ontology, alterity, and ethics in kabbalistic anthropology

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alles ist weniger, als
es ist,
alles ist mehr.
Celan

I

"Kabbalah," which literally means "tradition," is the generic term used by pious practitioners and critical scholars to denote the various currents of esoteric lore and mystical praxis that have been cultivated by elite rabbinic circles from the High Middle Ages to the present. The kabbalah is not monolithic in nature; on the contrary, it can be described most appropriately as a collage of disparate doctrines and practices.[1]

The present study is a much-abbreviated version of the first chapter of a forthcoming book on the relationship of mysticism and ethics in the history of kabbalistic speculation and practice. The book is based on the three lectures I delivered as the Shoshana Shier Visiting Professor of Judaic Studies at the University of Toronto in the Spring of 1998. I express my gratitude to Sheila Delany whose meticulous editing of the original draft improved my essay in both form and content.

[1] Gershom Scholem suggested two typological trends in medieval kabbalah: theosophic and ecstatic. For a brief but incisive review of this typology, especially as articulated by Moshe Idel, see H. Tirosh-Rothschild, "Continuity and Revision in the Study of the Kabbalah," *AJS Review* 16 (1991): 174–76. A challenge to Scholem's typological distinction is

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For the purposes of this study, I will limit my analysis for the most part to the corpus of the *Zohar*, the major sourcebook of theosophic kabbalistic symbolism.[2] Apparently, the literary units that make up the fabric of zoharic literature were composed and began to circulate in the latter decades of the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fourteenth. It is probable that the different literary strata of the *Zohar*, composed in Hebrew and/or Aramaic, were the product of a fraternity of kabbalists who assembled in the region of Castile.[3] Like other mystical fraternities within rabbinic societies of this period, the zoharic circle was elitist in its composition. The extant historical documents provide relatively sparse biographical information about the Spanish kabbalists who participated in this circle. Nevertheless, we may conclude that they were practicing rabbinic leaders or had been trained in the talmudic academies and were thus well versed in classical Jewish learning. We can assume, moreover, that these kabbalists availed themselves of the religious institutions that served the rest of their extended communities. In that respect, it is doubtful that the kabbalists were separated from the society at large even though there is good reason to assume that they belonged to a small fraternity made up exclusively of fellow practitioners. One must suppose that to some degree this circle functioned autonomously, laying claim to a secret knowledge that explained the essence of Judaism but that was not readily available to all Jews.

In this study, I shall consider to what extent the kabbalistic orientation, cultivated by this circle, fostered a sense of social consciousness and a call to moral action on behalf of the human community at large. In my judgment, the study of ethics in kabbalistic tradition must begin with a proper understanding of the ontological place accorded non-Jewish nations. In this regard, I am naturally indebted to a host of philosophers who have identified in one way or another the

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developed in my *Abraham Abulafia, Kabbalist and Prophet: Hermeneutics, Theosophy, and Theurgy* (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 2000).

[2] On the literary structure and authorship of the *Zohar*, see G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1956), 156–204; I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, trans. D. Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1–126.

[3] For an extensive discussion of this hypothesis, see Y. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, trans. A. Schwartz, S. Nakache, and P. Peli (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 85–138.

centrality of the status of the other in ethical discourse.[4] Indeed, as one contemporary philosopher reminds us, the sense of the other entailed in the notion of obligation must "include not only other human beings but what is other than human—animals, e.g., or other living things generally, and even the earth itself."[5] My discussion, however, will focus on intersubjective alterity as expressed in the place accorded the non-Jew within the zoharic ontology. My emphasis on ontology reflects the way of thinking adopted by the kabbalists from the thirteenth century until the present, but it does not indicate my own personal preference or what I would consider an adequate approach to moral theory and praxis. In the pre-Kantian world in which traditional kabbalistic symbolism was formulated, there was no justification for separating ontology and axiology: For the kabbalists, value is grounded in the nature of being.

Scholars who have written about kabbalistic ethics have noted symbolic representations of Islam and Christianity, but have usually ignored the position of the non-Jewish other in the ontological scheme that informs kabbalistic theosophy and anthropology.[6] The point is epitomized in Yitzhak Baer's seminal study on Jews in Christian Spain.[7] Baer called his chapter on the thirteenth-century Catalonian and Castilian kabbalists "Mysticism and Social Reform." He argued that the kabbalists, particularly as presented in the later strata of the zoharic corpus, derived from an inferior social and economic class and that they vigorously attacked the courtier aristoc-

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[4] For example, see M. C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); W. Farley, *Eros for the Other: Retaining Truth in a Pluralistic World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); E. Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering: History, Heterology, and the Nameless Others* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998); S. Glendinning, *On Being With Others: Heidegger, Derrida, Wittgenstein* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). Perhaps no single philosopher has been more insistent on emphasizing the importance of the other to the ethical project than Emmanuel Levinas; cf. the essays collected in *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, ed. A. T. Peperzak (New York and London: Routledge, 1995).

[5] J. D. Caputo, *Against Ethics: Contributions to a Poetics of Obligation with Constant Reference to Deconstruction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 5.

[6] See Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 68–71; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 149–50, 154–61, 244 n92, and R. C. Kiener, "The Image of Islam in the *Zohar*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 8 (1989): 43–65 (English section).

[7] Y. Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, trans. L. Schoffman, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1961), 1:243–305; see also idem, "The Historical Background of the Ra'aya' Meheimna'," *Zion* 5 (1940): 1–44 (in Hebrew).

racy, amongst them the rabbinic leaders. Thus the kabbalists, according to this perception, sought to improve the moral and religious life of the Jewish masses. Baer writes, "A marked affinity existed between the ideologies of the ascetics and mystics and the aims of the practical reformers bent upon achieving a higher standard of social morality."[8]

Without challenging the main thrust of Baer's historical analysis, I would question the appropriateness of his locution "ethical-social reform" to characterize the mystical speculations and practices of the kabbalists. Baer is surely correct in saying that the intent of some of the kabbalist moralists was to improve the pietistic standard of Jewish society by attacking the ethical deficiencies of the rabbinic leadership. Nonetheless, scholars have not properly examined the appropriateness of his terminology to depict the kabbalistic sources. Do the concerns with social morality expressed in kabbalistic writings refer to the Jewish people only or to humanity at large? Does the moral standard embraced by the kabbalists reflect a narrow exclusionary ethnocentrism or, instead, a broad universalism? Has the utilization of terms like "ethics" and "social reform" prevented scholars from appreciating a leitmotif of this material? From my perspective the suitability of such terms to the esoteric tradition depends on a careful exploration of the symbolic constructions of the other that informed the major kabbalistic texts. Before we adopt this terminology we must probe the ethnocentric and in some measure misanthropic assertions strewn throughout the literature, especially the anthropological presumption that humanity in its most ideal sense refers to Israel alone. Can a mystical tradition that ontologizes ethnic difference foster genuine social reform by promoting an ethical standard of behavior, as Baer proposed? Is it appropriate to speak, as some scholars have done, of a genre of literature composed of ethico-kabbalistic treatises? In what sense is the term "ethical" meaningful in this context?

I would like to contextualize the framing of the other in the theosophic symbolism of medieval kabbalah; such framing is an integral part of self-definition. First, let us acknowledge that the tendency to divide the world into we and they is instinctual, originating probably

[8] Baer, *History of the Jews*, 250.

in the most elemental form of territorialism.[9] Even the most advanced aspects of human culture—cognitive apprehension and linguistic discourse—are predicated on the act of differentiation. It stands to reason, therefore, that one's self-understanding will be based in great measure on one's sense of social and cultural otherness.[10] From that vantage point it is no exaggeration to say that the attitude towards the other is a key factor in defining the identity of a given group.

