

The Messiah of the Zohar: On R. Simeon bar Yohai as a Messianic Figure

Gershom Scholem maintains that the history of the Kabbala ought to be divided into two periods, each distinguished by a different attitude toward the idea of redemption.¹ In the first period, up to the expulsion from Spain, historical and national redemption was not in the forefront of Kabbalistic concerns. “The medieval Kabbalists,” Scholem writes, believed more in “a personal, mystical redemption which signified the individual’s escape from history to a time before history” than in a messianic hope focused on the end of days.² The Lurianic Kabbala, on the other hand, is concerned primarily with cosmic *tikkun* (restoration, perfection), and consequently also with national *tikkun*, a process that is to culminate at the end of days.³ According to Scholem, the *Zohar*’s approach does not differ in this regard from that of the medieval Kabbalists.⁴ He also maintains that the Messiah in classical Kabbala—though this would not be true of Shabbateanism—has no active role to play in effecting the *tikkun*, but merely symbolizes by his advent the end of a process that took place before his arrival.⁵

Scholem’s distinctions are basically correct. In this chapter, however, I wish to show that their validity must be restricted to only part of the literature of classical Kabbala. It has become apparent to me after further study that the *Zohar* contains two strata which must, for our purposes, be distinguished from one another: that comprising the majority of the Zoharic material, and that of the *Idrot*.⁶ Scholem’s assertions hold for the former; I maintain, however, that the concern of the latter is primarily messianic. I shall try to prove that the messianic element within the *Idrot* already bears within itself the seeds of later Kabbalistic thought: we find in it an interesting and unique amalgam of mystical redemption and cosmic *tikkun* which signifies not the return of the world to what it once had been, but a messianic process establishing an unprecedented state. I shall also try to show that the *Idra* presents a messianic figure who is actively engaged in the process of the world’s *tikkun*. While he is not the

Messiah himself—the latter will come only after the *tikkun*—it is he who paves the way for redemption and makes it possible. This figure is the literary persona of R. Simeon bar Yohai.

Accordingly, two strata of ideas must be distinguished in the *Zohar*: the *Idra* literature—the more profound stratum—and the rest of the book (I won't deal in this chapter with the *Ra'aya Meheimana* and the *Tikkunei Zohar*, which are later additions to the *Zohar*). This disparity in profoundness is not merely a matter of my own assessment; the text itself announces it explicitly and with great emphasis in its ceremonious description of the convening of *Idra Rabba*, the "great assembly" (*Zohar*, III, 127b–128a). The earlier disclosures, elsewhere in the *Zohar*, are referred to here as being of a lower grade. The text speaks of a need for warnings about the preservation of secrecy; for proper understanding, solemn oaths, and careful selection of the participants involved; and of much hesitation before disclosing the secrets of the *Idra*. None of this is to be found in other parts of the *Zohar*.

The Messiah in the Main Body of the Zohar

The Messiah is richly and variously described in the main body of the *Zohar*, as well as in the *Idrot*. The spirit of apocalypse hovers over most of those passages. The author of the *Zohar* made use of the Jewish apocalyptic literature, casting it in his own style, developing it in his own unique way, and bringing it into line with events of his day. This can be seen, for example, in the long passage on the Torah portion of *Shemot* (II, 7b–10a) and in many other places as well.⁷ While these passages did not spring from a specifically Kabbalistic interest, this did not prevent the Kabbalist from interweaving them with matter of mystical concern, as, for example, in the passage in the *Zohar Hadash* on the Torah portion of *Balak* (55b–56c). Sometimes Kabbalistic material is used as a basis for calculating the advent of the End of Days.⁸ However, the details of the *Zohar's* apocalyptic teachings are beyond the scope of this essay.

The Kabbalistic-messianic idea most common in the main body of the *Zohar* is that of the harmony that will prevail among the *sefirot* after the coming of the Messiah, and especially that of the unification and coupling that will take place between the *sefirot* of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*. This unification, it should be stressed, is really a reunification, a return to what had been the normal situation before its disruption by the destruction of the sanctuary and the exile of the people, and it shall in no way be viewed as a culmination of the cosmic

process of Creation. Furthermore, this ideal situation does not differ in essence from what is attainable even in exile through observance of the *Torah's* injunctions. While it may be argued that the cosmic erotic union that is to take place with the advent of redemption will be fuller or more complete than that which can be achieved in exile, it would nevertheless appear that the object of the erotic unions achieved by the performance of such *mitsvot* as the recitation of *Shema'*, putting on phylacteries and marital relations on the Sabbath eve is not merely to hasten the advent of the Messiah. In the passages of the *Zohar* that deal with the *mitsvot*, the author seems to regard them as being of intrinsic worth.

The Messiah himself has no part in the Kabbalistic *tikkun*. As we have noted, his advent merely symbolizes the accomplishment of the *tikkun*. Kabbalistic symbolism is sometimes attached to him, but here, too, it is his passivity that is emphasized. The Messiah (i.e., the son of David) is identified primarily with the *sefira* of *Malkhut*, to which he bears a resemblance precisely on account of his humble status, as described by the prophet Zechariah (IV:9): "Humble, riding on an ass"; for *Malkhut*, too, is humble and "has nothing of its own" (*Zohar*, I, 238a). Even when the *Zohar* ascribes to the Messiah attributes of the *sefira* of *Yesod*, which is more active, it stresses their passive aspect: The Messiah is indeed righteous, an attribute associated with *Yesod*, but he is redeemed rather than redeemer, in accord with a reading of that same verse in Zechariah: "righteous and saved is he."⁹

Another element related to the figure of the Messiah in the main body of the *Zohar* is that of the new Torah and the profound mode of understanding that is to be revealed through him. This is described extensively in III, 164b, where it is developed on the basis of the *Otiot de-Rabbi Akiva*.¹⁰ This mode of understanding is sometimes described as a feature of the Kabbalistic-ontological harmony (I, 103b), which takes on a different meaning in the *Idra*. The idea that the messianic era is one of mystical comprehension is quite common in medieval Jewish thought and has clear connections with Christianity. This idea does not exclude national-historical redemption but often relegates it to an instrumental level, where it is seen as a means for achieving the mystical-cognitive objective.¹¹ The *Zohar*, however, appears to view these various elements as different aspects of the same thing, and so, given the great diversity inherent in the *Zohar's* symbolic mode of thought, a hierarchical ranking of this kind would be inapplicable.

