

MURMURING SECRETS:  
EROTICISM AND ESOTERICISM IN MEDIEVAL KABBALAH

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When it cannot achieve its perfect form, the A Bao A Qu suffers great pain, and its moaning is a barely perceptible murmur similar to the whisper of silk.

But when the man or woman that revives the creature is filled with purity, the A Bao A Qu is able to reach the topmost step, completely formed and radiating a clear blue light.

—Borges, *The Book of Imaginary Beings*

*Transmitting Secrets: Concealing the Concealment*

I commence with a generalization the validity of which must be illustrated from particular instantiations: eroticism and esotericism converge at the point of their divergence. Or, so it might seem, as eroticism ostensibly exposes the concealed and esotericism conceals the exposed. On closer examination, however, this contrast does not engender divergence as much as difference that suggests its own sameness in being different. Alternatively expressed, exposure of the concealed and concealment of the exposed ought not be seen as binary opposites; hermeneutically, exposure is the most exposed concealment, and concealment the most concealed exposure. To attend this paradox is to ascertain that the exposed is precisely what is concealed in being exposed as what is concealed, an inherent duplicity that renders every act of uncovering a recovery, every act of undressing a redressing. It should be obvious that in this doubly concealed concealment, the exposure of exposing, one can discern something resonant with the nature of eros. In the course of this analysis, the relevance of this remark shall become more evident.

A specific application of this tenet may be elicited from the teachings expounded by medieval kabbalists. It is reasonable to presume that the elusive manner of divulging secrets through allusion satisfied a psychological need to reveal and a religious obligation to conceal, that is, to reveal in such a way that the revealing would conceal what was

revealed at the same time that the concealing would reveal what was concealed.<sup>1</sup> As Abraham Abulafia succinctly expressed the matter, “the way of the mouth is to reveal the hidden and to conceal the revealed (*legalot ha-nistar u-lekhsosot ha-nigleh*).”<sup>2</sup> A noteworthy formulation of this approach is found in an important text likely to have been composed in the late-thirteenth or early-fourteenth century where a total of 112 esoteric teachings are transmitted as oral traditions received from the elder (*zaqen*).<sup>3</sup> In the context of writing about the mystical significance of the cloud into which God descended and through which the glory was revealed to Moses, the anonymous kabbalist notes, “we mentioned it here as an allusion from the allusions of its secret (*be-remez mi-rimzei sodo*) in order to hide it (*lema’an hastiro*).”<sup>4</sup> In other passages from this

<sup>1</sup> I have articulated the paradoxical hermeneutic of esotericism in many of my previous publications. For example, see Wolfson, “Occultation of the Feminine”; *Abraham Abulafia*, 9–38; “Divine Suffering,” 110–115; *Language, Eros, Being*, 17–19, 27, 134–135, 222–224, 232–233, 262, 287, 363. The tension between disclosure and concealment in zoharic kabbalah has been explored as well by Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 26–30. I note, finally, that this dialectic was also a critical aspect of Gershom Scholem’s orientation, although there are important differences between our approaches and the respective theoretical frameworks that we adopt. Here I simply note that Scholem, in contrast to Liebes, expressed in creative ways an irresolvable tension between the urge to communicate secrets and the apparent impossibility to do so without rendering the esotericism inauthentic. Liebes, by contrast, entertains that kabbalists, at least from the zoharic circle, affirmed the possibility of a full disclosure of secrets in the messianic era, and thus the tension (or ambivalence) between revealing and concealing is reflective of living in a messianically charged time before the coming of the messiah (*Studies in Zohar*, 30). See Biale, “Gershom Scholem’s Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms”; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 26–29. As I noted in the aforementioned study, Scholem’s view regarding the possibility of an esoteric tradition cannot be separated from his depiction of mystical language as the symbolic communication of the non-communicable. On Scholem’s linguistic mysticism and his approach to symbolism, see Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 89–92; Idel, “Zur Funktion von Symbolen bei G.G. Scholem.” Most tellingly, as part of his wrestling with the possibility of an esoteric tradition, Scholem at times questioned the legitimacy of his own participation in disseminating kabbalistic secrets. For recent discussion and citation of some of the relevant sources, see Weidner, “Reading Gershom Scholem,” 213–215. On the critical notion of an esoteric text in Scholem’s worldview, see Biale, *Gershom Scholem*, 147–162.

<sup>2</sup> Abulafia, *Mafteah ha-Ra’ayon*, 69.

<sup>3</sup> A version of the complete text is extant in MS Oxford, Bodleian Library, 2396, fols. 1b–63b. I am presently preparing an annotated edition based primarily on this manuscript, though I am utilizing as well fragments of the work found in other manuscripts. The composition has been previously mentioned by a number of scholars. See Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, 188; *Kabbalah*, 61 (in that context, Scholem identifies the *zaqen* as Moses); Idel, *Golem*, 111–12; “Introduction,” 36; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 284 n. 50; “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 182–184 and the relevant notes; Abrams, “The Shekhinah Prays,” 531–532.

<sup>4</sup> MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 3b.

treatise, the written transmission of secrets through allusion is justified by the anxiety of loss, a fear that the traditions would be forgotten.<sup>5</sup> The comment that I cited, however, pinpoints the paradox at a more poignant spot of juxtaposition: disclosure through allusion serves the twofold purpose of revealing what is concealed, and concealing what is revealed. Thus the secret telling of secrets—in the idiom of Maimonides, communicating truth in flashes<sup>6</sup>—enables one to divulge mystical truths to worthy recipients while keeping them hidden from the unworthy.

In a second extract, the practice of speaking secretly embraces a profounder sense of dissembling. Commenting on the words of Moses to Pharaoh, “we shall not know with what we are to worship the Lord until we arrive there” (Exod 10:26), the anonymous kabbalist writes: “He did not mention a specific place, a celebrated country, a recognized city, or a disclosed location that is known to any man, but he simply said ‘there.’ He concealed his knowledge from everyone, and he revealed it, and publicized it to everyone (*histir yedi’ato me-ha-kol we-gillah otto u-firsamo la-kol*).”<sup>7</sup> How can we make sense of the assertion that Moses at the same time concealed and revealed his knowledge from everyone? To be sure, a more politically oriented form of esotericism, to which I have briefly alluded, turns on adopting a way of communication that reveals the secret to some and hides it from others, but this does not fit the description of Moses concealing and revealing knowledge indiscriminately to everyone. Clearly, from the standpoint of a binary logic, this is illogical—one either conceals or reveals, one cannot both conceal and reveal at the same time and in the same correlation. And yet, it is exactly this coincidence that we must take up, if we are to comprehend a paradox that has informed kabbalistic thinking on this matter.

In this essay, I will not rehash the various assumptions inherent in the duplicitous nature of the secret, a strategy deployed adroitly in the different trends of kabbalah, a topic I have discussed at length elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, fols. 7a, 51b–52a, 62b, and see Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 183–184. The rationale for committing esoteric matters to writing in order to prevent forgetfulness is not unique to this text. See, for instance, Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, 179: “Our intention in this book is to make known in it matters that have been received from the prophets that have been forgotten from a long time ago since they were not written in books.” Abulafia’s remark echoes the opinion expressed by Maimonides, *Guide*, I.71, 176; III: Introduction, 415.

<sup>6</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I: Introduction, 7–8; I.34, 78.

<sup>7</sup> MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 9a.

<sup>8</sup> See references cited above, n. 1.

Instead, I will mark more carefully the spot where the erotic and esoteric crisscross, so that we may better ascertain the manner in which the secrecy of eros can be discerned from the eros of secrecy, and the eros of secrecy from the secrecy of eros, a reciprocity that prompts a doubling of vision, a re/vision, a secreting of the secret, a concealing of the concealment, the mystery revealed in the veiling of its unveiling.

The central place accorded the erotic in kabbalistic teaching is a theme that has been well studied by scholars. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that at the very center of the kabbalists' vision—and here, again, I see little value in making distinctions along typological lines, as the central place accorded the erotic is something shared by kabbalists from the different groups, classified by the dominant nomenclature of contemporary scholarship as theosophic and prophetic, even if we readily admit that the depiction of eros is not monolithic—is an appreciation of eros as imparting, to borrow the evocative terminology of George Steiner, a grammar of being.<sup>9</sup> More specific to the mythopoetic sensibility cultivated by many kabbalists is an envisioning of God's unity in heteroerotic terms, an onto-theological assumption that undergirds the positive valorization of sex as a theurgic means to maintain the balance of forces in the divine and, by extension, in the universe. I am quick to add, however, that the theurgical cannot be separated from the deeply sexual nature of the mystical experience attested in kabbalistic literature. This is not to say that traditional kabbalah celebrates the sexual as such, but, rather, that the modes of rhetoric enlisted to describe the inner workings of the divine, and to account for the ecstatic experiences therewith, are infused with tropes of sexuality.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, even gestures of ascetic renunciation, which may be excavated from kabbalistic sources, are expressions of the erotic. As we find in other forms of mystical spirituality, so too in various currents of medieval kabbalah, the intensity of desire is to be measured by the desire not to desire, the most passionate of passions by the passion to be dispassionate.<sup>11</sup> From a kabbalistic standpoint, contemplative envisioning of God revolves about the belonging-together, or the laying in proximity, of intercourse and discourse, not only two predominant

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<sup>9</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 39–40. See *ibid.*, 61–64, where kabbalah is discussed explicitly by the author.

<sup>10</sup> My understanding of the correlation of the sacred and sexual, the mystical and erotic, resonates with the view espoused by Kripal in his writings, especially *Kali's Child* and *Roads of Excess*.

<sup>11</sup> For more extensive discussion, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 296–371.

modalities that structure human experience, as Steiner appreciated, but also two forms that indicate the nature of the divine being, and, indeed, the nature of being more generally.<sup>12</sup> The language of eros, one might say, reverberates with the eros of language. As kabbalists have repeatedly taught, the letter is the sign of the flesh that is the flesh of the sign. Inscribed therein, one knows the way.

*Decoding Esotericism: Silence of Not-Speaking*

The path I shall follow begins by attending the link between transmission of the mystery and the verbal gesticulation of the murmur, a course determined by the further assumption that, in the point of their meeting, one may fathom a significant facet of the eroticism that informed kabbalistic doctrine and practice. The link is attested in the rabbinic principle that a matter received in a whisper, even if derived exegetically from a scriptural proof-text, must be conveyed in a whisper.<sup>13</sup> Especially important in this regard is the talmudic interpretation of the expression *nevon lahash* (Isa 3:3), which contextually denotes an expert in charms, as one who has the capacity of understanding one thing from another and, therefore, is worthy of receiving “words of Torah that are given in a whisper (*be-lahash*).”<sup>14</sup> The whisper hovers between speech and speechlessness, as it is a verbal act, but one that, nonetheless, remains inaudible except to the person to whom it is directly communicated. It is worth noting, in passing, that a manner of silent oration—*qol dimmat elohim*, a locution likely based on the expression *qol demamah daqqah* in 1 Kings 19:12 to which I shall return below—is associated already in some Qumran fragments with angelic speech.<sup>15</sup> Further evidence for the depiction of the liturgical utterance of angels as silent language may be educed from the Aramaic targum

<sup>12</sup> See above, n. 8 and the brief discussion in *Language, Eros, Being*, 118.

<sup>13</sup> *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3, 19–20, and parallel sources cited on 19, n. 10; Altmann, “A Note on the Rabbinic Doctrine of Creation”; Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58; Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 173–175; *Language, Eros, Being*, 521 n. 135.

<sup>14</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14a. See also Wewers, *Geheimnis und Geheimhaltung*, 116; Idel, “Secrecy, Binah and Derishah,” 319 and 326. For a review of the role of secrets in the rabbinic notion of revelation, but without any sustained discussion of the whisper, see Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 104–123.

<sup>15</sup> See Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, 303–307, 312–314; Allison, “The Silence of Angels,” 189–197. See also the analysis of Paul’s reference to the worshipper conversant in the “tongues of angels” (1 Cor 14:2) in Bockmuehl, *Revelation and Mystery*, 168–170.

(traditionally ascribed to Jonathan ben Uziel) on the aforementioned phrase from 1 Kings 19:12, *qal dimeshabbehin ba-hasha'i*, the “voice of those who utter praise silently.” To utter praise silently is to execute a form of speech that is at the same time silence, to speak and not speak concomitantly, to speak by not speaking, not to speak by speaking. It is reasonable to surmise, though I cannot prove my conjecture, that at some point the characterization of the angelic mode of liturgical utterance was appropriated and utilized to depict the form of secret talk by which human beings should propagate esoteric wisdom. This surmise is enhanced by the further presumption that angels are privy to cosmological and theological mysteries known to God and on rare occasions revealed to extraordinary human beings, the righteous souls who are transformed and attain an angelic status.

