

## 8 Occultation of the Feminine and the Body of Secrecy in Medieval Kabbalah

Perhaps truth is a woman  
who has reasons  
for not letting us see her reasons?

Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*The Gay Science*

### *Dis/closing the Secret Secretly*

The occult tradition of Judaism, which by the High Middle Ages is referred to most frequently by the generic term “kabbalah,” literally, “that which has been received,” is usually studied under the rubric of “mysticism.” A far better term, however, to capture the nature of this phenomenon is “esotericism.” Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the mystical dimensions expressed in Jewish sources – and here I extend the scope to include more than just kabbalistic texts – are contextualized within the hermeneutical framework of esotericism.<sup>1</sup> Here it is relevant to recall as well that, in the first of his ten unhistorical aphorisms on the history of kabbalah, Gershom Scholem duly noted the central concern with the issue of secrecy in the kabbalistic sources. He remarked that the fundamental problem that presents itself is that, on the one hand, the kabbalists presume that truth is transmitted from generation to generation, but, on the other hand, the truth of which they speak is secretive and thus it cannot by nature be fully transmitted. In his inimitable style of ironic paradox, Scholem wrote, “Authentic tradition (*echte Tradition*) remains hidden; only the fallen tradition (*verfallende Tradition*) falls (*verfällt*) upon an object and only when it is fallen does its greatness become visible.”<sup>2</sup>

The truly esoteric knowledge cannot be divulged if it is to remain esoteric and thus a secret tradition that is transmitted is by definition a fallen (as opposed to an authentic) tradition.

The fascination with secrecy, which has held great power over the Jewish imagination through the generations,<sup>3</sup> is often linked exegetically to the verse, “To investigate the matter is the glory of kings, but to conceal the matter is the glory of God” (Ps. 25:2). It is not an exaggeration to say that the words of the psalmist have served as an oracle posted on the walls of the small elitist circles wherein specific secrets pertaining to both symbols and rites have been transmitted orally and in writing. This is true, even though the eventual proliferation of written transmission of secrets usually posed a challenge to the explicit injunction against disclosing secrets publicly. To be sure, not every written exposition of occult knowledge is in defiance of this injunction, for there were kabbalists who mastered the art of concealing secrets by revealing them. This, in my mind, is exemplified in the zoharic literature, wherein mysteries of Torah are disclosed through being hidden, an exegetical pattern that the zoharic authorship discerns in the Torah itself.<sup>4</sup> The exoteric and esoteric layers are distinguishable, but one can only be expressed through the other. The way to the secret is through the letter of the text, not by discarding it. One passage worth particular mention is a text wherein the hermeneutical dissimulation is framed in ontological terms: just as the name of God is both hidden and revealed, the former corresponding to YHWH and the latter to Adonai, so the Torah, which is identical with the name,<sup>5</sup> is concurrently concealed and disclosed. Indeed, all the matters of this world and the supernal world are hidden and revealed.<sup>6</sup> The example of the name illumines the impenetrable depth of the paradox: ultimately there are not two names, but one name, for the very name that is written “YHWH” is pronounced “Adonai.” The articulation of the name YHWH as Adonai, therefore, is precisely that which preserves the ineffability of the name. The inexpressibility of the inexpressible is preserved only through that which is expressed. Analogously, the exoteric sense of Torah sustains the esoteric meaning by masking it in the guise of that which it is not. In the final analysis, the hermeneutical position adopted in Zohar is such that there can be no unveiling of naked truth, for truth that is stark naked – divested of all appearance – is mere simulation. If the secret is the truth that is completely disrobed,

then the secret is nothing to see.<sup>7</sup> By contrast, the truth that is apparent is disclosed in and through the garment of its enclosure.<sup>8</sup> The tension between the formless glory and the image endowed with form accounts for what may be called the erotics of dressing in zoharic literature, which is predicated on the paradox that nudity is the ultimate veil and the veil the ultimate nudity: the naked body is the garment that obstructs the gaze, whereas the garment renders the body naked in its transparency.<sup>9</sup>

The full force of this dialectic can only be ascertained if one bears in mind the implicit gender signification of this symbolism:<sup>10</sup> For the medieval kabbalist, the concealed name is correlated with the masculine, and the revealed name with the feminine. Consequently, the feminine is assigned the paradoxical role of representing that which cannot be represented. Representation in this case does not denote a re/presenting of that which is eclipsed from the field of vision, but the making present of that which forever alludes presence,<sup>11</sup> the representation of the masculine absence that is known as absent only in its specula(riza)tion through the mirror of the feminine.<sup>12</sup> The value of the feminine from the androcentric standpoint adopted by the male kabbalists lies exclusively in the fact that she is the speculum that refracts the nonrepresentable image of the masculine glory, an ocularcentric conception that can be expressed in auditory terms as the revealed name through which the concealed name is articulated.<sup>13</sup> In a similar manner, the *peshat*, the outer sense of the text, serves as the sheath through which the *sod*, the secret, is disclosed. One obtains the covering of *peshat* through the exegetical act of uncovering.<sup>14</sup> Later in this essay I shall return to this paradox of the mirror/garment, the cognizance of which is fundamental to the ecstatic experience underlying the hermeneutical orientation of zoharic kabbalah.

The matter of putting down secrets implicates the kabbalist in a process of esoteric writing, which is predicated on the notion that written allusions to secrets become themselves secrets that require decipherment at the hands of an interpreter. In this manner, the subtle interplay of revelation and concealment fosters a rhetoric of secrecy based on the interface of orality and writing as it pertains to the dissemination of esoteric knowledge. The hermeneutical circle thus created by the paradox of the secret as that which is disclosed in its concealment and concealed in its disclosure has preserved the

essentially esoteric nature of this enterprise even in textual communities (such as the fraternity surrounding the Zohar in late thirteenth-century Castile, or the mystical fellowship clustered around Isaac Luria in sixteenth-century Safed) that have advocated a fuller written expression of secrets. These secrets, whose authenticity presumably is linked to their having been transmitted in a continuous chain, retain something of their secret nature even when committed to writing. Indeed, the zoharic image of the book of concealment (*sifra di-tseni'uta*),<sup>15</sup> that is, the book that conceals the secrets it reveals,<sup>16</sup> captures the paradoxical nature of secrecy more overtly than a purely oral form of discourse: the secret as such must be exposed if it is to be a secret, but being a secret precludes its being exposed.

Still, we are intrigued by the phenomenon of secrecy in the history of kabbalah, and we ask what is it about secrets that is so compelling and seductive? Why is it that kabbalists have continuously fostered the notion of mysteries that cannot be openly disclosed even, and perhaps especially, in the context of written disclosure? The esotericism cultivated in kabbalistic fraternities does not simply involve the hiding of information from others. Quite the contrary, an important aspect of secrecy is clearly the investiture of power to those who seek to disseminate the secrets they possess, but in such a way that the hidden nature of the secret is preserved. To state the obvious, a secret presupposes the concomitant transmission and withholding on the part of the one in possession of the secret.<sup>17</sup> If I possess a secret and transmit it to no one, the secret has no relevance. By the same token, if I readily divulge that secret without discretion, the secrecy of that secret is rendered ineffectual. What empowers me as the keeper of a secret is not only that I transmit it to some and not to others, but also that in the very transmission I maintain the secret by holding back in my advancing forward. From that vantage point, therefore, the secret is a secret only to the extent that it is concealed in its disclosure, but it may be concealed in its disclosure only if it is disclosed in its concealment.<sup>18</sup>

The confluence of concealment and disclosure underscores another essential element in the nature of secrecy expressed in the history of kabbalah. I refer to the link between esotericism and eroticism, which is related more specifically to the insight that transmission of secrets requires the play of openness and closure basic to the

push and pull of eros. The erotics of esoteric disclosure is a particular application of the more general perception that reading, which is marked by the dialectic of knowing and not knowing, is an act of desire.<sup>19</sup> Alternatively expressed, the motif of passing on secrets, which we may refer to as the generative nature of esoteric knowledge, is associated in the kabbalistic tradition with the dynamic of flow and containment, the (male) master who bestows and the (male) disciple who receives. In the receiving, however, there is as much, if not more, power than in the bestowal, another facet that renders the use of the image of the (homo)erotic perfectly apt to characterize the process of communication of esoteric traditions.<sup>20</sup>

On this score, it is of interest to remark that in one of his works Jacques Derrida notes in passing that the genealogy of secrecy is also a history of sexuality.<sup>21</sup> Derrida's formulation seems to me to apply especially well to Jewish esotericism. In my own work, I have argued that the history of Jewish mysticism can be viewed as a progressive disclosure of the secret that is contextualized in the phallic aspect of the divine.<sup>22</sup> This is not to deny that secrets operate on many different levels in Jewish mystical literature. However, my thesis is that (1) the structure of secrecy as such involves the uncovering of the sign that by nature must be concealed, and that (2) in the relevant sources (penned through the ages by male Jews), but especially conspicuous in the medieval Kabbalah, this is related to a phallogocentric eroticism.

My claim is based on two assumptions, which in my judgment are well attested in the primary texts of kabbalistic literature: the phallus is the mark of signification that by nature must be concealed.<sup>23</sup> The signifier, however, has the task of disclosing that which is signified. The convergence of these two factors yields the contradictory nature of secrecy: to reveal itself, the phallus must be veiled. From that vantage point, each explication of a secret is compared phenomenologically in kabbalistic literature to the primordial exposure of the phallus, or more specifically, the aspect of the phallus that is exposed through the rite of circumcision, the sign of the covenant, which is linked anatomically to the corona (*aṭarah*). Given the centrality of the covenant of circumcision in rabbinic Judaism (based on biblical precedent) as the marker of Jewish identity,<sup>24</sup> it should come as no surprise that kabbalists would interpret the foundational ceremony as the paradigm for an esoteric hermeneutic

based on the unmasking of the mystery that is concealed.<sup>25</sup> Circumcision is the sacrament through which the Jew enacts the role of dissimulation by cutting away the foreskin to create the sign, the presence that is re/presented through its own absence.<sup>26</sup> The paradox is fully expressed in the insistence on the part of kabbalists that it is forbidden to gaze on the corona that is laid bare.<sup>27</sup> In the disclosure is the concealment, for the marking of the sign occasions the erasure of the name.<sup>28</sup>

The primacy accorded the phallogentric orientation in kabbalistic symbology is based on the larger assumption that sexual imagery is the principal linguistic field to which all others are related by way of euphemism or displacement. The primary works of theosophic kabbalah proffer the view that language itself, in both its verbal and graphic forms, is an expression of God's erotic impulse, which seeks closure in the narcissistic coincidence between the will of desire and its object.<sup>29</sup> In an ontological system that recognizes one ultimate reality, there is no genuine other;<sup>30</sup> hence, the underlying logic of the mythical structure is such that heterosexual eros is transmuted into the homoerotic, which in the final analysis is an expression of the autoerotic.<sup>31</sup> From a psychoanalytic perspective, this may strike the ear as a form of reductionism, but from the standpoint of symbolic discourse the claim is expansionist in the extreme, for all forms of experience relate to the erotic, which is the most appropriate way to express the creative potency of the divine. The nexus of eroticism and esotericism in the kabbalistic worldview is predicated on the presumption that the deepest ontology of religious experience embraces the erotic.

