

# THE EXEGETICAL CRAFT OF THE *ZOHAR*: TOWARD AN APPRECIATION

by

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As a consequence of the specialization that thrives in current humanistic studies, it is not surprising that scholarship has tended to classify the literary creations of the past into fixed compartments. In the study of medieval Judaism, it is particularly common to follow the traditional division of disciplines into philosophy, Kabbalah, and rabbinism—a categorization that was indeed promoted by the medievals themselves.<sup>1</sup> Following this way of thinking, the study of Rashi's biblical commentaries would be assigned to one class of scholars devoted to the study of rabbinic Judaism; Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* to experts in Jewish philosophy; and the *Zohar* to yet a third group consisting of specialists in Jewish mysticism.

As helpful as such a division of labor may be, we should not lose sight of

1. Some aspects of the interrelationships between the three medieval Jewish disciplines of "talmudism," philosophy, and Kabbalah are explored by I. Twersky, "Talmudists, Philosophers, Kabbalists: The Quest for Spirituality in the Sixteenth Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. B. Cooperman (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1983), pp. 431–457. The classification underlies the fourfold division employed in R. Bahya b. Asher's commentary to the Pentateuch (to which he adds the method of *peshat* interpretation).

the fact that these kinds of classifications tend to obscure the individuality of sources which can often, when taken on their own terms, prove notoriously difficult to pigeonhole. In the specific context of medieval Judaism, we must bear in mind that philosophers and mystics alike saw themselves as operating within the tradition defined by the Talmud and Midrash, whose more profound or mysterious contents they were venturing to expound. Moreover, several leading kabbalists, the author of the *Zohar* among them, arrived at the way of mystic contemplation only after having mastered the curriculum of philosophical study.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it should not come as a surprise that in actual fact the disciplines tend to overlap a great deal.

In the following pages, we shall be examining some passages from the *Zohar* that illustrate its author's talents as a biblical exegete and homilist. Because no other work of medieval Jewish thought has become so synonymous with the Kabbalah, virtually all academic study of the *Zohar* has approached it as a document of Jewish mysticism. Aside from some studies that have dealt with historical questions of authorship and philology, and an occasional literary interest in various narrative motifs, *Zohar* research has been devoted almost exclusively to the investigation of the author's kabbalistic doctrine.<sup>3</sup>

While there is no denying the importance of such studies, they do not always give appropriate recognition to other important aspects of the work. For instance, a considerable proportion of the *Zohar* deals with content that

2. On the Maimonidean apprenticeships of R. Moses de Leon and his fellows, see D. Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment* (New York, 1983), pp. 5–6; G. Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York, 1974), p. 432, etc. Abraham Abulafia is another example of a mystic who continued to build upon the implications of Maimonides' philosophy; see M. Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (Albany, N.Y., 1988), pp. 2–3 and index. I cannot think of any figure of significance who took the reverse route; i.e., progressing from Kabbalah to rationalism.

3. This impression is borne out by a perusal of various bibliographies of medieval Judaism and Kabbalah; e.g., J. H. A. Wijnhoven, "Medieval Jewish Mysticism," in *Bibliographical Essays in Medieval Jewish Studies: The Study of Judaism II* (New York, 1976), pp. 269–332. It is also shared by E. Wolfson, "Left Contained in the Right: A Study in Zoharic Hermeneutics," *AJS Review* 11 (1986): 27–52, esp. p. 27 and n. 2. Wolfson himself presents an instructive attempt at tracing the treatment of various themes through the *Zohar*. Whatever scholarly attention has been attracted by the literary merits of the *Zohar* seems to have been confined to the narrative structures, especially the exotic old men and *wunderkinder* who populate its pages. This has influenced the selections of I. Tishby and F. Lechover, *Mishnat Ha-Zohar* (Jerusalem, 1957); Matt, *Zohar*, etc. (Matt makes some perceptive observations on the literary methods of the *Zohar* on pp. 25–32). A significant exception to the above generalizations is Louis Ginzberg's *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1910–46), who cites the *Zohar* with frequency and erudition as an important link in the chain of medieval aggadic development.

is not identifiably mystical or kabbalistic (or is only peripherally so), belonging to the realms of moralism and homiletics. The *Zohar* is, of course, structured not as a treatise on mysticism or the theory of the *sefirot*, but as a talmudic midrash, distinguished by its use of the classical *petihta* structures. In both form and content, it stands solidly in the tradition of rabbinic homiletics, though its place in that tradition has rarely been fully defined, and it is often omitted from general surveys and anthologies of Jewish biblical exegesis.

With the examples presented in the following pages, I hope to kindle some interest in the study of the *Zohar* among non-kabbalists, with a view to reclaiming it as a masterpiece of Jewish biblical exegesis and homiletics. Our method will involve selecting a number of problematic passages and themes in the literature of the Talmud and classical midrashic works, and surveying the treatment of these passages by medieval Jewish exegetes, especially those who we can presume were known to the *Zohar*'s author. Against this background, we can hope to arrive at the beginnings of an appreciation of the special place occupied by Rabbi Moses de Leon as a continuer of (and, I believe, as a landmark in) this tradition.