Be that as it may, the emphasis on this form of entrusting secrets is all the more striking in light of the fact that the demand to be utterly silent, as opposed to speaking silently, is not unknown in Jewish mysticism, not to mention mystical literature produced in other contexts wherein the apophatic ascent leads the mind to what can be neither known nor spoken.<sup>16</sup> If the most serious matters are, as Plato intimated, to remain unspoken (and this includes both verbal and written communication), then it is precisely by not speaking that these matters may be delivered. The unspeakable, in a word, is transmitted without being spoken, for if spoken, it is not the unspeakable that has been transmitted.<sup>17</sup> Although Plato seemed to be especially anxious about the written dissemination of secrets, for, as commonsense dictates, what has been committed to writing cannot be unconditionally controlled,<sup>18</sup> a concern later expressed by Maimonides as well,<sup>19</sup> his philosophical esotericism runs deeper, as he apparently felt that certain topics should not be communicated by either oral or written means.

<sup>16</sup> For a comparative analysis of this theme, see Williams, *Denying Divinity*, 84–92, 101–104, 128–134. See also the sources cited in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 422 n. 247.

<sup>17</sup> See the illuminating discussion in Rhodes, *Eros, Wisdom, and Silence*, 25–31, 110–112, 167–175, 534–539.

<sup>18</sup> See Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 148 and references to other scholars cited in nn. 7–8 *ad locum*.

<sup>19</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, I.71, 176. Commenting on the rabbinic dictum that it is prohibited to put down in writing words that were communicated orally (Babylonian Talmud, *Giṭṭin* 60b), Maimonides wrote that “it was meant to prevent what has ultimately come about in this respect: I mean the multiplicity of opinion, the variety of schools, the confusions occurring in the expression of what is put down in writing, the negligence that accompanies what is written down, the divisions of the people, who are separated into sects, and the production of confusion with regard to actions.”

Here it is beneficial to recall the words attributed to Aqiva, “silence is a fence for wisdom.”<sup>20</sup> Aqiva’s dictum, which may have been inspired textually by Proverbs 17:28, is not connected to esotericism, even though he is portrayed in other contexts as adept in mystical secrets, the most well-known in the rabbinic tale of the four sages who entered Pardes.<sup>21</sup> I do not think, however, that it is implausible to suggest that the requirement to be silent with respect to secrets promulgated by other rabbinic sages can be seen as a specific application of a more general pietistic sensibility regarding the nexus between wisdom and silence. Thus, for example, we find the following interpretation of “The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter” (*kevod elohim haster davar u-khevod melakhim haqor davar*) (Prov 25:2) transmitted in the name of R. Levi: “‘The glory of God is to conceal the matter’—before the world was created. ‘And the glory of kings is to search out the matter’—after the world was created.”<sup>22</sup> From this exegetical gloss, we may glean evidence that it is appropriate to be silent with regard to the most profound mysteries, secrets that relate to the divine nature prior to creation. The admonition is reiterated in a second tradition preserved in the name of R. Levi, explaining why the world was created with *beit*, the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, but the first letter of *bere’shit*, the word with which the Torah begins: “Just as *beit* is closed on all its sides but open from one side, so you have no permission to seek out what is above, below, before, or after, but only from the day the word was created and forward.”<sup>23</sup>

The reticence to divulge secrets about the account of creation (*ma’aseh bere’shit*) is affirmed as well with respect to secrets about the account of the chariot (*ma’aseh merkavah*), two central taxonomies employed by rabbinic scribes to circumscribe the contours of esoteric wisdom. For example, we find the following teaching attributed to R. Aḥa bar Jacob:

<sup>20</sup> Mishnah, Avot 3:13; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 26, 82. On the benefit of silence for physical well-being, see the tradition transmitted in the name of Simeon ben Gamliel in Mishnah, Avot 1:16; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 22, 75; Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 99a.

<sup>21</sup> The bibliography related to this talmudic tale is rather substantial, and here I will mention only one useful source that incorporates references to various other studies: Bregman, “Introduction.”

<sup>22</sup> Palestinian Talmud, Hagigah 2:1, 77c. For an alternative version of this teaching, see *Genesis Rabbah* 9:1, 67–68.

<sup>23</sup> Palestinian Talmud, Hagigah 2:1, 77c. Cf. *Pesiqta Rabbati*, 21:52, 502. For the later reverberation of this aggadic motif in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, one of the early textual repositories of kabbalistic teaching, see Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 124–125.

There is another firmament above the heads of the beasts, as it is written, "Above the heads of the creatures was a form: an expanse, with an awe-inspiring gleam as of crystal" (Ezek 1:22). Until here you have permission to talk, but from there and beyond you have no permission to speak, as it is written in the book of Ben Sira, "Do not seek out what is too enigmatic for you and do not investigate what is concealed from you." Contemplate that for which you have permission, but you have no business being occupied with hidden matters.<sup>24</sup>

In the same section of the Babylonian Talmud, there is another rabbinic dictum that makes a comparable point about the exposition of matters pertaining to the chariot: "It has been taught with respect to them, 'Honey and milk are under your tongue' (Song 4:11), matters that are sweeter than honey and milk should be under the tongue."<sup>25</sup> A similar outlook is expressed in what appears to be a later scribal interpolation that serves as the opening of *Heikhalot Zūṭarti*,<sup>26</sup> a textual unit from the corpus of ancient *merkavah* mysticism: "Do not investigate the words of your lips, contemplate what is in your heart, and be silent, so that you will merit the beauties of the chariot."<sup>27</sup> Bracketing the provenance of this interpolation, the critical point is that attested therein is the avowal of silent contemplation as the appropriate means to occasion a vision of the divine throne.

The need for silence with respect to esoteric matters is reiterated in a passage from the first part of the ancient cosmological work *Sefer Yeṣirah* (a composition that is better described as an aggregate of disparate parts that were assembled over a lengthy period of time and eventually redacted into a text, but still one whose boundaries remained porous),<sup>28</sup> where the word *belimah* in the expression *eser sefirot belimah* is rendered midrashically as *belom pikha mi-ledabber belom libbekha mi-leharher*, "close your mouth from speaking and stop your heart from thinking."<sup>29</sup> We may presume that encoded here is a code of esotericism—perhaps, as

<sup>24</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Ḥagigah 13a.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 77, already surmised that the remarks at the beginning of *Heikhalot Zūṭarti* "may not constitute an original part of the *Urform* of the book."

<sup>27</sup> Schäfer, *Synopse zur Hekhalot-Literatur*, §335, 142–143. The thematic link between this passage and the text from *Sefer Yeṣirah* was previously noted by Elior in her annotated edition of *Hekhalot Zūṭarti*, 60 n. 3.

<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed discussion with reference to other scholarly treatments, see Wolfson, "Text, Context, and Pretext," 218–228.

<sup>29</sup> There are a number of variants connected to this passage including a reversal of the order of the two phrases "mouth" and "heart." For references see Gruenwald, "A Preliminary Critical Edition," 142 (section 5); Hayman, *Sefer Yeṣira*, 72–74.



has been suggested, an oath of secrecy, alluded to as well in the continuation of the passage where reference is made to a covenant (*berit*) that is decreed in relation to this affair<sup>30</sup>—which impels the initiate not to discourse about or to meditate on the *sefirot* excessively, a stance that was linked by kabbalists at a later period to the verse already crucial to the talmudic tradition mentioned above, *kevod elohim haster davar*, “The glory of God is to conceal a matter” (Prov 25:2).<sup>31</sup> To cite one of numerous examples, the thirteenth-century kabbalist, Azriel of Gerona, commenting on the aforementioned directive in *Sefer Yesirah*, remarks that “even with respect to what you have permission to contemplate, ‘Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin’ (Eccles 5:5), for it says ‘The glory of God is to conceal the matter.’”<sup>32</sup> It is possible to interpret this statement politically, that is, silence is necessary to prevent the transmission of secrets to those who are not fit to receive them, a form of esotericism at work, for instance, in the thought of Maimonides.<sup>33</sup> However, it is equally feasible that the issue here is not political, but rather epistemological and ontological, that is, the need to be silent rests on the surmise that the secrets portend the inherently inscrutable dimensions of divine reality, even if permission has been granted to contemplate them. Indeed, the contemplation thereof leads one to the discernment that these are matters beyond comprehension. The citation from Ecclesiastes is also significant, as it brings together indiscretion of the mouth and sin of the flesh. In the medieval kabbalistic imaginary, especially pronounced in zoharic kabbalah,<sup>34</sup> the reserve to hide secrets is juxtaposed to the modesty of covering the genitals, for the inappropriate disclosure of esoteric wisdom is on a par

<sup>30</sup> Gruenwald, “Some Critical Notes,” 490. See, more recently, Liebes, *Ars Poetica in Sefer Yetzira*, 55–56.

<sup>31</sup> The verse was utilized by other masters of esoteric lore in the Jewish middle ages. See, for instance, the very beginning of Eleazar of Worms, *Sodei Razayya ha-Shalem*, 1. This part of the text was previously published in the compendium of magical and mystical texts, *Sefer Razi'el*, 7b.

<sup>32</sup> Azriel of Gerona, *Perush le-Sefer Yesirah*, 2:456. The comment of Azriel seems to have been inspired by a section from *Sefer ha-Bahir*. See Abrams, *The Book Bahir*, §§32–33, 135–137; and brief analysis in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 235 n. 32. The bahiric passage is cited together with the interpretation of Proverbs 25:2 in the dictum attributed to R. Levi in the Palestinian Talmud (see above, n. 13) in Ṭodros Abulafia, *Sha'ar ha-Razim*, 46.

<sup>33</sup> Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 38–52. For the possible influence of Avicenna on Maimonides, see Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 24–26, 30.

with sexual improprieties.<sup>35</sup> Thus, according to one zoharic passage, R. Isaac applied the scriptural idiom of the mouth causing the sin to flesh to the transgression of explicating matters of the Torah that one did not receive directly from his master, an indiscretion that is linked as well, both thematically and exegetically, to the prohibition against making idols and/or worshipping images.<sup>36</sup>

The nexus between these two elements comes to the fore in the following interpretation of the aforementioned verse from Proverbs attributed to R. Ḥiyya in a zoharic homily:

“The glory of God is to the conceal a matter,” for a man does not have permission to reveal hidden matters that were not transmitted to be revealed, matters that the Ancient of Days covers, as it says “that they may eat their fill and clothe themselves elegantly (Isa 23:18).” “That they may eat their fill,” to the place for which there is permission, and not more. And “clothe themselves elegantly” (*we-limekhasseh attiq*), surely [these words must be applied] to what the Ancient One (*attiq*) covers (*mekhasseh*).<sup>37</sup>

The zoharic interpretation of the key term *we-limekhasseh attiq* is based on the midrashic rendering attested in the talmudic dictum, “What is [the meaning of] *we-limekhasseh attiq*? The one who covers matters that the Ancient of Days (*attiq yomin*) covered. And what are they? Secrets of Torah.”<sup>38</sup> In the zoharic context, the Ancient of Days is one of the technical designations of *Keter*, the first of the ten emanations. From the exegesis transmitted in the name of R. Ḥiyya, it would seem that these secrets must always be concealed in emulation of the aspect of the Godhead that covers them, the terminus beyond the place about which there is permission to investigate and to converse. This suggestion is supported by the continuation of the zoharic text in which another explanation is offered, an explanation that, I suggest, challenges the perspective implied in the words attributed to R. Ḥiyya.

Another explanation: “That they may eat their fill,” these are the comrades who know the ways and paths to go in the way of faith, as is appropriate,

<sup>35</sup> It should be noted that also attested in other passages from the zoharic text is the moralistic interpretation of Ecclesiastes 5:5, which explains the mouth causing the flesh to sin as lewd speech that may lead a man to illicit sexual behavior. See *Zohar* 1:8a; *Zohar Hadash*, 60d–61a.

<sup>36</sup> *Zohar* 2:87a. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 24. For a more extensive discussion on idolatry in this literary setting, see Wolfson, “Iconicity of the Text.”

<sup>37</sup> *Zohar* 3:105b.

<sup>38</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Pesahim 119a. See as well *Zohar* 3:28a (*Ra'aya Meheimna*); Moses de León, “Sefer ha-Mishkal”, 49.

like the generation in which R. Simeon dwells. “And the Ancient One covers,” this refers to other generations, for they are not worthy to eat or to drink, or for words to be revealed in their midst. Rather, “and the Ancient One covers,” as it is said, “Do not allow your mouth to cause your flesh to sin” (Eccles 5:5). In the days of R. Simeon, a man would say to his neighbor, “Open your mouth and let your words shine.”<sup>39</sup> After he departed, they would say, “Do not allow your mouth [to cause your flesh to sin].” In his days, “that they may eat their fill,” after he departed, “and the Ancient One covers.” For the comrades were stammering, and the words were not established.<sup>40</sup>

According to this textual layer, a distinction must be made between the status of esoteric knowledge when Simeon ben Yoḥai is alive and its status after he has expired. In his presence, the code of secrecy could be disbanded, as the master elevates the stature of all those who live in his time, but with his absence the mysteries that were revealed have to be hidden again. This aspect of the zoharic hermeneutic of secrecy has been duly noted in previous scholarship, with particular attention paid to the messianic implications implied thereby,<sup>41</sup> but I wish to focus on the view preserved in the name of R. Ḥiyya. It seems to me that that this view is reiterated in the explication of the phrase from Isaiah 23:18 proffered at the end of the passage: “Another explanation: ‘That they may eat their fill,’ in those matters that were revealed; ‘and the Ancient One covers,’ in those matters that are covered.”<sup>42</sup> Some matters may be revealed, other matters must be concealed. These are secrets that forever elude our grasp, even in the generation of the supreme master of esoteric lore.