I am in full agreement, therefore, with a position articulated by a number of scholars regarding the use of erotic imagery to characterize the experience of the sacred. Matters pertaining to the spiritual realm can be depicted in erotic terms because there is a presumption with respect to the nature of divine sexuality, which is reflected in human sexuality.<sup>32</sup> My contention that kabbalists perceived the erotic, and more specifically phallic, element in the very texture of being is not equivalent to reducing everything in a simplistic fashion to the crude phallogentricism of the pornographic imagination, as some of my critics have mistakenly claimed.<sup>33</sup> On the contrary, as I have argued explicitly in several studies, the phallogentric eroticism of the kabbalistic tradition is predicated ideally on an

ascetic renunciation of heterosexual carnality and the concomitant affirmation of the homosocial rapture of mystical ecstasy,<sup>34</sup> which are expressed in the zoharic text in terms of erotic passion that binds together the members of the fraternity.<sup>35</sup>

In this essay, I will explore one particular theme related to the larger nexus of eroticism and esotericism in medieval kabbalah. Previously, as I have intimated, I have investigated the phallogocentric dimension of kabbalistic esotericism, epitomized by the identification of the phallic potency of the divine *anthropos* as the ontological root of secrecy; this theme is underscored by the verbal assonance between the words *sod*, “secret,” and *yesod*, “foundation,” the term that is used most frequently to name the ninth of the ten attributes of the Godhead, which corresponds to the phallus. The complex of motifs to be discussed here has forced me to refocus my gaze, for I will reexamine the theme of secrecy in the kabbalistic tradition from the specific vantage point of the body of the feminine. As I shall demonstrate, however, the link between the feminine and the notion of secrecy affirmed by the kabbalists involved in the production of the zoharic literature is contingent on the occultation of the former. Simply put, my thesis is that the trope of the hidden woman, the female that must be veiled, functions as a symbolic depiction of the body of secrecy in the poetic discourse espoused by the zoharic authorship. In the complex gender orientation evident in the literary strands of the Zohar, the image of the woman as mystery entails the dissimulation that hides itself, for the secret that is unveiled in the pretense of not-showing is the masculine transvaluation of the feminine, the female specularized through the gaze of the male.

### *Secrecy Unveiled in the Veil of Femininity*

The most poignant illustration of the motif of truth as the concealed woman in the zoharic corpus is the parabolic image spoken by the mysterious elder (*sabba*)<sup>36</sup> concerning the beautiful maiden without eyes, which is applied to the Torah.<sup>37</sup> This parabolic utterance is elucidated by means of another parable about the beautiful beloved who is hidden within her palace whence she discretely reveals herself to her lover in a sequence of disclosures, which culminates with the face-to-face encounter between the lover and the beloved, the

enlightened sage and the Torah. The parable is introduced by the hermeneutical claim that God hides all the secrets within the “garments” of the Torah, which refer to the literal words of the text.<sup>38</sup> The sage, who is described in contrast to the maiden/Torah as the one full of eyes, sees the mystery through the garment in which it is hidden. The secret, then, is garbed in the covering of the plain sense, but by means of that very covering it is revealed, though only to the one who has the eyes to see through the veil.<sup>39</sup>

The zoharic author inserts this hermeneutical discussion about the meaning of the text in the context of a complicated deliberation on the nature of the soul of the convert.<sup>40</sup> I cannot enter here into a full discussion of what is arguably one of the most intricate and convoluted sections of the zoharic text. For the purposes of this analysis I will streamline the argument. The analogy is drawn in the following manner: just as God conceals the secrets of Torah in the cloak of the letters of the text, the soul of the Jew (or, more specifically, the *neshamah*, which originates in the gradation of *Binah*) in its descent from the supernal Garden of Eden (that is, *Malkhut*) to this world is cloaked in the soul of the convert. For the sage, the task is to set his interpretative glance on the Torah, which is the beautiful maiden without eyes, so that he may discern the secret hidden beneath the letter of the text, but there is no way for him to apprehend that esoteric meaning except through the garment of the literal sense. In the same manner, the mystery of the convert is such that the Jewish soul is temporarily garbed in the body of a Gentile.

The mystery of the convert is thus related exegetically to the verse, “If a priest’s daughter marries a layman” (Lev. 22:12): The “priest’s daughter” (*bat kohen*) refers symbolically to the holy soul of the Jew, for the latter emanates from its ontological source in *Binah*, the great mother of the sefirotic gradations. When the spirit (or breath) of *Hesed*, “lovingkindness,” which is allied symbolically with the priest, blows, the soul settles in the “concealment of the Tree of Life,” that is, within the phallic gradation of *Yesod*, whence it enters the repository of the Garden of Eden, which is the feminine *Malkhut*. When the male Jew below transgresses sexually by engaging in intercourse with the Gentile woman, he draws down the force of the evil inclination and the Jewish soul inhabits the “layman” (*ish zar*), the body of the non-Jew, in which it is trapped until the moment of conversion.<sup>41</sup> The interpretation of this verse as a reference to the



phenomenon of conversion is buttressed by the symbolic association of the priest and *Hesed*, and the further association of the latter with the Patriarch Abraham, who is described in the Zohar (on the basis of an older rabbinic source<sup>42</sup>) as the “first of the converts” (*qadma’ah la-giyyorin*).<sup>43</sup>

The full implication of the zoharic text may be gained if we heed more attentively the import of the biblical idiom *ish zar*, which should be translated as the “foreign man,” for the term *zar* in zoharic literature denotes the ontological sense of otherness linked to the demonic potency.<sup>44</sup> Thus, elsewhere in the Zohar, the offspring that results from the intercourse of the male Jew and the female Christian are considered “alien children,” *banim zarim*, born from the one who has broken faith with God (Hosea 5:6).<sup>45</sup> The conjugal relationship between the Jewish man and the Christian woman sets the stage for the zoharic version of the ancient gnostic myth. This myth is reworked in the medieval kabbalistic source in distinctively ethnocentric terms, for the alienation of spirit is not related to the general condition of human embodiment, but rather to the particular embodiment of the Jewish soul in the Christian body, which results from the transgressive act. There is, however, another possibility embraced by the zoharic authorship and related as well to the verse concerning the marriage of the priest’s daughter and the strange man. In this case, the conversion comes about when the Christian soul desires to become Jewish, a desire that brings about the ontological transformation of the demonic soul into a spark of divinity. Moses de León succinctly expressed the matter in one of his Hebrew compositions:

You must know that the uncircumcised nations have no soul except from the side of impurity, for they are immersed in the foreskin, and on account of this their spirits are impure ... When they remove from themselves this filth, which is the foreskin, their impurity departs from them, and they approach their purity by means of the true justice (*ha-tsedeq ha-amiti*). Thus the convert is called the righteous convert (*ger tsedeq*), for this is the gradation of the covenant (*madregat ha-berit*), and this is the secret of the covenant (*sod ha-berit*) and the eternal life (*hei ha-olam*), which is the secret of Sabbath (*sod shabbat*).<sup>46</sup>

Conversion thus entails an ontological transubstantiation, for the soul of the convert divests itself of its demonic character and enters into the divine realm of holiness. The point of access, and the grade to which the converted soul is attached, is the last of the sefirotic emanations, which is referred to in the above passage by several names, to wit, justice, the secret of the covenant, eternal life, and the secret of Sabbath. In the language of the Zohar, the convert separates from the Other Side and enters beneath the wings of the *Shekhinah*. The technical name of the convert, *ger tsedeq*, derives from the fact that the divine presence, the divine attribute to which the convert is conjoined, is referred to as Justice (*tsedeq*).<sup>47</sup>

In order for this radical metastasis to take place, it is also necessary for the divine to inhabit the foreign body of the demonic. The soul of the convert is described accordingly by the zoharic authorship: "Woeful is the holy soul that belongs to the 'foreign man' and who emanates upon the proselyte that converts, and who flies to him from the Garden of Eden in a concealed way, upon the edifice that is constructed from the impure foreskin."<sup>48</sup> The latter clearly refers to the body of the Christian, which derives from the side of the foreskin, and thus stands in opposition to the covenant, the aspect of holiness that corresponds to Israel. The convert is described further as the "soul that belonged to the Other Side, the foreign man, and she is oppressed by him."<sup>49</sup> There is a glaring disparity, therefore, in the life of the convert, for before the conversion the soul of the potential convert is a Christian on the outside but secretly a Jew. Dissimulation lies at the core of the identity of the would-be convert: they are what they are not, for they are not what they are.

Tellingly, the zoharic author refers to this mystery as the "secret that is higher than all the rest."<sup>50</sup> Given the widely accepted view expressed in kabbalistic literature with respect to the origin of the Jewish soul in the sefirotic realm,<sup>51</sup> it seems reasonable to conclude that the allusion here is to the fact that the embodiment of the Jewish soul in the Christian corresponds symbolically to the exile of the pneumatic spark of God. The esoteric significance of the soul being cloaked in a foreign garment is the displacement of an aspect of God from the pleroma of light, expressed in the mythical language of the estrangement of the daughter from the father. In a manifestly androcentric manner, the banished and disenfranchised aspect of the divine, which creates a blurring of identity in the social sphere, is

linked especially to the female gender.<sup>52</sup> The point is made explicitly in the elder's interpretation of the verse, "If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights" (Exod. 21:10), in light of the verse, "And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who bestowed it" (Eccles. 12:7):

What is [the meaning of] "and the spirit returns?" This is the *Shekhinah*, which is the holy spirit. When the *Shekhinah* sees in the ten sojourns that she must take that Israel does not want to return in repentance before the blessed holy One, the Other Side rules over the holy land, as it has been established by the comrades. Come and see: The spirit of a man who is worthy is crowned in the image in the Garden of Eden below, and every Sabbath and new month the spirits are crowned, and they are divested [of the body] and they ascend above. Just as the blessed holy One acts in relation to the supernal, holy soul above, so too he acts in relation to that spirit below in the Garden of Eden below, which rises before him. He says, "This is the spirit of the body of so-and-so." Immediately, the blessed holy One crowns that spirit in several crowns, and he delights in her.<sup>53</sup>

In terms of the specific example of the potential convert, one might say that before the conversion, the Jew is alienated in the other that mirrors the soul, as the soul that mirrors the other. The sense of dislocation is correlated with the duality of good and evil woven into the very fabric of being. This ontological presumption is related in the zoharic context by the poetic image of the rotating scale (*tiqla*),<sup>54</sup> which is described as the "pillar that stands in balance in the air that blows" (*ammuda de-qayyama letiqlin go aveira de-nashvat*). The weight comprises scales of justice (*mo'znei tsedeq*) on the right and scales of deceit (*mo'znei mirmah*) on the left, the force of holiness and the force of impurity.<sup>55</sup> In conjunction with this scale, the souls are said to "rise and descend, depart and return." However, when the right side is oppressed by the left, a condition that is tied exegetically to the phrase, "when a man rules over a man to treat him unjustly," *et asher shalat ha-adam be-adam le-ra lo* (Eccles. 8:9),<sup>56</sup> the daughter of the priest can be wed to the foreign man, the alien one who stems from the other side. Thus, the verse in question is related by the zoharic authorship to

the mystery of the oppression of the Jewish soul in the body of a Christian. The world is governed by the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Consequently, when those of the world behave in accordance with the side of goodness, the scale is tipped to the right side, but when they behave in accordance with the side of evil, it is tipped to the left. The Jewish souls, which are in the scale at the time that the evil force dominates, are oppressed by the demonic side.<sup>57</sup> What may be called the ontological possibility for conversion, therefore, involves the suffering and oppression of the Jewish soul in the body of the Christian, which is manifest in the historical domination of Jacob by Esau. Beyond the historical plane, moreover, this oppression signifies the anguish of the divine spark trapped in the shell of the demonic.

