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In the Beginning

Before the conclusive findings Gershom Scholem published about fifty years ago, resumed in his magisterial *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*¹—that Moses de Leon, a Spanish Jew and cabalist writing in thirteenth-century Spain was, in fact, the sole author of most of what we now know as The Zohar—provenance of this strange and influential text had been argued back and forth for centuries. Although, here and there a serious academic will still disagree with Scholem,² there seems to be a general acceptance of his research. Adding to the cogency of the idea of de Leon as author is also the fact that Scholem evidently came to his decision reluctantly and grudgingly, having commenced early in the 1920s by trying to prove rather the *antiquity* of The Zohar—that it was, indeed, as de Leon claimed it to be, entirely the work of the famous, quasi-legendary Rabbi Simon ben Yohai, a refugee of the Diaspora that followed the destruction of the second temple, and a mystic, scholar, and cabalist who was supposed to have lived, worshiped, and worked with a small band of faithful acolytes, in certain remote mountain retreats and caves in or near “the holy land” in the second century A.D. Scholem’s early efforts were in fact a reaction to a certain nineteenth-century positivist and historicist tendency, an extension of eighteenth-century

rationalist enlightenment, to deflate, deemphasize, and discredit The Zohar, in particular, and Cabala and Jewish mysticism in general.

The extraordinary cabalist career of the notorious Sabbatai Zevi, seventeenth-century apostate and “false messiah,” the scandal caused by the iconoclastic sexual and religious practices of eighteenth-century Jewish sects that continued to believe in Sabbatai’s apocalyptic message, “beyond good and evil,”³ and also the general temper of our nascent scientific, practical, and empirical world, to which Judaism, as other religions, were trying to adapt, had made many thinkers, of the mainstream at least, distrustful and suspicious of anything as subjective, incalculable, and immeasurable as a mystical experience. By establishing, for instance, that Moses de Leon wrote The Zohar, Heinrich Graetz, foremost nineteenth-century historian of Judaism, meant to subvert its authority, in claiming that, far from being divinely inspired, it was rather a sham and a forgery, or “book of lies,” as he called it. Ironically, Scholem found himself confirming Graetz’s suspicions about de Leon, while differing from Graetz dramatically over the significance of The Zohar. For Scholem, Cabala, as conveyed most significantly in The Zohar, represented rather an authentic cultural, literary, and religious movement, one with immense, sometimes even awesome influence and consequences. The Cabala of the Renaissance,⁴ as Scholem conceived it and so brilliantly communicated to his generation, was nothing less than a major gnostic revival, which was nourished and inspired both by a syncretic neoplatonism and an idealistic utopianism. Heresies, heterodoxies, imaginations, alternatives which had been forced out of official religions of the western world a millennium ago and had led a subterranean, “denied” existence, surface in the Renaissance, for Scholem, in Cabala. The hegemony of this fundamental thesis of Scholem’s has been challenged, certainly in orthodox circles but also by a contemporary French school of Cabala translators and scholars, very important among whom is Charles Mopsik, who directs a series devoted to Jewish mystical texts, published by Verdier. Mopsik’s ecstatic-practical bias is evident even in the title of his recent magisterial survey of theurgy in Cabala, *The Great Texts of Cabala: Rites Creating God*.⁵ The French “ecstatics” are, in their turn, very respectful students of Moshe Idel, who for the English-speaking audience would be notable for his reservations about Scholem’s Cabala. In *Kabbalah: New Per-*

spectives, Idel gets even a little personal over it, where he calls Scholem a “theoretical mystic,” even going so far as to state, relying on personal and biographical information, that Scholem, who thought of himself as “rather a failure qua mystic, yet one who longed for mystical experience,” was the culmination of a tradition that overemphasized the speculative-philosophical current in Cabala, paying insufficient attention to more “ecstatic”-meditative elements, for instance of Eastern European Ashkenazi-Hasidic, and also of Sufi provenance.⁶ A major intention of Idel’s book, announced early, was, indeed, to right that imbalance.⁷

That Scholem’s Gnostic-Sabbatian Cabala has aroused such passionate opposition may, on the other hand, indicate its power and cogency: like Freud’s unconscious, Scholem’s Cabala forces us to acknowledge hidden parts of our psyche and nature, while placing in question all moral complacencies. Just as Freud obliges us to admit this other dimension—the ceaseless amoral drives of the blind Id—into our psyches, so Scholem obliges us to admit an “other side”—that of the violator, criminal, and even counterfeiter—into our devotions.⁸ The fact that *The Zohar* was written in the thirteenth rather than the second century, according to Scholem, therefore merely confirms *the* major text of Cabala in its *Renaissance* avatar. Pseudepigraphy, or the attribution of the work of a contemporary to a more ancient and hallowed source, is actually no sign necessarily of imposture but rather a familiar hallmark of mystical writings. It was finally important, for Scholem, that we conceive of *The Zohar* as a Renaissance creation not for the mere satisfaction of scientific curiosity, but so as to be able, by situating it in its context and by seeing it as the major statement of an evolving movement of Cabala, to understand its relevance, impact, and influence, both in its own time and for centuries subsequently.

