# THE LIBRARY OF THE PALACE

# 8

GIULIO BUSI

# SYMBOLS OF JEWISH TOUGHT



FPBP

Copyright © 2023 Fondazione Palazzo Bondoni Pastorio
All rights reserved.

Published by FPBP – Fondazione Palazzo Bondoni Pastorio
Via Marconi 34
46043 Castiglione delle Stiviere MN (Italy)
www.fondazione-bondonipastorio.eu

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction
1. Icon of Thought
2. Philology of Symbols

SYMBOLS OF JEWISH THOUGHT

‘Afar Dust
‘Ammud Column
Aryeh Lion
‘Ayin Eye, Source
Bayit House
‘Eden
Emet Truth
Eṣ Tree
Eš Fire
Galgal Wheel
Golem
Ḥalom Dream
Ḥorbah Destruction
Ḥošen Breastplate
‘Ir City
Kesef Silver
Kisse Throne
Kos Cup
Laylah Night
Lev Heart
Lilit
Liwyatan Leviathan
Luḥot Tablets
Magen Shield
Mal’ak Messenger, Angel

Man Manna
Mašiaḥ Anointed, Messiah
Maṣṣah Unleavened Bread
Mayim Water
Menorah Candelabrum
Merkavah Chariot
Mezuzah
Migdal Tower
Milah Circumcision
Naḥaš Serpent
Nešer Eagle, Griffin
Niddah Menstruation
Or Light
Qešet (Rain)bow
Qol Voice
Rimmon Pomegranate
Ruaḥ Wind, Spirit
Ša'ar Gate
Sabbaμyon
Šaḥar Dawn
Śaṭan Adversary
Sefirah
Ṣeḥoq Laughter
Šekinah Presence
Ṣel Shadow
Ṣelem Image
Šemeš Sun
Seneh Bush
Šeqeṭ Silence
Ṣimṣum Concealment, Contraction
Ṣiṣit Fringe
Šofar Horn
Šošan Lily, Rose
Sukkah Booth

Sullam Ladder
Ṭal Dew
Tefillin Phylacteries
Tevah Ark
Tiqqun Ornament, Restoration
Tohu wa-vohu Chaos and Void
Yareaḥ Moon
Yayin Wine
Yonah Dove
Zahav Gold
Zonah Prostitute

## INTRODUCTION

μικρὰ μεγάλων ἐποιοῦντο σύμβολα
Plutarch

### I. Icons of Thought

Traditional Hebrew teaching began with a methodical repetition of Bible verses, which the child recited aloud so that their sounds penetrated the memory and were absorbed by it. The patient guidance of the teacher accompanied the young pupil, perhaps only four or five years old, toward an intuitive, sensorial grasp of the sacred language. Sometimes, even before they could recognize the words, the child had learned to recognize the mysterious outlines of the Hebrew alphabet by tasting the forms of the letters spread with honey. A medieval text relates that “whenever a child is introduced to the study of the Torah,

letters are written for him on a board. The child is carefully washed and dressed. A girl kneads three small cakes of flour and honey for him, and he is given three hard-boiled eggs, apples, and other fruits [...] The letters of the alphabet are then read to him. The characters [on the board] are spread with honey and he is told to lick them.[1]"

These strategies of teaching were based on the deep-rooted notion that the involvement of physical perception, emotions, and pre-logical faculties of knowledge create an intimate and lasting bond with tradition. Repetition as a technique predominated throughout the young Jew's entire course of studies, inculcating in him a lifelong discipline for memorization. Through repetition, the student not only internalized the meaning of the text, but also revived the message of the past. To pronounce, again and again, a verse already repeated thousands of times was both proof of textual fidelity and an act of creation. Indeed, the sentence resounded, so to speak, in an absolute present, through the recovery of the original meaning and the simultaneous production of a new one.[2]

Traditional Hebrew education required the reader to break the text down into simple units, that is to say, into verses that could easily be remembered and pronounced in a single breath. A deep bond united breath and meaning; the caesura that divides Bible verses (known in Hebrew as sof pasuq) marked the pause after exhalation: for an instant the continuity of discourse was interrupted, and the effort of talking and understanding found respite. This reading rhythm reflected the profound structure of the holy text. The verses, which were studied as meaningful units, had been created as autonomous fragments of reality.

[1] *Machsor Vitry nach der Handschrift im British Museum (Cod. Add. No 27200 u. 27201),* Herausgegeben von S. Hurwitz, (Nürnberg, 1923[2] [1893-1897[1]]), pp. 177-202. On similar customs in the Christian tradition, see F. Dornseiff, *Das Alphabet in Mystik und Magie*, (Leipzig, 1925[2] [1922[1]]), pp. 17-20.

[2] As a further evidence of this fundamental Jewish concept, it can be noted that the Hebrew root *šnh* means "to repeat" as well as "to study," and also "to transform" and "to change."

In fact, the Biblical authors had tried ceaselessly to enclose within the short space of each sentence a self-standing message[3].

The entire history of Hebrew exegesis is permeated not only by the intense desire to understand the sacred text, but also by a deep sense of precariousness and limitation. Those translating into the Diaspora languages, who probably began their work in the third century BCE, were forced to confront the harsh simplicity of the Biblical tales, void of details, and expressed in words that seemed impossible to wrest from the sacred enclosure of the Hebrew language. The Greek version of the Septuagint, and those of the other Jewish translators, as well as the Aramaic version of the Targumim, strove to transpose the world of the Holy Scriptures into the culturally fragmented Near Eastern region, and to fill the gap between the old sayings and the new historical circumstances.

During the centuries that followed the establishment of the canon, the long work of elaborating the Biblical text resulted in ample collections devoted both to normative aspects of ritual and social life (generically called Halakah), as well as to the homiletic reworkings of the Biblical tales (the Haggadah). Originally, these traditions were transmitted orally. Towards the end of the second century, however, they began to find their place in textual structures, eventually extending for thousands of pages. It was by this process that the legal corpus of the Mišnah was formed, which was carefully annotated over the centuries, resulting in the two great collections of the Yerušalmi and the Babylonian Talmud. Many interpretations then flowed into the midrašim, writings that document the activity of the synagogue's preachers, and which often relate the discussions on the Torah that took place within the rabbinic academies until the Early Middle Ages.

[3] This phenomenon of expressive self-sufficiency is particularly evident in the poetical sections, first among them the Psalms, where each verse, and even each hemistich, often represents a separate world. But in the prose sections, too, the discourse proceeds through paratactic juxtapositions, where sentences of very few words succeed one another without any rigid structural hierarchy.

This quite substantial literature of Late Antiquity seemed to have a preference for a somehow fragmentary approach to the Holy Writings, since the Jewish masters avoided commenting on the overall sense of the Biblical books, instead concentrating on the elementary units of the discourse. Rather than moving from the general meaning to an analysis of the individual parts, the interpreters proceeded from details, thereby bringing to light the deepest structure of the Biblical texts. In Jewish exegesis from the first centuries of the Common Era, we generally find neither comprehensive presentations of the prophetic works nor systematic treatments of the theoretical purposes of legislation. One can easily get the impression that, in rabbinic hermeneutics, the persuasive impact of a text comes not from the sum of its parts; rather, it can be understood only by focusing on the equilibrium governing the words and sounds of each individual verse. This is perhaps the most modern, albeit somewhat estranging, aspect of a method that dissolved the continuity of discourse, looking for an explanatory key, which, once the automatic features of communication were eliminated, would reveal the meanings hidden behind the words.

One can therefore say that the Haggadic exegesis was a metaphoric way of proceeding par excellence, aimed at inferring latent textual meanings, and often using semantic and parasemantic stratagems, such as anagrams, alphabetic permutations, and numerical calculations. What's more, the dissonance of meanings, far from being avoided, helped the interpreter to create a kind of intensified semantic energy, which resulted in deeper and more innovative implications. A characteristic rabbinic method lay, for instance, in quoting two apparently inconsistent verses, culled from different Biblical books, and then evoking a third verse, capable of resolving the dissension and re-establishing harmony. The collage of the three minute segments, extracted from their original context, enabled Jewish sages to reach the hidden source of the discourse. In this way, it was possible to go back to the moment when each sentence, just uttered, still held its full emotional vigor, and to perceive the energy each verse had at its first

appearance, before flowing on—and in a sense getting lost—in the stream of discourse.

The use of rhetoric devices such as semantic hindrances, pleonasms, and redundancies permitted the exegesis to slacken its rhythm, paying tribute to the sacred words and rather humbly accepting their supremacy. The only way to intuit the real meaning of those scarcely accessible words was to reject clear, definite statements in favor of remaining aware of the impermanence of human notions.

In most cases, the commentary on the texts followed a quite simple rhetorical pattern. Two rabbis, or perhaps a master and his pupils, engaged in a short dialogue about a Biblical passage. Suddenly, a play on words arose, for which a new explanation was suggested in a detached manner. But, just when an ampler treatment of the theme would have been expected, the prose simmered down, making way for the customary laconic expres-

sion davar aḥer: "another interpretation." After this phrase, the same verse evoked a new, sometimes contrasting, explanation, which occasioned in turn a new fleeting remark. As if in an inexorable "da capo," as if resuming a sentence many times interrupted, the Jewish teachers obstinately scoured the path already covered so many times. They turned their attention back to the text they had already investigated, down to each letter, each accent, each vowel: to comment meant to try and try again, so that the manifold facets of the Torah—which are never revealed all together—could shine, sparked by the brief and sudden fire of inspiration.

Thus, in the Jewish conception, exegesis was a quest, its goal the discovery of a meaning, already contained in the text, which needed to be brought to the surface and freed from the veil that had long rendered it invisible. The series of lightning interpretations that resulted could therefore be understood as reconnaissance surveys, often unrelated to each other, into the deep abyss of the Holy Writings. And yet, tradition assigned to the Bible seventy faces, which, according to Semitic linguistic usage, indicated the innumerable meanings enclosed within the sacred text. Within each verse, and each word, a

sediment of messages was concealed, thought to have been deposited there by divine wisdom at the beginning of time. The challenge of the exegesis laid in revealing these secret meanings, and in bringing to light—if only for an instant—one of the many faces carved into the stone of the Hebrew language. In this way, the flourishing of the Haggadah represented a boundless symbolic expansion of the Biblical text.

During its entire first period, which lasted from the beginning of the Common Era until the eighth and ninth centuries, Hebrew exegesis proceeded essentially by singling out key words which became fundamental symbolic stages toward the comprehension of the Biblical text. It sought out the recurrences of words, since the interpreters were convinced that repetitions were never accidental, but intentional, with each usage serving to

clarify the previous one. Thus, a nucleus of words of stronger semantic density was formed, which assumed the role of icons of thought, well-recognizable in the otherwise variegated Biblical lexicon. Through these words of peculiar symbolic import, Jewish interpreters encompassed the sense of whole Scriptural episodes. Since the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible were basically regarded as having a circular structure, each word was taken into consideration per se, with no concern for variation in style, or for the chronological stratification of different contexts. The semantic space of words was therefore defined through addition, and each term received a broad constellation of meanings which nevertheless still did not saturate their expressive possibilities.

To give just one example, eš, "fire," was first of all the flame that enveloped the bush in Moses's vision, but also the ardor of God's word in the prophecy of Jeremiah, and the column of fire that led the Israelites in the night-time exodus, or else the destructive rain hurled against Sodom, or the blaze that consumed the offering on the altar. The word eš came, therefore, to symbolize a bursting forth of the divine in the human sphere. This one word permitted an understanding of the secret consonance shared by all of these passages, regardless of where

the exegetic discourse had begun. In fact, the reappearance of a word implied the existence of a profound synergy among expressive areas that seemed at first glance to be in conflict, and created a continuum in which disparate individual episodes could be simultaneously evoked.

This method allowed the Hebrew interpreters to build very complex notions without ever having to resort to theoretical explanations. As a matter of fact, the masters never expounded the meaning of a word, but simply demonstrated their harmony directly in their exegetic practice; they achieved higher semantic levels through the simple juxtaposition of Biblical meanings with new ones, taken from legends and mythological fragments that, to us, seem foreign to the ancient Biblical tradition.

To continue with the example of eš, in some fifth-century texts the notions of "white fire" and "black fire" appeared for the first time; concepts that enlarged the symbolic possibilities of this word in a direction completely unknown to the Bible, and probably derived from other cultures.[4] Nevertheless, since these new connotations were used in commentaries on the Holy Writings, they became part of the traditional heritage in a seemingly natural way.

What the rabbinic culture intended to construct was a metahistorical background against which a certain number of symbolic knots could stand out, captured in their essence and unburdened by temporal concerns. This became even more evident when, instead of generic notions such as "fire", words were taken into consideration that reflected the political and social experience of ancient Israel. In the altered historical conditions of the Diaspora, the realities designated by terms such as melek—"king"—and bayit, "house,"—in their specific sense of the Temple of Jerusalem, lost their specificity and were relegated to the allegorical, suspended between a nostalgia for the past splendor of the kingdom of Judah and the hope for a Messianic future. In the rabbinic literature of Late Antiquity, as a substitute for the Temple of Jerusalem, which was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE,

[4] On this subject, see the entry *Eš*, Fire.

a huge verbal construction was put in place: for the original stone Sanctuary, emotionally dense memories of the recent ruin, or longings for the Messianic reconstruction, were substituted. If the building destroyed by the oppressor combined a symbolic function with a specific one, the concepts of the Temple of the Haggadah and the Halakah are purely symbolic, supported only by the power of an inner representation.

The exegetical approach of the Late Antiquity tended to consider each term as an independent universe, and did not usually explore synonymies. In fact, for the masters of the Haggadah, different words, even of similar meaning, expressed a different Scriptural message, and therefore its synonymic correspondences were usually excluded from the hermeneutical field. It was only with the beginning of the ninth and tenth centuries that the development of an autonomous philosophical thought allowed Jewish exegetes to turn to a process of abstraction of the Biblical lexicon, which in turn allowed for the definition of conceptual areas, composed of words with mutual similarities. Under the influence of Muslim theology, Jewish authors immersed in the medieval Judeo-Arabic koiné reconsidered the Biblical linguistic usages, and in particular all of the anthropomorphic references to God, in order to give them an allegorical interpretation, and to exercise from Judaism the prospect of any iconic representations of the Godhead.

A similar reconsideration of the Biblical text, already contained in the Book of Doctrines and Beliefs by Sa'adya Ga'on (882 – 942), was brought to an extremely refined level by Maimonides in his Guide to the Perplexed, written at the end of the twelfth century. The preparatory work necessary for identifying the Biblical expressions to be allegorically interpreted brought these thinkers to create categories of significance that went beyond single words, instead defining more ample and composite semantic areas. The concept of eš, for instance, was inserted into the complex of the luminous manifestations of God, and was therefore somehow equated with the Biblical notions of or, "light," kavod, "glory," or with the rabbinic notion of Šekinah, "Presence," as apparition of the transcendent splendor. Even if this

philosophical exegesis had as its goal a transfiguration of the literal level of the text, as a matter of fact it served to widen the symbolic areas which came to include entire chains of terms.

This systematizing work was a very good opportunity for the mystics as well, who took advantage of it in their exploration of the covert meanings in the Bible. If Sa'adya Ga'on was eagerly read by the Ashkenazic pietists, and especially by their main exponent, El'azar of Worms, Maimonides's Guide, thanks to its unsurpassed precision and lucidity of style, was doubtless a decisive factor in the birth of the Kabbalistic thought in Southern France and in the Iberian peninsula at the beginning of the thirteenth century. In fact, although they pursued an aim apparently in contrast with that of the philosophers, the Kabbalists built their theosophy using, much more than it has been admitted until now, the Maimonidean work, which had discovered a web of esoteric meanings under the veil of Biblical expressions. The philosophical chains of concepts were reformulated using the characteristic mystical language, that is to say, with the creation of almost infinite series of symbolic correspondences. In this way, the lists of words conveying the changing nature of the divine attributes were born, in which elements combine themselves with one another, with evocative force based on metaphoric principles as rigorous as they are unexpressed.

In its more creative period, between the second half of the twelfth and the end of the thirteenth centuries, the Kabbalah received new life from an outburst of symbolic imagery, in which the theoretical tools taken from philosophy united with the Haggadic inheritance. In most cases, the resulting new approach deeply influenced not only mystical theories but Biblical exegesis as well. Even when many of the Haggadic readings were accepted, as well as many legendary cues, the theoretical structure was very different, since each interpretation found its place in the vast mosaic of the intradivine life, and was ordered according to the hierarchy of the ten grades of emanation. As a consequence, the entire Hebrew lexicon was reorganized into ten fundamental cores,

corresponding with the diagram of the sefirot.[5] As a matter of fact, the sefirotic structure itself would have been unthinkable without the theoretical basis developed by philosophical allegorism, which permitted the Kabbalists to organize different Biblical expressions according to wider conceptual areas.

This system of symbolic equivalences, which constituted the cornerstone of Kabbalistic thought, was not intended rigidly, but was rather understood as an open structure. It therefore admitted inconsistency and ambiguity, and, in its semantic oscillations, reflected the dynamic nature of the very idea of sefirah. To continue with our example, the word eš, "fire," now referred to different sefirot, depending on its diverse specifications and on the different Biblical episodes in which it appeared.

Besides this theoretical approach, the Sephardic mystics also showed an unexpected attitude towards assembling symbolic images in tales, often endowed with literary value. The *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) represents perhaps the key example of this school.[6] In fact, the *Zohar*ic stories are not simple allegorical transpositions of mystical teachings, but real actions, where symbols are brought on with strong dramatic rendering. The fascination of the *Zohar*—which was probably written in the Iberian peninsula toward the end of the thirteenth century, and soon became a fundamental text of the Kabbalah—depends largely on the skill of its author, who gives to the icons of thought the dash of a tale which proceeds from episode to episode to the climactic mystical conclusion. The reader, trapped in the narration, almost forgets that the primary roles are often entrusted to

[5] Those lexical series ranged from God's names to patriarchs' attributes to the terms that indicate colors and even to pronouns and interjections. See, for instance, G. Busi, *La qabbalah,* (Roma-Bari, 1998), p. 73.

[6] A new, reliable English translation of the *Zohar* has been published by D. C. Matt (10 vols, Stanford, 2004-2016); in vol. 1, pp. xxxi-lxxxi, the origin and authorship of the various zoharic text-layers are discussed by A. Green. See also *Zohar. Il libro dello splendore*, a cura di G. Busi, traduzioni dall'aramaico e dall'ebraico di A. L. Callow, (Torino, 2008), pp. 9-37. For a large, annotated anthology see F. Lachover, I Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* [Heb.], 2 vols., (Jerusalem, 1957[2]), Eng. trans. (Oxford, 1989).

words and locutions of the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, strongly personified and transformed into the actors in an esoteric scene.

In its richness of themes and variety of sources, the *Zohar* is a real omnibus of the mysticism that preceded it: from the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation), to the heavenly visions of the merkavah of the Middle Ages, to Maimonides's exegesis, the book encloses highly variable symbolic cues and reworks them in a wide theoretical guide. In the *Zohar*, a richness of details unites with a deeply felt spiritual experience, which gives the Kabbalistic metaphors an unparalleled breadth. Thanks to the *Zohar*, out of pure contemplation of the Godhead, mysticism became a narrative of the transcendent.

From the second half of the fourteenth century, the increasing popularity of the *Zohar*ic model set the Kabbalistic imagery in formulas that mainly imitated and commented on the Book of Splendor. As a result, the Kabbalistic lexicon withdrew into itself, and the mystics took autonomous paths, almost always remote from those of philosophy, while the philosophers, for their part, slowly abandoned linguistic analysis in favor of demonstrative processes.

Besides a few texts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries which offer a stern philosophical presentation of the [7]Kabbalah, the major mystical authors devoted themselves mainly to the systematization of the *Zohar*ic doctrines in a theoretical process that found its apex in the great synthesis elaborated by Mošeh Cordovero (1522-70) in his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates).[8] An entire section of this work, the Ša'ar 'erke ha-kinnuyim (The Chapter of the Epithets) dedicates itself to a complete inventory of the main terms used in the Kabbalah, which are listed in alphabetical order and discussed in their mutual relationships and symbolic values. That such

[7] A good example of this kind is offered by the *Ma`areket ha-elohut* (The Structure of Divinity): cfr. A. Elkayam, "On the Architectonic Structure of the Book "Ma`arekhet ha-'Elohut" (in ebr.), in *Kiryat Sefer* 64 (1992-1993), pp. 289-304.

[8] Overall presentations of Cordovero's thought are offered, in Hebrew, by Y. Ben Shlomo, *Torat ha-elohut šel rabbi Mošeh Cordovero,* (Jerusalem, 1965); B. Sack, *Be-ša`are ha-qabbalah šel rabbi Mošeh Cordovero,* (Beersheba, 1995).

a repertoire was felt necessary demonstrates how, during the centuries, the mystical tradition had grown to the point of including a vast amount of contradictory and obscure materials, which would

have been very difficult to understand without the help of a clear classification.

On the other hand, Cordovero's work, which also solidified the status of the *Zohar* as a classical source, marked the end of an epoch, and a new season of Jewish mysticism was on its way. With Yiṣḥaq Luria—whose public teaching took place in Safed, in Galilee, in the last year of Cordovero's life, and in the two years that followed—Kabbalistic symbolism underwent a marked process of abstraction, which was also accompanied by a partial detachment from the earlier exegetic inheritance. In fact, taking the *Zohar* as a starting point, Luria built a very original cosmogony based on the concepts of, for instance, ṣimṣum (contraction) and tiqqun (restoration of the worlds), which did not have any specific relationship with the Biblical tradition, but were the ultimate product of the theoretical process that developed inside the Kabbalah itself. In the authoritative exposition given by his most important student, Ḥayyim Vital, Luria's world appears to be dominated by a symbolic invention that lasts thousands of pages, with very few quotations of Biblical texts. With Luria, the Kabbalah freed itself, at least in large part, from the Haggadic heritage of the Late Antiquity, and acquired an autonomous theoretical [9]consciousness.

Within the Lurianic school, which soon spread from the Near East into the whole European Diaspora, perhaps the most creative were the Italian Kabbalists, and especially the circles that gathered in northern Italy around Menaḥem ʻAzaryah Fano, and later around Mošeh Zacuto

[9] For a general introduction on Luria and Vital and his school see *Mistica ebraica. Testi della tradizione segreta del giudaismo dal III al XVIII secolo,* a cura di G. Busi ed E. Loewenthal, (Torino, 1995), pp. 559-590, 671; Sh. Magid, *From Metaphysics to Midrash. Myth, History, and the Interpretation of Scripture in Lurianic Kabbalah*, (Bloomington, 2008); G. Necker, *Einführung in die lurianische Kabbala*, (Frankfurt a. M., 2008).

and Mošeh Ḥayyim Luzzatto. [10] In these authors the Lurianic construction mixed with themes typical of Italian Judaism, that is with a certain magic tradition, and with a feeling for the rhetorical structures of the language that had its roots in fifteenth century Humanism. Works were thereby written which were still capable of offering original metaphorical images, in which the repertoire of *Zohar*ic subjects, together with the more recent elements of the Lurianic theology, combined to redefine Jewish ritual practice. In fact, the Italian Kabbalah was a fundamental workshop for the development of a complex symbolism in liturgical practice, which itself characterized Judaism until emancipation; a symbolism that helped in the preservation of a strong Jewish identity in the perilous epoch of the Counter-Reformation.

Between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, a process became more and more evident, by which Kabbalistic notions were translated into rules for behavior which were easy to popularize even outside of esoteric circles. The devotional practices inspired by the Kabbalah deeply influenced the mysticism of Central Europe, where a renaissance of Jewish spirituality was about to emerge, which would go under the name of Hasidism. Having begun in the third decade of the eighteenth century around the charismatic figure of Yiśra'el Ba'al Šem Ṭov, by the end of the century the Hasidic movement was able to reach large parts of the Jewish population in those countries, thanks to an original blend of contemplative aspects with a new attention to the needs of the community.[11] The Hasidic teaching was often given through tales and parables, even if some masters still entrusted their message to the traditional genres of

[10] On the Italian kabbalistic school in the sixteenth century see G. Busi, *Mantova e la Qabbalah. Mantua and the Kabbalah,* (Génève-Milano, 2001). In particular, the *Qelaḥ pitḥe ḥokmah* by Luzzatto are translated into Italian in *Mistica*, pp. 591-624.

[11] For a first approach to the hasidic movement see J. Weiss, *Studies in Eastern European Jewish Mysticism,* (Oxford, 1985); *Hasidism Reappraised*, edited by A. Rapoport-Albert, (London-Portland, 1996); G. Dynner, *Men of Silk. The Hasidic Conquest of Polish Jewish Society*, (Oxford – New York, 2006).

Biblical commentaries and theoretical treatises. Its various expressive forms notwithstanding, the symbolism of the ḥasidim gave the Kabbalistic doctrines a deep psychological tone that transferred, so to speak, the sefirotic structure of the cosmos into the boundaries of human interiority.

Though the correspondence between theosophy and inner experience was implicit in the medieval Kabbalah, Hasidism emphasized it, transforming the doctrine of the sefirot into a method of spiritual improvement. The works of the most important Hasidic teachers, for instance those of Naḥman of Bratslav—a tormented master, who lived at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth—show a strongly subjective, almost physical, rendering of symbolic themes that, in the preceding centuries, were treated essentially as intellectual abstractions.

The interiorization of the Kabbalistic message in some exceptional personalities created the basis for the transformation of the Kabbalah from a sapiential or contemplative doctrine into a shared experience, mediated by the relationship between the charismatic figure of the ṣaddiq, who guided the group, and the ḥasidim, who gathered around him. The Hasidic Kabbalah was first of all a process of inner education, through which the ṣaddiq discovered in his personal life the sefirotic levels, and rendered them understandable to his followers with a force arising from the immediacy of living. Having a particularly gifted personality, the ṣaddiq was the one who lived the mystical itinerary and ventured in direct experimentation with the cognitive value of Kabbalistic symbols. The ḥasid could thereby proceed in the mystical path by following his master's footsteps, doing his best to improve his own conduct, without necessarily reaching the degree of perfection reserved for the spiritual leader.

If Hasidism did not add very much to the theoretical structure that the Kabbalah had acquired since the Lurianic shift, it made a major contribution in granting an empirical dimension to the Kabbalistic lexicon—thanks in part to the actual experimentation—to community

life, and to the behavioral rules dictated by mystical symbolism. The insistence of the Hasidic masters on the psychological value of symbols also brought to light the heuristic power of mystical metaphors, which until then had remained hidden behind the veil of the esoteric allusions.

With Hasidism, the cognitive itinerary of Jewish mysticism reached what may have been its apex: a doctrine of the cosmos and reflection on the divine order as it already was, the Kabbalistic meditation further became a guide for the soul and an ultimate experience of the religious law.

During the nineteenth century, the growing secularization of Jewish culture caused the creative power of symbolism to weaken, and it was increasingly substituted by other languages considered more appropriate to modernity. In an effort to critically understand their own tradition, Jewish intellectuals increasingly chose the path of scientific arguments, typical of positivism, and abandoned the crowding of verbal images which appeared then to be the remains of an irrational past. Contrary to symbolism, which advanced through additions and tried to eliminate the contradictions of history, modern criticism proceeded through distinctions, imposing a chronological order on events.

This secularization was also reflected in the use of Hebrew, which had previously been the main basis of Jewish written culture. While, on the one hand, the Jews increasingly chose to write in the local European languages, which were previously only used in everyday conversation, on the other hand, at the end of the nineteenth century, Hebrew underwent a vigorous renaissance, no longer as a sacred language but as a secular form of expression, written as well as spoken. This transformation of the status of the Hebrew language marked the definitive end of the old symbolism, whose existence was only possible inside a closed and self-referential system. What's more, the literary use of Hebrew reflected the flourishing of new themes in Jewish culture. The semantic spectrum of vocabulary expanded, since words were now deeply immersed in the profane world, and were no longer de-

voted to the exclusive expression of the symbolical teachings of theology and theosophy.

A fracture between old and new developed, separating the traditional religious literature both from the genre of the novel and from theoretical prose, which was no longer confined to Biblical themes but instead wanted to express new ideas, for instance nationalistic enthusiasm, or debate on science and modernity. The drying up of traditional means of expression also affected authors who, as the late followers of Hasidism, remained faithful to the old lexicon: their style very often became a stereotypical reproduction of the past, without any creative élan. On the other hand, some authors more bound to modern times, for instance Avraham Yiṣḥaq Kook (who was active in Israel at the beginning of the twentieth century),[12] remained faithful even to the symbolic lexicon of the Kabbalistic tradition, expressing an approach that might be called ideological, and shifted the focus of their texts from the usual exegetical subjects to the new path of political rhetoric.

## 2. Philology of symbols

When I started to work on this book, I was acutely aware that, notwithstanding the extraordinary importance of symbolic thought throughout Jewish history, I could rely on hardly any conceptual tools that would enable me to gather and evaluate the data housed in this enormous textual corpus. The aim of this Lexicon was not to collect erudite curiosities, nor to pursue the meanderings of an archaic way of thinking, but rather to arrange the evidence of the past in a meaningful sequence that

[12] By Avraham Kook, writer of enigmatic Hebrew prose, is available in English the fundamental *Orot,* Translated with an Introduction by B. Naor, (Northvale, 1993), as well as the anthology *The Essential Writings of Abraham Isaac Kook,* Edited, translated and introduced by B. Z. Bokser, (New York, 1988). See also B. Ish Shalom, *Rav Avraham Itzhak HaCohen Kook. Between Rationalism and Mysticism*, translated from Hebrew by O. Wiskind-Elper, (Albany, 1993).

could underscore both the constancy of the symbols and the ways they were modified in light of changing historical circumstances.

As such, examining the Jewish tradition to appreciate its symbolic continuity meant for me, first of all, searching for a method that would diverge from the usual course. From this point of view, this is an experimental work: it represents the first attempt to compile a comprehensive inventory of the developmental lines of the symbolism in Hebrew literature over the span of three millennia.

Even the works of scholars as distinguished as Louis Ginzberg (1873-1953) and Erwin R. Goodenough (1893-1965) paid too little attention to the development of symbolism in the rabbinic Judaism of Late Antiquity. In The Legends of the Jews,[13] Ginzberg concentrates on a retelling of the Jewish legends according to the Haggadic tradition, confining to footnotes his evaluation of the primary sources, and only rarely venturing to refer to later medieval commentary. Goodenough's monumental 13-volume [14]work is essentially an inventory of Jewish iconography in the Greco-Roman era, which he tried to contrast with the rabbinic tradition. He considered the rabbinic concepts purely literary abstractions, openly diverging from the multifaceted archeological evidence of everyday Jewish life in the first centuries of the Common Era. Although this discrepancy between the archeological findings and the rabbinic writings is obvious in many instances, neither Goodenough's work nor the texts produced by his followers are based on a thorough analysis of the bountiful verbal images which constitute the real essence of the Haggadah in Late Antiquity[15], whose roots go back to the Biblical books, and whose development

can actually be traced to the end of the eighteenth century, or even later.

[13] L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols., (Philadelphia, 1925-1953).

[14] E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 13 vols., (New York, 1953-1968).

[15] Cf., for instance, the nonetheless important study by J. Neusner, *Symbol and Theology in Early Judaism*, (Minneapolis, 1991).

The textual analysis in this Lexicon has therefore been carried out by focusing on the characteristics of symbolic language. In fact, although it is easy to forget, metaphorical speech is structured according to precise laws and a specific grammar. For the method I used, I propose the expression "philology of symbols.[16]" This kind of philology is not intended to replace, but rather to supplement, traditional philological techniques, with the aim of achieving a deeper understanding of the text. Symbolic analysis does not conflict at all with the traditional philological and semiotic procedures, but has the specific role of bringing to light the meanings concealed in a highly metaphorical text.[17] The first stage of this approach involves a close examination of the traditional texts in order to single out minimal units of meaning, such as individual words or short expressions.[18] The second stage consists in carefully noting the number and locations of these

[16] After having shaped this definition, I discovered the locution *philologia symbolica* in the *Symbolicae quaestiones*, (Bononiae, 1555), p. 330, by the humanist Achille Bocchi (1488-1562), who intended to express with it his synthesis of the metaphoric language in the Renaissance. See G. Busi, *Achille Bocchi, ebraista figurativo*, in Id., *L'enigma dell'ebraico nel Rinascimento,* (Torino, 2007), pp. 187-195.