The Idra as a Messianic Composition and R. Simeon bar Yohai as a Messianic Figure

Since the *Idra* is explicitly concerned with theosophy, the mystery of the Godhead, an attempt to read the work as a messianic text requires some justification. Although the ultimate justification of the attempt is its success, which I leave to the reader to judge, I believe that the *Idra* itself contains explicit indications of its messianic character. The convening of the *Idra* is viewed in the *Zohar* as a singular event, greater even than the assembly of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai for the giving of the Torah, an event the like of which will not occur again until the coming of the Messiah.¹² The messianic character of the occasion is so evident to R. Simeon that he even expresses his astonishment at the absence of the prophet Elijah, after which Elijah does appear and offers an apology (III, 144b).

His astonishment makes sense only if the *Idra* is taken as an event presaging the coming of the Messiah, for Elijah's role in that stage of the nation's history has been celebrated in Jewish literature ever since it was first announced by the prophet Malachi (iii:23). At the same time, it is also evident that what is described here is not the coming of the Messiah himself, but only a stage preparatory to his advent. R. Simeon, the messianic figure here, certainly cannot be confused with the Messiah himself; he merely proclaims the latter's coming and sustains the world until his arrival. This becomes more clear if we bear in mind that R. Simeon died more than a thousand years before the *Zohar* was written, so that its author could not have attributed any more to him than the sustenance of the nation in exile. Even his casting in the role of herald of the redemption was no simple matter. We must recall, however, that in the consciousness of the author of the *Zohar*, the historical period of R. Simeon's actual lifetime merged without a break into the period of the book's composition (or its "disclosure at the end of days"). The only way to make sense of the merger of these two eras so separated by time is to conclude that the author of the *Zohar* regarded his own activity as messianic and that he identified fully with his R. Simeon. It may be that it is the messianic nature of his activity that accounts for his choice of R. Simeon as the hero of the *Zohar*, even though he is not among the Talmud's more mystical personalities. It is precisely in the Jewish apocalyptic literature that R. Simeon, the zealot known for his rebellion against Rome, his scathing denunciations of the gentile nations, and his forthright statements concerning the redemption of Israel,¹³ became a central figure.¹⁴

Another reason for the *Zohar's* selection of precisely this tannaitic figure was his suitability for portrayal as the righteous man, who maintains the world (with this conception we shall deal below). In the rabbinic literature R. Simeon speaks of himself as being a unique figure,¹⁵ the single-handed protector of his contemporaries, able, together with his son Eleazar and Jotham ben Uziah, to "bring about the exemption of the whole world from judgement . . . from the day of Creation until the world's end."¹⁶ Another version found in the Midrash speaks specifically of the advent of the "King Messiah," and not simply the "world's end," as delimiting the time until which R. Simeon can effectively intercede with heaven.¹⁷ What rabbinical literature had described R. Simeon as being able to do is elaborated in the *Zohar* and brought to fruition, it appears, in the pre-Messiah event which is *Idra Rabba*. At this gathering, R. Simeon actualizes his ability and becomes a truly messianic figure, thereby turning the *Idra* into a messianic event and a messianic composition.

These statements by the rabbis about R. Simeon are developed differently elsewhere in the *Zohar*, in another clearly messianic passage (I, 4a-b). There R. Simeon, Ahiah of Shiloh and Hezekiah King of Judea (who appears in Sanhedrin 99a as a messianic personage) are described as heads of academies (yeshivas) of learning in the world to come. R. Simeon is concerned there with the mystery of redemption and the Messiah. God himself attends these three academies, and even lesser academies to learn that teaching, and by virtue of this study the Messiah is "crowned and adorned."

Here is another passage that explains the messianic character of the *Idra*:

Mark now, in future generations the Torah will be forgotten, the wise of heart will assemble in the holy *Idra*, and there will be none to close and open.¹⁸ Alas for that generation! There will be no generation like the present until the Messiah comes and knowledge will be diffused throughout the world, as it is written: "For all of them, from the least of them to the greatest, shall heed me." [Jer. xxxi:34] (III, 58a)

This passage, I believe, reflects the negative opinion that the author of the *Zohar* had of his own generation (a view expressed frequently in the *Zohar*). At the same time, however, he regards the *Idra*, which he perhaps identifies with his own activity and that of his circle, as a turning point. Henceforth, until the generation of the Messiah, there will not be another generation as bad as his own, as bad, that is, as the generation that preceded the gathering of sages

which is the *Idra*. The whole passage is clearly influenced by a passage from the Talmud, whose exposition here resembles that of the statements around which the image of R. Simeon coalesced; that is, statements by the rabbis referring to the generation that came after the destruction of the Temple are read as though they referred to the last generation of the *Zohar's* composition—and given messianic significance. The passage in question occurs in Tractate Shabbat (138b):

Our Rabbis taught: When our Masters entered the vineyard at Javneh they said: The Torah is destined to be forgotten in Israel. . . A woman is destined to take a loaf of *truma* (heave-offering) and go about in the synagogues and academies to know whether it is ritually unclean or clean and none will know. . . R. Simeon bar Yohai said: "Heaven forbid that the Torah be forgotten in Israel, for it is said: "for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed." [Deut. xxxi:21]