### *Benjamin's Necks*

With these goals in mind, let us proceed to our first example. In Genesis 45:14, after the emotionally charged scene in which Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers, it is related: "And Joseph fell upon the neck [צוארי] of Benjamin his brother and he wept. And Benjamin wept upon his neck [צוארי]." In a number of talmudic works we find attached to this verse a dictum explaining that "Joseph was weeping for the two Temples that would be destroyed; and Benjamin was weeping over the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh."<sup>4</sup>

Underlying these comments are the widespread midrashic assumptions that the biblical protagonists function as transhistorical archetypes representing eternal themes and values,<sup>5</sup> and that central personages of the Israelite past were endowed with varying degrees of prophetic inspiration, able to

4. *Genesis Rabbah* 93:7 and 93:12; ed. Theodor-Albeck (Jerusalem, 1965), pp. 1161, 1170. Targum Ps. Jonathan to the verse; TB *Megillah* 16b and other parallels cited by Albeck, p. 1170; Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 2:13; 5:355; M. M. Kasher, *Torah Shelemah* ad loc.

5. Heinemann, *Darkei Ha-Aggadah* (Jerusalem, 1974), pp. 32–34 (and p. 210, n. 88).

discern the future in their present experiences. More fundamental to our understanding of this passage is a technical point of Hebrew grammatical style. The Hebrew word that we translate as “neck,” *šavvar*, is often treated as a plural form. The use of singular and plural is, like everything else in a divinely written text, believed to be not accidental. The midrash is also alluding to some basic historical facts: the Temples in Jerusalem were housed in the tribal territory of Benjamin, while the sanctuary at Shiloh was situated in the region of Joseph’s son Ephraim.

If we bear in mind all the above factors, it is not difficult to understand how the homilist, inspired by the plural usage of Joseph weeping on (or, as the Hebrew permits, “over”) Benjamin’s “necks,” discerned in this episode a prophetic insight into the future destiny of Benjamin’s children.

Now all this works very neatly for the first part of the text, wherein Joseph laments over the two necks/temples of Benjamin. The second part, however, is more problematic. Benjamin is weeping over a single destroyed sanctuary. This would fit nicely if the word for “neck” appeared there in the singular form. Unfortunately, though, it does not. The symmetry of the homily, and its exegetical logic, are hence marred. Commentators over the ages have tried their hands at solving the problem. Several have drawn the conclusion that underlying the midrashic interpretations was a biblical text which did actually switch from the plural to the singular form, thereby supplying the basis for the homily. Unfortunately, no such text is known to have existed.<sup>6</sup>

Thus we find Rashi, in his explanation of the version of the passage in the Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 16b, doctoring the talmudic text, which began with the rhetorical objection “How many necks did Benjamin have?!” Rashi insists that the question be deleted, since the plural usage of “neck” is the rule rather than an exception. Ignoring for the moment the fact that the objectionable question is attested in all known manuscripts of the Talmud

6. See the critical apparatus to the Theodor-Albeck edition. The second clause, about Shiloh, is missing in most of the witnesses to the first instance. Albeck deals exhaustively with the textual evidence, noting that several authorities make reference to a singular form in the second part of the verse, which would obviate the need for the question that Rashi deletes. He notes that C. D. Ginsburg’s edition of the Masorah (London, 1926) records the singular form in the name of “other versions,” though no one else seems able to locate an actual manuscript with that reading. Cf. the remarks of R. Yedidiah Norzi, in his *Minḥat Shai*, who also questions the existence of such a reading on the basis of the known Masoretic traditions.

except for those which consistently accept Rashi's emendations,<sup>7</sup> it is clear (as some of the traditional commentators have observed) that in solving the one difficulty, Rashi has created another: i.e., without the emphasis on the singulars and plurals, there is no longer any visible textual basis for the homily!<sup>8</sup>

We might add a further objection. Allowing that the usage of singular and plural forms is of significance here, can we say the same of the homiletical equation between necks and sanctuaries? While midrashic associations can be built at times on the flimsiest of pretexts, a more substantial semantic similarity would have been preferable. The passages before us lack such semantic connection, a fact which constitutes a serious flaw in their aesthetic symmetry.

Enter the *Zohar*. In its discourse on the relevant passage in Genesis (*Vayyigash* 209b), we find the following:

R. Isaac proceeded to discourse on the verse: *Thy neck is like the tower of David builded with turrets, whereon there hang a thousand shields, all the armor of the mighty men* [Cant. 4:4].

*The tower of David*, he said, signifies the heavenly Jerusalem, of which it is written: "*The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runneth into it, and is set up on high*" [Prov. 18:10]; the phrase *on high* pointing to the tower above.

*Thy neck* signifies the Temple below, which stands as the perfection of beauty like the neck in the human body. Just as the neck constitutes the beauty of the body, so does the Temple contain the beauty of the whole world.

*Builded with turrets* [Heb. *talpiyyot*, which suggests: "mound of mouths"], that is, a mound toward which all men turn their gaze when they open their mouths to offer prayer and praise.<sup>9</sup>

*Whereupon there hang a thousand shields*, alluding to the thousand cosmic

7. See E. L. Segal, "'The Goat of the Slaughterhouse . . .':—On the Evolution of a Variant Reading in the Babylonian Talmud," *Tarbiz* 49 (1979–80): 50.

