already noted, central to this trend of kabbalah is the emphasis on the pictorial configuration of the *sefirot* in the shape of an anthropos. In *Sefer ha-Bahir*, one of the earliest documents that remains a key for contemporary scholars who seek to uncover what some of the roots of the occult tradition may have been, it is presumed in an unqualified way that the potencies (*middot*) of God or the forms (*surot*) relate to the limbs of a human body; the theosophical claim is linked exegetically to the biblical notion of the divine image in which Adam was created.[25] That is, the image of God is interpreted in distinctively somatic terms. The significance of this dimension of the kabbalistic outlook is underscored in the following explanation of the fundamental commandment of Jewish monotheism, to know that there is a God, offered by Joseph of Hamadan: "The rationale for this commandment by way of kabbalah is that one should know the property of the body (*tekhunat ha-guf*) as Scripture says 'And God created Adam in his image' (Gen 1:27) so that man should know the matter of the chariot, the matter of the *sefirot*, which is the property of the body, and he should bind them for they are one form."[26]

[24] On the image of the double mirror, see Wolfson, "Sacred Space," p. 597. See the citation from Jabès below in n. 33.

[25] Daniel Abrams, *The Book Bahir: An Edition Based on the Earliest Manuscripts* (Los Angeles, 1994), sec. 55, p. 151, and sec. 116, p. 200. For discussion of the divine forms in bahiric symbolism, see Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, edited by R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, translated by Alan Arkush (Princeton, 1987), pp. 139–142; idem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 43–45; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven, 1988), pp. 122–128. For an analysis of this mythical symbol from a gender perspective, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Woman – The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, edited by Laurence J. Silberstein and Robert L. Cohn (New York and London, 1994),p. 171; idem, "Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions of Wisdom in *Sefer ha-Bahir*," *Poetics Today* 19 (1998): 166–167.

[26] Menachem Meier, "A Critical Edition of the *Sefer Ta'amey ha-Mitzwoth* ('Book of Reasons of the Commandments') Attributed to Isaac Ibn Farhi/Section I – Positive

Needless to say, many other examples could have been cited, but this one reference will suffice to make the point that the corporeal interpretation of the divine image is a basic tenet of medieval kabbalistic theosophy.[27] In the subsequent development of this literature, especially in the fraternities of male kabbalists active in the second half of the thirteenth century in northern Spain, the anthropomorphism of the earlier tradition was articulated in more systematic or, at the very least, in more elaborate fashion. Two points that are essential to my reflections: First, the preponderant utilization of anthropomorphic imagery to depict the divine on the part of the kabbalists is predicated on the presumption that the Hebrew letters assigned to each of the relevant limbs constitutes the reality of the body on both the human and divine planes of being. For kabbalists, therefore, the use of human terms to speak about matters divine is not simply understood in the philosophical manner as an approximate way to speak of God, a concession to the inevitable limitations of embodied human beings who desire to speak of that which is disembodied.[28] On the contrary, when examined from the kabbalistic perspective, the examples of anthropomorphism in the canonical texts of the tradition employed to describe God indicate that the nature of human corporeality can only be understood in light of divine corporeality, but the body of God is constituted by the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which are all contained in or derive from the Tetragrammaton.[29] Theosophic and prophetic kabbalists agree that the four-letter name is the root-word, the origin of all language, the mystical essence of Torah, which is envisioned concurrently in the bodily image of a human form.[30] A recurrent feature of medieval Jewish esotericism is the

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Commandments/With Introduction and Notes," Brandeis University, Ph. D. dissertation, 1974, p. 3.

[27] This is not to deny that in medieval kabbalistic literature we cannot find qualifications regarding the somatic interpretation of the divine image. In some sources, the rationalist standpoint, which is articulated most emphatically by Maimonides, is adopted. For instance, see *R. Moses de Leon's Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, edited by Charles Mopsik (Los Angeles, 1996), pp. 2–3 (in Hebrew); Joseph Gikatilla, *Shaʿarei Orah*, edited by Joseph Ben-Shlomo, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1981), 1:49–51; Menaḥem Recanaṭi, *Be'ur al ha-Torah* (Jerusalem, 1961), 37b-c. See Boaz Huss, "R. Joseph Gikatilla's Definition of Symbolism and its Versions in Kabbalistic Literature," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 12 (1996): 157–176, esp. 160–165 (in Hebrew).

[28] See David B. Burrell, *Knowing the Unknowable God: Ibn-Sina, Maimonides, Aquinas* (Notre Dame, 1986).

[29] For a fuller exploration of this theme, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Anthropomorhic Imagery and Letter Symbolism in the *Zohar*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989): 147–181 (in Hebrew).

[30] See discussion in Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 56–73.

tradition that Torah, which is the imaginal body of God, is composed of letters of the name.[31] At a subsequent stage of this analysis I will return to the secret of this image, but suffice it here to note that the kabbalistic tradition yields a notion of a literal body, that is, a body made up of letters. This image of body transforms the corporeality of that which is incorporeal into an icon of that which is not visible.[32]

My second observation concerns the presumption that the anthropomorphic shape of the divine is configured within the imagination of the mystic, primarily in the context of contemplative prayer and Torah study. The experience of union, which is so often designated as the distinctive mark of mystical experience, is affirmed in the relevant kabbalistic sources only to the extent that one cleaves to the form of God that one has visualized in one's imagination. In this state of consciousness, the phenomenal boundaries of inside and outside dissolve, for only by means of the internal image does one experience the divine as external.[33] Through the proper visual comprehension the mind or heart of the devotee becomes the throne upon which God dwells at the same time that God is transformed into the throne upon which the devotee dwells. The meeting point of the two, the holy of holies, is the nakedly garbed Torah. Through the garments of Torah, the letters that constitute the limbs of the textual body, the enlightened exegete sees the hidden light of God, which is identified as the secret in the double sense of inner reality and esoteric meaning. The critical aspect of contemplation in zoharic literature, therefore, is not union with God per se, but the anthropomorphic representation and visual apprehension of God that ensues from the state of mystical conjunction, *devequt*. I am not suggesting that the idea of *devequt* in zoharic symbolism does not relate at all to unitive experiences that could be explained both on the basis of Aristotelian epistemology and Neoplatonic ontology. My point is, rather, that the experience of union serves the ultimate goal of inducing mystical consciousness, which involves the visual comprehension of the immediate

[31] The notion of body as text has to be seen against the larger philosophical background regarding verbal images. See Mitchell, *Iconology*, pp. 19–31.

[32] My formulation is indebted to the phenomenology of the invisible within the visible articulated in Jacques L. Marion, *La croisée de visible* (Paris, 1991), as cited in Graham Ward, "The Gendered Body of the Jewish Jesus," in *Religion and Sexuality*, edited by Michael A. Hayes, Wendy Porter, and David Tombs (Sheffield, 1998), p. 176 n. 16.