The problem as to who exactly wrote it has not been the only point in contention for the almost seven hundred years *The Zohar* has been in existence. There has been debate also about whether there were one or more authors, which complicated the question of whether it was of ancient or thirteenth-century provenance. In addition there has been considerable speculation, because of a variety of manuscript and published versions, as to what exactly should comprise it. While another kind of integrity, that of the authenticity, intentions, and sincerity of its author(s), transcribers,

translators, promoters, "believers," and followers has also been frequently attacked, defended, and certainly wondered about, since this would, by affecting drastically its aura of sacredness, modify its reception and influence.

Manuscript versions of the main body of what was going to be known as The Zohar were apparently in circulation in Spain by 1290. Even close to the time of its first appearance the circumstances of its creation and/or discovery were a matter for speculation and curiosity. A traveling cabalist of the period, and some kind of fugitive from the Moslem conquest of Acre, Isaac ben Samuel of Acre, has left an account of a trip he made to visit de Leon's widow in the "author's" house, which she still occupied in Avila, in Spain, in 1305. Isaac ben Samuel had mentioned that Moses de Leon, whom he said he had met previously in Valladolid, had sworn to him that the Aramaic original was in his house in Avila, yet, when he asked to see it, in Scholem's words, "both the widow of the deceased and his daughter had denied the existence of such an original."⁹ This is the kind of "evidence" that was eagerly seized upon later by Graetz in his attempt to assign The Zohar exclusively to de Leon. Another kind of proof or nonproof of the book's "authenticity" has also been that of comparison of other cabalistic-mystic texts by de Leon, written in Hebrew, with the language, expressions, and formulations of The Zohar's Aramaic. So, in 1856, Rabbi David Luria published findings, based on this comparative method, according to which de Leon could not have been the author. Yet, obviously in the field of Zohar studies, how one interprets evidence has a lot to do with the allegiance of the critic, for just a few years earlier, an important German-Jewish scholar, Aaron (Adolph) Jellinek, had used the same approach to come to the opposite conclusion. Jellinek equally agreed with Graetz that Isaac of Acre's testimony was reliable, pointing to de Leon as the author, but, apparently anticipating Scholem, did not feel that The Zohar was thereby discredited.¹⁰

The controversy that surrounds Cabala from the time it first came to be known to a wider (non-Jewish, or Christians whose goals were other than *only* converting Jews)¹¹ audience was only an extension of one that was already thriving. Although Cabala might have seemed, for Pico, Reuchlin, Agrippa, and its acolytes in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, to begin with the zoharic texts,

actually, they represent more of a culmination, fruition, and climax than any real beginning. Cabala had been an important and original if somewhat exotic and esoteric element in Jewish religious life for at least two hundred years before *The Zohar* started to circulate. Then, as more recently, Cabala was passionately espoused and opposed. In the slightly over two centuries between the first appearance of *The Zohar* and the expulsion of the Jews from Spain the book was known, if not widely so, in its country of origin, but had not yet achieved its later international fame, authority, and notoriety, all surely subsequent to the Spanish exodus. Significantly it was Spanish Jews, who had taken up residence in Italy, who initiated Pico, who was to become the major source and fountain-head of a pan-European Christian Cabala, into the mysteries of *The Zohar* and other cabalistic texts.

Accepting the claim of de Leon that he was only the book's transcriber and editor, from an "original" in Aramaic that no one has ever seen, had been customarily those who believe in its "divinity" and treat it accordingly. On the other hand, Scholem, who as a scholar is interested rather in the phenomenology of the appeal to divine inspiration than in proving a work to be dictated by angels to Simon ben Yohai (a Pascalian wager in any case, the risks of which science can in no way reduce), argues against the book's antiquity on linguistic, philosophical, and textual grounds. De Leon's Aramaic, for Scholem, is rather that of a clever literary convention, an affectation, device, or mask, in the sense of a Late Medieval version (anticipating Renaissance "games with the reader"), of a language in use in second-century Palestine, but no longer current, than convincingly organic. However, between the extremes of conceiving of *The Zohar* as a fixed holy word or as a secular and modifiable commercial and marketable production, meant to exploit a certain public, there have been nuances too. Leaving aside the question of its ultimate authority, so modern in its anti-metaphysical resonances, the book has been a cultural resource, its stories, styles, and ideas borrowed, alluded to, and adapted for literary, philosophical, mystical, and "magical" purposes. It has been the perfect example of a text that can mean many different things to different people. For many Jews, on the one hand, it had represented, especially during the Renaissance, an intensification and culmination of their faith; but since the fifteenth century at least,

and probably even earlier, the work has been seminal also for a Christian Cabala, so much so that it was often spared the bonfires lit by an Inquisition that consumed other Hebrew-language books. A whole gamut of shades and degrees of involvement and connection of author to text are implied in one aspect or another of the debate over its authenticity and authority, and composition, the latter both in the sense of *who* composed it and *when* and what exactly it is supposed to have been *composed of*.