The meeting of the Sanhedrin at the vineyard in Yavne, at which the rabbis foresaw the woes that were in store for Israel (the "birth-pangs of the Messiah"), was thus transformed in the *Zohar* into the convention of the "holy *Idra*," whose purpose is to remedy that situation.¹⁹ The meeting of the Sanhedrin took place shortly after the destruction of the Temple, while that in the *Zohar* takes place in the generation before the redemption—that of the *Zohar's* own composition. That this did not prevent the *Zohar* from naming R. Simeon and his companions as the conveners of the gathering is an indication of the depth of its author's identification with his literary hero. A similar reference of the Sanhedrin's Yavne session to an eschatological vision is already to be found in the Midrash:

The Holy One blessed be He will sit with the righteous sitting before Him as on a threshing floor, like that of Ahab: "The king of Israel and King Jehoshaphat of Judah were seated on their thrones, arrayed in their robes, in the threshing floor" [I Kings xxii:10]. Were they then sitting in a threshing floor? Surely what is intended is as we have learned in a Mishnah (Sanhedrin iv:3): "The Sanhedrin were seated in the formation of a semi-circular threshing floor." (Leviticus Rabba xi:8)

It is quite conceivable that the *Zohar's* author was also influenced by this Midrash. The choice of the term "*idra*" may well allude to the Sanhedrin and its seating arrangement, for the word

means “threshing floor,”²⁰ and it appears in the sources in reference to the Sanhedrin.²¹ Its very sound calls up possible associations with the word *sanhedrin*. The use of the designation “kerem” (vineyard) for the Sanhedrin’s session at Yavne (*kerem d’Yavne*) may also have had some small part in determining the choice, for “idra”—threshing floor—belongs to the same semantic realm. It is apparently to this vineyard that the beginning of *Idra Rabba* refers in its statement that “the reapers of the field are few, and only at the edge of the vineyard” (III, 127b). The entire opening of *Idra Rabba*, with its rueful description of the state of the times which sets the context for the gathering, parallels the passage I have analyzed here. It should be recalled, too, that Maimonides viewed the convening of the Sanhedrin as a precondition for redemption.

A similar complaint about the degenerate state of the people in the period of exile is attributed by Midrash ha-Ne’elam (*Zohar Hadash*, 6a) to none other than R. Akiva. It is his pupils, as we shall see below, who represent the state of *yir’a*, of worshipping God out of fear and respect, which R. Simeon seeks to remedy by the *Idra*. While in the Talmud R. Simeon is both actually and spiritually R. Akiva’s pupil, in the *Zohar* he is, as it were, the reformer.

At the end of *Idra Rabba* there is a similar reverse parallelism between the R. Simeon of the Talmud and the messianic R. Simeon of the *Idra*. After the participants at the *Idra* leave the gathering, a fine aroma arises wherever they look, regarding which R. Simeon says: “The world is being blessed because of us” (III, 144b). This suggests a comparison with the talmudic description of the emergence of R. Simeon and his son from the cave, after which, it is related, “whatever they cast their eyes upon was immediately burned up. Thereupon a Heavenly Echo came forth and said to them: ‘Have you come out to destroy My world? Get back to your cave!’” (*Shabbat* 33b; the session of the Sanhedrin at Yavne is mentioned on the same page). That, it would seem, is the difference between the period marking the beginning of the exile and the messianic End of Days.

The messianic significance of the *Idra* is also suggested by another passage in the *Zohar*. This passage is of great importance for establishing the messianic character of the *Idra* both because it comes from a section in the *Zohar* which is expressly and openly messianic and because it may be considered an early version of *Idra Rabba*. The idea of the *Idra* is much simpler here than in its final development in the *Idra Rabba*; with the realization that this is an earlier version of the same work, however, it will be easier to identify the messianic elements that are more subtly present in the later version. The passage (II, 9a–9b), which is part of a larger eschatological discourse,

appears after an exposition of the verse: "I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field: Do not wake or rouse love until it pleases" (Song of Songs ii:7). In the *Zohar's* interpretation, "Love" is *Hesed*, God's love with which he will redeem Knesset Israel. This attribute will only awaken in a generation worthy of it, and the adjuration in the verse is a warning against trying to hasten the end, which would be to awaken love—and redemption—prematurely.²² The *Zohar* concludes its commentary with the words: "Happy is he who will be worthy to be of that generation, happy is he in this world and happy is he in the world to come." It is at this point that the passage which I take to be an early version of *Idra Rabba* begins: "R. Simeon lifted up his hands in prayer to the Holy One blessed be He and prayed. When he had finished his prayer, R. Eleazar his son and R. Abba came and seated themselves before him."

The *Zohar* then relates how the three sages see lightning strike the waters of the Sea of Tiberias. They interpret this, following the myth recounted in the Talmud (Berakhot 59a), as tears shed by God out of sorrow for his children who are in exile. Then, says the *Zohar*, "R. Simeon wept, and his companions too." After that R. Simeon commences to speak:

"We have been awakened in the secrets of the letters of the Holy Name,²³ in the mystery of His awakening to His sons,²⁴ but now I must disclose what no one else has been allowed to disclose. I may do this because the merit of this generation upholds the world until the Messiah shall come." R. Simeon then said to R. Eleazar his son and to R. Abba: "Rise in your places!" R. Eleazar and R. Abba rose. R. Simeon wept once again and said: "Who can bear what I have seen? The Exile will be protracted. Who will be able to endure?" Then he too rose and said: "O Lord our God! Lords other than You possessed us, but only Your name shall we utter" (Isaiah xxvi:13). This verse has already been interpreted,²⁵ but it contains the supreme mystery of faith [i.e., about the world of the divine *sefirot*]. This "O Lord our God" is the beginning of supernal mysteries,²⁶ a place²⁷ [i.e., a spiritual entity] whence emanate all the shining lights. . ."