[17] As C. Segre, *Semiotica filologica*, (Torino, 1979), p. 158, remembers: "Between the visual, or musical, or literary art work and our interpretive effort a tension develops that produces sometimes revealing lightning. The important is to endeavour to grasp the *res*, and do not let our or others' words bewitch us". For a presentation of the major problems of biblical philology, see B. Chiesa, *Textual History and Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Old Testament,* in *The Madrid Qumran Congress,* Edited by J. Trebolle Barrera – L. Vega Montaner, (Leiden, 1992), pp. 257-272; Id., *Il testo biblico. Condizionamenti antichi e moderni,* in *Il giudaismo palestinese. Dal I secolo a.C. al I secolo d.C.,* (Bologna, 1993), pp. 5-18; E. Tov, *Textual Criticism in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd rev. ed., (Minneapolis, 2001).

[18] It is precious, on this regard, the harvest of observations gathered by the scholars who research on the formulas typical of oral traditions. Such researches, started for the Omeric epic by Milman Parry at the end of the nineteentwenties, have been expanded also to Biblical literature: R. C. Culley, *Oral Formulaic Language in the Biblical Psalms,* ([Toronto], 1967); W. R. Watters, *Formula Criticism and the Poetry of the Old Testament,* (Berlin-New York, 1976). Very useful also the big volume by Y. Avishur, *Stylistic Studies of Word-Pairs in Biblical and Ancient Semitic Literatures*, (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1984). A methodological synthesis is offered by P. Acker, *Revising Oral Theory. Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse,* (New York-London, 1998).

syntagmata in order to ascertain their usage in different contexts: juxtaposing the various symbolic expressions enables the philologist to measure the relative proximity of two or more works, irrespective of their chronological or geographical origins. In this way it is possible to reach deductions that are tantamount to proofs, which help to bring texts quite remote in time or style within a common symbolic framework of development. Meanwhile, two works from the same milieu may interpret a metaphorical theme in conflicting ways and may thus need to be positioned at extreme points of a hypothetical symbolic spectrum.

As a result, we can establish affinities or polarities that demonstrate an undeniable empirical validity. The occurrence of an individual element centuries apart, or in apparently unrelated milieu, seems to reflect the peculiar nature of symbolic language, whose images can emerge in places far removed from their original sources, with a precision suggesting a hidden continuity.

Even if the actual paths taken by these verbal images are often difficult to follow, this phenomenon is too important to be ignored. The degree of symbolic kinship is a fact that catches the attention of readers as intensely as déjà vu. Consequently, before approaching an analysis of the possible reasons for these similarities, it seems appropriate to start with a census of them, in order to reconstruct the intersections of symbolic schemes that characterize traditional communication.

The validity of symbolic philology is demonstrated by the heuristic vigor of its methods. They enable us to reexamine the abstract judgments resulting from the modes of interpretation, common among scholars in the Jewish tradition since at least the nineteenth century, which focus on the contents of a text, rather

than considering its deep expressive structures. To give just one example, let us examine the idea that philosophy and Kabbalah are supposedly two antithetical strands of medieval Judaism. This view, first advocated by scholars belonging to the German school of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, and generally accepted in the twentieth century, has given rise to the claim that mysticism was simply a

reaction to the spread of philosophical rationalism. Such an interpretation, however, contradicts the undeniable commonality of symbolic elements that links philosophical semantics, and especially Maimonidean thought, to the most important works of thirteenth-century Kabbalah. Although a few Kabbalists did indeed voice doubts about, and even an aversion to, philosophy, the vocabulary and the conceptual implications of their writings reveal a very careful reading of the Hebrew philosophical classics. Already at the beginning of the thirteenth century, Yiṣḥaq the Blind (who, as it seems, was the first great Kabbalistic master) uses not only precise symbolic syntagmata found in philosophical works, such as the Kuzari by Yehudah ha-Lewi and the Maimonidean Guide (for instance, the fundamental expression eš yesodi [t ], "elementary fire"19), but also definitions derived from writings on logic (such as the idea of ṣurah, "figure," meaning the support of the individual existence of [19]things). Furthermore, it is well-known that Maimonides was greatly admired both by Avraham Abulafia, who devoted three different mystical commentaries to the Guide,[20] and Moses de León, the presumed author of the main part of the *Zohar*, whose name appears for the first time

in 1264 as the owner of a manuscript copy of the Maimonidean chef [21]d'œuvre. It is clear that this historical evidence cannot be reconciled with the view that philosophy and mysticism represent two essentially unrelated realms. On the other hand, such a cultural background explains only too well the clear resonance of philosophical exegesis in the Kabbalistic way of developing both Hebrew metaphorical images and concepts.

[19] See Yiṣḥaq statement in the *Commentary on the Creation*, which has been attributed to him: "The spirit of wisdom and intelligence that is called, according to the language of the sages (*be-divre ḥokmah*) `the force that draws the figure.'" (D. Abrams, *R. Asher ben David. His Complete Works and Studies in his Kabbalistic Thought,* (Los Angeles, 1996), p. 310)

[20] Cfr. M. Idel, "Maimonides'"Guide of the Perplexed" and the Kabbalah," in *Jewish History* 18 (2004), pp. 197-226.

[21] Moscow, Russian State Library, ms Guenzburg 771, copied by Šemu'el ben Yiṣḥaq. Cfr. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1946[2]), p. 395 note 131.

The attention paid to symbolism, which at first sight may appear to be an ahistorical practice, actually produces historiographical results more significant than those of an ideological approach that considers texts as homogeneous units. Instead of imposing on Hebrew works of the past categories that are extraneous to them, such as the entirely modern contrast between irrationality and reason, symbolic criticism respects their expressive intentions through a kind of mimetic identification with the methods used by their authors. The process is perhaps slower, but deductions are based only on textual evidence, and synthetic judgments are reached only after having broken down a work into its constitutive elements and having dissolved formal links by a procedure similar to alchemical incandescence.

Owing to the concision of symbolic formulas, often the sequence noun-adjective, or subject-verb, or else a short simile, it is possible to compare them in works coming from quite different cultures and languages. In fact, a formal parallel not found within a particular literary tradition may appear unexpectedly in a more remote milieu, in this way confirming the meaning of the expression in its first occurrence or, even better, precluding false deductions that might have arisen from the symbolic isolation. The philology of symbols therefore also legitimizes cross-cultural comparisons, provided they are kept within written traditions, since it is only in this way that it is possible to verify the identity of a particular symbolic syntagma, even

when it pertains to milieus whose historical links cannot be proved.

Among the many interesting cases of this, for instance, it is worth considering Psalm 19, where the morning sun is described like a bridegroom coming from his wedding canopy. Behind this image there is presumably a mythological layer: the sun has the dawn as its bride. This motif, although not alluded to in any other Biblical passage, has been analyzed by scholars who have pointed out a parallel with the Mesopotamian myth of the union between the sun and its spouse, Aya. Since no Mesopotamian text introduces this image with a comparison formula (“like”), as in the Biblical one, it has been concluded that the expression “like a bridegroom,” voices a deliberate attempt on the part

of Jewish culture to distance itself from pagan anthropomorphism, retaining it here as a mere rhetorical device.[22] However, this deduction is undermined by a hymn from the ᵃg-Veda, where a sentence occurs, identical to the Biblical one, in which the sun follows Uṣas, the deity of the dawn, "like the bridegroom follows the bride."24 In the Vedic verse the image of the bridegroom is accompanied by the Sanskrit particle ná, "like," which is the equivalent of the Hebrew prefix ke-, "like." It is therefore evident that the attenuation, the "like," expressed by the psalmist in his simile is not theological-

ly motivated, but belongs to the deep substratum of the solar hierogamy. In this case, an objective evaluation of the Biblical passage can be achieved only by expanding the area of inquiry to include the Vedic tradition, which seems to have been ignored by Biblical scholars, more because of inveterate cultural habits than on the basis of a serious consideration of its contents.

A careful study of metaphorical structures can also shed light on the processes of textual transmission, such as those resulting in the corruption of symbols along the way. In fact, an analysis of the laws of symbolism is useful not only for reconstructing the relationships between different texts and evaluating their individual features, but also as a tool for correcting them from a philological point of view. Symbolic criteria can assist in choosing among variant readings, which cannot be resolved on the basis of mechanical principles of transmission alone. If a work was inspired by a particular symbolic logic, this has to be taken into consideration when reconstructing the original form of the text, especially when there are no sure data proving that one branch of the textual tradition is to be preferred over another. When certain stemmatic data are missing, traditional philology leaves to the editor the task of choosing among variant

[22] Cf. N. M. Sarna, s.v. *Šemeš,* in *Enṣiqlopedyah miqra'it,* vol. VIII, (Jerusalem, 1982), col. 188. On Aya see, H. D. Galter, s.v. in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD)*, [edited by] K. van der Toorn – B. Becking – P. W. van der Horst, (Leiden, 1995), coll. 235-238. In the classical tradition, husband of Eos (the dawn) is Tithonus (son of Laomedon), who obtained immortality but not eternal youth.

readings, following criteria which reflect the style of the author. However, in the case of composite works such as the Bible, which are the result of practically inextricable chronological strata, this stylistic approach is often not feasible. In this case, the only alternative is to trace the symbolic structure in order to understand and reintegrate the expressive coherence of the original. Quite a few mistakes in transmission undoubtedly resulted either from the faulty comprehension of an image that had become too archaic over the centuries, or from the deliberate transformation of symbolism no longer considered theologically acceptable.

Many textual differences between the Hebrew masoretic text and the ancient versions of the Bible, especially the Greek Septuagint, should therefore be interpreted as breaks in the earlier

symbolic coherence, whose harmony was obfuscated as a consequence of the faulty preservation of an original metaphor. A good example is offered by the idea, attested to at least twice in the Bible, of the shadow being a sign of the prosperity of the man who projects it. In the Book of Numbers (14.9), Joshua exhorts the Israelites not to be afraid of the Canaanites: their shadow is removed from them and the Lord is with us. Here the Hebrew text preserves, in the word ṣillam, "their shadow," an ancient magical belief that a man without a shadow will die soon.[23] Although this meaning was widely corroborated until recently in the Jewish folkloric tradition, already in very ancient times religious orthodoxy seems to have attenuated the evident magical implications of the shadow symbolism. The Greek version, in fact,

[23] See M. Müller, *Anthropological Religion,* (London, 1892), pp. 218-226 and J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion,* abridged ed., 2 vols (London, 1922), vol. I, pp. 189-194; see also the bibliography gathered by Th. H. Gaster, *Myth, Legends, and Custom in the Old Testament. A Comparative Study with Chapters from Sir James G. Frazer's Folklore in the Old Testament,* (Gloucester [Mass.], 1981), p. 861; P. van der Horst, s.v. *Shadow,* in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* (New York, 1992), vol. V, pp. 1148-1150; on the Vedic tradition see also H. Oldenberg, *Die Religion des Veda,* (Stuttgart-Berlin, 1923[3]), Eng. trans., (New Delhi, 1988), p. 334 note 14; A. Coomaraswamy, "Ch¼y¼," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 55 (1935), pp. 278-283. See also the entry *Ṣel,* Shadow.

translates ṣillam as kairos,[24] meaning "the proper time," clearly allegorizing the original formulation.

At another point, parallel in certain aspects, in the Book of Job (15.29), it is the Greek text which remains faithful to the archaic sense of the shadow. It describes the uncertain fate of the man with the sentence: "He will not project his shadow on the ground."[25] The Hebrew text betrays in this case the coherence of the symbol, using instead of "shadow" the obscure hapax legomenon minlam, which may mean either "their purchase" or

"their patrimony." On the other hand, the very graphic form of the word recalls ṣillam, which was probably the original reading.[26]

Reflecting on their symbolism enables us to discern the literary coherence of sources and to overcome the discontinuities within interpretative traditions. In the above quoted example of the shadow, the reliable reading is attested in one case by the Hebrew, and in the other by the Greek—clear proof that no single tradition can claim to be the unique custodian of the correct symbolism.

Quite often, mistakes are the consequence of a deliberate innovation, i.e., when the intentions of the original no longer reflect the opinions of the transmitter. The laughter which causes Hagar and Ishmael to be expelled, as narrated in Genesis, is probably an important example of this theological distortion of symbolism$.

The Hebrew text states (concisely) only that Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian laughing [and] said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son" (Gen. 21.8-9). The Greek version instead says that Ishmael was not just "laughing," but also "playing with Isaac," Sarah's son. In Hebrew, the verse seems to be abruptly truncated, with the result that the verb ṣḥq ("to laugh," "to joke") expresses Ishmael's proclivity to do evil. Such a negative connotation to his laughing, which

[24] This is the only case in which the Septuagint renders the Hebrew *ṣel* with *kairos,* instead of with *skia*. In fact Aquila and Theodotion have *hñ skia autõn,* while Symmachus translates with *hñ skepñ autõn.*

[25] *Mñ balñi epi tñn gñn skian.*

[26] The *Vulgate* has: *Nec mittet in terra radicem suam,* and therefore reads probably *eṣlam.*

loses the original flavor of pure childish playfulness, resonates well with the negative transformation undergone by Ishmael in the Hebrew literature of Late Antiquity.29 For this reason, rather than supposing an addition in the Greek text, it would be better to assume an omission in the Hebrew, which can be corrected by divesting the symbolism of the laughter of its post-Biblical developments.

These examples show how the philology of symbols can be successfully used in the concrete field of textual evidence. Indeed, being able to search for symbolic coherence offers not just a further reading level to be added to others, but also a chance to ascertain the essential bonds that hold the whole textual structure together.

What now follows will trace the sedimentation process of symbolism in Hebrew literature, beginning with the original nucleus represented by the Bible.[27] Each lemma is based on a reconstruction of the Biblical meanings of a single word, through both its narrative usage and the complicated pattern of allusions that characterizes the Scriptural prose. Appropriately, in Jewish culture the Torah represents not only the absolute model but also a never solved enigma which seems to elude a final understanding. After this Biblical investigation, the discussion of each symbol follows a chronological sequence, with the aim of showing its various transformations in later Hebrew tradition.

The seventy entries in this Lexicon exemplify the symbolic teachings of Judaism as faithfulness to a limited nucleus of expressive cores, around which, through the centuries, the exegetes measured both the persistence of the old and the exploration of the new. The Jewish masters opted for symbolism because it enabled them to actualize traditional teachings without having to confront

[27] An ample attempt to analyze the biblical symbolism, especially in a psychological key, has been recently proposed by M. Girard, *Les symboles dans la Bible,* (Montréal-Paris, 1991). See also G. Ravasi, *Bibbia ed estetica simbolica,* in *Il simbolismo dall'antichità al Rinascimento. Persistenza e sviluppi,* a cura di L. Rotondi Secchi Tarugi, (Milano, 1995), pp. 201-211.

unbridgeable gaps between the past and the present. Indeed, in employing symbols the rabbis could add new meanings to the old ones in a continuous quest for ultimate truths. Despite its apparently anachronistic flavor, the recovery of symbols offers an invaluable key to uncovering, beneath the meta-historical surface

of tradition, the real cognitive strategies and empirical utopias which represent the deep message of Judaism.

The analysis of symbolism presented in this book is the result of a long preparatory work involving counting the occurrences of each term within specific homogenous contexts (e.g., the Bible or the Haggadah or the *Zoharic* literature) and, more generally, throughout the entire Hebrew literary heritage. Thanks to the resulting statistical evaluation of their frequency, it has been possible to establish the objective visibility of the different words and their importance for the inventory of symbolic themes. Since the path of symbols departs from that of the average level of common speech, the exemplary value of the symbolic knots consists in their distance from, so to speak, a "neutral" center of linguistic expression. In order to reconstruct this line of thought, one has to take into account the standard deviation from the norm of both extremely frequent words and very rare ones that suddenly crop up in the text so as to strike the reader with the intensity of a surprise encounter.

Therefore, in addition to the cardinal ideas of Jewish imagery, a set of rarer notions has been included that, while not as conspicuous, nonetheless accompany the history of Hebrew literature with a concealed regularity. One of the fundamental criteria in choosing the lemmas has in fact been their capacity to persist, enduring through ancient Biblical stories and episodes right up to texts of the early modern age. This "endurance" denotes the central role of such words within rabbinic Judaism, and enables us to transform the momentary nature of symbolism into a history of the changes of thought and cultural horizons.

The terms collected in the Lexicon generally have a clear visual implication; that is to say, they can easily be represented by the

imagination. In this inclination toward verbal iconicity is to be found the real reason for their persistence. In fact, metaphorical teaching is based on the attributes of an inner vision, on the capacity of a symbol to become a subtle image of thought. The entries, which present words that usually cover

large conceptual fields, often analyze their synonyms, too, to enable the reader to evaluate the diffraction of meanings radiating from the expressive center of a lemma.

Moreover, the inventory of reality transmitted in this work is only sparingly anthropomorphic; rather, it reflects man's observation of the world around him, and primarily his way of giving a sonorous and graphic expression to natural manifestations. Presented here, therefore, are the names of numerous animals, plants, metals, and planets, whose interplay evokes the network that, according to the symbolic conception, encompasses all levels of reality. Against this backdrop, human deeds and actions appear as reactions, as a thread connecting different images, providing them with movement and a psychological dimension. For this reason, the proper names of individuals, and in particular the names of patriarchs, do not receive separate entries, even if their meanings can be appreciated through the cross-references contained in the different lemmas.

Poor in abstract connotations, the Hebrew language encourages representations of objects according to their material characteristics, resulting in clear contours, elementary colors, and an essential physicality. Hebrew defines first of all things that can be seen and heard, and even these are expressed through their salient features, unencumbered by details, in order to preserve the emotional impact of the object. Thus, instead of "wealth" the entry "gold" is listed; instead of "intuition" or "feeling," "heart" is analyzed; instead of "destiny," "cup"; instead of "evil," "Lilit," and so on.

Notwithstanding their obvious limits, the terms covered in the Lexicon try to single out an exemplary symbolic path, recording both the mainstream of Jewish imagery and those occasional deviations which denote a personal understanding of metaphorical truths. This

initial nucleus of symbols represents only one of the many possible paradigms of a conceptual declination of reality. Naturally, it will be possible to enlarge the

analysis to include more words, so that an even more detailed map of Hebrew verbal iconography can be drawn.

The discussion proposed in the entries that follow is intended as a kind of discursive presentation of a piece of philological research. Consequently, it follows an itinerary that does not record all of the occurrences of a symbol, instead summing up the salient data and omitting too frequent repetitions of a single meaning. An exhaustive list of all of the recurrences of a single lemma through the different strata of Jewish tradition would extend for hundreds of pages without offering any synthesis of the continuous imperceptible variation in interpretative keys that constitutes the vital force of the symbol. The development of each symbolic icon is, in fact, characterized by themes that become broader in scope, at times contrasting with one another, but which are in any case connected by a stream of thought spanning centuries. Chronological gaps sometimes appear in the frame of the lemmas because a common motif, which had been dormant for a while, may suddenly reemerge to rekindle the imagination of later writers, who adopted it again with the immediacy of a word flow just shortly interrupted. Sometimes a symbolic statement crystallizes in a definitive form, and as such is accepted by later interpreters, who do not dare to tamper with its perfection. For this reason, some entries end on medieval texts, while others include more recent centuries, to reflect when symbols disappeared or quietened down into a final classical definition.[28]

Although an effort has been made to keep each entry autonomous by means of contextual explanations, only a cross-reading offers a truly comprehensive picture. In fact, the lemmas can also be read with all of the cross-references, making use of the patterns that link coeval

[28] In the entire Lexicon, the mention of a "first" occurrence of a word in the biblical corpus refers only to the sequence of the books according to the Hebrew canon and does not, in any case, intend to be a judgment on the dating of the scriptural texts.

occurrences of different symbols. And, finally, some entries (e.g., *sefirah, ṣimṣum, Šekinah*) offer an opportunity to appreciate the conceptual realms most characteristic of Judaism and complete the field where the reader can move about, freely enjoying the continuous flow of verbal images constituting the true vocation of Jewish symbolism.

ʿAfar עפר
DUST

The dust of the ancient story of creation is blood red. The Mesopotamian goddess Nintu mixes earth with the blood and flesh of an immolated god to give form to the first man: "That same god and man were thoroughly mixed in the clay [...] from the flesh of the god the spirit remained. It would make the living know its sign, lest he be allowed to be forgotten, the spirit remained. After the two had mixed that clay[1] In this very ancient tale, probably dating from the eighteenth century BCE, flesh and spirit are of divine heritage, while man's endowment to life is dust.

A similar contrast between the dust of soil and the breath of God dominates the second Biblical narrative of creation, markedly different in its concreteness to the contemplative tone of the first chapter. Like a potter who gives form to a handful of clay, The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Gen. 2.7). Through the warmth of the divine breath, the inert man of dust acquires movement, which connotes the celestial nature of his being. The predestined dwelling of the figure modeled by God is the Garden of Eden and, for the entire length of time in which he resides there, man seems to forget the recent, precarious mixture of earth. Only after the expulsion does the word ʻafar, the Hebrew term for "dust," echo twice more: Till you return to the ground; for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust shall you return (Gen. 3.19). The force of this tragic, divine malediction is entirely concentrated in the iteration of the verb šwb,

[1] B. J. Foster, *Before the Muses. An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, 2nd ed. (Bethesda, 1996), p. 168. For a short review of the symbolism of clay in the ancient Near East see M. Dijkstra, s.v. "Clay," in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons,* cols. 384-386.

"return," and in the obsessive metaphor of dust, as if life were a vortex of sand, which rises only to fall again.

After this initial enunciation in Genesis, the word pair of "dust" and "return" reappears in other Biblical books, for example in that of Job, who turns to God, invoking his own ephemeral destiny: Remember, I beseech you, that you have made me of clay; and will you bring me back to dust? (Job 10.9). We likewise find it in that of Ecclesiastes, who extends this return to all of the manifestations of reality: All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again (Eccl. 3.20).

In other Biblical passages, the syntagma 'afar mawet, "the dust of death," denotes the indistinguishable blending where the deceased reunite with the earth that receives them: My strength is dried up like a potsherd—as one psalm states—my tongue cleaves to my jaws; and you lay me down in the dust of death (Ps. 22.16). Here, 'afar is the result of a reduction of man not only in the general sense of the disintegration of the body, but also in the regression of physical traits to the indistinct mass of dust. The symbolism of dust also evokes the mortal terror of the living, as if 'afar were the icon of death[2] Similarly, voices that rise from the earth mix with dust, losing forcefulness until finally becoming subtle whispers: And you shall be brought down, and shall speak from the ground, and your speech shall be low from the dust, and your voice shall be, as of a medium, from the ground, and your speech shall whisper from the dust (Isa. 29.4).

In these Biblical passages resounds the archaic notion of an abode of dust as the final resting place of every man. This conception was present in the imagery of many peoples of the ancient Near East, where the hereafter was described as an obscure house, a subterranean shelter of mud. In the Mesopotamian tradition, Enkidu, the hero of The Epic of Gilgameš, tells of the dark desolation of the underworld, as if premonitions of coming death had appeared to him in a dream: "The

[2] On Hebrew funeral uses of dust and ashes cf. M. Jastrow, "Dust, Earth and Ashes as Symbols of Mourning among the Ancient Hebrews," in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 20 (1899) pp. 133-150; Th. Reik, *Pagan Rites in Judaism* (New York, 1964), pp. 57-62.

house wherein the dwellers are bereft of light [...] where dust is their fare and clay their food [...] the House of Dust."[3] In the tale of Enkidu, the expression "House of Dust" indicates the hereafter, where the deceased "sit in darkness" and where "the crowns of those who had governed the world from time immemorial" lie in a heap.

The symbolism of dust extended, then, from the context of the funeral to the semantic realm of humility and humiliation: in countless Biblical verses, those who lie in the dust are the wretched, the poor, or the vanquished, and the gesture of sprinkling the head with dust denotes mourning, penitence, or surrender. It is the Lord who raises up the poor from the dust, and lifts the needy from the dunghill (Ps. 113.7), while his enemies lick the dust (Ps. 72.9). When Job's friends visit him after the misfortune, they offer the usual condolences according to oriental tradition—they cry out, slash their clothes, and sprinkle dust on their heads toward heaven (Job 2.12). At the end of the book, Job repents having doubted the wonders of God: Therefore I loathe myself, and repent in dust and ashes (Job 42.6).

Along with the pairs dust/dunghill and dust/ash, other hendiadys can be found in the Scriptures, generally reinforcing the negative connotation of 'afar. In Deuteronomy, among the maledictions in store for the Jews if they fail to fulfill the Lord's commands is a rain of sand and dust (Deut. 28.24), while Job characterizes his own calamity as a fall into the mire, rendering him like dust and ashes (Job 30.19). A strong symbolic connection also unites dust with the serpent, exemplified by the Lord's curse upon the reptile in the Garden of Eden: Upon your bellyshall you go, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life (Gen. 3.14). The expression "eat dust," which will be taken up again in Isaiah and Micah, expresses not only the serpent's constant contact with the earth, but also transforms the latter into a true animal-dust.

The constant presence of dust in the magic rituals with which Moses and Aaron inflict the divine punishments on the Egyptians lends 'afar the menacing force of a lethal ingredient, which a wise hand can

[3] *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. J. B. Pritchard, 3rd ed. with supplement, (Princeton, 1969), p. 87.

transform into a scourge. In Exodus, Aaron beats the dust of Egypt with a stick and changes it into [4] mosquitoes, which scatter themselves throughout the country. In Exodus, Moses also takes handfuls of ashes from the furnace to throw towards heaven: And it shall become fine dust in all the land of Egypt, and boils shall break out with sores upon man, and upon beast (Exod. 9.9).

We can also readily find dust used as a positive metaphor in the Bible, above all in comparisons where ʻafar introduces the idea of multitudes and of extraordinarily large numbers. This image occurs for the first time in the Lord's promise of innumerable progeny to Abraham: And I will make your seed as the dust of the earth; so that if a man can count the dust of the earth, then shall your seed also be counted (Gen. 13.16). After this first comparison, many other passages express a similar notion, extending it for instance to the idea of an incalculable wealth, such as that of Tyre, which has heaped up silver like dust, and fine gold like the mire of the streets (Zech. [5] 9.3).

In a single verse, contained in the book of the prophet Nahum, dust is used in the theophany of Yhwh, who is described in his attributes as God of the tempest: The way of the Lord is in the tempest and in the storm, and the clouds are the dust of his feet (Nah. 1.3).

This isolated apparition of the Lord, who passes through the sky rousing a storm like one who walks a dusty path, recalls a mythical pattern that is not to be found in the Bible, but which appears in other oriental traditions, where the divinities of the tempest precipitously rush along, thundering and reaping destruction. This is for instance the case with the Mesopotamian god Marduk. In the creation epic, which begins with the words Enūma eliš ("When on high..."), it is said of him: "He fashioned dust, he made a storm bear it up."[6] Another particularly intense example is found in the Sanskrit hymns of the [a]g-Veda, in which the chariot of Vāta, the god of wind, passes by, "making a sound like thunder. Touching the sky as it moves, it makes red streaks; passing

[4] Exod. 8.12-15.

[5] Cf. also Job 27.16: *Though he heaps up silver like dust, and piles up clothing like clay.*

[6] Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 357.

along the earth, it scatters the dust."[7] In accordance with the ancient epic, which tends to identify the chariot and the driver as a single unit, Vāta's vehicle becomes the god himself, who stirs up clouds of tempest in the sky and vortexes of sand on the ground, in the thunderous movement of his celestial display.[8]

On the other hand, in some midrašim dating from Late Antiquity, the Jewish sages superimposed on the isolated figure of Yhwh, who raises clouds of dust, the image of a divine horse which throws nature into disorder on its passing: "What is the horse of God?"—asks one rabbi in Exodus Rabbah—"the whirlwind and storm; as it is written: The Lord, in the whirlwind and in the storm is His way, and the clouds are the dust of His feet."[9]

Overall, the positive symbolism of 'afar is accentuated in Late Antiquity exegesis, and dust is compared, for instance, with Israel or the Torah itself. In a long passage in the midraš, Genesis Rabbah—probably composed at the beginning of the fifth century—the divine promise, I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth, is commented upon in a literal sense, alongside a detailed list of the attributes that dust shares in common with the Jewish people: "Just as the dust of the earth is found from one end of the world to the other, so shall thy children be found from one end of the earth to the other [...] as the dust of the earth wears out even metal utensils, yet itself endures forever,

[7] ªg-Veda X.168.1.

[8] Cf. on this point the observations of K. F. Geldner, *Der Rig-Veda aus dem Sanskrit ins Deutsche übersetzt,* 4 vols., (Cambridge [Mass.], 1951-1957), vol. III, p. 394 n. 1a, as well as ªg-Veda III.49.4. In Ps. 104.3, Yhwh is thus described: *who makes the clouds his chariot; who walks upon the wings of the wind.*

[9] *Exodus Rabbah* VIII.1. Cf. also *Tanḥuma*, ed. S. Buber (Vilnius, 1885), *NaŚo* 34. This interpretation also recalls the image of the divine chariot with horses of fire that appears in the episode of Elijah's spiriting away to heaven (2Kings 2.11). According to another midrašic exegesis, the sentence *the clouds are the dust of his feet* refers to the deep sorrow of the Lord who, as a sign of mourning for the sins of man, walks barefoot "like a human king" (*Lamentations Rabbah* I.1 and III.10).

so will Israel [...] as the dust of the earth is trodden upon, so will thy children be downtrodden under the heel of [foreign] powers."[10]

A saying attributed to Rabbi Ḥanina of Sepphoris compares the difficulty of Scriptural study to a "heap of dust": dense and compact, at first glance impossible to clear away. While the foolish despair at the difficulty of the task, "A sensible person says: 'I shall remove two basketfuls today and two basketfuls tomorrow, until I shall have removed the whole.' Even so does the fool say: 'Who can learn the whole of the Torah?' [...] whilst the sensible person says: 'I shall learn two halakot today, and two tomorrow, until I shall have learnt the whole of the Torah.[11]'"

Already in Late Antiquity, the notion of a special dust which God had placed under his [12]throne to use in the creation of the world made headway in the midrašic literature. According to the Song of Songs Rabbah, this prodigious dust was the dust of Jacob, which was mentioned in the book of Numbers,[13] and which granted the Jews extraordinarily belligerent virtues. "All the success which

Israel has in war is due to the merit of that dust of our father Jacob [...] Rabbi Berekyah and Rabbi Simon in the name of Rabbi Abbahu said: 'That dust was taken by the Holy One, blessed be He, and put under the Throne of Glory.[14]'"

In the later Exodus Rabbah, a singular tale appears in which the dust of the throne is the ingredient used in the formation of the world. The story is attributed to a bricklayer sage interrogated by several masters while standing on a scaffolding: "And [they] said to him: 'We have a question to ask you.' The reply came: 'I cannot descend, because I am hired by the day; but ask anything you like.' They then said to him: 'How was the earth originally created?' The reply was: 'God took dust

[10] *Genesis Rabbah* XLI.9. Cf. Genesis Rabbah LXIX.5 and *Pesiqta Rabbati* XI.4.

[11] Leviticus Rabbah XIX.2.

[12] For other objects traditionally imagined as being situated beneath the divine throne, see the entry *Kisse*, Throne.

[13] Num. 23.10.