In medieval kabbalistic sources, the construction of alterity occurs in a context of historical contingencies that fostered negative stereotypes of the other. We cannot stand in moral judgment of medieval kabbalists when our own attitude is shaped by the present social, political, and economic realities; to do so would be anachronistic. Nevertheless, we are obliged to investigate the symbolic rhetoric of kabbalistic material and its effect on later Jewish attitudes towards the other, particularly as this rhetoric pertains to the relationship between ethics and mysticism. Although I personally would not condone the use of kabbalistic material to justify either the right-wing political agenda in the state of Israel or the tacit denunciation of non-Jews by certain segments of the ultra-orthodox Jewish community elsewhere, as a scholar I would argue that these applications do not necessarily distort the sources (as some more liberal-minded Jews might claim). On the contrary, some recently published works written by individuals deeply influenced by the symbolism of traditional kabbalah depict Islam (under the guise of the biblical Ishmael) and Christianity (portrayed as Edom) in overtly negative, at times even demonic, terms; these works accurately reinscribe attitudes that arose in the medieval context. What is remarkable is that the rhetoric of hatred forged in the crucible of medieval animosity continues to be used in the service of a political agenda.[11] The task

[9] R. Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953), 92.

[10] See J. Z. Smith, "What A Difference A Difference Makes," in *"To See Ourselves As Others See Us:" Christians, Jews, and "Others" in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Neusner and E. S. Freirichs (Chico: Scholar's Press, 1985), 4–48; idem, "Differential Equations: On Constructing the 'Other,'" *Thirteenth Annual University Lecture in Religion*, Arizona State University, March 5, 1992, Department of Religious Studies.

[11] A good example of my point is an anonymous eschatological work based on kabbalistic sources, *'El Qeṣ ha-Tiqqun*, "Concerning the End of the Rectification," which was published in Israel in 1982. Another is *Gilluy ha-'Or ha-Ganuz le-Yisra'el*, "The Disclosure of the Light Hidden for Israel," a massive and rambling compilation of traditional kabbalistic symbolism composed by Judah Kalfon, a kabbalist who lives in Tel-Aviv.

of responsible scholarship is to acknowledge the reverberations of kabbalistic ideas in contemporary Jewish culture even when we want to avoid ethical condemnation of a tradition shaped in a different time. In short, we need to navigate between the extremes of pious apologetics and moral dogmatism.

II

Before I turn to an analysis of passages from zoharic literature, I want to make a methodological observation. With respect to many of their most important themes kabbalistic texts exemplify a remarkable degree of homogeneity; surprisingly, changes in time and place hardly have any effect at all. This textual phenomenon can be explained in part by the fact that the conditions of production and consumption[12] of kabbalistic ideas and practices have been so severely limited through the ages, restricted as authors and audience were to men with rabbinic training, that there is little change with regard to the major themes that engaged their imagination. I would suggest that, had these conditions been more diverse, the range of attitudes reflected in the sources would have been wider. But the historical reality is that in the formative period of kabbalistic symbolism such variety in social context is absent. I sympathize with the contemporary tendency to seek multiple voices in the reading of texts, and I applaud the attempt to avoid a totalizing and reductive hermeneutic. However, in the case of traditional kabbalistic sources, I submit that the general invariability and redundancy are due to male exclusivity and social homogeneity fostered by the androcentrism of medieval rabbinic culture. Of course, kabbalistic texts yield a range of opinions on any number of theological, anthropological, and cosmological issues; but the point is that with respect to many major themes, like the one that I will discuss here, uniformity is far more striking than diversity.

What guiding principle informs zoharic symbolism regarding the nature of humanity, a concept that arguably lies at the foundation of any ethical orientation? In the various literary strata of the zoharic anthology, a consistent anthropological picture emerges: Israel is

[12] I am grateful to Sheila Delany for this locution.

considered the "holy seed" (*zar'a' qadisha'*),[13] whereas the other nations of the world (with the possible exception of Islam according to some passages[14]) are said to derive from the demonic "other side" (*siṭra' 'aḥra'*), the realm of ten impure potencies on the left that correspond to the ten holy *sefirot*, or luminous emanations, on the right.[15] In some measure, the attitude expressed in zoharic literature, and confirmed in other kabbalistic sources, elaborates a position articulated in earlier rabbinic texts, which in turn echo ethnocentric tendencies evident in parts of the Hebrew Bible. In the words of one scholar, "the rabbinic image of the non-Jew is xenophobic in the extreme."[16] Empirically, the Rabbis may have had positive interactions with non-Jews, but their process of cultural self-identification was fostered by promulgating the stereotypical image of the non-Jew as an inferior and intrinsically wicked being.[17] Consider, for example, the blunt interpretive gloss on one of the three blessings that, according to Rabbi Judah, the Jewish male is required to utter each day (a formula that is still part of the traditional liturgy), "Blessed are you for not making me a Gentile:" "For the

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[13] *Zohar* 2:6a, 78b, 124a, 125a; 3:152b, 237a. All translations are my own based on *Sefer ha-Zohar*, ed. R. Margaliot, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1984). Also see Baer, *History*, 246.

[14] Some passages associate Islam with the demonic potency (*Zohar* 1:103b, 110a, 118b; 2:17a, 124a; 3:124a, 246b, 282a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, ed. R. Margaliot [Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1978], 78d), whereas others locate it in a realm of being that is above the demonic (*Zohar* 2:86a). Because it practices circumcision, Islam is situated beneath the wings of the *Shekhinah*, i.e., in the lower part of the last of the divine emanations, which is also the place accorded to those who convert to Judaism (*Zohar* 1:13a–b). On the ambivalent attitude of the zoharic authors to Islam, see Kiener, "Image of Islam," 62–65; P. Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine: Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 51 and other relevant references cited on 146 n114.

[15] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 35–36, 235–39; idem, *Kabbalah* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 122–28; idem, *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead: Basic Concepts in the Kabbalah*, trans. J. Neugroschel, ed. and rev. J. Chipman (New York: Schocken, 1991), 56–87; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 447–546.

[16] S. Stern, *Jewish Identity in Early Rabbinic Writings* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994), 4. Other scholars have emphasized the universalizing tendencies in biblical and rabbinic sources. While this is not a completely distorted or falsified portrait of ancient Judaism, it is only partial. One can surely understand the lingering desire to combat an anti-Semitic stereotype of parochial Judaism and its negative attitude towards the Gentile, but the scholarly task requires a balanced assessment that takes into account the laudable and reprehensible elements of the past.

[17] Ibid., 5–6, 22–30.

Gentiles do not amount to anything [*she-'ein ha-goyim kelum*] [as it is written] 'All the nations are nothing in relation to him' [Isaiah 40:17]."[18] So unworthy are the non-Jews that no specific reason for their unworthiness is given. In still other rabbinic texts, a more definitive contrast is drawn between the intrinsic purity of Israel and the impurity of the nations,[19] classified as worshippers of a foreign god, an orientation epitomized in the remark addressed by God to Israel:

> In this world I abhor all the idolaters for they are from the seed of impurity [*zera' ṭum'ah*], but I chose you, for you are the seed of truth [*zera' 'emet*], as it says "I planted you with noble vines, entirely the seed of truth" [Jeremiah 2:21], and it is written "The Lord God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be his treasured people" [Deuteronomy 14:2]. Even in the future I will choose only you, for you are the seed of holiness [*zera' qedushah*], blessed by the Lord, as it says "They shall not toil to no purpose, they shall not bear children in vain, for they shall be a seed blessed by the Lord" [Isaiah 65:23].[20]

In other rabbinic texts, Israel's holiness is related more specifically to the observance of ritual commandments (*miṣwot*).[21] In some passages, the distinctive potentiality for holiness is expressed as a homology between the community of Israel and the heavenly angels.[22] The Jewish people are an angelic race inasmuch as Jews have the capacity to realize their divine nature by becoming like angels in the liturgical service of God through prayer, study, and good deeds. In

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[18] Palestinian Talmud, Berakhot 9:1, 12b.