8. See the objection of R. Josiah Pinto (the Rif to *Ein Jacob*) regarding the dubious coherence of the connection once the question is deleted. Several of the supercommentaries to Rashi on the Pentateuch make their own attempts to justify the talmudic reading by positing finer grammatical distinctions, such as the following: True, the plural is used in both clauses; in one, however, it is normal (in the construct form), while in the other it is unusual (as a possessive). See the commentaries of R. Elijah Mizrahi and the *Gur Arieh*. All of this strikes us, of course, as a bit too subtle and elaborate to have been presupposed by the midrashic texts under discussion.

9. Cf. *Berakhot* 30a, etc.

reconstructions that are performed there. . . . Just as all a woman's ornaments are hung about her neck, so all the ornaments of the world are hung about the Temple.

Similarly, in the passage *To our very neck we are pursued* [Lam. 5:5]—for the sake of the Temple, which is the neck and the beauty of the entire world, we are pursued. *We labor and have no rest*, that is, we have exerted ourselves to build the Temple twice . . . but they have not permitted us, and it was destroyed and has not been rebuilt afterwards. Even as the whole body perishes when the neck is cut off, so as soon as the Temple was destroyed and its light extinguished, the whole world was plunged into darkness, and there was no light of sun and heaven and earth and stars. . . .

Hence, Joseph wept on account of this. After he had wept for this, he wept for the tribes that were to go into exile. For as soon as the Temple was destroyed, all the tribes were exiled and scattered among the nations.<sup>10</sup>

In the hands of the *Zohar*, the midrashic association between the fates of the sanctuaries and the necks of the brothers has taken on new significance. It is not merely the mechanical wordplay of a *gezerah shavah*, as one often finds in midrash, but rather it graphically reflects the special place occupied by the Temple in the “body” of the Jewish people. Arguably, the least of the *Zohar's* achievements here lies in the fact that it has called our attention to the verses in Song of Songs in which the neck of the beloved is compared to a tower. For Rabbi Moses de Leon, this is merely the starting point for a series of poignant associations that develop a variety of meaningful themes. Using the neck imagery as suggested in various biblical and rabbinic texts, the Temple is singled out at once as the pride of the Jewish people, and as a vulnerable vital organ in the “spiritual body” of the nation and of humanity, the channel through which prayers are directed to the Almighty. These qualities were cruelly overturned by the ultimate tragedy of Jewish history, the destruction of Israel's Temples and the consequent state of historical and metaphysical Exile. Though the mystical symbolism of the *sefirot* and the exile of God's *Shekhinah* certainly underlies the author's portrayal of the situation, the principal themes can be appreciated by a Jew nurtured on traditional rabbinic values, even if he is unfamiliar with the minutiae of kabbalistic doctrine.

The homily is so eloquent in its structure, and in its erudite stringing

10. Translations from the *Zohar* are based on those of H. Sperling and M. Simon (London, 1978), with minor changes.

together of appropriate biblical and rabbinic quotations to make its point, that we might easily overlook the author's solution to the technical problem that flawed the midrashic homily upon which his own is based: the problem of the "two necks." How does Rabbi Moses de Leon explain his sources' failure to supply an appropriate exegetical basis for Benjamin's weeping over the destruction of the sanctuary at Shiloh? His solution to the difficulty is to be found in the following paragraph of the *Zohar*:

Scripture thus tells us, *And he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them* [Gen. 45:15], that is to say, *for* them. He wept for all of them, for the twofold destruction of the Temple and for his brethren the ten tribes that went into exile and were scattered among the nations.

The implied answer, of course, is that he chooses not to salvage the problematic midrash at all, but rather to supply one of his own. Instead of focusing on the inconsistencies in the use of the singular and plural forms of Benjamin's necks, for which (following Rashi's critique) there is no convincing grammatical or textual justification, Rabbi Moses de Leon elects to build his homily on a comparison between the two different weepings by Joseph. In verse 14 he weeps over Benjamin's necks; i.e., over the destruction of the two Temples; while in verse 15, "and he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them," over the exile of the entire nation. The midrashic exposition of Benjamin's lament on Joseph's neck is exegetically unwarranted, and therefore best ignored. The *Zohar's* own reference to the "twofold destruction" is now simply a historical fact, rather than the product of dubious exegesis. By choosing this option, Rabbi Moses de Leon is able to broaden the thematic range of his discourse. Rather than dwelling upon the single motif of the loss of the Temple, he can direct his *derashah* to a highly effective analysis of the Exile, a topic which may have been of more immediate relevance to his target audience, and one which is central to the symbolism of the *Zohar* as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

But there is a further dimension to the *Zohar's* aptitude for "creative midrash." Rabbi Moses de Leon's agility at pulling together relevant scriptural texts inspired him to produce yet another original homiletical variation on our passage, one which adds a further set of insights to the theme.

Elsewhere in Genesis is found another description of brothers falling in

11. See Matt, *Zohar*, pp. 15 ff.

tears upon each other's necks: in the encounter between Esau and Jacob, following the latter's long sojourn away from home (Gen. 33:4). Here, however, we find that the unvocalized word for "neck" is actually in the singular, though the traditional pronunciation, the *qere*, instructs us to read it as plural, precisely like the wording of the Joseph-Benjamin episode. The similarity of style is not lost on Rabbi Moses de Leon. It is here, according to the *Zohar*, that we should look for significance. Esau—who according to the venerable Jewish typology is identified with the wicked Roman Empire,<sup>12</sup> responsible for the destruction of the Second Temple—is providing a prophetic foreshadowing of the fact that one (and only one) Temple is destined to be destroyed by Rome. The text (*Vayyishlah* 171b) may be suggesting that this tragedy came as a punishment for Jacob's excessive readiness to submit and humble himself before his evil brother.<sup>13</sup>

*And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him; and they wept.* The shorter form *savvaro* [singular] is written here instead of [the plural] *savvarav* [the *qere*]. Said Rabbi Isaac: . . . One "neck"—this is Jerusalem, which is the neck of the universe. *He fell on his neck* rather than on his "necks." For the Temple was destroyed twice, once by Babylonia and once by the seed of Esau, who fell upon it one time and destroyed it. Hence: *And he fell on his neck*—a single one.