[14] Song of Songs Rabbah III.8.

from beneath the Throne of Glory, and cast it into the water, where it became earth, and the little pebbles that were in the dust became mountains and hills,' as it says: When the dust becomes a mass, and the clods cleave fast together (Job 38. 38)."[15]

In another midraš, composed around the eighth century, the dust used by God to create the first man was gathered from the four corners of the world, and consisted of four colors: red, black, white, and pale green. In this way, wherever man finds himself at the moment of death, he will be once again mixed with the earth from which he is made: "Why from the four corners of the world? Because the Lord, blessed be He, said: If a man will go from the east to the west or from the west to the east [...] when he is on the point of dying, the earth of that place would not say: Your body does not come from my dust and therefore I don't want to receive it: go back to where you were created. This teaches that wherever man goes to die, the dust of his body returns to the place from which it came."[16]

The idea of the presence of distinct elements in the dust of creation was carried over to the Kabbalistic tradition of the

Middle Ages, and stoked in particular the imagination of Mošeh de León, active in Castille in the second half of the thirteenth century. In his Šušan edut (The Lily of the Testimony), he examined the double nature of 'afar, in which there is supposedly a superior and an inferior component: the spirit of man is derived "from the dust of the supernal sanctuary, while his body comes from the lower sanctuary."[17] Behind this reference to two sanctuaries, a further reference to two sefirotic levels can be inferred, that of binah (intelligence), the sefirah that corresponds to the celestial Temple, and that of malkut (kingdom), which alludes to the terrestrial dwelling. The symbolism of dust was therefore used to express the Kabbalistic idea of the creation of man as a reflection of sefirotic energies, which join to mold the destiny of things.

[15] Exodus Rabbah XIII.I. See also Genesis Rabbah I.6.

[16] *Pirqe de-rabbi Eliezer* 10.

[17] "Šušan edut," ed. G. Scholem in *Kobez al yad* 8 (18) (1975), pp. 325-284: 344.

The same conception was taken up again with slight variations in some passages of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), which modern scholarship has attributed, at least in part, to Mošeh de León himself. In a short annotation contained in the first part, we find themes already present in the Šušan ʻedut, as well as a clear echo of the ancient midraš. Nevertheless, the emphasis has shifted to the place where God mixed the dust during the act of creation: "Come and see. When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He gathered the earthly matter from the four corners of the world and fashioned him thereof on the site of the lower Temple. Then He bestowed upon him the soul of life from the supernal Temple."[18]

However, in the *Zohar*, ʻafar is not the only material used by the divine creator to model man. In fact, another type of dust is mentioned, called in Aramaic ʻafra de-qiṭma, "dust of ash," which is not "the sacred dust, which bears fruit and is called dust of gold (Job 28.6) but [...] the ashes of the burnt heifer of purification for sin (Num. 19.17) [...] which is the secret of that powerful animal."[19] The potent beast alluded to in this passage is the tempting serpent, which here seems to shroud its coils in the obscure and menacing aspect of ʻafar. In this way, dust becomes the negative counterpart of the divine principle inherent in the creature, but also the substance that emanates from the wicked deeds of Samma'el, the prince of evil: when he attacks Jacob, battling with him the whole night, it is not real dust that rises from the earth but "ashes, the residue of fire," which "does not bear any fruit on earth."[20]

The complex symbolism of ʻafar finds its way from the pages of the *Zohar* to the texts of the later mystics, who elaborate its meaning, mostly emphasizing its negative aspects. Thus, around the middle of the sixteenth century, the Sephardic Kabbalist Mošeh Cordovero associated ʻafar with the dissolution of the body, and with the ascent of

[18] *Zohar* I.205b; cf. also with some variations, *Zohar* II.24b.

[19] *Zohar* II.266b.

[20] *Zohar* I.170a.

the spirit to its heavenly resting place. In the chapter of Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates) dedicated to the doctrine of the supernal spirit, he asserts that the return of the body to dust is a necessary passage, representing the final liberation from physicality—the negative component of being. Until the limbs are completely dissolved—maintains Cordovero—the spirit will not be free to adorn itself with the immaterial garments of its acts in order to ascend to gan 'Eden: "He who has tasted death is united with death itself [...] he is of dust and to dust he shall return, so that it swallows his body. Even if he is righteous, he will not in fact deserve to partake of the garden's delights until his body is consumed."[21]

During the first half of the seventeenth century, the Italian Kabbalist Aharon Berekyah Modena put forth a long discussion of the symbolic implications of dust in a treatise on the good death, entitled Ma'avar Yabboq (The Crossing of the Yabboq). According to Modena, the earth that is used to cover the deceased performs a deep mystical function that reintegrates the body into the sefirotic world: "For this reason the dead are buried, because the lower dust is the last he, while the higher corresponds to the supernal he, and man is represented by the middle waw, enclosed between the other two letters [...] this is the supernal unification."[22] The letters evoked by the Kabbalist are the last three consonants of both the name Yhwh and those of three sefirot, respectively binah (intelligence), tif'eret (beauty) and malkut (kingdom), the reunification of which allows man to achieve eternal life. The gesture of gathering dust during burial is therefore not only an act of religious piety, but also a deed of cosmic import, which provides sense to the long roaming of man and restores peace to the sefirotic energy that terrestrial existence had dispersed.

[21] *Pardes rimmonim* XXXI.6 (*Ša`ar ha-nešamah*): ed. Munkács, [1906], vol. II, fol. 75b.

[22] *Ma`avar Yabboq, Sefat emet* 27: ed. Jerusalem, (1996), p. 240.

***ʿAMMUD*** עמוד
*COLUMN*

In the book of Genesis, which is pervaded by an atmosphere of patriarchal and nomadic life, references to building techniques are rare and the notion of "column" is completely absent. It is only **after** the flight from Egypt, when God **guided** the people through the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea (Exod. 13.18**),** that the term **ʿ**ammud appears in the Bible for the first time. **Here,** however**, it does** not **denote** a construct of wood or stone, **nor** a labor of man, but a standard of cloud and fire which serves as a guide by day and as a source of light by night: And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light; to go by day and night (Exod. *1***13.21).** In Exodus, the column arises at the first appearance of the desert, and the wilderness seems to feed its inextinguishable flame. It **disperses** only when the Jews, having abandoned the steppe, make their entrance into the cultivated lands of Canaan. Thus, the divine sign, upright and clearly visible from afar, denotes the entire journey of the Israelites **towards** the Promised Land: He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire *by night, from before the people (Exod. 13.22***).**

From these passages, it seems possible to deduce the existence of two distinct columns, one obscure against the diurnal sky, the other shining in the dark of night. Proceeding with the tale, however, it becomes clear that there is only one column, which prodigiously contrasts with the colors of the sky and, depending on the observer, may appear dark or lucid. To confuse the Egyptian pursuers, for example, the column moved from the front to the rearguard, coming between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel: And

it was a cloud and darkness to them, but it gave light by night to these: so that the one came not near the other all the night (Exod. 14.20). The details within the description even suggest a theophany of the God

of Israel, who is at times identified with the column itself, and indeed may reside within it: And it came to pass, that in the morning watch the Lord looked unto the host of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire *and of the cloud* (Exod. 14.24).

Although the column in Exodus is a completely miraculous and transcendent apparition, historical testimony also exists relating to the custom of mobilizing behind fire. Tales tell of the Persian army advancing behind a fire "sacred and eternal, set upon silver altars," while Macedonian troops would have proceeded by observing a lance, visible from every point, owing to, "a fire at night and to smoke during the day."[23] Accordingly, the 'ammud of the desert must be included in the most general symbolism of fire as a guide and smoke as its insignia. This representation is based on the visibility of combustion, and on the idea of a force of supernatural vigor conveyed by the blaze of the flame.[24] In the Jewish interpretation of this cross-cultural pattern, the cloud takes the place of smoke, with a semantic change that transposes a physical experience into a unique and unrepeatable miracle.

Cloud and smoke are notably used together as synonyms in a verse of Isaiah, which amplifies the passage from Exodus: And the Lord will create upon every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and upon

her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day, and the shining of a flaming fire *by night* (Isa. 4.5). The notion of smoke as a divine sign is also found in a passage of the prophet Joel, in which columns of smoke

[23] Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander the Great* III.3.8-9: "The order of their [the Persians] march was in this manner. The fire, which they call holy and eternal was carried before upon silver altars." The same author refers elsewhere (*ibid*., V.2.7) to the Macedonian troops and their custom of heeding the sign of fire: "He [Alexander] raised a high pole to be always lit before his pavilion, whereupon remained a sign apparent to all men. The token that they observed was fire in the night and smoke in the daytime." The parallel with Exodus was also suggested by C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblischer Kommentar über das Alte Testament*, vol. I, (Leipzig, 1866), Eng. trans., *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. II, (Edinburgh, 1872), p. 40.

[24] Sanskrit retains a succinct expression for this ancient conception in the word *dhumáketu*, which means "smoke-bannered" and which became an epithet of Agni, the Divine Fire. Cf. *Ṛg-Veda* X.4.5.

(timrot ʻašan) are numbered among the portents through which God manifests his scorn and proclaims the redemption of Israel: And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood, and fire, *and pillars of smoke* (Joel 2.30).[25]

The theophanic function of the column is also a relevant feature of Biblical symbolism, representing perhaps the most specifically Judaic metaphorical realm of ʻammud. The Scriptures attest only in a fragmentary way to the reception of the idea of the column as the support of the world, which was otherwise extremely widespread in the ancient world. The image of one or more pillars supporting the terrestrial surfaces, or sustaining the vault of the sky, gave rise to poetic invention in many cultures, which made these supports an essential element of their cosmological doctrines.[26]

At times, the Hebrew Bible evokes God's laying the foundations of the world by erecting it on stable columns, thereby guaranteeing the continuity of the course of nature and human events. The Lord is the source of this stability—The earth and all the inhabitants thereof are dissolved: I bear up the pillars of it (Ps. 75.3)—but also the only one capable of subverting it, whenever he wishes, to punish mankind: Which shaketh the earth out of her place, and the pillars thereof tremble (Job 9.6). The cosmogonic gesture through which God casts the foundation of the earth was then imagined as a truly building act: Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

[...] Upon what are its foundations fastened? Or who laid its corner stone? (Job 38.4-6). These words, which the Lord directs to Job out of the whirlwind, resound as the question posed by the Godhead in order to assert its true incommensurability, almost as if the occult architecture of creation contains the challenge of the unknowable.

[25] The value of smoke as a sign also finds application in human context: *Now there was an appointed sign between the men of Israel and the liers in wait, that they should make a great flame (maḎ'at) with smoke rise up out of the city* (Judg. 20.38). *But when the flame began to arise up out of the city with a pillar* (`*ammud*) *of smoke, the Benjamites looked behind them, and, behold, the flame of the city ascended up to heaven* (Judg. 20.40).

[26] Cf. the bibliography indicated by Gaster, *Myth*, p. 863.

In other sacred scriptures, from the Zoroastrian Avestā to the Vedic hymns of ancient India, the palace of the world, which rests on columns hidden underground, elevating its immaterial pillars to the heavens, provokes a question. The question posed by the author of the Avestic composition in order to confirm his faith is, for instance: "This I ask Thee, tell me plainly, oh Ahurā. Who holds the earth down below and the heavens above to prevent them from falling? Who holds the waters and the plants?"[27]

In Vedic speculation, the mysterious support of the cosmos merges with the Godhead himself, who through his mystical body sustains all that is real: "In whom earth, atmosphere, in whom the sky is set, where fire, moon, sun, wind stand fixed [...] tell me: which indeed is he in whose limbs all the three and thirty gods are set together [...] tell me: which indeed is he?"[28] eleventh In this last passage, taken from one of the most intensely mystical hymns of the Atharva-Veda, the concept of a cosmic pillar seems highly metaphorical. The column is no longer an inert element of the palace of the world, but has assumed anthropomorphic characteristics ("in whose limbs"), becoming a sort of living prop of the existent.

The column has strong connotations of functionality within ancient symbolism. The pillar is a support given to mankind, or to the cosmos, and is harmoniously situated in a more ample structure, to which it guarantees existence and duration. However, in traditional cultures there also existed the concept of a column that was no longer an

[27] Yasna XLIV.4 (*The G¼t¼s of Zarathushtra and the Other Old Avestan Texts*, by H. Humbach in collaboration with J. Elfenbein and P. O. Skjaervø, 2 vols., (Heidelberg, 1991), vol. I, p. 157). The parallel with the biblical tradition was noted by Scheftelowitz, *Die altpersische Religion*, p. 106.

[28] *Atharva-Veda* X.7.12-13. On this hymn, and the subsequent X.8, which constitutes a sort of complement to it, cf. K. F. Geldner, *Vedismus und Brahmanismus*, (Tübingen, 1928), pp. 105-109; Renou, *Études*, vol. II, pp. 79-85. The notion of cosmic support, *skambhá*, is widely documented in the *ᵍg-Veda:* cf. e.g., III.31.12, VI.47.5, VI.72.2, VIII.41.10, X.111.5; in X.5.6 the meaning seems close to that, extremely abstract, of the *Atharva-Veda*. *Sthānú*, "Immovable pillar-like god" is the name of the god Shiva. Cf. J. Gonda, *Notes on Names and the Name of God in Ancient India*, (Amsterdam-London, 1970), p. 60.

accessory of the world's machinery, but that stood out, isolated and endowed with its own semantic autonomy. In the Biblical tradition, two columns appear that are devoid of structural purpose and are laden with allegorical meaning. The detailed description of the furnishings of the Temple, realized by Hiram of Tyre for King Solomon, mention two bronze columns erected in the vestibule of the Temple: He set up the right pillar, and called its name Jachin: and he set up the left pillar, and called its name Boaz (1Kings 7.21).[29] From the context, it can clearly be inferred that the pillars which stand in the atrium would not have served any structural function. The attribution of two proper names—a truly singular occurrence in the ancient tradition—expresses a pronounced personification, whose exceptional symbolism we can grasp, even if many details escape us.[30]

In his *Histories*, Herodotus mentions having visited, in Tyre in Phoenicia, a sanctuary "very richly decorated with many dedicatory offerings, and there were moreover in it two pillars, one of refined gold,

[29] The text continues: *And upon the top of the pillars was lily work* (*ibid*., 7.22), while, further on, two globes situated on two pillars are mentioned: (*ibid.,* 7.41). Cf. also 2Cor. 3.17 and 4.12-13.

[30] As pointed out by G. Garbini, *I Filistei. Gli antagonisti di Israele*, (Milan, 1997), p. 201, the consonant text *ykyn* and *b'wz*, can be read as, instead of two proper names, a continuous sentence: "Sustain (or "sustains") with force (*be-'oz*, instead of Bo'az)." For various hypotheses on the columns situated in the Temple atrium, see also W. Kornfeld, "Der Symbolismus der Tempel Säulen," in *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 74 (1962), pp. 50-57; M. Görg, "Jachin und Boas. Namen und Funktion der beiden Tempelsäulen," in *Aegyptiaca-Biblica. Notizen und Beiträge zu den Beziehungen zwischen Ägypten und Israel*, (Wiesbaden, 1991), pp. 79-98; F. Briquel-Chatonnet, *Les relations entre les cités de la côte phénicienne et les royaumes d'Israël et de Juda*, (Leuven, 1992), pp. 359-360; O. Keel and Ch. Uehliger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole*, (Freiburg, 1995), pp. 194-195; and H. Walter, "Le colonne di Ercole. Biografia di un simbolo," in *Il simbolo dall'antichità al Rinascimento*, ed. L. Rotondi Secchi Tarugi, (Milan, 1995), pp. 247-306. According to some modern interpretations, the two columns should be considered as stylized trees: cf. E. O. James, *The Tree of Life. An Archaeological Study*, (Leiden, 1966), p. 37; and O. Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament. Am Beispiel der Psalmen*, (Göttingen, 19965 [1972[1]]), pp. 144-145.

the one of emerald, a huge pillar that shone by night."[31] The Phoenician pillars, created from precious materials, evidently resembled in ornamental typology those of Solomon's Temple. Their intimate connection with the symbolism of the god Melqart (identified by modern scholars as "Heracles", of whom Herodotus speaks)[32] suggests, in this case, an indebtedness on the part of Jewish tradition to that of the Phoenicians.

In the post-Biblical Judaic tradition, Jachin symbolized the moon and Boaz the sun, on the basis of etymological speculations that connected the two names with Biblical verses: "Jachin corresponds to the moon, of which it is said: It shall be established (yiqqon) for ever (Ps. 89.37) [...] Boaz corresponds to the sun, which comes forth with vigor and might (be-'oz) as it is said: The sun which [...] rejoices as a strong man when he run a race (Ps. 19.4-5)."[33] This interpretation appeared for the first time in the Midraš Tadše, probably compiled in the century, and was soon repeated by the French exegete Šelomoh ben Yiṣḥaq (Raši; 1040–1105), who added a speculation of a historical character, in which the columns, as images of cosmic stability, were tied to the duration of the Davidian dynasty[34].

[31] *Historiae* II.44. Cf. Herodotus, *The History*, trans. D. Greene, (Chicago and London, 1987), p. 150.

[32] Cf. C. Bonnet, *Melqart. Cultes et mythes de Héraclès tyrien en Méditerranée*, (Leuven, 1988), pp. 47-50; on the design of the Vedic pillars see also *ibid.*, pp. 219-220, 233-236. Bonnet, *ibid.*, p. 43, advances the hypothesis that Ezek. 26.11 (*thy strong garrisons shall go down to the ground*) could refer to the two columns of the temple of Tyre. The Biblical columns have already been compared with those of the temple of Melqart by R. F. Barnett, s.v. "Fenico-punici centri" in *Enciclopedia universale dell'arte*, 15 vols. (Venice and Rome, 1958-1967), vol. V, col. 352-363: 359; *id.*, "Ezekiel and Tyre," in *Eretz-Israel* 9 (1969), pp. 6-13: 7. On the symbolism of the cosmic column in the ancient Palestinian region, see also Garbini, *I Filistei*, pp. 200-202.

[33] "Midraš Tadše," in *Bet ha-Midrasch. Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur*, ed. A Jellinek, 6 vols. (Leipzig, 1853-1878), vol. III, p. 165. The correspondence appears more evident in the consonant spelling of the words: *Ykyn – ykwn* ; *B'z – b'wz.*

[34] *Commentary on 2 Chron. 3.27.*

Therefore, in the symbolism of ʻammud, two tendencies coexist: a cosmological one, in which the idea of the pillar serves as the representation of the world, and an allegorical one, in which the column becomes an image of ethical or historical character. The most complete example of the intersection of these two schemes appears in a passage of the Talmudic treatise Ḥagigah, in which the Jewish sages review various possible solutions to the problem of the columns of the world. According to some schools, these pillars are to be identified with the twelve tribes of Israel, while others believe that there are only seven columns, to be understood perhaps as the seven heavens of the rabbinic cosmogonies. The opinion that ultimately prevails, however, is that of Rabbi Elʻazar ben Šammuaʻ, for whom the world maintains itself through the support of ethical conduct: "Rabbi Yose says: 'Woe to those who see but do not know. Those who stand but do not know upon what they stand.' Upon what does the earth rest? On the columns [...] the sages declare: it rests upon twelve pillars, as it is said: He set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel (Deut. )32.8). Others maintain there are seven columns, as it is said: Wisdom hath hewn out her seven pillars (Prov. 9.1). Rabbi Elʻazar ben Šammuaʻ said: 'Upon one pillar whose name is "the Righteous," as it is said: The righteous is the foundation of the world (Prov. 10.25).'"[35] In spite of the apodictic tone, Rabbi Elʻazar expresses himself using a mythical image: rather than referring to an abstract concept of justice, the rabbi invokes a pillar, to which he gives the name "Righteous," thereby creating a new personification which will have extraordinary fortune in the mystical speculation of the following centuries.

[35] *bḤagigah* 12b.

*Atharva-Veda* X.7.12-13. On this hymn, and the subsequent X.8, which constitutes a sort of complement to it, cf. K. F. Geldner, *Vedismus und Brahmanismus*, (Tübingen, 1928), pp. 105-109; Renou, *Études*, vol. II, pp. 79-85. The notion of cosmic support, *skambhá*, is widely documented in the *ᵍg-Veda:* cf. e.g., III.31.12, VI.47.5, VI.72.2, VIII.41.10, X.111.5; in X.5.6 the meaning seems close to that, extremely abstract, of the *Atharva-Veda*. *Sthānú*, "Immovable pillar-like god" is the name of the god Shiva. Cf. J. Gonda, *Notes on Names and the Name of God in Ancient India*, (Amsterdam-London, 1970), p. 60.

In the early Middle Ages, in one version of the Seder rabbah di-Be-re´šit, the "Righteous" is encountered as part of the cosmic structure, almost like a macroanthropos suspended in absolute solitude: "The world is five hundred years long and equally as wide, and deep in equal measure. There are those who say that it is round and the ocean surrounds it like a vault: the great ocean and the entire world rest upon a single pillar, whose name is the 'Righteous' [...] This column, and the rest of the world, rests then upon a scale of Leviathan, which, in his turn, resides at the bottom of the lower waters like a small fish in the middle of the sea."[36] The image of the ṣaddiq ("righteous") is here enclosed in a paradoxical chain which attempts to render the idea of the minuteness of the earth by comparison to the colossal dimensions of creation, and, even more so, by comparison to the greatness of the divine.

When, around the end of the twelfth century, the mystics established the foundations of Kabbalistic thought, they took inspiration from precisely this—in some respects ironic—insertion of the column of the ṣaddiq into the doctrine of the worlds. In two passages of the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir)—one of the earliest documents in which the medieval tradition assumes a Kabbalistic tone—the "righteous" is the physical support, and also the spirit, of collective mercy: "There is a single pillar extending from heaven to earth, and its name is 'Righteous' [...] when there are righteous people in the world, then it becomes strong, and when there are not, it becomes weak. It supports the entire world, as it is written: The righteous is the foundation of the world (Prov. 10.25). If it becomes

[36] "Seder rabbah di-Be-re'šit 17," in Š. A. Wertheimer, *Batte midrašot*, 'Im hosafot [...] me-et Y. A. Wertheimer, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1950), vol. 1, pp. 27-28 (cf. also, with some variations, El'azar of Worms, *Sefer sode razayya*, ed. Š. Weiss, (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 37). The reference to the "righteous" does not appear, on the other hand, in the text of the "Seder rabbah di-Be-re'šit," published in *Synopse zur Hekhalot Literatur*, in collaboration with M. Schlüter and H. G. von Mutius, ed. P. Schäfer (Tübingen, 1981), chap. 473, which probably reflects an older text.

weak, the world cannot endure. Therefore, even if there is only one righteous person in the world, it is he who supports the world."[37]

Towards the close of the thirteenth century, in the Sephardic Kabbalah, the identification of the column with the righteous was further complicated by the addition of two elements needed to represent the diagram of the sefirot. To yesod, the sefirah of the foundation, imagined as the central pillar of the sefirotic tree, and also identified with the "righteous," two lateral columns were added, representing neṣaḥ (eternity) and hod (majesty) respectively. According to the Kabbalist Yosef Giqaṭilla, "neṣaḥ and hod are the sides, and yesod, which represents the firmament, is the center." On the basis of another system of correspondences, the two lateral sefirot are equivalent to Solomon's Jachin and Boaz, while yesod, "erect in the center, sits on the throne."[38]

In the works of Mošeh de León, who most likely had a friendly relationship with Giqaṭilla, the identification of hod and yesod with the two pillars of the Temple reappears, along with a thorough treatment of the mystical meaning of the column of the righteous, especially in its astral symbolism. For De León, the central sustaining force is the sun, or more precisely, the sky in which the diurnal star occupies the middle place, surrounded by the moon and the stars. This sky "encompasses all others [...] and is the greatest and most vast sphere, from which all things emanate, and upon which all the lights of the stars depend [...] the sun represents the masculine principle, which nourishes and feeds the feminine [...] this is the column upon which the world bases its existence." [39] According to Giqaṭilla, another meaning of 'ammud emerges from the traditional identification of the sun with the

[37] *Sefer ha-bahir* 102 [71] ]; cf. also 101 [70]. The opinion of G. Scholem, *Das Buch Bahir. Ein Schriftdenkmal aus der Frühzeit der Kabbala*, (Leipzig, 1923), p. 73, according to which this reference to the "righteous" in paragraph 101 [70], should be expunged, seems to be faulty

[38] *Ša`are orah* 3-4, ed. Y. Ben Shlomo, 2 vols. (Jerusalem, 1981²), vol. I, pp. 154-155; cf. also *ibid*., p. 173.

[39] *Šušan `edut*, ed. Scholem, p. 338.

masculine astral, which he expresses in strongly esoteric tones: "Behold, you see that this column corresponds to the sign of the sacred pact, the most concealed secret of the Creator, blessed be He. This column represents, in fact, the secret essence of his conduct [...] and is the support of all things. In the sign of the pact a precious mystery is concealed, as this is the link which holds together all the links, and is the link of all the chains."[40] In this image of the world of the sefirot, which De León formulates in markedly anthropomorphic terms, the column is equated, therefore, with the virile member through which the energy of tif´eret, the sefirah corresponding to the sun, is propagated in malkut, the feminine supernal, emanating through her to the lower worlds. This is a difficult passage in Kabbalistic speculation, since the author presupposes a metonymic correlation between two closely related sefirot, tif´eret (beauty; the male and the sun) and yesod (foundation; the righteous and the virile member), each of which can take the place of the other in a kind of mystical exchange.

From this conceptual contiguity emerges the double sense of the column in the lexicon of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the substantial compendium of Kabbalistic thought, considered to have been partly composed by the same De León in the closing decades of the thirteenth century. In the *Zohar*ic vocabulary, 'ammuda de-amṣa'ita, "middle column," is now tif'eret, while 'ammud 'olam (or 'ammuda de-'olma), "column of the world," is yesod.[41] With this latter identification, the dynamism of the masculine principle succeeds in finding shelter, and completes itself in the feminine. In several cases, the central pillar is compared to a tree, a cedar of Lebanon or a palm: "Just as a palm tree does not grow unless the male be accompanied by the female, so the righteous cannot flourish save when they are male

and female together, like Abram and Sarai." [42] With this characteristic use of comparisons and metaphorical images, the author of the *Zohar* explores the value of the column as a bond, believing that

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] E.g., in *Zohar* II.11a and 116a as well as in II.110a and 169b (*`ammuda de-kol `olma*)

[42] *Zohar* I.82a. .

it reaches its purpose only by uniting with its female counterpart. Rather than remaining a static element, ‘ammud therefore becomes a dynamic principle in the Kabbalistic doctrine, enclosed in a representation where sexual similes serve to evoke the reciprocal attraction of the cosmic elements, and the desire that drives one toward the other, to complete the divine plan.

*Aryeh* אריה
LION

In the limited vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew, at least seven different names are reserved for the lion. Along with *aryeh*, the most frequently used term, we find the near-homophonous ari, along with a series of rarer appellatives: *gur, kefir*, and *šaḥal*, usually employed to designate the young lion[43] *lavi*, most likely the Asiatic lion; and *layiw*, which appears only three times in the poetic texts.

The lion dominates Biblical imagery as the protagonist of numerous legends, and as a frequent source of comparisons relating to strength and courage. According to the book of Proverbs, it is the strongest among beasts, and turns not away for anyone (Prov. 30.30), rendering it a traditional epithet of the hero. In Jacob’s benediction to his children, for example, Judah is a young lion (gur aryeh), and his brave behavior is compared to the menacing regality of the wild beast: He stooped down, he crouched as a lion*, and as an old wild lion* (lavi);[44] who shall rouse him up? (Gen. 49.9). Moses refers to the tribe of Dan as “young

[43] A list of biblical names for the lion appears in bSanhedrin 95a. According to some, *kefir* indicates the lion in general, without reference to age, while *ša...al* is the name of all the great and/or feared animals (cf. A. Bialik, s.v. “Aryeh. Ari,” in *En£iqlopedyah miqra'it*, vol. I, [Jerusalem, 1972], cols. 560-564).

[44] *Lavi* is often translated, in this and in other passages, with “lioness,” although such a rendering seems doubtful. The feminine is instead, surely, *leviyya* (or, in post-biblical Hebrew, *leviyyah*), in Ezek. 19.2 (and the plural *leva'ot* in Nahum 2.13). Cf. bSanhedrin 106a: “Who would throw his own garments in between the lion (*lavi*) and the lioness (*leviyyah*) when they are coupling?”

lion" (gur aryeh), and to that of Gad as lavi.[45] In the book of Numbers, the people of Israel also appear as a lion that shall not lie down until he eats of the prey, and drinks the blood of the slain (Num. 23.24).[46] Saul and Jonathan are said to have been swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions (2Sam. 1.23), and, to define for Absalom the highest valor, the sage Hushai uses an expression that will become proverbial: And he also who is brave, whose heart is as the heart of a lion*, shall completely melt* (2Sam. 17.10).[47]

Killing the beast is considered an achievement of the one who accomplishes it, such as David, who tells Saul the story of his own battle with a lion that had made away with a sheep from the flock: And I went out after him, and struck him, and rescued it from its mouth; and when he arose against me, I caught him by his beard, and struck him, and slew him (1Sam. 17.34-35). Likewise Benaiah went down [...] and slew a lion in the midst of a pit in a time of snow (2Sam. 23.20). In the book of Psalms, the lion is the enemy, the wicked man who lays a snare for the good and the faithful.[48] In the books of Kings, an assault by the beast is God's chosen punishment for individuals, or even for a population, as is the case of the lions unleashed upon the foreigners' dwellings in the place of the children of Israel in the city of Samaria: And so it was [...] that they feared not the Lord; therefore the Lord sent lions among them, which killed some of them (2 Kings 17.25).

God can nevertheless reduce the beasts to docility, saving individuals through providential acts—as in the case of Daniel, who is protected by an angel who shut the lions' mouths (Dan. 6.17-28) in the den—or by liberating the people from the menace of violence in the coming age: when the leopard shall lie down with the kid [...] the lion

[45] Deut. 33.20-22.

[46] Cf. Also Ezek. 19.3 and Mic. 5.7.

[47] On the cult, in ancient Palestine, of a warrior goddess with the attributes of a lioness, called *Lb't* see E. Puech, s.v. "Lioness," in *Dictionary of Deities*, cols. 981-983; Garbini, *I Filistei*, p. 94.

[48] Ps. 7.3, 10.9, 17.12, 22.14, 22.17, 35.17, 57.5, 58.7; cf. also Prov. 28.15.

[49] Cf. also Isa. 65.25.

*shall eat straw like the ox* (Isa. 11.6-7) and even *No lion shall be there* (Isa. 35.9).[49] In a few cases, the epithet of the lion is directly attributed to the God of Israel, whose actions are compared to the terrible appearance of the beast. In the book of Isaiah we see a simile inspired by the daily experience of pastoral life: the angry deity bursts into the life of man like a starving lion that roars before attacking: *Like the lion and the young lion* roaring on his prey, when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice, nor abase himself for the noise of them; so shall the Lord of hosts come down to fight for Mount Zion, and for its hill. (Isa. 31.4).[50]

This metaphorical use of the verb for the lion's roar originated, perhaps, from the representation of the thundering voice of the god of the tempest in a model already present in ancient Sumerian literature.[51] In fact, in the Scriptures, the same root (š'g) is also employed to describe thunder, which thereby assumes the connotations of a divine roar: After it a voice roars; he thunders with the voice of his Excellency (Job 37.4).

The book of Judges contains a narrative cycle in which the symbolic image of the lion has a central function; the protagonist of the events is Samson, figure of the solar hero, celebrated for his strength, his wisdom and the cheerfulness of his behavior. In the first episode, a young lion comes towards the hero who, invested with the spirit of the Lord [...] tore him as he would have torn a kid, and he had nothing in his hand (Judg. 14.5-6). Over the course of the narrative, the carcass of the lion prodigiously fills with honey. Samson makes an enigma of the event for the Philistines, who are unable to resolve it without the secret help of the hero's wife: Out of the eater came food, and out of the strong came sweetness (Judg. 14.14).

[49] Cf. also Isa. 65.25.

[50] Cf. also Jer. 49.19, Hos. 5.14, 11.10, 13.7-8, Amos 1.2. .

[51] Cf. e.g., Th. Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness. A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven and London, 1976), p. 136. For the medieval Arabic translation cf. I. Goldziher, *Der Mythos bei der Hebräern und seine geschichtliche Entwicklung* (Leipzig, 1876), Eng. trans., *Mythology among the Hebrews and its Historical Development* (London, 1877), pp. 164-165.