The point is reiterated in another zoharic homily where the distinction is made (based, in part, on the language of Deut 29:28) between the revealed matters (*niglot*) that one has permission to know and to investigate and the concealed matters (*nistarot*) about which one has no permission to acquire knowledge.<sup>43</sup> The admonition against seeking what lies beyond our capacity to seek is linked textually to Ecclesiastes 5:5, that is, the mouth that speaks what cannot be spoken brings about sin to the flesh. In that context, the apophatic orientation is immediately qualified by the statement that no one has permission to utter or to

<sup>39</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 22a.

<sup>40</sup> *Zohar* 3:105b. For a parallel version, see *Zohar* 3:79a.

<sup>41</sup> Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 25–26.

<sup>42</sup> *Zohar* 3:105b.

<sup>43</sup> *Zohar* 3:159a.

explicate hidden matters except for Simeon ben Yoḥai. I submit that we can identify in this instance as well two distinct approaches preserved in the zoharic text, one predicated on the assumption that some things are forever beyond human comprehension and another that maintains that R. Simeon is the exception to the rule since he was empowered to disclose mysteries that had been hidden prior to his time and that would not be revealed again until the era of the messiah.

As intriguing as is the portrait of Simeon ben Yoḥai that emerges from these passages, and especially the implicit messianic significance attributed to his role as master of esoteric lore, the other opinion expressed in the *Zohar* is the one I wish to emphasize, as it sheds light on the erotic nature of secrecy and the secret nature of eros. The mysteries that the Ancient One conceals can be (un)seen only through a veil, simultaneously seen and not seen, seen precisely because not seen, and not seen precisely because seen. The pursuit of the most recondite truths, which can never be apprehended, lures the heart with the greatest enticement, just as in matters of sexual temptation, the object of the gaze becomes more exposed precisely when it is most hidden. Moses de León alludes to this paradox in his commentary on Ezekiel's chariot vision when he notes that the verse "And Moses approached the thick cloud where God was" (Exod 20:18) indicates that one cannot draw near the *sefirot* without a garment, *ein lavo lahem beli levush*. A double connotation is implied here, though the two meanings can be understood as two sides of the selfsame coin. On the one hand, the statement conveys that one cannot approach the divine emanations without being properly attired, a gesture that has a decidedly erotic connotation in the zoharic symbolism,<sup>44</sup> and, on the other hand, the statement also communicates that the emanations cannot be envisioned unless they are garbed in a form by which they appear to be other than what they appear to be, a general tenet that is illustrated by the particular liturgical practice of vocalizing the ineffable name (YHWH) by way of its epithet (Adonai).<sup>45</sup> Just as the ineffability of the name is preserved by the epithet by which it is (mis)pronounced, so the form-

<sup>44</sup> On the erotic connotation of the entry of Moses into the cloud, see the explication of the relevant zoharic text in Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 386–387.

<sup>45</sup> Moses de León, *R. Moses de León's Commentary to Ezekiel's Chariot*, 63. See *ibid.*, 65, where the author relates this idea to images of the four beasts beheld by Ezekiel: the face of the human, which corresponds to YHW, the core letters of the Tetragrammaton, is clothed in the faces of the lion, ox, and eagle.

lessness of the inner reality is preserved by the garment by which it (dis)appears.<sup>46</sup> As de León puts it in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, the “Book of the Pomegranate,” a lengthy kabbalistic exposition of the 613 commandments enumerated in rabbinic jurisprudence,

The matter of his existence is hidden, and the scrutiny of him is concealed, and there is no one who can understand his secret, but even so from the revealed one can comprehend in the contemplation of the hidden matter [*ki mi-tokh ha-nigleh yukhal ha-adam lehavin be-hitbonenut be-inyan ha-nistar*], as you find that the secret of the matter of the soul is concealed and not revealed or discerned, for it is concealed and hidden, but its rank is revealed and discerned from its many actions through the limbs of the body, the limbs that act by its power and on account of its agency. Analogously, the essence of God’s existence, blessed be he, is concealed and hidden, but through his being conjoined to the inner gradations, he displays his power and his actions, and through his actions his rank is discerned.<sup>47</sup>

De León’s words reflect the distinction made by Maimonides between the unknowable essence of God’s being and the attributes by which his actions are known,<sup>48</sup> but he subverts the distinction by identifying the attributes that disclose the providential power of the divine actions as the “inner gradations” (*madregot ha-penimiyot*), that is, the sefirotic emanations, the potencies that reveal the inscrutable essence by concealing it. From an anthropocentric perspective, the task is similarly to emulate this pattern, primarily by exposing the secrets hidden in the Torah by way of the appropriate forms of dissimilitude.<sup>49</sup>

The same point of view is expressed in a different terminological register in the conclusion of the first part of the anonymous *Sefer ha-Temunah*, the “Book of the Image,” an important and influential kabbalistic text whose provenance is still a matter of dispute, though it is likely to have been composed sometime in the fourteenth century:<sup>50</sup>

<sup>46</sup> For a more elaborate discussion of this dimension of kabbalistic hermeneutics, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 221–224.

<sup>47</sup> Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 20–21 (Hebrew section).

<sup>48</sup> The impact of Maimonides on Moses de León is well-established in the intellectual portraits of his life proffered by scholars. For discussion and references to other sources, see Wolfson, “Introduction” to *Book of the Pomegranate*, 36–38.

<sup>49</sup> Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 162 (Hebrew section) where the hidden and revealed aspects of Torah are mentioned.

<sup>50</sup> According to the record of Gershom Scholem’s view in *The Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temurah*, 21, *Sefer ha-Temunah* was composed most likely in Catalonia (and perhaps in Gerona itself, the center of kabbalistic activity) sometime in the thirteenth century. In *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 178, Scholem wrote that *Sefer ha-Temunah* was composed

“The twenty-two letters are forces from above in thousands and myriads. Know and understand everything well, and your mind should be very strong, conceal and seal the matters, for ‘The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter.’”<sup>51</sup> The little attention that this treatise has commanded has been mostly focused on the doctrine of cosmic cycles (*shemittot*) and their eschatological implication, especially as they relate to the antinomian (or what I would prefer to call the hypernomian)<sup>52</sup> status of the messianic Torah.<sup>53</sup> There are, however, many other important ideas in this textual aggregate and here I offer a modest attempt to articulate briefly some features of the esotericism that may be elicited from a selection of the relevant passages, concentrating particularly on those aspects that touch on the nature of eroticism as well.

The first thing to note is that the mandate to place a seal around mysteries, to double the secrecy by secreting the secrets that one secretes, is followed dutifully by the anonymous author of *Sefer ha-Temunah*. As Scholem astutely noted, the kabbalist responsible for this text employed a “highly allusive style that conceals more than it reveals in matters

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“around 1250,” and, similarly, in *On the Kabbalah*, 78, he described the book as having “appeared about 1250 in Catalonia.” See Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 111, where *Sefer ha-Temunah* is described as “a mystical treatise written in early thirteenth-century Spain.” But see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 52, where this view is modified somewhat by the suggestion that it was composed in the first half of the thirteenth century by a kabbalist living either in Provence or Gerona. See *ibid.*, 120 and 347 (in that context, Scholem asserts more definitively that *Sefer ha-Temunah* “originated in a circle associated with the kabbalists of Gerona.”) See, however, Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 460–461 n. 233, where Scholem accepts the view espoused by Gottlieb and Idel (see the continuation of this note for the more recent opinion expressed by the latter) that *Sefer ha-Temunah* “was written around 1300.” In that context, moreover, he is more inclined to locate the place of composition in Provence rather than Catalonia (see *ibid.*, 468). For discussion of other texts composed by kabbalists who belonged to the circle surrounding *Sefer ha-Temunah*, see Scholem, “*The Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 67–70; Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 570–571. For an alternative view that locates the text in mid-fourteenth century Byzantium, see Idel, “Some Concepts of Time,” 168; *Messianic Mystics*, 56, and see *ibid.*, 125 and 191. On the relation of *Sefer ha-Temunah* to the kabbalistic writings of Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi and David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid, see Idel, “The Meaning of Ta’amei Ha-Ofot Ha-Teme’im,” 18–21.

<sup>51</sup> *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 8a. On the place accorded esotericism in this text, see the brief but incisive comments of Scholem, *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 29.

<sup>52</sup> See Wolfson, “Beyond Good and Evil,” and the revised version in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 186–285. I regret that in both of these publications I neglected to include *Sefer ha-Temunah* in my attempt to articulate the hypernomian ideal that may be elicited from kabbalistic sources.

<sup>53</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 40–50; *On the Kabbalah*, 77–81, 83–85; *Origins*, 466–474; *Messianic Idea*, 111; *Kabbalah*, 120–122.

of detail.”<sup>54</sup> The need to hide mystical secrets connected to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, which constitute the divine image that is configured in the Torah as it is beheld in the contemplative vision,<sup>55</sup> is reiterated in the conclusion of the second part of this treatise, albeit in a somewhat more expansive and effusive tone:

These are the inner matters, concealed, wondrous, mysterious, pure, radiating in the eye of the intellect [*ein ha-sekhel*], and from them there is the light for the soul, for this is the light of the image [*or ha-temunah*] upon which those who contemplate gazed, and from them their faces were illumined, and from them they were darkened, and from them glory extended to glory. Concerning this [it is said] “Do not come at any moment” (Lev 16:2) into them, but on a pure day and with a pure soul and a pure intellect, and a mind that is good, pure, clean, and subtle, to expand and to rise to the resplendent light, to ascend to the “mount of the Lord” and to the “holy place” (Ps 24:3), “one of clean hands and a pure heart” (ibid., 4), to contemplate and to comprehend great, wondrous matters. A person should not probe faith and knowledge [*ma’amiq dat we-da’at*] except by way of a straight path [*derekh yesharah*] so that he does not expire as Elisha the heretic [*aher*] expired.<sup>56</sup> And you must understand well that all is before you like a “set table” (Ezek 23:41), and you should eat and live eternally, for “this is the table that is before the Lord” (ibid., 41:22), and the angels of the living God derive pleasure from it. You must be careful as to how you draw near them or how you draw away from them. Conceal and secure the matters in a seal [*hotam*] and in an encasement [*misgeret*], “and make a gold molding for its rim round about” (Exod 25:25), and a seal upon a seal [*hotam al hotam*], for “The glory of God is to conceal a matter, and the glory of kings is to search out a matter.”<sup>57</sup>

It lies beyond the scope of this essay to do justice to this extraordinarily rich text. To highlight the point most critical to this study, we reiterate the admonition near the conclusion: the one who contemplates mysteries

<sup>54</sup> Scholem, *Origins*, 461. On the tendency of the author of *Sefer ha-Temunah* to conceal his thoughts, see also the astute comments of Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 571.

<sup>55</sup> Scholem, *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 25–39; “The Name of God,” *Diogenes* 80, 174–175; *On the Kabbalah*, 78; *Origins*, 460–461.

<sup>56</sup> This statement is somewhat enigmatic as the fate of Elisha according to the earlier rabbinic sources is not death but heresy in virtue of which he received the appellation *aher*, that is, the “other one,” the one whose views and/or actions led to his exclusion from the body politic of Israel. For some relatively recent analyses of this archetypal rabbinic sinner, see Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha*; Rubenstein, “Elisha ben Abuya”; *Talmudic Stories*, 64–104; and Goshen-Gottstein, *The Sinner and the Amnesiac*, 21–229.

<sup>57</sup> *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 26b. On the hidden and formless letters within *Hokhmah* according to *Sefer ha-Temunah*, see Scholem, *Origins*, 466–467.

must know how to approach them and how to withdraw from them. Engagement with secrecy demands a twofold movement, taking-hold and letting-go,<sup>58</sup> “to distance that which is remote and to draw near that which is proximate,” according to a passage in *Sod Illan ha-Ašilut*, “The Tree of Emanation,” an anonymous text that was composed in all likelihood by someone who belonged to the circle of kabbalists responsible for *Sefer ha-Temunah*.<sup>59</sup> I would propose that here we have come to the point where the erotic and esoteric intersect: the former, as the latter, can be spoken of as exhibiting the duplicity of attraction and repulsion. The stipulation to secure the secrets in a seal suggests, moreover, that the interplay of coming-near and pulling-away must be thought from the point of their conjunction and not as oppositional. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the encasement of the mysteries is depicted as the “seal upon a seal.” One might have thought that a single seal would have been sufficient. What is the import of the rhetorical replication? That the seal must be sealed imparts the sense that the hiddenness must be hidden as the hiddenness exposed as what is hidden. The truth of the secret is disclosed through the guise of the disclosure that is secret. The twofold seal opens the door through which one can enter to behold the mystery of eros from within the eros of mystery.