R. Simeon then begins to expound at length on the mystery of the Godhead and on the situation of the *sefirot* during the history and exiles of the Jewish people, and finally, from an examination of the letters of the Tetragrammaton in combination with other calculations, determines the date of the End of Days (II, 9a–10b). The End would occur in several stages. The first, according to my calculations, was

to come in 1334.²⁸ But a generation or two before the beginning of redemption, in 1286, "distress will befall Israel." The *Zohar's* composition began in that year, or shortly thereafter.²⁹ The period of distress coincides remarkably with the description in the passage cited above (III, 28a) of the wicked "last generation" during which the sages come together in the holy *Idra* to sustain the world until the advent of the Messiah. This definitely confirms the conception of the *Idra* as an event of messianic significance, as well as the identification of the gathering with the activity of the author of the *Zohar* himself.

Let us now compare this passage (II, 9) with *Idra Rabba* to prove my contention that it constitutes an early version of the latter. First of all, it should be noted that the description here is of a solemn event laden with pathos. This alone calls to mind *Idra Rabba*, though in *Idra Rabba* the aspect of ceremony is of course much more elaborate, just as all the elements found here are developed further there. In the earlier passages the occasion begins with a prayer and an oath: "R. Simeon lifted up his hands in prayer to the Holy One blessed be He." At the opening of *Idra Rabba*, too, we find that "R. Simeon prayed. . ." (III, 127b), while the oath is expanded considerably and dramatically described, with all the participants taking part. A statement similar to the first quoted above serves as the solemn opening of another passage, it too is one of the most profound in the *Zohar*, as well: "R. Simeon said: I raise up my hands in prayer [swearing that] that when the Most High Supreme Will. . ." This passage appears in several places in the *Zohar*,³⁰ but should be regarded as part of the *Idra*, as evidenced by the fact that Kabbalists who lived before the invention of printing referred to it by the name "*Idra*."³¹ As used in the *Zohar*, this opening statement expresses on the one hand an obligation to reveal the loftiest secrets and the great importance of doing so, and on the other a sense of abasement and modesty and an awareness of the prohibition against such a disclosure.³² The ambivalence present in this passage is highly developed in the *Idra*, charging it with intensity. Further on in the passage R. Simeon weeps, as he also does at the opening of the *Idra*, and announces that he will disclose something whose revelation had hitherto been forbidden. This motif is, again, expanded in the *Idra*, where R. Simeon is portrayed as hesitating even at the very moment of his disclosure of the mysteries.

The greatest similarity, however, has to do with the gathering itself. To be sure, this passage has only three participants while the *Idra* has ten, but R. Simeon singles out three of those ten, whom he describes as "the sum of all" (III, 128a). The three are the very same who come together in the "early version," namely R. Simeon himself,

R. Eleazar, his son, and R. Abba. The description in *Idra Rabba* is clearly an expansion of that found here. What is more, the meeting of these three figures is in and of itself, I believe, of messianic significance. We have seen that the *Zohar* "actualizes" the pronouncements made by R. Simeon in various *midrashim*, where he appears as a figure capable of absolving the world of judgment until the advent of the Messiah—if he is joined by two others, one of whom is R. Eleazar, his son, and the other a biblical personality such as King Jotham ben Uziah or Abraham. But even the author of the *Zohar* with his deficient chronological sense could not bring such a figure together with R. Simeon and his son and so brought in R. Abba instead.³³

Furthermore, at the opening of the *Idra* R. Simeon declares concerning the trio (himself, his son, and R. Abba): "As for us—the matter depends on love." I will consider the meaning of this statement in a later section; here it will suffice to note that R. Simeon is alluding to several statements immediately preceding our early version that express the idea that the messianic era will be a time of the awakening of love. Not only does this indicate the link between the versions, but it also says something directly about the *Idra's* conception of itself as messianic. It should be noted that the *Zohar* also has these same three sages meeting in a cave in Lydda, where they converse on the mystery of the love between God and Knesset Israel (I, 244b–245b). Another passage, too (I, 20a–20b; also mentioned in I, 9a), describes an event related to these three. There R. Eleazar and R. Abba achieve a special status and are granted the title *Peniel*—i.e., those who have seen the countenance of the Shekhina—by R. Simeon because they have received a vision of R. Hamnuna Sava who descended from the World of Truth to reveal the secrets of the Torah to them. This event, however, is linked to *yir'a*, the fear of God, and not to love, and R. Simeon alludes to it at the opening of the *Idra* by way of contrast, saying: "There it was right to fear." In the *Idra* he associates this with the verse on which he had expounded at length in the previous passage (I, 7b): "O Lord, I have heard the report of You and am afraid" (Habakkuk 3:2).

Special status is also attributed to these same three at the beginning of *Idra Zuta* (III, 287b): they alone are inside, while the others remain outside for fear of the raging fire. R. Eleazar and R. Abba alone participate in *Idra Raza de-Razin* (II, 123b) as well, asking questions in a dream of R. Simeon, who is already in the World of Truth. Only these three, moreover, are deemed worthy to delve into the "Account of the Chariot," as R. Simeon tells them at the beginning of the commentary on the chariot of Ezekiel's vision (*Zohar Hadash*, 37c).