[33] One is here reminded of the poetic formulation of the philosophical point offered by Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Questions*, vol. 1, translated by Rosmarie Waldrop (Hanover and London, 1991), p. 203: "'A double mirror,' he said, 'separates us from the Lord so that God sees Himself when trying to see us, and we, when trying to see Him, see only our own face.'"

and direct presence of God as the imaginal body, a body composed of the four letters of the name, which splinter into the twenty-two letters of Torah.

My understanding of mystical contemplation as the imaginal visualization of God contrasts sharply with Scholem's characterization of meditation as it appears in kabbalistic literature from the middle of the thirteenth century as "contemplation by the intellect, whose objects are neither images nor visions, but non-sensual matters such as words, names, or thoughts."[34] I note, parenthetically, that this characterization conflicts sharply with the view that Scholem expressed elsewhere, which I mentioned above, regarding the nature of kabbalah as a symbolic thinking based on images in contrast to the discursive thinking of philosophy based on concepts. No one could argue with the claim that the *sefirot*, the spiritual entities that make up the divine pleroma, constitute the ultimate object of meditation in theosophic kabbalah. The important point, however, is that these entities, whatever their ontological status vis-à-vis the infinite Godhead (the kabbalists offered two conceptual possibilities, the *sefirot* are the essence of God or they are instruments by means of which God expresses his creative potency), are phenomenally experienced only insofar as they are configured in particular sentient forms within human consciousness. Contemplation of the linguistic structures mentioned by Scholem – words, names, and thoughts – is itself dependent on imaginative visualization of these very structures. Can we in any meaningful way distinguish the verbal and visual?

One must raise questions about Scholem's sweeping attempt to contrast Christian and kabbalistic doctrines of meditation on the grounds that "in Christian mysticism a pictorial and concrete subject, such as the suffering of Christ and all that pertains to it, is given to the meditator, while in Kabbalah, the subject given is abstract and cannot be visualized, such as the Tetragrammaton and its combinations."[35] The textual evidence from kabbalists indicates just the contrary: The divine names, and especially the Tetragrammaton, serve as the object of contemplation only to the degree that they assume morphic (and, in many instances, anthropomorphic) shape in the mind of the mystic. One of the fundamental ways that this is achieved is through envisioning God's form, a basic tenet in theosophic and prophetic kabbalah. The contemplative gaze is precisely what lies at the heart of the kabbalistic conception of *kawwanah* in prayer. Indeed, some of the earliest kabbalistic documents

[34] *Kabbalah*, p. 369, and for other relevant references in Scholem's publications, see Wolfson, "Sacred Space," p. 600 n. 16.

[35] *Kabbalah*, p. 371.

suggest that *kawwanah*, the intentionality required in liturgical worship, was predicated on the representation of the *sefirot* as an anthropomorphic shape configured as the letters of the name YHWH within the imaginative faculty – here again we note the convergence of anthropomorphic imagery and linguistic symbolism.[36] To be sure, the conjured image is not the portrait of the suffering Christ, as Scholem remarks, but it is an anthropomorphic form that is no less graphic.

Countless examples could have been cited to support my claim, but I will mention one brief passage from a section of *Zohar* known as *Idra Zuta*, the "Small Gathering," which appears (undoubtedly as a consequence of the redactional process) in the culmination of the zoharic text as the final meeting of Simeon ben Yohai and the members of the fraternity that results in the master's death. The relevant passage, which is cited as a quotation from the aggadah of R. Yeiva Sabba, is a mystical reflection on the name of the third emanation, *Binah*, "understanding," the mother that comes forth from and is united with the second emanation, *Ḥokhmah*, "wisdom," the father. From the union of these two emanations comes forth *Tif'eret*, "beauty," which is also depicted as the son who contains within himself *Malkhut*, "royalty," the daughter who becomes the bride of the brother/son. In the four letters of the name *Binah*, there is a reference to the quaternity of divine potencies: The *yod* and *he* refer respectively to *Ḥokhmah* and *Binah*, and the remaining consonants, *bet* and *nun*, spell *ben*, which is the son, but the latter is androgynous (in the pattern of Adam according to the first chapter of Genesis) and thus contains *bat*, the daughter, within himself. Although not stated explicitly, from other zoharic passages it is reasonable to assume that the son and daughter, *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, may also be symbolically marked by the last two letters of the Tetragrammaton, *waw* and *he*. The four letters of the name, therefore, correspond to the father, mother, son, and daughter. The sensitive nature of this disclosure and the implied manner of visualizing the divine is underscored by a remark contained in the zoharic text itself after the matter is brought to light: "These words cannot be revealed except to the supernal holy ones who have entered and exited and who know the ways of the blessed holy One, and they do not deviate to the right or to the left. … Praiseworthy is the lot of one who merits to know his ways, and who does not deviate from them or err with respect to them, for these matters are concealed, and the supernal holy ones are illumined by them like the one who is illu-

[36] Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 288–304.

mined from the flame of the candle. These words are not transmitted except to one who has entered and exited."[37]

This one example is illustrative of a larger point affirmed by the kabbalists whose opinions are preserved in the zoharic corpus as well as scores of other kabbalists who lived before and after the dissemination of this composition: The visionary imagination is informed by a confluence of letter and anthropomorphic symbolism.[38] There is no justification to Scholem's claim that in the kabbalistic approach to contemplation, in contrast to the Christian, the "subject given is abstract and cannot be visualized, such as the Tetragrammaton and its combinations." A proper grasp of the kabbalistic material necessitates the understanding that in this contemplative practice the name is visualized in strikingly concrete and embodied terms as an anthropos, which is the incarnational form of the Torah.[39]

In the aforecited passage from *Zohar*, one is introduced as well to another critical dimension of the pictorial representation of God in somatic terms: Only one who transforms the physical body into a spiritual body – a transformation that is presented in the relevant texts as an angelification of the mystic – is capable of imaging the divine form in bodily images.[40] This is the implication of the zoharic claim that the words concerning the portrayal of God as father, mother, son, and daughter can be revealed only to the "supernal holy ones" who have

[37] *Zohar* 3:290a.

[38] The correlation of the anatomical forms and different permutations of the Tetragrammaton is especially prominent in the contemplative exercises promulgated in the name of Isaac Luria. See Lawrence Fine, "The Study of Torah as a Rite of Theurgical Contemplation in Lurianic Kabbalah," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, edited by David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta, 1988), pp. 29–40.