The notion of double secrecy, the secret secreted and thereby uncovered as secret, is expanded in the introduction to the third part of the book where the author relates that the “twenty-two supernal and wondrous letters” (*kaf-beit otuyyot elyonot we-nora’ot*) and the “ten closed and hidden emanations” (*eser sefirot segurot we-ne’elamot*) were

inscribed in the secret of the power of *Hokhmah*, subtle and greatly concealed, without image, form, or boundary on account of the abundance of its subtlety, and they emanated in *Binah*, and *Binah* brings them to light in subtle inscriptions and great merit, the thirty-two wondrous paths from which all beings and cycles derive, and the spirit of God is in their midst, and all of them were hidden, sealed, and concealed within *Hokhmah*.<sup>60</sup>

The description of the thirty-two paths, the ontic source of all beings and of all the historical epochs in which they will be manifest, inscripted without image or form within the depths of the splendor of divine wisdom provides a model to understand the ideal of iteration prof-

<sup>58</sup> For elaboration, see Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 111–115.

<sup>59</sup> “Secret of the Tree of Emanation,” 73.

<sup>60</sup> *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 27a.



ferred in the figure of the duplicate seal, the seal that is sealed within the seal, an unfolding that unfolds all that is enfolded in *Hokhmah* to the attribute of *Binah*,<sup>61</sup> where the entities assume differentiated form, and from there to *Tiferet* and *Aṭarah*,<sup>62</sup> four of the ten attributes that correspond to the four letters of the name, which comprise all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the fullness of the divine pleroma. The profundity of the erotic secrecy, which is always at the same time a secret eroticism, proffered in this text is underscored particularly by the notion of alphabetic ciphers that have neither ocular nor acoustic images. In the precise language of the text itself:

And in this wondrous Torah that is acquired and that is comprised of the ten emanations . . . everything is written in a supernal language, concealed and very sublime, supernal letters, wondrous and hidden, not understood by an angel or a supernal archon but only by God, may he be blessed, glorious and awesome, blessed be he, who explained them to Moses our master, may peace be upon him, and he informed him of all of their secrets and their matters, and Moses wrote them in his language in the order of the supernal way that is alluded to in the Torah, in the crow-nets, titles, great and small letters, broken, crooked, folded, straight, vocal and graphic forms, opened and closed sections. All of these supernal, wondrous allusions were concealed, for he did not have the capacity to find a language to write them or any way to stipulate them.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> In “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 74, *Hokhmah* is identified as the “secret of the world of letters” (*sod olam ha-otiyyot*). And see *ibid.*, 75, where it is said that in *Hokhmah* is the “place of the Torah of the letters in [their] forms” (*torat ha-otiyyot be-ṣiyurim*).

<sup>62</sup> *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 28b.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 30a. Consider the following statement in “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 72: “Cease from finding a true explanation and a reply in his mouth except by way of the wondrous and deep wisdom, the divine wisdom.” According to this text, the secrets are discernible only through divine wisdom, *hokhmat ha-elohut*, a theosophic *gnosis* that is transmitted exclusively to the Jews, the “holy seed of Israel,” in contrast to the “other nations” for whom the tradition is inaccessible. Hence, the author of this treatise insists that there is no way to explain the hidden matters (*devarim ne’elamin*) except by this wisdom though he also emphasizes that all forms of knowledge are contained in it: “Everything is unified in the order of the emanation of the ten *sefirot*, for there is no wisdom, great or small, that does not emerge from there and that is comprised therein, and it is called the world-to-come, the good and elongated world, the eternal world, the awesome world, exceedingly hidden and elevated.” (73) The radical difference between Israel and the nations of the world, a common theme affirmed by kabbalists through the generations (see extensive documentation of this point in Wolfson, *Venturing Beyond*, 17–128), is expressed in another passage in the “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 78: “In the secret of the first unleavened bread (*maṣṣah ri’shonah*) alluded to in the river Chebar (*nehar kevar*) (Ezek 1:1), and thus [it says] ‘all who are uncircumcised will not eat of it’ (Exod 12:48), for no shell shall derive pleasure from it, as it is wholly of the river that already was and there is no foreskin or closing of the heart there.”

The matter is reiterated in slightly different terms in a passage in the aforementioned *Sod Illan ha-Ašilut* where the ultimate unity in which the ten *sefirot* are incorporated is described as follows:

Thus you must know that there is no form [*temunah*] or image [*dimyon*] there, no measure [*middah*] or computation [*heshbon*], no face [*panim*] or back [*ahor*], no upper [*elyon*] or lower [*tahton*], but there is discrete unity [*yihud meyuhad*], holy [*qadosh*] and sanctified [*mequddash*], awesome [*nora*] and majestic [*adir*], lofty [*nisgav*] and hidden [*ne'elam*], concealed [*nistar*] and elevated [*na'aleh*] above every other creature in this cycle.<sup>64</sup>

From the perspective of the world of creation (*olam ha-beri'ah*), the unity of the realm of emanation (*ašilut*) is fractured and hence it is perceived under the guise of binary opposites—left/right, up/down, front/back, mercy/judgment, inside/outside, pure/impure, distant/proximate—but from the perspective of the divine all divisions are integrated into the attribute (*middah*) that

is consumed in its being to the [point of] the unification of being for all of them [*ha-mitballa'at be-hawayatah ad be-yihud hawayayah le-khullam*], a wondrous, concealed, and hidden name, lofty and elevated in the Infinite [*shem nora we-nistam we-ne'elam nisgav we-na'aleh be-ein sof*], beginning [and] end for all of them [*ro'sh [we-]sof*<sup>65</sup> *le-khullam*].<sup>66</sup>

A proper analysis of the consumption of all things in the Infinite, the topos of apocatastasis well known from kabbalistic compositions as well as mystical literature in other religious cultures, will have to await a separate study, but the crucial point to underscore here is the depiction of the concealed name so sublime that it is devoured in the silent mystery of the Cause of Causes (*illat ha-illot*), the indifferent one that is the commencement and terminus of all that exists in the continuous chain of differentiated being. Needless to say, the image of consumption deployed in this citation suggests a loss of identity that has obvious erotic overtones. To be even more precise, it is said of *Keter*, which is characterized as the “first” of the ten utterances of creation (*ma'amar ri'shon*) or as the “first” of the ten words of revelation (*dibbur ri'shon*), that it has no place (*ein lo maqom*) and consequently that it is not included in

<sup>64</sup> “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 72.

<sup>65</sup> I have accepted Scholem’s suggestion, “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 73 n. 17a, to emend the text from *ro'sh sof* to *ro'sh we-sof*.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

the enumeration (*heshbon*) of the *sefirot*,<sup>67</sup> but it is nonetheless depicted as beginning and end; indeed, in this ultimate state of ontological indifference, future and past meet in the compresence of the moment at hand, a point that is conveyed as well by the fact that this attribute, also called the “supernal supplement” (*musaf elyon*) for the increase (*tosefet*) of the divine efflux overflows from it to the other emanations, the “supernal appointed times” (*mo'adim elyonim*), is designated by the appellation “Ehyeh” and identified as the “root of the river Khebar.” The former, the name of God revealed to Moses at the epiphany of the burning bush (Exod 3:14), denotes what shall be, and the latter, the place in Babylonia where Ezekiel had his vision of the heavenly chariot (Ezek 1:1), signifies by a play on words (*kevar*, which means “previous,” but it is also the proper name of the river) what has come to pass.<sup>68</sup> The import of this wordplay is underscored by another title assigned in this text to *Keter*, the “light that has been” (*or kevar*), a turn of phrase based on the rabbinic idea that a portion of the primordial light was stored away for the righteous in the eschaton. It is likely, as Scholem has already suggested, that the biblical and rabbinic idioms are meant to be joined together insofar as the Hebrew *nahar* can be linked philologically to the Aramaic *nehora*, which means “light.”<sup>69</sup> If we accept this suggestion, and I think it reasonable to do so, then *nehar kevar*, literally, the “river Chebar,” can be transposed into *or kevar*, the “light that has been

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 75. On the virtual identity of *Keter* and Ein Sof, see *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 38b: “All of these wonders issue from the potency of *Keter*, for there is the true unity and the infinite limit of his essence, in *Keter* is his unity and his essence, and he is called ‘Ein Sof’ inasmuch as he is the innermost interiority (*tokh tokho*) of *Keter*, as there is no limit (*she-ein sof*) to his comprehension that is there, and from there and within there is the essence of his unity, and from Ein Sof will be comprehended the essence of his light, his splendor, and the limit of his unity...for everything from the unity of Ein Sof, and his secret and his mystery that are there, and this is the secret of the thirteen concealed gradations, and this is the Sabbath, the repose of all the Sabbaths, holidays, and appointed times, the one Sabbath that is called ‘peace’ in truth, the single unity, for everything comes in peace, the lights and souls, and in truth and in peace all is one unity.” See *ibid.*, 45b.

<sup>68</sup> “*Secret of the Tree of Emanation*,” 74. In that context, the author further describes *Keter*, *Tiferet*, and *Malkhut*, also referred to as the three beings (*hawwayot*) and demarcated respectively by the names Ehyeh, YHWH, and Adonai, as the “essence of all the emanation” (*iqqar kol ha-ašilut*). The three names are contrasted in the following way: Ehyeh is “hidden and concealed in its pronunciation and in its scripting;” YHWH “is written but not pronounced except through its epithets;” and Adonai “is pronounced and it is seen.” On the hiddenness of YHWH in the name Ehyeh, which is said to be beyond all knowledge and beyond any discernable name, see *Sefer ha-Temunah*, 70a.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 74 n. 24.

beforehand.” The confluence of opposites in *Keter* yields the ideational structure that underlies the kabbalistic conception of time as a circular linearity—a present determined concurrently by the past of the future that is yet to come as what has already been and by the future of the past that has already been what is yet to come.<sup>70</sup> Language here falters as the notion of temporality can be properly enunciated only through the withdrawal of speech that bespeaks the annihilation of thought at the point of its fullest realization.

As a final illustration of the role accorded silence in kabbalistic esotericism, I cite a passage from the commentary on the Torah by Baḥya ben Asher that forges a synthesis between the negative theology embraced by Maimonides and the code of secrecy attested in Jewish esotericism.<sup>71</sup> The relevant comment appears as an elucidation of the scriptural decree “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below, there is no other” (Deut 4:39):

This is a positive commandment from the Torah regarding the knowledge of God, blessed be he, for we are commanded to know him, to investigate about his unity, and not to rely solely on tradition. This knowledge is from his actions and wondrous deeds, the lower and upper created beings. Thus this knowledge is [of] the contingent [*ha-efsharit*], but knowledge from the aspect of his substance [*mahuto*] and essence [*ašmuto*] is inaccessible, and it is impossible to attain it, and concerning it is said “The glory of God is to conceal the matter” (Prov 25:2). Since the matter of divinity [*inyan ha-elohut*] is not comprehended by man through his intellect in the beginning of his thought the expression “keep in mind” [*wa-hashevota el levavekha*] is mentioned in relation to it, like a man who contemplates something and he must go back and contemplate, as we find in the case of Elijah: “[And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the Lord;] but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. After the fire—a soft murmuring sound” (1 Kings 19:11–12). The matter of what is written: when a man thinks about him, whether he is wind, or an earthquake, or fire, he goes back and closes the edifice of his mind with respect to everything he thinks about him, and after all of the thoughts he will find nothing but concealment [*ha'alamah*] and ineffability [*belimah*], and this [the import of the words] “After the

<sup>70</sup> This aspect of kabbalistic thought is elaborated in Wolfson, *Alef, Mem, Tau*, 87–98.

<sup>71</sup> For a more extensive discussion of this topic, see Wolfson, “*Via Negativa* in Maimonides.”

fire—a soft murmuring sound,” in accordance with the matter that was mentioned in *Sefer Yeširah*,<sup>72</sup> “Close your mouth from speaking and your heart from thinking” [*belom pikha mi-ledabber we-libbekha mi-leharher*].<sup>73</sup>

This passage well demonstrates the genuine tension between the katephatic orientation of scriptural faith, on one hand, and the apophatic orientation of the medieval theological perspective, on the other. The conflictual tug is resolved to some degree by appeal to the Maimonidean approach, that is, the injunction to know God is limited to apprehension of the contingent beings of the cosmos, whereas knowledge of the divine essence is not available to the human mind. The thirteenth-century kabbalist from Saragossa thus interprets the sequence of images from Elijah’s epiphany on Mount Carmel in a manner that accords with the negative theology of Maimonides. Apropos of the above discussion regarding the exegetical link of the gesture of the whisper to the scriptural elocution *qol demamah daqah*, it is important to emphasize that in Bahya’s mind the “soft murmuring sound” denotes the cessation of thought, the “concealment” and “ineffability” that marks the culmination of the path, the silence that re/sounds after the wind, earthquake, and fire. The philosophical insight is supported by the mystical directive in *Sefer Yeširah* to close one’s mouth from speaking and one’s heart from thinking about the *sefirot*.