In the early version it is stated that "By the merit of this generation the world will exist until the advent of the Messiah." This notion is a development of one stated several times elsewhere in the *Zohar*—that there will not be a generation like this one until the generation of the Messiah (e.g., II, 147a; III, 149a). Those statements do not necessarily mean that the present generation has a messianic task. It is often asserted, in fact, that after R. Simeon's death things reverted to their earlier dreadful state: the Torah that had been disclosed was once again forgotten (III, 23a). Shortly before his death, R. Simeon proposes a strategem for maintaining the world after his decease which involves bringing a Torah scroll to the cemetery (I, 222a). The notion that it is the task of R. Simeon and his circle to uphold the world through the evil times that precede the coming of the Messiah—the period of the "birth-pangs of the Messiah"—is only one step away from the idea that his generation must take measures to induce the Messiah's coming. That step appears even smaller when we bear in mind that the disclosure in the earlier version is a description of the stages of redemption and an explanation of them in terms of processes taking place within the Godhead. This idea was further developed in the final version of the *Idra*, where the very description of the *tikkun* within the Godhead is bound up with the actual *tikkun* itself. So too with redemption. Although the messianic theme is much more subdued in the *Idra* and is incorporated within its theosophical element, which is developed at greater length there, and although the *Idra* contains neither apocalyptic descriptions nor calculations of the time of the End, close examination establishes the fundamental structural parallels between the two compositions (this is also observable in the theosophic descriptions, which in both works proceed downwards from above to below). The difference between the two works may be explained as resulting from a deepening and refinement that took place in the author's thought during the time that passed between the composition of the former and that of the latter. It would surely be incorrect to try to reverse their order and argue that the more primitive work was composed after *Idra Rabba*, a contention that makes no psychological sense.³⁴

The existence of several versions of *Idra Rabba* is not so extraordinary, for in fact we find an early version of *Idra Zuta* as well. It appears in *Zohar Hadash* (18d–19a) and again in *Tosefet* (III, 309a–309b), and is part of *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* to the Torah portion of *Bereshit*. Like *Idra Zuta*, this passage too describes a gathering of R. Simeon's disciples with their master, who is about to die. In both versions, R. Simeon speaks with joy and enthusiasm to his disciples about the fate awaiting him in the world to come. In both *Idra Zuta*

and in the early version, R. Simeon also lectures them on the deep mysteries of the Godhead, though in *Idra Zuta*, as I shall try to show below, this subject is closely bound up with the departure of R. Simeon's soul, an event which itself plays a crucial role in the *tikkun* of the upper worlds.

The earlier "draft" is referred to explicitly at the beginning of *Idra Zuta* (III, 287b). R. Simeon relates that after the scene recounted there his life was extended, and that is why he is still alive; only now has his time come to depart from the world. The author of the *Zohar* most likely inserted this comment into the more developed version of *Idra Zuta* in order to escape the contradiction arising from the existence in his work of two different accounts of R. Simeon's death (no such contradiction arises in the case of *Idra Rabba*, the two versions of which can be viewed as depicting different events). It seems that the author either did not want to excise the first version or was unable to do so, since the *Zohar*, as we know, was issued as separate tracts,³⁵ and the tract containing the first version may already have been published. Whatever the case, the reference to the first version is a clear indication that *Idra Zuta* was a later composition and should be regarded as a more profound reworking of the more primitive version. I wish to establish the same type of relationship with respect to the two "versions" of *Idra Rabba*. These examples of the author of the *Zohar* returning to earlier sections and reworking them on a deeper level sheds light on his method of working, yielding an insight that might fruitfully be brought to bear on other parts of the *Zohar* as well—but that would take us beyond the scope of this chapter.

Analysis of the *Idra*

In this section I shall describe the messianic significance of the *Idra* and analyze several key passages in which it is demonstrated, devoting special attention to the opening of the work (III, 127b–128a).

Idra Rabba opens with the following words: "R. Simeon said to his companions, 'Until when will we dwell in the place (or status, situation, reality, existence, world or foundation) of one pillar?'" His inquiry might also be translated thus: "Until when will we dwell where only one pillar is our support?" These words express a complaint about the state of things on the eve of the *Idra*, which its convening is meant to remedy. A precise understanding of this sentence is therefore necessary for an understanding of the *Idra*; and, conversely, we shall need to analyze the *Zohar's* description of what is achieved in the course of the *Idra*, in order to understand its opening statement,

devoting special attention to passages bearing linguistic allusions to it. It must also be borne in mind that precisely because of the poverty of its vocabulary, the language of the *Zohar* is richly laden with meanings, nuances and associations, as artificial languages generally are.³⁶ For this reason just one interpretation of the opening statement will not suffice, because there is a wealth of ideas here whose association with one another in the consciousness of the author of the *Zohar* reflects a depth of thought worthy of investigation.

What is this one pillar that has been the support of R. Simeon and his companions until *Idra Rabba*, whose exclusive support is the fault the *Idra* intends to remedy? Our analysis will show that this pillar has two aspects: on the one hand it is R. Simeon himself, but on the other it is also a divine force, which is essentially the attribute of divine judgement (*middat ha-din*). There are a number of dimensions to the fault of which R. Simeon complains. On the plane of human existence, first of all, there was only one righteous man in the world, namely R. Simeon, and the existence of the entire world was dependent on him alone. Second, on the same plane, love and friendship did not prevail among the sages as it should have. Third, on the epistemological plane, only very few people had knowledge of the Kabbala, and in fact only one person was really privy to its secrets, namely R. Simeon himself. Fourth, on the same plane, the secrets of the Kabbala that were known were of a low level; fifth, also on that plane, their apprehension was merely discursive and did not come as an intuitive grasp of a profusion descending from above. Sixth, on the ontological plane, the structure of the upper worlds lacked harmony, and the various divine attributes could not be divided into male and female and therefore could not maintain their existence. The supreme emanated configuration, the *Arikh Anpin*, had not undergone its requisite *tikkun*, and its light therefore did not shine on the lower configuration, *Ze'ir Anpin*—and when the latter was by itself it poured forth stern and wrathful judgment. The seventh aspect of the fault of which R. Simeon complains is related to the previous one—since the upper and lower configurations were not in a continuous, intimate relationship to one another, full mystical *devekut* (cleaving, or communion) with the Godhead was not possible. Eighth, on the personal plane, R. Simeon was alone in the world and also apparently did not have the appropriate type of sexual relations with a female. Ninth, also on that plane, love did not prevail among R. Simeon's companions as it should have. Tenth, on the national-historical plane, Israel was in exile, without a sovereign of its own and subject to the rule of the gentiles (mainly "Edom," meaning the Christians), and Jerusalem and the Temple lay waste.