The feats of Samson are sung with an epic tone somewhat unusual for the Scriptures, which nevertheless find ample parallels in other traditions, as much in the classical as the oriental, for example in the Vedic poetry of ancient India.[52] Although often varying in details, and whether found in the Hebrew Bible or in the ªg-Veda, a similar enumeration of paradoxical deeds is found, in which the lion becomes the emblem of the upset of nature's usual course by the hero.[53] The literary topos of courage as represented by combat with the lion is incarnated in the ªg-Veda in the god Indra, who, in a curious semantic transposition, kills a lion "with a goat,"[54] or rather, according to the text, "Even with the weak he wrought this matchless exploit." Moreover, Indra puts forth, in a tone of ironic defiance, a riddle, in which the lion is ensnared by a fox.[55] In this way, he uses a paradoxical reversal of roles, running parallel to Samson's enigma. Much like the

[52] The narratives related to Samson have been the subject of ample comparative studies, beginning with the pioneering, H. H. Steinthal, "Die Sage von Samson," in *Zeitschrift für Völkerpsychologie und Sprachwissenschaft* 2 (1862), pp. 129-170. Among the more recent inquiries see P. Nel, "The Riddle of Samson," in *Biblica* 66 (1985), pp. 534-545; O. Margalith, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magic Locks," in *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986), pp. 225-234; J. L. Crenshaw, s.v. "Samson," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary,* vol. V, pp. 950-954. G. Garbini, *I Filistei*, pp. 197-203, proposes an interesting reading of the saga of Samson as a relic of "Philistine" tradition, and therefore likely of Indo-European ancestry.

[53] As already noted A. de Gubernatis, *Zoological Mythology. Or The Legends of Animals*, 2 vols., (London, 1872), vol. II, p. 156 (further pursued by A. Smythe Palmer, *The Samson-Saga and its Place in Comparative Religion,* [London, 1913], p. 77), the relationship of the lion to honey also appears in ªg-Veda IX.89.3: *"si®há® nasanta mádhuvo* [the flows] of honey caress the lion" (as translated by Renou, *Études védiques*, vol. IX, (Paris, 1961), p. 39). This image refers to *soma*, the drink offered in libation in Vedic sacrifices. On the symbolism of the Sanskrit term *mádhu* see H. Lüders, *Varuna,* ed. L. Alsdorf, 2 vols.,(Göttingen, 1951-1959), vol. II, pp. 340-351.

[54] ªg-Veda VII.18.17: *si®híyam cit pétuven¼ jagh¼na*. In the Jewish sphere, the motif of the kid is expressed in a different manner in the Testament of Judah, datable to the end of the first century B.C.E.: "I killed a lion and plucked a kid out of its mouth" (*The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R. A. Charles, [London, 1968] 2 vols., vol. II, p. 316).

[55] Singer, understand this that I say: The rivers carry their currents upstream. The fox crept up to the lion from behind" (ªg Veda X.28.4; ).

Biblical hero, Indra wants to reaffirm boldly the inimitability of his valor and the human impossibility of equaling it.

The variegated symbolism of the lion developed in post-Biblical Judaic literature through the addition of other legendary elements. In the first centuries of the Common Era, the identification of the God of Israel with the beast gave origin to a mythical beast of colossal proportions, different from any other. In fact, the Ḥullin treatise of the Babylonian Talmud states that "The Emperor once said to Rabbi Yošua‘ ben Ḥananyah, 'Your God is likened to a lion, for it is written: *The lion* hath roared, who will not fear? The Lord God hath spoken, who can but prophesy? But what is the greatness of this? A horseman can kill the lion!' He replied: `He has not been likened to the ordinary lion, but to the lion of Be-‘Ila'y!' 'I desire,' said the Emperor, 'that you show it to me.' He replied: 'You cannot behold it.' 'Indeed,' said the Emperor, 'I will see it.' He [Rabbi Yošua‘ ben Ḥananyah] prayed and the lion set out from its place. When it was four hundred parasangs distant it roared once, and all pregnant women miscarried and the walls of Rome fell. When it was three hundred parasangs distant it roared again and all the molars and incisors of man fell out; even the Emperor himself fell from his throne to the ground."[56] Thus the sovereign found himself forced to ask the rabbi to return the lion to its cage.

Other Talmudic pages are populated with fairy-tale lions, such as those that appeared in front of Rabbi Šim‘on ben Ḥalafta as he walked down the street. Upon seeing them, he recited the verse The young lions roar for their prey, and seek their food from God (Ps. 104.21), and "two lumps of flesh descended [from heaven]. They ate one and left the other." The story closes with a curious judicial question, when the master, having carried the remaining piece of meat back to the school, asks his colleagues if it was pure or impure food.[57]

They replied to him: "No unclean thing descends from heaven."

Further on in the Talmud, one finds a comparison attested to in other cultures but which is absent in Biblical literature: that between

[56] bYullin 59b.

[57] bSanhedrin 59b.

the lion and fire. The Yoma treatise teaches in fact that the fire used for sacrifices in the Temple "was lying like a lion, it was as clear as sunlight, its flame was of solid substance, it devoured wet wood like dry wood, and it caused no smoke to arise from it."[58] Here the image of fire resembling a lying animal appears unexpectedly, and the rabbis provide no other explanation for this singular symbolism. The only important detail treated in the course of the text is that this fire-lion burned in the first Temple while the fire of the second Temple was "lying like a dog,,[59] thereby showing an inferior grade of holiness, represented by the weaker nature of the beast.

The Talmudic simile seems to reflect the ancient mystery of the sacred fire, not so much in its evident manifestations but in its occult state, where it remains hidden in matter like a beast lying in ambush—that is to say that the metaphor of fire as a lion evokes the uncontaminated power of the element, which precedes each of its mundane forms. The ability to see it in this essential state is a privilege for the few, and it is for this reason that the Talmud reveals its image with a tone of esoteric teaching. It is again the Sanskrit tradition that offers a very pertinent parallel: in one Vedic hymn, Agni, the divine fire, resembles an enigmatic lion: "After he surpassed every error and obstacle, they find him vigilant, uncorrupted, crouching in the water like a lion."[60]

While in the Hindu tradition the symbolism of occult fire received a wide and coherent development, in Jewish literature the fleeting Talmudic mention did not produce organic reflections; rather, they

[58] bYoma 21b.

[59] *Ibid.* The Ugaritic epic also includes a dog-fire: Išat, "Fire," is in fact the name of the "divine bitch" vanquished by the goddess Anat: cf. M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places,* (Münster, 1995) [KTU$^{2}$], 1.3.III.45; W. Beyerlin, *Religiongeschichtliches Textbuch zum Alten Testament,* (Göttingen, 1985$^{2}$, 1975$^{1}$). "Dogs of fire" are mentioned by the Muslim author Tha`¼lib¾ (d., 1038) in his *Thim¼r al-qul½b*: cf. F. von Hammer - Purgstall, "Auszüge aus Saalebi's Buche der Stützen des sich Beziehenden und dessen worauf es sich bezieht" in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 9 (1855), pp. 368-404: 376.

[60] [a]g-Veda III.9.4. .

gave rise to fragmentary interpretations, in which, nevertheless, the feral flame is frequently used as a narrative image. In the eleventh century, the Ashkenazic exegete Šelomoh ben Yiṣḥaq (Raši) explains that "The embers which fell from heaven on the altar at the time of Solomon [...] were like a crouching lion," [61] while approximately a century later, for Moses Nachmanides (1194-1270), fire is "a lion that devours the sacrificial offering."[62] At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Yiṣḥaq of Acre wrote, in a commentary on the words of Nachmanides, that the embers allude to the *sefirah* of power, since "the figure of the lion in the first Temple means that the Lord's providence for Israel was complete, similar to the lion, which is not surpassed by any other wild beast; rather, all are dominated by him."[63]

In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor)—composed in the same years in which Yiṣḥaq of Acre was working on the Nachmanidean teachings – the Temple fire underwent another transformation, becoming the lion-like image of an angel, which, at the moment of the sacrifice, "from on high descended [...] crouching on his prey, consuming the offerings like a mighty giant."[64] The passage from the full holiness of the first Temple to that of the disempowered second sanctuary is also represented in the *Zohar* in a narrative sequence, which concludes with the dramatic outcome of the suppression of the beast:

"But when sin prevailed He descended to the regions here below and slew that lion, not desiring any more to provide his portion as formerly. The same evil monster (siṭra aḥra),[65] seeing this, sent a dog to consume the offerings."[66] In this case, the lion of fire does not constantly dwell in the Temple but suddenly descends when a sacrifice is offered: it is a

[61] Šelomo... ben Yi£...aq (Raši), *Commentary on* bYoma 21b.

[62] Moses Nachmanides, *Commentary on* Gen. 2.3.

[63] Yi£...aq of Acre, *Me'irat `enayim*: A. Goldreich, "Sefer Me'irat Einayim by R. Isaac of Acre" (in Hebr.), 2 vols., PhD Dissertation, (Jerusalem, The Hebrew University, 1981), vol. II, p. 21. Cf. also *ibid*., p. 183.

[64] *Zohar* I.6b.

[65] That is to say the forces of evil.

[66] *Zohar* I.6b.

lion, which is hoped for and feared at the same time, which descends among men to ravish the sacrifice, and whose fury is appeased by the victim. The beast represents the placation of the divine wrath,[67] and corresponds to the intimate nature of the ritual sacrifice, whose aim is to expiate guilt and pacify the divinity.

The narrative development of the figure of the lion in the pages of the *Zohar* found a parallel a few centuries later in the work of Naḥman of Bratslav (1772-1811), a Hasidic sage of no ordinary literary talents. In his theoretical works, Naḥman often introduces the lion as an icon of meditation, upon which it is necessary to reflect in order to discover the intentions and the harmony of the divine design: "The righteous continuously search and inquire to try to understand the will of the Lord, blessed be He, in everything, for instance to uncover the reason for the power and the might of the lion, of its image, and no less of its nature and behavior, which belong to it alone."[68] The lion is, in fact, for the sage of Bratslav, the first link in a chain that uncoils in reality, almost an archetype to contemplate in its mysterious force. Naḥman's insistence on the meaning of the lion renders it, more than a simple example, a true hermeneutical key, capable of opening up an understanding of all of creation. In this way, Naḥman's lions assume protean aspects, appearing with a variety of attributes equivalent to multiple expressive suggestions. According to the Hasidic sage, for example, when prayer reaches maximum intensity, "the lion descends and devours the offering,"[69] and he who prays feels the accents of the words in the shivering of the bones. In the *Sippure maʿaśiyyot*—the Tales that narrate, under the veil of allegory, the incessant motion of the

[67] The name of this angelic lion (which is equivalent to one of the aspects of the *...ayyot* described in 1.10 and 10.14) is, according to the *Zohar,* Uri'el: cf. also *Zohar* I.23b and III.32b, as well as R. Margaliot, *Mal'ake `elyon*, (Jerusalem, 19883, 19451), pp. 7-9 and the bibliography cited there. For Mošeh Cordovero, *Pardes rimmonim* X.7.5 (*Ša`ar hagawwanim*): ed. Munkács, vol. I, fol. 60c, Uri'el symbolizes, in the sefirotic plan, the attribute of mercy (*...esed*), included in the *waw* of the name Yhwh, located in the *sefirah* of beauty (*tif'eret*).

[68] Na...man of Bratslav, *Liqquµe Moharan, Mahadora qamma* 17.1

[69] *Ibid.*, 50.

sefirot, and the tiresome human contribution to the completion of the celestial order—Naḥman entrusts to the lions the office of strict guardians. One of them, all gold, which keeps watch over the throne of a fabled king, "opens its mouth and swallows up anything that comes close to it,"[70] while another beast sows terror on a mountain of fire: "When it wants to eat, it hurls itself among the flock, and even if the shepherds strike it and make noises to scare it off, it is not afraid, and takes a calf or a sheep, roars, and eats it."[71] Naḥman's inventory even includes a monstrous medley of man and beast, the "human lion," a name attributed to some members of a particular group of people that made money into their God.[72] The ferocity of the animal is, for once, a negative metaphor for the debasement of man, caused by his thirst for riches. The Hasidic fable here expresses its vocation as social satire, treating a world populated with sad menshlikhe leybn, human lions, sinister predators of other people's goods.

## ʻAyin עין
EYE; SOURCE

ʻAyin encompasses, in one unique sound, three homophonous notions apparently very different from one another, meaning both "eye" and "source," as well as designating the sixteenth letter of the Hebrew

[70] *Sippure maʻaƀiyyot, Maʻaƀeh* 11.
[71] *Ibid., Maʻaƀeh* 12.
[72] *Ibid., Maʻaƀeh* 12.

alphabet. In post-Biblical language the term assumes moreover the most general meaning of a round object, and goes on to indicate rings and pierced instruments. In a figurative sense, ‘ayin refers to the phenomenon of the sudden reflection of light produced from metals and stones, the rainbow of colors for which the gemological term “cat’s eye” is sometimes used.

The link between the form of the eye and the visual appearance of the Hebrew letter can be intuited easily; on the other hand, the affinity between the eye and the source of water seems more mysterious, especially since the two concepts are not only homophonous in Hebrew, but also in Arabic, and with slight phonetic variations in other Semitic languages as well as Persian, Turkish, and Armenian.[73] Such semantic proximity can perhaps be explained by the idea, documented in the Scriptures, of the eye as the source through which the spirit emerges into the external world, displaying its own intimate qualities. In order to give voice to inclinations such as arrogance, humility, derision, or malevolence, Hebrew frequently resorts to metaphors constructed around the eyes: in Isaiah (2.11) “lofty eyes” are referred to, while, to define a malevolent attitude in Deuteronomy (15.9), the expression “thine eye be evil” appears. On the other hand, to fix one’s eyes on something signifies a manifestation of favor, affection, and concern. Behold, the eye of the Lord is upon those who fear him, we find in Psalms (33.18), indicating the protection that is the fruit of a vigilant watch.

In the sun-drenched landscape of the Near East, the eye and the spring are also united for reasons connected with daily experience. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, among the Bedouin nomads, ‘ayin—“eye”—was, in Arabic, the epithet for the one who rode in front of the marching tribe, assigned the task of finding a place to camp and, most importantly, of finding water.[74] When the Israelites,

[73] Scheftelowitz, *Die altpersische Religion,* p. 147, elaborates upon the affinity between the Hebrew, Persian and Armenian.

[74] Cf. A. Musil, *The Northern Ḥe¬¼z. A Topographical Itinerary*, (New York, 1926), p. 269.

departing from Sinai, ventured into the desert, Moses sought a scout familiar with the terrain and, turning to Hobab the Midianite, he said You know how we are to camp in the wilderness, and you may be to us instead of eyes (Num. 10.31). The eye that scrutinizes the desert searches, above all, for signs of water, which mark the stages of the walk and guarantee its continuation.

Fundamental features of the topography of ancient Israel, springs and wells were common meeting places where, sooner or later, all would have convened. Biblical figures also frequently end up there: Abraham's servant waits near a well for the future wife of Isaac,[75] and it is at a spring that Jacob encounters Rebecca. Even the Lord's angel, when frantically looking for Hagar, who had escaped from Sarah's maltreatments, traces her close to a fountain: And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, as stated in Genesis (16.7)—by the fountain on the way to Shur. After this encounter with the celestial messenger, Hagar gives the place the name of El-ro'i, which can perhaps be rendered "the God who sees me."[76] This epithet is a reminder that springs were, in ancient times, privileged places for the apparition of the divine.

But there is another episode in which the figure of Hagar is surprisingly tied to the interwoven symbolism of eyes and water. Driven into the desert by Abraham, Hagar is about to die of thirst, together with her son Ishmael, when God, moved to pity by the cries of the child, turns comfortingly to her and comes to her rescue: And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad to drink (Gen. 21.19). God's intervention is expressed here with the technical term pqḥ, which is reserved, in Hebrew, for the opening of one's eyes with the attainment

[75] On this episode, see also the entry *Šeqet,* Silence.

[76] Cf. K. Koenen, "Wer sieht wen? Zur Textgeschichte von Genesis XVI 13," in *Vetus Testamentum* 38 (1988), pp. 468-474; E. A. Knauf, *Ismael. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte Palästinas und Nordarabiens im 1. Jahrtausend v.Chr.,* (Wiesbaden, 1989[2], 1985[1]), pp. 48-49. According to A. De Pury, s.v. "El-roi" in *Dictionary of Deities*, cols. 555-558, the appellative is perhaps an archaism by a later editor of Gen. 16.

of a new inward consciousness. Hagar therefore becomes aware of something that she had probably already seen but wasn't able to understand.

God's act confers a status of dignity on the figure of the Egyptian slave, and makes her resemble other Biblical personages to whose lot fell this prodigious intensification of cognitive faculties. The disclosure of a new vision is in fact the central theme of the temptation by the serpent in the Adamic tale, so much so that the word *'enayim*, "eyes" appears in each of the three verses that constitute the nucleus of the episode. In order to induce Eve to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge, the serpent promises: For God knows that in the day you eat of it, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3.5). In the subsequent verse, the woman, turning her gaze upwards, sees that the tree is pleasant to the eyes (Gen. 3.6) and is thereby induced into taking the fruit and eating it together with Adam. Soon enough, the promise of the serpent comes true: And the eyes of them both were opened (Gen. 3.7). The decisive scene of the transgression of the divine order unfolds, therefore, even before words are spoken, in a silent exchange of looks, and the eye seems to be the true theme of the narrative. As a consequence of this eye-opening, the Scriptures affirm that Eve and Adam knew that they were naked. (Gen. 3.7). The recourse to the root *yd'*, "know," instead of to the verb *r'h*, "see," indicates with absolute precision the character of the new state of consciousness brought about by the forbidden fruit.

This passage generated a serious interpretive dilemma among the Jewish exegetes. In this short Biblical tale, the disclosure of a new cognitive faculty contrasts with the narrative economy of the episode, which ends with the divine punishment. Why, in the temptation by the serpent, does a new consciousness signify expulsion and a lost state of happiness? The most ancient commentators on the Biblical text chose to answer this question with a parable. As the midraš Genesis Rabbah puts it: "And the eyes of them both were opened (Gen. 3.7) [...] it can be compared to a villager who was passing a glass-worker's shop, and just when a basket full of goblets and cut-glass ware was in front of him he

swung his staff round and broke them. Whereupon he [their owner] arose and seized him, saying to him, 'I know that I cannot obtain redress from you, but come and I will show you how much valuable stuff you have destroyed.' Thus He showed them how many generations they had destroyed."[77] In this enigmatic simile, the one who breaks the glassware opens his eyes to the consequences of his own gesture in the same way as Adam and Eve as they become aware of their nudity, recognizing the meaning of an image already seen countless times, and understanding the consequences of that nudity. The gaze of man after the expulsion is therefore not limited to the present: it is the eye of history, which substitutes the absolute present of Eden with a future characterized by anxiety, and subject to evil and corruption.

In Judaism, the eye that scrutinizes the future meets other eyes, which keep vigil over death. In the post-Biblical tradition, the angel of death was represented with many eyes, as already briefly alluded to in the Babylonian Talmud, according to which that celestial envoy "is full of eyes."[78] This unusual image had an extensive legacy, in particular in the folklore of the Ashkenazic Jews in the Middle Ages. In the *Sefer Hasidim* (The Book of the Pious)—a collection of legends and traditions compiled between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries—we find written: "when a man is close to death his angel of protection sees the angel of death full of eyes, as it is said: *it is pleasant to the eyes* (Gen. 3.6), *and the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3.7) to see the angel of death

[77] Genesis Rabbah XIX.6.

[78] b`Avodah zarah 20b; cf. also *Kallah rabbati* 52b; "Barayta de-ma`aƀeh merkavah 4," ed. Wertheimer, *Batte midrašot,* vol. I, p. 58. According to A. K. Coomaraswamy, "Le corps parsemé d'yeux," in Id., *Selected Papers*, I. *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, (Princeton, 1977), pp. 371-375: 371-372: "It is more than doubtful whether it is Satan as such and not rather Lucifer in the proper sense of this name that is intended by the "Angel of Death" in the Babylonian Talmud: for "Death" is one of the highest names of the God that both quickens and slays, separates and unifies." It should nevertheless be noted that *Luciferus* (Latin equivalent, in Jerome's version of Isa. 14.12, of Hebrew *hellel ben šaḥar*), has no role in the Jewish Haggadah, nor can it be affirmed that, in Hebrew, death (*mawet*) indicates "one of the most elevated names of God."

that is full of eyes."[79] The temptation by the serpent was transformed in this way, in the medieval imagery, into the prefiguration of the ultimate encounter, in which man, accompanied by his own angel, approached the gaze, unique and innumerable, of death.

In the Kabbalistic literature, the notion of 'ayin displays a twofold symbolic import, suspended between negative physicality and clear intellectual understanding. Indeed, for the Kabbalists, the eye was the tool of malediction, through which the wicked were able to cause misfortune and ruin. Balaam, the Biblical personage called upon by the king of Moab to curse Israel, was considered an archetypal figure of this connotation of 'ayin. At the end of the thirteenth century, in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), Balaam was defined as "he who had the evil eye and who drew the spirit of destruction on anything he looked at." Nevertheless, according to the author's interpretation of the *Zohar*, the disintegrating power of Balaam's gaze was concentrated in a single eye, which had to be turned to the object of execration in order for the magical act to have the desired effect: "It is written: He raised his eyes (Num. 24.2) and therefore: raised one eye and lowered the other, to finally look at Israel with the evil eye."[80] The evil eye seems here to be a consequence of the reduction of the full gaze to the partiality of a single eye.

The anthithetical vocation of 'ayin is found again in other *Zohar*ic images, for example in the contrast between the pupil and the interior light of the spirit, the former being a dark-colored symbol for matter while the latter represents a spiritual principle: "The eye of the intellect is like a light that illuminates the pupil; it is in fact dark, *I am black, but comely* (Song of Songs 1.5), since the light that brightens it corresponds to the white part."[81] The intellectual knowledge, which

[79] *Sefer ḥasidim,* (Bologna, 1538), nr. 1145. Cf. also, for images of the angels "full of eyes," El`azar of Worms, *Sefer sode razayya*, ed. Weiss, p. 145; Avraham ben Azri'el, *Sefer `arugat ha-boƀem,* ed. E. E. Urbach, 4 vols., (Jerusalem, 1939-1963), vol. I, p. 270.

[80] *Zohar* I.68b

[81] *Zohar* III.280b (*Ra`aya mehemna*)-

ennobles the look, constitutes the positive component of the eye, and extends its symbolism to the immaterial realm of the divine.

In a voluminous work, entitled *Ma'avar Yabboq* (The Crossing of the Yabboq), Aharon Berekyah Modena, the Italian Kabbalist of the seventeenth century, applied the idea of the divine energy of the eyes to the symbolic relationship between the eye and death. In this text, a kind of manual on the mystical approach to illness and the physical end of man, the author discusses at length the necessity of "turning the eye to face of he who is close to passing away." According to Modena, who here follows the *Zohar*ic tradition, death is nothing but a distancing from the supernal light, which abandons the body to a dark obscurity. Thus the look of the one who assists the sick has the function of rendering less brusque and terrible this lowering into darkness, since the eye of man is light and "all the saints are alight in it, the divine extension and the whole world."[82] To follow the dying with one's eyes in their ultimate passage is therefore interpreted not only as a gesture of religious piety, but also as an act of cosmic significance, which testifies to the persistence of the divine light beyond death.

[82] *Ma`avar Yabboq, ±ifte ṣedeq* 25: (Jerusalem, 1996), p. 172. The equivalence between the eye and light is already affirmed in bṢabbat 151b.

Bayit בית
HOUSE

In Biblical Hebrew, bayit indicates the dwelling of sedentary peoples, in contrast to the nomadic tent.[83] By extension, bayit also means the goods that belong to the head of a family and the people who make up his circle. After a fleeting mention in Genesis (12.15), where the word is employed to name the palace of the Pharaoh, the first Biblical episode that has the image of the house at its center is that of the angels' visit to Lot, set in a Sodom of dark, gloomy, urban tracts. Lot sees the angels of the Lord and invites them to spend the night in his home, but they reply to him: No; we will stay in the street all night. And he pressed upon them greatly; and they turned in to him, and entered into his house (Gen. 19.2-3). From this moment on, the house becomes the theatre of an agitated nocturnal scene. A protected space of hospitality, Lot's residence is the physical location around which the outrage happens that causes the destruction of Sodom. The men of Sodom, surrounded the house, both old and young, all the people from every quarter; And they called to Lot, and said to him, Where are the men who came in to you this night? Bring them out to us, that we may know them (Gen. 19. 4-5). The following events unfold in the very narrow space between the threshold and the door: And Lot went out the door

[83] For "tent" the terms *ohel miškan, yeria`, miškan`* are found.

to them, and closed the door after him (Gen. 19.6). To defend his guests, he resorts to an expression that describes the protective symbolism of the house, which does not appear anywhere else in all of the Scriptures: Only to these men do nothing; seeing that they have come under the shadow of my roof (Gen. 19.8).

But, under the shadow of Lot's roof, the last obstacle against the impiety remains the door. The Sodomites want to knock it down, but heavenly intervention changes the course of events with one stroke: *But the men*—who are the Lord's angels—*put forth their hand, and pulled Lot into the house to them, and closed the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great; so that they wearied themselves to find the door* (Gen. 19. 1011). All at once, Lot's home becomes invisible to the aggressors, and its image vanishes from the tale. The word bayit, which is repeated five times in ten verses, is not mentioned again, not even to describe the precipitous departure of Lot and the angels at the break of dawn. The destruction of Sodom is the destruction of a city, and the sin being punished is—perhaps even more so than sexual excess—the attempt to violate the fundamental unit of a city: the house. After the Lord causes it to rain sulfur and fire from the sky, annihilating the city, the plain, the inhabitants, and even the vegetation in the soil, Lot takes refuge in the mountains and—according to the Scriptures—goes to live with his children in a cavern (Gen. 19.30). Me'arah, the Hebrew word for a cave, provides here a desolate counterpoint to the vanished house, and cements the regression of the protagonists to a state of pre-urban life.

Through the episode of Lot, the Scriptures seem to express a negative judgment on the culture of the Canaanite cities. The opposition between the positive connotations of the domestic environment, symbolized by the hospitable home of Lot, and the powerful negativity of the urban structure, characterized by perversion, creates an unbearable tension, which leads to the destruction of Sodom.

The idea of bayit as a closed and protected place, separated from a sometimes hostile environment, seems to be a constant characteristic of the Hebrew language, which resorts to this term not only to indicate a physical space of dwelling but also, in a figurative sense, the conceptual sphere that it implies. Composites that contain the term bayit (which becomes bet in the construct case) can also designate animal: *bet 'akkaviš* is the spider's web, for example;[84] the steppe is the "house" of the wild donkey,[85] while the cypresses are home to the stork.[86] The body is also allegorically called bayit, with the arms as the "keepers of the house."[87] Furthermore, light and darkness both have houses, even if God alone knows the paths leading to them.[88] Bayit is the shelter, the domicile that welcomes one for nocturnal rest, for example in the episode in which Abraham's servant, tired from the journey, anxiously asks Rebecca: Is there room in your father's house for us to lodge in? (Gen. 24.23). The house appointed for all living (Job 30.23) is the hereafter, which, in a passage of Ecclesiastes, is even described as the eternal home (Eccles. 12.5).

With bayit (or with the composite bet ha-miqdaš, "the house of the consecrated place"), [89] the Scriptures identify the sanctuary constructed by Solomon in Jerusalem, which represents one of the most important symbolic nodes of the Biblical narrative, not to mention of Jewish identity. According to the Biblical tale, after the long roaming that had marked the Jewish story since the departure from Egypt, a unique and permanent residence was created for the cult. The building of the Temple was the mark of a change in the relationship with the divine, as if the stability of Israel also signified the transformation of the nomadic liturgy of Exodus into a temple cult: For

[84] Job 8.14.
[85] Job 39.8.
[86] Ps. 104.17.
[87] Eccles. 12.3: *When the keepers of the house tremble.*
[88] Job 38.20.
[89] In addition to these terms, to designate the Temple, biblical Hebrew also employs the word *hekal*, "palace," of ancient Sumerian etymology.

I have not dwelt in a house—affirms God himself in the book of Chronicles—since the day that I brought up Israel to this day; but have gone from tent to tent, and from one tabernacle to another (1Chron. 17.5). The edification of the Temple is described in the Scriptures as a deliberate, but nevertheless brash, act of God, so much so that Solomon questions himself on the risks of his own undertaking: And who is able to build him a house, seeing the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain him? (2Chron. 2.5). This question is intended to express the perilous passage between a conception of the divine bound up with the portents of nature and the establishment of an exclusive sacred space, well circumscribed, desired by the royal dynasty to manifest its own enduring power. Prepare for me timber in abundance—says Solomon—for the house which I am about to build shall be wonderful and great (2Chron. 2.8). This transformation of the cult can therefore only occur through an edifice of splendor, created through the most refined constructive techniques and with the most valuable materials. The description of the Temple's features contained in the book of Kings—and in parallel passages in Chronicles—represents a topos of the ancient ars aedificatoria. The long list of precious metals, rare woods and materials, precise measurements, as well as the particulars of the construction, make Solomon's sanctuary the literary paradigm of architectural knowledge, capable of concentrating in an edifice all of the splendor of reality.[90]

The act of building the house is thus transformed into an exemplary gesture, assuming even a cosmic meaning.[91] The source of this conception is to be found in a religious belief widespread in the ancient Near East, which saw in the actions of man the reflection of the holy

[90] The historical truthfulness of the construction of Solomon's Temple, as it is referred to in the Scriptures, is the object of ample philological doubts: cf. K. Ruprecht, *Der Tempel von Jerusalem. Gründung Salomos oder jebusitisches Erbe?*, (Berlin, 1976); E. A. Knauf, King Solomon's Copper Supply" in *Phoenicia and the Bible,* ed. E. Lipinski (Leuven, 1991), pp. 167-186.

[91] This idea is developed in a very effective manner in the "Midraš Tadše," Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrasch*, vol. III, pp. 164-165, a text probably compiled around the eleventh century.

sphere. The idea that every human building imitates a divine act emerges, among others, in several places in the Scriptures: in a passage of Psalms, for example, the construction of the Temple is directly attributed to God, and is compared to the foundation of the earth: And he built his sanctuary like the high heavens, like the earth which he has established for ever (Ps. 78.69). Ha-boneh (the Builder) is therefore God himself, and the human enterprise in turn reflects the celestial archetype.

This concept is taken up again in the comments of numerous sages of Late Antiquity. For them, the first and most important construction was the creation of the universe, which is compared to the building of a house, with God following the design sketched for him by his wisdom. [92] In Leviticus Rabbah—a midrašic collection probably composed in the Land of Israel in the fifth century—a commentary on the verse Wisdom has built her house (Prov. 9.1) quotes interpretations from four masters of the Haggadah. The house of wisdom is at once identified with God's creation of the world, with the construction of the Temple of Jerusalem, with the Torah, and with the Ark of the Covenant. In a sort of exegetical continuum, God's act is reflected in all levels of reality, according to a coherent symbolic chain extending down from the highest heavens to the buildings of man.[93]

[92] On the basis of the passages in the Scriptures in which the action of building is directly attributed to God (Isa. 5.2; Amos 9.6; Ps. 78.69, 102. 17, 127.1 and 147.2), the rabbinic literature frequently introduces architectural similes to describe the actions of the Lord – e.g., a commentary on the cited passage in Amos, bḤagigah 12a and, with a different interpretation, *Tanḥuma, Be-ha`aloteka* II and Numbers Rabbah XV.18. See also Genesis Rabbah I.1; *Tanḥuma,* ed. Buber, *Pequde* 8; Ecclesiastes Rabbah III.1; *Midraš zuta* to Songs I, where *boneh*, "builder" is listed among the epithets of God; "Alfa beta de-rabbi `Aqiva," ed. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrasch. Sammlung kleiner Midraschim und vermischter Abhandlungen aus der ältern jüdischen Literatur,* 6 vols., (Leipzig, 1853-1878), vol. III, pp. 12-49: 18. God takes explicitly upon himself the role of a builder also in commentaries on biblical passages that seem to suggest the mediation of Wisdom in the construction of the world: i.e., bSanhedrin 38a: "Wisdom has builded her house (Prov. 9.1), this is the attribute of the Holy One, blessed be He, who created the world by wisdom.