[39] A bold formulation of the kabbalistic interpretation of Torah as the incarnate form of God is found in Menaḥem Recanaṭi, *Ta'amei ha-Miṣwot*, MS Vatican 209, fol. 1b: "The holy One, blessed be he, is not something apart from the Torah and the Torah is not distinct from him, and he is not something distinct from the Torah. Thus the sages of kabbalah say that the holy One, blessed be he, is the Torah." For a slightly different and, in my view, inferior version of this text see the printed edition of Recanaṭi's *Ṭa'amei ha-Miṣwot*, edited by Simhah Lieberman (London, 1962), p. 2.

[40] Underlying the mystical conception of angelification is the kabbalistic acceptance of a much older belief regarding the notion of an astral or aetheral body. For discussion of this motif connected especially to the biblical notion of the divine image, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 251–273. See, for example, the kabbalistic fragment cited by Scholem, *Origins*, p. 291, according to which the sacred body of the righteous is said to be woven by the angels in contrast to the body of the sinner, which is said to be woven by angels of destruction. The interpretation of the plural form in the verse "Let us make Adam in our image" (Gen. 1:26) reflects the exegesis of R. Jonathan reported by R. Samuel ben Naḥman in *Genesis Rabbah*, edited by Julius Theodor and Chanoch Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), 8:8, pp. 61–62.

entered and exited. The kabbalists who have undergone the ecstatic experience of visual contemplation in a successful manner with their faith and mental capacity intact – a point that is underscored by the use of the technical expression "to enter and to exit"[41] – are called supernal holy ones, a term that usually designates angelic beings. The application of this expression to the kabbalists signifies their transfiguration, which is expressed as well in the image of illumination. Other passages in the zoharic corpus emphasize that this transfiguration ensues from the adoption of an austere lifestyle and the consequent curtailment of physical desire.[42] Simply out, the ascetic negation of the physical body allows for the ocular apprehension of God's imaginal body. The mindfulness achieved by meditative ascent affirmed in zoharic texts is not a state of abstract emptiness, a peeling away of all material form from consciousness to attain the illumination of formless absorption. It is quite the opposite: Contemplation eventuates in the polishing of the mind so that reflected therein is the image of the divine anthropos.[43] From that vantage point, the mystical tradition expressed in *Zohar* retrieves the iconic representation of the divine, albeit located in the imagination.

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[41] On this technical expression see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Forms of Visionary Ascent as Ecstatic Experience in the Zoharic Literature," in *Gershom Scholem's Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After: Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism*, edited by Peter Schäfer and Joseph Dan (Tübingen, 1993), p. 211 and other references cited in n. 11 *ad locum*.

[42] The ascetic orientation in zoharic literature is discussed briefly by Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, translated by David Goldstein (Oxford, 1989), pp. 764–765, and in more detail in Elliot R. Wolfson, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, edited by Jeffrey J. Cohen and Bonnie Wheeler (New York, 1997), pp. 151–185.

[43] The point, which is so basic to understanding the phenomenological underpinning of the hermeneutical experience depicted in countless zoharic passages, is expressed concisely and clearly by the fifteenth-century Italian kabbalist, Judah Ḥayyat, in his commentary to *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut* (Jerusalem, 1963), 143a, an anonymous treatise, probably written in Spain in the early part of the fourteenth century: "The lower anthropos is a throne for the supernal anthropos, for the physical limbs that are in him allude to the spiritual limbs above, which are the divine potencies, and not for naught does it say 'Let us make Adam in our image' (Gen. 1:26). Inasmuch as this image is the image of the spiritual, supernal anthropos, and the prophet is the physical man who, in the moment of prophecy, is almost transformed into a spiritual entity, and his external senses almost depart from him, thus he sees the image of an anthropos, just as he sees his image in a glass mirror."

Imaging the Imageless and the Prohibition on Pictorial Representation

On the basis of the previous discussion it may be argued that the contemplative practice, which has informed the worldview of the kabbalists in a relatively persistent manner, is the visual imaging of the being to whom no image may be attributed. In the mystical vision, the imagelessness of God is not called into question. On the contrary, as I have already noted, the visual experience of kabbalists affirms the paradox that the God who is seen is invisible, for the concealed cannot be revealed unless it be revealed as concealed lest it not be the concealed that is revealed. Alternatively expressed, the *sefirot* reveal the luminous darkness of the infinite dark light, but only in such a manner that the dark light continues to be concealed as the luminous darkness.[44] Kabbalistic theosophy rests on the assumption that the limitless assumes the form of the limited, and thus kabbalists understood that one of their primary religious obligations (indebted to ancient esoteric speculation, which is preserved in the *shi'ur qomah* texts, based on the ascription of corporeal dimensions to the body of the Creator) consisted of attributing measure to the Infinite (*ein sof*) by means of visually contemplating the imaginal form of the divine anthropos (*adam qadmon*). The point is made explicitly in the one of the more recondite sections of the zoharic text, which deals with the entity known as the measuring-line (*qav ha-middah*), the instrument by means of which the delimiting of the limitless takes place, the emanation of the Infinite into the imaginal form that is imaged concurrently as light, letter, and limb:

> The *ayin* and *dalet* [of Deut 6:4] are enlarged, [for they spell the word] *ed* [witness] to attest about the secret of secrets, to bring forth a measure that measures the secret of faith. The one who knows this secret knows the secret of his master and inherits the two worlds, this world and the world-to-come. This measure is called the line-of-measure, and this was given to the holy, supernal sages who know the secret of their master and are occupied with his glory… and they are the true righteous ones in whom is the secret of the upper Faith. To them is given to know and to contemplate for they do not turn right or left. … The one who knows the secret of wisdom can comprehend and can produce a measure in all aspects, until he knows the supernal secrets, the secrets of his master, the secrets of wisdom so that he may know

[44] I have discussed this hermeneutical dialectic of secrecy in various publications. See, most recently, Elliot R. Wolfson, "Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah," in *Rending the Veil: Concealment and Secrecy in the History of Religions*, edited by Elliot R. Wolfson (New York and London, 1999), pp. 113–121, and further references supplied on pp. 148–149 n. 1.

and comprehend. Fortunate is the portion of one that knows and contemplates in this world and in the world-to-come, for by means of this principle a person should arrange his feet such that he enters [from behind] the curtain and walks in a straight way. Fortunate is he in this world and in the world-come.[45]

The esoteric gnosis, which is the distinctive possession of the supernal sage who knows the secret of God, is portrayed as the process of mapping out the divine body, a process that is referred to in the above citation as the "measure that measures the secret of faith." The spiritual enlightenment of the kabbalist below parallels an ontological process above by means of which the infinite darkness is illuminated through the emanation of the sefirotic potencies. By knowing the measure by which the imaginal body of God is measured the kabbalist apprehends the secret of faith, a technical expression employed in zoharic literature to depict the divine pleroma, and related especially to the sacred coupling of male and female. It is surely not inconsequential that this task is linked exegetically to the utterance of the *shema* (Deut 6:4), the liturgical expression of the monotheistic foundation of Judaism. The kabbalist who measures the divine form through visual contemplation gives witness to the unity of God – the mystical intent of the word *ed*, "witness," which is spelled by the orthographically enlarged *ayin* of *shema* and *dalet* of *ehad* – precisely in his discernment of the multiple powers that make up the divine realm.