### *Whispering Secrets: Dispelling Mysteries of Torah*

In contrast to these statements that implore the adept to be quiet, there was another strategy advocated by some kabbalists, a tactic connected to the rabbinic stipulation to transmit secrets in a whisper, a form of speaking silently. With respect to this type of speech, as opposed to an unmitigated silence, we can grasp another component of the intimate nexus between the esoteric and erotic. Here it is worth recalling the comment of Hai Gaon, a leading figure in the rabbinic academy of Pumbedita in the tenth and eleventh centuries, on the talmudic instruction that secret matters be transmitted in a whisper: “They whisper to him in whispers, give him the principles, he understands them, and from

<sup>72</sup> See above, n. 29.

<sup>73</sup> *Rabbenu Bahya*, 3:268.

heaven they show him the mysteries of the heart.”<sup>74</sup> Medieval masters of esoteric lore elaborated and embellished this notion of communicating secrets in a murmur. As an illustration, I will mention a passage in the first part of the compendium of mystical doctrines *Sodei Razayya* composed by Eleazar of Worms, the thirteenth-century Rhineland Jewish pietist. According to this text, the secret of the chariot (*sod ha-merkavah*), which is associated with three distinct literary compositions, *Sefer ha-Merkavah*, *Sefer Yeširah*, and *Sefer ha-Qomah*, can be revealed only in a murmur (*be-laḥash* or *bi-leḥishah*).<sup>75</sup> Eleazar does not indicate either explicitly or implicitly that the esotericism surrounding the chariot entails an erotic dimension. This possibility cannot be ignored, however, given comments scattered about in the works of Eleazar as well as in other pietistic writings that overtly utilize sexual symbolism to discuss the nature and experience of the chariot.<sup>76</sup>

The connection between esotericism and eroticism is made more openly by Spanish kabbalists who were active in the second half of the thirteenth century. Consider, for example, the following statement in Abraham Abulafia’s *Ḥayyei ha-Nefesh*, one of the three commentaries he wrote on *The Guide of Perplexed* by Maimonides:<sup>77</sup>

In the beginning of creation were contained three types of transgression, idolatry, illicit sexual relations, and murder.<sup>78</sup> These three are also found

<sup>74</sup> *Oṣar ha-Geonim*, 4:12 (Hebrew). The text was cited by Scholem, *Jewish Gnosticism*, 58 n. 10, and see Wolfson, “Beyond the Spoken Word,” 215 n. 82; Idel, “The Concept of Torah,” 39 n. 41; “Secrecy, Binah and Derishah,” 326–327.

<sup>75</sup> Eleazar of Worms, *Sodei Razayya ha-Shalem*, 115.

<sup>76</sup> A number of scholars have dealt with this issue, and here I will offer a modest sampling of the relevant studies: Farber, “The Concept of the Merkavah”; Wolfson, “The Image of Jacob” (revised English version published in Wolfson, *Along the Path*, 1–62); Abrams, *Sexual Symbolism and Merkavah Speculation*.

<sup>77</sup> On the impact of Maimonides on Abulafia, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 126, 138–139, 383 n. 76; *Kabbalah of Sefer ha-Temunah*, 107, 127–128, 151–152; Idel, “Maimonides and Kabbalah”; “Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*.” See also other references to Idel cited below, n. 83, and Altmann, “Maimonides’s Attitude.”

<sup>78</sup> These three sins are often classified together in rabbinic literature to signify cardinal acts of impiety. To mention some examples, the three sins are singled out as the transgressions through which exile and destruction come to the world (Mishnah, *Avot* 5:9; Tosefta, *Menahot* 13:4; Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 9b; *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, version A, ch. 38, p. 115; *Massekhet Kallah*, ch. 8; *Numbers Rabbah* 7:10), the sins for which one must be prepared to die rather than to violate (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74a), or as the only sins that cancel out the permission, indeed the obligation, to transgress for the sake of saving a life (Tosefta, *Shabbat* 10:14; Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 82a, *Ketuvot* 19a). See also Tosefta, *Nedarim* 2:6; *Soṭah* 6:3; *Bava Meš’ia* 6:6; Babylonian Talmud, *Pesahim* 25a–b, *Yoma* 67b, *Sanhedrin* 56b, *Shavu’ot* 7b, *Erkhin* 15b; *Genesis Rabbah* 31:6, 41:7; *Exodus Rabbah* 16:2, 42:1. These three sins are also included in the

in the secret of circumcision, for from it is the beginning of the creation of the species and its perpetual existence. And this in order to overturn what was created corresponding to the final divine intention [*ha-kawwanah ha-elohit ha-ahronah*], and this is the first natural intention [*ha-kawwanah hativ'it ha-rishonah*], for the natural intention, which is the account of creation [*ma'aseh bere'shit*], is to preserve the species perpetually and to maintain its particulars, the attribute of a single time [*middat zeman ehad*] through the intermediary of the uncovering of the genitals [*giluy arayot*]. And the divine intention, which is the account of the chariot [*ma'aseh merkavah*], is to sustain the unique individual [*ha-ish ha-meyuhad*] perpetually by means of the disclosure of secrets [*giluy nistarot*], which are like the uncovering of the genitals in the case of the multitude of the species [*ha-hamon haminyyim*],<sup>79</sup> lewd matters to speak about and concerning which it is not appropriate to listen like words pertaining to illicit sexual relations [*ke-divrei arayot*], and they are the essence and the rest is secondary. Therefore it is necessary for the select ones [*yehidim*] to believe their opposite, and this is to uncover the nakedness of the revealed to themselves [*legallot erwat ha-nigleh le'asnam*] but to cover it in relation to others [*lekhasoto mi-zulatom*], and to take the hidden [*nistar*] as wheat and the revealed [*nigleh*] as chaff. Concerning something similar to this Solomon, peace be upon him, said “Stolen waters are sweet, and bread eaten secretly is tasty” (Prov 9:17), that is, mysteries of Torah [*sitrei torah*] are the secrets said in a murmur [*setarim ha-ne'emarim bi-lehishah*] and are known by the intellect with an abundance of thought [*ha-sekkel be-rov mahshavah*], and they are stolen and hidden from the multitude, and all the hidden matters attest to the two inclinations. When one of the necessary and beneficial commandments of the commandments, which are for the sake of the welfare of the body [*tiqqun ha-guf*] or for the welfare of the soul [*tiqqun ha-nefesh*], is revealed, the revealed [*ha-nigleh*] is a key to open the gates of the hidden [*sha'arei ha-nistar*]... for rectification of the body is preparation for rectification of the soul, and rectification of the soul is preparation for the final perfection, which is the goal of the final divine intention, and this is comprehension of the name [*hassagat ha-shem*].<sup>80</sup>

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list of the seven Noachide laws, the rabbinic classification that embraces some notion of a universal moral law that is foundational for human society in general and not exclusively for the covenantal community of Israel. See Tosefta, Avodah Zarah 9:4; Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 56a.

<sup>79</sup> The adjectival form *miniyim* is derived from *min*, which can denote either the species or the sexual. It is reasonable to presume that Abulafia had both connotations in mind.

<sup>80</sup> Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, 15. For an earlier translation and explication of a section of this passage, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 190–193, and for an alternative analysis, in part inspired as a response to my own discussion, see Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 160–162.

The Abulafian text can be read as an interpretive gloss on a number of philosophical claims by Maimonides. To begin with there is the correspondence made between the account of creation and physics, on the one hand, and the account of the chariot and metaphysics, on the other. For Abulafia, the rabbinic classifications allude respectively to the natural and divine intentions, the former characterized as the impetus to maintain the existence of the species and of the particulars comprised within them, and the latter as the impulse to sustain the existence of unique individuals. The natural intention is identified, moreover, with *gilluy arayot*, the disclosure of secrets that are linked exegetically to the delineation of illicit sexual relations in the eighteenth chapter of Leviticus, which together with *ma'aseh bere'shit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* are the subjects designated by tannaitic authorities as too dangerous to be divulged publicly.<sup>81</sup> It seems to me, however, that Abulafia employed the term in a way that was closer to an alternative connotation of “uncovering the genitals” attested in rabbinic literature,<sup>82</sup> which is based, in turn, on the scriptural expression *legallot erwah*, “to uncover nakedness,” (Lev 18:2) the root *eryah* signifying that which is without garment. This is also the import of the comment that the “secret of circumcision” (*sod ha-milah*) is the “beginning of the creation of the species and its perpetual existence,” the word “circumcision” obviously denoting in this context the male organ upon which the ritual cut is performed.

Abulafia thus draws an analogy between two forms of denuding, uncovering the genitals and exposing secrets, the former associated with the account of creation, which is revealed to the masses, and the latter with the account of the chariot, which is set aside for unique individuals. The preservation of the species quite literally depends on the former and hence *gilluy arayot* fulfils the first natural intention. But this interpretation relates only to the external level, the chaff that is disclosed for the multitude; the internal meaning or the wheat consists of the secrets that are revealed exclusively to select individuals (*yehidim*). The point is reiterated when Abulafia notes that the “mysteries of Torah,” which are the secrets said in a murmur and are known by the intellect with an abundance of thought,<sup>83</sup> are hidden from the multitude. He

<sup>81</sup> See Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 192–195; Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 155–185.

<sup>82</sup> Tosefta, *Soṭah* 6:3.

<sup>83</sup> Abulafia’s insistence that the mysteries “are known by the intellect with an abundance of thought” reflects his view that kabbalistic truths are linked to the overflow that ensues from the Active Intellect, which is personified in the ecstatic vision principally in



adds that “all the hidden matters attest to the two inclinations,” a tacit reference to the imagination and intellect.<sup>84</sup> Abulafia does not disclose in this context the esoteric import of the secrets that are connected to the illicit sexual relations, but from other treatises that he composed, and especially a passage from his *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*,<sup>85</sup> we can assert that the mysteries pertaining to *arayot* refer to the allegorical representation of form and matter, which are associated respectively with Adam and Eve. This is implied as well in the connection that Abulafia draws between *sitrei arayot* and the aggadic theme of the serpent having intercourse with Eve.<sup>86</sup>

In the conclusion of the aforecited passage from *Hayyei ha-Nefesh*, Abulafia establishes a hierarchy based on another teaching of Maimonides concerning the twofold purpose of the law, the welfare of the body and the welfare of the soul.<sup>87</sup> Abulafia’s reworking of the Maimonidean view yields three perfections, which correspond to body, soul, and intellect.<sup>88</sup> The ritual performance of the commandment, which encompasses the two goals specified by Maimonides, constitutes the revealed aspect that is appropriate for the consumption of the populace, but the revealed aspect opens the gates of the hidden aspect, which corresponds to the final perfection, the comprehension of the name that is ascertained exclusively by the elite. There are many important themes in this text that can be clarified only by an intertextual analysis with other writings of Abulafia, a task that lies beyond the scope of this study. What is most important to underscore for our purposes is Abulafia’s acceptance of the older tradition that the proper way to transmit secrets is through the still

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the figure of Metatron. As Idel (*Absorbing Perfections*, 400) noted, Abulafia, in contrast to a kabbalist like Nahmanides, rarely mentions an explicit reception of an oral tradition from an actual master. The point I have made independently corroborates this claim. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that the technique of letter-combination and the prophetic experience occasioned thereby advocated by Abulafia is a level of attainment that exceeds the discursive thought embraced by philosophers. On this point, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 54; Altmann, “Maimonides’s Attitude,” 207–209; Idel, “*Sitre Arayot* in Maimonides’ Thought,” 89; “Abulafia’s Secrets of the Guide.”

<sup>84</sup> As noted by Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 161 n. 507.

<sup>85</sup> Abulafia, *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, 7–10. For an annotated citation and analysis of the text, see Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 155–157. See also Abulafia, *Sitrei Torah*, 69–70.

<sup>86</sup> For translation of the relevant passage, see Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 194.

<sup>87</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, III.27, pp. 510–11; Galston, “The Purpose of the Law.”