The dual nature of the pillar, as both terrestrial person and cosmic force, becomes clearer when we realize that behind the phrase in R. Simeon's statement lies the verse *ve-tsaddik yesod 'olam* (Proverbs x:25)—“the righteous is an everlasting foundation,” or “the righteous is the foundation of the world”—and the meanings that have been attached to it in rabbinic and Kabbalistic literature.³⁷ Especially relevant here is the talmudic statement, “[The world] rests on one pillar, and its name is ‘Righteous,’ for it is said, ‘Righteous is the foundation of the world’” (*Hagiga* 12a). It is difficult even in the rabbinical statements to determine whether what is meant is a cosmic pillar, which is called “Righteous,” or a righteous person who is likened to a pillar. The context and formulation of the statement in Tractate *Hagiga* would seem to indicate a real pillar, but in other places a righteous person is undoubtedly intended; for example: “Even for the sake of a single righteous man does the world endure, as it is said, ‘But the righteous is the foundation of the world’” (*Yoma* 38b). There are several persons to whom, by their description in rabbinic literature, this description would be applicable; R. Simeon is the most outstanding among them, but there are others.³⁸

In Kabbalistic literature, this pillar is regarded as one of the *sefirot*, and it is called *Yesod* (Foundation). It serves as the foundation mainly of the world of the *sefira* of *Malkhut* (Kingdom), and sometimes also of *Netsah* (Endurance) and *Hod* (Majesty) (II, 123a). This, however, did not dispel the ambiguity presented by the verse, and the conception of “the righteous, the everlasting foundation” as both pillar and terrestrial person persisted. This can be seen, for example, in a passage from *Sefer ha-Bahir* (120) which, citing two opposing talmudic statements, begins with a pillar and concludes with a righteous person:

There is one pillar from the earth to the firmament and Righteous is its name, after the righteous ones, and when there are righteous persons in the world it gains strength, and when there are not it is weakened, and it bears the burden of all the world, as it is written, “Righteous is the foundation of the world,” and if it is weak the world cannot exist. Therefore even if there is only one righteous man in the world, he upholds the world.

Here the pillar is a cosmic entity, but its existence depends on the terrestrial righteous person, whose merit is greater than its own (the pillar's very name is derived from him). In *Sefer ha-Bahir* this pillar is identified with the cosmic tree, and here too for the first time in Jewish literature it also comes to symbolize the male organ, thus

opening the way for the linkage in the mystical literature between the righteous man's virtue and the sexual realm.³⁹ This dual appreciation of "righteous" as referring to both person and cosmic entity is also found in the *Zohar*. Generally, however, the treatment is symbolic: the righteous man on earth is like the righteous above, and his relations with his terrestrial wife resemble those of the *sefira* of *Yesod* (or *Tiferet*) with the *Shekhina*. At times the *Zohar's* descriptions depart from the symbolic level and enter that of portraying direct sexual contact between the righteous individual and the *Shekhina*. It is also said that the *Shekhina* cohabits with scholars who spend all of the week studying the Torah and refrain from relations with their wives, on the condition, however, that they return to their wives on the Sabbath and on that day have relations with the *Shekhina* in symbolic fashion (I, 49b).⁴⁰ The righteous man is thus between two females, just as the *Shekhina* is between two "Righteous" entities, the one divine and the other earthly.⁴¹ While this is true of righteous individuals in general, however, there are two exceptional individuals from whom the symbolic element is totally lacking, who are mythically "Righteous" in the fullest sense. One is Moses—the other R. Simeon.

As we noted above, R. Simeon as he is portrayed in rabbinic literature was befitting of the title "Righteous, foundation of the world." It is also said of him that no rainbow appeared in his lifetime, for he protected the world in its stead (*Ketubot* 77b). In the *Zohar* we find him proclaiming: "I am the sign that protects the world" (I, 225a). The rainbow (*keshet*) alludes to the *sefira* of *Yesod* (I, 18a), and the same word in its rabbinic usage, moreover, refers both to the male organ (*Sanhedrin* 92a) and to the glory of God (*Hagiga* 16a, based on *Ezekiel* i:28). R. Simeon's identification with the rainbow may also have messianic significance, for according to the *Zohar* (e.g., I, 62b), the rainbow will appear on the eve of the Messiah's coming (although there the rainbow would seem to represent the *sefira* of *Malkhut*, not *Yesod*).

At the beginning of the early version of *Idra Zuta* (*Zohar Hadash* 18d), R. Simeon is called "the pillar of the world." He fulfills this role by his teaching, constituting, as it were, a living Torah scroll, and in fact a Torah scroll will fulfill his function after his death (I, 225a). He is also likened to a candle who kindles all his pupils with the light of his teaching (II, 86b).⁴² In another passage (II, 34b), the description of him upholding the entire world by virtue of his teaching is linked to his knowledge of matters concerning the *sitra ahra* (the power of evil, literally: the other side):

R. Simeon said: "The companions study the story of Creation (*ma'ase bereshit*) and have knowledge of it, but only few know how to interpret it in connection with the great sea monster, and as we have learned, the entire world hangs from its fins. (II, 34b)