Immediately preceding the discussion of the concealment of secrets in the Torah, further mysteries regarding the convert are disclosed, but in this case in relation to the laws pertaining to the sale of an Israelite woman by her father into slavery (Exod. 21:7–11). The daughter refers symbolically to the Jewish soul and the father to God. In light of the complexity of the zoharic exegesis, the reader will be best served if I translate the relevant passage in full:

All the souls of the converts fly out from the Garden of Eden in a concealed manner. When the souls, which [the converts] inherit from the Garden of Eden, depart from this world, to what place do they return? It has been taught:<sup>58</sup> The one who takes and holds on to the property of converts at the outset merits them. So too all those supernal, holy souls that the blessed holy One prepares below, as we have said ... all of them issue forth at appointed times and ascend in order to take delight in the Garden of Eden. They encounter the souls of the converts, and those souls who hold on to them grasp them and merit them, and they are garbed in them, and they ascend. All of them exist in this garment, and they descend to the Garden in this garment, for in the Garden of Eden nothing exists without the garment of those who exist there. If you say that on account of this garment these souls are deprived of all the pleasure they had at first, it is written, “If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights” (Exod. 21:10). In the Garden they exist in the garment that they initially seized and merited. When they ascend above

they are divested of it, for there they exist without a garment ... When these holy souls descend to this world so that each one will dwell in its place, which is appropriate for human beings, all of them descend garbed in these souls [of the converts] of which we spoke, and thus they enter the holy seed, and in this garment they are enslaved by them in this world. When these garments draw on matters of this world, those holy souls are sustained from the scent emitted by these garments.<sup>59</sup>

It is reasonable to conclude that the proximity of the above citation and the discussion of God's hiding secret matters in the Torah underscores the fact that, in the mind of the zoharic authorship, the ontological account of the convert, which entails the garbing of the holy seed of the Jewish soul in the Christian body, sheds light on the hermeneutical notion of secrets being cloaked in the letters of Torah. Just as in the case of the convert the external garment conceals the inner soul revealed therein, so in the case of Torah the literal sense is the covering that hides but also reveals the secret meaning. Accordingly, the task of reading does not necessitate the complete discarding of the garments for the soul to be disclosed. On the contrary, as I have already noted in passing, the language of the Zohar is very precise: the wise ones, who are full of eyes, see the hidden matter only through the garment (*mi-go levushah*).<sup>60</sup> After having established the general hermeneutical point, the zoharic authorship returns to the specific example of the convert:

In several places the blessed holy One gave a warning about the convert so that the holy seed will be forewarned regarding him, and afterward the concealed matter comes out from its sheath. When it is revealed, it returns immediately to its sheath wherein it is garbed. In every place that he gave a warning about the convert, the matter came out from its sheath and was revealed, and it says, "You know the soul of the convert" (Exod. 23:9). Immediately it entered its sheath, and returned to its garment wherein it was concealed, as it is written [in the continuation of the verse], "For you were converts in the land of Egypt." Scripture thought that since it was immediately garbed, there was no one taking heed of it. Through the soul of the convert the holy soul knows of the matters of this world and derives pleasure from them.<sup>61</sup>

In this most extraordinary passage, the zoharic authorship reveals the mystical intent of the biblical assertion that the Israelites were “strangers,” *gerim*, in Egypt, a historical reflection that is meant contextually to legitimate the moral prescript not to oppress the stranger. From the vantage point of the author of the zoharic passage, the rationale for the ethical injunction to act kindly toward the convert is the historical claim that the Israelites were converts themselves. But this is a secret that must be concealed. Most remarkable is the literary intent assigned to Scripture itself: “since it was immediately garbed, there was no one taking heed of it.” The operative notion of the secret espoused by the medieval kabbalists, epitomized by this zoharic text, involves the doubling of mystery: the Torah hides the secret it hides.<sup>62</sup> That is, the ultimate dissimulation of Torah lies in the pretense that there is no secret. So profound is the mystery of conversion that the secret conceals its own secrecy; the dissimulation hides itself in the mirror of the text.<sup>63</sup> To reveal the secret, the concealment must be concealed, and thus the Torah seeks to hide the fact that the ancient Israelites were converts. But, of course, the zoharic author (that is, the kabbalistic luminary) knows better, and thus he uncovers the secret by bringing forth the hidden matter from beneath its sheath. In so doing, the secret no longer conceals its own secrecy in the masquerade of truth that is image. In the game of hide-and-seek, the mystic interpreter dis/covers the secret hiding beneath the garment. The selling of the Israelite maiden into slavery and the marriage of the priest’s daughter to a stranger, the two scriptural accounts related to the fate of the convert, both signify the displacement of the divine spark in a foreign body. To uncover the mystery that the ancient Israelites were converts is to understand the ultimate ontological truth that is predicated on the paradoxical coincidence of opposites: just as the soul of the Jew is embodied in the personhood of the Christian, so the divine inhabits the form of the demonic. To reveal this secret, moreover, has soteriological value inasmuch as the investiture of the esoteric sense in the letters of Torah is understood as the exile of the divine. The interpretative activity of the kabbalist, which is primarily the unveiling of the mystical import of Scripture, reveals the secret garbed in the cloak of the text, and thereby redeems the aspect of God imprisoned in the form of the incarnate Torah.<sup>64</sup>

*Enclosure of the Feminine: Secrecy, Modesty,  
and the Mystery of Redemption*

From other passages in the Zohar, one must conclude that the process of disclosure is indicative of the exilic condition when the feminine is dispersed among the nations, whereas the concealment of the mystery is characteristic of redemption, a state wherein the feminine is enclosed securely within her spatial boundaries.<sup>65</sup> The uncovering of secrets, which involves the disrobing of the text, is cast primarily in messianic terms as the means to bring about the union of male and female, but the consummation of that union results in the concealment of that which has been unveiled. The re/covery is portrayed geometrically as the centering of the point within the circle. *Prima facie*, it would seem that the depiction of redemption in terms of the concealment of the feminine is a reverse of the current situation described in a number of passages in zoharic literature: during the six weekdays the feminine is closed, but on the Sabbath she is open to receive the overflow from the masculine potency,<sup>66</sup> a process that is brought to fruition by the conjugal intercourse of the kabbalist with his wife on Friday evening.<sup>67</sup> Closer inspection of the relevant sources reveals that there is no contradiction, for the opening of the feminine to receive from the masculine is the initial stage of the redemptive process. However, the culminating phase results in the reintegration of the feminine to the masculine, which is depicted in a number of images, including the elevation of the feminine to the position of the crown on the masculine<sup>68</sup> or the centering of the feminine as the point within the circle. Both of these symbolic images are related in zoharic literature to the ontological stabilization of the *Shekhinah* on the Sabbath, which is a prolepsis of the final redemption.<sup>69</sup>

Let us probe more deeply into the symbolic representation of the enclosure of the feminine within the masculine. I begin with a zoharic passage, which is an interpretation of the verse, "O my dove, in the cranny of the rocks, hidden by the cliff" (Song of Songs 2:14):

"O my dove," this is the Community of Israel. "In the cranny of the rock," this is Jerusalem, for it rises above the rest of the world. Just as a rock is supernal to and stronger than everything, so Jerusalem is supernal to and stronger than everything.

“Hidden by the cliff,” this is the place that is called the Holy of Holies, the heart of all the world. Therefore, it is written “hidden by the cliff,” for there the *Shekhinah* is hidden like the woman who is modest (*tsenu‘ah*) in relation to her husband, and she does not depart from the house to the outside, as it is written, “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine within your house” (Ps. 128:3). Similarly, the Community of Israel does not rest outside of her place, the hiddenness of the gradation,<sup>70</sup> except in the time of exile.<sup>71</sup>

Following the position articulated in the classical rabbinic corpus, the zoharic author affirms that the dispersion of the *Shekhinah* among the nations was in order to protect Her children. Deviating from the rabbinic position, however, the kabbalist notes that such a state is precarious, for the *Shekhinah* is exposed and thus open to the pernicious effect of the demonic forces. Indeed, according to another passage in the Zohar, the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple is described from the vantage point of the separation of the Matrona from the King, resulting in the exposure of the former’s genitals. Conversely, the construction of the Temple below as the place of dwelling for the divine glory parallels the unification above between the masculine and the feminine aspects of the divine, the blessed holy One and the *Shekhinah*. When the Temple stands and there is unity above and below, then the feminine is stabilized in her permanent habitation. Transgression on the part of Jewish males severs the bond between male and female, and the latter is driven from her dwelling. This banishment and consequent homelessness are depicted in the image of her being unclothed: “The King separates from the Matrona, and the Matrona is driven from her Temple, and consequently she is naked with respect to all, for the matter of the exposure of the genitals does not apply to the King without the Matrona or to the Matrona without the King, and thus it is written, ‘Do not uncover the nakedness of your father and the nakedness of your mother’ (Lev. 18:7).”<sup>72</sup>

Exile entails separation of male and female, which in turn results in the exposure of the genitals, a situation that is especially dangerous for the feminine, inasmuch as she is subject to the potential encroachment of the demonic force of Samael. The prohibition against illicit sexual relations, referred to by the idiom *gilluy arayot*, the uncovering of the nakedness, is linked in zoharic literature to the



warning against the improper disclosure of the secrets of Torah.<sup>73</sup> It follows that if the exilic condition is one that is marked by the uncovering of the genitals, esoteric knowledge cannot be fully revealed. In the state of redemption, by contrast, the *Shekhinah* will be concealed within the rebuilt Temple, like a woman who is compared metaphorically to the fruitful vine hidden within the house. The spatial enclosure of the feminine within the confines of the Temple symbolically depicts the concealment of the feminine that is appropriate to her unification with the masculine. In the moment of *hieros gamos*, the *Shekhinah* is fully exposed vis-à-vis her masculine consort – an intimacy that is conveyed in the zoharic text by the image of the face-to-face encounter<sup>74</sup> – but in the same moment she must be concealed to protect herself against the possible intrusion of the demonic power.<sup>75</sup> Thus, the biblical locution interpreted as a reference to the holy of holies is *be-seter ha-madregah*, which should be rendered according to the theosophic symbolism deployed in the zoharic context as “in the secrecy of the gradation.” The place wherein the *Shekhinah* is hidden is the locus of occult wisdom, the divine gradation that is identified as the ontological root of secrecy. The matter of esotericism, therefore, is related directly to the erotic interpretation of the sacrificial cult of the Temple.