<sup>88</sup> On the delineation of three human perfections corresponding to body, soul, and intellect, see Abulafia, *Shomer Miṣvāh*, 24, cited by Idel, “Kabbalistic Interpretation,” 161 n. 514.

speech of the murmur.<sup>89</sup> However, it must be pointed out that several passages in Abulafia's corpus indicate that he interpreted the gesture of the whisper in a novel way (though he may have been influenced in part by Maimonides)<sup>90</sup> as a reference to a technical meditative technique, an idea he supports by the fact that the consonants of *be-laḥash*, "in quiet," can be rearranged to spell *laḥashov*, "to contemplate."<sup>91</sup> For Abulafia, therefore, the notion that secrets are transmitted in a whisper is not to be interpreted literally, but rather as a figurative expression of the contemplative ideal. The distinctiveness of Abulafia's approach is brought into sharp relief when we compare it, for example, to the insistence in the anonymous text to which I referred above wherein the kabbalistic secrets attributed to the *zaqen* must be transmitted in a whisper.<sup>92</sup> There is no reason to interpret the relevant comments from this treatise figuratively; on the contrary, one of the fascinating aspects of this text is that it seems to preserve the behavior of an actual fraternity

<sup>89</sup> See *Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba*, 76, where it is emphasized that the name is transmitted in a whisper (*be-laḥash*) just as it has been received. On the need to transmit the divine names in this manner, see also *Sitrei Torah*, 77, and *Shomer Miṣvāh*, 32 (in that context, the matter is connected with humility, which is depicted as the supreme virtue that comprises all other virtues).

<sup>90</sup> In *Guide*, I.34, p. 78, Maimonides interprets whispering as the capacity to give a "concise and coherent expression of the most hidden notions." Maimonides thus understands the whisper in a figurative way and in this respect Abulafia may have been indebted to him even though the substance of the latter's explanation is different. Concerning the interpretation of Maimonides, see Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon*, 94–96. The author suggests that it is reasonable to conclude that the affirmation of the whisper (*laḥash*) on the part of Maimonides as the way to transmit mysteries of Torah reflects the passage about Simeon bar Yehoṣadaq and Samuel bar Naḥman in *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3 (see above, n. 13). While I concur that it is likely that Maimonides had this text in mind, this should not obfuscate the fact that the medieval sage interpreted the rabbinic idea of incantation figuratively.

<sup>91</sup> Abulafia, *Oṣar Eden Ganuz*, 48. In that passage, Abulafia connects the saying of the *Shema*, the traditional confession of Israel's monotheistic faith (Deut 6:4), with the ideal of ascetic piety, that is, only one who has withdrawn from the desires of the material world can properly unify the name of divine unity. Following the rabbinic ritual, moreover, he writes about the need to utter silently the phrase *barukh shem kevod malkhuto le'olam wa'ed*. Abulafia glosses the expression *be-laḥash* as *laḥashov libbo be-khawwanah*, "his heart should contemplate with intention." On the need to praise the name of the glory silently and openly, *leshabeaḥ shem kevido be-laḥash u-ve-gilluy*, see Abulafia, *Sefer ha-Ot*, 30. See also Abulafia, *Hotam ha-Haftarah*, 109. In that setting, Abulafia relates the biblical phrase *ma'aseh ḥoshev*, "worked in design," which is used in conjunction with the construction of various sacred objects of the Tabernacle (Exod 26:31, 28:6, 28:15, 36:8, 35, 39:3, 8), to the word *laḥashov*, which he then transposes into *be-laḥash*, a term that he links, in turn, to the words *shaliḥ* and *mashiah*, the angelic messenger and the messianic figure.

<sup>92</sup> MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fols. 30b and 36b; see Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word," 182–183.

structured around a master and his disciples. A crucial practice attested in this treatise was the communication of mystical doctrine through the whisper, and therefore comments such as the one that a particular secret connected to sacrifices is too deep to be comprehended except by one who hears the matter received orally from the elder<sup>93</sup> are to be taken quite plainly—the mystical truth is whispered by the master into the ear of the worthy disciple.<sup>94</sup> In contrast to the silence of not-speaking, the speech of the murmur yields an erotic texture that is not embodied in the paradox of a secret that must be hidden if it is the secret that is revealed, but in the sensual transmission of the secret from mouth to ear, a diffusion of truth that partakes of the timbre of eros displayed in the stillness of the muted word.

*Gestural Unsayings/Envisioning Silence*

In the concluding section of this study, I will focus in greater detail on the juxtaposition of three elements that have shaped the contours of esotericism in medieval kabbalah, to wit, the whisper, the secret, and the erotic. It is instructive that this mode of dissemination is appropriated by kabbalists and made especially explicit by the Castilian kabbalists of the late-thirteenth and early-fourteenth centuries responsible for the early stages of the literary production and redaction of what may be called the zoharic canon (*sifrut ha-zohar*),<sup>95</sup> as an acceptable manner to converse about divine sexuality, the sacred union of the male and female through the medium of the phallus. The analysis of the particular motif that I have proposed should shed light on the intertwining of eros and the esoteric in the religious philosophy that may be elicited from zoharic texts, a philosophical sensibility that had a significant impact on subsequent generations of kabbalistic productivity.

Let me begin by noting that several zoharic passages simply reiterate the rabbinic contention that secretive matters—and in some contexts these are related more specifically to prophecy or to the muse of the

<sup>93</sup> MS Oxford, Bodleian Library 2396, fol. 6b.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, fol. 7a.

<sup>95</sup> For some studies that deal with the historical and literary history of the *Zohar*, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 156–204; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1–126; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 85–138; Huss, “*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text”; “The Appearance of *Sefer ha-Zohar*”; Mopsik, “Le corpus Zoharique”; Abrams, “Critical and Post-Critical Textual Scholarship,” 61–64; “The *Zohar* as a Book”; Meroz, “Zoharic Narratives”; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 3–33.

holy spirit—are transmitted in a whisper.<sup>96</sup> One text, in particular, is noteworthy as it illustrates the tension that the medieval kabbalist would have likely felt between upholding the traditional emphasis on concealing secrets and the impulse to share them so that they may be preserved for posterity.<sup>97</sup>

R. Simeon wept and said, “One word from those words whispered to me [*millin di-lehishu li*] from the head of the academy of Paradise that were not said openly [*be-itgalyya*], this word is a mystery [*sitra*], and I will say to you, my beloved sons, my sons, the beloved ones of my soul, what shall I do? They said it to me in a whisper [*bi-lehisha*] but I will say it to you openly [*be-itgalyya*], and in the future when we see one another face-to-face, all the faces will rely on this.”<sup>98</sup>

The master reveals overtly the secret he had received in a whisper, and the ostensibly transgressive act is transformed into a sign of initiation. The author of this passage has captured concisely the hermeneutical dilemma (expressed by Maimonides as well<sup>99</sup>) on the part of the master confronted with the urge to disclose and the injunction to hide, which is voiced in several other places in zoharic literature in the words “Woe if I reveal, woe if I do not reveal!”<sup>100</sup> On the face of it, the whisper would seem to allow one to occupy the space between these two inclinations, as it is a form of disclosure that is at the same time a form of concealment. Yet, in the aforementioned passage, R. Simeon cannot contain himself, and thus he reveals openly what he received clandestinely through a whisper.

In other passages scattered in the zoharic topography, the cryptic gesture of whispering the secret is framed in a more complex theosophic manner. As an illustration I will cite a key excerpt that is marked as belonging to the Tosefta stratum.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>96</sup> *Zohar* 1:217a; 2:130b, 179b.

<sup>97</sup> On the tension between disclosure and concealment in zoharic kabbalah as it pertains specifically to a messianic theosophy, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 26–30.

<sup>98</sup> *Zohar* 2:190b. See *ibid.*, 291a.

<sup>99</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, III: Introduction, pp. 415–416.

<sup>100</sup> *Zohar* 2:257b; 3:127b (*Idra Rabba*). See also *Zohar* 1:11b: “R. Simeon wept and said: Woe if I speak, woe if I do not speak.” And *Zohar* 3:74b: “R. Simeon struck his hands and wept, and he said: Woe if I speak and I reveal the secret, woe if I do not speak and the comrades will lose the matter.” See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 34; Wolfson, *Abraham Abulafia*, 23–25.

<sup>101</sup> On this strata of the zoharic anthology, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 161; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 3; Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbala Literature*, 163–214.

The voice of the sphere rotates from below to above, and chariots that are closed go forth and rotate. A pleasant voice ascends and descends, it goes forth and roams the world. The voice of the ram's horn extends in the depths of the gradations and it causes the sphere to spin round. Two pipes are placed from the right and left in two colors that emanate together,<sup>102</sup> one white and the other red. Both of them rotate the sphere above, when it turns to the right the white ascends, and when it turns to the left the red descends. The sphere rotates continuously and it does not rest. Two birds ascend when they chirp, one to the south side, and the other to the north side, they fly through the air. The chirping and the pleasant voice of the sphere join together, concerning which [it is written] "A psalm, a song for the sabbath day" (Ps 92:1). All the blessings issue forth in the murmur of this sound from the love of the voice of the ram's horn. Corresponding to these the blessings descend from above to below and they are concealed as one within the depth of the well, the spring of the well, which does not cease, in a murmur until the rotating sphere is filled.<sup>103</sup>

It lies beyond the scope of this study to decode all of the intricate details implied in this text. What is most important for the main focus of this analysis, however, is the assertion that the blessings ascend from below in a murmur that is incited by the sound of the ram's horn, and the further claim that the blessings from above similarly come forth in a murmur from the depth of the well (*umqa de-veira*),<sup>104</sup> a symbolic reference to *Binah*, whence the lower seven *sefirot* emanate. To be more precise, the blessings are said to issue from the spring of the well (*nevi'u de-veira*), a technical expression that I propose refers more specifically to the womb of *Binah*,<sup>105</sup> which is characterized in zoharic literature and other kabbalistic sources in decidedly phallic terms.<sup>106</sup> The issuing forth of all blessings from this attribute of the divine pleroma in a murmur—and I note, parenthetically, that in other zoharic passages instruction is given to the worshipper to direct the intention of the heart to this depth of the well in order to draw down the blessings

<sup>102</sup> Literally, "are drawn forth, one with the other" (*mishta'avin da be-da*). For a similar use of this term, see *Zohar* 1:165a; 2:98b; 3:209a.

<sup>103</sup> *Zohar* 1:234a.

<sup>104</sup> On the attribution of the term *umqa* to *Binah*, see *Zohar* 1:30a, 31a, 147a, 2:63b, 3:26a, 70a, 146a, 285a, 289b. On the mystical-esoteric resonance of the word *omeq*, the Hebrew equivalent of the Aramaic *umqa*, see Idel, "Secrecy," 317 n. 24, 321 n. 47, 327 n. 84, 335 n. 133, and other scholarly references cited by the author in these notes.

<sup>105</sup> The locution appears as well in *Zohar* 2:142a.

<sup>106</sup> See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, 98–106; *Language, Eros, Being*, 83, 138, 456 n. 231, 458 n. 241.

that sustain the world<sup>107</sup>—is consistent with the many characterizations of *Binah* in medieval kabbalistic works that center around notions of secrecy and hiddenness,<sup>108</sup> as we find, for instance, in the zoharic idiom *alma de-itkasya*<sup>109</sup> and in its Hebrew equivalent in the works of Moses de León *olam ha-nistar*.<sup>110</sup> The application of the eschatological term employed in rabbinic literature *olam ha-ba*, the world-to-come, to *Binah* is cast in the same mystical light, as this is a realm of existence that no human eye has seen (based on the language of Isa 64:3),<sup>111</sup> an inherent inscrutability that is communicated as well by the scriptural injunction to send forth the mother bird before one takes fledglings from the nest (Deut 22:6–7).<sup>112</sup> Most importantly, this attribute is demarcated as the silence of the “subtle inner voice,” *qol ha-daḡ ha-penimi*,<sup>113</sup> the “hidden voice that is not externalized,” *qol satum asher einno yoṣe huṣah*,<sup>114</sup> the “mighty voice without end,” *qol gadol we-lo yasaf* (Deut 5:19), the “soft murmuring sound,” *qol demamah daqqah* (1 Kings 19:12),<sup>115</sup> a litany of acoustic images (to which other examples could have been added) meant to convey what I shall call the *gestural unsaying*, that is, the verbal act of saying-not rather than the muteness of not-saying, affixing a sign to the sign that does not signify identity of difference, but rather marks difference of identity.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>107</sup> *Zohar* 2:63b, 3:70a.

<sup>108</sup> Idel, “Secrecy,” 325–334.

<sup>109</sup> *Zohar* 1:152a, 154a, 156a, 158a; 2:29b.

<sup>110</sup> Moses de León, *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 375; *Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 23–24, 26–27; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 22–23, 105–106, 191–192 (Hebrew section); “She’clot u-Teshuvot le-R. Moshe di li’on be-Inyenci Qabbalah,” 41.

<sup>111</sup> *Zohar* 1:59a, 130b; 2:156b, 210b; Moses de León, “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” 59–60.

<sup>112</sup> Moses de León, *R. Moses de Leon’s Commentary to Ezekiel’s Chariot*, 70.

<sup>113</sup> Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, 336 and 370; *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 375; *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 6, 26. See also Moses de León, *Perush Yod-Gimmel Middot*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1609, fol. 130b: “You must contemplate the matter that from the Primordial Wisdom (*ha-hokhmah ha-qedumah*) the Torah comes forth in the secret of the thirty-two paths. . . . And contemplate that this father produces a construct to be built from him, and this is the eighth sphere that establishes everything, but this sphere is the inner subtle voice (*ha-qol ha-daḡ ha-penimi*), and it is called the construct of the father (*binyan av*).” Compare *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 6, 88.