[93] Leviticus Rabbah XI.1. .

There is a tight bond of correspondence between high and low; every part of the supernal work is reflected in an identical design, and in a similar proportion, in the construction of the world. But the technique used by God to realize his work is radically different from that of a human architect. According to exegetical themes frequently repeated in midrašic literature, God builds by turning earthly architectural paradigms radically upside down. Instead of proceeding in an orderly way, from the foundation towards higher levels, he builds both upper and lower levels in a single stroke.[94] Moreover, in his construction, the upper floor (the sky) is wider than that below it (the earth),[95] while the attic—instead of stone, wood and earth—is made of water (the cistern of the rain).[96] God then places the tenants (the birds) in the void[97] and, in contrast to an earthly king, is capable of moving his house.[98]

In post-Biblical Judaism, the celestial structure is also frequently imagined as a sequence of buildings that, from heaven to heaven, become more ethereal and luminous: "In the Seven Sanctuaries"—we read for example in the Hekalot rabbati (The Great Treatise of the Palaces), one of the most important texts of pre-Kabbalistic mysticism—"resides Ṭwtrwsy'y, the Lord of Israel, and one room is inside another; and at the door of every sanctuary there are eight custodians of the threshold."[99] The literary genre of the Hekalot, rich in visionary images, is centered on an ascent that develops through celestial palaces, conceived as architectures of light in the divine space. These celestial houses reflect the inward quest; the advancing of the adept can be described as a passage through a succession of angelic palaces. To be admitted into each of these, the protagonist must know

[94] Genesis Rabbah XII.12 (cf. also Exodus Rabbah XXV.6 and *Midraš Tehillim* LXXXVI.3, as well as bḤagigah 12a).

[95] Genesis Rabbah I.13.

[96] *Ibid.* IV.1.

[97] *Ibid.* VII.3.

[98] Exodus Rabbah XXIX.7.

[99] Hebrew text in *Synopse*, chap. 206. The textual variations in *Übersetzung der Hekhalot-Literatur.* II. ## 81-334, ed. P. Schäfer (Tübingen, 1987), p. 152.

the names of the archons that protect them, their passwords, and the dimensions of the buildings. Since the ascent toward the top is also imagined as a descent into the interior, this transcendent architecture reflects a kind of construction of the spirit, and accommodates the mystic like a secure refuge.[100]

In the medieval Kabbalah, imagery depicting cosmic architecture became increasingly more explicit, finally becoming a recurrent mystical theme. At the end of the thirteenth century, the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) quotes a verse from Psalms to express the essential connection between construction and creation: "Except the Lord build the house, thy labour is in vain (Ps. 127.1) [...] He created and garnished this world and fitted it out with all its requirements, thus making it a House."[101] However, to be able to approach the mystery of the divine construction, man must set himself on a path of introspection. As in the earlier ancient mysticism of the Hekalot, in the medieval tradition of the *Zohar* the cosmic edifice is knowable only through the house of the spirit. Indeed, meditation appears as a truly constructive act that leads to the realization of the superior level of the soul that the Kabbalists call nešamah: "When a man has penetrated into the mystery of wisdom and perfected himself therein, then Solomon tells him to 'build his house' (Prov. 24.27), i.e., to cultivate his soul in his body, so as to attain perfection."[102]

This idea of contemplation, understood as the path toward inner plenitude, became one of the central themes of Eastern

European Hasidism. In the work Degel maḥaneh Efrayim (The Ensign of the Camp of Ephraim) by Mošeh Ḥayyim Efrayim of Sudylkow (ca. 1740-1800?) , grandson of Ba'al Šem Ṭov, the image of the house of

[100] For a general presentation of the mysticism of the Hekalot see P. Schäfer, *Der verbogene und offenbare Gott. Hauptthemen der frühen jüdischen Mystik*, (Tübingen, 1991), Eng. trans. *The Hidden and Manifest God. Some Major Themes in Early Jewish Mysticism,* (New York, 1992).

[101] *Zohar* II.226a. The constructive labor of God is not limited to the edification of the structure but also includes the act of adorning the world, which, like a house to be inhabited, requires decorative furnishings.

[102] *Ibid.* I.141b..

the soul returns with a strong accent on mystical devotion: "Indeed, he who continually looks at and sees God in front of his own eyes [...] comes out of the darkness and into the light, and therefore towards the level of the light of wisdom. A man's wisdom makes his face shine (Eccles. 8.1) and built himself a house (Gen. 33.17), which is to say that he builds himself a superior, holy soul."[103] In mystical thought, the true house of man is in fact his soul, that is, a shelter of light, which contains and precedes all physical dwellings.

## ʿEDEN עדן

[103] Mošeh Ḥayyim Efrayim of Sudylkow, *Degel maḥaneh Efrayim, Devarim*.

Upon its appearance in the book of Genesis, the word "Eden" is compressed between "garden" and "east": And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, eastward (Gen. 2.8). The mention of Eden here has a purely topographical value, insofar as the Biblical tale distinguishes between the garden and the space in which it is situated, and appends to it the essential element of a cardinal point. But the precision of this introduction is deceptive, as the juxtaposition of these three details actually renders the symbolic geography of Eden one of the most elusive themes of the entire Scriptures.

Eden is introduced without any anticipation, almost as if the reader should already be familiar with the site, and could give an appropriate meaning to the specification "eastward," which ends the sentence.[104] Is Eden to the east of the observer?[105] Or is the garden placed in the eastern part of that region? That such an indication could specify the garden's position relative to Eden seems to be suggested by the following sentence: And a river went out from Eden to water the garden (Gen. 2.10). To make the tale more ambiguous, in the central section of the episode the notions of Eden and the garden (in Hebrew gan) merge in the expression gan 'Eden, "garden of Eden," which accompanies the most intense phase of the event.[106] Certainly, the tale proceeds in a sort of retrograde motion toward the east, almost as if Eden were a

[104] "Eastward" in Hebrew is, *mi-qedem,* which can also have the temporal meaning of "from before," "in former times." If the Greek translation in the Septuagint renders this expression as *kata anatolas,* applying its geographic sense, the Aramaic *Targumim* (Onkelos, Pseudo-Jonathan and Neofiti), like the midrašic exegeses, interpret it in a chronological sense, expressing the pre-existence of Eden with respect to the other creations (cf. also Jerome, *Hebrew Questions on Genesis, ad locum*). Some scholars maintain that *mi-qedem* could, in this case, signify "in front of": cf. A. Ohler, *Mythologische Elemente im Alten Testament,* (Düsseldorf, 1969), p. 184.

[105] This interpretation is by far the most widespread.

[106] It should be remembered that the widespread expression "earthly paradise" is not a translation of a biblical sentence but substitutes the Hebrew *gan `Eden* with a substantive of Persian etymology, "paradise" (derived from *paradeisos* employed by the Greek translators of the Scriptures), and with an adjective, "earthly," which is not to be found in the Hebrew Bible.

ubiquitous Occident. In fact, when God banishes Adam and Eve from the garden, he places cherubim at the east of the garden (Gen. 3.24), while Adam establishes himself, after the expulsion, in the east of Eden (Gen. 4.16).

The significance of the place is emphasized by the etymological value of the term ‘eden, which in Biblical Hebrew literally means “pleasure,” or “delight.”[107] The gan ‘Eden is also a “garden of pleasure,” in which God causes every tree to grow that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food (Gen. 2.9). What the vegetation here evokes is a place of comfort present in the oriental imagination since the most ancient times. However, the gan ‘Eden is a divine dominion, and it therefore contains at its center two symbolic plants, which are completely outside of ordinary experience: the tree of life and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. In this setting, apparently predisposed to peace and enjoyment, one prohibition is nevertheless in force: man, according to divine commandment, can nourish himself from the fruit of every plant, except, under the threat of death, from that of the tree of knowledge. In the tale of the temptation by the serpent, the tree of life seems to have become invisible, while Eve’s attention is attracted by that of knowledge: And the woman said to the serpent, we may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden; But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, you shall not eat of it, nor shall you touch it, lest you die (Gen. 3.2-3).

After the infringement and the eating of the fruit, the garden temporarily becomes the space of knowledge, which manifests itself first of all as the fear of nudity and as the appearance of shame; the divine threat of death that results, as its first consequence, an effect connected to the sphere of corporality.[108] The gan ‘Eden is now a place

[107] E.g., in Ps. 36.9: *Naḥal `adaneka tašqem, and you shall make them drink of the river of your pleasures.* In the feminine, *`ednah* is employed in Gen 18.12 to indicate female sexual pleasure (or perhaps also menstruation: cf. the post-biblical meaning of the Hebrew term *`iddon* in Genesis Rabbah XLVIII.17; see also, below, note 940$).

[108] The consequent divine malediction against the female, predicting for her the *pains of childbearing* and *the desire* for her husband, can be similarly regarded.

to hide, and the trees, no longer desired or enjoyed, become mere shields to protect them from the presence of the Lord God (Gen. 3.8). At the end of the episode, all of Eden's vegetation remains, as if concealed by divine malediction, confining man to a hostile landscape: the ground [...] thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to you; and you shall eat the herb of the field (Gen. 3.1718). Only the tree of life will reappear in the narrative, evoked by the enigmatic words with which God decides to expel man and his companion: Now, what if he puts forth his hand, and takes also from the tree of life, and eats, and lives forever (Gen. 3.22). It seems that the fruit of the tree of life should be an antidote that, by rectifying the infraction of the alimentary taboo, could restore the progenitors' lost immortality, but—for a reason not illustrated by the text—this antidote will be negated by God, who places, in defense of the tree, cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way (Gen. 3.24).[109]

In addition to this image of the garden in the book of Genesis, another representation of Eden appears in the Scriptures,[110] which seems to echo more directly the ancient Mesopotamian idea of the divine garden, conceived as a dwelling of light, full of precious stones. In the book of Ezekiel, the eulogy to the king of Tyre offers the starting point for a description of Eden in which the profusion of gems adorning the king's robe evokes the mineral landscape of Mesopotamian epics: You have been in Eden the garden of God,[111] every precious stone was

Therefore the eating of the fruit comes also to correspond, in a metaphorical sense, to conception and procreation.

[109] On the symbolism of the trees of the *gan `Eden*, see also the entry *`Eṣ*, Tree

[110] A short but acute comparison between the two descriptions of Eden is proposed by U. Cassuto, *Bible and Ancient Oriental Texts*, (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 104-107; cf. also, about Mesopotamian parallels, S. Kramer, *Enki and Ninhursag. A Sumerian "Paradise" Myth*, (New Haven, 1945); G. Bibby, *Looking for Dilmun,* (New York, 1969); H. N. Wallace, *The Eden Narrative,* (Atlanta, 1985). On Ezekiel's references to Tyre see also P. M. Bogaert, "Montaigne sainte, jardin d'Eden et Sanctuaire (hiérosolymitain) dans un oracle d'Ézéchiel contre le prince de Tyr (Ezek. 28.11-19)" in *Le mythe, son langage et son message,* (Louvain, 1983), pp. 131-153.

[111] In Gen. 13.10 and Isa. 51.3 on the other hand, the expression *the Lord's garden* recurs.

your covering, the ruby, the crysolite, and the diamond, the beryl, the onyx, and the jade, the sapphire, the emerald, and the carbuncle, and gold [...] you were upon the holy mountain of God; you have walked up and down in the midst of the stones of fire (Ezek. 28.13-14). Nature here, as if petrified in a flame of light, recalls the scene that stretches in front of Gilgameš—the hero of the most celebrated epic of the ancient Near East (itself the fruit of a long composition, already begun by the end of the third millennium BCE)—as he finally arrives at the garden of the gods: "He went straight, as soon as he saw them [...] A carnelian tree was in fruit [...] A lapis lazuli tree bore foliage, in full fruit and gorgeous to gaze on."[112] But, while the garden has the function of a narrative interlude in the story of Gilgameš, the evocation made by Ezekiel is relegated to a past already concluded, and the splendor of the place only serves to reinforce the contrast with the imminent fall of the king of Tyre.

The sages of the post-Biblical tradition regarded the exile from the garden as a temporary event, because they believed that an ineluctable force would carry all spirits back to their origins. The path of this return was nevertheless twofold, since it reflected a fundamental worldly dichotomy—the contrast between the Jews and the other nations—which caused a division of the space in the afterlife into the garden of Eden and Gehinnom; the first reserved for the children of Israel, and the second conceived as a place of suffering for other people. While Israel would return to Eden along the path marked by the coherent symbolism of the Biblical prescriptions, the return of the Gentiles seemed to be a negative process, lacking consciousness and to be passively suffered. Gehinnom could therefore be seen as a kind of mirror image of Eden, almost a rhetorical negation, which serves to add value to the reward in store for the Jews.

Despite their substantial qualitative differences, the two places were imagined as very close to one another, as stated in Ecclesiastes Rabbah, a midrašic collection, probably written in the eighth century of the

[112] *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, A. R. George, Trans. and Intro., (London, 1999), p. 75.

Common Era with materials from Late Antiquity: "Gehinnom and Paradise. What is the distance between them? A handbreadth. Rabbi Yoḥanan said: '[They are divided by] a wall.' The rabbis say: 'They are parallel, so that one should be visible to the other.'"[113] Gehinnom and Eden are therefore very close to each other, much as the difference between moral actions and infringements is often so thin that it verges on the imperceptible. Nevertheless, the distinction, though faint in appearance, becomes an overwhelming distance, a barrier that divides, in expectation of the final judgment, the punishment for the evil of the nations from the pleasure of the righteous of Israel.

The image of the wall that divides these two portions of the dwelling in the afterlife transformed a notion of ethical character into a symbolic construction, in accordance with the rabbinic conception of the cosmos as an architectural structure. Indeed, in post-Biblical Judaism, the structure of the sky was often imagined as a succession of palaces that become increasingly more immaterial and splendid. In a similar way, the Edenic space is also represented as a series of edifices, in which the spirits reside, according to the level of their dignity. In the Midraš konen, a text written in the Near East in the early Middle Ages, one reads, for example: "Eden measures eight hundred thousand years: the seven classes of righteous are found here, and there are edifices, each one measuring twelve thousand myriads of millions, and it is a hundred million myriads high."[114] Thus the palaces of Eden succeed one another, marking a progressive intensification of pleasures and ornaments, extending to the summit of the last palace, where among "nectars, oliban, delightful fragrances, and pallets of gold and silver [...] the Messiah son of David, Elijah, and the Messiah son of Ephraim live."[115]

In medieval Kabbalistic literature, which takes up this idea, the ascent of the elected spirits through the Edenic palaces was marked by

[113] Ecclesiastes Rabbah VII.14. .

[114] "Midraš Konen," ed. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrasch*, vol. II, pp. 23-39:28.

[115] *Ibid.,* p. 60. On the idea of the ascension from palace to palace, see also the entry *Bayit*, House.

recurrent metaphors of light, in which the blaze of each spirit corresponds to a diverse level of beatitude. Towards the end of the thirteenth century, the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) imagines at the center of the seventh palace "the most secret and hidden of all [...] there is a column of different colors: green, white, red and black. When the spirits rise and make their entrance into this palace, each assumes the color that suits him best."[116] In the Kabbalistic representation—as already seen in the midraš—the seven palaces of Eden are contrasted with dwellings of obscurity and suffering, which transform the indistinct abyss of Gehinnom into a negatively articulated architecture: "We have already demonstrated that"—it is stated in another passage of the *Zohar*—"just as there are different grades and palaces in the holy part, there are seven palaces in the part of impurity, corresponding to the seven names given to Gehinnom."[117] The residences of Gehinnom are therefore the result of negative behavior, and they are built with the darkness that accompanies every act of human arrogance.[118]

In Jewish literature the architectural metaphor of the afterlife represents a funding symbolism, where the images provide the idea of retribution and condemnation. Whether it is the wall, which in the midraš separates the two parts of the garden, or the palaces of Gehinnom and Eden described in the *Zohar*, the same idea is interpreted in different ways: the garden is part of the vast heavenly dwelling, an enclosed space within a larger architectural project. The rural scene of the Biblical narrative is transformed, and the primeval garden, which in Genesis seemed set against an abstract background, suddenly appears surrounded by the majestic profile of the divine palace. The Garden of Eden is in reality the heart of the heavenly dwelling, and satisfies the function of a realm of pleasures, where the Lord goes walking in the cool of the day.

[116] *Zohar* I.39.a-b..

[117] *Zohar* II.263a..

[118] On the infernal palaces see also the entry *Zonah*, Prostitute.

Emet אמת
Truth

A divine attribute and endowment of prophets, kings, and chiefs of peoples, emet, "truth,"[119] also issues at times from the mouths of humble characters in the Bible, forced by circumstance into an extreme situation of interpersonal relationships. Thus, truth is invoked twice in the cautious peroration of Abraham's servant, who is seeking approval from Rebecca's family members for the marriage to Isaac. The dialogue has the characteristics of an encounter among strangers, and is limited to a few essential sentences which seem to correspond to a customary formula: The Lord God of my master Abraham, who had led me in the

[119] Depending on the contexts, *emet* is also rendered in English translations of the Bible as "fidelity," "rectitude" or "honesty." The Septuagint translates the word as *alÂtheia* (on the Greek rendering cf. J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language,* (London, 1961), pp. 187-200), while the Aramaic *Targumim* usually use *qešoµ.* A short presentation of the biblical uses of *emet* is offered by H. Wildberger, s.v. *'mn,* in E. Jenni and C. Westermann, *Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament,* 2 vols., (Munich and Zurich, 1971-1976), vol. I, cols. 177-209: 201-208.

way of truth to take my master's brother's daughter to his son. And now if you will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me (Gen. 24.48-49). The mention of the God of Abraham seems a supernatural omen for the positive outcome of the request: derek emet, the "way of truth," by which the servant reached Rebecca, was in fact a succession of fortuitous circumstances, marked by predestination, which therefore show the sign of a divine will to be respected.[120] In the servant's talk, the word emet is then at once vague and eloquent, and apt to suggest the force of a providential plan, whose outlines are nevertheless not specified.

Emet recurs again in another agitated dialogue, between Rahab, the prostitute, and the Jewish scouts to whom she offered refuge in her home. In this case, the invocation of truth also concludes a kind of pact that has a precise purpose: the request, on Rahab's part, to have her life spared: Now therefore, I pray you, swear to me by the Lord, since I have shown you kindness, that you will also show kindness to my father's house, and give me a true sign (Josh. 2.12). Ot emet, "a true sign," seems here to have almost the consistency of a tangible safe-conduct, even if the expression remains without further determination, nor is it taken up again in the entire episode.[121]

Both of these examples demonstrate how, in the Scriptures, the concept of emet remains in a, so to speak, "unfinished" semantic sphere; the word seems, in fact, to be surrounded by an indeterminate expressive space, and the other terms employed to define its meaning are of little use. The hendiadys "mercy and truth"[122] in the episode of Rebecca, for example, vanishes into a generically positive notion,

[120] On other aspects of this episode see the entry *Šeqet,* Silence

[121] The Hebrew *we-natatem ot emet, give me a true sign*, is omitted in the Greek Septuagint, while in the Vulgate is translated as *detisque mihi verum signum*. According to *Zohar* I.241b, the *line of scarlet thread* (Josh. 2.18), which the Israelites asked Raḥab to tie to the window at the moment of conquest, was supposedly a sort of equivalent to that *true sign*. On the events of Raḥab, see also the entry *Zonah*, Prostitute

[122] The pair *ḥesed,* "mercy" and *emet* appear frequently in the Scriptures, recurring seventeen times.

which expresses in a few words a long past and foretells a future of benediction, but leaves to the reader the task of qualifying its specific characteristics. What's more, in other Biblical hendiadys, such as be-emet u-vi-ṣedakah, "truth and justice,"[123] or emet u-mišpaṭ, "truth and righteous judgment,"[124] the term "truth" is the one that extends more towards the inner dimension and towards subjective reflection: it recalls ethical behavior alluded to but not specified.

Such rarefied semantic material pushes emet towards the realm of the God of Israel. The Lord is thus referred to as El emet or Elohim emet,[125] "God of truth," and all of his actions, sayings, and teachings are marked by the attribute of truthfulness. In some passages of Psalms, emet even seems to thin out into a celestial substance that God can cause to descend from the sky for his own pleasure: From heaven [...] God shall send forth his loving kindness and his truth (Ps. 57.4). When truth originates from the secret divine dwelling, it is compared to light – *O send out your light and your truth* (Ps. 43.3). This process of cosmic transposition of the ethical principle can even occupy the entire visible horizon: For your loving kindness is great to the heavens, and your truth to the clouds (Ps. 57.11).[126]

The supernatural truth has a double value: on the one hand, it protects righteous men with an immaterial shield—He shall cover you with his feathers, and under his wings shall you find refuge; his truth shall be your shield and buckle (Ps. 91.4)—while, at the same time, expresses the providential character of divine act—The works of his hands are truth and justice (Ps. 111.7).

In post-Biblical literature, emet often becomes an almost solid substance, in order to fix supernal truth in stable and easily

[123] 1Kings 3.6 and Zech. 8.8; cf. also Isa. 48.1, Jer. 4.3, Prov. 11.18, as well as the similarity of *emet* to *ṣedeq* (e.g., in Ps. 25.2).

[124] Jer. 4.2, Zech. 8.16, Ps. 111.7. Also to be noted is the expression *mišpaṷ emet* (e.g., Zech. 7.9) and *šofet be-emet* (Prov. 29.14).

[125] Cf. Ps. 31.6 and Jer. 10.10.

[126] Cf. Ps. 108.5

recognizable conceptual forms. In the midraš Genesis Rabbah, composed at the beginning of the fifth century, a statement is found that is repeated various times in successive works: "What is the seal of the Lord, Blessed be He? It is truth." The continuation of the text gives an explanation connected to the symbolism of the letters: the three consonants that form the word emet (alef, mem, taw) epitomize the whole alphabet and allude to the totality of the divine: "Said Rabbi Sim'on ben Laqiš: 'Alef is the first of the letters [of the alphabet], mem the middle one, and taw the last, thus it corresponds to, I am the first, and I am the last, and beside Me there is no God (Isa. 44.6)'."[127]

The process of materialization of the notion of truth became almost paradoxical in another Haggadic story, which transposed the concept of the divine seal to the level of a humorous popular apologue: "Woe, woe, it is he"—lamented the Israelites before the Lord—"who has destroyed the Sanctuary, burnt the Temple, killed all the righteous, driven all Israel into exile, and is still dancing around among us! Thou hast surely given him to us so that we may receive reward through him. We want neither him, nor reward through him! Promptly a tablet fell down from heaven for them, whereupon the word 'truth' was inscribed."[128]

The tendency to give emet spatial connotations was strengthened in the mystical literature of the late Middle Ages, in which the epithet "truth" was applied to a visionary topography of the ultra-mundane dominion. In fact, emet designated the divine throne, the final destination of the mystical journey, during which the adepts rose step by step, to appear in the presence of the celestial glory: "The Lord, blessed be He, is called 'truth' and his throne is also known as 'truth.'"[129]

The connection between truth and the throne undoubtedly influenced the first Kabbalists' elaboration of the symbolism of emet, who gave the word the value of an icon of centrality and placed it along

[127] Genesis Rabbah LXXXI.2. Cf. e.g., bŠabbat 55a.

[128] bYoma 69b.

[129] "Barayta de-Ma`aseh merkavah 1": ed. Wertheimer, *Batte midrashot*, vol. I, p. 55. For other aspects of the symbolism of the throne, see the entry *Kisse,* Throne.

the median axis of the sefirotic diagram. In one of the earliest preserved documents of the medieval Kabbalah, the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), emet is connected to the sefirah of beauty, tif'eret, and to the angel to which it corresponds: "At the center is the truth, Uri'el, the first of all the sacred forms."[130] Situated between the angel Gabriel, who designates gevurah, the sefirah of power, and Michael, who indicates that of mercy (ḥesed), Uri'el contains within his name the idea of light, [131] thus expressing the solar connotation of truth, which distributes its energy to the grades of emanation.

An effective compendium of the sefirotic value of truth is found, around the middle of the thirteenth century, in the work of Avraham ben Alexander of Cologne, an Ashkenazic Kabbalist, who moved to Spain and was probably educated at the school of 'Ezra of Gerona. Recalling the identification between the throne and truth, Avraham affirms: "You will show truth to Jacob (Mic. 7.20). It is in the middle, corresponding to the heart, and its color is median, not red, not white, but green. It is called 'throne,' because its letters, alef, mem and taw, contain the entire alphabet [...] and thus also the throne." [132] The concept of truth here is compared to various aspects of the symbolism of the center, both on the physical level, represented by the image of the heart, and on the chromatic one, where green has the role of suggesting the fullness of the equilibrium, as an intermediate stage between the two opposing principles of severity and mercy.

Toward the end of the thirteenth century, in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), a new expressive nuance of emet appears. Even if only alluded to in a short and enigmatic passage, the notion of truth assumes the mysterious value of a figure of sexual union: "When the male and the female are united as one, then Jacob adorns himself with all the letters that form the word attem ('tm), "you [plural]," meaning

[130] *Sefer ha-bahir* 108 [77]: cf. *Mistica*, p. 180.

[131] Uri'el means, in fact, "my light is God."

[132] "Keter Šem Ṯov," ed. A. Jellinek, *Auswahl kabbalistischer Mystik*, vol. I, (Leipzig, 1853), pp. 29-48: 43; cf. *Mistica*, p. 366. On the bond between Jacob and truth see also Menaḥem Recanati, *Be'ur `al ha-Torah, Lek leka*: (Venice, 1545), fol. 44b-c.

emet (‘mt) [...] completed union between male and female and complete fullness.” [133] Thanks to this alphabetical permutation, in which the plural pronoun, “you” is transformed into the word “truth,” the author of the *Zohar* discloses a new metaphorical perspective on emet, and inserts it into an anthropomorphic representation of the forces of emanation.

This *Zohar*ic image was probably the basis of the unusual exegesis proposed by Ḥayyim Vital in the Sefer ša‘ar ha-haqdamot (The Book of the Gate of Premises), a manual of Lurianic Kabbalah written around the end of the sixteenth century. According to the teachings of Luria, the propagation of the divine energy and the celestial harmony were guaranteed by the union of the Ze‘er anpin—the masculine principle of the sefirotic structure—and the female, the symbol of the sefirah of the kingdom (malkut). “As is known”—affirms Vital—“the Ze‘er anpin and the female are called emet, ‘truth.’”

In introducing a new alphabetical permutation, Vital also elaborates on the traditional image of the seal of truth, maintaining that, “the letters of the word ḥotam (ḥwtm), ‘seal,’ are the same that form the term ḥomat (ḥwmt), ‘wall,’ which means that emet [...] becomes a wall of curved light, which encircles the Ze‘er anpin and the female.” It is upon the fulfillment of the celestial union—the passage seems to affirm—that truth reaches fullness; that is, when the sefirotic light encloses the two celestial figures. “Try to understand this very well,”[134] exhorts Vital finally, meaning that the daring linguistic transformations which changed emet into a luminous shield actually constitute a sound principle of knowledge that can be used to penetrate the mystery of the divine.

Eṣ עץ

Tree

[133] *Zohar* III.163b.

[134] *Ša`ar ha-haqdamot, Sod remazim ba-šemot ha-nizkarim we-sod Šem ha-meforaš ha-amitti*: ed. Y. Z. Brandwein,15 vols.,(Jerusalem, 1988), vol. V, p. 209a.

Sharing a close border with the human realm, some trees of the Biblical landscape seem to share feelings and affections, expressing joy or distress over events that disrupt the course of things. This empathy is particularly intense with regard to happiness, as we see, for example, in the emotional wave that extends to the limits of the field of vision upon the return from the Babylonian exile, as described by in the book of Isaiah: The mountains and the hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. (Isa. 55.12). Likewise consider the hymn of praise sung by Asaph in celebration of the ark: Then shall the trees of the wood sing out at the presence of the Lord, because he comes to judge the earth (1Chron. 16.33).[135]

Exultation among the trees is thus one of the attributes of the Lord's manifestation. It is probably a reminiscence of the theophanic connotations of wind, but also reflects a more general sense of expectation of the sudden force of the divine and the echo of the Lord's act in historical events: Break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the Lord has redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel (Isa. 44.23). At times, though, trees can express pain and desperation, changing their voice into a lament: Wail, O cypress tree; for the cedar has fallen; because the mighty trees are ruined; howl, O you oaks of Bashan; for the thick forest has come down (Zech. 11.2).

The exchange of features between man and tree is a widespread phenomenon in Biblical imaginary. It is expressed in a plurality of ways, from the talking trees that must choose a king for themselves in Jotham's apologue,[136] to the frequent identification of people with plants, especially to characterize the thriving and lucky or the declining and misfortunate types.[137] The fruit tree, planted in a location

[135] See. also Ps. 96.12-13.

[136] Judg. 9.7-15.

[137] The parallel between man and tree is widespread in various cultures, from ancient Egypt – cf. e.g., *The Instruction of Amenemope*, J. R. Black, ed., (Madison, 2002) – to the Sanskrit tradition (e.g. *B‰had¼ra™yaka upaniṣad* III.9.28), and the Greek (Plato, *Timaeus* 90A) and Latin (e.g., Varro, cited by Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* XVI.16).

rich in water, is a metaphor for prosperity: Joseph is a fruitful bough, even a fruitful bough by a well (Gen. 49.22), while decline or sterility are compared to the dissecting of roots and to the felling of a trunk: My hope has he removed like a tree (Job 19.10); Nor let the eunuch say, Behold, I am a dry tree (Isa. 56.3)).

The conceptual value of the tree in the Scriptures can be deduced, however, not only from its frequent anthropization, but also from its sacred attributes, masked only partially by the theological concerns of the Biblical authors. While ʻeṣ means, in a general sense, "tree" as well as "wood,"[138] the more important plants have specific names in Hebrew, and assume a stronger symbolic value, thanks to their grandeur or the usefulness of their products. Among the fruit trees, a dominant role is reserved in the Bible for the olive, zayit, the oil of which was used both in the diet and for sacred functions[139], and which therefore served to honour God and man (Judg. 9.9). The fruits of the te'enah, the fig, also had a medicinal use, as attested to by the poultice of figs (2 Kings 20.7)[140] prescribed by Isaiah to heal King Ezekiel's ulcer. Gefen, the vine, is a common image of prosperity, valued for its flowers' perfume[141] and employed as the symbol of Israel[142], while the juice of the rimmon, the pomegranate, is celebrated in Song of Songs as a delicious beverage.[143]

There is a rich inventory of trees endowed with a sacred force thanks to their appearance or longevity; the terebinth is mentioned several times in relationship to sacred places, as in the case of Shechem,[144] or of Ophrah, where the angel of the Lord, who came to show himself to Gideon, *sat under* ***a*** *terebinth* (Judg. 6.11). Allon (or

[138] ±*iaḥ* means "shrub" (see also the entry, *Seneh,* Bush), while the term *ilan,* "tree" (in Aramaic also *ilana*) is common in post-biblical usage.

[139] Cf. the entry *Mašiaḥ,* Messiah.

[140] Cf. Isa. 38.11.

[141] Cf. Song 2.13.

[142] Cf. Ps. 80.9 and Isa. 5.2.

[143] Cf. Song 8.2. On the meaning of the pomegranate see the entry, *Rimmon*, Pomegranate.