In another zoharic context, the matter is expressed specifically as an interpretation of the verse “A garden locked is my sister the bride, a fountain locked, a sealed-up spring” (Song of Songs 4:12): “R. Isaac said: When the holy King remembers Israel on account of his name, and the Matrona returns to her place, it is written ‘When he goes in to make expiation in the Shrine, nobody else shall be in the Tent of Meeting until he comes out’ (Lev. 16:17). Thus, when the priest entered to unify the holy name, to make atonement in holiness, to unite the King and the Matrona, it is written ‘nobody else shall be in the Tent of Meeting.’”<sup>76</sup> Entry into the sacred space of the Tabernacle, which is symbolically equivalent to the Temple, is prohibited because the cultic activity of the priest fosters the union of the masculine and the feminine aspects of the divine, a union that must be concealed. The necessity for concealment is tied to the female, who must be hidden within the erotogenic zone wherein the holy coupling takes place. The intrinsic hiddenness of the feminine is exegetically linked to the verse from the Song, wherein the sister/bride is compared poetically to the images of a locked garden,

a locked fountain, and a sealed-up spring.<sup>77</sup> To cite a third passage from the Zohar, where the point is further elaborated:

R. Jose began his discourse: “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine within your house; your sons, like olive saplings around your table” (Ps. 128:3). “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine,” all the time that your wife is inside the house and does not go out she is modest (*tsenu‘ah*), and it is proper for her to give birth to righteous offspring. “As a fruitful vine,” just as the vine is not planted in another species but only in its own, so the worthy woman does not produce seedlings in another man, and just as there is nothing grafted unto the vine from another tree, so too in the case of the worthy woman ... From this we learn that when the *Shekhinah* is hidden (*tseni‘a*) in her place as is appropriate for her, as it were, “your sons, like olive saplings,” this refers to Israel when they are dwelling in the land. “Around your table,” for they eat, drink, offer sacrifices, and are joyous before the blessed holy One, and the supernal and lower beings are blessed on account of them. When the *Shekhinah* departs, Israel are exiled from the table of their father and they are amongst the nations. They scream every day and there is none who hears them but the blessed holy One, as it is written, “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, [I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God]” (Lev. 26:44).<sup>78</sup>

The concealment of the *Shekhinah* in her appropriate dwelling, which is reflected below in the edifice of the Temple, marks the ideal situation wherein the divine androgyny is perfectly constituted. The word *tsenu‘ah*, which is applied to the feminine *Shekhinah* in this citation and in the other relevant contexts, has the double connotation of “hidden” and (sexually) “modest.”<sup>79</sup> The philological point underscores the attitude cultivated by the traditional male kabbalists with respect to female sexuality and the notion of secrecy more generally: the eschatological condition of the *Shekhinah* reflects and is reinforced by the sexual modesty of Jewish women, who ideally should remain within the home so that the upper covenant, the sign of which is inscribed on the male organ, is not

forgotten or damaged. Thus, reflecting on why Jonah fled to Tarshish, the zoharic authorship comments,

The *Shekhinah* does not dwell outside the land of Israel, and thus in order for the *Shekhinah* not to dwell upon him, he fled from the land of Israel. The *Shekhinah* dwells there, as it says, “Your wife should be as a fruitful vine within your house” (Ps. 128:3). “A fruitful vine,” this refers to the *Shekhinah*. Just as the *Shekhinah* was hidden within the Holy of Holies, so too a wife must be modest and not go out from her house.<sup>80</sup>

A link is thus forged between sexual modesty and the occultation of the feminine.<sup>81</sup> This occultation, in turn, is related specifically to the concealment of secrets even though, from the traditional kabbalistic perspective, it is clearly the male to whom the secrets are entrusted. Not only is it exclusively to the male that the secrets are concomitantly revealed and concealed, but only to the male who is sexually pure, for the locus of the secret is in the gradation that corresponds to the phallus. Nevertheless, the female plays an instrumental role in this process, since the sexual modesty of the male is dependent on her, just as above the concealment of secrets is dependent on the enclosure of the feminine potency within the proper spatial boundaries of the idealized holy of holies. The point is made explicitly by the sixteenth-century kabbalist Moses Cordovero, reflecting on the verse, “When men began to increase on earth and daughters were born to them” (Gen. 6:1):

It says “daughters” and not “sons” because the essence of sexual modesty (*tseni'ut*) depends on the feminine, for [women] must be modest, and by means of this the men will be modest and the children will emerge with a disposition of modesty. Therefore, the beginning of the damage sprouted from the licentiousness of the daughters, and thus it says “and daughters were born to them.” And from here the sexual immorality (*peritsut*) began to produce a bad result, estranged children ... The explanation for the blessed copulation is related to the fact that the holy soul is garbed within it, and it must be like the supernal copulation, for just as the supernal copulation is hidden in secrecy, such that no created being can experience it, so too the lower copulation

must be in concealment (*tseṇi'ut*) such that it is not known by any creature in the world. Consequently, the holy soul, which is made from the supernal copulation, will descend, but when the copulation is in the open and in public no supernal holiness dwells there.<sup>82</sup>

Sexual modesty, *tseṇi'ut*, is related to the concealment of the feminine, whereas licentiousness, *peritsut*, is related to the exposure of the feminine. Cordovero's remarks highlight the androcentric dimension of the kabbalistic symbolism, already implicit in the earlier sources, including the passages from the Zohar to which I have referred. The disclosure of the feminine reflects an ontologically defective state, albeit one that has an impact on the phenomenological accessibility of the divine. In his commentary on Ezekiel's chariot vision, Moses de León connects this idea exegetically to the words that inaugurate the prophetic epiphany, "the heavens opened and I saw visions of God," that is, in the exilic state, "that which was concealed is disclosed," *mah she-hayah satum nir'eh*, for there is no shelter or covering protecting the *Shekhinah*. The geographical dispersion of the exile is the symbolic intent of the heavens opening up, which signifies a rupture in the divine, "everything was a single unity that was bound in a sturdy bond in the secret of the heavens," *hayah ha-kol yiḥud meyuḥad mequshar be-qesher amits be-sod shamayim*. The visions of God are here related directly to this state of disclosure that is associated with exile, a point that is related exegetically to the fact that the word for visions, *mar'ot*, is written in the defective form (without the letter *waw*). In the state of exile, therefore, the *Shekhinah* is likened to the mirror (*mar'eh*) in which the image is seen, whereas in a more perfect state of redemption she would be hidden: "That which was concealed 'as a fruitful vine within your house' (Ps. 128:3) went outside, and she was seen and revealed in another land in this day; she descended to Babylonia outside her boundary, and she was made visible there."<sup>83</sup>

A better understanding of the nexus of spatial delimitation and the occultation of the feminine will indicate even more clearly how deep the chord of androcentrism strikes in the kabbalistic literature. Above I noted in passing that the enclosure of the feminine within the masculine is portrayed in the geometric image of the midpoint of the circle. In a separate study, I have argued that the

symbolization of the *Shekhinah* as the point in the center of the circle signifies the aspect of the female that is anatomically homologous to the male.<sup>84</sup> Without rehearsing all of the technical arguments and textual examples that I put forth in support of my position, let me simply reiterate that the application of the symbol of the point to the feminine implies a gender transformation of the feminine. When the feminine potency is concentrated in the center of the circle, she is described in overtly phallic terms, such as the foundation stone, whence all entities derive or the spring that overflows and sustains all things. It is particularly important for this study that the symbol of the midpoint is also associated with the image of the enclosed female. The one, like the other, is meant to convey the symbolic intention regarding the phallic nature of the feminine.

The implications of this symbolism for the role of gender in the theosophic kabbalah should be obvious. The concealed feminine represents the body of secrecy, but in that occultation, she has been transposed into an aspect of the male. Given the structural affinity between the phallic potency and the rhetoric of secrecy, it should come as little surprise that, for the exclusively male kabbalists, the locus of secrets should be in the female envisioned as part of the male. We are now in a better position to understand the parabolic image of the Torah as the beautiful maiden without eyes to which I referred above. To sum up the previous discussion: the esoteric meaning is garbed in the exoteric in the same manner that the existential situation of the convert involves the dissimulation of the Jewish soul and the donning of the garment of a Christian. On the surface, the two would appear to be diametrically opposed. But, for the wise one who has eyes to see, the two are not radically distinct at all, for the truth of the internal is beheld precisely from the external covering. In the case of the convert, as I also noted above, the zoharic authorship relates the secret to the verse, "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt" (Exod. 23:9). Taking the word *ger* to refer to the religious convert rather than to the ethnic stranger, the kabbalistic interpretation of the verse proffered by the zoharic authorship is that the Israelites themselves were converts. The seemingly ontological wedge separating Jew and non-Jew is thus substantially narrowed by this realization, which arises exegetically from the implicit meaning covered by the

sheath of the explicit text. As the continuation of that passage indicates, the one to whom the secrets are revealed comprehends not only that contextual sense is an allusion to inner truth, but that the allusion is the veil through which the unveiling is veiled in the veil of unveiling.