Even after accepting de Leon as the originator of the main body of the work, there are other vast sections, the *Raya Mehemna* and the *Tikkune Zohar*, comprising about 40 percent of (what usually circulates as) the whole that everyone, including Scholem, seems to accept are by other, probably later but more radical, experimental, and urgently mystical and/or apocalyptically minded acolytes; and sections from these texts are typically interpolated into subsequent editions and translations of de Leon's text, introducing a permanent element of structural paradox, contradiction, and polysemy, and also keeping editors (who tend to note where they think the style of the text and character of the ideas and language changes markedly) and readers perpetually on the alert. We should add, to these imponderables, issues relating to provenance, acceptability, meaning, and interpretation. How, for example, are we being asked to read and understand The Zohar, given that texts, especially as enigmatic as this one and aspiring as it does to significance, come either explicitly and implicitly with a *mode d'emploi*? Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* never tires of telling us, for instance, on so many different registers how it wants to be read and understood. However, for The Zohar, are we to read it symbolically, literally, anagogically, or teleologically? Or are we to adopt the philosophically sophisticated hermeneutics of its readings of scripture to The Zohar itself, seeing its characters and narrators often as so many abstractions and ideas? Are we to *see through* this Zohar and other classics of Cabala as they have taught us to *see through* Scripture? Some such element of obliged figuration must be operating here, since there are zoharic flights (into Heavenly mansions, for instance, described in absurdly exact detail) that would defy a literal reading, even more characteristically than for the Bible, which, in comparison, is certainly more down to earth. Yet The Zohar, like the Bible, often likes to be homey, practical, and concrete, so we

can't get too settled in any hermeneutic system or attitude. What all this must amount to is the notion that The Zohar—apex, confluence, masterpiece, and incarnation of Cabala—is also a consummately Renaissance problematization of writer, reader, and work, which anticipates, prepares, and probably helped to create contemporary critical attitudes and ambivalencies as well as modern textual strategies and deconstructions.

Scholem and Benjamin

It is surely more than a coincidence that our twentieth-century revival or recovery of The Zohar was developed by Scholem, at least in its early phases, at a time when he was in close contact and communication with Walter Benjamin. Cabala was one of their frequent subjects of conversation, at a time (World War I) when their knowledge of and interest in these matters was apparently beginning. Scholem relates, in his memoir of the period, *Walter Benjamin, the Story of a Friendship*, that the very first time the subject of Cabala ever came up between them was connected to their interest in a work by the Christian Cabalist and German-Romantic thinker Franz Josef Molitor: "Between 1827 and 1857, Molitor published anonymously, as an introduction to a projected presentation of the Kabbalah, four volumes under the memorable title *Philosophie der Geschichte oder Über die tradition* [Philosophy of history or on tradition] . . . That period [1916–17] marked the beginning of his [Benjamin's] interest in Franz von Baader and in Franz Joseph Molitor, who was a pupil of Schelling and Baader and the only serious German language philosopher to study the Kaballah, having devoted 45 years to it . . . These [on Molitor] were our first conversations on the Kaballah."¹² This discovery of Cabala was connected with their mutual fascination with mysticism; and the recourse to mystical texts, generally, for both Scholem and Benjamin, must have symbolized their opposition to the war mentality, which they bitterly opposed, and to the prevailing drift of contemporary society toward a reductive materialism and commercialism. Significantly, Martin Buber, Jewish existential philosopher and enthusiastic about Hasidism, with whom Scholem and Benjamin were as disillusioned as they were with the "patriotic" German

socialists and who already had an important following, was both anti-Cabala, which he regarded as an individualistic distortion of communitarian Judaism, and also, swept along in the fanatical current of the time, *pro-war*.¹³

These two writers were also, according to David Biale, in *Gershom Scholem, Kaballah and Counter-History*, attracted to the specifically word-oriented quality of Cabala, in contrast to other mystical approaches (for instance, Eastern, or even Buber's I-thou relation, with its Zen connotations) that are built in and around the wordless, or various modes and styles of *silence*. Biale explains that, whatever their later differences, implied by Benjamin's and Scholem's intellectual style at this time was a notion that "Language itself is of divine origin . . . [and that] the experience of revelation is linguistic. Since language is equivocally both human and divine, a basis exists for using language to communicate an experience of the divine."¹⁴ One of Benjamin's innovations, precisely language centered, was an ability to illuminate texts with contemporary and relevant philosophical-critical insights, meant to bring out their political challenges, social implications, and ideological ambiguities. Equally the freshness of Scholem's approach and its fecundity lay, as a matter of fact, in the particularly literary attitude he was able to take, for example, toward The Zohar, which tended previously to be handled more emotionally and subjectively, or as a matter of either reverence or repulsion; and the most compelling evidence in his crucially important attribution of the book to de Leon was indeed of a literary-critical nature, grounded in a close linguistic, stylistic, and textual analysis.