[19] Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 31–32.

[20] *Tanḥuma'*, Naso', 7.

[21] *Tanḥuma'*, Shelaḥ, 15; *Numbers Rabbah* 17:6; Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 32, 71–79.

[22] Babylonian Talmud, Qiddushin 70a; *Exodus Rabbah* 15:6; *Midrash Mishle*, ed. B. L. Visotzky (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1990), 8:1, 57–58; *Pirqei Rabbi 'Eli'ezer* (Warsaw: 1852), chapter 22, 51a; Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 40–41. It is possible that the rabbinic depiction of Israel as angelic is based on the portrayal of the righteous as angels in earlier apocalyptic and sectarian literature. See J. H. Charlesworth, "The Portrayal of the Righteous as an Angel," in *Ideal Figures in Ancient Judaism*, ed. G. W. E. Nickelsburg and J. J. Collins (Chico: Scholars Press, 1980), 135–51; D. Dimant, "Men as Angels: The Self-Image of the Qumran Community," in *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Adele Berlin (Bethesda: University of Maryland Press, 1996), 93–103; W. F. Smelik, "On Mystical Transformation of the Righteous into Light in Judaism," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26 (1995): 122–44; D. L. Bock, *Blasphemy and Exaltation in Judaism and the Final Examination of Jesus* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1998), 113–83.

opposition to angelic Israel stand the inherently impure and idolatrous nations. Such extreme disavowal of the worth of non-Jews is not necessarily the normative, or even majority, rabbinic opinion; but it was articulated and preserved in the classical rabbinic literature and had an impact on subsequent generations.[23]

The demonization of non-Jewish nations in kabbalistic texts has much to do with the mythologoumenon preserved in rabbinic sources based on the sexual relationship of Eve and the serpent (identified with the angel Samael). An early formulation of this aggadic motif is found in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan to Genesis: "And Adam knew that his wife Eve was impregnated from Samael, the angel of the Lord."[24] Particularly important is the view attributed in some talmudic sources to Rabbi Yohanan: that the pollution with which the serpent inseminated Eve, when she and Adam disobeyed the divine command in the Garden of Eden, was removed from Israel when they stood at Sinai; but it was never extracted from the

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[23] The prayer *'Aleynu le-Shabbeaḥ*, which originates in the talmudic period and is still recited in many Jewish congregations on a daily basis and featured in the High Holiday liturgy, praises God "for not making us like the nations of the lands, for not placing us amongst the families of the earth, for not allocating our portion with them nor our fate in all of their masses." In the continuation of the prayer (according to the oldest textual witnesses still preserved in many prayer-books), the God of Jewish worship is contrasted with the false gods of the nations. What meaning can this prayer have when it is uttered in a synagogue in the end of the twentieth century, and how should it affect the ethical sensibility of the worshiper? On the background of this prayer, see M. D. Swartz, *'Alay le-Shabbeaḥ*: A Liturgical Prayer in Ma'aseh Merkabah," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 77 (1987): 179–90.

[24] My translation is based on the version of the text established in *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch: Text and Concordance*, ed. E. G. Clarke with W. E. Aufrecht, J. C. Hurd, and F. Spitzer (Hoboken: Ktav, 1984), 5. In the continuation of the targumic text, this impregnation produces the birth of Cain, which parallels the birth of Abel from Adam's seed. In this particular textual accretion of the tradition, the insemination of Eve by Samael accounts for the birth of Cain rather than for humanity at large. On the midrashic theme of the demonic Cain, see D. M. Eichhorn, *Cain: Son of the Serpent*, 2nd ed. (Chappaqua: Rossel Books, 1985), and the interesting analysis of the image of the "monstrous Cain" in Western culture in R. J. Quinones, *The Changes of Cain: Violence and the Lost Brother in Cain and Abel Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 41–61. On the possibility that the aggadic depiction of Cain may have generated the Gnostic myth of the impure seed born from the union of the earthly female and the demiurge, see G. Stroumsa, *Another Seed: Studies in Gnostic Mythology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1984), 45–49. The negative stereotype of Cain in the biblical narrative is discussed by R. M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

other nations.[25] I do not think we would be far off the mark in saying that the aggadic myth comes remarkably close to the conception of original sin enunciated in Christian tradition, for the claim it makes is that the ontological status of humanity was changed with the insemination of Eve by the serpent. The antidote to this seminal pollution is Torah, the efficacy of which will be fully realized only in the time of the messiah when the evil force in the world will be completely eradicated and non-Jews will be purified in the manner that Jews were purified at Sinai.[26]

The portrayal of the Jews vis-à-vis the other nations in kabbalistic literature is enhanced by the claim found in a number of rabbinic texts that the term *'adam*, which denotes humanity in its fullest sense, applies only to Israel and not to the idolatrous nations. In the Babylonian Talmud, non-Jews are excluded from a number of halakhic rulings on the basis of this philological assertion, which is supported exegetically by a gloss on the verse, "For you, my flock, flock that I tend, are men" (Ezekiel 34:31): "You are called men, but the idolaters are not called men."[27] Underlying this philology is the anthropological presumption that Jews alone possess the human soul (*nefesh ha-'adam*) and thus are ontologically different from other nations.[28] The contrast between Israel and the nations is not simply a matter of difference in custom or belief, but an essential difference of their being. The ontological divergence is expressed in striking terms in the following statement attributed to Rabbi Bun:

> The blessed holy One said: "I have established prophets in Israel, for they are called men [*'adam*], as it says, 'for you are

[25] Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 103b; 'Avodah Zarah 22b.

[26] See E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1969), 148 (in Hebrew).

[27] Babylonian Talmud, Yevamot 61a; Bava' Meṣi'a 114b; Keritut 6b; Sanhedrin 72b; Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 39–40. Other passages in the classical rabbinic corpus attest that the exclusive attribution of the term *'adam* to Israel was expanded beyond the specific issue of ritual purity. See *Exodus Rabbah* 4:1; *Leviticus Rabbah* 5:3; *Numbers Rabbah* 12:14; *Deuteronomy Rabbah* 1:2; *Esther Rabbah* 7:11; *Tanḥuma'*, Ki Tissa' 4; Wayaqhel 3; *Pesiqta' Rabbati* 10:4, 47:5; *Pesiqta' de-Rav Kahana'* 2:3. The exclusion of non-Jews from the category of human (*'adam*) was certainly not the only opinion expressed in rabbinic literature. The inconsistency of the Rabbis on this point was duly noted by M. Smith, "On the Shape of God and the Humanity of the Gentiles," in *Religions in Antiquity: Essays in Memory of E. R. Goodenough*, ed. J. Neusner (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968), 320–26.

[28] *Genesis Rabbah* 34:13, 325.