The hermeneutical relationship can be framed as well in gendered terms. Thus, for example, in one zoharic context, the divine is portrayed in the dichotomy of that which is hidden and that which is revealed (*setim we-galya*): "We have learnt that the blessed holy One is hidden and revealed. The revealed relates to the courthouse below and the concealed to the place whence all blessings emerge."<sup>85</sup> To decode this relatively straightforward passage, it will be noted that the hidden aspect is related to the male, or more precisely to *Yesod*, the wellspring of all blessings, and the revealed to the female, or the *Shekhinah*, the attribute of limitation referred to symbolically as the lower courthouse, that is, the place whence judgment is issued. As I noted above, in other zoharic passages, the Torah is delineated in the same manner, for it is emphasized that the Torah is hidden and revealed because it is identical with the name, which is itself hidden and revealed. We are justified, therefore, in utilizing this formulation to disclose something fundamental about the zoharic attitude toward the hermeneutics of esotericism. In the continuation of the aforesaid passage, the zoharic authorship draws the obvious hermeneutical principle as it emerges from the theosophical notion of the concomitant concealment and disclosure of the divine: "Therefore [to the extent] that all the words of a person are in secrecy, blessings dwell upon him, and if they are disclosed, it is a place upon which the courthouse rests on him. Since it is a place that is disclosed, that which is called the evil eye governs it. Everything is in the supernal mystery in the pattern of that which is above."<sup>86</sup>

Secrecy is contextualized in the phallic component of the divine, but in the moment of union, the female itself is transposed into part of the male. The reunion of male and female in the theosophic kabbalah is a process of reintegration of the female in the male or, to put the matter somewhat differently, insofar as the female provides the space to contain the male, she may be considered the extended phallus.<sup>87</sup> On the essential role of the female to contain the male, I mention here one example from the text of the Zohar,

which involves the interpretation of the expression *aron ha-berit*, “ark of the covenant,” as a reference to the *Shekhinah* that contains the mystery of the “image of the holy body” (*raza diyoqna de-gufa qaddisha*) of the divine *anthropos*, which is also depicted as the “secret of the Torah” (*raza de-oraita*).<sup>88</sup> In this context the “holy body” refers more specifically to the phallus, which is the aspect of the divine anatomy wherein the mystery of Torah is localized. It is stated explicitly in that passage that only one who is careful with respect to the phallus, which is referred to as the “sign of the holy covenant” (*ot qayyama qaddisha*), is considered to be in the category of the human (*adam*) in the fullest sense,<sup>89</sup> an anthropological classification that effectively dehumanizes both Jewish women and non-Jews, for the ontological status of the complete human is imparted exclusively to Jewish males. In that context, moreover, this symbolic nexus is applied to the custom of placing the corpse of the righteous man in a coffin, for he alone is worthy of such an honor, since he was careful with respect to the “sign of the holy covenant.” The biblical paradigm is Joseph, of whom it says that “he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt” (Gen. 50:26). Commenting on the double *yod* in the word *vayyisem*, the author of this zoharic passage writes:

The covenant was joined to the covenant, the secret below in the secret above, and he entered the coffin. What is the reason? For he guards the holy covenant and it is established in him. Thus it was appropriate for him to enter into the coffin, for only the righteous one, who knows and is aware of the fact that he has never sinned with respect to that phallus, the sign of the holy covenant, can enter into the coffin ... The coffin is not joined except to the righteous one who guards the sign of the holy covenant.<sup>90</sup>

The mystical valence attributed to the placing of Joseph in the coffin involves the sacred union of the divine phallus – appropriately personified by Joseph, inasmuch as his righteousness is related to the fact that he was scrupulous in sexual matters pertaining especially to the phallus – and the feminine, symbolized by the casket. The symbolic image conveys the philosophical principle of the feminine as the empty space that contains the phallic potency. The

choice of this particular image is also important insofar as it underscores the nexus of eros and thanatos.<sup>91</sup> The ultimate symbol of death is transformed into a potent image for eros. What may be gathered from this specific example is the more general claim that the “othering” of the feminine, which entails the psychic projection of the feminine as other, is to be evaluated strictly from the point of view of the male. The phallogocentric dimension of the zoharic imagery is well captured in the following account of Lacan’s theory of signification, given by Judith Butler: “This is an other that constitutes, not the limit of masculinity in a feminine alterity, but the site of a masculine self-elaboration. For women to ‘be’ the Phallus means, then, to reflect the power of the Phallus, to signify that power, to ‘embody’ the Phallus, to supply the site to which it penetrates, and to signify the Phallus through ‘being’ its other, its absence, its lack, the dialectical confirmation of its identity.”<sup>92</sup> The contemporary feminist reflection is an entirely apt portrayal of the underlining assumption of the theosophic symbolism embraced by the members of the zoharic circle and other kabbalists.

From this perspective, one can comprehend that the zoharic portrayal of the body of secrecy is related in several key passages to the motif of the occultation of the feminine. The hidden woman is the modest wife secluded in the house, which parallels the enclosure of the *Shekhinah* in the holy of holies. In this state, the female is united in secrecy with the male, and as a result of that union she becomes the fruitful vine, an image that clearly conveys the act of bestowal and fruition, traits that are generally associated with the masculine and, more specifically, with the phallus. Indeed, the woman who is sealed up in the house becomes the fruitful vine, for she is transformed into the male, and the power that receives becomes the power that bestows. The ultimate secret, the mystery that marks the path of secrecy, centers around the fact that the occluded feminine is one whose femininity is no longer ontologically distinct from the male. For the kabbalists, this secret lies at the core of the mystical insight that brings about messianic redemption. In the case of the Zohar and related kabbalistic literature, however, the secret did not involve esoteric knowledge that had to be suppressed for political reasons. Rather, the erotic nature of the union necessitated the concealment of that which was exposed, which again underscores the fact that concealment and disclosure



are inseparably linked in dialectical tension. By contrast, in modern scholarship, this secret has assumed another connotation, for it has become dangerous to uncover that which is hidden in the symbol of the concealed woman.<sup>93</sup> Alas, in what can only be called hermeneutical revenge, the secret has hid itself precisely from the very scholars who have undertaken the systematic exposure of the mysteries of the tradition. The disclosure of this secret on my part has not been without a price, but it is a price that must be paid if the notion of secrecy in kabbalistic esotericism is to be properly understood.

### Notes

1. Elliot R. Wolfson, "Beyond the Spoken Word: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," in *Transmitting Jewish Traditions: Orality, Textuality and Cultural Diffusion*, ed. Yaakov Elman and Israel Gershoni (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 166–224.
2. The original German text and translation are cited from David Biale, "Gershom Scholem's Ten Unhistorical Aphorisms on Kabbalah," in *Gershom Scholem*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1987), pp. 103–104.
3. On the centrality of esotericism in the history of Jewish mysticism, consider the perceptive remarks of William T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London: Lippincott, 1960), p. 57: "The degrees in which mystics tend thus to cloak their experiences from the public view vary with individual temperaments and also with the traditions of the particular culture, religion, or society. The most extreme secrecy was observed ... among Jewish mystics."
4. On the hermeneutical play of concealment and disclosure evident in the zoharic orientation toward secrets, see Liebes, *Studies*, pp. 26–30. The point is expressed in any number of zoharic contexts, but perhaps nowhere as poignantly as in Zohar 2:98b–99b, which includes the exposition of the parable of the maiden without eyes. For an extended discussion of the hermeneutical implications of this parable, see Wolfson, "Beautiful Maiden," pp. 155–203; idem, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 384–387. Needless to say, this parable has been discussed by a number of scholars. To mention here some of the relevant references: Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 55–56; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 1084–1085; Talmage, "Apples of Gold," pp. 316–318; Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, pp. 227–229; Liebes, "Zohar and Eros," pp. 87–98; Michal Oron, "'Place Me as a Seal upon Your Heart': Reflections on the Poetics of the Author of the Zohar in the Section of Sabba de-Mishpatim," in *Massu'ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994), pp. 1–24 (Hebrew); and Pinchas Giller, "Love and Upheaval in the Zohar's Sabba de-Mishpatim," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 7, 1997, pp. 31–60.
5. Regarding this hermeneutical principle in medieval kabbalah, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, pp. 37–44; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 283–284, 292–295, 1079–1082; and Idel, "Concept of Torah," pp. 49–58.
6. Zohar 2:230b.

7. See Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. and Richard Rand (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), p. 50: "The Jewish *Geheimnis*, the hearth in which one looks for the center under a sensible cover [*enveloppe*] – the tent of the tabernacle, the stone of the temple, the robe that clothes the text of the covenant – is finally discovered as an empty room, is not uncovered, never ends being uncovered, as it has nothing to show." For an illuminating discussion of secret in Derrida's philosophical reflections, see John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 101–112.
8. A possible alternative to the view that I have attributed to the zoharic text may be found in a vivid parable employed by Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, 1:195–199, in an effort to explicate the relationship of the Tetragrammaton, which is equated with the Torah (*ibid.*, p. 48; and references to the scholarly treatment of this topic given above in note 5), to the rest of the names and appellations: there is a progressive disrobing by the king, which is proportionate to those who are in his company, until the point that he takes off all of his clothing when he is alone with the queen. The garments here represent the other names and appellations by means of which the Tetragrammaton, which is the ontological name, governs the world. In a second passage from this work (*ibid.* 205–206), Gikatilla returns to this parabolic image, but in that context the disrobing by the king and the subsequent union between the king and his wife is related symbolically to God's relationship to the spiritual elite of the Jewish males, that is, the pious, ascetics, and pure ones. See Wolfson, "Eunuchs," pp. 172–174. Although it might seem that Gikatilla, in contrast to the zoharic authorship, embraces the notion of a naked truth, which would be expressed symbolically by the image of the king removing all of his clothes, the fact is that for Gikatilla as well there is always a garment, for the king who stands naked is the name itself, the Tetragrammaton, which is the ultimate garment. One might say that there is no nakedness beyond the attire of the four-letter name.
9. See Mario Perniola, "Between Clothing and Nudity," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body, Part Two*, ed. Michel Feher with Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi (New York: Zone, 1989), pp. 237–265.
10. Beyond the specific instance of the kabbalistic literature, it is evident that the issue of revealing and concealing is often linked to the eroticized body, a point that has been made by many writers from different theoretical perspectives. For recent discussion along these lines, see Alison L. Brown, *Subjects of Deceit: A Phenomenology of Lying* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 90–127.
11. I will take this opportunity to respond to the criticism of my work made by Yehuda Liebes, "Judaism and Myth," *Dimmu*, 14, 1997, p. 15 n. 5 (Hebrew). (I thank Gil Anidjar for drawing my attention to this essay.) In the body of his study (p. 7), Liebes makes the point that Jewish mystics have embraced the paradox that the vision of God is occasioned by not seeing, which he relates to the quality of humility. In the note, Liebes signals out my book, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, as an illustration of not grasping this point. This is a rather remarkable claim inasmuch as countless times in that work, as well as in other studies (not mentioned by Liebes), I have noted the ultimate paradox with respect to the vision of God in the history of Jewish mysticism engendered by the concomitant affirmation of presence and absence. Repeatedly, I have emphasized that the God who is visible to Jewish mystics is the invisible God, and that which is revealed is revealed in its concealment. On the very first page

of the book, I write, “The theological tension between vision and invisibility provides the narrative context to articulate the esoteric dialectic of concealment and disclosure so characteristic of the various currents of Jewish mysticism. To see the God who is hidden – or, more precisely, the aspect of God that is hiddenness as such – is the destiny of the Jewish mystic, bestowed upon him by the name Israel, which, as some ancient authors playfully proposed, signifies the one who sees God” (p. ix). In the conclusion of the book, I reiterate the point: “The tension between aniconism, on the one hand, and visualizing the deity, on the other, is an essential component of the relevant varieties of Jewish mystical speculation ... In all of the mystical sources dealt with in this study there is a tension between disclosure and concealment of the divine form. This tension, I believe, is related to the fact that the ultimate object of vision is the phallus that must be hidden. The unveiling of the veiled phallus in the visionary encounter necessitates language that is paradoxical and contradictory” (pp. 394–396). Leaving aside for a moment the correctness of my assumption that the phallus is the site of mystical vision, it is evident that I embrace the paradoxical notion that the vision is of that which is invisible. That is the force of my locution that the object of vision is that which must be hidden. Of the zoharic text itself, I say, “The Zohar thus embraces the paradox that the divine phallus is both concealed and revealed” (p. 343). I thus go on to speak of the “essential feature of the mystic vision as a seeing of the veiled phallus.” Again, one may quibble with my phallic interpretation, but one would have to admit that my thesis is predicated on accepting the paradox that the mystical vision is a seeing of that which must be veiled. Indeed, in my dissertation, “Sefer ha-Rimmon” 1:23, I touch upon this paradox when I note that Moses de León, whom I considered at the time to be the sole author of the Zohar, was influenced by the Maimonidean hermeneutic of esotericism, which is predicated on “letting that which is hidden appear and that which appears remain hidden. The teaching of truth, like truth itself, is characterized by a hide-and-seek dialectic: the concealed is disclosed as the disclosed is concealed.” Liebes’ criticism is nothing more than a cavalier dismissal of my work and does not measure up to the standard of legitimate academic dispute.