[144] Gen. 35.4. Cf. also the oak of Jabesh, cited in 1Chron. 10.12.

elon)[145] is the oak that demonstrates the power of prophecy, expressed in the words Elon me'onenim, Oak of the soothsayers (Judg. 9.37), with toponymic value, and most likely to be identified with the Oak of Moreh, the "Oak of the master" (Gen. 12.6) of the story of Abraham, the place where the divine teaching and the oracle on future events were given.[146] Ešel, the tamarisk, is another plant that signals the presence of the sacred. It is associated with Abraham's establishment of a religious place when he settled in Beersheba: And Abraham planted a tamarisk in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the Lord (Gen. 21.33). The custom of burying the dead under tamarisks was also widespread, as testified to by the interment ceremony of Saul and his sons: And they took their bones, and buried them under the tamarisk-tree in Jabesh (1Sam. 31.13).[147]

Biblical authors usually convey the idea of a cult of patriarchs linked to trees without negative comment. Some-times though, in the historiographical and prophetic texts that refer to the monarchical age, devotional acts associated with plants are severely judged and rejected as idolatrous practices. According to Deuteronomy, for example, the Hebrews, when they entered Canaan, should have removed all trace of altars and sacred areas connected to vegetation: You shall utterly destroy all the places, wherein the nations which you shall possess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every green tree (Deut. 12.2). Jeremiah condemns Israel for having succumbed to pagan worship: When upon every high hill and under every green tree you bowed down, playing the harlot (Jer. 2.20). This Scriptural judgment actually demonstrates that the Israelites long shared the Canaanite practice of regarding trees as symbols of

[145] On the distinction between *elah* and *allon* (*elon*) see M. Zohary, *Plants of the Bible,* (Tel Aviv, 1982), Ger. trans., *Pflanzen der Bibel,* (Stuttgart, 1983), pp. 108-111.

[146] Also in Deut. 11.30 (*the terebinths of Moreh*). On the oracular function of the trees (and of wood) see as well Hos. 4.12: *My people ask counsel of a piece of wood, and their staff declares to them!;* cf. K. Jarosh, *Die Stellung des Elohisten zur kanaanäischen Religion,* (Göttingen, 1974), pp. 217-218.

[147] In a parallel passage of 1Chron. 10.12, a terebinth (*elah*) is mentioned instead of a tamarisk. Gen. 35.8 confirms the custom of interning cadavers under trees.

fertility,[148] in a natural exchange of cultural models, also attested to by the chronicles of the Davidian monarchy. The reign of Rehoboam, son of Solomon, was probably already characterized by the diffusion of rites performed under every green tree (1Kings 14.23), according to the expression that characterizes most of the Biblical invectives against idolatry. Among the faults of Rehoboam were supposedly the construction of images and Ašerim, the latter word denoting cult objects consecrated to Ašerah, the feminine divinity of fecundity—probably poles of wood or, according to the Septuagint's interpretation, sacred woods.[149]

The trees perhaps most celebrated in the Scriptures are those that appear in the story of the Garden of Eden, which

represent a central narrative element. The foundation of the gan 'Eden is willed by God, with every tree to grow that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food, but the true focuses of the representation are the tree of life in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2.9). The two trees are described with laconic ambiguity in Hebrew: the expression rendered in English as "in the midst" is in fact, in the original, be-tok, literally "within," and therefore does not have a distinct topographical position, nor is it clear from the context whether this expression refers only to the tree of life or to both trees. This is the only time that the trees are mentioned together, since the tree of knowledge alone goes on to occupy the following scene, while that of life will be mentioned again only at its close. The tale does not linger on any particular aspect of the tree, with the exception of Eve's observation that the tree of knowledge was good for food, and [...]

[148] For a discussion of the iconographic evidence, cf. Keel and Uehlinger, *Göttinnen*, pp. 172-174.

[149] The Greek version of the Septuagint renders the Hebrew *ašerah* as *alsos*. The connection of the *ašerah* to the vegetable kingdom is definitely intended by Deut. 16.21: *You shall not plant you an ashera of any tree near the altar of the Lord your God.* On the interpretation of the term, see, in general, the synthesis of N. Wyatt, s.v. "Asherah" in *Dictionary of Deities*, cols. 183-195. In m`Avodah zarah III.7: "What is meant by ashera? Any tree that has an idol under it. Rabbi Šim`on claims: `Any tree that is worshiped.'"

pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise (Gen. 3.6). In this lack of definition, the symbolic meaning is entirely entrusted to the protagonists and to the effects of the fruits—that of the tree of knowledge, which had the power of opening one's eyes, awaking the perception of corporality, and that of the tree of life, which would have the effect of eternal life.[150]

The entire event is therefore conducted at an extremely abstract level. The image of the two trees is built on an absence of details, which renders them bereft of mythological relief or, rather, functional to an unadorned mythology, which exploits the evocative value of common concepts, such as that of the "tree of life." A long Near Eastern tradition, already present in the Pyramid Texts of ancient Egypt and in Sumerian literature, made familiar the idea of a tree of life as a metaphor of vitality, a promise of life after death, or an icon of benediction and fertility. [151] However, the author of the Biblical passage evidently referred to these traditional meanings only to state, in the conclusion, that such a vital force is a divine prerogative.

Other original features are recognizable in the invention of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which have no known parallels in other ancient traditions. It has been assumed that the determination of the concept of knowledge with the coordinated pair tov, "good," and ra', "evil," was no more than a rhetorical addition, to define the concept of absolute knowledge. [152] Other Biblical uses of the concept of "knowledge of good and evil" nevertheless seem to point to a—so to speak—generational notion, in which "to know good and evil" implies adulthood, and a sense of reality with which neither children nor the

[150] Cf. the entry, `*Eden*.

[151] Many bibliographical indications are offered by Gaster, *Myth*, p. 337; see also U. Widengreen, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion,* (Uppsala, 1951); E. O. James, *The Tree of Life. An Archaeological Study,* Leiden 1966. On the problematic identification of the plant mentioned in the poem of Gilgameš (XI.266-289) with the tree of life cf. G. Pettinato, *La saga di Gilgamesh*, in collaboration with S. M. Chiodi and G. Del Monte, (Milan, 1992), p. 186.

[152] Cf. Gaster, *Myth*, pp. 34 and 338 note 15.

elderly are endowed.[153] In any case, despite the linguistic substratum from which the tree of knowledge is born, it is clear that its fruit establishes the human condition, and therefore has a temporal connotation, which separates a before—suddenly obsolete—from an after—well-known and able to be experienced.

In the first centuries of the Common Era, a rich exegetical literature developed out of the short Biblical tale about the garden of Eden, in which the qualities of the two trees were described in new detail. The tree of knowledge was considered an individual species, even if the authors themselves do not seem to have ever been in agreement: for some, the forbidden fruit was flour, for others, grapes, while there were some who maintained it was a fig or carob or, finally, an apple.[154] According to the sages, the Biblical vagueness surrounding the nature of the tree was intentional due to concern that people would hate the tree that had caused the expulsion of Adam.[155]

With regard to the tree of life, according to the sages of the Haggadah, its dimensions were of such gigantic proportions that they extended over the entire earth, as stated in the midraš Genesis Rabbah: "It was a tree which spread over all living things. Rabbi Yehudah ben Il'a'y said: 'The tree of life extended for a five hundred years' journey, and all the primeval waters branched out in streams under it.'"[156] Underneath its foliage, the righteous would have gathered in the afterlife: "These are the sixty companies [...] who sit in the Garden of

[153] Cf. Deut. 1.39: *Your children, who in that day had no knowledge of good and evil* (*ašer lo yad`u ha-yom μov wa-ra`*), and 2Sam. 19.36*: I am this day eighty years old; and can I discern between good and evil?* (*ha-eda` ben μov le-ra`*).

[154] bBerakot 40a; Genesis Rabbah XV.7.

[155] Cf. Ginzberg, *The Legends*, vol. V, pp. 97-98 note 70. According to Ginzberg, by *tappuaḥ,* which commonly means apple, the sages of the Haggadah would have referred to the *etrog,* the cedar (such hypothesis, that seems, in fact forced, is based on an annotation to bŠabbat 88a).

[156] Genesis Rabbah XV.6.

Eden [...] and study the Torah."[157] Meanwhile, in a recurring metaphor the tree is the Torah itself.[158]

In the rabbinic texts of Late Antiquity, we find the idea of a direct antagonism between the tree of life and the tree of knowledge, whereby the latter assumed the traits of an actual "tree of death." This conception had already appeared in an allegory in Genesis Rabbah, where a farmer is confronted with the dilemma of watering the two trees, which grew closely woven together in the garden of a king: "If I water the tree of life"—the man racked his brain—"the tree of death will prosper together with it, but if I don't water that of death, how can the other one survive?" The apologue ends in judicious resignation: "I will do my duty."[159]

It was, however, only in the later Tanna de-ve Eliyyahu rabbah (The Teaching of the School of Eliyyahu), probably written in the ninth century, that the expression 'eṣ mawet, "tree of death," was explicitly associated with "the plant that the Lord, blessed be He, had prohibited to the first man, but from which he ate, bringing death to himself and to his future descendants, down to the end of all generations."[160]

A later Haggadic development is also an image that recurs in the Midraš Konen, an early medieval text characterized by doctrines with a mystical imprint. The tree of life was conceived there as a ladder, situated at the center of Eden: "From the tree of life the souls of the righteous rise and descend, they go to heaven and from heaven towards the Garden of Eden, as if they were going up and down a ladder.[161] The explicit superimposition of Jacob's ladder over the ancient symbolism of the cosmic tree gave birth to a kind of ultramundane machine, which could also function as an instrument for ascending from the terrestrial

[157] Song of Song Rabbah VI. 21.
[158] bBerakot 32b; bTa`anit 7a; b`Arakin 15b.
[159] Genesis Rabbah XVI.6.
[160] *Tanna de-ve Eliyyahu rabbah* V, ed. M. Friedmann, (Vienna, 1902), p. 23.
[161] *Midraš Konen*: cf. *Mistica*, p. 58.

dimension toward the celestial sphere, and which became, in successive centuries, an important element of mystical representation.

In fact, from the earliest beginnings of the Kabbalah, the idea of the tree of souls was taken up and transformed into a secret center of creation, an essential nucleus that supported everything. In the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), probably written in the second half of the twelfth century, the tree is described by God himself, who assumes the qualities of a archetypical farmer: "I am the one who planted this tree"—says the Lord—"I fixed everything in it and I called it all, since everything depends on and comes from it. Everyone has need of it, they search for it, and await it: from it all superior souls propagate in joy."[162] The invention of this tree identified with "all"[163] seems related to a solar metaphor, which could have arisen from the pervasive presence of the sun, and on the natural association between plant foliage and the radiation of light.[164] Certainly, for the author of the Sefer ha-bahir, the tree symbolized above all the fullness of the divine forces that, according to the definition offered in another passage of the work, "are situated one inside the other and resemble a tree." The comparison with the tree made it possible to represent creation as a living organism: "As the tree gives fruit thanks to water, so the Lord, blessed be He, enhances the forces of the tree by means of water. And what is the water of the Lord, blessed be He? It is wisdom and the superior souls of the righteous."[165] Behind this comparison we see embodied, probably for the first time, the image of the tree of the sefirot, fed from the

[162] *Sefer ha-bahir* 22 [14b].

[163] The insistent repetition of the term *kol*, "all," closely recalls the Greek gnostic definition of *pleroma*, as *to pan* or *to holon*, the "all" (cf. G. Scholem, *Ursprung und Anfänge der Kabbala,* (Berlin 1962), Eng. trans. *Origins of the Kabbalah*, (Philadelphia – Princeton 1987), pp. 71-72), even if the affinity between the kabbalistic concept and the Greek one belongs more to a shared phenomenology than to a documentable historical procedure.

[164] Rich material on the solar symbolism of the tree was collected, on a comparative basis, by A. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Papers*, vol. I, *Traditional Art*, Princeton 1977, pp. 376-404 (*The Inverted Tree*). On the sun as the dominating force of "all" cf. e.g., Philo, *De plantatione* 40.

[165] *Sefer ha-bahir* 119 [85].

sefirah of wisdom, ḥokmah, whose energy reaches step by step to the lowest level, represented by malkut, the sefirah of the kingdom.

The metaphor of the sefirotic tree, which would become common in the subsequent Kabbalistic literature, is initially bound to the physical reality of trees themselves, as demonstrated by several observations by Yiṣḥaq the Blind, a mystic active in southern France at the beginning of the thirteenth century, who was very close to the theoretical positions expressed in the Bahir. In fact, in his Commentary on the Sefer yeṣirah, Yiṣḥaq adopts the tree as a model of the divine mystery, comparing the esoteric path to an immersion in the silent and almost invisible arboreal structure: "The marvelous paths are like the cavity situated inside the pith of the tree, and wisdom is the root: it is an internal and fine essence, which no creature could comprehend, save he who absorbs it: the way of contemplation is to absorb, and not to know discursively."[166] To penetrate into the recesses of wisdom, the Kabbalist must therefore make himself similar to a plant, renouncing antagonism towards other things, to merge into the oblivious dominion of the divine.

By the end of the thirteenth century, the icon of the tree of the sefirot was already conceptually well developed in the classical texts of the Sephardic Kabbalah, having been built around the contrast between the tree of life and that of knowledge. According to the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), for instance, the two plants symbolize, respectively, the sefirah of beauty, tif'eret, and that of the kingdom, malkut, but also serve to recall the more complex design of sefirotic dynamism and the gradual descent of the divine toward the limits of matter.[167] And, in the same way that the tree of life was at the center of the garden in the Biblical tale, tif'eret occupies the median position in the diagram of emanation, and the celestial forces radiate from it in every direction. The correspondence between the tree of life

[166] *Peruš Sefer yeṣirah*, in G. Scholem, *Ha-qabbalah be-Provence*, ed. R. Schatz (Jerusalem, 1963), pp. 1-18: 1; cf. *Mistica*, p. 218.

[167] The epithet *`eṣ peri,* "fruit tree" is used to signify the *sefirah* of the foundation (*yesod*): cf. e.g., *Zohar* III.236a (*Ra`aya mehemna*).

and the sun is also insisted upon in the *Zohar*: "Come. Look: the tree of life extends from high to low and it is the sun that illuminates everything. Its splendor starts at the peak and extends straight down the entire trunk; two sides are united in it, one to the north and one to the south, one on the right, and one on the left."[168] Therefore, the tree tif'eret is, at the same time, pure bright potency, a phytomorphic structure of cosmic dimensions and the image of the equilibrium between the two main guiding principles of the emanation: the right, which bears the influence of mercy, and the left, characterized by rigor.

Complementary to the tree of life is that of knowledge, which has a nocturnal and lunar character, and therefore simply reflects the energy that emanates from the center of tif'eret. The tree of knowledge is thus passive and feminine, and is also called the "tree of death" to express the obscure adhesion to the lower reality of the sefirah malkut which it symbolizes: "For as soon as night falls, the Tree of Death dominates the world and the Tree of Life ascends to the height of heights. And since the Tree of Death has sole rule of the world, all the people in it have a foretaste of death. It is therefore incumbent upon man to make haste and meet the Tree of Death and deposit his soul with it, as a man deposits a pledge with his creditor."[169] Thus, in the *Zohar*, the specific function of the nocturnal tree of knowledge is that of a temporary depository of souls, which it gives back at the break of day.[170]

While the tree of life fulfills the fundamental role of the center of equilibrium, the other tree is characterized by a sort of essential uncertainty, summarized by the expression "knowledge of good and evil." In the Kabbalah, good and evil are not two coordinated terms, but rather forces that succeed one another in the dominion of the tree, provoking a distressing state of uncertainty. In a passage from Tiqqune

[168] *Ibid.* III.148b. Also in the "Seder gan `Eden," ed. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrasch*, vol. III, p. 139, a work attributed to Mošeh de León, the tree, which is identified with a cosmic column (`*ammud*), extends "from high to low".

[169] *Zohar* III.119a.

[170] On the complementary symbolism of the tree of life and the tree of death in the kabbalistic tradition, cf. also Busi, Introduction to *Mistica*, pp. LXIII-LXVII.

ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor), the two aspects of the tree of knowledge are even personified, so that the plant emerges split into two opposing principles: "The tree of knowledge of good is Meṭaṭron and that of evil is Samma'el [...] who comes from the other part."[171] The angelic figure of Meṭaṭron and that of Samma'el, prince of evil, render here the duplicity of the sefirah of the kingdom, which it transmits to man, provoking ambiguous moral conduct.

The idea of the contrasting nature of the lower tree did not fail to cause perplexity in the later Kabbalists, since it seemed to transfer the mark of evil to the internal structure of the emanation. To remove this doubt, at the middle of the sixteenth century, Mošeh Cordovero wrote, "It is not necessary to go astray and insist that evil is inserted in the sefirah of the kingdom, it could never be so. Since the name 'evil' is applied to it because good and evil reside under it."[172] Therefore negativity would be nothing but the reverberation of the sub-divine world: when it rises towards malkut, it obscures its diaphanous nature of celestial force.

Only a few years after the work of Cordovero, the teaching of Yiṣḥaq Luria modified some of the salient features of Kabbalistic thought, and with them the concept of the tree of knowledge was also partly revised. A short discussion on this subject is contained in the 'Eṣ ḥayyim (The Tree of Life), the fundamental presentation of Lurianism written by Ḥayyim Vital in the last decades of the sixteenth century. In this work, the double connotation of the symbolic plant is closely bound to the reality of man, both on the physical level and on the level of the inward attitude, in a description in which human and vegetal features mix to the point of merging: "The tree of knowledge is life on the right, and death on the left, since the good inclination that comes from the sefirah of mercy is called right, and is the cause of man's life, similar to the humidity of the roots that moistens the tree. The bad inclination, however, corresponds to the natural heat of man, which dries up the

[171] *Tiqqune ha-zohar, Tiqquna* 53: ed. Zhitomir, 1863, fol. 87b.

[172] *Pardes rimmonim* XXIII.16 (*Ša`ar `erke ha-kinnuyim*): ed. Munkács, vol. II, fol. 34d.

moisture of the roots, causing death."[173] The right side and the left side of the sefirotic tree are identified here, at first, with the two fundamental inclinations of the human spirit, and then with the principle of invigorating moisture and with that of heat that parches. The final result is a new symbolic entity, based on mysti-cal physiology, that is to say a tree of emanation that works according to the laws of corporality and that ex-presses, at the same time, the moral contrast typical of human life.

Eš אש
FIRE

The word "fire" in Hebrew is woven from ephemeral sonorous material: two consonants (alef and šin), which, when pronounced, evoke the sound of a swift flame. The word's spelling also gives it an appearance that visually isolates it from its context: the four rays of alef, which extend in the four spatial directions, are followed by the trident of šin, so that the eye immediately gathers the decisive and peremptory strokes.

Eš, which is gendered feminine, is always used in the Scriptural texts in the singular, as if to reinforce its archaic separateness. Among the 380 Biblical statements containing the word, there is one that, more so

[173] "Shoots out branches": in Hebrew *ma`ale lulavin.* Cf. also the expression *mi-šeta`aleh timrato* of bBerakot 43a (*timrah* means either "column of smoke" or "hyssop branch": see the entry `*Ammud,* Column). The wafting of incense is described in very similar terms in an ancient Babylonian divinatory text: G. Pettinato, "Libanomanzia presso i babilonesi," in *Rivista degli studi orientali* 41 (1966), pp. 317-327: 318 (text) 320 (translation).

than the others, brings fire closer to the mystery of transcendence: For the Lord your God is a consuming fire (Deut. 4.24). In fact, in the Torah, eš is an essential part of the manifestation of the God of Israel. Among the elements, fire is perhaps the closest to God; it is the one that constantly accompanies him, and the one that first materializes when he appears. The Biblical expression and the Lord appeared in a flame of fire appears frequently, and eloquently expresses the intimate connection between the Lord and this fundamental attribute of his. In the structure of revelation, fire functions as the vehicle of God's message to men. Fire is, in other words, the word of God, or rather—as it is expressed many times in the Scriptures—the word of God is fire. It is indeed a devouring fire, ceaseless and offering no respite, as in a passage of Jeremiah: Behold, I will make my words in your mouth *fire*, and this people wood, and it shall devour them (Jer. 5.14). The divine fire, in contrast to its earthly counterpart, does not need feeding and does not die out,[174] but consumes whoever suffers it in punishment.

The masters of the post-Biblical tradition questioned the peculiar nature of fire that emanates from God. They left, in some passages, a richly detailed description: "The heavenly fire"—according to the midraš Exodus Rabbah—"shoots out branches upwards,[175] burns but does not consume, and is black in color."[176] This image represents one of the most elusive and profound paradoxes of ancient symbolism. Black fire—which sparkles with the intensity of the origins—spans various literary traditions, and leaves enigmatic traces not only in mythological literature but also in the vocabulary of the most ancient languages. We find it in the root *ā(t )er of Indo-European traditions, which gave origin to the avestic ātarš ("fire"), to the *atharvan* ("priest

[174] Cf. the entry *Seneh,* Bush.

[175] "Shoots out branches": in Hebrew *ma`ale lulavin.* Cf. also the expression *mi-šeta`aleh timrato* of bBerakot 43a (*timrah* means either "column of smoke" or "hyssop branch": see the entry *`Ammud,* Column). The wafting of incense is described in very similar terms in an ancient Babylonian divinatory text: G. Pettinato, "Libanomanzia presso i babilonesi," in *Rivista degli studi orientali* 41 (1966), pp. 317-327: 318 (text) 320 (translation).

[176] Exodus Rabbah II.5.

of fire") of Sanskrit, to the atrium (domestic "fireplace"), and also to the ater ("dark, black") of Latin.[177]

While the Latin tradition seems to indicate that this "dark fire" alludes only to the smog and dense matter of a terrestrial flame,[178] contrasting with the clear light of the stars' fire, the Jewish tradition abhors this opposition, instead rendering the black light the specifically divine element. The Hebrew imagination implies here a mirror-like symmetry between high and low. In fact, that the divine bursts out into everyday reality signifies the upsetting of ordinary experience and the exchange of the usual attributes of light and darkness.

Moses Maimonides takes up the rabbinic idea of the existence of black fire fire again, at the end of the twelfth century, in a passage from *The Guide of the Perplexed*. In this fundamental text of medieval Jewish thought, the philosopher proposes an interpretation of the beginning of Genesis which creates a completely new exegetical perspective, inasmuch as he attributes a character of precise physical reality to the primordial darkness. Maimonides's intent was to demonstrate that, at the beginning of the creation story, the Bible mentions the four elements of the Greek philosophical tradition. "For the tale mentions"—he writes—"earth, water, spirit, and darkness. Now darkness is the elementary fire; do not think anything else." The identification of darkness with fire is a bold innovation, which the author develops by referring to the lexicon of the philosophical doctrine of the cosmos: "The elementary fire was designated by this term, because it is not luminous, but only transparent. For if the

[177] Cf. P. Moisson, *Les dieux magiciens dans le Rig-Véda. Approche comparative de structures mythiques indo-européenne,* (Milan, 1993), pp. 102-103.

[178] On the fatal and physical nature of this black fire it is enough here to cite two examples taken by Vergil: "*Sequar atris ignibus absens / et, cum frigida mors anima seduxerit artus, / omnibus umbra locis adero,* There I shall reach thee, wrapt in dark flames; And when cold death hath stript my living flesh, My ghost shall haunt thee!" (*Aeneid* IV.384-386); "*subiectisque ignibus atris / conditur in tenebras altum caligine caelum*, And lit black fires below them, shrouding all the lofty heavens in gloom" (*Ibid.,* XI.186-187). According to Plotinus, *Enneads* II.3.11, "[earthly] fire is dark."

elementary fire had been luminous, we should have seen at night the whole atmosphere in flame like fire."[179] Maimonides thus carried the conception of a colorless, heavenly fire, as discussed by the Muslim philosophers, to the extreme, and bestowed on the rabbinic black fire the philosophical dignity of elemental fire. The Guide therefore handed over to Hebrew literature the depiction of a fire of darkness in the sky, which would not fail to fascinate the imagination of the mystics.

The Maimonidean elementary fire saw a reappearance at the beginning of the thirteenth century with the French Kabbalist Yiṣḥaq the Blind, in his Comment on the Work of Creation.[180] Towards the middle of the same century, the Sephardic exegete Moses Nachmanides cited the Guide almost to the letter, devoting a place of importance in his doctrine of creation to the fire of darkness: "Fire is said to be dark because the elementary fire is obscure. If it had been red, it would have reddened the night."[181]

In the second half of the thirteenth century, the mystic Avraham Abulafia took up the notion of black fire, and made it an attribute of a sefirah: "The elementary fire is dark"—writes Abulafia in the Sefer haḥešeq (The Book of Desire)—"it is in fact a fire that does not shine, an opaque mirror, and represents the force of gevurah (strength) [...] and its attribute, fear".[182] In the vision of this Kabbalist, fire, as a result of

[179] *Dal¼lat al-ḥ¼'ir¾n* II.30. Although Maimonides echoes Aristotelian terminology here, the idea of a colorless fire, similar to diaphanous air, is not directly derived from the works of the Stagirian but from his Islamic commentators: it is, for example, attributed to Avicenna by Šahrast¼n¾ (Šahrast¼n¾, *Livre de Religions et des Sectes*, II, trans. J. Jolivet and G. Monnot, [Leuven, 1993], p. 460); cf. S. Munk, in his commentary on the French translation of the *Guide* (*Le guide des égarés*, 3 vols., [Paris, 1856-1866], vol. II, p. 237 note 2). Yehudah ha-Lewi *Kit¼b al-radd wa-'l-dal¼l f¾ 'l-d¾n al-dhal¾l* (*al-Kit¼b al-Khazar¾*) V.14, argued against the conception of a colorless fire, cf. also *ibid.* V.4.

[180] Cf. the *Commentary* attributed to Yiṣḥaq, ed. Abrams, *R. Asher ben David*, p. 310: "*U-mi-šam yoṣe ha-eš ha-yesodi* [*sic*] *we-qorehu ḥošeq,* from there issues forth the elementary fire that is called `obscurity'.

[181] *Commentary on* Gen. 1.1.

[182] *Sefer ha-ḥešeq*: New York, Jewish Theological Seminary, ms Mic. 1801. A passage on the elementary fire also appears in the early work of Yosef Giqaṭilla, student of Abulafia: *Ginnat egoz*, ed. M. Attia, (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 181.

its blackness, is attracted to the sphere of apprehension, and therefore becomes a symbol that belongs to the dominion of the sefirah of power.

A few years later, the image of the elementary fire appears again in Mošeh de León, the alleged author of the main part of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), who was an assiduous reader of the Guide, and who transformed more than a few of Maimonides's philosophical notions into vivid representations of the mystical inner being.[183] For instance, the expression repeated several times in the *Zohar*, boṣina de-qadrinuta, "light of blackness," which describes the original clotting of the cosmos in a thick and dark seed[184] before it unfolds into the colors of creation, seems to descend from the Maimonidean black fire. Since the blackness of the fire contains in itself all of the tones that it apparently denies, its impenetrable darkness also contains—in the Kabbalistic imagination—the vision of every future object. Through a process of rhetorical amplification, all of the infinite worlds that crowd the mystical sky are lit from that singular fire. "What is meant here by 'fire'?" is the question posed in the treatise Idra Rabbah of the *Zohar*; "It does not refer to a real fire, but indicates the spark, which was contained in the pure air and illuminated two hundred seventy worlds."[185]

In other passages of the *Zohar*, the relationship between celestial fire and terrestrial fire is conceived as an encounter between the masculine and the feminine principles of creation. Fire that descends

[183] A clear reference to the "elementary fire" already appears in the *Šeqel ha-qodeš* of De León, ed. Ch. Mopsik (Los Angeles, 1996), p. 38: "*Darkness*: is the secret of this attribute [*gevurah*], the secret of the elementary fire." Cf. also E. R. Wolfson, *The Book of the Pomegranate. Mose's De Leon's Sefer Ha-Rimmon,* (Atlanta, 1988), p. 195, as well as *Zohar* I.16a: "`Darkness'" is fire, but fire is not darkness, save when it takes hold of *Tohu*" (the parallel between this last passage and Maimonides` *Guide* was already noted by S. Munk, *Mélanges de philosophie juive et arabe*, [Paris, 1859], p. 278). In the Hebrew writings of Mošeh de León as well as in the *Zohar* the theme of the fire of darkness is intertwined with that of the obscure light of the origins.

[184] According to G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, (Jerusalem, 1974), $It. Trans., *La cabala,* (Rome, 1982), p. 229 $, this expression (which he translates as "powerful light") results from a misunderstanding of bPesachim 7a.

[185] *Zohar* III.135b; cf. *Mistica ebraica*, p. 478.

from the sky becomes the masculine element, symbolizing divine compassion, while the fire that rises upwards represents the feminine component, the attribute of the severity of God. In this case, on a sefirotic level, the masculine fire alludes to the sefirah binah (intelligence) while the feminine designates malkut (kingdom).

Here we see the transposition of an image already consolidated in Talmudic literature, that is, of the representation of the union between man and woman as the source of a devouring fire. Judging only by its appearance, such an idea seems to have been influenced by the obvious assonance between eš, "fire," and the two words that designate man and woman in Hebrew, iš and iššah respectively.

This correspondence between the symbolism of celestial and terrestrial fire and the opposition between masculine and feminine appears not only in literary testimony, but also in Jewish ritual practice. In Judaism, fire is extremely important in marking the festive day: the lighting of the two Sabbath candles marks the initial rite, while the benediction on the lights of fire decrees the return to the workday. In a departure from liturgical convention, the woman is entrusted with the kindling of the lights which announce the beginning of the Sabbath. The man recites the formula of the havdalah, which proclaims the Sabbath's end: "Blessed are you Lord, our God, king of the world, who created the lights of fire." The attribution to the woman of such an important liturgical function, precisely in connection with the lighting of the sacred fire, seems related to the ancient idea that she alone, inasmuch as she is the carrier of the terrestrial fire, is capable of attracting the divine fire.

During the Sabbath, the Scriptures proscribe, among others rules, any profane fire, and even threaten transgressors with the penalty of death. The Sabbatical lamp therefore symbolizes the perennial fire that burned on the altar of the Temple, according to Biblical precepts: The fire shall be burning always upon the altar; it shall never go out (Lev. 6.6). Only the flame of that fire could remain lit on the Sabbath,

testifying to, in the absence of every other light, the visible presence of the God of Israel.[186]

## גלגל Galgal
## Wheel

In galgal, "wheel,"[187] two identical sequences of letters follow one another in a rigorous semantic principle. In fact, the simple sequence gal evokes in Hebrew the semi-circle, in its concrete manifestation as an ocean wave or a pile of stones. Galgal is thus a double semi-circle or wheel, whose circular movement is suggested by the iteration of its sound.

In the Bible, the image of the wheel refers to various levels of reality: to the natural world, or to that of human creations, and extending to the secret sphere of the divine. In the physical realm, galgal is the whirl, turned by the wind (Isa. 17.13; Ps. 83.14) and sometimes accompanied by the rumble of thunder (Ps. 77.19). The wheel often seems tied to the notion of a deep and menacing roar. In the vision of Isaiah, for example, the march of the Assyrian army is described by the rumble[188] of the wagons of war: Their horses' hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a stormy wind (Isa. 5.28); while, in Jeremiah, the Pharaoh's advance is announced by the rushing of his chariots, and at the rumbling of his wheels (Jer. 47.3). The wheel is therefore primarily connected with images of war and battle, and with a rapid and insistent

[186] Cf. also the interpretation offered by *Mekilta de-rabbi Yišma`e'l, Šabbata* 2.49-56.

[187] In post-biblical Hebrew, and in some medieval forms, *galgal* frequently assumes the meaning of "sphere."

[188] The English word "rumble" originates from the sound of a wheel: the top that was made to turn in ancient charms, is called *rhombos* in Greek, and *rhombus* in Latin: "*Deficiunt torti sub carmine rhombi*, The whirligig spun to a magical chant has had no effect," Propertius in the *Elegiae* II.28b.35.

movement. Yet the Scriptures also offer a glimpse of its use in daily civilian activity, as for example in threshing, as mentioned in Isaiah: When he drives the wheel of his cart and his horses over it, he does not crush it (Isa. 28.28), or in irrigation, as in its depiction in Ecclesiastes: Before [...] the wheel [is] broken at the cistern (Eccl. 12.6).