> men' [Ezekiel 34:31], but I have not established prophets in idolatrous nations, for they are called beasts [*behemah*], as it says, 'and many beasts'" [Jonah 4:11].[29]

The viewpoint expressed here, although not consistently maintained in rabbinic literature, is that prophecy is unique to the Jews because they are fully human, whereas the other nations are comparable to beasts.[30]

The portrayal of Jews as human in contrast to the beastly character of non-Jews was greatly accentuated in medieval kabbalistic literature, and especially in the corpus of the *Zohar*.[31] To cite one of the bolder formulations of this idea from the zoharic text:

> These [sefirotic] lights form an image below to establish the image of everything that is contained within Adam, for the inner form of all inner forms is called by this name, and from here [we know that] every form that is contained in this emanation is called "Adam," as it is written, "for you are men" [Ezekiel 34:31], you are called men but not the rest of the nations, for they are idolaters. . . . The spirit that emanates on the rest of the idolatrous nations, which derives from the side that is not holy, is not considered [to be in the category of] humanity [*'adam*]. *Zohar* 1:20b

Building upon the rabbinic exegesis of Ezekiel 34:31, the zoharic authors demonstrate that Israel alone of the nations is called *'adam*, which denotes that ontologically only the Jew is human in the fullest

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[29] *Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 3:22. On the portrayal of non-Jews as animals in rabbinic sources, see Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 33–39.

[30] An important exception to the dichotomy of the human nature of Israel versus the beastly character of the non-Jews is found in *Zohar* 3:147a wherein Israel itself is said to comprise both human (*'adam*) and beast (*behemah*), a point that is derived exegetically from "man and beast you deliver, O Lord" (Ps. 36:6). See also ibid., 125a (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*), but in that context the beastly component of the community of Israel is the "mixed multitude," the *'erev rav*, that journeyed together with the Israelites in the desert on the way out of Egypt (Exod. 12:38). On the use of the symbol of the mixed multitude to denote the inherently flawed members of the Jewish community derived from Lilith, see Giller, *Enlightened Will Shine*, 49 and references given on 145 n97.

[31] *Zohar* 1:28b; 2:25b (*Piqqudin*), 86a, 120a (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*), 275b; 3:125a (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*), 219a, 238b (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*); *Zohar Ḥadash*, 37b, 78c–d. See, however, *Zohar* 3:173b, where *benei 'adam* (in Ps. 31:20) is interpreted as a reference to the worshipers of the stars and the constellations.

and most proper sense.[32] The point is made poignantly in the following passage from the commentary on Ruth that is part of the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* stratum of the *Zohar*:

> Rabbi began [his exposition] and said: "The primal Adam is the soul of the soul, and Eve is the soul. Cain and Abel: Abel is of the same type as Adam and Eve, which is called the holy spirit. Cain is the spirit of impurity of the left, which is called an admixture [*kil'ayim*], that is, an unnecessary combination, the other side, which is not of the type of Adam and Eve. Concerning this [it says] 'You shall not plow with an ox and an ass together' [Deuteronomy 22:10]. Thus you should not enter the holy covenant in the other dominion, [as it says] 'You shall not have the other god before me' [Exodus 20:3]. Adam is in the pattern of that which is above. The 'other god' is the ass and the she-ass, male and female. Accordingly, it is written with regard to the one who enters the holy covenant into the other dominion, 'They have rebelled against the Lord, and thus they have begotten alien children' [Hosea 5:7]. There is no jealousy before the blessed holy One except for that which concerns the holy covenant. The blessed holy One created in man [*'inash*] *YHWH*, which is his holy name, the soul of the soul, and this is called *'adam*." *Zohar Ḥadash* 78c

The radical ontological distinction between the Jews and the other nations is expressed typologically in terms of Cain, representing the left side of impurity, and Abel, being aligned with the right side of holiness. Cain was the offspring of the illicit union of holy and demonic (Eve and the serpent), whereas Abel is the progeny of the sanctioned coupling of the holy pair (Eve and Adam). The presumption here, borne out by many other passages (for example, *Zohar* 1:34b), is that the first Adam, the prototypical human, is the idealized Jew created in the image of God (*ṣelem 'elohim*). The male Jew is forbidden to engage in intercourse with a non-Jewish woman, for to do so would be to "enter the holy covenant into the alien do-

[32] This philological usage is attested in other kabbalistic works contemporary with the composition of the zoharic corpus, including the Hebrew theosophic works of Moses de León. See, for instance, J. H. A. Wijnhoven, "*Sefer ha-Mishkal*: Text and Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brandeis University, 1964), 39–47; *Rabbi Moses de León's Sefer Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, ed. C. Mopsik (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), 14 (in Hebrew).

main," a sexual transgression equivalent to worshipping a false god.[33]

In contrast to the other nations, which are compared to the male and the female ass,[34] the soul of the Jew is the genuinely androgynous human (signified by the term *'adam*), which is linked to the deity by way of numerology, an association that is best appreciated if one bears in mind that when the four letters of the name YHWH are written out in full (*ywd he' waw he'*) their numerical value is 45, the same as the numerical value of the word *'adam*, a theme widely attested in kabbalistic literature. The word *'adam*, therefore, applies most precisely to the Jew, a connotation that is conveyed as well in the Aramaic idiom frequently used in the zoharic corpus, *bar nash*, which contemporary scholars have misleadingly rendered in generic terms as a reference to human beings in an unqualified sense.[35] Dozens of textual examples can illustrate the point, but for my purpose it is sufficient to mention one that relates to the issue of the contrast between the essential impurity of the nations and the purity of Israel:

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[33] In the zoharic polemic against other religions, principally Christianity, theological and sexual themes are intertwined: heretical belief is treated as form of illicit sexuality and illicit sexuality as a form of heretical belief. The common denominator is defilement of the holy covenant by effacing the boundary between sacred and profane. See E. R. Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant: Memory, Forgetfulness, and History in the *Zohar*," *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi*, ed. E. Carlebach, D. S. Myers, and J. Efron (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England for Brandeis University Press, 1998), 214–46.

[34] Later on in this passage, *Zohar Ḥadash* 78c, the verse "Cursed is the one who lives with any beast" (Deut. 27:21), is interpreted as a reference to a Cuthite woman, which is the "body that is from the side of the other impure beast above." It seems that this is a cryptic allusion to a Christian woman. Compare the reference to the Cuthite man in *Zohar* 3:200a, who inquires of Rabbi Eleazar about the seemingly superior power of Balaam in comparison to Moses. I would suggest that in that case as well there is an encoded hint to a Christian, and the figure of Balaam stands typologically for Jesus. The use of the ass to symbolize non-Jews is based on rabbinic sources, which in turn expand on the imagery of Ezekiel 23:20. See Stern, *Jewish Identity*, 37–39. One wonders if implicit in some of the rabbinic texts there is a polemic against Christians who are depicted as a race of asses, an image that is especially related to the issue of sexual promiscuity. See A. Rousselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. F. Pheasant (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 117–18.

[35] In the fuller version of this study, I will discuss in detail the philological issues by analyzing some critical texts.