What is so extraordinary about kabbalists through the generations, hardly altered by differences in time or place, is their resolute aversion to depict pictorially the symbolic images that they articulated in such overt language. In spite of the very explicit anthropomorphic nature of their reflections on the Godhead, at times embracing intense erotic imagery, kabbalists have consistently upheld the injunction against representing God graphically in bodily terms. To be sure, one finds in kabbalistic texts, both in manuscript and in print, diagrams of the divine potencies usually in the form of what has become known as the *illan hasefirot*, the tree of the emanations. In the wake of the spread of the complex theosophy of Lurianic kabbalah in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these diagrams grew increasingly more intricate. The striking feature about these diagrams, however, is the conspicuous absence of the very anthropomorphic detail that is so prevalent in the

[45] *Zohar Ḥadash*, edited by Reuven Margaliot (Jerusalem, 1978), 57a. For fuller citation and analysis of this passage, see Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, 1995), pp. 72–74.

verbal depiction of the divine that accompanies the diagrams. Typically, instead of pictures of an explicit corporeal nature, kabbalists drew abstract geometric forms, usually consisting of circles and lines, to depict the symbolic language that is patently anthropomorphic in nature. This is not to deny that there are exceptions to the rule, which indicate that certain kabbalists (or scribes who copied the relevant sources) thought it perfectly reasonable to use the outline of a human form to represent the sefirotic potencies. On the whole, however, kabbalistic sources demonstrate a remarkable reluctance to portray the divine in corporeal images, and this in spite of the fact that the symbolic language employed by kabbalists to describe God is overwhelmingly anthropomorphic in tone. For the most part the iconotropic representations were expressed in the symbolic language of imagination.

Once more we come upon an intriguing irony: The very tradition that so steadfastly preserved the prohibition against figural representation fostered a highly intense and complex anthropomorphic and sexually nuanced sketching of the divine. Abstract shapes used to depict the divine pleroma on occasion accompany kabbalistic texts, and often enough these shapes are implicitly anthropomorphic. To be more precise, the geometric shapes of the circle and line allude symbolically to the feminine and masculine potencies, and this is so both in terms of the linguistic description of these shapes and their graphic representation. The attribution of gender characteristics to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which is a repeated motif in kabbalistic literature, is itself predicated on the assumption that the contours of physical bodies allude to aspects of the divine body, which is always engendered in its literal embodiment.[46] Indeed, in the final analysis, the concreteness of corporeality consists in the ability to discern the semiotic underpinning of body. The example that best illustrates the convergence of anthropomorphic imagery and letter symbolism is the kabbalistic understanding of Torah as the embodied form of God to which I have already referred. The process of uncovering the form that is hidden can never be terminated for that which is uncovered has no image. The uncovering of the imageless comes by way of conjuring the image that comprises multiple images. Analogously, the disclosing of the secret ensues through a continual process of covering by producing different layers of meaning, the

[46] See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Letter Symbolism and Merkavah Imagery in the *Zohar*," in *Alei Shefer: Studies in the Literature of Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Dr. Alexandre Safran*, edited by Moshe Hallamish (Ramat-Gan, 1990), pp. 195–236, esp. 215–224 (English section).

levushei oraita, "garments of Torah," according to the noteworthy locution of one zoharic passage.[47]

It may be concluded, therefore, that the unusually daring portrayal of God in anthropomorphic terms on the part of zoharic kabbalists did not seem to implicate them in crossing the line set by the traditional ban on iconic representation of the divine. On the contrary, as I have already intimated, the paradox consists of the fact that it is precisely the injunction against iconic figuration of God that unleashed such a powerful visual imagination on the part of kabbalists in their effort to chart the contours and dimensions of the divine body. There are, however, occasional indications that kabbalists behind the composition of *Zohar* themselves were aware of the fact that they were pushing the limit of theological discourse to the point of brushing up against the edges of idolatry.[48] It is certainly not coincidental that towards the beginning of *Idra Rabba*, the "Great Gathering," a section of zoharic literature wherein the anthropomorphic language is particularly bold, Simeon ben Yoḥai is said to have begun his exposition with the verse, "Cursed be the man who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the Lord, a craftsman's handiwork, and sets it up in secret" (Deut 27:15).[49] From the vantage point of those not illumined with mystical insight it might seem that theosophic descriptions of the divine anthropos constitute a form of idol-making, and thus the master begins his exposition with the moral exhortation against making an idol and setting it up in secret, *we-sam ba-sater*. When viewed from the perspective of the enlightened kabbalists, however, not only is the anthropomorphic representation not to be confused with idol worship in secret, but it constitutes the disclosure of the secret on the mystical path. To craft the image of God

[47] *Zohar* 3:152a. In the zoharic text, the actual expression is "garment of Torah," *levusha de-oraita*, but I have taken the liberty to use the plural form. See also *Sefer Me'irat Einayim by Isaac of Acre: A Critical Edition*, edited by Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem, 1981), p. 110 (in Hebrew): "You must know that the verses, that is, the words and letters, that a man sees with his eyes are like the garment of a man that covers his body. The contextual interpretations and the commentaries are the body and the true kabbalah, the potencies, and the great and wondrous secrets that emerge from the Torah are the soul, and this is the import of what is written 'From my flesh I shall see God' (Job 19:26)." For a creative discussion of this zoharic motif, see Michael Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1989), pp. 33–46.

[48] It must be pointed out that historically kabbalists were attacked for promoting an idolatrous theology inasmuch as the unity of God was supposedly challenged by a theosophic doctrine of multiple divine potencies and the theurgical notion of prayer based on the idea that intentionality had to be directed to different potencies. See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 240–241.

[49] *Zohar* 3:127b–128a.

in the imagination is the paramount act of devotion that unifies the divine nature and thereby sustains the world. It would seem that it is for this reason that Simeon ben Yoḥai is adamant in his warning to members of the fraternity that they should not set up an idol in secrecy, that is, they should not reify the anthropomorphic images of God conjured within the imagination.[50] The ironic intent of this admonition, however, is that disclosure of secrets about the divine anthropos is a form of erecting an idol carved not from stone but from images in the mind. One who iconically envisions the secret must be mindful of not placing the idol in secret.