Benjamin and Scholem could converge also, to a certain degree on this revival of the mystical text, endemically idealistic, because of their common passion, and that of their intellectual generation, for *utopia*, in art, thought, and practice, although, of course, they were later to diverge radically in their attitudes on how their ideals could be realized. Benjamin's path was to take him eventually in a Marxist and secular social-aesthetic and political direction, in a process, nevertheless, modeled on ideals, styles, and practices of the German Romantics (among them the Christian Cabalist Molitor) and French Symbolists, whereby much of the energy, absoluteness, and "aura" of the sacred word is displaced onto a literary one. For Benjamin came to conceive that only *this* world, transformed through

a revolutionary praxis, personal and social, could become that other, better one; whereas for Scholem, the two domains, a quotidian one ruled by politics and economy and a rarer one where we can aspire to higher things, would need to stay separated, except perhaps for momentary joinings. These connections might be facilitated, for example, by certain sublime moments of insight and knowledge occurring in some protected and demarcated area, as of Sabbath-evening or mystical text; and no one has done more than Scholem, as in his intriguing studies of the mystical heresy of Sabbatai Zevi, to make us aware of the awesome implications and world-shattering and world-creating consequence of the careers of those who have attempted to lay claim to *more* of this "ecstasy" and for *more* people. So Scholem's path led him toward an exploration of possibilities for human elevation into extraordinary, visionary, and numinous levels and experiences through research into the arcana of Jewish mysticism, these flights guaranteed from a territory, secured by a pact or compromise, a Zionist one, with the real, that is not *only* mental or spiritual, and certainly is not always fair. On the other hand, however much, sometimes, he wanted to, Benjamin could never stray too far from a neoenlightenment universalism that Scholem came to think of as a hopeless cause, or one, at least in its Marxist avatar, that would reduce humanity to a narrowly economic dimension. Try as he would and did, Scholem could never bring Benjamin to Jerusalem, perhaps because for the latter it meant leaving too many and too much behind.

The Zohar

The Zohar is mainly a massive commentary on the Five Books of Moses, also known as the Torah, or Pentateuch. Like other important Jewish commentaries, which (we now know) predate it, on the Bible, like the Talmud, Mishnah, and Gemora, it expounds the quandaries, problems, seeming conundrums, and general relevance of scripture for comportment; but The Zohar purports to be, in addition to its quality as commentary on some of the most provocative and intriguing portions of scripture, also an introduction to "the mysteries of the Bible," invisible as it were to the untrained eye and ear. For it, the Bible would be a labyrinthine mystery and

secret to explore, one to conceal while revealing, reveal while concealing.

Including various strata, some manifestly not de Leon's responsibility but which it would be inconceivable still not to regard as an essential and integral portion of the work, The Zohar will amount to from about three thousand to five thousand printed pages, depending on the version and translation. Until the late nineteenth century it existed mainly in its Hebrew-Aramaic "original" version, first printed in the Mantua and Cremona edition of 1558–1560, with an important introduction by Isaac de Lattes, and in Latin translations, anthologies, and selections of passages, more or less representative and comprehensive. In our own century there have been translations of The Zohar into French, by Jean de Pauly [1910]¹⁵ and Charles Mopsik [1981–96].¹⁶ S. L. G. Mathers (of Rosicrucian fame) published an English translation (from the Latin of Knorr Von Rosenroth's 1677 anthology, *Kaballa Denudata*) of some of the most important and "curious" portions of The Zohar in 1887, which was the only place to go to read The Zohar in English until the five-volume English translation, by Maurice Simon and Harry Sperling, from the "original" Hebrew-Aramaic appeared in 1933. This is, in spite of its quaint editorial position on The Zohar's antiquity, still the definitive version. Translations as well as editions of The Zohar would seem to be, however comprehensive and well intentioned, structurally incomplete, inevitably for a text like this, probably impossible to establish definitively, or whose very indefiniteness is part of its charm. In our century there have been a number of anthologies, in English, of parts of The Zohar: for instance Mather's anthology, *The Kaballah Unveiled*, which last appeared under that title in 1926, some of which resurfaced in Dagobert Runes's selection, *The Wisdom of the Kaballah*, in 1967; a slender, but widely known book of passages chosen by Scholem, *Zohar, the Book of Splendour* [1949]; and, most magisterially, Isaiah Tishby's impressive edition, from a translation into Modern Hebrew of selected passages, *The Wisdom of The Zohar*, arranged thematically and commented on extensively, which has appeared in English in 1989.

Although other very important, though much more summary cabalistic works were known before the appearance of de Leon's Zohar—the most renowned and important of which were the Sefer

Yetzirah, or Book of Formation, which may date back to the fourth or fifth century A.D. and the enigmatic Sefer Bahir, or Book of Brightness, thought to be the oldest cabalist work, whose roots go back into gnostic antiquity—no other cabalistic text had ever approached the comprehensiveness, ambition, amplitude, and sheer encyclopedic exhaustiveness of The Zohar, which, especially since the Spanish Diaspora, has truly made the Cabala its own. So compact has this identity of Cabala been with The Zohar that, starting at least in the fifteenth century, all cabalistic writings tend to be, are just about obliged to be, zoharic, that is commentaries on and interpretations of this Book of Splendour, to the point that it would not be straining a comparison to say that what Marx's *Capital* has been to Communism The Zohar has been to Cabala.