> Rabbi Eleazar and Rabbi Yeisa were sitting one night and they were engaged in [the study of] Torah. Rabbi Eleazar said: "Come and see: When the blessed holy One will resurrect the dead, all the souls that will be aroused before him will rise in images [*diyoqnin*], in the very image that they had in this world." . . . Rabbi Yeisa said: "We have seen that as long as the person exists in this spirit [of holiness] he is not defiled, but when his soul departs, he is defiled." [Rabbi Eleazar] said to him: "It is certainly this way, for it has been said that when the evil inclination takes the spirit of the person, it defiles him and his body is impure. With respect to the other idolatrous nations, they are impure when they are alive, for their souls are from the side of impurity, and when that impurity is removed from them, their bodies remain without any defilement at all. Therefore, he who is conjoined to a woman from the other idolatrous nations is impure, and the child born to him will receive upon himself the spirit of impurity." *Zohar* 1:131a–b

The Aramaic word that I have rendered as "person" is *bar nash*; my translation is dubious insofar as one might assume that the zoharic author is speaking about human beings in a generic sense. From the context, however, it is obvious that *bar nash* relates specifically to the Jews who are set in contrast to "the rest of the idolatrous nations," a coded reference in zoharic literature to Christians.[36] In a parallel to this zoharic passage, in *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, Moses de León, the thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist who appears to have had the principal role in the composition and redaction of the main body of the *Zohar*, expresses himself in even bolder language, for he remarks without qualification:

> You know that all of the Gentiles [*goyim*] and all of their matters are in the category of the impure. . . . You must know and discern that the Gentiles come from the side of impurity, for the souls of the Gentiles derive from the side of impurity. . . .

[36] See D. Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 240; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 161, 234 n47, 244 n92; E. R. Wolfson, "Woman—The Feminine As Other in Theosophic Kabbalah: Some Philosophical Observations on the Divine Androgyne," in *The Other in Jewish Thought and History: Constructions of Jewish Culture and Identity*, ed. L. Silberstein and R. Cohn (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 189–90; idem, "Re/membering the Covenant," 217.

> [S]ince their cause is impure their bodies will perish and their souls will burn; their root and their source is impure.[37]

Similarly, in another composition, *Mishkan ha-'Edut*, in the context of discussing the transgression of a Jewish man having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman, who is referred to (on the basis of Malachi 2:11) as the "daughter of an alien god," de León contrasts the holiness of Jews and the impurity of other nations:

> Know that the elements of the supernal gradations are divided into several aspects and functions, and in accordance with their secrets and their divisions all the families of the earth are divided below. Israel is amongst them as a unique and holy nation, which persists in its holiness and in the secret of the reality of the blessed holy One that disseminates in them in the secret of the holy forms that are given to them from the power of the river that comes forth without cessation.[38] And just as the branches and the leaves separate as the foxes hold on to them, so the souls of the nations separate from the place of their separation, from the secret of holiness, and the souls separate and fly out from the side of impurity, the side of the other god, in accordance with the impurity of the filth of the serpent, which is in the secret of the male and his female mate.[39]

The souls of the nations stem from the demonic power, but the soul of Israel comes from the mystery of the divine. Needless to say, the texts of the *Zohar* (and all subsequent kabbalistic works influenced by its terminology) will yield a radically different anthropological conception when it is understood that in the vast majority of cases terms such as *bar nash* and *benei nasha'* denote not humanity in general, but the Jewish people in particular. Indeed, inasmuch as *'adam* in the most exact sense denotes the divine image, and the latter is the supernal Israel, it follows that texts that depict the forma-

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[37] *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses de León's Sefer ha-Rimmon*, ed. E. R. Wolfson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 211–12 (Hebrew section). The radical position whereby all of the non-Jewish nations are indiscriminately characterized as impure in relation to the holiness of the Jews is affirmed by other kabbalists from the period of the *Zohar* as well.

[38] In many passages in the *Zohar* and Hebrew theosophic works of de León, this is a standard way of referring to *Yesod*, the ninth of the ten *sefirot*, which corresponds to the phallic potency of God.

[39] MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Quat. 833, fol. 26a. The fox image is based on Song of Songs 2:15.

tion of *'adam* in the terrestrial world should be understood as referring to the embodied configuration of the Jewish soul,[40] a point that is often missed by scholars who apply the anthropocentric orientation of the *Zohar* (or related kabbalistic literature) to human beings in general.[41] From the perspective of the kabbalists, the symbol of primal Adam does not denote "Man" in an unqualified sense, but it refers rather to Israel, which is the ideal human, the Archanthropos, that bears the image of God. Consider, for example, the following passage:

> Rabbi Simeon said: "It is written, 'This is the book of the generations of man' [*zeh sefer toledot 'adam*] [Genesis 5:1]. Did he have a book? Rather it has been established[42] that the blessed holy One showed to primal Adam each generation and its interpreters. How did he show it to him? If you say that he saw by means of the holy spirit that in the future they would come to the world like one who sees through wisdom what will come about in the world, it is not so; rather he saw everything with the eye, and that image that in the future will exist in the world he saw with the eye. What is the explanation? From the day the world was created all the souls that in the future would exist in people [*benei nasha'*] stood before the blessed holy One in that very image with which they would be in the world. In this manner, after all of the righteous ones depart from this world, all of the souls ascend, and the blessed holy One prepares for them a new image in the pattern of that world in which they will be garbed. Thus they all exist before him, and primal Adam saw them with the eye. You might say that after he has seen them they no longer exist in their reality. Come and see: All the words of the blessed holy One actually exist, and they stand before him until they descend into the world. In this manner, it is written 'but both with those who are standing here with us [this day

[40] See, for instance, *Zohar* 1:134b, 104a–b, 186b; 2:75b, 166a–b, 178a; 3:48a, 147a; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 68d, 78c.

[41] See, for example, Scholem, *Major Trends*, 239–43; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 677–722; A. Altmann, "The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism," in *Biblical and Other Studies*, ed. A. Altmann (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963), 208–13; idem, "*Homo Imago Dei* in Jewish and Christian Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 48 (1968): 257–58.

[42] Babylonian Talmud, 'Avodah Zarah 5a; Sanhedrin 38b.

> before the Lord our God and with those who are not with us here this day]' [Deuteronomy 29:14]. It has been established[43] that all of the people [*benei nasha'*] that would in the future be in the world were found there [i.e., at Sinai]." *Zohar* 1:90a–b

Prima facie, one might argue that the author of this passage, basing himself on an earlier rabbinic source, affirms that the souls of all humankind—here depicted as the image (*diyoqna'*, from the Greek *ikon*) of this corporeal world in which the individual is garbed in the manner that the righteous are garbed in the image of the divine realm when they depart from this world—existed before God from the time of the creation of the world and they were shown to Adam. It would seem, accordingly, that at least in this context the term *benei nasha'* does indeed signify humanity at large, which would justify my translation "people." At the end of the citation, however, it becomes evident that this is not the author's intent, for his reference to the appearance at the Sinaitic theophany of the images of all the people that would exist in the future can only denote the Jewish nation. The rabbinic texts upon which these words are based unequivocally assert that the souls of all future Jewish generations were standing at Sinai, but there is no mention of the souls of humanity at large.[44]

Yet the matter is even more clear, for *bar nash* (and its semantic equivalents) in the most precise sense denotes, in most zoharic sources, not only Jews but the circumcised Jewish male. Let me cite as an illustration of this point the following warning to Jewish men not to engage in sexual intercourse with Gentile women:

> It has been established that the verse "Let us make Adam in our image and in our likeness" [Genesis 1:26] refers to the moment of intercourse [*ziwwuga'*], and thus [the words] "image" [*ṣelem*] and "likeness" [*demut*] refer to the union of the two [male and female]. . . . I have found in the "Book of King Solomon" that in the moment of intercourse, the blessed holy One sends an image of a human countenance [*diyoqna' ke-parṣufa' de-var*

[43] *Exodus Rabbah* 28:6; *Tanḥuma'*, Neṣavim, 3; *Pirqei Rabbi 'Eli'ezer*, chapter 41, 97b.

[44] There are rabbinic texts that emphasize the universal dimension of revelation. See, for example, *Mekhilta' de-Rabbi Yishma'el*, ed. H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1970), Yitro, chapter 1, 205, and parallels noted in n. 16 *ad locum*. These sources, however, do not affirm that all of the nations, let alone all the future souls of these nations, were present at the Sinaitic epiphany.