The scriptural admonition against setting up the idol in secret is transformed in the zoharic text into the exhortation to expose secrets of God on the part of the master and disciples bonded together in the mystical fraternity. R. Simeon's words are profoundly ironic, for the ostensible safeguarding of the biblical prohibition is a transvaluation of the law against idolatry. The iconic depiction of God is the decisive expression of piety. The import of the theme of idolatry in this context is elucidated by another passage wherein the inappropriate explication of secrets by uttering words of Torah that one has not understood or that one has not received from a teacher is also interpreted as a form of worshipping an idol.[51] Beyond this we may posit that the symbolic thinking of kabbalists, which involves the mythopoeic figuration of God in human form, is potentially a kind of idol-making aligned with the demonic other side. Support for this may be derived from a passage in the introduction to *Tiqqunei Zohar* wherein the admonition of Deut 27:15 is applied explicitly to one who forms a mental image of the one who has no image, not even the image of the letters or the vowelpoints.[52] Idolatry is transferred from the production of material images to that of mental images that serve as the iconic representation of God. But in the aforementioned zoharic context this process is looked upon negatively as a breach with what is ritually required. What is so extraordinary about the previously cited passage from the beginning of *Idra Rabba* is the fact that the intent of the biblical injunction is turned on its head, for the seemingly idolatrous activity of the imaginative depiction of God in overtly anthropomorphic terms is presented as true worship

[50] Reflecting on this zoharic passage, Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, p. 287, wrote, "to take the symbols literally as denoting the actual essence of God is considered to be a form of idolatry." My own analysis agrees in part with Tishby, but I have emphasized an ironic element that overturns the verse by affirming an acceptable form of idolatry related to the anthropomorphic configuration of the divine within the imagination.

[51] *Zohar* 2:87a.

[52] *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction, 6b.

of God in the heart, *avodah she-ba-lev*, the rabbinic idiom for liturgical service. To worship God in the heart is transmuted in the mystical tradition of zoharic kabbalah to forming a contemplative image of God in the imagination.[53]

To appreciate the exegetical impudence exemplified by this text, it is important to recall that in zoharic literature idolatry is connected symbolically to the demonic other side.[54] I will cite one critical passage from *Tiqqunei Zohar* that illumines this symbolic nexus:

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[53] As stated, one can perceive the gap separating the zoharic ideal of imaginal contemplation and the contemplative ideal proffered by Maimonides, which necessitates a gradual stripping away of all images to the point of intellectual conjunction. Maimonides himself, however, recognized the ultimate necessity of the imagination, and his use of the parable of the king's palace towards the end of the *Guide* (III.51) to depict various social groups and their relationship to God suggests that he, too, could not rid himself of the imagination in the effort to communicate what he considered to be religious truth. The parable as figurative trope depends on imagination. See José Faur, *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides's Guide for the Perplexed* (Syracuse, 1999), pp. 55–88; Lenn E. Goodman, "Maimonides and the Philosophers of Islam: The Problem of Theophany," in *Judaism and Islam Boundaries, Communication and Interaction: Essays in Honor of William M. Brinner*, edited by Benjamin H, Hary, John L. Hayes, and Fred Astren (Leiden: Brill, 2000), pp. 279–301.

[54] This idea is expressed in pre-zoharic kabbalistic sources. See, for instance, the interpretation of *elohim aḥerim* given by Naḥmanides in his commentary to Exod 20:3, in *Perush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah*, edited by Ḥayyim D. Chavel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1984), 1:390: "Know that in every place that Scripture mentions 'other gods' the intent is to those other than the glorious name (*shem ha-nikhbad*)." Inasmuch as the "glorious name" refers to *elohim*, which is the name associated with *Shekhinah* (for references see Elliot R. Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Naḥmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 14 [1989]: 142 n. 109), it stands to reason that Naḥmanides intends that the other gods denote the demonic powers extrinsic to the divine presence. Naḥmanides alludes to this kabbalistic secret in the continuation of this passage, op. cit., p. 391: "By way of truth, understand the secret of the face (*panim*), and Scripture exhorted with respect to this revelation 'The Lord spoke to you face to face' (Deut 5:4), and know the secret of the word 'others' (*aḥerim*), and the whole verse can be understood according to its literal and plain sense." The face of God denotes the unity of male and female, a mystery conveyed more patently by the expression "face to face," *panim be-fanim*, whereas the back, *aḥor*, relates to other gods, *elohim aḥerim*, demonic forces that stand outside the realm of holiness. See Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, pp. 194–195, explain the interpretation of "other gods" in Naḥmanides as a reference to the sin of separating the divine potencies into autonomous powers. See citation of Isaac of Acre below at n. 64. While it is certainly true that there is an intricate relationship between the activity of cutting the shoots and empowering the demonic realm, I think the reader would have been better served had Halbertal and Margalit at least noted that Naḥmanides is also hinting at the notion of a force of impurity that can act autonomously or at least in opposition to the force of purity. The allusion to a demonic force is also apparent in the interpretation of the scapegoat to Azazel that Naḥmanides offers in his commentary on Lev. 16:8, in *Perush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah*, 2:88–91. On the attribution of traditions concerning the demonic to Naḥmanides, see Scholem, *Origins*, p. 297

The spine is called back (*aḥor*) from the side of the moon, but from the side of the middle pillar it is called front (*qedem*). The secret of the matter is "You formed me from before and behind" (Ps 139:5), and in the exile "He has withdrawn his right hand in the presence of the foe" (Lam 2:3). Who is the foe? This is Samael, for all other gods (*elohim aḥerim*) are from behind (*le-aḥor*). In order not to gaze upon *Shekhinah* in the west, which is the back (*aḥor*), one must place her to the right. Therefore, it is forbidden to pray to the west, which is the back, for other gods are there, and Saturn is there, the elixir of death. Because she was first in the west and then turned to the right, the other gods inquire of her, "Saturn (*shabbetai*), where is Sabbath (*ayyeh shabbat*)?" The letters of *shabbetai* are *ayyeh shabbat*.[55]

The place of the *Shekhinah* is in the west,[56] which is the back (*aḥor*), but this is also the region of the other gods (*elohim aḥerim*), the demonic potencies led by Samael. The latter is identified as Saturn, a planet that is frequently depicted in malevolent terms, the astrological maleficus.[57]

n. 192, and reference cited there to one of his earlier studies. For a less dualistic approach, see Chayim Henoch, *Nachmanides Philosopher and Mystic: The Religious Thought of Nachmanides From His Exegesis of the Mitzvot* (Jerusalem, 1978): 414–427 (in Hebrew).

[55] *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 21, 56b.

[56] Babylonian Talmud, Baba Batra 25a.