Thinking about the Cabala in general and The Zohar in particular for a theory-drenched modern is certainly an intellectually dizzying enterprise, full of traps, aporias, paradoxes, and outright contradictions. One cannot read for long in and about Cabala, for instance, without noticing that this is a tradition in which an *oral* component pretends to be all important, one made necessary and ineluctable because the *written* word of God, comprised first and foremost of the Torah, together with its canonical commentaries and accretions, Talmud, Mishna, and Gemora, is insufficient, or rather inexistent without it. However, whether this Torah is an oral tradition or a written text, or both simultaneously, concurrently, and undecidably, The Zohar is never more ecstatically hyperbolic than when telling us that the world was created for the purpose of Torah, and indeed *by* Torah, not, as might seem reasonable to suppose, the other way around: "When God . . . created the world, He did so for no other purpose than that Israel should one day come and receive the Torah. It was by means of the Torah that the world is established" [*Zohar IV*, 177].¹⁷ Yet what exactly we mean by Torah, by this text by which and for which the world was created, cannot always be so clear; for Torah is not identical with the literal letters and words that comprise it, even if they are Hebrew and ostensibly more proximal to the divine than that of another language. Nor on the other hand can Torah be separated from its literal, written manifestation or avatars.

When especially The Zohar likes to comment and interpret is where the letter of Torah seems puzzling, enigmatic, or contradictory.

Certain explanations and motivations very urgently demanded by ethics, morality, and common sense are just not present, or not amply enough, presumably, for Cabala's sophisticated Renaissance audience, in the literal "letter of the law." The Zohar, accordingly, is concerned with finding a higher logic behind that rather blunt partial ethnocide Moses seems to have carried out on his own people subsequent to the first, disappointing descent from Mount Sinai and the breaking of the tablets of the law. The breaking of the tablets was ineluctable in any case, The Zohar will explain, since there was as yet no oral law, indispensable, exactly because of human frailty, to receive, explain, and contain any written one; Moses receives this *cabal* or oral word on the *second* ascent, along with a new edition of the written one, in response to the *fall* involved in the episode of the worship of the Golden Calf. Moses' zoharic Jehovah, like Milton's later Puritan one, likes to give humans every chance to be perfect, before visiting them with the well-deserved consequences of their not being so. Even for the killing of the masses who had turned to idol worship or crass materialism and luxury, we are not to think of it, according to The Zohar, as really internecine slaughter: what essentially seems to have been eliminated, as the rationalizing zoharic commentary explains the matter, were impure pagan elements that had followed Israel into freedom, motivated rather more by license than religion, but whose pleasure-loving proclivities had now become an obstacle, preventing those faithful others from observing the Sabbath strictly: "and R. Isaac next began a discourse on the text: *And Moses assembled all the congregation of the children of Israel etc.* 'The object', he said, 'of this assembling was to give them anew the law of the Sabbath. For the previous promulgation of the Sabbath before the Israelites made the golden calf was not observed by the mixed multitude [ostensibly recent converts, plus Jews of longer standing]. When they heard the words . . . they said in protest: Are we to be excluded from this? . . . Then, after the guilty ones were put to death, Moses assembled the children of Israel separately and gave them the Sabbath anew" [*Zohar IV*, 187].

On another, more abstract level, The Zohar likes to explain such enigmas as why the wicked prosper on this earth, which is because "the side of impurity, the other side, has rule only in this world and none at all in the one to come" [*Zohar II*, 190]; or why

the good are so often unrewarded and/or die young. This later question is considered such a troubling one that it is answered very early in our text, during the prologue or overture to the main body of the work, where we are told to love God “even if he deprive thee of life . . . it was for this reason that the light of creation which first emerged was afterwards withdrawn [meaning the abandonment of the earth to the powers of evil] . . . in order that there might be perfect [disinterested] love” [*Zohar I*, 50]. This gnostic argument is thematic indeed in the zoharic conception of life on earth, with its proto-Nietzschean reversals and transvaluations, as in a later passage when we are assured flatly that “when suffering befalls a righteous man it is on account of the love God bears to him” [*Zohar II*, 190].

The *Zohar* is equally illuminating and consoling in its ways of justifying and explaining the existence of unenlightened strata, according to which we require our opposites, since “each class can win credit for itself though the medium of the other, that is, the righteous through the wicked, the wise through the stupid, the rich through the poor” [*Zohar II*, 288]. Even more ingenuity is required on the very sensitive question of why it is that the virtuous need to be malign. Naturally the potential for confusion and abuse in this area is maximal; and certainly in this matter of the incorporation of evil into the lives of the ostensibly just were sown the seeds of later “adventures on the other side,” including the catastrophic cabalistic messianic movement of the seventeenth century.