> *nash*], an impression engraved in the image [*reshima' ḥaqiqa' be-ṣolma'*], and it stands over that union. Had permission been given to the eye to see, the person [*bar nash*] would see over his head this image inscribed with the human countenance, for through this image a person is created. . . . With respect to Israel, who are holy, this image [*ṣelem*] is holy and from a holy place it exists within them. The image of those who worship the stars and constellations is from evil matters and from the side of impurity it exists within them. Thus a person should not mix his image with the image of an idolater because the one is holy and the other is impure. *Zohar* 3:104b (cf. 1:219b–220a)

In this passage, the expression *bar nash*, which I have equivocally rendered as "person," specifically denotes the Jewish male who should avoid having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman, for by so doing he would mix the holy and the impure images.[45] To cite a second example that drives the point home even more emphatically,

> Rabbi Hamnuna said, "'Do not let your mouth cause your flesh to sin' [Ecclesiastes 5:5], for a person [*bar nash*] should not let his mouth lead him to an evil thought, which will cause him to sin with respect to the holy flesh upon which is inscribed the holy covenant." *Zohar* 1:8a

Conversing about sexual matters can lead a Jewish man to an improper thought, which in turn can cause him to sin with his penis, the flesh upon which the holy covenant of circumcision is inscribed. Inasmuch as this covenant is restricted to Jewish males, the expression *bar nash* in this passage can only refer to a Jewish man. In a similar vein, we read in another passage,

> "For the Lord God is sun and shield" [Psalms 84:12], "sun and shield" refers to the holy covenant: Just as the sun shines and illumines the world, so the holy covenant shines and illumines the body of the person [*gufa' de-var nash*], and just as the shield is to protect the person [*bar nash*], so too the holy covenant is a shield for the person. . . . He who lies with respect to the holy covenant that is sealed on his flesh is as if he lied with respect

[45] On the doctrine of the image (*ṣelem*) in zoharic kabbalah, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 770–73; Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 261–71.

> to the name of the blessed holy One; the one who lies with respect to the seal of the king lies with respect to the king.
>
> *Zohar* 2:3b

These statements (and dozens more that could have been cited) make no sense unless we render *bar nash* as a reference to the Jewish man. The textual evidence is overwhelming on this point: The status of human being in its most precise sense refers to the circumcised male Jew. As De León writes, "When one receives the holy covenant that is sealed and inscribed on his flesh, then he is included in the category of a human being [*nikhlal bi-khelal 'adam*]."[46] The link between circumcision and the classification *'adam* underlies the zoharic assertion, *u-ma'an 'ihu de-qa'im be-raza' de-'adam ma'an de-natir 'ot qayyama' qadisha'*, which translates literally as "and who is the one who exists in the secret of Adam? The one who guards the sign of the holy covenant" (*Zohar* 2:214b). Only the Jewish man who avoids illicit sexual acts, and thereby protects the covenant incised on his flesh, maintains the status of human being.

To be sure, the zoharic authorship on many occasions (following the line established in classical rabbinic sources, which is based on the textual authority of Scripture) emphasizes that the complete human being entails the union of male and female.[47] The purpose of ritual observance is to raise the feminine aspect of the divine (*Shekhinah*) from a state of degradation and humiliation so that she may be reunited with her masculine consort in holy matrimony, a process that mimics and thereby anticipates the redemption from exile. This conjugal repairing is advantageous to the male as well, for his own sense of completion is dependent on being unified with the female: neither is whole without the other. From this perspective one can speak of gender in zoharic symbolism as a correlative phenomenon: to converse meaningfully about gender we must posit the polarity of male and female. However, as I have noted elsewhere, the ontological structure that informs the concept of gender in the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic writings is that of the male androgyne, meaning that the female is perceived ontologically as a part of the

[46] Text in Wijnhoven, "*Sefer ha-Mishkal*," 131.

[47] The point has been discussed by many scholars too numerous to list here. For a succinct review of the relevant zoharic texts, see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1355–79.

male.[48] That is to say, the condition of separation, which is characteristic of the spiritual nature of exile by the kabbalists, necessitates the heterosexual bonding of male and female, a union that marks the redemption, the restoration of the female to the male and the consequent overcoming of gender dimorphism. For the purpose of this study, my main point is that this conception of gender implies that the ideal *anthropos* is the male Jew who contains within himself his feminine counterpart, just as the original Adam contained within himself his female other.

That the kabbalistic conception of the *anthropos* in its idealized form refers exclusively to the male is implicit in the recurrent aggadic idea that the community of Israel that left Egypt numbered 600,000 adult males.[49] According to the theosophic appropriation of this rabbinic motif, the Israelite nation in the mundane sphere corresponds to the sixth of the ten divine emanations, the central *sefirah* of *Tif'eret*, which represents the balance between the left side of severity and the right side of grace. The contextualization of the 600,000 Israelite men in this aspect of the Godhead signifies the divine status of the Jewish males, the "holy sons" of God who are bound to the body of the king,[50] for they represent the totality of the community of Israel, which encompasses both men and women, just as the attribute of *Tif'eret* comprises left and right, severity and grace (*Zohar* 1:2b, 22a; 2:2b, 195a).

To state the matter in stark but not exaggerated terms: The anthropological perspective articulated in the *Zohar* is that the soul of Israel is most fully manifest in the circumcised male body and derives from divine potencies, whereas the soul of idolatrous nations

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[48] Wolfson, "Woman—The Feminine As Other," 166–204; idem, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), 79–121; idem, "*Tiqqun ha-Shekhinah*: Redemption and the Overcoming of Gender Dimorphism in the Messianic Kabbalah of Moses Ḥayyim Luzzatto," *History of Religions* 36 (1997): 289–332; idem, "Eunuchs Who Keep the Sabbath: Becoming Male and the Ascetic Ideal in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Mysticism," in *Becoming Male in the Middle Ages*, ed. J. J. Cohen and B. Wheeler (New York: Garland, 1997), 151–85; idem, "Constructions of the Feminine in the Sabbatian Theology of Abraham Cardoso, with a Critical Edition of *Derush ha-Shekhinah*," *Kabbalah: A Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 3 (1998): 11–143.

[49] *Song of Songs Rabbah* 3:17, 6:23; *Numbers Rabbah* 11:3. In some sources, it is specified that the minimum age to be included in this census was twenty years old.

[50] *Zohar* 1:162a (*Sitrei Torah*), 216a, 223b; 2:86a.

derives from demonic forces. The contrast is cast exegetically in terms of the verse "God said, 'Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind'" (Genesis 1:24): The "living creature," *nefesh ḥayyah*, refers to Israel, for they embody the soul that emanates from the supernal, holy creature, i.e., the *Shekhinah*, whereas the rest of the idolatrous nations are the "cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind," for they originate in the demonic foreskin (*Zohar* 1:47a). According to another passage, the souls of the nations are "dried wood upon which no light shines," and thus "they remain still and they do not shake for they have no Torah." By contrast, Jewish souls are compared to the burning light of a candle that flickers to every side, a sign of their vitality and dynamism (*Zohar* 3:219a). Thus the verse "the soul of man [*nishmat 'adam*] is the lamp of the Lord" (Proverbs 20:27) is applied solely to the Jews for they alone are called *'adam* (based on the rabbinic reading of Ezekiel 34:31). So noxious is the impurity of the non-Jew that in several passages the zoharic authorship insists that the Jew must avoid all contact with living non-Jews. There is an essential difference between the Jew and the non-Jew: The soul of the non-Jew is intrinsically impure since his soul derives from the demonic realm, and thus he can transmit this impurity only through his soul when he is alive; the Jew, by contrast, is intrinsically holy since his soul derives from the divine realm, and thus he transmits impurity only through the body after the soul separates from it at death.[51] According to another passage, which may represent a somewhat later interpolation into the zoharic text,[52] the children of Israel are commanded not to eat the thigh muscle (*gid ha-nasheh*) for it represents the demonic force, but the idolatrous nations can consume this part of the animal since their nature is innately demonic.[53]

It might be objected that the zoharic portrayal of the idolatrous

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[51] See *Zohar* 1:47a, 131a, 220a; 2:21b; 3:25b, 37a, 104b, 105b, 119a, 259b; *Zohar Ḥadash*, 78d; *Book of the Pomegranate*, 211–12.