The *Zohar's* exegetical achievement here is impressive. Rabbi Moses de Leon's obvious familiarity with the full biblical corpus allows him to move beyond the confines of the particular chapter which he is expounding. By looking earlier in Genesis, and ahead to the Song of Songs, Proverbs, and elsewhere, he is able to disclose patterns that were not readily visible to other exegetes, and he succeeds in creating an aesthetically appealing and thematically integrated homily. And, I venture to suggest, it is not unlikely that he may in fact have, in some of the instances,<sup>14</sup> correctly reconstructed the original intentions of the midrashic homilists.<sup>15</sup> In true midrashic

12. Heinemann, *Darkei Ha-Aggadah*, pp. 11, 32, etc.

13. The gravity of his behavior would be magnified by the demonic status that typifies Esau in kabbalistic tradition; cf. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 274.

14. Referring to the various scriptural connections between necks and the towers of Jerusalem. For a survey of parallel materials, see Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* 5:309 (n. 264).

15. In the literature of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis, I am aware of only a single commentator to Genesis who addresses the question that the *Zohar* answers about the connection



fashion, he has presented the reader with two alternative homilies, distributed in two different places in the *Zohar*.

Since Rabbi Moses de Leon is presenting his work not as a commentary, but as a talmudic midrash in its own right, he need not confine himself to explaining the words of his predecessors. He is free to compose his own midrashim, ones that are from various perspectives superior to the ones that appear in our talmudic and midrashic texts. By comparing Joseph's weeping over Benjamin to Jacob's weeping over Esau, rather than to Benjamin's over Joseph, he has again produced a homily that is at least as poignant as the original, and yet free from the difficulties that encumbered the talmudic interpretations.

Note that the *Zohar* is not unique in citing the Song of Songs in a similar context. According to a tradition brought in *Canticles Rabbah* 7:5 and alluded to in *Genesis Rabbah* 3:9, Song of Songs 7:5, "Thy neck is as a tower of ivory," is cited in order to prove a very different point.

[Esau] wished to bite [Jacob], but our father Jacob's neck was transformed into marble, and the teeth of that wicked man were blunted and softened like wax. Why is it written *and they wept*? Rather, one [Jacob] was weeping for his neck, while the other [Esau] was weeping for his teeth. R. Abahu in the name of R. Eleazar proved it from here: *Thy neck is as a tower of ivory*.<sup>16</sup>

The contrast between the respective uses of the verse in the midrash and in the *Zohar* could hardly be clearer. Both employ a similar method of association, searching for texts that juxtapose necks and towers. The midrash uses it to build an amusing, but not terribly edifying, slapstick that may have served to satisfy some of its audience's frustrated rage against Roman oppression. In the *Zohar*, it becomes a profound and sensitive statement that emphasizes the sanctity of the Jerusalem Temple, the tragedy of its de-

between necks and temples: namely, R. Bahya ben Asher, who, in his commentary to Gen. 45:14 (ed. C. Chavel [Jerusalem, 1941], p. 355), adds: "And because the neck is at the top of a man's body, it was employed as an analogy for the Temple, which is situated at the top of the mountain." Note also his reference to Song of Songs 8:1, and his explanation of why the neck would semantically be treated as a plural. On R. Bahya's familiarity with parts of the *Zohar*, see Chavel's introduction, pp. 16–17 and literature cited there; E. Gottlieb, *Ha-Qabbalah be-Khitvei R. Bahya ben Asher* (Jerusalem, 1970).

16. For an analysis of parallels and textual information, see Albeck's notes to *Genesis Rabbah*, p. 927. An interesting variation on this passage is in fact found in the *Zohar* to Gen. 33:4.

struction, and the inexorable fatalism that determined Esau/Rome's role in that greatest of Jewish national (and, for the *Zohar*, cosmic) catastrophes.

### *Counting the 'Omer*

As our next example, let us look at the *Zohar's* treatment of another pentateuchal passage, this time the law in Leviticus 23:9–22 which prescribes the ritual of the 'omer. The biblical text, elaborated in rabbinic tradition, speaks of a complex structure of precepts and symbols: the harvesting of an 'omer of barley; its being brought and waved before the Lord by the priest "on the morrow of the sabbath" of Passover to the accompaniment of specified sacrifices; the permitting of the new grain-crop, which has hitherto been forbidden; the counting of seven weeks from the day of the bringing of the 'omer, and the offering of the two loaves of bread (*shte'i ha-lehem*) made of leavened wheat-flour on the fiftieth day, along with the accompanying sacrifices. An ancient halakhic tradition identifies the feast of Shavu'ot with the day of the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, a fact which influenced the interpretations which were subsequently given to the law of the 'omer and which defined the festival in the liturgy as "the time of the giving of our Torah."<sup>17</sup>

Given the rabbinic emphasis on the connection between Pentecost and the Sinaitic revelation, one would expect that the rituals of the 'omer would be interpreted in the same context. It therefore comes as something of a surprise that the 'omer, as far as I have been able to discern, is not interpreted as anything other than a purely agricultural ritual of thanksgiving. In the standard works of the talmudic period we do not find any statements which link the rationale for the counting of the 'omer to the revelation at Mount Sinai.<sup>18</sup> This theme, as we shall observe below, was to assume importance at a later date, and would be cited by some medieval authors in the name of the Midrash.