12. My analysis here is greatly indebted to Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 83–85. Although Irigaray does not deal with the symbolic orientation of the medieval kabbalists, her incisive remarks can be fruitfully applied to this world. Lest one protest that this not a justifiable application on my part, it should be remembered that Irigaray’s insights relate to the Western philosophical tradition of which the kabbalists are an integral part.
13. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 306–317. The convergence of the visual and auditory modes of symbolization related particularly to the role of the *Shekhinah* as the garment that makes the masculine glory both visible and audible is well captured in the summary account in Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* 23, s.v., *imrat*: “Thus the *Shekhinah* is a garment (*levush*) and a palace (*heikhal*) in relation to *Tiferet*, for the Tetragrammaton is not mentioned except in his palace, which is Adonai. And she is called by the term *imra* insofar as she is the diadem (*aṭarah*) on the head of her husband.” On the implications of this symbolism in the writings of Cordovero as it relates to the phallic transformation of the *Shekhinah* in her elevation, see Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 335–339.
14. There is obviously a play on the words *pashaṭ*, the external sense, and *lehaḥshif*, to strip away. The *pashaṭ*, which is the garment, is uncovered by an act of

- covering. Alternatively expressed, the unveiling of meaning appears through the veil of the text.
15. This literary unit, which is likely itself a composite of discrete textual strands, appears in Zohar 2:176b–179a.
  16. The ontological implication of the zoharic expression is underscored in the postscript to the textual unit wherein the “book of concealment,” *sifra ditseni’uta*, is identified with the “concealment of the King,” *tseni’uta de-malka*. The process of divine autogenesis, the unveiling of that which is veiled, is concomitantly the composition of the esoteric book, the text that reveals the secret by concealment. This idea is captured in the formulation used in a number of relevant zoharic passages, *tseni’uta de-sifra*, the “concealment of the book,” which conveys the idea that the book hides in its very disclosure. See Zohar 2:176a; 3:128a, 130a, 130b, 131a, 133a–b, 135a, 138b, 139a–b, 141a, 142a–b, 143a–b, 146b, 289a. On the poetic underpinning of this textual unit, which is related to the creativity of the divine, see Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” pp. 78–79. For a more general characterization of poetry as the utilization of the language of mystery to reveal the secret that must be concealed, see the poignant discussion in Norman O Brown, *Apocalypse and/or Metamorphosis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 3–4.
  17. This insight lies at the basis of the analysis of Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979).
  18. Consider George Simmel’s notion of the triadic structure of secrecy discussed by Hans G. Kippenberg and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa, “Introduction: Secrecy and Its Benefits,” in *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Gedaliahu G. Stroumsa (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995), pp. xiii–xiv.
  19. The erotic nature of reading is especially salient in the notion of textuality offered by Roland Barthes in *The Pleasure of the Text* and *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*. See the pertinent reflections in the introduction to *Sexuality and Masquerade: The Dedalus Book of Sexual Ambiguity*, ed. Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Dedalus, 1996), pp. 4–5.
  20. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 368–372. An interesting formulation of the implicit homoerotic dimension of the transmission of secrets from the master to his disciples seems to be implied in the following remark of Joseph Angelet, *Livnat ha-Sappir* (Jerusalem, 1913), 60b–c: “You already know that the justice above, which is in the Jerusalem that is constructed, is the Tree of Life, and it is called ‘Lord,’ in the secret of ‘the ark of the covenant of the Lord of all the earth’ (Josh. 3:11) ... and it is called male. The Community of Israel, which receives from him, is called by the name woman (*ishshah*), the ‘fire of the Lord’ (*esh h* [the individual *he* is a standard scribal circumlocution for the Tetragrammaton], which are the same letters that make up the word *ishshah*). Since Rashbi, may peace be upon him, would cause his wisdom and Torah, which was called the Tree of Life, to overflow to the sages, he too was called the ‘Tree of Life’ and the ‘Lord’ in this manner in relation to the lower beings who receive the Torah and wisdom from his mouth. This is proven from the *Idra* [the zoharic section that relates to the gathering of R. Simeon and the rest of the comrades to discourse about the most recondite theosophic secrets], for he set forth the arrayments (*tiqnen tiqqunim*) of the Tree of Life ... and the rest of the sages explicated the arrayments, each one in accordance with the level that he comprehended. If you comprehend the secret of ‘For in his image did God make the perfect man’ (Gen. 9:6 with the author’s addition of the word

‘perfect’), you will comprehend the great principle in the Torah that was explicated by Ben Azzai, and this is the great principle regarding ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’ (Lev. 19:18), and this is a secret concealed for the wise of heart, for by means of their arousal below the holy power is aroused above.” Let me note that Angelet’s reference to Ben Azzai, probably cited from memory, is a distortion of the relevant rabbinic source according to which Aqiva’s choice of the verse “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18) as indicative of the “great principle” (*kelal gadol*) of Torah is opposed by Ben Azzai’s comment that the verse “This is the record of Adam’s genealogy: On the day that God created Adam, he made him in the image of God” (Gen. 5:1) is an even greater principle (*zeh kelal gadol mi-zeh*). See *Sifra*, Qedoshim 4:12. The order is inverted in *Genesis Rabbah* 24:7, 236–237. The main point for our purpose, however, is Angelet’s citation of the obligation to love one’s fellow man in the context of casting the process of transmission of secrets by the master, Simeon ben Yohai, to his colleagues. The master who imparts corresponds to the phallic potency of the tree of life, which overflows to the feminine receptacle, represented symbolically by the comrades who receive and explicate the words arrayed by the master. Together they constitute the perfect human, the androgynous Adam in whose image humanity was created. For a similar pattern in the body of Zohar, see Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 371–372 n. 155. It is also of interest to note that Angelet describes Simeon ben Yoḥai’s rhetorical activity in the dissemination of secrets in terms of the erotically charged verse, “Like an apple tree among the trees of the forest, so is my beloved among the young boys” (Song of Songs 2:3): the beloved is Simeon and the young boys the rest of the comrades. On the relationship of Angelet to the zoharic circle, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 134, 224–225 n. 298. For a more extensive discussion of some elements in the writings of this kabbalist, see Iris Felix, “Chapters in the Kabbalistic Thought of R. Joseph Angelet,” M.A. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1991 (Hebrew).

21. J. Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 3.
22. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*.
23. In this matter, I have been especially influenced by the Lacanian notion that the phallus as signifier can play its role only when masked. See Arika Lemaire, *Jacques Lacan*, trans. David Macey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 87–88.
24. Many have written on circumcision, but particularly pertinent for our discussion of the kabbalistic androcentrism is the work of Hoffman, *Covenant of Blood*.
25. See Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision,” reprinted with some slight modifications in idem, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 29–48, and notes on pp. 140–155.
26. The point is well understood by Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, pp. 81–82, who thus contrasted castration (the obliteration of the masculine to constitute the feminine as essential lack) and circumcision: “Now the Jewish operation, despite what is cut away, lies in the realm of the sign. What is cut away is only cut away in order to make a sign. It is ‘true’ that it is also in the realm of the body. But almost the reverse of castrating, this excision is what marks the body’s entry into the world of signs ... And rightly so, moreover: circumcision attests to a specialist’s expertise in the field of signs. Should the rest of the stage be transformed into a protesting chorus, in the name of castration no less, that changes, in fact, nothing. The spot left by the Jew is still there. To make him play it over again as a simulacrum is worth more. Provided he is made to pass

- as other. And without a veil? The thing taken from him was (only) a blind. Though a necessary one. His role will therefore be to enact dissimulation.”
27. See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 339–345.
  28. I refer here to a process that elsewhere I have called the erasing of the erasure. See Wolfson *Circle in the Square*, pp. 49–78.
  29. See my study referred to in the previous note.
  30. See Wolfson, “Woman – the Feminine as Other.”
  31. See idem, “Eunuchs,” pp. 169–171.
  32. I will list only a few representative studies that affirm the confluence of the spiritual and the erotic: Evola, *Eros and the Mysteries of Love*; Ben Zion Goldberg, *The Sacred Fire: The Story of Sex in Religion* (New York: University Books, 1958); Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*; Doninger O’Flaherty, *Asceticism and Eroticism*; Kripal, *Kali’s Child*. See also the collection of essays in *Sexual Archetypes, East and West*, ed. Bina Gupta (New York: Paragon House, 1987); and on the relationship of mystical experience and the language of passion in medieval Christendom, see Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, trans. Montgomery Belgion (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 141–170.
  33. Mark Verman, “Kabbalah Refracted: Review Essay,” *Shofar*, 14, 1996, p. 129; Green, “Kabbalistic Re-Vision,” p. 272 n. 16.
  34. See Wolfson, “Eunuchs;” idem, “Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs,” in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 92–118. For a parallel insight that the celebration of the homosocial bonding between God and Christian men rests upon an unequivocal rejection of homosexual deviance, see Elizabeth B. Keiser, *Courtly Desire and Medieval Homophobia: The Legitimation of Sexual Pleasure in Cleanness and Its Contexts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 165–200.
  35. Although in his discussion of the messianic theosophy of the *Idrot* sections of zoharic literature (*Studies in the Zohar*, pp. 37–43), Liebes recognizes the importance of the motif of love that binds together the members of the mystical fraternity, in his discussion of the *tiqqun* (rectification) through erotic union (pp. 71–74), he privileges heterosexual activity as the only form of eros that has redemptive value. The homoerotic relation that pertains between Simeon ben Yoḥai and the other members of the fraternity is explored by Liebes in “Zohar and Eros,” pp. 104–112, but in that context as well he assigns priority to heterosexuality as the means to bring about the messianic repair of the primal sin of celibacy. In my judgment, however, celibacy is not rectified simply by affirming and engaging in heterosexual intercourse. The matter is more complex inasmuch as the erotic bond of the members of the fraternity is predicated on the (temporary) abrogation of carnal sexuality. The *tiqqun* for celibacy, therefore, is attained dialectically through abstinence from physical sex between the kabbalist and his spouse, which facilitates the erotic bonding of the male mystics in their textual community. As I put the matter in “Eunuchs,” p. 165, the symbolic worldview of the Zohar entails the insight that “homoeroticism is the carnality of celibate renunciation.” See also my brief criticism of Liebes in *Through a Speculum*, p. 371 n. 155, and my more extensive remarks in “Constructions of the *Shekhinah* in the Messianic Theosophy of Abraham Cardoso, with an Annotated Edition of *Derush ha-Shekhinah*,” *Kabbalah*, 3, 1998, pp. 46–51.