At the same time such nuanced handling of matters of morality became part of the later appeal of Cabala. This was an aspect, of gnostic-dualist inspiration, which was already well established by the time of *The Zohar*. A particular province that Cabala had staked out for itself was that of Theodicy, or justification—that is, to confront and account for the existence of evil. In the gnostically tinged *Bahir*, or *Book of Brightness*, for example, so very important in the late Medieval stirrings of Cabala in Provence and Northern Spain, it is even suggested that evil is a *middah*, or aspect or quality of God: “And what is this [principle of the seduction to evil]? It is Satan. This teaches us that God has a *middah* which is named ‘Evil’.”¹⁸ Although it treats gnostic ideas so seriously, Cabala does not surrender to the pessimism or apocalyptic desperation that has often accompanied them. In stressing an idea of incorporating evil

into the divine, Cabala was thereby trying to eschew recognizing in it an independent principle, thereby being forced to assign this world to the rule of Satan, as in the troubling and dangerous contemporaneous revival of Dualism-Manicheanism, in its Cathar and Albigensian forms in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France.

On the other hand, by bringing evil in so close to the heavenly, Cabala runs a different risk, that of a process of contamination of the very principle or possibility of the good, at the end of which moral judgment of any sort would be a frank absurdity because the divine on which such a thing could be based had been irremediably compromised. However, even at its inception Cabala was distinguished by a willingness to take such risks, for stakes that seem to have been nothing less than a more honest and intimate understanding and toleration for the ambiguities of existence. In the thought, for instance, of Isaac the Blind, a major figure in early Cabala, whose influence radiated from Provence to Northern Spain early in the thirteenth century, there is a special tendency to find a place for evil, which is allocated a position in the hierarchy of the *sefiroth*, or forms, before even any worldly manifestation or materialization. The position of evil was, according to Isaac, an honorable and legitimate one until an episode of rebellion and an effort at usurpation against other powers in the cosmic scheme of things. Nevertheless, we still cannot demarcate evil definitively from "the holy," but must keep it in mind and view, paying it all due respects, for its "fall" is only a temporary one. In a messianic era, and perhaps as one of its harbingers, Satan will be reinstated, an essential element in the repair of the Throne of God, which had been damaged, presumably, during the War in Heaven, and incomplete ever since.¹⁹

Isaac seems to have gone so far in his "faith in evil" as to become an advocate of the doctrine of apocatastasis, or theory of the "ultimate restoration of Satan." It should be added too that, since, in Judaism, authority tended to be fragmented rather than centralized, such speculations like these on the place and destiny of evil could never become a matter of dogma or doctrine but remained discretionary and open. It is not surprising, therefore, that later in the Renaissance we find Christian writers turning to Cabala and also to gnostic sources, with which it is connected, for nuances and explanations in this matter of evil when they found their own traditions insufficiently comprehensive.

Generally it seems that this problem of evil, which was already an important and characteristic element in early Cabala, becomes a matter of extensive and obsessive concern in *The Zohar*, where, for example, an opportunity is never missed to elucidate the very ambiguous issue of the “use of evil to overcome evil.” *The Zohar* concludes its discussion of one of the most obvious and notorious Biblical examples of this situation, Jacob’s cheating Esau out of his birthright, by claiming flatly: “It was in this way that Jacob dealt with Esau, who was on the other side, so as to outwit him by craft, as was necessary in order to keep the upper hand of him from the beginning to the end, as befitted” [*Zohar II*, 114–15]. This use of “the weapons of the enemy” is thereby not only prescribed but also commanded and *enjoined*. It is not peculiar, therefore, according to *The Zohar*, that Job was punished, because his vice was that of an excessive and self-conscious purity, a sort of complacency or pride, besetting sin of the good, or those who like to think of themselves as such:

And when Job made sacrifices, he did not give Satan any part whatsoever . . . had he done so, the Accuser would not have been able to prevail against him. Hence in the end he only took what was his due. As to the question which might be asked, why then did God allow Job to suffer thus, the answer would be that had he given Satan his due, the “unholy side” would have separated itself from the holy, and so allowed the latter to ascend undisturbed into the highest spheres; but since he did not do so, the Holy One let justice be executed on him. Mark this! As Job kept evil separate from good and failed to fuse them, he was judged accordingly: first he experienced good, then what was evil, then again good. For man should be cognizant of both good and evil, and turn evil itself into good. This is a deep tenet of faith. [*Zohar III*, 109]

The Two Sources of Morality and Religion

Certainly a founding narrative for Cabala would be the story of Moses’ return to Mount Sinai, there to receive, along with another

edition of the Decalogue, literally “in his ear” (another meaning of Cabala, from which we get the modern *cabal*, denoting something that tends to be whispered, conspired, and secret rather than written and open), an oral *supplement* that would make the revised written rendition tolerable. The episode of the worship of the Golden Calf having revealed that humanity is unready to confront the challenge of the naked written word, just *there*, demanding attention and devotion—not until a Day of Judgment perhaps, or other messianic event, we need, in the meantime (and Cabala is an ideology for this *mean-time*, or time of exile), the constant help, consolation, warmth, and life of this spoken wisdom. Cabala’s function is at once a guiding, sheltering, and challenging one, from which the idea and reminder of a *voice* is never very far away, like a parent, the sound of whose very words connotes care for the child, encouraging, calming, and reassuring, gently correcting and explaining when there’s been misbehavior or when upsetting or contradictory things happen.