The connection between the counting of the 'omer and the receiving of

17. Most of the relevant materials and issues are summarized by I. Jacobson, *Netiv Binah* (Tel-Aviv, 1978), 4:87–94.

18. E.g., the extended pericopes on this precept in *Leviticus Rabbah* 28 (ed. M. Margolies [Jerusalem, 1972], p. 648–667); *Pesiqta de-Rav Kahana* 8 (ed. B. Mandelbaum [New York, 1962], pp. 135–145; trans. Braude and Kapstein [Philadelphia, 1975], p. 155); *TB Rosh ha-Shanah* 16a, etc.

the Torah was expounded by Maimonides in the *Guide of the Perplexed* III:49.

Shavu'ot is the day of the receiving of the Torah, and because of the greatness and exaltedness of the day, we count the days from the first of the festivals until this occasion, just as one who is expecting his most intimate friend on a certain day counts the days and even the hours. It is for this reason that we count the days that pass following the offering of the 'omer, between the anniversary of our departure from Egypt and the anniversary of the Lawgiving. The latter was the aim and object of the Exodus from Egypt, and thus did God say, *I brought you unto myself* [Exod. 19:4].

Maimonides' interpretation is founded on a straightforward psychological observation about the connection between anticipation and counting days. The *Zohar* presents a very similar interpretation of the relationship between the counting of the 'omer and the receiving of the Torah, but with its own distinctive approach.<sup>19</sup>

*And you shall count from the morrow of the sabbath. . . .* Come and see: When Israel were in Egypt they were in the power of the Other Side [i.e., the forces of evil], and they were held in a state of uncleanness like a woman when she sits during her days of uncleanness. After being circumcised they entered the domain of holiness which is called "Covenant" [*berit*], and when they united with it the impurity ceased from them, even as a woman when the blood of her impurity ceases from her. After it has ceased what is written? *And she shall count seven days* [Lev. 15:28]—so also here, when they had entered the holy domain, their uncleanness ceased from them and the Holy One said: From now on there is a counting for purity. *And you shall count for yourselves*—precisely *for yourselves*, as it is written, *and she shall count for herself seven days*—"for herself," for her own sake; so also in our instance: "for yourselves," for your own sakes.<sup>20</sup> And why? In order to be cleansed by the sacred

19. Leviticus (vol. 2) 97. Cf. Al-Nakawa's *Menorat ha-Ma'or*, ed. H. Enelow (New York, 1949), 2:273, cited from *Midrash Yehi Or*. A number of central themes in the *Zohar's* account of the Exodus and its relationship to the Sinaitic revelation are discussed by Wolfson, "Left Contained in the Right." It is interesting to note that the author of the *Zohar* seems to be referring to the later practice of counting from the *end* of the period of uncleanness, not from the beginning, as should have been expected in a supposedly tannaic work.

20. Alluding to the *baraita* from *Sifra Nega'im/Mešora'* 9:1, cited in the name of Samuel in *Ketubbot* 72a: "Whence do we know that a menstruant may do her own counting? Because it says: *And she shall count for herself seven days* [Lev. 15:28]—*for herself* implies by herself." Cf. Nahmanides' commentary to Lev. 23:15, discussed below.

celestial waters, and afterwards to unite with the King and receive the Torah. There [in the case of the menstruating woman] *And she shall count for herself seven days, here: seven weeks . . .*

It is probably safe to assume that Rabbi Moses de Leon's point of departure was the exposition of Maimonides. It will therefore be instructive to discern how his treatment of the subject differs from the Maimonidean explanation of the commandment.

As in our previous example, the novelty of Rabbi Moses de Leon's approach is fueled initially by his creative use of stylistic associations, which leads him to ponder similar phraseology elsewhere in the Bible. In this case, he is building upon the fact that one of the few other instances in the Torah of a command to count days occurs with regard to the woman who has become unclean and must count seven clean days before she is permitted to resume relations with her husband. The male-female relationship fits well into the standard mythology of the *Zohar*, which repeatedly compared the *Shekhinah*, the mystical representation of the divine presence among the Jewish people, to a woman who has been separated from her husband the King (the main body of the *sefirot* structure, especially the *sefirah Tif'eret*). The mission of restoring unity in the divine realm is, of course, the central theme of kabbalistic religiosity, and this blends well with the perception of the Sinaitic theophany as a unique "marriage" between God and His people. This kind of erotic imagery is typical of the *Zohar*.<sup>21</sup> The association with matters of purity and defilement also leads naturally to the identification of Egypt as an embodiment of uncleanness, a motif which has firm