36. In the concluding postscript of the relevant section, Zohar 2:114a, the elder is identified by name as R. Yeiva Sabba, who appears elsewhere in the zoharic narrative. See Zohar 1:55a, 59a, 225a; 2:135a. In a number of contexts, we read of the “book of R. Yeiva Sabba” (1:47a, 117b; 2:6a, 60b, 206b; 3:7b, 155b), or of the “book of legends (*aggadah*) of R. Yeiva Sabba” (3:289a, 293a, 295a), or simply the “legend (*aggadah*) of R. Yeiva Sabba” (3:290a, 290b). It is possible that the identification of the elder in the section on Mishpaṭim as R. Yeiva reflects a later redactional accretion to the base text.
37. Zohar 2:95a, 99a–b. For scholarly treatments of the parable, see the references supplied in note 4.
38. Zohar 2:98b. On the use of the image of the garment to describe the status of the literal sense of Torah, see Cohen-Alloro, *Secret of the Garment*, pp. 45–49.
39. For elaboration of this point, see Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” pp. 186–187. Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” p. 97 n. 182, criticizes my understanding of the image of the beautiful maiden without eyes as a reference to the fact that the text in and of itself is blind, that is, without sense. Liebes did not comprehend the dialectical force of my argument. Thus, he refers only to the part of my study that would seem to support his criticism and he neglects to cite the continuation of my argument that not only undermines his criticism but clearly indicates that my position is closer to what he presents as his own view. I argued that the hermeneutical theory implied in the zoharic parable is that in bestowing meaning on the text the interpreter draws meaning out from the text. From that perspective it is difficult to distinguish in a clear way between eisegesis and exegesis. It is curious that Liebes does not at all refer to a second passage in “Beautiful Maiden” (pp. 171–172) wherein I state explicitly that interpretation in the Zohar is an unfolding of the infinite meaning within the text. For the sake of setting the record straight, I will cite the relevant portion of my argument: “The movement of zoharic hermeneutics may be thus compared to a circle, beginning and ending with the text in its literal sense. For the Zohar the search for the deepest truths of Scripture is a gradual stripping away of the external forms or garments until one gets to the inner core, but when one gets to that inner core what one finds is nothing other than the *peshat*, i.e., the text as it is. To interpret, therefore, from the perspective of the Zohar, is not to impose finite meaning on the text, but to unfold the infinite meaning within the text.” In that context, moreover, I make use of Ricoeur’s term “appropriation” to convey the idea that interpretation is a recovery of what is latent in the text. It is lamentable that the judgmental ire of the scholarly critique was not tempered by a more careful assessment of my argument.
40. See Jochanan H. A. Wijnhoven, “The Zohar and the Proselyte,” in *Texts and Responses: Studies Presented to Nahum N. Glatzer on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday by His Students*, ed Michael A. Fishbane and Paul R. Flohr (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), pp. 120–140, esp. 130–131.
41. Zohar 2:95a–b. Compare the use of the expression *guf zar*, “alien body,” in Zohar 1:127a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*). In that context as well it is clear that the word *zar* refers more specifically to the non-Jew. I would thus respectfully take issue with Giller’s assertion, “Love and Upheaval,” p. 36, that *ish zar*, the “non-priest,” symbolizes the physical body in an apparently generic sense. Giller himself notes that throughout this zoharic section the “images of ascent and descent are employed to underscore the strained relationships between Jews and Gentiles.” The more nuanced interpretation of *ish zar* as a reference to the body of a non-Jew, or specifically that of a Christian, supports his claim about the underlying tension of this literary unit. The alienation to which the

zoharic authorship alludes in this case is not the generic imprisonment of the soul in the physical body, but relates more precisely to the entrapment of the Jewish soul in a Christian body. In this respect, one might contrast the zoharic myth of the alienation of the Jewish soul in the body of the Christian from the gnostic myth of the estrangement of the soul in general in the body, which has its roots in Platonic thought. In spite of the many important developments in scholarly research on the phenomenon of gnosticism in its multivalent nature, one of the most articulate formulations of this basic element in gnostic myth remains Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, pp. 48–99. Many scholars have noted the Platonic element of gnosticism in its classical expression. For a review of this relationship, with reference to many of the relevant studies, see Birger A. Pearson, *Gnosticism, Judaism, and Egyptian Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), pp. 148–164. One might consider the kabbalistic orientation an ethnocentric application of the more generic philosophical position that lies at the core of the gnostic worldview, and this applies even to those gnostic texts that seem to be based on the notion of the fall of Sophia, which may be related in part to the Hellenistic Jewish speculation on wisdom (*hokhmah*). See George MacRae, “The Jewish Background of the Gnostic Sophia Myth,” *Novum Testamentum*, 12, 1970, pp. 86–101.

42. According to a statement attributed to Rava in Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 49b (and repeated in Hagigah 3a), Abraham is assigned the title *tehillah la-gerim*, the “first of the converts.” On the rabbinic portrait of Abraham as a proselyte (in some passages related to his own circumcision at the age of ninety-nine according to Gen. 17:24) or as one who (together with Sarah) was engaged in the process of converting others (derived exegetically from Gen. 12:5), see Gary G. Porton, *The Stranger within Your Gates: Converts and Conversion in Rabbinic Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994), pp. 58, 91, 139, 197, 211, 217, 224 n. 45, 256 n. 85, 262 n. 142, 319 n. 310.
43. Zohar 2:95a. See Zohar 1:95a; Wijnhoven, “Zohar and the Proselyte,” pp. 125–127.
44. The demonic potency is thus designated in several passages in the Zohar by the biblical idiom (Ps. 81:10) *el zar*, “strange god.” In some contexts, this locution is related specifically to the male potency of the demonic realm as opposed to the feminine, which is designated *el nekhar*, the “foreign god.” See Zohar 1:161b; 2:182a, 243a, 263b, 268a; 3:13a, 106a–b. On the use of the term *zar* to refer to the demonic potency, see Zohar 2:133b; 3:7a, 55a, 73b, 297a. The nexus between idolatry, sexual misconduct, and the demonic is emphasized repeatedly in the zoharic corpus. See Zohar 1:131b; 2:3b, 61a, 87b, 90a; 3:84a, 142a; Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 461–462, 1365; Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 140 n. 2.
45. Zohar 1:93a, 204a; 2:87b, 90a. See also *ibid.* 1:131a–b.
46. “Sefer ha-Mishkal,” p. 132.
47. Zohar 1:13a–b, 96a.
48. Zohar 2:98b.
49. Zohar 2:95b. I have explored the demonization of Christianity in the zoharic literature in “Re/membering the Covenant.”
50. Zohar 2:95b.
51. For an extensive discussion of the zoharic treatment of the soul, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 677–722.
52. It goes without saying that this (dis)orientation is not unique to the medieval kabbalah, and has roots in much older phases of the Jewish religion, indeed stretching back to ancient Israel. For an enlightening study of the theme of concealment and the blurring of identity, see Timothy K. Beal, *The Book*



of *Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997).

53. Zohar 2:97b. On the motif of the exile of *Shekhinah* in the zoharic corpus, see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 382–385. The psychical application of this theme is much older in kabbalistic sources. The nexus of the dispersion of the *Shekhinah* and the transmigration of the Jewish souls seems to be implied already in a passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*. See Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, pp. 203–204. The possible gnostic background to the bahiric myth of the lower wisdom who falls from the realm of light was already noted by Scholem, *Origins*, pp. 93–95. In this context, it is noteworthy that the depiction of the feminine in the ancient gnostic works seems to me more equivocal than in the medieval kabbalistic sources. That is, in the former, there is a genuine ambivalence such that one finds both positive and negative images, whereas in the case of the latter, positive elements are only associated with the masculinized feminine. On the ambivalence of gender imagery in gnostic sources, see Michael A. Williams, “Uses of Gender Imagery in Ancient Gnostic Texts,” in *Gender and Religion: On the Complexity of Symbols*, ed. Caroline Walker Bynum, Stevan Harrell, and Paula Richman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), pp. 196–227; idem, “Variety in Gnostic Perspectives on Gender,” in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 2–22. On the variance of the gnostic image of the feminine in particular, see Jorunn J. Buckley, “Sex, Suffering, and Incarnation: Female Symbolism in Gnosticism,” in *The Allure of Gnosticism: The Gnostic Experience in Jungian Psychology and Contemporary Culture*, ed. Robert A. Segal, June Singer, and Murray Stein (Chicago: Open Court, 1995), pp. 94–106. In my judgment, the textual evidence of the kabbalistic material yields a far more monolithic picture inasmuch as the kabbalists were operating with a clear-cut principle of gender transformation rooted in an unambiguous androcentric perspective. In my work, I have referred to the containment of the female in the male, the left in the right, as the principle of the male androgyne, which is the key to understanding the kabbalistic idea of androgyny. With respect to the divine and the demonic, the male is ontologically privileged. However, the prioritizing of the masculine in both realms demands a double transposition of gender, the male into female and the female into male. In terms of the divine realm, the transformation of the male into female (enacted through the assimilation of the male kabbalist into the divine feminine) is to facilitate the metamorphosis of the female into the male (that is, to transpose the gender of the divine feminine so that she is restored to the male). The ideal of androgyny implied in the imaginal symbol of the divine *anthropos* (as refracted through the prism of the medieval male kabbalists) is thus one in which the primal androgyne is reconstituted (and still not beyond embodiment) when the female is reintegrated in the male. In terms of the demonic, the transposition of the male into female, that is, the male who is female, involves the image of the emasculated male, which is represented in the zoharic text by the symbol of the seven Edomite kings whose weapons were not found. The transposition of the female into male entails the symbol of the warrior queen, the phallic princess who wages war and avenges wrong, the quality of punitive judgment. Translated into sexual terms, the male Samael is the castrated god, who is emulated below by the Christian clergy who adopt celibacy as the ultimate spiritual ideal; the female Lilith is the prostitute arrayed in royal garments of seduction, the temptress who torments the male Jew in the guise of the Gentile woman. The insistence by my critics that I have