The association of oral and written, already implied by Torah, with Cabala becomes a formal rule and, in fact, its very reason for being. Dating from that time of primordial revelation of human insufficiency and dependency, symbolized by the need for a second Mosaic ascent, according to Cabala, the written and the oral have coexisted: “Since the only aim and object of the Holy One in sending man into this world is that he may know and understand that *YHVH* is *Elohim*. This is the sum of the whole mystery of the Faith, of the whole Torah, of all that is above and below, of the written and Oral torah, all together forming one unity. The essence of the mystery of Faith is to know that this is a complete Name. This knowledge that *YHVH* is one with *Elohim* is indeed the synthesis of the whole Torah, both of the Written and the Oral, the former being symbolic of *YHVH* and the latter of *Elohim*” [*Zohar IV*, 58].

As with the confirmation of a cosmic and “righteous” place for evil, this dialogue, symbiosis, and dialectic between a written and oral Torah, which so pervades *The Zohar*, was already amply adumbrated earlier in the Cabala of Isaac the Blind, according to whom no written Torah is even conceivable without an oral one. As paraphrased by Scholem, from an important fragment left by Isaac, “we find a conception according to which there simply is no Written

Torah within reach of the ordinary mortal. Everything we call by that name has already passed through the mediation of the Oral Torah . . . The Torah scroll itself symbolizes that. The ink and the parchment form a unity. But the element rendered visible by the ink is the blackness, the 'obscure mirror' of the Oral Torah; the true secret of the Written Torah, which embraces everything, is contained in the signs, still not visible, of the white parchment."²⁰

Just as in this striking image (that may recall Mallarmé, who made us very much aware of the whiteness of the page) of the materiality of the writing, perceptible only because of the emptiness it shows against, so the word and the letter come together for Cabala. The written and the spoken here are intertwined inseparably, analagous, if not identical to other borders, margins, and divisions across which traffic continues to flow—such as Heaven and Earth, Human and Angel, Evil and Good, Man and Woman, Jew and Muslim, Living and Dead, Wise and Foolish—leaving it to the imagination of contemporaries to supply the current polarities between which there is still, hopefully, some flow.

Strategically, then, the very notion of Cabala, that of a written law, is a way of dealing with a present that is likely to be making very different demands and posing other problems than the past, without sacrificing the orientation and anchoring provided by the "sacred" written word. An oral line can change with the times, and, as in *The Zohar*, where opinions frequently differ on issues and difficulties are often resolved in conversation, an opinion expressed verbally is intrinsically less permanent. From the point of view of the oral, the *spirit*, which has to do, as conveyed etymologically by "inspiration," with breath and breathing, would be what matters. With the spoken word a mutability or drift is immediately there, not only in the process of production and amplification but in the aspect of reception and dissemination; and this quality of contingency returns us necessarily to the spirit or intention behind the word, as supported by the gestural or body language that accompanies it. In respect to the written word, and especially when its author would be the divine, the *spirit*, of course, still is all-important—in Torah the *spirit* is the letter, inseparably, unalterably, unchangeably. Nevertheless writing involves intrinsically the illusion or suggestion of permanence, whether product of a divine authority or of a demonic impertinence. What, for instance, expresses the

unmodifiability of the decalogue with which Moses descended is their status as inscribed, therefore staying elements in an otherwise passing world. If commentary has found an oral component to be implicit in Torah, on the other hand, in Cabala, and preeminently in The Zohar, the written text is its own commentary, since it is replete with signals of its essential oral accompaniment. "Cabala," anyway (and *cabal*), means something conspired, that is whispered and received in each other's ear.

A written Zohar thereby absorbs much of the fluidity, flexibility, and possibility for confusion, fragmentation, and correction that would belong to a spoken one, thereby altering, by making more contingent, also the way we read and understand Torah. This impermanence in The Zohar is intensified further because it is a text, which, even though it claims divine provenance and inspiration, has never, unlike Torah, assumed a final, set, and authoritative form. The very notion of what exactly comprises it is fluid, since for every scholar, editor, translator, certainly every era, it seems to be something else, not to mention even *what* it means!