21. The *Zohar* in the continuation of this passage develops in elaborate detail the symbolism of Shavu'ot as "the night when the bride was to be rejoined to her husband," a theme which is also found elsewhere (e.g., in the "prologue" to the work, p. 8b). A similar motif is cited in the name of a "midrash" in *Sefer Abudraham* ("ha-Shalem" [Jerusalem, 1959]), p. 241, ("Laws for Counting the 'Omer"): "The Midrash offers an additional reason: It is analogous to one who was incarcerated in a prison, who cried out to the king to set him free and give him his daughter. He continued to count until the awaited time. Thus did the Israelites do at the time of the Egyptian Exodus." While the addition of the new motif of anticipated marriage to the daughter may be a diluted allusion to the *Zohar*, it does not necessarily presuppose the *Zohar*'s comparison to the *niddah*, but could follow naturally from the twofold significance of the events: the Exodus itself (= freedom from incarceration) followed by the Sinaitic revelation (= marriage covenant).

roots in early rabbinic tradition,<sup>22</sup> and which is elaborated elsewhere in the *Zohar*.<sup>23</sup>

The author of the *Zohar*, it must be observed, was not the only medieval exegete to note the stylistic parallels between Lev. 23:15 and 15:28. Naḥmanides' commentary to Lev. 23:15<sup>24</sup> contains a detailed discussion of the various types of counting that are commanded by the Torah.

*And you shall count lakhem [unto you]*—The meaning thereof is similar to the expression *And you shall take lakhem* [Lev. 23:40], thus establishing that the counting [of the forty-nine days of the 'omer] and the taking [of the *lulav*, *etrog*, etc., on the festival of Tabernacles] be done by each and every person. Thus the counting must be done by word of mouth, and he should mention the number, just as our rabbis<sup>25</sup> have received it by tradition. This is unlike the expressions *and he shall count to himself seven days for his cleansing* [Lev. 25:13]; *then she shall number to herself seven days*, because if they so wish, they may remain in their impurity; they must only beware not to forget their impurity.

Naḥmanides, while noting the similarity of wording, is careful to emphasize the vital difference between the counting of the 'omer and the enumeration of days of impurity. In the latter case, the counting does not constitute an obligation per se. It is prescribed only if the individual wishes to become ritually pure, or if he or she plans to perform an activity that requires levitical fitness. By contrast, the verbal counting of the 'omer is an absolute duty in its own right.

As regards the strictly halakhic concepts involved, Naḥmanides' analysis appears to be correct. It nonetheless leaves itself open to a serious objection. If the legal status of the two precepts is really so different, then how are we to account for a similarity of phraseology—"for yourselves/herself"—that seems to suggest misleadingly that the counting of the 'omer is also an

22. *Mekhilta d-Rabbi Ishmael*, *pisha* 1:1, and many other instances in talmudic literature. The defilement of Egypt is traced variously to its association with the wicked Ham or, more commonly, to the proliferation of idolatry, sorcery, and other abominations in that land.

23. E.g., *Zohar* to Genesis, pp. 1:81b, 1:83a; see Matt's remarks, *Zohar*, p. 220.

24. Cited here from the English translation of C. Chavel: *Ramban: Commentary on the Torah* (New York, 1974), vol. 3.

25. *Menahot* 66a, cited by Chavel in his note.

optional practice proposed for the convenience of the individual?<sup>26</sup> Naḥmanides offers no clear justification for the phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, the *Zohar* is responding to the difficulties that were implicit in Naḥmanides' exegesis. On a strictly halakhic level, the two laws may indeed function differently; on an aggadic plane, however, there exists a profound parallelism. Just as the procedures for menstrual purification were set down for the convenience of the woman, in order to permit the resumption of conjugal relationships, so was the counting of the 'omer established in consideration for the spiritual yearning of the Israelites for intimate knowledge of God as manifested in the revelation of the Torah.

The advantages of the pseudepigraphic presentation are again evident. Instead of merely composing a supercommentary or critical gloss to Naḥmanides, Rabbi Moses de Leon has produced an alternative midrash which takes off from the same stylistic observations as his predecessor, but succeeds in organizing the material in such a manner that he is able not only to sidestep the weakness of Naḥmanides' explanation, but actually to turn them to his advantage, integrating them with other thematic elements in order to produce a homily that is fully consistent with the *Zohar's* distinctive religious symbolism.

A significant difference between the *Zohar* and Maimonides lies in their respective treatments of the historical dimension of the ritual.<sup>27</sup> Maimonides is careful to note that it is "we" who do the counting from Passover to Pentecost, as distinct from the original Israelites at the time of the Exodus, who were presumably unaware then of the precise date on which the Torah was scheduled to be revealed. By explaining the precept in this manner, he is establishing a distance between the one-time events of the Exodus and the permanent rituals that have been established to commemorate these events. The anticipation of the Sinaitic revelation on Shavu'ot did not form part of the consciousness of the liberated Israelites; it is a feeling that is inspired only by the hindsight of subsequent generations, who are conscious of the significance of the respective festivals. Thus, the commemoration here (as

26. R. Moses de Leon likely had in mind such rabbinic passages as R. Simeon b. Laqish's comment (*Sotah* 34b, etc.) to Num. 13:2: "Send thou—at your own will" (Rashi: "I am not commanding you . . .").

27. For similar problems in talmudic homiletics, see M. Bregman, "Past and Present in Midrashic Literature," *Hebrew Annual Review* 2 (1978): 55–58.

distinct from rituals like the Passover seder) is not intended to be a full *reenactment* of the feelings of the generation of the Exodus.