[57] The negative connotations of Saturn are attested in the astrological ruminations preserved in older rabbinic sources. For example, see *Pesiqta Rabbati*, edited Meir Friedmann (Vienna, 1880), 20, 96a. In that context, Saturn is associated with the view that in the future the nations of the world would rule over Israel. Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 6 vols. (Philadelphia, 1968), 5: 405 n. 72, mentions a legend reported by a number of medieval rabbinic sources according to which Moses chose Saturday as the day of rest since this is presumed to be the unlucky day of Saturn. On the negative portrayal of Saturn, see also *Beraita de-Mazzalot*, in *Battei Midrashot*, edited by Solomon Wertheimer (Jerusalem, 1980), p. 35. Interestingly, there are astrological sources from antiquity and the middle ages wherein the "black star" of Saturn, identified as well in some contexts as the abode of the devil, is identified as the star of Israel, a view enhanced by the fact that the Jewish Sabbath is on Saturday, which is Saturn's day. See sources and discussion in Carl G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, second edition (Princeton, 1979), pp. 74–76. The tradition that Saturn is the patron of the Israel is found in Samuel ibn Zarza; see Schwartz, *Astral Magic*, p. 164. It must be pointed out, however, that the same author preserves the negative portrayal of Saturn as a destructive force; see op. cit., p. 149. See also op. cit., pp. 277–278. On the nexus between Saturn and the disclosure of secrets, see the passage of ibn Zarza cited by Schwartz, op. cit., p. 119. A link between Saturn and Sabbath is also found in some medieval kabbalistic texts such as the anonymous *Sefer ha-Temunah*. See Haviva Pedayah, "Sabbath, Saturn, and the Diminution of the Moon – The Sacred Conjunction: Sign and Image," *Eshel Beer-Sheva* 4 (1996): 143–191 (in Hebrew). On the link between Saturn and the moon, see sources cited and discussed by Carl G. Jung, *Mysterium Coniunctionis: An Inquiry into the Separation and Synthesis of Psychic Opposites in Alchemy*, translated by R. F. C. Hull, second edition (Princeton, 1970), p. 175 n. 358. On the destructive and melancholic power of Saturn combined with the messianic character of this planet, which were assigned especially to Sabbatai Sevi, see Moshe Idel, "Saturn and Sabbatai Tzevi:

The letters of the Hebrew name for this planet, *shabbetai*, can be transposed into the expression *ayyeh shabbat*, "where is Sabbath?" This play on words denotes that the demonic force of Saturn is the antithesis of the holy force of Sabbath.[58] Given the identification of Samael as the archon of Esau,[59] and the further identification of Esau as Christianity in medieval rabbinic sources,[60] it is reasonable to surmise that implicit in this passage is the presumption that Saturn is Jesus, the demonic power that is the ontological source of idolatry. If my surmise is correct, then it stands to reason that the position adopted here is one of radical dichotomization of the holy and the impure, Sabbath and Sabbatai. According to another zoharic passage, however, the word for idol, *pesel*, is interpreted as the "refuse of holiness" (*pesolet di-qedushah*), which is the secret of the other gods.[61] By identifying the object of idol worship in this manner, there is an attempt to avoid positing an absolute metaphysical dualism, for the demonic force is perceived as the dross of the holy realm rather than an autonomous, sinister power.[62] To be sure, this very term demarcates the difference between the two realms, for one who worships idols is involved with the refuse of holiness and not with the spark of holiness itself. Nevertheless, the notion of the refuse of holiness problematizes the hard and fast dichotomization of the two realms.[63]

What, then, does it mean for a Jewish male to give way to his temptation for idol worship by occupying himself with the dregs of the sacred? To understand this it is necessary to recall that the nexus between idolatry and the demonic in zoharic literature is expressed as well in terms

A New Approach to Sabbateanism," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations From the Bible to Waco*, edited by Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen (Leiden, 1998), pp. 173–202; idem, *Messianic Mystics* (New Haven and London, 1998), pp. 192–195.

[58] For an elaborate account of the dark side of Saturn, see *Zohar* 3:227b (*Raʿaya Meheimna*). The antithesis of Samael and Sabbath is emphasized elsewhere in zoharic literature. For example, see *Zohar* 3:243a (*Raʿaya Meheimna*).

[59] For references to this motif in rabbinic and zoharic sources, see Elliot R. Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and the Construction of History in the *Zohar*," in *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, edited by Elisheva Carlebach, John M. Efron, and David M. Myers (Hanover and London, 1998), pp. 237 n. 40.

[60] See Gerson D. Cohen, *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Culture* (Philadelphia, 1991), pp. 243–269, esp. 259–260.

[61] *Zohar* 2:91a.

[62] The less dualistic approach to *elohim aḥerim* is accentuated in Gikatilla, *Shaʿarei Orah*, 2:17–19. On Gikatilla's view regarding the nature of evil, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 78–81; Ephraim Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, edited by Joseph Hacker (Tel-Aviv, 1976), pp. 278–279 (in Hebrew); Ben-Shlomo, "Introduction," in Gikatilla, *Shaʿarei Orah*, 1:34–39.

[63] On the tension between the monistic and dualistic approaches to the problem of evil in zoharic kabbalah, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 450–458.

of sexual deviancy, which is related more specifically to the Jewish male entering the holy covenant inscribed on the penis into the unholy space of the Gentile woman, the embodiment of the feminine aspect of the demonic who assumes the posture of the seductress.[64] Indeed, the biblical command against turning toward idols (Lev 19:4) is interpreted in one zoharic passage as a prohibition of gazing upon the women of the nations lest the Jewish male become sexually aroused.[65] Based on the biblical linkage of idolatry as the worship of a foreign god and adultery as having intercourse with the woman from the other nations, in *Zohar* we find an unequivocal description of idolatry as the lust for the forbidden woman.[66] In another part of the aforecited passage from *Tiqqunei Zohar*, the desecration of Sabbath by carrying into the public domain (*reshut ha-rabbim*) is equated with having intercourse with the prostitute and thereby defiling the sign of the covenant by placing it in the domain of the other power.[67] Insofar as Sabbath is on a par with all Torah, an older rabbinic dictum utilized in this later kabbalistic work,[68] the point of this comment is to underscore the extent to which the worship of the false god is intertwined with the Jewish male's lust for the harlot, which in this context is limited more specifically to a Gentile woman whose soul derives from the demonic.[69] Moreover, inasmuch as the zoharic kabbalists, in line with a number of medieval rabbinic authorities, considered Christianity as opposed to Islam idolatrous,[70] it makes perfectly good sense for the misguided eros to be associated more specifically with the desire of the male Jew for the Christian woman. Fornication with a Christian woman has the same effect as sexual intercourse with one's wife during her menstrual period, for the holy covenant is defiled and the offspring of such a union partakes ontologically of the impure spir-

[64] *Zohar* 1:38b; 2:87b; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 461, 468–469. In *Zohar* 3:42a, the ingestion of forbidden foods on the part of a Jew is considered to be idolatry since the line separating holy and demonic is crossed in a manner that is analogous to a Jewish man having sexual relations with a Gentile woman.