In Ezekiel's vision of the celestial carriage, the wheels assume a fundamental function, and are represented by two different terms, only partial synonyms: galgal and ofan. The sudden pulling asunder of the sky causes a great cloud, and a fire flaring up in front of the prophet. At its center then occurs something similar to a flash of lightning: four living creatures that moved rapidly, each one of them had four faces, that of a man, a lion, an ox and an eagle and near to them there was a wheel (ofan: Ezek. 1.15). There were therefore four supernatural wheels, and their work was like the color of an emerald. Moreover, they manifest a fragmentary anthropomorphism (or zoomorphism), since they were full of eyes; they all had the same structure and appeared as if their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. They participate in the angelic nature, and appear as if when the living creatures moved, the wheels moved with them. Ezekiel emphasized then several times that the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels (Ezek. 1.2021, 10.17).

The prophet himself establishes, in an enigmatic sentence, the correspondence between ofan and galgal: As for the wheels, they were called in my hearing, the wheelwork (ha-galgal: Ezek. 10.13). This is one of the most obscure points of the entire book, even if the sense of the enunciation does not seem equivocal: according to Ezekiel, that there are four of the ofannim corresponds to the oneness of galgal. In this passage, galgal even appears with an article, to underline that the four aspects find a synthesis and merge into a single entity.

The mystery of the single wheel, which gathers the multiform movements of the angelic wheels, betrays an archaic solar symbolism, which probably inspired, at least in part, Ezekiel's revelation. It is perhaps possible to detect, behind the four faces of the living creatures, the ancient representation of the four cardinal points and the

corresponding positions assumed by the sun in the course of the year. The contrast between the four ofannim and the galgal [189] seems therefore to allude to the cyclical motion of the sun, which remains constant in its oneness, while passing through the four cardinal points on its trajectory.

In fact, in the post-Biblical Judaic tradition, galgal will be a frequent epithet of the sun which marks out its own solitary orbit in the sky; with the expression galgal ḥammah, "wheel of the sun," the masters of Late Antiquity usually designated the star in the fullness of its splendor. In the midraš Genesis Rabbah, compiled in the Land of Israel at the beginning of the fifth century, it is said that "The globe of the sun has a sheath" to protect creation from its excessive heat; in front of the star there is also "a lake of water [...] and when it goes forth, the Holy One, blessed be He, tempers its strength in the water, lest it go forth and burn up the world." [190] In a later midraš, the Leviticus Rabbah, the rounded form of the sun changes at sunset into a drop of red color: "The globe of the sun never sets before becoming a grain of blood."[191]

In the Haggadah, two parts of the human body correspond to the solar globe, which recall its form: the eye and the malleolus in the ankle. According to ancient belief, the form of the eye evokes the source of heavenly light, and the composition of the black of the pupil with the white that surrounds it is a sort of mirror representation of the clear wheel of the sun, surrounded by the darker sky.[192] In a similar way, the shape of the malleolus is a microcosmic figure of the rotundity of the sun. Thus, in a passage of Ecclesiastes Rabbah, it is stated: "The ball of Adam's heel outshone the sun."[193]

[189] The Greek rendering in the Septuagint, in Ezek. 10.13, is *gelgel*.

[190] Genesis Rabbah VI.6.

[191] Leviticus Rabbah XXXI.9.

[192] *Ibid*. XXXI.8. In "*Midraš Alfa betot*," ed. Wertheimer, *Batte midrašot*, vol. II, P. 450, with regard to the first man, it is explicitly affirmed "the spheres of his eyes were similar to wheels of the sun." On the eye as source see also the entry *`Ayin*, Eye, Source.

[193] Ecclesiastes Rabbah VIII.2.

In Late Antiquity, the turning of the solar disk in the sky, a visible sign of the passing of time, was very often seen as the symbol of changing fates, which, similarly to a wheel, cause the fortunes of man to rise, only to drag them inexorably back down. Thus, according to a celebrated Talmudic saying, "a wheel revolves in the world,"[194] and subjects all of reality to never-ending movement.

If the sun is the archetypical wheel, the earthly reproductions that repeat its form are nothing more than a metonymy of universal destiny: The wheel of fortune often assumes the features of an archaic hydraulic wheel—typical of the ancient landscape and sometimes visible even today in the Orient—constructed of hard wood, and surrounded by numerous earthenware containers, which rise full of water from the well and descend empty after pouring it into irrigation canals. "This world"—explains Rabbi Naḥman in the midraš Leviticus Rabbah—"is like a pumping-wheel through which the full is emptied and the empty filled."[195]

The constant succession of filling and emptying in the image of the water jars emphasizes the alternation of good and evil, transforming the icon of the wheel into an ethical metaphor. A similar notion must have guided the author of the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation) in choosing the wheel as the nucleus of his linguistic doctrine. Probably written in the Land of Israel between the beginning of the sixth century and the second half of the seventh, this short work is a very early document of mystical reflection on the Hebrew alphabet. The letters are conceived of as the source of the cosmos, that is, as founding elements, which by means of successive permutations give life to all of reality. In the Sefer yeṣirah, the breaking up and recomposing of the consonants among themselves, in a succession of linguistic transformations, is represented as the revolution of a circle in a quick movement: "Twenty-two fundamental letters,

[194] bŠabbat 151b; cf. bBava batra 74a.

[195] Leviticus Rabbah XXXIV.9.

set in a wheel in two hundred twenty-one gates. The wheel turns forward and backward. And this is its sign: if it is for the good on high, it gives pleasure (‘oneg), if it is for evil, below, it causes pain (nega‘ ).”[196] The play upon the alphabet is added here to the ethical meaning of the image of the wheel: the two sequences of consonants mentioned are not only specular from a lexical point of view, but also express the contrasting principles of pleasure, which marks the height of the movement, and of pain, which characterizes its lowest point.

The symbolic choice of the wheel of fates had a deep influence on successive Jewish mysticism: beginning with the earliest medieval commentaries on the Sefer yeṣirah, the wheel became a specific instrument, a drawing sketched out in ink, which was literally spun in order to follow with one’s gaze the succession of alphabetical combinations. [197] Nevertheless, this practical tool did not lose its original value as a diagram of earthly fortunes. For the Jewish mystics, to meditate on the wheel of permutations of the letters signified setting off along an inner path, devoted to understanding the mechanism that constantly transforms good into evil and evil into good. It was believed that the elements, combining in different ways, gave origin to the contrasting aspects of reality, in the same way that the letters, even though they remained the same, changed their positions on the wheel.

Although the most widespread representation was perhaps that of a wheel of graphic signs, at the end of the thirteenth century an intense, as well as enigmatic, description of a wheel of sounds is to be found in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor). Here the spinning of the wheel highlights the alternation of joy and affliction: “The voice of the wheel changes from

low to high, while secret chariots rotate. A sweet voice rises and falls and spreads throughout the world; a sound of a horn is played in the

[196] *Sefer yeṣirah* 18; cf. *Mistica*, p. 37.

[197] Cf. e.g, the wheel included in many copies of the original edition of the *Sefer yeṣirah*, (Mantua, 1562), (a reproduction in G. Busi, *Edizione ebraiche del XVI secolo nelle biblioteche dell'Emilia-Romagna*, [Bologna, 1987], p.171). See also the entry, *Golem*.

deepest levels, encircling the wheel."[198] Two heralds[199] are situated at the sides of the circle, one white and one red, who provide the impulse to the movement of the wheel, the first declaring the beatitude of the righteous and the second the punishment of the impious. "Two birds"—continues the text—"take off in flight, one to the south and the other to the north, soaring through the air, so that their song and the melody of the wheel join together like a Psalm song for the Sabbath day (Ps. 92.1)."

Even though commentaries on the *Zohar*, older as well as more recent, tend to disregard the literary qualities of this masterpiece in favor of its mystical content, the iconographic complexity of such a bold representation like that of the sound wheel is typical of the style of the work, and is an integral part of its message. The wheel of fates also appears again in the *Zohar*, where it changes almost into a precarious acrobatic prop, upon which the spirits must firmly maintain themselves or risk falling into the abyss: "A certain wheel is ever whirling continuously round and round. Woe to those whose feet lose their hold on the wheel, for then they fall into the Deep which is predestined for the evildoers of the world! Woe to those who fall, never to rise and enjoy the light that is stored up for the righteous in the world to come!"[200] The unsure surface of the cosmic wheel, which is only evoked in this single passage, seems extraneous to ancient Jewish symbolism.[201] It echoes rather the thin, arched bridge (the so-called "bridge of the devil")—well-known in the Zoroastrian culture of

[198] *Zohar* I.233 (*Tosefta*).

[199] "Heralds": the Aramaic translation with *magrofin*, is a problematic rendering. In the rabbinic literature (and elsewhere in the *Zohar*, e.g., in III.135a), *magrefah* means in fact, "shovel," or "spear."

[200] Cf. e.g., the description of the bridge, called *cinva†*, in *D¼†ist¼n-¾ †in¾k* XXI.2-7.

[201] It is mentioned in only one passage of a late medieval *midraš*, *the Pseudo-Seder Eliyyahu zuµa* 3 (21), ed. M. Friedmann, (Vienna, 1904), p. 34 (cf. *Tanna de-be Eliyyahu. The Lore of the School of Elijah*, trans. W. G. Braude and I. J. Kapstein [Philadelphia, 1981], p. 505).

Persia,[202] but also attested to in the Islamic tradition,[203] as well as in medieval and renaissance Christian iconography[204]—on which, after death, the souls of the righteous are able to maintain themselves in equilibrium, while the wicked plunge into the abyss.

In the mystical literature of the following centuries it is difficult to find descriptions of the cosmic wheel as vivid as those offered in the *Zohar*. It is necessary to look at that of the seventeenth century to come across, in the pages of the Hasidic master Naḥman of Bratslav, a singular comparison between the wheel "that recurs in the world" and the children's game of dreydl. Dreydl, in Yiddish, is the name of a small spinning top, given as a gift to children at Ḥanukkah, "the festival of lights," which takes place beginning from the 25th of Kislew; these tops can be simple carved wooden pieces or refined objects in gold, often in the shape of dice. "Indeed, it is known"—writes Naḥman in his Śiḥot (Conversations)—"that the whole world is similar to the wheel that turns, called dreydl, everything turns continuously and transforms from man into angel and from angel into man [...] from supernal entity to lower reality and back again to supernal: in effect, from the roots, everything is one."[205] Thus, the wheel of fortunes changes here into a real cosmic wheel, which causes divine energy to descend to the lower realm, and causes the human one to rise, in a perpetual exchange between heaven and earth. This interpretation of the popular custom of playing with tops during Ḥanukkah, the festival that commemorates the dedication of the Temple following the Maccabean revolt, seems typical of the Hasidic mentality. In fact, according to the teacher of

[202] Cf. e.g., the description of the bridge, called *cinva†*, in *D¼†ist¼n-¾ †in¾k* XXI.2-7.

[203] On the fortune of the bridge of judgment in the Islamic tradition (where it is usually called *ṣir¼µ*, literally "street") and on the references in Christian literature see E. Cerulli, *Il "Libro della scala" e la questione delle fonti arabo-spagnole della Divina Commedia*, (Vatican City, 1949), pp. 529-32.

[204] See e.g., the fourteenth-fifteenth century fresco of the *Final Judgment*, preserved in the church of Santa Maria in Piano, by Loreto Aprutino, or the *San Michele* of Beccafumi, at the Accademia of Siena. On the iconography of the "bridge of the devil" cf. E. Battisti, *L'anitirinascimento*, 2 vols., (Milan, 1989), vol. I, pp. 101-3.

[205] *±iḥot Moharan*, *Mem*.

Bratslav, the origin of this simple game is based on mystical reason, since it alludes to the symbolic function of the Sanctuary of Jerusalem: "During such festivity," writes Naḥman, "the top is used for fun, in memory of the Temple; and in fact the construction of the Sanctuary was inspired by the concept of the spinning of the wheel, inasmuch as it caused the supernal influence to descend downwards and the terrestrial reality to rise upwards."[206] Thus the Hasidic mystic sees in the sacred space of the Temple the place where God had chosen to contain his own infinite essence and, at the same time, the physical space where offerings rose to heaven, thus representing the ascension of terrestrial elements towards heaven. For Naḥman, the Sanctuary is the center of earthly changes, and is the space where the divine and the human can unite: the small spinning top is a metonym of the great sacred wheel that, with its perpetual movement, allows the world to exist.

## גולם Golem

One of the most intense verses of the Hebrew Bible urges three times the dissolution of light and darkness in the divine: Even the darkness is not dark for you; but the night shines like the day; darkness

[206] *Ibid.*

is as light with you (Ps. 139.12). Prefaced by this clashing of opposites, which seems to be a prelude to the disclosure of a heaven of lights, the psalmist's poetry descends instead unexpectedly to the womb, to scrutinize the birth of the fetus. The hidden space in which genesis of the body occurs is pointed to as a place of mystery, and again announced by a negation, which makes God the only spectator of a process, at once physical and earthly: My frame was not hidden from you, when I was made in secret, and finely wrought in the depths of the earth. Your eyes *saw my embryo* (Ps. 139.15-16). Even the possessive adjective "my," which in Hebrew composes one word with golem, "embryo" (golmi), is more a negation than the enunciation of a belonging, because the unformed object is in reality as invisible to the author as to any other person. The word golem, which appears here for the only time in the Bible, is already marked by a propensity to anachronism, as if the unformed were suitable for premature, as well as belated, dimensions.[207]

The root glm, which serves as etymological support for this term, destined for a progressive polysemy, in Hebrew means "to wrap up," or "to fold together," as with fabrics that alter the contours of forms, heralding them without revealing them. The knowledge of the phonetic and symbolic relationship between the cloak and the concept of golem was present in post-Biblical Judaic literature, as demonstrated by a wordplay related by the Babylonian Talmud: "A cloak [gelima] [is so called] because one looks in it like a shapeless mass [golem]."[208] In

[207] The Hebrew *golmi* is rendered as *akatergaston*, literally "unfinished work," in the Septuagint and as *amorfõton*, "unformed," by Symmachus, while the Vulgate opts for *imperfectum*; the Targum of Psalms, finally, uses *gišmi*, "my substance," "my body." The clear reference to the fetus of the preceding verses (*For you have formed my insides; you knit me together in my mother's womb*: Ps. 139.13) and the later Hebrew use also render plausible the translation "embryo," despite the contrasting opinion of G. Scholem, *Zur Kabbala und ihrer Symbolik*, (Zürich, 1960), Eng. trans. *On the kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, (New York, 1965), p. 161: "There is no evidence to the effect that it meant 'embryo,' as has sometimes been claimed." Cf. on this point, M. Idel, *Golem. Jewish Magical and Mystical Traditions on the Artificial Anthropoid*, (Albany, 1990), pp. 296-305.

[208] bŠabbat 77b.

the Talmudic texts, the word gelima (or gelim) was adopted to indicate the large mantle in use in the Near East, while golem slowly acquired a variety of meanings. Besides the tangle of limbs not yet formed,[209] it was used to point out rough or incomplete objects, or amorphous material before it is worked by the artisan, but also, in a figurative sense, uncultivated persons, without wisdom and education.[210] The similar Aramaic form golma means, in addition, "stone" or "lump of clay," as well as "hill."

The Hebrew uses are reflected in equivalent forms in other Semitic languages, such as the Syrian gālma,[211] but also find a parallel in the Latin noun glomus, "ball of wool." The denominative verb glomerare, which expresses the action of wrapping up or of thickening into a confused mass, resounds, for example, in the final scene of the battle between Hercules and Cacus in book VIII of the Aeneid, where it represents the tangle of darkness and flame that saturated the cave in which the half beast sought to escape: "Glomeratque sub antro / fumiferam noctem commixtis igne tenebris, Black clouds of smoke, amidst his father's fires, / gath'ring, with each repeated blast, the night."[212]

The first Hebrew employment of golem with a stark symbolic connotation occurs in a saying probably dating back to the fourth century. It relates the idea of an indistinct mass to the creation of the first man: "Rabbi Tanḥuma in the name of Rabbi Banayyah, and Rabbi Berekyah in the name of Rabbi Eli'ezer, said: He created him as a lifeless mass (golem) extending from one end of the world to the other."[213] The "first man" is therefore an indistinct figure, a macroanthropos that extends along the horizon until finally losing all human features,

[209] E.g., in yNiddah III.50d; Leviticus Rabbah XIV.8.

[210] Cf. mAvot V.7 and *Avot de-rabbi Natan* (A) 37.

[211] Cf. D. Cohen (et al.), *Dictionnaire des racines sémitiques ou attestées dans les langues sémitiques*, *Fascicule* 3, (Leuven, 1993), p. 129, s.v. "Glm."

[212] *Aeneid* VIII.254-55.

[213] Genesis Rabbah VIII.1; cf. also *ibid*. XIV.8; *Pesikta Rabbati* XXIII; *Midraš Tehillim* CXXXIX.5.

becoming one with the cosmos. The rabbis of the Haggadah do not explain the true nature of this immensity, which seems nevertheless to evoke the idea of an intense radiance, dominated by a human image lacking in articulation and therefore similar to fetal indetermination.

The fusion of these enormous dimensions with light seems to stem from a very ancient mythological heritage, which attributed anthropological traits to luminous sources,[214] even if confined to loosely formed figures of pure energy, without feet or head. In the Sanskrit tradition, for example, the nucleus of light was considered to be similar to a fetus in the womb of the mother, still hidden and barely distinguishable, but charged with power and ready to disperse it with unstoppable force. Thus Agni, the divine fire, is celebrated in the ªg-Veda in his mysterious appearance, as he who "sprang into existence, at great heaven's base, and in this region's bosom; Footless and headless, both his ends concealing, in his Bull's nest[215] drawing himself together."[216] Moreover, Agni is often called gárbha, in Sanskrit "embryo," an appellation also applied to the morning sun, while the dawn is called, in the Vedic hymns, apád, "footless."[217] In ancient Indian culture, therefore, incompleteness seems to be the sign of the maximum concentration of vital force, and denotes the interval that precedes the manifestation into being and the disclosure of light.

In a Haggadic tale of Late Antiquity, the image of the golem was used as a prelude to the story of creation, appearing to coincide with the dawn's announcement of the day. The Biblical event of Adam and Eve,

[214] See also the entry *Or*, Light.

[215] According to Geldner, *Der Rigveda*, vol. I, p. 414, the expression "`Bull's nest' is a paradox. Agni is at once bull and bird."

[216] ªg Veda IV.1.11. Cf. also *ibid*., VI.59.6 (cf. Geldner, *Der Rigveda*, vol. II, p. 161) and X.79.2.

[217] Among the many passages in which *gárbha* (which is at times rendered as "sprout") refers to Agni cf. ªg Veda I.70.3, I.95.4, III.1.12, III.29.2, III.29.11, VII.9.3, X.1.2. The dawn is said to be "footless" in ªg Veda I.152.3 and VI.59.6. Cf. also A. Bergaigne, *La religion védique d'après les Hymnes du Rig-Veda*, 3 vols., (Paris, 1878-83), vol. I, p. 318, while in ªg Veda I.24.8 it is the sun (cf. also J. Eggeling, *The ±atapatha Br¼hma™a according to the Text of the M¼dhyandina School*, 5 vols., [Oxford, 1882-1900], vol. II, p. 380: IV. 4.5.5).

in turn, is made to fit into an episode of twelve hours, evidently corresponding to the daylight hours. The narrative structure presents a clear fusion between the formation of the macroanthropos that occupies the first five hours of the day and the events in the garden during the remaining seven hours, culminating in the expulsion. A powerful mythical tension drives the Biblical story of the beginning towards the image of a primeval Adam, whose gigantic body slowly becomes animated; only later are Adam's actions in Genesis revisited: "The day consisted of twelve hours"—narrates Rabbi Yoḥanan bar Ḥanina—"In the first hour, his [Adam's] dust was gathered; in the second, it was kneaded into a shapeless mass. In the third, his limbs were shaped; in the fourth, a soul was infused into him; in the fifth, he arose and stood on his feet; in the sixth, he gave [the animals] their names."[218] The first three hours of the dawn therefore correspond, in a kind of cosmic ontogenesis, to conception, formation, and birth. The Adam-golem of the Haggadah seems to be situated between the inertia of the earth and the dynamism of life. He is only half a creature; even a minimal change in the Creator's mind could forever return him to the realm of the nonexistent.

The rabbinic tales of Adam's creation corroborated the connection between the idea of golem and an intermediate moment in the genesis of man, characterized by a passivity and amorphousness, but nonetheless necessary to the development of the animate and thinking being. The term golem represented, therefore, a rare occasion to give a name to the unclear space before what is not yet or after what is no more. This space, usually unmentioned in speech, was of fundamental importance for the erudite Jews of the Talmudic era, who sought instruments able to conduct magical acts upon the world. In fact, this magical work had a particular predilection for both germinal moments and ultimate outcomes of reality, both of which seemed more malleable,

[218] bSanhedrin 38b: cf. *Mistica*, pp. XL-XLI. The same story is contained, with significant variations, in Leviticus Rabbah XXIX; *Pesikta de-rav Kahana* XXIII.1; *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, *Be-re' šit* 25; *Tanḥuma*, (Warsaw, 1881), *Šemini* 8; *Midraš Tehillim* XLII.3.

since they combine a powerful transforming energy with the highest level of instability.

Even if, in the Jewish literature of Late Antiquity, the word golem was not directly associated with the concept of an individual created by magic, as it came to be in the late medieval period, these cultural premises nonetheless supported the idea that it might be possible for the expert in occult practices to instill movement in an inert body, or to keep alive, at least provisionally, the deceased. What's more, the Jewish sages considered themselves capable of creating of a humanoid, as can be inferred from a celebrated episode of the Babylonian Talmud, according to which Rabbah created "a man and sent him to Rabbi Zera. Rabbi Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him: 'Thou art a creature of the magicians. Return to thy dust.'"[219]

Such legends were characteristic of an ancient, magical mentality, which emerged in various narrative forms, not only in Jewish culture but also in Greek and Roman literature, and in other Eastern traditions. For instance, Simon Magus, who lived in the first half of the first century, boasted that he had changed "air into water and then water into blood, and then to have changed it into flesh and to have created a new human creature, a young boy." Simon then claimed to have unmade him "and returned him to air," but not before having put his image in his own bedroom.[220]

The temporary survival of a cadaver, thanks to the incantation of a magician, also marks the beginning, between frightening and grotesque, of the Golden Ass of Apuleius. Here the protagonist, killed in a nocturnal assault, rises again in the morning thanks to a magical sponge that a sorceress had slipped down his throat. However, after walking a long stretch of road and stopping to drink from a brook, "his

[219] bSanhedrin 65b.

[220] Pseudo-Clement, *Recognitiones* II.15.

throat opened wide and the sponge dropped out into the water [...] He was stone dead."[221]

In the Indian tradition, on the other hand, two beings are found, who were created by Brahmans, to replace the arrogant and cruel King Vena, whom they killed. The two artificial sovereigns were supposedly produced by "twisting and churning" Vena's hands: from the left hand, a man was born "black in color and very short of stature," destined to reign over a hill tribe, while King P‰thu came from the right, dazzling "like the Firegod."[222]

This ancient myth of the culture of magic found an appropriate terminological expression in late medieval Judaic literature: in fact, the word golem was employed specifically to indicate an extreme state, that is, the inert form of a corpse temporarily recalled to life, in a very risky imitation of the creative activity of God. The Megillat Aḥima'aṣ, a well-known chronicle composed in the eleventh century by the Apulian Jew Aḥima'aṣ ben Palti'el, tells of a rabbi who revived a youth killed in a shipwreck. Through a cut, the rabbi inserted a parchment engraved with the divine name into the youth's arm. The youth lived for some time until, it was noted during a liturgical service in a synagogue that he did not sing the praises of the divine name, "since the dead do not celebrate the Lord." Upon the discovery of the magical manipulation, the rabbi was obligated to show the point where he had inserted the parchment: "A cut was made in that spot and the [divine] name was extracted: the body was left thus without vital spirit and the golem fell putrefied, like he who has rotted after many years and the flesh returned to pulver."[223]

The figure of the artificial man, and that of the deceased retained by the living, proved to be narrative ingredients capable of transmitting

[221] *Metamorphoses* (*Asinus aureus*) I.19. (Lucius Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, trans. Robert Graves [New York, 1950], p. 34). Another cadaver recalled to life appears in a later episode of the same work: II.27-30.

[222] *V¼yu pur¼™a, Anusa™ga* I.120-40 (*The V¼yu Pur¼™a*, trans. and commentary by G. V. Tagare, 2 vols., [New Delhi, 1988], vol. II, pp. 467-69). Cf. also G. P. Upadhyay, *Br¼hma™as in Ancient Indi*a, (New Delhi, 1979), pp. 84-85.

[223] *Megillat Aḥima`aṣ*, ed. B. Klar (Jerusalem, 1974), p.15.

multiple meanings. This genre exalted in fact the sapiential powers of the erudite classes—such as those of the Brahmans of the puranic era or of the Talmudic masters—suggesting that whoever had control of magical procedures could accomplish the mysterious leap from inanimate to animate, and was therefore the repository of extraordinary and dangerous capabilities. At the same time, the appearance of these beings of indefinite nature enriched the tales with an unexpected element, which allowed for sudden coups de théâtre, and for the tale to warn of the risks of magical acts. What's more, the operations on the golem posed a latent challenge to the divine, and were therefore predestined to have only a temporary effect, as if failure was the expected outcome of every human substitute for the divine creative act. But precisely this element of uncertainty and deception guaranteed the fortune of the literary topos of golem: after the Megillat Aḥima'aṣ, the figure of golem accompanied a large part of the subsequent development of Jewish narrative.

Besides this literary use, between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, a mystical interpretation of golem appeared, utilized in small mystical circles as an unusual instrument for meditation. The purely symbolic use of a human simulacrum made of clay was a unique feature of Jewish mysticism, whose importance was all too often neglected in favor of its popular and fairy-tale aspects. On this point, the most important source is the passage that concludes the Comment to the Sefer yeṣirah by El'azar of Worms, the main exponent of Ashkenazic mysticism in the medieval period. After having illustrated, step by step, the concealed meaning of the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation), El'azar instructs the reader in the most appropriate method for studying the work; that is, he suggests the correct procedure for penetrating the mystical practice proposed by the text. "Whoever occupies himself with the Sefer yeṣirah," he affirms, "has to purify himself and wear white clothes; he should not dedicate himself to it alone, but rather he must do it in the company of another, or two others." After this opening, which recalls the traditional rites of purification required for any magical practice, the rabbi of Worms

describes the means of preparing the object that will guide the adept in the exploration of the alphabetical machine of the Sefer yeṣirah: "He must take virgin soil from a mountain location, where nobody has dug, this he will mix with running water and he will obtain a golem. One begins to spin, according to the alphabet of the two hundred twenty-one gates, each of the limbs taken alone."[224] Thus, the inanimate shape of the golem is bound to the movement of the wheel of letters that, in the Sefer yeṣirah, summarizes all of the possible combinations among the Hebrew consonants, that is, the "two hundred twenty-one gates."[225]

El'azar here repeats the ancient symbolism of the figure of man inserted in the circle of light. He adds to it the common Jewish element of the dynamic energy of the alphabet, which is considered to have the ability to join the limbs of the man of clay and to induce movement in them. The theoretical premise is the correspondence between the articulation of the letters and that of the limbs, as if the mental activity that awakes the energetic nexus between the consonants were equal to the vital spirit inherent in the parts of the human body, which in turn causes them to move. It is also possible to follow the path of meditation backwards: the intuitive awareness of the relationships between the limbs can be transferred to the more abstract level of the alphabet series, thus permitting their mystical absorption.

The sage of Worms only alludes to the concrete practice of meditation, and it is not clear whether the golem was materially inserted into the design of a circle, nor whether the rotation of the letters was recited, or indeed only imagined, by the participants.[226] Nevertheless it is certain that the permutations were centered on the various vocalizations of the Tetragrammaton, and therefore had to include, besides a graphic element, an oral component. Even if this was

[224] *Peruš `al Sefer yeṣirah*, (Przemysl, 1888), fol. 15d.

[225] According to another calculation, there were two hundred thirty-one gates: cf. e.g., *Mistica*, pp. 28.230, 630. On the wheel of letters in the *Sefer yeṣirah* see the entry *Galgal*, Wheel.

[226] Scholem clearly inclined towards the hypothesis of recitation, *On the kabbalah,* p. 175-177.

a practical ritual, the mystical action evidently had only a meditative aim, and no detail of the text indicates that the golem needed to be, or could be, animated in a physical sense.

In other medieval variations on this ritual, a much greater space was given to more magical or supernatural elements, as for instance in the "recipe" contained in a text which was for a long time attributed to Sa'adyah Ga'on, but was probably written by some French mystics in the thirteenth century. The work—in this case also a commentary on the Sefer yeṣirah—describes the creation of a figure of earth and water, around which one must proceed in a circle: "If one walks forward, the creature rises to life, thanks to the force the Lord, blessed be He, has infused into the letters. If, however, one desires to destroy what has been created, one proceeds backwards, pronouncing the letters in an inverted way. The creature then collapses and dies."[227] The tone of the passage is evidently very far from meditation, and inclines rather towards the popular anecdote. This is confirmed by the text's conclusion, which describes how the disciples of Yišma'e'l ben Eliša', wanting "to give life to the creature, committed an error in the movements and walked backwards, so that they sunk into the earth up to their navels [...] and were not able to get away. So they yelled and their voices were heard by the rabbi, who said to them: 'Pronounce the sequence of the letters going forwards, instead of backwards.' They did it and were able to escape."[228] Anecdotes of this kind also appeared in other texts of the medieval era, almost always as a forewarning of the dangers associated with the animation of the golem, and to confirm, in a more or less explicit way, that the creative power is a uniquely divine right.

The classic works of the Kabbalah lacked a deep reflection on the meaning of golem; their authors evidently did not want to give conceptual importance to a practice with clear magical connotations.

[227] *Commentary* of "Pseudo-Sa`adyah " on the *Sefer yeṣirah* II.4, already inserted in the original ed. (Mantua, 1562). Cf. Scholem, *On the kabbalah*, p. 178 and Busi, introduction to *Mistica*, pp. XLI-XLII.

[228] *Ibid.*

The word golem (or the corresponding Aramaic golma), for example, very rarerly appears in the most important document of Sephardic mysticism of the thirteenth century, the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), where it is used to mean "fool," "insensible man," as well as "indeterminate matter."

However, in a passage in the *Zohar*ic text Midraš ha-ne'elam (The Hidden Midraš), the Haggadic image of the golem of the primordial man is taken up again, interpreted as a sort of prototype of the subsequent creation.[229]

It was only late into the sixteenth century that the Sephardic mystic Mošeh Cordovero considered it appropriate to investigate the theoretical implications of the tales involving the production of artificial beings. He sought to insert these prodigious creatures into the Kabbalistic doctrine of emanation by attributing to them a particular level of energy completely different from the one that animated the beings directly willed by God. In fact, the simulacra of earth and water, made to move through magic, possessed to his mind, "neither a superior soul nor an animal soul, no spirit, but a vitality more sophisticated than that of the beasts [...] as it is closer to the source of light."[230] The bond that united the particles of these artificial bodies was, for Cordovero, a thin, luminous energy, different from the more material bond that united the elements of normal animal bodies. What came out of this bond was a temporary formation, which could dissipate extremely quickly, "without anything similar to a [true] death."[231] Thanks to a sort of autonomy enjoyed by magical practice, the destruction of an artificial being was not a murder, but only the dissolution of a precarious state, and had no implications on the ethical level.