[52] See A. Altmann, "On the Question of the Authorship of the Book *Ta'amey ha-Mitzwoth*," *Kiryat Sefer* 40 (1965): 275 (in Hebrew).

[53] *Zohar* 1:170b. Cf. *Tiqqunei Zohar* 56, 91a; J. Hecker, "Each Man Ate an Angel's Meal: Eating and Embodiment in the *Zohar*" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1996), 109–66.

nations is simply an elaboration of a much earlier tradition, and without any immediate application. However, it is clear that the medieval authors radically altered the tradition in light of their own social and theological context.[54] For example, the following remark (attributed to Simeon ben Yoḥai) comes from an older work of rabbinic scriptural exegesis: "The blessed holy One said to Israel, 'I am God for all the inhabitants of the world, but I have not assigned my name except to you. I am not called the god of those who worship the stars and constellations, but the God of Israel.'"[55] Here, a universalist posture is presupposed insofar as the God of Israel is recognized as the God of all people; yet particularism immediately qualifies that universalism because the divine name is given only to Jews. Hence, the God of Israel (*'elohei yisra'el*) is sharply contrasted with the god of the idolaters. When the medieval zoharic circle appropriates this locution, it imposes a fundamental change. The issue of idolatry no longer refers to actual astral worship, as it did in the rabbinic statement, but now connotes a false theistic faith, which can only point to Christianity.[56] The true meaning of the worship of stars and constellations is suggested in the following passage:

> Thus the blessed holy One warned Israel to be holy, as it is written, "You shall be holy for I am holy" [Leviticus 11:44]. What is [the import of the word] "I"? This refers to the blessed holy One, the holy heavenly kingship [*malkhut shamayim qadisha'*]. The other kingship [*malkhuta' 'aḥra'*] of the nations who worship the stars and constellations is called "the other" [*'aḥer*], as it is written, "You shall not bow down to the other god [*'el 'aḥer*],

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[54] Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 244 n92, offers several other examples of the zoharic transformation of classical rabbinic passages into a polemic with the Christianity contemporary to the time of the composition of the medieval kabbalistic anthology.

[55] *Exodus Rabbah* 29:4.

[56] Following the view of a number of medieval halakhic authorities, including Maimonides, the kabbalists of the zoharic circle maintained that Christianity is idolatry. See above, n. 37. Although Islam is treated as a demonic force in some passages in the *Zohar*, especially in the later strata of *Ra'aya' Meheimna'* and *Tiqqunei Zohar* (see discussion above, n. 14), for the most part this religion is not considered idolatrous, a position that is also affirmed by Maimonides. The theological ruling is reflective of the broader cultural symbiosis between Judaism and Islam in the early Middle Ages. For a succinct review of this recurrent attitude in the historiographic portrait of medieval Jewish society, see D. Berger, "Judaism and General Culture in Medieval and Early Modern Times," in *Judaism's Encounter With Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration*, ed. J. J. Schacter (Northvale: Jason Aronson Inc., 1997), 61–84.

> for the name of the Lord is the jealous one" [Exodus 34:14]. Come and see: The sovereignty of the "I" is in this world and in the world-to-come, and everything depends upon it. The sovereignty of the other, the side of impurity, the other side, is in this world, and it has nothing of the world-to-come. Therefore, he who cleaves to this "I" has a portion in this world and in the world-to-come, and he who cleaves to the other is destroyed in this world and he has no portion in the world-to-come, but he has a portion in the world of impurity on account of the other kingship of the nations who worship the stars and constellations. *Zohar* 1:204b

Reversing a standard trope of medieval Christian polemic against the Jews that contrasted the otherworldly spirituality of Christianity with the thisworldly orientation of Judaism, the zoharic authorship instead associates Christianity with the power of impurity in this world. By contrast, Jews alone know the path of holiness that leads to eschatological reward. Far from being people only of the letter of the law, which was long associated with carnality in Christian attacks on Judaism, the zoharic text presents the Jews alone as having access to the spiritual realm—not at the expense of the physical world, but in conjunction with it. In terms of the more specific symbolic language employed in the aforecited text, the holiness of Judaism depends on cleaving to the aspect of God referred to as "I," i.e., the kingdom of heaven, *malkhut shamayim*, which is a technical designation of the tenth of the sefirotic emanations, *Malkhut* or *Shekhinah*, the immanence of God in creation.[57] The dual portion of Israel, this world and the world-to-come, is linked to the role of *Shekhinah* as kingdom of heaven, which signifies her capacity to exercise providential care over the universe. Conversely, idol worship consists of cleaving to the other god, the foreign dominion of demonic kingship, the other side (*siṭra' 'aḥra'*). If one cleaves to *Shekhinah*, *malkhut shamayim*, one attains a portion in the world-to-come, but if one cleaves to the "other kingship," *malkhuta' 'aḥra'*, one is destroyed in this world and has no portion in the world-to-come.

Kabbalists of the zoharic fraternity portrayed Christianity as the

[57] Scholem, *Major Trends*, 216, explains that the attribution of the first-person pronoun to *Shekhinah*, the last of the ten *sefirot*, signifies that this stage of the emanative process is characterized as the "true individuation in which God as a person says 'I' to Himself."

idolatrous religion that worships the demonic other side. It is possible that the zoharic authors have set up an analogy between Judaism and Christianity along the following lines: The holy nation cleaves to the masculine potency of God, designated as "heaven" (*shamayim*), through the *Shekhinah*, which is also called *malkhut*; the idolatrous nations are conjoined to the masculine potency of the other god through the feminine presence of the demonic realm, *malkhuta' 'aḥra'*. Although the names Samael and Lilith are not mentioned explicitly in the aforecited zoharic passage, from parallel texts it may be concluded that these terms can be applied appropriately to the masculine and feminine forces of impurity.[58] I surmise that the "other god" and the foreign "kingship" stand respectively for Jesus and Mary, the pair on the left side of impurity that corresponds to *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut* on the right side of holiness.[59] Even if we were to bracket this dimension of the Jewish-Christian polemic, it is evident that when the zoharic authors contrast the holy souls of Israel with the impure souls of the idolatrous nations, the distinction that is really being made is between Jews and Christians in the European landscape of the Jewish Middle Ages. Christians cleave to the demonic other side, the god who is foreign, for the spiritual root of Christianity is Esau or Edom, the nation to which is assigned the evil force of Samael and Lilith. As I have already intimated, the tropological intent of the kabbalistic polemic can only be fully appreciated if one bears in mind that, in zoharic literature, the theological dispute with the idolatrous nature of Christianity cannot be sepa-

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[58] *Zohar* 1:148a–b (*Sitrei Torah*); see Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 376–79, 462, 467–68.