[65] *Zohar* 3:84a.

[66] *Zohar* 1:38b; 2:90a.

[67] *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 21, 57a–b. On the utilization of the rabbinic category of *reshut ha-rabbim* as a sign for the alienation of exile, see Pinchas Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* (Albany, 1993), p. 41.

[68] Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 1:7, 3c; Nedarim 3:14, 38b; *Exodus Rabbah* 25:12.

[69] In *Zohar* 1:38b, idolatry is designated the "foreign fear" and is identified further as the prostitute (*eshet zenunin*). See also *Zohar* 2:148b, 245a.

[70] *Mishnah im Perush Rabbenu Mosheh ben Maimon: Seder Nezikin*, edited by Joseph Kafiḥ (Jerusalem, 1965), Avodah Zarah 1:3, p. 225; *Mishneh Torah*, Avodat Kokhavim 9:4.

it.[71] Promiscuous sexual behavior and idolatrous religious practices were thus understood as forms of seduction by the serpentine feminine impurity that lead to the desecration of the male body of the Jew that is made in the image of God.[72]

Another dimension of the nexus between idolatry and the erotic yearning for the demonic other in zoharic literature (attested in other kabbalistic sources) is the view of idol worship as creating a separation of the male and female within the godhead. The act of separation is understood more precisely as an expression of the impulse to reify *Shekhinah*, the feminine aspect of the divine.[73] A significant aspect of kabbalistic symbolism, which is not always appreciated by contemporary scholars and especially those who want to assuage the androcentricism of the tradition, is the following asymmetry: Even though the unity of God is repeatedly pitched as the union of male and female, only the worship of the female in exclusion of the male is portrayed as idolatry. Foreign worship, *avodah zarah*, consists of venerating *Shekhinah* in isolation from the rest of the sefirotic emanations.[74] The point is captured succinctly in a remark by Isaac of Acre, a kabbalist more or less contemporary with the zoharic circle. In his effort to explain the kabbalistic intent of the commentary of Naḥmanides on the verse "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Exod 20:3), Isaac writes: "I say with all the paltriness of intellect that is in me that all the effort of the master was to allude in the secret of 'You shall have no other gods besides me' that one should not cut the shoots and not separate [the attribute of] *Aṭarah* in thought, and one should not direct intention to her alone through sacrifices or prayer, but only in the unity of the edifice (*yiḥud ha-binyan*)."[75] The "strange worship" of idolatry is interpreted as the estrange-

[71] *Zohar* 1:131b; 2:87b; Moses de León, *Mishkan ha-Edut*, MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fols. 26a–27a; *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de León's Sefer ha-Rimmon*, edited by Elliot R. Wolfson (Atlanta, 1988), pp. 212–213; Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant," pp. 216–224.

[72] The *Zohar* repeatedly links sexual relations with Gentile women and idolatry (understood as the worship of the other god of the demonic realm). For references, see Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant," p. 235 n. 33. On the worship of idols as a contamination of the Jewish male body, see *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 268–269.

[73] According to the formulation adopted by some kabbalists, informed by the statement in *Sefer Yeṣirah* regarding the ten *sefirot* "ten and not nine, nine and not eleven" (1:4), one must be careful not to cut off the first of the *sefirot*, *Keter*, just as one must be careful not to isolate the last of them, *Shekhinah*. See, for instance, the commentary of Azriel of Gerona to the relevant passage in *Sefer Yeṣirah* in *Kitvei Ramban*, edited by Ḥayyim D. Chavel, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1982), 2:454.

[74] A sustained discussion of this theme is found in *sha'ar ha-harisah*, the chapter on heresy, in *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, 113a–134a.

[75] *Sefer Me'irat Einayim*, p. 105.

ment of the female (designated by the term *aṭarah*, literally, the diadem) from the rest of the emanations, the reification of the feminine potency as an object of liturgical worship. One must not offer sacrifice or prayer to *Shekhinah* when she is detached from the rest of the *sefirot*, which are referred to as *binyan*, the edifice.[76] The kabbalistic perspective on idolatry, Naḥmanides explained, is that it is an act of heresy, a "cutting of the shoots" that creates a rupture in the letters of the divine name, a theme that is related to the major accounts of sin in the biblical text, including the eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden, the building of the Tower of Babel, and the creation of the Golden Calf.[77] The danger connected to the idolatrous act centers around the male need to worship the female in isolation. To appreciate the psychological element implicit in this reification, one must bear in mind that *Shekhinah* is viewed as the focal point of *tefillah*, worship,[78] and *qiyyum miṣwot*, fulfillment of ritual obligations.[79] A common denominator thus exists between pious devotion and idolatrous worship inasmuch as both acts are directed toward the feminine potency. The key difference lies, however, in the insistence that piety as opposed to idolatry involves the mystery of the faith, which is dependent on maintaining the unity of the masculine and feminine aspects of God. I have argued in a number of studies that this unity ultimately entails the ontic restoration of the female to the male, an ontological principle linked exegetically to the scriptural notion (attested in the second account of creation) that the female is constructed out of the male body, an androcentric conception that defies logic and experience.[80] Nevertheless, to achieve this state of

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[76] To appreciate the kabbalistic application of the term *binyan* to the totality of the *sefirot*, one must bear in mind that this edifice is shaped by the fourfold structure of the letters of the name. For a perceptive insight regarding the relationship of the Tetragrammaton to the fourfold cosmological pattern, see Pedaya, "Divinity as Place and Time," pp. 89–90.

[77] See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 374–376; Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, pp. 190–201.

[78] See Elliot R. Wolfson, "Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*," in *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, edited by David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta, 1988), pp. 41–79, esp. 52–56.

[79] *Book of the Pomegranate*, pp. 59–62 (English introduction).

[80] For a representative sampling of some of my studies that have dealt with this topic, see "Woman – The Feminine as Other," *Circle in the Square*, pp. 79–121; "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*: Redemption and the Overcoming of Gender Dimorphism in the Messianic Kabbalah of Moses Hayyim Luzzatto," *History of Religions* 36 (1997): 289–332; "Constructions of the Feminine in the Sabbatian Theology of Abraham Cardoso, with a Critical Edition of *Derush ha-Shekhinah*," *Kabbalah: A Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 3 (1998): 11–143.

restoration it is necessary to unite the female and male. Idol worship is predicated on keeping these forces separate.