- imposed an androcentric (and even worse phallogocentric) reading on the kabbalistic sources is empty rhetoric that fails to engage in a sustained reading of either the primary materials or my analysis.
54. My translation of the word *tiqla* as “rotating scale” is an attempt to combine the two salient connotations of this term as it is employed in the zoharic text. See Zohar 1:109b–110a; 2:99b; and the lengthy discussion of this term in Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 327–331.
  55. See Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 331–332.
  56. As Liebes, “Eros and the Zohar,” p. 87 n. 126, points out, this is a unique occurrence in the body of the Zohar wherein both the force of holiness and that of impurity are designated by the term *adam*, a usage that is found in the later strata of zoharic literature to contrast Samael, the evil man (referred to as *adam beliyya’al* on the basis of Prov. 6:12), and the holy One, the good man (*adam tov*, which is also designated by the title *yisra’el*). See *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 67, 98b; *Zohar Hadash*, 106d (*Tiqqunim*). In the main body of the Zohar, the contrast between the divine and the demonic is often framed in terms of the philological point that only the former is referred to by the term *adam*, an anthropological approach indebted to the rabbinic notion that Jews, in contrast to idolaters, are called by the name *adam*. See Babylonian Talmud, *Yevamot* 61a; *Baba Metsi’a* 114b; *Keritot* 6b; *Zohar* 1:20b, 28b, 1:35b; 2:25b (*Piquudin*), 86a, 120a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 162b, 275b; 3:125a (*Ra’aya Meheimna*), 143b, 219a, 238b (*Ra’aya Meheimna*); *Zohar Hadash*, 37b; “*Sefer ha-Mishkal*,” p. 130; Liebes, *Sections*, pp. 30, 46–47, 54–55. On a key passage wherein the demonic force is represented as *ish* (as opposed to *adam*), see *Zohar* 3:48b, analyzed in Wolfson, “Light through Darkness,” p. 81 n. 29.
  57. *Zohar* 2:95b.
  58. Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Batra* 52b.
  59. *Zohar* 2:98b.
  60. I am here repeating and expanding my argument in “Beautiful Maiden,” pp. 169–170.
  61. *Zohar* 2:98b–99a.
  62. An even profounder level of dissimulation is the secret that is never kept.
  63. My formulation here is indebted to the description of truth as the feminine in Irigaray, *Marine Lover*, p. 89. On the trope of the book as a mirror in historical perspective, see Herbert Grabes, *Speculum, Mirror und Looking-Glass: Kontinuität und Originalität der Spiegelmetapher in den Buchtiteln des Mittelalters und der englischen Literatur des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1973), pp. 101–102.
  64. The sense of suffering on the part of God in his giving the Torah (personified in distinctively erotic terms as the feminine entity in which the male glory takes delight) to Israel is implied in a number of rabbinic statements, for example, Babylonian Talmud, *Shabbat* 89a; *Exodus Rabbah* 33:1. Particularly the latter passage, which entails the parabolic image of God being sold together with the Torah to Israel, had an important impact on a parable in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, which in turn influenced subsequent kabbalists. See Scholem, *Origins*, p. 170; and Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 11–12. See especially the commentary of Nahmanides on Exod. 25:3. The esoteric significance, which Nahmanides marks by his signature expression “by way of truth” (*al derekh ha-emet*), of the offering (*terumah*) is related to the wisdom that God gave to Solomon, that is, the feminine attribute of the *Shekhinah* that is imparted as a gift by the father (or the upper wisdom) to the son. In the context of alluding to this mystery, Nahmanides refers explicitly to the aggadic comment in

- Exodus Rabbah* 33:1, to which he adds the following interpretative gloss: "For the gift (*terumah*) will be for me and I am with her, in the manner of 'My beloved is mine and I am his' (Song of Songs 2:16), and thus it says "Exactly as I show you" [*ke-khol asher ani mar'eh otkha*] (Exod. 25:9), for the I (*ani*) is the vision (*mar'eh*)." For a brief discussion of this passage, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 15–16. Nahmanides is thus alluding to the fact that the *Shekhinah*, which is designated by the first person pronoun, is the speculum through which the divine appears, a speculum that is related as well to the Torah, which is the wisdom bestowed as a gift upon Israel by God. The nexus of the Torah as the prism by means of which the divine light is refracted and the exile of *Shekhinah* is also implicit in the zoharic parable according to my reading. This notion of the incarnation of the *Shekhinah* in the form of the Torah, which entails the suffering of God exiled in the letters of the material scroll, is a foundational aspect of Nahmanides' overall hermeneutical approach, which, unfortunately, has not been appreciated by most scholars who have worked on his admittedly complex and multidimensional thought. For a preliminary discussion of the symbolic identification of Torah and the feminine *Shekhinah* in Nahmanides, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 15–16. I intend to elaborate someday on the theme that I have mentioned in this note. On the incarnational aspect of Nahmanides' theosophy, see Wolfson, "The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides," *Da'at*, 24, 1990, pp. 25–49 (English section); idem, *Through a Speculum*, pp. 63–64.
65. Zohar 1:84b, 115b–116a; 2:170b–171a; 3:125b.
  66. Zohar 1:75b; 2:204a; *Tiqunei Zohar*, sec. 19, 38a; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, pp. 438–439, 1226–1227; Ginsburg, *Sabbath*, pp. 115–116, 292–293; Wolfson, "Coronation," pp. 315–316.
  67. For a recent discussion of this motif, see Wolfson, "Eunuchs," pp. 159–162.
  68. See Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, pp. 116–117; idem, "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*," pp. 322–332.
  69. See idem, "Coronation," pp. 315–324.
  70. The Aramaic idiom *setiru de-darga*, which I have translated the "hiddenness of the gradation," is an exact rendering of the biblical expression *be-seter ha-madregah*, "hidden by the cliff." According to the zoharic interpretation, this term refers to the gradation wherein the *Shekhinah* is hidden in the time of redemption.
  71. Zohar 1:84b.
  72. Ibid. 3:74b.
  73. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 25.
  74. Ibid., pp. 68–69.
  75. In some zoharic passages, the concealment of the feminine from the masculine is given a negative valence. In this hiding, which is occasioned by the transgressions of Israel below, the divine feminine is compared to a woman in her menstrual period during which she is forbidden to have physical contact with her husband. See Zohar 1:61a.
  76. Zohar 3:66b. Consider the words of Blake from *Jerusalem in The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982), p. 193: "In Beulah the Female lets down her beautiful Tabernacle;/ Which the Male enters magnificent between her Cherubim:/ And becomes One with her mingling condensing in Self-love/ The Rocky Law of Condemnation & double Generation, & Death."
  77. The verse from the Song is applied in a number of passages in zoharic literature to the feminine *Shekhinah*. The opening of the closed woman is

- facilitated by the male or is said to occur as a result of the masculine potency. See Zohar 1:32b, 262b; 2:4a; *Tiqqunei Zohar*, Introduction 12b; sec. 19, 38a (see note 64), 39a (in this context, the image of the locked garden is explicitly linked to the virgin); sec. 21, 60b, 61a; sec. 28, 72b; sec. 29, 72b–73a.
78. Zohar 1:115b–116a.
  79. The double connotation of the term *tsenu'ah* applied to the *Shekhinah* has its basis in a passage in *Sefer ha-Bahir*, sec. 156. In the effort to explain the divine potency referred to as the west, which clearly refers to the *Shekhinah* (given the well-established tradition concerning the location of the latter in the west), the following parable is offered: “[This may be compared to] the prince has a beautiful bride and she is hidden (*tsenu'ah*) in his chamber, and he would take great wealth from the house of his father and bring it to her, and she would take everything, and constantly hide (*matsna'at*) it and mix everything until the end of days.” On the implicitly (and, in some cases, explicitly) erotic relation that pertains between father, daughter, and son adopted in several bahiric passages, see Wolfson, “Hebraic and Hellenic Conceptions,” pp. 156–167.
  80. Zohar 2:170b–171a.
  81. On the correlation of secrecy and sexual modesty, see Wolfson, “From Sealed Book to Open Text,” p. 157. See *ibid.*, p. 173 n. 57, where I mentioned that a similar nexus between mystery and modesty, which is connected to the feminine in particular, is essential to the thought of Emmanuel Levinas.
  82. *Zohar im Perush Or Yaqar* (Jerusalem, 1963), 2:233.
  83. *R. Moses de León's Commentary to Ezekiel's Chariot*, Asi Farber-Ginat and Daniel Abrams (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1998), p. 58 (Hebrew).
  84. Wolfson, “Coronation,” pp. 319–324.
  85. Zohar 1:64b.
  86. *Ibid.*
  87. *Circle in the Square*, pp. 92–98. The correlation of the feminine and space has been well noted in feminist criticism. As an illustration of this insight, see Catharine Keller, *Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to the End of the World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), pp. 140–180.
  88. Zohar 2:214b.
  89. The exact words of the zoharic text (2:214b) are *u-ma'n ihu de-qa'im be-raza de-adam ma'n de-natir ot qayyama qaddisha*, which translate literally as “and who is the one who exists in the secret of Adam? The one who guards the sign of the holy covenant.” In light of such statements, it is astonishing that my critics have accused me of reading the phallogocentric orientation into the Zohar and other kabbalistic sources that espouse a similar viewpoint.
  90. Zohar 2:214b.
  91. See Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), pp. 222–237.
  92. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 44. In my study, “Re/membering the Covenant,” I cite Butler's words. I repeat them here on account of their clarity and incisiveness.
  93. This is particularly evident in Green, “Kabbalistic Re-vision.” Green claims that my understanding of gender symbolism in the theosophic kabbalah has set aside “the truly important role occupied by the female, especially in the Zoharic sources” (p. 270). He then proceeds to offer a litany of images used to characterize the *Shekhinah*, including queen of the lower worlds, hind of the dawn, mother that nourishes the universe, city, temple, holy of holies, kingship (*malkhut*, which Green perplexingly renders with the neutral term “realm”) that exerts dominion, governance, and judgment over existence.

After going through this list, Green concludes, “The Zohar is at least as fixed with celebration of the female as it is with the male ... Wolfson’s dismissal of this entire world of symbols through his single insight concerning *atarah* ... produces a significantly distorted picture of kabbalistic eros.” Anyone truly familiar with the range of my work would readily discern that the notion that I have dismissed this entire world of symbols characterizing the *Shekhinah* is grossly misleading and unfair. The real issue that emerges from my work, which is ignored by Green, is that these positive characteristics of the *Shekhinah* are predicated on a gendered axiology that kabbalists shared with other men living in medieval European cities, enhanced as well by biblical and rabbinic sources. I have argued that ostensibly female images are valenced as masculine in the androcentric culture of the kabbalists. The androcentricism is so pervasive that female biological traits are appropriated as masculine. Thus, even birthing and lactation are seen as masculine traits, for in the dominant kabbalistic symbology, when a woman gives birth or nurses she assumes the gender value of a male. I have not ignored these obvious feminine attributes, as Green claims, but what I have done is contextualize them in a more sophisticated analysis of gender as a hermeneutical category. See especially Wolfson, “Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth,” in *Circle in the Square*, pp. 79–121, and the extensive notes on pp. 195–232. Regrettably, Green does not refer to this aspect of my work, which is in fact my singular contribution, and thus his criticisms consistently miss the point. Those who wish to ignore my emphasis on the phallogocentric androcentrism that characterizes this tradition may find comfort in the alleged alternative presented by Green, but in my mind I do not see any real option being offered here that truly responds to my scholarship. One can only hope that intelligent readers will see through the glass darkly and understand that these barbs in no way pose a serious intellectual challenge to my thesis. My detailed response to Green’s review can be found in “*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*.” See also Wolfson, “Coronation.”