Such fine distinctions of historical perspective may be suitable for a rationalist scholar like Maimonides,<sup>28</sup> but they are probably too subtle to serve the more immediate homiletical ends of supplying inspiration and motivation for the religious observances of ordinary Jews. It was probably a similar consideration that prompted the following variation on Maimonides' interpretation, cited in the Italian halakhic compendium *Shibbolei ha-Leqet* by Rabbi Zedekiah ben R. Abraham ha-Rofeh, a work roughly contemporary with the *Zohar*.<sup>29</sup>

And it states in an aggadic midrash: Why did Scripture connect the day of Shavu'ot to counting, something it did with no other festival? This is because when Israel were told that they would be leaving Egypt, it was announced that they would be receiving the Torah at the end of fifty days after the Exodus, as it says: *When you take the people out of Egypt you shall worship [ta'abdun] God upon this mountain* [Exod. 3:12]. Now the *nun* of *ta'abdun* seems superfluous. Rather, it comes to teach you that at the end of fifty days [fifty is the numerical value of the letter *nun*] you shall worship God, that you shall receive the Torah. And Israel, out of its love, would count each day, saying: Behold, one day has passed, and the second day, and so throughout; because to them it seemed like a long time, owing to their great yearning. For this reason the counting was established for subsequent generations.<sup>30</sup>

Through the use of a simple *gimatria*, the author of this "midrash" is able to demonstrate that the date of the Lawgiving had already been revealed to Moses at the outset of his career. Accordingly, the children of Israel spent the period leading to that event impatiently counting the days, an experience which later generations of Jews would reenact annually in the ritual of the counting of the *'omer*.

28. The rationality of the exposition is at any rate questionable. According to Maimonides' interpretation, Jews are being commanded to act out of eager anticipation for an event that has, after all, already taken place. This is designed to commemorate a historical occasion when this future-directed longing (at least, with respect to a fixed date) was not part of the feelings of the original participants.

29. Ed. S. Buber (Jerusalem, 1970), 110a (par. 236).

30. Cf. *Canticles Rabbah* 2:15 (cited in Arama's *'Aqedat Yişḥaq* to Lev. 23:15); Kasher, *Torah Shelemah, Emor* (Lev. 23:15), n. 103 and sources listed there. Additional medieval citations of similar "midrashim" can be found in Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 6:29 n. 175.

For the *Zohar*, the connections between past and present are so pervasive as not to require any explanation. The Israelites were aware not only that they would be receiving the Torah in fifty days, but also of the process of mystical sanctification which they would have to undergo in preparation for that event.

It is this point which accounts for what is perhaps the most significant change which Rabbi Moses de Leon has introduced into his explanation vis-à-vis Maimonides. This concerns the very function of the counting. For Maimonides, the counting is an expression of longing for the coming of the revelation. Other than giving utterance to the people's religious devotion to the Torah, the ritual is perceived as essentially a static one that leaves the individuals unchanged. By contrast, the *Zohar* envisages the counting as part of a powerful and dynamic cleansing process, by means of which the Jew is elevated from the depths of defilement to the heights of holiness. This is the process through which the ancient Israelites prepared themselves to stand before Mount Sinai, and (by implication) the path which can bring every Jew to the level of revelation.

What Rabbi Moses de Leon has done, at the most fundamental level, is to transform Maimonides' theoretical historical explanation of the 'omer law into a true homily, one that succeeds, in an aesthetically constructed literary unit, in conveying the full relevance of the topic to his contemporary audience. The *Zohar* is not only interpreting the past, but also inspiring and motivating the future religious behavior of its readers. To this extent, Rabbi Moses de Leon is replicating a normal function of classical midrash, as emulated by several other medieval sermonizers. Where he seems to excel is in the imaginative palette of techniques that he brings to bear on the task: an immense store of verbal and thematic associations (the counting for menstrual purification, the defilement of Egypt, etc.) and a knack for tying them all together in such a way that the rhetorical techniques effectively serve the purposes of the central theme. The true measure of his success lies in the dimension of inevitability that is evoked by the homily. Everything fits together so neatly that even a critical historical scholar remains haunted by the possibility that these allusions might, after all, have been intended by the biblical author.

In spite of these homiletical aims, we should not lose sight of the fact that what transpired at Mount Sinai was for Rabbi Moses de Leon, just as it was for Maimonides, an actual historical event that culminated in the revelation of the literal text of the Torah. While this observation might strike us



at first as absurdly obvious, it is really not so self-evident. Subsequent commentators, whether of rationalist<sup>31</sup> or kabbalistic<sup>32</sup> leanings, were often unable to resist the temptation to allegorize the event as a spiritual process that occurs continually within the individual soul. Rabbi Moses de Leon's reluctance to pursue such a course in this instance may be a further indication of his dependence on Maimonides' exposition of the commandment.