[59] The decoding of Samael as a symbolic reference to Jesus is enhanced by the adaptation on the part of the zoharic kabbalists of the aggadic theme that Samael is the archon of Esau, which is identified as the Christian empire. See *Midrash Tanḥuma'*, Wayyishlaḥ, 8; *Zohar* 1:146a, 170a; 2:11a, 111a, 163b; 3:124a (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*), 199b, 243a (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*), 246b (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*), 248a (*Ra'aya' Meheimna'*); *Zohar Ḥadash*, 23d (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*), 47a (*Midrash ha-Ne'elam*); *Tiqqunei Zohar*, sec. 69, 105a; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 464. On the association of Satan or the "other god" and Jesus, see Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 234 n47 and 244 n92. Many of the images that depict Lilith—for example, the mother of the mixed multitude (*Zohar* 1:27b), the estranged woman identified as Se'eir (*Zohar* 1:172b), the woman of harlotry (*Zohar* 2:148b), and the evil maidservant (*Zohar* 3:273a)—suggest a clandestine reference to Mary. Worthy of further analysis are the implications of the congruence between descriptions of *Shekhinah* and Lilith on the Zoharic elaboration of the relationship between Synagogue and Church. On the complex relationship between *Shekhinah* and Lilith, see Scholem, *On the Mystical Shape*, 189–92; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 382–85, 468–69.

rated from the moral struggle with sexual temptation, expressed as the Jewish man's desire to commit adultery with a Christian woman.[60]

III

By way of summary, we may conclude that the kabbalistic perspective, which may be culled from the zoharic text, accords special status to the Jewish people, who alone are endowed with a soul divine in nature; thus only to Jews is the term "human" accurately applied. By implication non-Jews are accorded an inferior status. The ethnocentric anthropology has exerted a major influence on kabbalists, pietists, and rabbinic preachers through the generations. What is especially noteworthy is that this orientation has figured prominently in writings that scholars have classified under the rubric of kabbalistic ethics, for example, *Re'shit Ḥokhmah* of Elijah de Vidas,[61] *Shenei Luḥot ha-Berit* of Isaiah Horowitz,[62] and *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim* of Ḥayyim of Volozhin.[63] The persistence of the ethnocentrism is evident even in the work of Judah Loew of Prague, the towering rabbinic figure of the sixteenth century known as Maharal. Despite the effort on the part of Maharal to accord a divine status to all people, on the basis of the belief that human beings without qualification bear God's image,[64] in the end he, too, embraces an anthropological ideal that distinguishes in an essential way between Israel and the nations. The designation *'adam* applies most properly

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[60] See Wolfson, "Re/membering the Covenant," 221–22.

[61] *Re'shit Ḥokhmah ha-Shalem*, 3 vols. (Jerusalem: 'Or ha-Musar, 1984), Haqdamah 1:4; *Sha'ar ha-Yir'ah*, chapter 4, 1:92.

[62] *Shenei Luḥot ha-Berit ha-Shalem*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Yad Ramha Institute, 1992–97), 1:223–24.

[63] The kabbalistic anthropology adopted by Rabbi Ḥayyim in *Nefesh ha-Ḥayyim* is thoroughly ethnocentric in its orientation: The image of God relates to man's capacity to influence cosmic events, but this is a capacity that is realized only by Jews through performance of ritual commandments, especially study of Torah. See N. Lamm, *Torah Lishmah: Torah for Torah's Sake in the Works of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin and His Contemporaries* (Hoboken: Ktav, 1989), 73–87. For a universalistic reading of Ḥayyim of Volozhin's anthropology, see E. Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, trans. G. D. Mole (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 151–67.

[64] See, for example, Judah Loew of Prague, *Be'er ha-Golah* (Benei Beraq: 1980), 121: "This image comprises all people, Israel and the nations, everyone who walks upright has the divine image."

to the Jewish people, for only they truly possess the image of God in the most perfect sense since they alone have a divine soul that allows them to attain states of consciousness wherein spirit is separated from body.[65]

The price to be paid for the mystical conception of the Jewish people as the singular incarnation of the divine image is the ontological division separating Jews and other religious or ethnic cultures, which in both the medieval and modern context has led to a demonization of the cultural other. One might argue, however, that kabbalistic sources yield the possibility that this state of affairs will be overcome in a messianic future when the reintegration of all things back to the divine will signal the "othering of the other," i.e., the unification of opposites results in restoring the "other" to its original place so that it is no longer other, a de-othering[66] whereby the other becomes its other and thus remains the same. The monistic ontology undermines the logical antinomies, good versus evil, light versus dark, right versus left, male versus female. Prior to emanation of the various worlds, in the infinite, opposites are identical.[67] The ontological principle underlies the cosmological secret, linked exegetically in the *Zohar* to the verse "Who can bring forth a pure thing out of an unclean one, but the One" (Job 14:4): The pure comes forth from what is impure, for what was initially impure is purified in the manner of the ashes (*'efer*) that are turned into dust (*'afar*) by means of the raging fire (*Zohar* 2:237a–b). That the impure can become pure is possible for at root the pure and impure are not different; indeed, herein all opposites are the same.

As a consequence of this coincidence of opposites must not the ontological distinction between Jew and non-Jew also be transcended? If the impediment to a kabbalistic ethic is the xenophobic portrayal of the Gentile as asinine in contrast to the angelic Israel, then it follows that the possibility of genuine social reform emerging from kabbalistic symbolism would be linked to the metaphysical in-

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[65] Judah Loew of Prague, *Gevurot ha-Shem* (London: 1954), chapter 66, 311–12; *Tif'eret Yisra'el*, ed. H. Pardes (Tel-Aviv: Yad Mordechai, 1979), chapter 1, 91–92; *Derekh Ḥayyim*, ed. H. Pardes (Jerusalem: Yad Mordechai, 1993), 354–55; *Neṣaḥ Yisra'el*, ed. J. Hartman (Jerusalem: Jerusalem Institute, 1997), chapter 11, 304–5.

[66] I am grateful to Sheila Delany for this locution.

[67] *Zohar* 3:80b. Citation and analysis of the text may be found in Wolfson, "Woman—The Feminine As Other," 183–184.

sight regarding the *coincidentia oppositorum* within the uppermost aspect of the Godhead. In this state of mind, moreover, the polarities that shape the contours of the world in the everyday consciousness of the kabbalist are surpassed.[68] The eliciting of ethics by scholars from the kabbalistic teaching may profitably be linked to the utopian vision articulated by kabbalists themselves, a vision predicated on a radical transposition of the axiological framework of priestly codes and rabbinic halakhah so that there is no longer any ontological difference between Jew and non-Jew. For this transposition to occur, however, the Torah will have to realize its universal potentiality as moral imperative binding on all people without discrimination; this can only happen at the point when the law exceeds the limits of its own ritualistic prescriptions. The ethical ideal demands the equality of all people before the law, a view that stands in striking contrast to the repeated emphasis in kabbalistic tradition on the unbridgeable gap separating Israel and the nations. Venturing beyond the polarity of opposites is part of the rich eschatological legacy of the kabbalah, which is most fully expressed in effacing the difference between holy and impure, permissible and forbidden.[69] When the other can be truly felt as the same, then Jacob is Edom and Israel *'adam.*

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[68] In the monograph that will include an expanded version of this article, I will enter into a much more detailed discussion of the ontological transformation (or what I have called the "othering of the other") occasioned by the messianic age, a breaking down of the barrier between holy and impure that is anticipated in the present by the phenomenon of the conversion of the non-Jew.

[69] See G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), 19–24, 49–141; idem, "Der Nihilismus als religiöses Phänomen," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 43 (1974): 1–50, especially 27–35.