<sup>114</sup> Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, 370.

<sup>115</sup> Moses de León, *Sod Eser Sefirot Belimah*, 376.

<sup>116</sup> I am here indebted to the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure as deflected and applied in the phenomenological analysis of “indirect language” and “voices of silence” in Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 39–83. Many scholars and philosophers have written about the role accorded language in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological psychology, and here I offer a modest representation of the relevant studies. For a succinct but incisive summary, see the foreword by James M. Edie to Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness*

It is important to emphasize that the muffled speech to which I here allude is not the wordlessness beyond all phonemic gesticulation and/or graphic inscription, a state (or, as the case may be, nonstate) that kabbalists associate with the nondifferentiated mystery of Ein Sof or *Keter*.<sup>117</sup> Nor is it the stillness that results from the severance of speech (*dibbur*) and voice (*qol*), the separation of the sixth and tenth emanations, the masculine *Tiferet* and the feminine *Malkhut*.<sup>118</sup> The murmur is allied with the third emanation, *Binah*, the attribute that is also envisioned as the source whence the letters of the Hebrew alphabet are derived like stones excavated from a quarry. In a very precise sense, then, this murmur can be demarcated as the sound of silence that engenders the silence of sound. The letters are depicted, moreover, as the substance of the seminal overflow that *Binah* receives from *Hokhmah*.<sup>119</sup> In a number of zoharic homilies, the efflux of divine light is portrayed figuratively as the overflow of seed from thought (*Hokhmah*), the Primordial Torah, whence comes forth the inaudible voice, which is also troped as inscription (*ketav* or *ketivah*); that voice, the sound of the ram's horn (*shofar*), reverberates in turn and fractures further into discrete phonemes and

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and the Acquisition of Language, xi–xxxii, and for more expansive analyses see Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, 108–144; Burke, “Listening at the Abyss”; Bucher, *Zwischen Phänomenologie und Sprachwissenschaft*.

<sup>117</sup> For an analysis of several typological forms of silence exemplified in works of Jewish mysticism, see Hallamish, “On Silence in Kabbalah and Hasidism”. On the apophatic depiction of Ein Sof in terms of Neoplatonic thought, see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 207–209, 214–217, 271–273; *Kabbalah*, 88–91; *Origins*, 265–276, 431–443; *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*, 38, 41–42, 46, 159; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 233–235; Idel, “The Image of Adam Above the Sefirot”; “The Sefirot Above the Sefirot”; “Jewish Kabbalah and Platonism”; “On the Doctrine of Divinity”; Matt, “Ayin”; Katz, “Utterance and Ineffability”, 287–294; Wolfson, “Negative Theology and Positive Assertion”; *Through a Speculum*, 67–68. On the relationship of Ein Sof and *Keter* in zoharic kabbalah, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 242–246.

<sup>118</sup> Moses de León, *Shushan Edut*, in “Shenei Quntresim,” 336. See also David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, *Or Zarua*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America Mic. 2203, fols. 3a–b: “The secret of the matter is that the Community of Israel is dead, as it were, when amidst the nations for the speech (*dibbur*) is separated from her, for there is no voice (*qol*) without speech (*dibbur*) or speech without voice, as it is written ‘I was dumb, silent’ (Ps 39:3).” It is of interest to note in this context that in *Zohar* 3:30a the biblical expression “soft murmuring sound”, *qol demamah daqah* (1 Kings 19:11–12), which is more typically associated with *Binah*, is related to *Malkhut*, “the last voice that is silent as it has no particular word, but it is speechless in and of itself. But when they gather upon her, she is heard in all of the worlds and they all tremble from her.” This characterization of *Malkhut* corresponds to the standard kabbalistic depiction of the last of the emanations as the attribute that has no light or substance except for what she reflects and absorbs from the potencies above her.

<sup>119</sup> *Zohar* 1:15b.

graphemes—the phonological and grammatological should not be conceived as independent aspects, but rather as two forms of one phenomenon—manifest in *Tif'eret*, the “audible voice” (*gol de-ishtema*) that is the script of the Written Torah, and *Malkhut*, the “speech” (*dib-bura*) declaimed in the ongoing interpretative narration that makes up the collective body of the Oral Torah.<sup>120</sup> With respect to both *Binah*, the “great voice,” and *Tif'eret*, the “voice that is heard,” we detect a coalescence of the auditory and visual,<sup>121</sup> and hence we can describe the emanative process in either acoustic or ocular terms.<sup>122</sup> This should alert us to the difficulty of casting the traditional kabbalistic scheme in terms of the contemporary distinction (largely indebted to Derrida) between the grammatological and logocentric. From the hermeneutical standpoint of medieval kabbalah, the graphic and oral cannot be severed, as every act of writing is simultaneously a spoken declamation, and every spoken declamation an act of writing.

In the citation that has been transmitted as part of the Tosefta stratum of the zoharic compilation, the gesture of the whisper is linked symbolically to *Binah*, the “soft murmuring sound” beyond imaginal or

<sup>120</sup> See Tishby, *Wisdom*, 293. A particularly interesting formulation of this notion is found in Moses de León, *Perush Yod-Gimmel Middot*, MS New York, Jewish Theological Seminary of America 1609, fols. 130b–131a.

<sup>121</sup> A striking example of the convergence of epistemic modes is found in the description of the knowledge of the “voice that is heard” (*gol de-ishtema*) through the “vision of the holy spirit” (*hezayona de-ruah qudsha*) in *Zohar* 2:43b (*Piqqudin*). In that context, the unity of the threefold in the audible voice, which corresponds to *Tif'eret*, is linked exegetically to the three occurrences of the divine name in Deuteronomy 6:4, the traditional proclamation of the monotheistic faith. Regarding this passage and other trinitarian formulations in zoharic literature, see Jellinek, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala*, 2: 51–56; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 973–974; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 140–145. See also Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 257–258. It is of interest to point out the connection that is drawn in the aforementioned passage from the *Piqqudin* section of the *Zohar* between the divine attribute depicted symbolically as the “voice” and the actual voice of the worshipper who recites the verse liturgically. The proper intention that one must have when one articulates the *Shema* is to unify the divine from “the Infinite to the end of everything” (*me-ein sof ad sof de-khola*). The verbal gesture is complemented by a meditative practice of an ocular nature, the seeing of interior colors through the “vision of the closed eye” (*heizu de-eina setima*). For further discussion of this technique of visualization in zoharic kabbalah, see Scholem, “Colors and Their Symbolism,” 34; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, 380–383. See below, n. 129.

<sup>122</sup> The inseparability of the acoustic and ocular in the kabbalistic understanding of language, which was a central component of Scholem’s presentation of kabbalistic phenomenology, has informed my own thinking as well. See Scholem, “The Name of God” *Diogenes* 79, 71, and *Diogenes* 80, 167–168; *Origins*, 277; Bloom, *Kabbalah and Criticism*, 52; Biale, *Gereshom Scholem*, 99–100; Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 4, 286–287, 400–401 n. 18, 555 n. 151.



iconic representation, the primordial void (*tohu*) that is the womb of all possibility, “the place in which there is no color (*gawwan*) and no image (*diyogna*), and it is not comprised within the mystery of the image (*raza de-diyogna*). Now it is within an image, but when they contemplate it, it has no image at all (*kad mistakkelan beih leit leih diyogna kelal*). Everything has a garment in which it is en clothed except for this one.”<sup>123</sup> *Binah*, the “soft murmuring sound”, *qol demamah daqah* (1 Kings 19:11–12)—demarcated elsewhere in zoharic homilies as the “inner place whence all the lights emerge”<sup>124</sup> or as the “Tabernacle of gold” upon which the “inner and subtle incense is offered” and in which “the knot of faith is bound”<sup>125</sup>—assumes the form of the gradations that emanate from it, but inherently it is without image,<sup>126</sup> and hence contemplation of it essentially entails envisioning the essence of inessentiality, seeing nothing, as it were, for in the absence of a garment what can be seen?<sup>127</sup> As the matter is expressed in the zoharic commentary on the image of the *hashmal*, which figures prominently in the appearance of the glory in Ezekiel’s prophetic vision of the chariot:

The internal vision (*heizu penima’ah*) is the vision in silence (*heizu bi-lehishu*), as it says “After the fire—a soft murmuring sound” (1 Kings 19:11–12), and this is the mystery of the image that comprises all the images in the prism that is above (*raza de-diyogna de-khalil kol diyognin be-heizu di-le’ela*), the supernal voice in the silence that is above (*qol ila’ah bi-lehishu di-le’ela*) whence all the images emerge.<sup>128</sup>

Explicating the symbol of the *hashmal* in his commentary on Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot, Moses de León similarly described *Binah* as the “secret of the inner splendor (*sod zohar penimi*) in the secret of

<sup>123</sup> *Zohar* 1:16a.

<sup>124</sup> *Zohar* 1:209a.

<sup>125</sup> *Zohar* 3:30b.

<sup>126</sup> See the commentary on Ezekiel’s chariot vision from the author of the later strata of zoharic literature printed in *Zohar Hadash*, 33b: “The soul (*nishmata*) is from the aspect of *Binah* upon which the Thought that has no end rests, and in it there is no image (*dimyon*), no form (*surah*), and no likeness (*diyogna*) for it is the world-to-come and in it there is no body (*gufa*) and no likeness (*diyogna*), as the masters of the Mishnah have established, ‘There is no body or corporeality in the world-to-come.’... And in that Thought all prophets would imagine all the images (*dimyonin*) and all the forms (*siyyurin*) that are beneath it. Above it they did not apprehend any image (*siyyur*) at all. They were not able to grasp any image (*siyyur*) or any form (*gawwan*) with respect to it let alone with respect to what is above it.”

<sup>127</sup> See Wolfson, *Occultation*, 115–118, 133–135, and the more extensive analysis in Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 220–233.

<sup>128</sup> *Zohar Hadash*, 38c.

intellectualized intellect (*sekhel muskal*) that shimmers momentarily and then disappears, and it is not comprehended in any manner that may be understood, for it is the denuded splendor without a garment (*zohar nishlal beli levush*). Therefore it is called *hashmal*, for it shimmers in the heart momentarily, and then it disappears momentarily.”<sup>129</sup> Inasmuch as the locus of secrecy is this aspect of the divine that exceeds any and every optic or acoustic figuration—thus it is characterized as both the “great voice” that emits no sound and as the “internal vision” that has no form—it follows that the apophatic path is the appropriate means to access it, emulating thereby the prophets (with the exception of Moses) who are implored “to contemplate through the luminosity of the heart” (*le’istakela be-ṣahuta de-libba*) the *hashmal* until “they saw within what they saw in silence” (*hamu lego mah de-ḥamu bi-leḥishu*), thereby apprehending “the mystery within silence (*raza bi-leḥishu*), the mystery that exists within the brain (*raza de-qayyema lego be-moḥa*)... the inner mystery of the brain that exists within the supernal mysteries in the supernal

<sup>129</sup> Farber-Ginat, *R. Moses de Leon’s Commentary*, 60. In the same context, de León also interprets the word *hashmal* as a reference to the “beasts” (*ḥayyot*), i.e., the central *sefirot* of *Ḥesed*, *Din*, and *Raḥamim*, that are unified within *Bimah*. See *ibid.*, 66 and 67 (in that context, the unification of the beasts is symbolically encoded in the name YAHDWNHY, which is formed by a combination of the Tetragrammaton and its epithet, YHWH and ADNY. It is worth noting as well that de León (Farber-Ginat’s *Commentary*, 66) utilizes the scriptural locution *demut ha-ḥayyot*, “image of the beasts” (Ezek 1:13), to distinguish between the “supernal beasts” *ḥayyot ha-elyonot*, that are “stripped of every matter” (*nishlalot mi-kol davar*) and hence beyond visual contemplation, and the lower beasts that can be seen in accordance with the capacity of the one who contemplates them. Presumably, the “supernal beasts” denote the supernal sefirotic potencies whereas the “lower beasts” are the refraction of the upper ones in *Malkhut* or perhaps the angelic beings in the realm beneath the world of the emanations. See *ibid.*, 67, where the supernal beasts, also identified as the “splendor of the speculum that shines” (*zohar aspaqlarya ha-me’irah*), are described as being visually comprehended through rotating the closed eye (see above, n. 121). The fleeting vision that results from this rather simple technique is compared to the reflection of the sunlight upon a dish of water, images that are meant to convey the inability of human intellect to apprehend the sefirotic emanations. For a similar explanation of the poetic imagery in Ezekiel’s vision, see Gikatilla, *R. Joseph Gikatilla’s Commentary*, 64: “Know that there are external beasts and they are called ‘holy,’ and they are bound to the throne. And there are inner beasts, which have no measure or aspect in a mind that is created. From the comprehension of the external beasts a man can contemplate a little from within the speculum that does not shine, to comprehend something of an allusion to the interior (*remez bi-penimiyut*).” See *ibid.*, 72: “There are supernal beasts in the secret of the great name, blessed be he, in the inner secret, and no mind can enter and comprehend. And there is below in the [world of] separation beasts that are the thrones and chariots for the supernal beasts.”

image (*raza penima'ah be-moħa qayyema go razin illa'in be-diyogna illa'ah*).<sup>130</sup> Encoded in these words is the epistemic basis of the principle of ontic dissimilitude: the vision within the silence is contemplated through the silence within the vision. The point is made in more direct language in the gloss attributed to Simeon ben Yoħai on the middle term in the key expression *qol demamah daqah*, which is identified both as the *qol ha-shofar*, the “voice of the ram’s horn” (Exod 19:19, 20:14), and as the *qol gadol*, the “mighty voice” (Deut 5:19), biblical terms associated symbolically with *Binah*, the source of divine revelation:

“Murmuring”—what is “murmuring” (*demamah*)? R. Simeon said: A person must be silent with respect to it and to close his mouth (*lemishtoqa minneih u-lemehsam pumeih*), as it says “I resolved I would watch my step lest I offend by my speech; I would keep my mouth muzzled” (Ps 39:2). “Murmuring”—this is the silence that is not heard on the outside (*shituqa de-lo ishtema levar*).<sup>131</sup>

The implication of the scriptural locution *qol demamah daqah*, then, is that the divine attribute to which it refers is the silence that is not heard on the outside and, consequently, one must close one’s mouth and remain silent with respect to it. The attentive ear, however, will heed the double silence in the signpost of the murmur, silently speaking in speaking silently about the speech of silence that is the silence of speech, the token action that betokens the erotic underpinning of kabbalistic esotericism.