The story of Creation with which the companions are acquainted is no doubt the Kabbalistic description of the emanation of the *sefirot* which was called *ma'ase bereshit* and was studied widely at the time of the *Zohar's* composition.⁴³ But the mystery of the great sea monster, as R. Simeon's discourse subsequently makes clear, concerns the *sefirot* of *sitra ahra*.⁴⁴ This was known by very few—indeed, it was apparently known by only one person, and it is therefore he alone who upholds the world. It was to him, then, that the rabbis alluded in saying that the whole world is supported on the fins of the Leviathan (*Pirqei de-Rabbi Eliezer*; this is the "sea monster" of the *Zohar*). They did not mean the actual fins of the Leviathan, but were referring figuratively to the person who understands this matter (there is some ambiguity here, however, for the actual Leviathan, through whose mystery the *ma'aseh* may be apprehended, is also intended). That person is none other than R. Simeon himself, who will later expound the mysteries of the Leviathan in a mythic and surprising way unknown anywhere else in our literature; the same R. Simeon who is referred to elsewhere as "Righteous, the foundation of the world." R. Simeon's words, beginning with "Few [who] know" and ending with only one who knows, are reminiscent of an utterance of his in the Talmud: "I saw the sons of heaven, and they are few, . . . and if they are two, they are myself and my son" (Sukka 45b). They also bring to mind a statement of his in *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana* about the thirty righteous men in each generation who resemble Abraham, which concludes, "And if there is one, I am he."⁴⁵

The correctness of this interpretation is proven by parallel passages I have found in the literature of the so-called "Gnostic Kabbalists," a circle with which the author of the *Zohar* was closely connected.⁴⁶ The source of the passage in the *Zohar* is to be found, I believe, in the opening words of *Sefer Amnud ha-Semali* (the Left Pillar) by R. Moses of Burgos: "The secrets of the left emanation . . . are unknown to most of those with knowledge . . . transmitted to select individuals."⁴⁷ Such boasts of particular knowledge of the mysteries of the *sitra ahra*, which placed the members of their circle on a higher rung than the Kabbalists who knew only the holy mysteries, are quite common in the literature of the "Gnostic Kabbalists."⁴⁸ The connection with this particular book lies in the phrase "only few know," which is clearly echoed in the Aramaic of the above passage. The difference

between these Kabbalistic groups was also known to R. Isaac of Acre, who observed that the Kabbalists of Castile had merited “receiving the Kabbala of the outer rungs,” while the sages of Catalonia (Gerona) had a Kabbala which was “correct in the ten *sefirot* of *belima*.”⁴⁹ The *Zohar* is closer to the Castilian scholars both geographically and in content.⁵⁰

That the “Righteous, the foundation of the world” should take the form of the Leviathan and be related to the forces of defilement is itself very interesting. On the one hand, the Leviathan is a fitting symbol for the foundation of the world, for “Leviathan” is one of the designations of the *sefira* of *Yesod* (in “Gnostic” circles as well).⁵¹ However, the use of this symbol in the context of the forces of evil, which are called sea monsters, puts the notion of the righteous one who is the foundation of the world in a new light. It suggests that he upholds the world by fighting the evil forces, which is why there is a resemblance between him and them (compare II, 27b: the evil sea monsters are ruled over by superior monsters which have been blessed and no doubt are the holy *sefirot*). In this too R. Simeon resembles Moses, who, according to the beginning of the passage quoted above (II, 34a), was able to overcome the great monster—Pharaoh, King of Egypt—because he first of all entered him “room by room” and came to know him well. In this way his merit was greater than that of Job, for the latter, since he turned from evil (Job i:8), had no part in the *Sitra Ahra* and so awakened its envy.

This notion also originates among the “Gnostic Kabbalists,” who relate it to the figure of the Messiah. In his *Ta’amei ha-Te’amim*, R. Isaac ha-Kohen writes: “When shall we be avenged? When our righteous Messiah shall come, who is likened to a serpent:⁵² a serpent will come and take his revenge of a serpent.” The same idea was subsequently taken up by the Shabbateans.⁵³ As we have noted, members of the “Gnostic” circle regarded themselves as superior to other Kabbalists because of their knowledge of the left emanation. In one place R. Isaac ha-Kohen’s acclaim for the “few who know” is far-reaching indeed: “On this path have tread but ‘two or three, berries on the topmost branch’ [Isaiah xvii:6], and they are the ancient sages of Castile who ministered in the palace of *Sama’el* (the Prince of evil).”⁵⁴ The last phrase expresses the idea that black magic is the glory of the best Kabbalists. Elsewhere R. Isaac says: “We acquired this knowledge from the ancient elders of the Kabbala, from the sages of Castile, rabbi from rabbi, elder from elder, *ga’on* from *ga’on*. They all practiced the lesser magic of demons, which leads to the great holy magic, whereby one ascends the ladder of prophecy and acquires its power.”⁵⁵ Here black magic is presented as a way to white magic and even to prophecy.⁵⁶

Another passage from the writings of this circle is of great importance to our understanding of the nature of the *Zohar's* Messiah. I refer to the ending of *Sefer Ammud ha-Semali*, whose opening we have seen echoed in the *Zohar*. Here, in the place where one would expect to find a wish for the advent of the Messiah like that with which Jewish books—including those by members of this circle—frequently closed, R. Moses of Burgos writes:

Until God shall look down and see from the heavens: may He lighten from upon us the burden of the distress of our time and ready for us the support of a *lasting pillar* straight and faithful *by virtue of a righteous one, foundation of the world*, to rest against, that he [perhaps it should read: we] may be capable of drawing divine favor by fear of the Lord and by His worship, through instruction in the secrets of our flawless Torah. We shall then rejoice and be glad, and sorrow and sighing shall flee.⁵⁷

This description of the redeemer who it is hoped would come is precisely how R. Simeon is described in the *Zohar* (a pillar who has the attribute of foundation—*Yesod*—and who redeems through study of the secrets of the Torah). Though it is possible chronologically for R. Moses to have seen the *Zohar* in his old age, it is most unlikely that he borrowed from it in this case, for he uses it nowhere else.⁵⁸ It is quite likely, on the other hand, that Moses de Leon fashioned R. Simeon bar Yohai as a messianic figure in light of expectations prevailing in his circle. It is also possible that its members had identified such a figure among themselves—perhaps even Moses de Leon himself.