The lust for the other is the thread that ties together the two explanations of idolatry, to wit, the worship of the feminine aspect of holiness alienated from the masculine, on the one hand, and the worship of the feminine aspect of the demonic as a goddess worthy of obeisance, on the other. The theosophical significance of idolatry, therefore, is the reification of the feminine, which expresses itself in one of the two ways that I have mentioned. When the matter is examined in this way, one may conclude that there is no substantial difference between *Shekhinah* and Lilith, the female on the side of holiness and the female on the side of impurity.[81] Any attempt to treat the feminine in isolation from the masculine is heresy, an infringement on the monotheistic mystery of faith. The idolatrous reification of the feminine as an autonomous power can be applied as well to the Torah, which is depicted in several key passages in *Zohar* (based on much earlier sources) as the female persona of the divine.[82] The ontic identification of Torah and God, a basic hermeneutical axiom uniformly posited by kabbalists, has the potential to foster the tendency on the part of Jewish men to treat the scroll of Torah as a fetishist object of erotic imagination. As a consequence of this desire, Torah would be turned into an idol, a *pesel*,[83] a piece cut off from the whole.[84] In the following remark, Joseph of Hamadan underscores the intricate nexus between idolatry as the exclusive worship of the feminine and the idealization of Torah:

> Know that this matter "You shall have no other gods besides me" (Exod. 20:3) corresponds to *Ze'eir Anpin*, the attribute of *Malkhut*, which is the secret of the bride, for one should not separate her from the bridegroom, the king, Lord of hosts. One should not make of it a form unto itself or a god unto itself, and one should not cut the shoots … and the one who worships this attribute and makes of her a thing unto itself worships idolatry. Concerning this the verse says "You shall have no other gods besides me." And it is written "You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image (*pesel*) or any likeness" (ibid., 20:4), that is, one should not decree (*yifsol*) in one's

[81] Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, pp. 376–379.

[82] On the female imaging of the Torah in rabbinic and kabbalistic sources, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 1–28, and notes on pp. 123–140; idem, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, pp. 385–386.

[83] It is of interest to consider the description of the first tablets inscribed by the finger of God (Exod. 32:16) in *Zohar* 2:84b.

[84] On the feminine figure of the divine, with specific reference to the iconic representation bordering ostensibly on idolatry, see Charles Mopsik, *Le Zohar: Lamentations* (Paris, 2000), pp. 36–46, esp. 41–42.

mind to worship anything but the unique name (*shem ha-meyuḥad*). … This is what Jeremiah, may peace be upon him, alluded to in his book, "The children gather sticks, [the fathers build the fire, the mothers knead dough, to make cakes] for the queen of heaven" (Jer 7:18), [the expression *milekhet ha-shamayim*] is missing an *alef*,[85] [for this alludes to] the queen of heaven, which is the second cherub, the secret of the bride, the community of Israel, for their intention was to worship this attribute and it was considered as if they worshipped idols. This is the secret that when the Torah was given to Moses our master, peace be upon him, it was said "do not go near a woman" (Exod 19:15), this is *Shekhinah*, and corresponding to this it says "For you must not worship the other god, for the Lord, whose name is jealousy, is a jealous God" (ibid. 34:14). Not for naught is [the word] "jealousy" (*qanna*) used here, for jealousy (*qin'ah*) is found in relation to a man's wife.[86]

Idolatry, or the worship of other gods, is interpreted as the veneration of the bride, referred to by the technical terms *Ze'eir 'Anpin* and *Malkhut*,[87] separated from the bridegroom. In a fascinating inversion, the notion of an idol, *pesel*, is related to the mandate to craft in mind (*yifsol be-maḥshavto*) the true object of supplication, the *shem meyuḥad*, YHWH, for this name signifies the masculine potency that contains the feminine within itself. Joseph of Hamadan perceptively interprets the biblical account that at Sinai the Israelite men were prohibited from touching a woman as a warning against worshipping *Shekhinah* in isolation from the male. There is an implicit spiritual danger in the revelation of Torah, for it can lead to the reification of the feminine as a distinct object of idolization. Kabbalists were especially cognizant of this peril since their contemplative envisioning was so tied up with the feminine potency. It will be recalled that in the celebrated parable of the beautiful maiden in the *Zohar*, the ultimate stage of interpretation, revealing the secret, is depicted as a face to face union of lover and maiden, exegete and Torah.[88] Hence, the dramatization of Torah as an erotic object does not yield reification of the feminine isolated from the masculine, for the ideal

[85] The assumption is that the correct spelling should be *mele'khet*, the constructive form of the nominative *mela'khah*, which signifies "work" or "labor."

[86] MS Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, héb. 817, fol. 141b.

[87] In the works of Joseph of Hamadan, the expression *ze'eir anpin*, the "smaller countenance," refers symbolically to the feminine *Shekhinah*, in contrast to zoharic literature where it refers to the masculine potency, either *Tif'eret* or the emanations from *Ḥokhmah* to *Yesod*. See Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 134–135; Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, translated by Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany, 1993), pp. 105–107; Charles Mopsik, *Les Grands textes de la Cabale: les rites qui font dieu* (Paris, 1992), p. 214, n. 34.

[88] Several scholars have discussed this section of zoharic literature. For a selective list of some of the relevant sources, see Wolfson, "Occultation of the Feminine," p. 115 n. 4.

calls for unification of feminine with masculine. That this union is thoroughly androcentric, however, is attested by the fact that the exegete is called the "husband of Torah" and "master of the house," terms that suggest that the feminine Torah is subordinate to the masculine exegete after she has successfully enticed him to know her face to face.[89]

By way of summary, it may be said that looming in the center of the zoharic kabbalist's worldview is the visual contemplation of the image of that which has no image, the doubling of vision that renders visible the invisible in the invisibility of the visible, a revelation that reveals itself in the laying bare of that which is withheld. Just as the name of God is both hidden and revealed, the former corresponding to YHWH and the latter to Adonai, so the Torah, which is identical with the name, is concurrently concealed and disclosed.[90] Indeed, all the matters of this world and the supernal world are hidden and revealed. The example of the name illumines the impenetrable depth of the paradox: ultimately there are not two names, but one name, for the very name that is written YHWH is pronounced Adonai. Analogously, the images by which the imageless God is manifest preserve the imagelessness of the divine reality just as the exoteric sense of Torah sustains the esoteric meaning by masking it in the guise of that which it is not. The image conjured in the imagination is the medium through which that which has no image appears in the image of the truth that preserves the truth of the image. It would seem that it is for this reason that Simeon ben Yoḥai was adamant in his warning to members of the fraternity that they should not set up an idol in secrecy, that is, they should not reify the anthropomorphic images of God that are invoked within the imagination in the effort to envision the form of that which has no form. Disclosure of secrets is itself a form of fashioning an icon of the divine anthropos from mental images that is to be distinguished from erecting an idol carved from material stones. One may not build an idol in secrecy, but secrecy demands that one construct an icon in the imagination.

[89] See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, p. 388.
[90] *Zohar* 3:159a, 230b.