### *Secreted Eros In Eros Secreted*

As the voice of silence that is not heard except as the silence of the voice, *Binah* is troped with a plethora of images that convey her occlusion from sight. In the succinct formulation of Moses de León, “With respect to this hidden world, its essence is not heard on the outside as it is being built, for all of its matter is in a whisper, in a secret.”<sup>132</sup> Yet, it is precisely from this nonphenomenalizable depth, the depth that is manifest as what remains hidden, that one can envisage the profundity

<sup>130</sup> *Zohar Hadash*, 38b.

<sup>131</sup> *Zohar* 2:81b. See *ibid.*, 3:209a, where *Binah* is described as the mother who in a whisper issues the supernal gifts that stimulate the overflow of light from the King to the Matrona.

<sup>132</sup> Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 192 (Hebrew section).

of the nexus of the erotic and esoteric that figures prominently in the psychosexual worldview of the kabbalists and particularly as it is expressed in the symbolism enunciated in zoharic literature. As we saw in the case of Abulafia, so too in the zoharic anthology, a connection is made between *gilluy arayot*, the uncovering of the genitals, related to illicit sexual relations, and inappropriate disclosure of secrets.<sup>133</sup> By contrast, the suitable revelation of secrets, exemplified in the case of Simeon ben Yoḥai, is correlated with a state of sexual purity. On occasion in the *Zohar*, this virtue is associated with the murmur, the very gesture deemed as the most pertinent method to divulge mystical wisdom. Consider, for example, the following passage:

Therefore, prayer is silent [*selota ve-laḥash*], like one who speaks secretly with a king [*de-mallil be-raza im malka*], and as long as he is with him in secret, he is not removed from him at all. . . . Thus, when one juxtaposes [the blessing dealing with] redemption [*ge'ullah*] and the [standing] prayer [*tefillah*], one must hold on to him, and to speak to him silently [*vi-leḥishu*], in secret [*ve-raza*], so that he will not be distant from him, and he will not be abandoned us.<sup>134</sup>

The main concern of this text is to secure the conjunction of the people of Israel below to the divine attribute above to which they are attached. Since it is the tendency of all the attributes to extend upward and to be absorbed in the Infinite,<sup>135</sup> how can the bond be preserved? The response relates to the liturgical saying of the *Amidah*, the standing prayer, also known as the *Shemoneh Esreh*, the eighteen benedictions, which, according to rabbinic practice, is to be recited silently. Secrecy maintains the union, and thus by uttering this prayer in a whisper the Jewish people guarantee that they will be united to God.

The erotic aspect of the murmur is implied in the rabbinic notion alluded to above concerning the need not to separate the redemption (*ge'ullah*) and prayer (*tefillah*), that is, the blessing that ends with a reference to the redeemer of Israel (*go'el yisra'el*) and the beginning of the *Amidah*.<sup>136</sup> When rendered through the prism of kabbalistic symbolism, the juxtaposition of redemption (*ge'ullah*) and prayer (*tefillah*) signifies the

<sup>133</sup> *Zohar* 3:79a; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 25.

<sup>134</sup> *Zohar* 2:138b.

<sup>135</sup> On the ascent to the Infinite in the zoharic conception of intention, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 955.

<sup>136</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 4b, 9b.

unification of the male and female potencies in the divine.<sup>137</sup> Insofar as the time of the utterance of the *Amidah* by the male Jewish worshipper (that is, in accordance with the medieval kabbalistic assumption regarding halakhic ritual) corresponds to the initiatory moment of copulation between the masculine *Tiferet* and the feminine *Malkhut* through the phallic potency of *Yesod*—the process reaches its climax at the conclusion of the *Amidah*—it follows that everything is “in silence.” In the words of one zoharic homily: “That Righteous One [*Yesod*] is aroused to be united in love, affection, joy, and desire, with the place that is necessary [*Malkhut*]...and then everything is in a murmur (*khola vi-lehishu*), above and below, in the kisses of desire.”<sup>138</sup> The silent prayer is located symbolically at the beginning of the union of the male and female potencies, and, therefore, the appropriate liturgical response is reticence, which reflects, in turn, the quality of modesty that is apposite to one witnessing the erotically charged drama in the divine pleroma.<sup>139</sup> Confirmation of this complex of ideas is found in the following passage:

It has been taught: R. Judah said, “When priests below rise and spread out their hands, all of the holy crowns above are aroused, and they are arrayed to be blessed, and they shine from the depth of the well [*umqa de-veira*], which overflows to them from that depth that issues forth continuously, and the blessings that flow from the wellsprings to all the worlds do not cease, and they are blessed and irrigated from all of them.” We

<sup>137</sup> *Zohar* 1:132b, 205b; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 79 (Hebrew section); *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 75; Tishby, *Wisdom*, 966–967. On the mystery of intercourse or the repair (*tiqqun*) of male and female as the primary intentionality (*kawwanah*) assigned to prayer, see *ibid.*, 957–959.

<sup>138</sup> *Zohar* 2:128b. According to *Zohar* 1:209b–210a, the custom to utter the *Amidah* silently (*be-lahash*) is explained by the symbolic link of this prayer and the *Shekhinah*, which is identified as the inaudible voice that is dependent on the masculine *Tiferet*, the “voice that is heard” (see above, n. 120). This explanation clashes with another view expressed in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic treatises according to which the posture of standing is valenced as male and that of sitting as female, which leads to the conclusion that the standing prayer corresponds to the masculine, in contrast to the prayers that are uttered in a sitting posture, which correspond to the feminine, just as the head phylacteries correspond to the masculine and the arm phylacteries to the feminine. See *Zohar* 1:132b, 205b; 3:120b; Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 79 (Hebrew section).

<sup>139</sup> See Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 133–134. For a later reverberation of the erotic connotation of the whisper according to the zoharic symbolism in the poetic compositions of Isaac Luria, see Liebes, “Hymns for the Sabbath Meals,” 548, where the “pure olive oil” is described as being drawn into the *Shekhinah* “in silence” (*bi-lehishin*), and 550, where the hope is expressed that “we will be shown his mystery/spoken in a whisper” (*we-yahwei lan sitreh/de-mitmar bi-lehishah*).

have learnt that at that time silence [*lehishuta*] and stillness [*shettiquta*] are in all of the worlds. [This may be compared] to a king who desires to unite with the matrona, and he desires to enter her in silence [*bi-lehishu*], and all the servants are stirred up at that time and they whisper “Behold, the king has come to be joined to the matrona.” Who is the matrona? This is the Community of Israel.”<sup>140</sup>

According to the teaching attributed to R. Judah, the priestly blessing sets into motion the downpour of light from the depth of the well, which, as we have seen, is a technical designation of *Binah*, onto all of the emanations and thence onto all of the worlds. A gloss on this teaching introduces the element of the whisper: When the blessings overflow from *Binah* to all of reality, there is a hush that permeates everything. The erotic implications of this stillness are brought into sharp relief by the parable according to which the king desires to enter the matrona “in silence.” We may conclude, therefore, that the opening of the womb of *Binah* is rendered symbolically equivalent to the act of coitus, which is likewise marked by silence, a moment that calls for timidity.<sup>141</sup>

I will end with the discussion of one final zoharic passage that brings into clear focus the nexus of eroticism and esotericism related to the murmuring of secrets. The text builds on the rabbinic custom to utter quietly *barukh shem kevod malkhuto le-olam wa’ed*, “Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever,” after proclaiming out loud the confession of God’s oneness, *shema yisra’el yhwah elohenu yhwah ehad*, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one” (Deut 6:4). The zoharic author notes that there is a parallel between these two utterances, each one consisting of six words, and both together constitute the “supernal order of faith” (*sidura illa’ah di-meheimanuta*): the former effects the unification of the *sefrot*, especially the lower six emanations from *Hesed* to *Yesod*, and the latter the unification of *Malkhut* in the forces beneath her. For our purposes, it is necessary to focus on the latter. In the precise words of the zoharic text:

In that moment, the matrona is crowned and adorned, and her servants enter into her with an abundant silence [*vi-lehishu saggi*], and they say, “Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever.” This is in silence [*vi-lehishu*], for thus must she be taken into her husband.<sup>142</sup>

<sup>140</sup> *Zohar* 3:146a.

<sup>141</sup> Compare the description in *Zohar* 3:209a, of the mother issuing gifts “in silence” and bestowing them upon the crown that sits on the head of the king.

<sup>142</sup> *Zohar* 2:133b. Compare *Zohar* 3:253b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*).

Deviating from the talmudic explanation, the zoharic author understands the gesture of the murmur in decidedly erotic terms. The blessing of *Malkhut* is whispered because the time of its utterance is when she is united with her male consort, a conjunction that occurs in silence. In the continuation of the zoharic passage, however, we learn of another reason for the silence:

They bring her into him in silence. Why in silence? So that the foreign one will not mix in with this joy, as it says, “And no outsider can share in his joy” (Prov 14:10)... In the time to come, the evil eye will be removed from the world and it will have no rule, then [the word] “one” [*ehad*] will be proclaimed [in relation to *Malkhut*] openly. Presently, since the Other Side cleaves to her, she is not one, and we unify her silently [*vi-lehishu*], in the mystery of alternative letters, and we say “forever” [*wa’ed*]. But in the future that is coming, that side will separate from her and it will be removed from the world, and then surely she will be called “one”... as it says, “On that day the Lord will be one and his name one” (Zech 14:9), openly and explicitly, not silently and secretly.<sup>143</sup>

In the present state of the world, there is a struggle between the right side of holiness and the left side of unholiness. As long as this Other Side exists, the unification of the feminine must be uttered silently so that the foreign element will not intrude and penetrate into the space of the holy. In the messianic future, however, the demonic force will be obliterated, and thus it will no longer be necessary to unify *Malkhut* in a muted way. On the contrary, both male and female will be unified overtly, a situation that is expressed in the eschatological vision of Zechariah, “On that day the Lord will be one and his name one,” *ba-yom ha-hu yihyeh yhwh ehad u-shemo ehad*.

The unification of the male and female implied in this verse represents the ideal of the heterosexual coupling. As I have argued elsewhere, the gender construction that overwhelmingly informs the kabbalistic worldview (based on a close reading of the biblical accounts of creation) is such that sexual union results in the restoration of the female to the male,<sup>144</sup> a restitution that, in turn, occasions a shift from the heteroerotic to the homoerotic, the latter signifying, at least ideally, the carnality of ascetic renunciation, which is fully instantiated in the messianic redemption.<sup>145</sup> I would suggest that this metamorphosis of the erotic is implied

<sup>143</sup> *Zohar* 2:133b–134a; Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 73–75 (Hebrew section); *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 83. See Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 30.

<sup>144</sup> Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 49, 62, 108–110, 175–176, 188–189, 373–374.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 148, 311–312, 324–332, 350, 366–371, 388–389.

in the above passage as well. Support for this interpretation may be adduced from the fact that the liturgical formula “Blessed be the name of the glory of his kingdom forever” is proclaimed out loud on the eve of Yom Kippur, the day of fasting that anticipates the eschaton. Precisely when sexual intercourse is prohibited, and the people of Israel stand in the posture of angelic beings, there is no more need to use the form of silent speech in relation to the divine feminine.<sup>146</sup> What is enacted on Yom Kippur proleptically portends the future when the bind of secrecy is undone completely, and the secret nature of eros will be exposed fully in the erotic nature of the secret.

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<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 364–371.



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