The Messiah's symbolic rung, according to this Kabbalistic circle, was the *sefira* of *Yesod*.⁵⁹ Especially relevant in this context is a statement by Todros Abulafia: "None of the commentators I have seen say what is the name of the Messiah [who is mentioned in the Talmud among the things that were created before the creation of the world], but I tell you by the true way [i.e., Kabbala] that his name is Righteous (Zaddik), for it is written: 'He is righteous and redeemed' (Zech. ix:9); 'Righteous, foundation of the world'; and 'The righteous shall live by his faith' (Hab. ii:4)."⁶⁰ R. Todros is not claiming that the Messiah's name had not been stated explicitly before him, for several names—Menahem, for example—are mentioned in the Midrash, and several others were added in R. Todros' Kabbalistic circle. We even find the name Righteous in the Midrash as a name of the Messiah.⁶¹ What had not been stated explicitly before R. Todros was able to do so on the basis of Kabbala is the name of the Messiah who was created

before the world. The implication here—and it is not merely on a symbolic level, for he is speaking, as we shall see, of total identity—is that the Messiah is an incarnation of the *sefira* of *Yesod*. A similar apprehension, I believe, characterizes the *Zohar's* view of R. Simeon, to whom the name Righteous is certainly applicable. It would appear, then, that the *Zohar's* unique conception of the Messiah has its source among the “Gnostic Kabbalists.” This circle also seems already to have taken up the custom of holding a night-long *tikkun* on the festival of Shavuot, a practice of messianic significance. It should also be noted that in its descriptions both of the Messiah and of R. Simeon the *Zohar* refers to the same verses as those used by R. Todros.

Let us return now to the literal interpretation of the expression *kaima dehad samkha* occurring at the beginning of *Idra Rabba*, which we have translated as “the place of one pillar.” *Kaima* is both pillar and foundation.⁸² It also means covenant,⁸³ and as such is related both to the *sefira* of *Yesod* and to R. Simeon's role of protecting the world, like the rainbow. *Kiyuma* means that which upholds the world and is the essence of the world. *Samkha* may mean foundation of the world. All of these refer to R. Simeon, who like Judah is called “the mainstay, the support of all supports” (I, 156a).

The Significance of the Gathering

As we have interpreted it, R. Simeon is here complaining about his loneliness in his role as foundation of the world. While the term “pillar” also attests to the strength of the one to whom this appellation is ascribed, even the strongest pillar cannot support the world as could several of them together, and certainly the personal fate of such a pillar is loneliness and suffering (like that of Atlas in the Greek legend). This is solved at the opening of the *Idra* by the assembly of nine of R. Simeon's disciples; and by the end of this passage, indeed, R. Simeon can already adopt the first person plural: “We are the pillars of the world.”

The expression “pillars of the world” also has an intellectual meaning: just as R. Simeon has protected the world with his teachings, they too can protect it by virtue of the wisdom R. Simeon is teaching them. Compare this with another statement in II, 15b: “The ‘wise and intelligent’ are the pillars and sockets, since they ponder with understanding all things needful for upholding the palanquin”—the Kabbalists (the “wise and intelligent”) know by their teachings how to uphold the upper world. While these “wise and intelligent” are also the upper *sefirot*, which support the *sefira* of *Malkhut* or *Yesod*

from above, they are at the same time the terrestrial righteous persons who sustain those *sefirot*.

As used in the *Idra*, the expression "pillars of the world" has a similar dual meaning. The ten companions symbolize the ten *sefirot* that sustain the world. When they are appointed as such and come together in the *Idra*, a marked improvement occurs in the cosmic situation as well: while the world had rested on one pillar, it now rests on ten—a situation that is undoubtedly more stable. After the participants are seated in their places, then, R. Simeon can declare: "Now we have completed the arrangement of the pillars on which the world rests." (Later in the *Idra* these pillars are equated with the supports of the marital canopy of the upper world, which is revealed to the participants [III, 135a].) This declaration by R. Simeon should be compared with its parallel in *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, which is itself a sort of *Idra Rabba*. It is related there that the *Shekhina* did not want to enter the room where the participants were seated, for the pillars had not yet been put in their proper order (II, 14a). This was remedied once R. Hiyya had found his place.

The precise seating arrangement of the participants at *Idra Rabba* is also of symbolic significance. This is reflected, among other things, in the way R. Simeon calls on the participants to deliver their discourse. To each of them in turn he says: "Rise in your place," which apparently also means: "Assume a particular attribute or *sefira*," or "In your discourse, which concerns a particular *sefira* (or one of the *tikkunim* [locks] of the Beard), perform a *tikkun* upon that place or *sefira*."⁶⁴ That this is how this form of address is to be understood is especially evident after the second *tikkun* of the Beard of Arikh Anpin (III, 132b). This *tikkun* was performed by R. Hezekiah, and R. Simeon praised him for it at length, describing what had occurred in the upper worlds as a consequence. As a sign of his appreciation, he intended to allow R. Hezekiah to perform the third *tikkun* as well, and he called upon him with the words: "Rise, R. Hezekiah, a second time." In protest, a heavenly voice declared: "One angel (messenger) does not perform two missions" (from *Genesis Rabba* 50:2, where the reference is in fact to an angel). Upon hearing this, R. Simeon "became agitated and said: 'Of course, each one in his place, and I and R. Eleazar my son and R. Abba complete the sublime wholeness.'" "In his place" means "in the place among the *sefirot* appropriate to him," which is the same "place" as that referred to by the words "Rise in your place" (in your *kiyuma*). The statement about R. Simeon, R. Eleazar, and R. Abba, who, according to the opening passage, constitute the other participants in the *Idra*, attests to this symbolic significance of the word "place." R. Simeon is of course persuaded by the heavenly voice