### *Closing Remarks*

The two passages that were examined in the preceding pages were selected virtually at random, having been encountered in connection with other topics of our research. The methods that were applied to their analysis were to a large extent the same ones that are routinely employed in the study of

31. E.g., the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*, in an explanation of the precept that is otherwise copied faithfully from Maimonides (#273, *Emor*, 'Asin 11; ed. C. Chavel, pp. 358–359), describes in great detail the Israelites' yearning to receive the Torah as they departed from Egypt. However, when it comes to summarizing the commandment, the author switches to the first person: "For all this demonstrates in us the mighty desire to reach that time . . . the number of days which we need to arrive at the offering of the two loaves of Pentecost," etc. For Don Isaac Abravanel as well, while following the basic outlines of Maimonides' explanation in his commentary to Lev. 23, Sinai marks not merely the receiving of the Torah, but the actual transformation of the Israelites into "rational beings capable of understanding." Cf. the elaborate treatment in Arama's *'Aqedat Yishaq*, where the author also wavers between historical and symbolic interpretations of the theophany. For example, he explains the fact that the Torah does not explicitly identify Shavu'ot as the day of the giving of the Torah as a consequence of the super-temporal dimension that attaches to the Torah and its revelation.

32. The implication is drawn out in R. Moses Alsheikh's commentary to Leviticus 23: "I believe that it is for this reason that these days were set apart for all generations, to save Israel, to support them in the improvement of their souls and hearts for the sake of Heaven until the advent of the festival of Shavu'ot . . . which requires preparation and purification in order to sanctify it through these days of cleansing." He goes on to explain all the specific rituals and offerings as symbolic spiritual preparations. Rabbi Eleazar of Worms in *Sefer ha-Rokeah* ("ha-Gadol" [Jerusalem, 1960], *Hilkhot ha-Omer*, par. 294, p. 162) equates the fifty days of the counting with the proverbial "fifty gates of wisdom," as does Recanati in his commentary to the passage. The translation of the revelation into psychological terms is especially prominent in the Hasidic homilies to Leviticus; e.g., Rabbi Elimelech of Lizensk in his *No'am Elimelekh* (ed. G. Nigal [Jerusalem, 1978], pp. 345–347), who interprets the harvesting of the 'omer as an allegory of the purification of man's thoughts; Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel in his *Ohev Yisra'el (Emor)*; R. Jacob Joseph of Polnoye's *Toledot Ya'aqov Yosef, Emor 7*, where the author relates the counting of the 'omer to the preparations which a man must make in the present world for the world-to-come; Rabbi Levi Isaac of Berditchev (*Qedushat Levi*, "Homily for the Counting of the 'Omer").

talmudic midrash or in the preparation of scholarly editions of medieval biblical commentaries; the identification of the authors' likely sources, and the comparison of their product with similar works by their contemporaries. In the case of the *Zohar*, the tools of midrashic studies proved more useful than those that we apply to normal biblical commentaries. Like the midrashim that he strove to emulate, Rabbi Moses de Leon does not tell us directly what he is doing in his *derashot*; he does not cite his sources by name, nor does he usually disclose why he has opted for a particular interpretation, other than by pinning his comments onto the technical books of midrashic and kabbalistic hermeneutics. To properly appreciate his achievement, we must uncover what he has elected to conceal, comparing his explanations of the various scriptural verses with those of the rabbinic homilists and medieval *parashanim* with whom we can presume he would have been familiar.

On the basis of only two examples, it would hardly be fair to attempt to paint a detailed portrait of Rabbi Moses de Leon the exegete. We are justified, however, in indicating, as a ground for future research, the following features that seem to typify and distinguish the exegetical craft of the *Zohar*.

The author was gifted with an uncanny facility for recalling stylistic and verbal parallels through the length and breadth of the Bible and talmudic literature. Having identified such a formal affinity, he is now able to smoothly translate it into a thematic or conceptual connection. A particular strength of the *Zohar's* artistry is to be found in the naturalness with which he draws the connections. The interpretations, created within the framework of accepted midrashic hermeneutical assumptions, and utilizing the rich and variegated symbolisms of the Kabbalah, come across as persuasive and coherent. In his ability to find and synthesize scattered verses and dicta, his method demonstrates a great similarity to that of some of the "later" midrashim, such as the *Tanḥuma-Yelammedenu*, which perform an analogous task of synthesizing individual comments from "classical" midrashic compilations into extended commentaries to the Bible.

While the energies of the *Zohar* are channeled primarily in the directions of kabbalistic hermeneutics and literary homiletics, it also makes a contribution to the textual interpretation of biblical and rabbinic literature. In the texts that we examined above, it was clear not only that the author had a passive familiarity with the relevant comments in the Talmud, Midrash, Rashi, Maimonides, and Naḥmanides, but that he had pondered them in considerable depth, noting the various difficulties that arose from the

respective interpretations. This important dimension of his achievement becomes apparent only after we take the trouble to identify and compare his sources, and observe how other commentators tried to cope with the same materials.

These observations also furnish some insights into one of the more perplexing problems of *Zohar* research, namely, the book's pseudepigraphic structure. While the most obvious reason for Rabbi Moses de Leon's passing off his work as an ancient midrash would be to ensure its acceptance, we noted in both our examples that the literary logic of the *Zohar's* construction offered an additional justification for the disguise. His self-assured handling of the earlier traditions brought him to the conviction that he was capable of composing alternative homilies that surpassed those in the classical sources that he was elaborating and were free from various difficulties to which they were subject. The standard commentary and homiletic genres as practiced in medieval Jewish literature did not offer adequate means of expressing his originality. This aim could only be achieved effectively by presenting the *Zohar* as a work of equal antiquity and authority to the rabbinic midrashim with which it was, at times, competing.

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