Traditionally (Cabala means "tradition" also, in the sense of something absorbed, "drunk with one's mother's milk," as we say, or told to us by our elders), Cabala thinks of itself as the vehicle of a body of lore, therefore, that was given to Moses directly from God, in the form of an *other* revelation he received (Cabala also means "reception") at the same time when he was given the literal written one in its material embodiment of the ten commandments. Cabala then is the Renaissance Latinization of the Hebrew word *cabal*, making of it a singular noun of the feminine gender, appropriately also, since another attribute of Cabala is to supply a softer feminine presence, known as the *Shekinah* (which in precabalist Jewishness meant simply "divine immanence"),²¹ to complement the severity of the male God or *Jehovah*. This, of course, involves a modification of a traditional image—which turns out to be somewhat of a misconception—of Judaism as a sexist religion. Recently, Raphael Patai, for instance, has done much to correct the distorted impression that Judaism was (is) so exclusively patriarchal. Interestingly, the ancient worship of the feminine, was not, however, as Patai points out (relying on Philo), really an expression of the principle of mercy but one of severity and rigor.²² The "softer," more

consoling Shekinah was a later creation, inspired perhaps by Christian worship of Mary. The feminine in the Jewish divine has come a long way since Leo Baeck insisted, seventy years ago, that such a notion was inconceivable: "Its language [Hebrew], plastic though it is, contains no word for 'goddess,' for the concept behind that word is alien to it."²³ The word *cabal* means ineluctably, then, in Hebrew that which is not, cannot be written down, the oral as opposed to written, but which the very substantial, though confusing (in the sense of who to ascribe them to) texts, the most illustrious of which is The Zohar, continue to *represent*. The very concept of an oral tradition that is written is a paradox in itself, which commentators, beginning at least as early as the Renaissance, have wondered about. Interesting also is the fact that The Zohar, now somewhat marginal in Jewish religious practice, or maybe relegated to cult status, was widely considered a sacred text for three or four hundred years, that is, treasured and revered as divinely inspired, along with the Torah and its canonical commentaries. This changed when Enlightenment rationalism and then nineteenth-century Jewish positivist scholarship attacked the mystical currents, especially Cabala, that were held responsible for messianic "excesses" of the previous centuries. The best known of these were the seventeenth-century apocalyptic movement of Sabbatai Zevi and Joseph Frank's eighteenth-century Sabbatian cult—both masters of what Scholem calls a "heretical Cabala," the first notable for eschatological deviation (principally claiming to be the messiah), culminating in conversion to Islam; the second for conversion to Catholicism, cooperating in the infamous "blood libel" (whereby Jews were accused of murdering Christian children, so as to drink their blood at Passover), and for polygamous-incestuous sexual orgies and rites.

This paradox of an oral tradition-in-writing as embodied in The Zohar was certainly evident, especially to the opponents of Cabala, even during the centuries of its greatest prestige, approximately between 1500 and 1700. Yet the damage of the contradiction may have been contained and attenuated by The Zohar's peculiarly fragmented and "dialogic" style. It is the burden of *this* particular written text, so obsessed with voice and voicing, to demonstrate so vividly and constantly, and to embody the existence and importance of an oral tradition, not only in its content, but also in its typically conversational way of proceeding. What happens when people are

allowed to talk, as Bakhtin has called to our attention in his studies of the “festive” style of Rabelais and Dostoevsky, is a threat to all central power and control. So, here, in *The Zohar*, where each has their say, authority—even the most commanding one, that of the legendary Rabbi Simon ben Yohai, to whom the original is attributed by de Leon, finder of the manuscript, whom many haven’t believed anyway—is always provisional, temporary, distributed, questionable, and frequently questioned.

A problem of accreditation, for instance, arises at one point when it is mentioned that the books, presumably Indian or Zarathustrian of “the children of the East” are identical in many respects to the teachings of *The Zohar*.²⁴ A similarity might be the presence of *gilgul*, or something like a doctrine of reincarnation, referred to at times in *The Zohar*, and growing in importance in the later Cabala but inexistent in Torah, as in mainstream Judaism. An essential aspect, additionally, of the theodicy of Sankara Vedanta, well established by the time of the inception of Cabala in the thirteenth century, was a separation of Brahman into upper and lower categories, of which only the lower was knowable. On a different register, this dichotomy was the basis of the pioneering explorations of Rudolf Otto into correspondences between the mystical systems of East and West. In *Mysticism East and West*, Otto compares Eckhart and Sankara, stressing however, for the former, a dichotomy between Godhead and God, that would parallel the cabalistic distinction between *Ain Soph* and the *Sephiroth*. Sankara (c. 788–820/50 A.D.) insisted that only the “upper” Brahman was real, all below being merely illusion; but the thirteenth-century Vedantic reformer, Ramanuja, insisted on “reality” for the lower realm as well, so in a sense, as for the cabalists with which he was contemporary, in the theurgic possibilities of the lower to influence the higher. The debate between Ramanuja and Sankara is the classic one between immanence and transcendence, respectively. In cabalistic terms this would surely mean the opposition between the intimate revelation of the *Sephiroth*, always here and now, and the distant secrecy of the *Ain Soph*, forever somewhere else. This maybe explains why some intellectually very exigent Christians were attracted to Cabala like bees to honey: that god-man, Jesus, would be the incarnation of a miracle that has long eluded philosophers, that of an *immanent* transcendence and a *transcendent* immanence.²⁵