Cordovero's complex doctrine cleared the way for a new mental attitude towards the golem. Between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, the fictitious creature was

[229] *Zohar* I.121b-122a.
[230] *Pardes rimmonim* XXIV.10 (*Ša`ar hekalot*), ed. Munkács, vol. II, fol. 50c.
[231] *Ibid.*

liberated from the laws of religious ethics and became a docile instrument in the hands of its artisans, who were free to release or suppress it according to their needs. In this way, the more modern literary motif of the golem as a servant was born. The golem became an obedient, if sometimes dangerous, servant, to whom learned rabbis entrusted daily tasks. The subject fascinated not only Jewish authors, but also Christian writers, who reported, often with an abundance of details, the popular legends of the menacing men of clay, who grew out of all proportion day after day, and who could only be controlled by new magical astuteness.[232]

In the gallery of various golem that populated the tales of the modern era, figures of female creatures also appeared. It was believed that the ancients were able to construct them, either as domestic servants or for sexual purposes. In the beginning of the seventeenth century, Yosef Delmedigo tells of a female golem, created by the famous medieval poet Šelomoh ibn Gabirol: the poet was reported to the authorities, but he was able to demonstrate that "she was not a perfect creature, by returning her to her original state, to the pieces of wood from which she was constructed." Delmedigo comments that news of this sort was on everyone's lips, especially in the land of the Ashkenazic."[233]

A few years later, Yeša'yah ben Avraham Horowitz (1565?–1630), a rabbi and Kabbalist born in Prague, tells an even stranger legend about a female creature who was magically called to life by the Israelites at the time of the patriarchs. According to Horowitz, different combinations of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet could give rise to beings "either masculine or feminine," and it was by exploiting this double possibility that the sons of Jacob, "with the permutations of the consonants indicated in the Sefer yeṣirah", created "a female, whom they delighted in." He maintains, however, that they were not sinning because they were not involved with a "daughter of a real father and

[232] Some of these tales are summed up by $Scholem, *La kabbalah*, pp. 251-56.
[233] *Maṣref la-ḥokmaḥ*, in *Ta`alumot ḥokmaḥ*, (Basel [but Hanau], 1629- *Ibid*.31).

mother," but with an artificial being, whose secret "was not passed on but to a few in every generation."[234] The setting of these episodes in the distant past seems to correspond to the desire to attenuate the moral doubts which could arise from these strange figures of artificial women, who seem to be a sort of unconscious projection of sexual imagination, usually omitted in the Jewish writings of the period.

Even when enclosed in exegetical contexts, the image of the golem already strays very far from the notion of material light, made of dust and mud, which characterized its earlier meaning, and it looks to have lost all contact with the divine. The female puppet of Ibn Gabirol, made from wood and animated by an occult contrivance, or the submissive woman imagined by Horowitz, are purely human inventions, coming very close to the automatons of the modern era, personifying the desire for a concrete dominion over reality. The golem of the tales of the seventeenth century no longer represent an element of mystical contemplation or the sign of the presence of God, but are simply simulacra of the earthly passions. In a similar way, the artificial beings that populated the legends and novels of successive centuries, up until the twentieth century, would mainly be characterized by the anxiety of a psychic phenomenon that cannot be controlled. They would become, more than anything, instruments of literary obsession. This fascination with them would nevertheless derive from the uncertainty of their nature, and from the trace of ancient magical heritage preserved in them.

חלום Ḥalom
Dream

The first personage to appear in the Bible in the context of a dream narrative is not a patriarch nor a pious Israelite, but a Philistine king, to whom God came [...] in a dream by night (Gen. 20.3), to prevent him

[234] *Šene luḥot ha-berit*, *Wa-yešev*. Idel has dwelled upon this passage, *Golem*, pp. 234-36.

from committing a grave sin. The entire event is marked by peculiar coincidences, as well as by a series of equivocations. Believing her to be Abraham's sister, Abimelech, king of Gerar, takes Sarah as his concubine, even though she is already very old. In the dream, the Lord begins by threatening the king with death, but tells him the reason only afterwards: Behold, you are but a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife (Gen. 20.3). In the vagueness of the dream, the king engages in a lengthy dialogue with God, which in fact represents one of the longest conversations between the Lord of Israel and a non-Jew.[235] Introduced by a respectful but familiar Adonay, "Lord," Abimelech's peroration follows with a rhetorical question: Will you slay also a righteous nation? [...] in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this (Gen. 20.5). His heart's innocence alone earned the king this divine intervention, to the point that God repeats the man's exact words: Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. This divine admission is followed by the sentence that provides the interpretive key to the entire passage, grants Abimelech's dream the value of a true religious teaching, and reveals the real message of the apparition: Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live (Gen. 20.7). Abraham is therefore a navi, a "prophet," and this condition, which renders him closer to the sphere of God, is expressed in the language of dreams, so that the king may become aware of what he did not realize in his daily experience.

In the Scriptures' vast repertoire of dreams, an episode occurs that, in its intense tone and uncertain chronology, can be associated with the story of Abimelech. Here Jacob is the protagonist. He is grappling with the covetousness of Laban, which he tries to counteract using magic. In the division of the flock, Jacob is allotted the black lambs and the spotted and mottled goats, while Laban (whose name, in Hebrew, means "the White One") receives the sheep of the flock which are free

[235] The words that God addresses to Laban in a dream in Gen. 31.24 are very short, while the dialogue with Balaam, which occurs in a nocturnal vision, in Num. 22.9-12, is lengthier.

of spots. Jacob resorts to a trick, putting striped twigs in the watering trough, so that the flocks, upon viewing them, generated, through imitative magic, striped lambs, which then rightfully belonged to him. The stratagem is effective, and Laban, now resentful, banishes Jacob, who is already master of most of the flock. It is at this point that the dream, or perhaps vision, occurs—a celestial envoy speaks to the patriarch: And the angel *of God spoke to me in a dream, saying, Jacob; And I said, Here am I. And he said, Lift up now your eyes*, and see, all the rams which leap upon the cattle are striped, spotted and speckled; for I have seen all that Laban does to you. I am the God of Beth-El, where you anointed the pillar, and where you vowed a vow to me (Gen. 31.11-13).

The ancient tradition noted that this dream could be considered to have occurred after the fact, as it refers to the past, rather than representing the customary premonition of the future. In fact, in the Samaritan Pentateuch the episode is anticipated at the beginning of the events relating to Jacob and Laban, and similarly so in some fragments of Genesis recovered from the caves of Qumran.[236] Nevertheless, exactly because of its contradictions,

the sequence of events documented in the present Biblical texts seems to be the original one. The teaching contained in Jacob's dream actually concerns the sudden perception of a reality experienced but not understood by the protagonist, almost as if the explicit divine message provided meaning to what could appear just to be a shepherd's cleverness. The dream of the striped flock is therefore a revelation that anticipates nothing, but which transposes the everyday into a theophany. Just as Abimelech learns of Abraham's prophetic mission from the dream, Jacob discovers the reasons for his own deed thanks to the scene that the angel replicates before his eyes; that is, he recognizes how his act is transformed into a true symbolic accomplishment, which is part of a more ample plan of remuneration of the righteous.

[236] Cf. E. Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, (Minneapolis and Assen/Maastricht, 1992), pp. 88 and 99. The tale of Jacob's dream, equivalent to Gen. 31.11-13, is placed after Gen. 30.36.

The self-referential character of the dream of the flock recalls the other, more well-known, dream of Jacob, of the ladder which the angels of God climbed up and down. The ladder itself did not fulfill any premonitory function, but rather stood out in its own right, carrying within itself a mysterious qualification of the divine.[237] Jacob's two dreams—and to some extent Abimelech's one—are metaphors that allude only to themselves, and do not require an explanation that projects them into the future. They have a, so to speak, definitive character, and do not require other interpreters besides the conscience of the protagonist.

Nevertheless, the normal function of the dream in the Scriptures is to represent a reality in fieri, with dream sequences creating a kind of anticipatory symbolic mime. In other words, the dream is usually not completely self-standing, but rather has its precise raison d'être in a future still inscrutable: the dreams dispatched by God are warnings, expressed through a coherent system of signs which at the same time require a wise interpretation. They go beyond the dreamer's mind, and usually implicate the act of an inspired person who knows how to project their imagery into the future.

In this way, we find characters in the Bible who seem particularly at ease with the perception of dreams, and who seem to dream reality instead of living it. This is, for example, the case with Joseph, whom the brothers (contemptuously) nickname *ba'al ḥalomot* (Gen. 37.19), literally "the lord of dreams"[238] because of his inclination to talk about himself and others only through visions in dreams. Joseph works with materials made from elementary images, drawn from daily experience of nature and fields: dens, the sun, moon, and stars, and then vines, baskets of bread, birds, cows, and ears of grain—things that conceal within themselves the destinies of individuals and populations, and whose signs become docile instruments of the future: Hear, I beg you, this dream which I have dreamed; For, behold, we were binding sheaves

[237] On this dream see also the entry *Sullam*, Ladder.

[238] In bBerakot 10b, *ba`al ha-ḥalomot* designates the professional interpreters of dreams.

in the field, and, lo, my sheaf arose, and also stood upright; and, behold, your sheaves stood around, and made obeisance to my sheaf. And his brothers said to him, Shall you indeed reign over us? Or shall you indeed have dominion over us? (Gen. 37.6-8). Yet it is not always easy to resolve the enigmas of dreams, since this sometimes entails laying bare a bitter reality or announcing the arrival of misfortune, as for instance in the case of the Pharaoh's dream of seven lean cows, in which Joseph sees a coming famine. Similarly, in the dream of the baker, the young Hebrew foretells: And within three days shall Pharaoh lift up your head off you, and shall hang you on a tree; and the birds shall eat your flesh off you (Gen 40.19).[239] Joseph's dreams earn him at first only hatred and scolding: And they hated him even more for his dreams, and for his words (Gen. 37.6-8), even if, in the end, it is precisely to his dreams that he owes his exceptional fortune in the Egyptian court.

In the Biblical tales, dream interpreters can even meet the threat of death if they are not able to give a meaning to the visions of a ruler. Thus Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, decides to exterminate the wise men of the court who proved unable to unveil his dream. On the other hand, Nebuchadnezzar's request exceeds human possibility, since he asks not only that the meaning of the vision be shown to him, but also the content of the dream itself, in a kind of exorbitant public amplification of his own inner being: I have dreamed a dream, and my spirit was troubled to know the dream [...] But if you declare the dream, and its meaning, you shall receive from me gifts and rewards and great honor; therefore declare to me the dream, and its meaning (Dan. 2.3-6). The Chaldean magicians, bewildered, try to convince him that *no king, lord, nor ruler, has asked such things from any magician, or astrologer, or Chaldean* [...] *And it is a difficult thing that the king requires, and there is none who can declare before the king, except the gods, whose dwelling is not with flesh* (Dan. 2.10-11). Only the gods—the fortunetellers seem to suggest to the king—are the repositories of the collective spirit to which the visions of individuals ascend. So the dreams remain, as if concealed, in

[239] For a discussion of Joseph's other dreams cf. the entry *Šemeš*, Sun, and *Kos*, Chalice.

a divine space, without connotations of time or personality; the king's problem transcends the limits of the individual because his dream has lost all direct relationship to the dreamer: the absurd request of the king to have the dream retold is, in reality, a plea for it to be given back to him, and for it to return to play a part in his living experience. This is why the Jew Daniel, who is the only one able to reveal the secret, can accomplish the miracle through an intensely mystical invocation of God, who reveals the deep and secret things; he knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with him (Dan. 2.22). The long vision that the king dreamt, which concerns the future of his reign and that of his descendants, can thus be illustrated to him, not because Daniel is more knowledgeable than the others, but in order that the meaning shall be made known to the king (Dan 2.30) and that he might know the secrets of his heart.

Nevertheless, dreams do not always contain a divine message, since, like every symbolic reality, they are also prey to evil and uselessness, vain tricks by foreign gods, or attempts to test the faith of the Israelites: If there arises among you a prophet or a dreamer of dreams—as can be read in Deuteronomy—and gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder, comes to pass, of which he spoke to you, saying, Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them; You shall not listen to the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams; for the Lord your God tests you (Deut. 13. 2-4). Therefore, false dreams are false not because they will not come to fruition, but because the ones who inspire them are mendacious and communicate a message that is false, much like a discourse built on false presuppositions.[240]

Dreams can also be empty containers which leave delusion upon waking, and which become exemplary enunciations of the ephemeral and deceptive—ka-ḥalom, "like the dream," becomes a paragon of the vain essence of evil, destined to vanish like a dream phantasm: That the

[240] In the pages of the Bible the invective against the dreamers appears several times, and they are subject to death penalty for having preached apostasy using deceit as a weapon of seduction: cf., e.g., Deut. 13.6.

exulting of the wicked is short [...] [and] shall fly away like a dream, and shall not be found; he shall be chased away as a vision of the night (Job 20.5-8)).

Although already ample in Biblical literature, the domain of dreams expands further still in the Jewish texts of the first centuries of the Common Era, as testified by the proliferation of belief in, and practice of, magic centered on the experience of dreams. In fact, the rabbinic authors gave voice to a vast heritage of folkloric tradition, for which the dream was such a key element that its explanation was entrusted to professional interpreters. The attitude of the Jewish sages toward this belief was twofold: while, on the one hand, they indulged the popular tendency and tried to monopolize the wisdom of the dream, on the other hand they attempted to contrast blind faith in magical practices, by recalling religious teachings and the apotropaic value of prayer. The importance of dreams in Late Antiquity can be inferred from statements that became proverbial, such as one attributed to Bar Qappara, a rabbi active at the beginning of the third century, according to whom "No dream is without its interpretation,"[241] or another of Rabbi Ḥisda, who affirms: "A dream which is not interpreted is like a letter which is not read."[242]

For a culture such as the Jewish one, which made interpretation its very foundation, even the explanation of dreams became an act of establishing reality. In discussing Joseph and his ability to untangle the enigmas within dreams, Yoḥanan ben Nappaḥa, one of the most important learned men of the third century, goes as far as asserting, "All dreams are dependent on the interpretation given to them,"[243] that is, that the images seen by the dreamer are entrusted to the one who interprets them, who can alter their effects on reality, depending on

[241] Genesis Rabbah LXVIII.12.

[242] bBerakot 55a.

[243] Genesis Rabbah LXXXIX.8. The sentence of Rabbi Yoḥanan is, in Hebrew, *kol ha-ḥalomot holkin aḥar ha-peh*, literally "all dreams go behind the mouth." On Jewish oneiromancy, very rich down to the modern era, see the recent volume of M. Harris, *Studies in Jewish Dream Interpretation*, (Northvale, 1994).

the predictions they draw from them. Rabbi Yoḥanan's saying appears as a commentary on an episode whose protagonists are another sage, Rabbi El'azar, and his inexperienced disciples, who, in his absence, improvise interpretations of dreams with fatal consequences: "A certain woman went to Rabbi El'azar and said to him: 'I saw in a dream how the loft of the upper story of my house was split open.' 'You will conceive a son,' he told her. She went away and this happened even so. Again she dreamed the same and came and told it to Rabbi El'azar, who gave her the same interpretation, and it happened. She dreamed this a third time and repaired to him but did not find him, so she told his disciples,' I saw in a dream that the loft of the upper story of my house was split open.' 'You will bury your husband,' they told her, and this happened. Rabbi El'azar, hearing a cry of wailing, asked what was amiss, whereupon they related to him what had occurred. 'You have killed the man.'"[244]

In some cases, dreams serve to prefigure reality. Here, dreams are nothing but a sort of "incomplete form of prophecy,"[245] or, as expressed in the Babylonian Talmud, "A dream is one-sixtieth part of prophecy."[246] The Haggadah offers several tales in which nocturnal apparitions anticipate the fate of individuals, sometimes putting them on guard against the approaching calamity. The symbolism of dreams often varies according to the professions of the dreamers, to the point that the rabbis of the Talmudic academies dream of becoming rectors, even when the premonitory sign is, to say the least, unusual: "Rabbi Hanina had seen in a dream that Rav was being hanged on a palm tree, and since the tradition is that one who in a dream is hanged on a palm tree will become head [of an Academy] he concluded that authority will be given to him."[247] Kings' dreams "embrace the whole world,"[248] while

[244] Genesis Rabbah LXXXIX.8.

[245] *Ibid*. XLIV.17 and XLIV.12; the Hebrew expression is *novelet nevu'ah ḥalom*, "the dream is the fruit not harvested by prophecy."

[246] bBerakot 57b.

[247] bYoma 87b.

[248] Genesis Rabbah LXXXIX.4.

women dream of being repudiated by their husbands, only to discover that reality fulfills premonitions: "'I saw you in a dream divorcing me.' Said he to her, 'Why only in a dream? Here it is in actual fact.'"[249]

The rabbis nevertheless exhort to devotional practices against visions that announce misfortune, such as the one recommended to someone who has seen his leg being cut off in a dream: "If he goes to the synagogue and recites the Šema' and says his prayer [...] no harm will come to him."[250] The universal remedy against inauspicious dreams is in any case the passing of time, which removes their impressions from the spirit, or fasting, which is "as effective for counteracting an evil dream as fire for consuming tow."[251]

In the early medieval era, with the spread of philosophical thought, including in the Jewish world, new theoretical investigations appeared, in which the dream was seen above all in its relationship to prophetic signs. The analysis of the mechanisms by which dreams work seemed in fact to be a valid method for approaching the mystery of divine revelation. Among the various dream hypotheses proposed at the end of the first millennium, a prominent place is occupied by the doctrine of Yiṣḥaq Israeli, a physician and philosopher born in Egypt, who also lived in Kairouan, in the Maghreb. In one of his works, originally composed in Arabic, he gave images from dreams the dignity of instruments chosen by the intellect for communicating its forms to the soul. According to Israeli, dream visions are "finer, more spiritual and luminous than those encountered in the wakeful state, which prove to be rather full of obscurity and impurity. It is for this reason that the ancients compared them to the forms of the superior world." This argumentation, of clear Neoplatonic origin, proposes a cognitive function for the dream, which is seen as a sort of remedy used by the intellect to manifest what would be otherwise incommunicable. Representations in dreams, continues the author, "teach us some truths, once they have been interpreted by incisive persons [...] The prophets

[249] *Ibid*. XXIII.7.
[250] Song of Songs Rabbah III.14.
[251] Genesis Rabbah XLIV.12.

[...] when they want to separate themselves from the rest of men [...] provide such spiritual forms and reveal them to the multitudes, in a comprehensible order."[252]

More cautious is the work of the commentator and philosopher Sa'adyah Ga'on (882-942), who lived for a long time in Iraq, and also wrote in Arabic. He sought the origin of dreams in sensorial experience, and assumed a critical attitude with regard to those who believed that "dreams are realities created in the exact form in which they appear [...] without being aware that they are in part due to the occurrences of the previous day, which hover in the mind, as it is written, For a dream comes through a multitude of business (Eccles. 5.2)." [253] Sa'adyah seemed to think that, along with the stimulation of the senses, dreams also express an independent elaboration of the soul, "which is wise in itself [...] It is known in fact for certain that a blind man sees in dreams as if he were endowed with sight, but because he does not owe this perception to a physical faculty, it must depend on his soul." [254] Sa'adyah's words seem to leave open the possibility of a free formulation of oneiric images on the part of the inner, cognitive principle.

The dream doctrine plays a significant role in the Guide of the Perplexed, the vast summary of Jewish thought completed in Egypt by Moses Maimonides, at the end of the twelfth century. In Maimonides's speculation, the experience of dreams is by nature joined with prophecy, inasmuch as the two phenomena are considered different

[252] *Kit¼b al-usµuquṣṣ¼t*, in the English version of A. Altmann and S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli. A Neoplatonic Philosopher of the Early Tenth Century*, (Oxford, 1958), p. 136; with regard to the sources of Israel's dream doctrine cf. pp. 140-45. Concerning the ideas widespread in the Muslim world, fundamental also to understanding the attitude of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages, cf. H. Gätje, "Philosophische Traumlehren im Islam," in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, 109 (1959), pp. 258-85; Muḥammad ibn Sir¾n, *Il libro del sogno veritiero*, edited by I. Zilio Grandi (Turin, 1992).

[253] *Kit¼b al-am¼n¼t wa-'l-'tiq¼d¼t*, ed. Y. D. Qafiḥ (Jerusalem, 1970), pp. 17-18; cf. Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, translation from Arabic and from Hebrew by S. Rosenblatt (New Haven – London, 1948), p.20.

[254] *Kit¼b al-am¼n¼t wa-`l-I'tiq¼d¼t,* ed. Qafiḥ, p. 200.

aspects of the imagination. With an interpretive audacity that is typical of Maimonides, he affirms that truthful dreams and prophetic visions are both produced by an overabundance of divine influence, which overwhelms man, provoking the manifestation of the supernal truth. However, while the vision, the exclusive prerogative of the prophets, is a perfect representation, and "sees the thing as if it were outside," the dream is like an "unripe fruit [...] that has fallen before it was perfect and before it had matured."[255] In other words, according to Maimonides, the prophetic process is only approached in the dream, but it is interrupted before reaching conclusion, and therefore retains the signs of "a deficiency," which "did not reach its ultimate term."[256]

An interpretation of the magical character of the phenomenon of dreams was proposed at the beginning of the thirteenth century by El'azar of Worms, who discussed the nature of the dream in his treatment of the soul. According to the mystic of Worms, dreams originate from the thoughts of the soul, elaborated during the night by an angel, who is entrusted with the mission of transforming emotion into a kaleidoscope of images: "But how is the angel capable of knowing thoughts? It is the soul that relates them to him,"[257] and it is for this reason that dreams are sometimes truthful and sometimes false, depending on the truthfulness of the reflections that originate them. The angel of the dream also has the peculiar ability to change appearances with prodigious rapidity, since "every thing that does not have a body, but is only spirit, is subject to incessant mutation."[258] The representation of the dream is then the fruit of conjoined forces, partly arising from man, who makes his own experiences available, and partly of divine origin, which uses the unrefined material to reveal to mortals the secrets of their souls and the mysteries of heaven.

[255] *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dal¼lat al-ḥ¼'ir¾n*) II.36.
[256] *Ibid.*
[257] *Sefer ḥokmat ha-nefeš*, (Bene Beraq, 1987), p. 16. The idea of the nocturnal colloquium of the soul with the angel, during sleep, already appears in *Leviticus Rabbah* XXXII.12.
[258] *Ibid.*

Upon the establishment of the Kabbalah in southern France and in Spain, the Jewish mystics strove to bring dreams into the scale of sefirotic levels. The Kabbalists found valuable theoretical support in the doctrine formulated by Maimonides, which was well-known in the cultivated circles of the European Diaspora through the Hebrew translation of the Guide, dating from the beginning of the thirteenth century. An almost exact echo of the Maimonidean definition of the dream is found, for example, in the work of Mošeh de León, who, in the second half of the thirteenth century, mystically declined the philosophical themes of the Guide. As Maimonides had emphasized the logical continuity between prophecy and dream, using the notion of fruit, De León stressed the unripe quality of the dream, in order to be able to describe an ascent from it towards the mature fruits that correspond to the highest sefirot: "Although it is the same thing, that which matured in its rightful place is not like that which matured after having fallen [...] It is known [from the supernal origins] that unripe fruits fall gradually, for six consecutive passages whence the dream is widespread, because it falls descending from the level of prophecy."[259] The six grades allude to the sefirot included between ḥesed (mercy) and yesod (foundation), through which the energy of the dream passes, as if thickening before finally reaching malkut (kingdom), the closest level to the earth, from which the visions make their last rush toward man.

The idea expressed here by De León, still in philosophical language, was reformulated—probably by De León himself—in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), in terms of a secret journey that the soul completes every night: "Dreams, then, originate on high when souls leave the bodies, each one taking its own route. How many degrees pertain to the secret of the dream! And all of them are included in the secret of wisdom."[260] In the *Zohar*ic imagination, in fact, the soul

[259] *Šušan `edut*, ed. Scholem, p. 369. Cf. the *Commentary on Talmudic Aggadoth* by `Azri'el of Gerona, ed. I. Tishby (Jerusalem, 1982[2] [1945[1]]), p. 6.

[260] *Zohar* I.183a. On the dream in the *Zohar* cf. F. Lachover and I Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (in Hebr.), 2 vols., (Jerusalem, 1957), Eng. trans., (Oxford, 1989), pp. 809-830.

detaches itself every night from the body, and sets out on a path of ascent towards its own celestial source. The dream potentially contains all of the energy that helps the spirit to rise towards its transmundane origins, degree by degree and sefirah after sefirah, as if the nocturnal vision were the first decisive sign of separation from physical reality.

Despite this theoretical development, a large number of dreams can be found in the *Zohar* that have the traditional goal of predicting the future, and that offer a survey of the temporary medieval beliefs on oneiromancy, based on the recurrence of certain words or on the presence of certain colors or gestures as seen by the dreamer. In agreement with the general orientation of Jewish literature of the late medieval and early modern era, the *Sefer ha-zohar* is rich in episodes where dreams manifest the destiny of man.

Oneiric revelations were particularly successful among the Jewish mystics, naturally inclined to interpret nocturnal visions as confirmatory in their inner search, and as a guide to their own personal destiny. The writings of some Kabbalists are sometimes genuine dream diaries, in which the protagonists register in minute detail their encounters with the apparitions of the night, which often assume the traits of spiritual guides. This is for example the case for the Maggid mešarim (He Who Proclaims That Which is Correct) by Yosef Caro, who, around the middle of the sixteenth century, collected many dreams of manneristic complexity,[261] and for the Pinqas ha-ḥalomot (Register of Dreams) of Mordekay Ashkenazi, a follower of the false messiah Šabbetay Ṣevi, who entrusted to private writing the most provocative accents of his Messianic faith.[262]

In the long history of mystical dreams—which it is not possible to catalogue in detail here—one tale stands out for its singularity: the portrait of a female dreamer, indicated in the sources as "the wife of

[261] *A Magid (Preacher) of Righteousness*, Edited by Y. Bar Lev, trans. by K. Skaist, (Petach Tikva, 2009). A partial Italian translation of the text can be found in *Mistica*, pp. 545-57.

[262] G. Scholem, *Ḥalomotaw ṣel ha-šabbeta'y rabbi Mordekay Aškenazi*, (Jerusalem, 1938).

Rabbi Abraham." At the end of the seventeenth century, she became the object of a short narrative cycle, transmitted by the Polish Hasidic tradition. Married to the son of the great Dov Baer of Mezhirech—who was the spiritual guide of the movement after the death of Ba'al Šem Ṭov—the woman had an assiduous connection with her father-in-law through dreams and, moreover, was able to predict future events through her dreams. In one of these, narrated in the Šivḥe ha-Bešṭ (In Praise of the Ba'al Šem Ṭov), a spacious decorated hall appeared to her, in which an assembly of venerable elders had gathered, old men who intended to take her husband away from her. She began to cry, and pleaded with the council to save her husband. "Then she woke up and realized that it was a dream, but she did not tell anyone," not even her rabbi husband.[263] The vision repeated itself a second time, and then a third. During its last iteration, after long insistence, the woman managed to win a concession from the venerable old men: "Very well. Because your arguments are true, we will let you have him for twelve years as a gift." And this is what happened. The "beautifully decorated hall" is a kind of leitmotif of the cycle, since it is there that the protagonist meets her husband after his death and speaks to him. Nevertheless, only at the end of the story, when the woman is ready to marry another man, is the symbolism of the room be clarified: "The Rabbi [Avraham] [...] was standing at the door of the hall, with his two hands stretched to the roof, crying out in a loud voice: 'Who is he who dares to enter into my hall?'"[264] The marriage was thus annulled, as proof of the supremacy of dreams over reality. The saga of the dreams of Rabbi Avraham's wife documents the tendency of the Jewish tradition to use the dream not only as a narrative subject, but also as teachings otherwise difficult to convey. Therefore, in the traditionalist culture of Polish Judaism of the late eighteenth century, more than an

[263] *Šivḥe ha-Bešṭ*, ed. A. Rubenstein (Jerusalem, 1991), p. 144 n. 45; cf. *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov* [Shivhei ha-Besht]. *The Earliest Collection of Legends about the Founder of Ḥasidism*, Trans. and edited by D. Ben-Amos and J. R. Mintz, (Northvale, 1993[22], 1970[1]), p. 96 n. 75.

[264] *Šivḥe ha-Bešṭ*, p. 147; cf., *In Praise of the Baal Shem Tov*, p. 99.

instrument for speaking about divine matters, dreams were the only language that enabled allusion to a sphere of human experience otherwise met with almost complete silence, that of the secrets of the female world.

## חורבה Ḥorbah
Destruction

A significant number of words that can be traced back to the consonant sequence ḥrb express in Hebrew both the idea of aridity, which recalls the desolation of the desert, and the destruction of human works. The noun ḥorbah is joined by other similarly sounding terms that cover the vast semantic range of the concept of devastation. Thus ḥaravon indicates drought, while ḥorev designates both the aridity of the land and bodily fever, and is the origin of the name Oreb (Ḥorev), the sacred mountain of the desert. In a territory such as the Land of Israel that must be wrested from the grip of drought through irrigation, aridity is an intrinsic condition, a state into which everything can rapidly regress. The parched landscape is thus identified with the impossibility of life, and with the negation of every human activity.[265]

The ruin of structures and the drying up of crops convey, in the Scriptures, the two aspects of destruction which are often evoked together to demonstrate unyielding divine punishment. In a prophecy of Jeremiah, God promises to punish the Jewish people by demolishing buildings and uprooting plants: The Lord said thus: Behold, that which I have built will I break down, and that which I have planted I will pluck up, even this whole land (Jer. 45.4). In another divine invective, found in Zephaniah, the extermination of the nations means a complete desertification of the landscape: I have cut off nations; their pinnacles are desolate; I made their streets waste, so that none passes by; their cities are destroyed, so that there is no man, there is no inhabitant (Zeph. 3.6). God, in his freedom, can therefore decide to destroy his own creations, and to act with the fury of an implacable adversary, as occurs in the pounding description of the great day of the Lord that appears again in Zephaniah: That day is a day of wrath, a day of trouble and

[265] To the list of words connected to the three consonants *ḥrb* the verb *ḥrb*, "to assail," to combat," as well as *ḥerev*, "sword," should be added.

distress, a day of ruin and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of the šofar and alarm against the fortified cities, and against the high towers. And I will bring distress upon men [...] because they have sinned against the Lord [...] and the whole land shall be devoured (Zeph. 1.15-18).

If the extreme tones of this passage of Zephaniah paint a scenario of a catastrophic future, many other pages of the Scriptures begin with historical scenes of ruin, which tell of the tormented events of the ancient Near East. The sequence of wars, sieges, surrenders, and pillages, which accompanies the change of reigns, is seen in the Bible as the manifestation of a divine project, in which the haughty affirmation of the victors is followed by their inevitable defeat; we see the spectators of some destruction turn, a few verses later, into the victims of a new catastrophe, just as the authors of a raid may quickly become the objects of devastation. The ruin spreads like a wave, affecting places increasingly farther away. So, for example, those who contributed to the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 (or 586) BCE, laying the Temple to waste, were soon thereafter subject to the same fate: first their closest neighbors, the Edomites—whose participation in the plunder of the holy city brought on them the prophecy pronounced by Ovadiah—For your violence against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off for ever (Ovad. 10)[266]—and then the Babylonians, who are annihilated, in their turn, together with all the inhabitants of Chaldea—And I will pay back to Babylon and to all the inhabitants of Chaldea all their evil that they have done in Zion in your sight, says the Lord. Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, says the Lord, which destroys all the earth; and I will stretch out my hand upon you, and roll you down from the rocks, and will make you a burnt mountain (Jer. 51.24-25).

In post-Biblical literature, the fall of the second Sanctuary, set on fire by the Romans in 70 CE, was added to the representation of the fall of the first Temple. The two events were united in a single symbolic

[266] Ovad. 1-10 contains a parallel to the oracle against Edom of Jer. 49.7-22, even if the exact relationship between the two texts is still very controversial.

entity since, according to tradition, they took place—with a gap of six centuries—on the same day, the ninth of the month of Av,[267] a date that had, for the Jewish sages, the force of an inauspicious prodigy. The destruction of the two Temples—for which the term ḥurban was usually used, another word that indicates the "destruction" in post-Biblical Hebrew—thus became an epochal event, whose historical value was interwoven with the subverting of human life. In fact, according to the Haggadah, such destruction could be likened to the expulsion of the first man from the Garden of Eden. In that moment, indeed, God would have showed to Adam the future destiny of the Sanctuaries: "So He drove out the man (Gen. 3.24), that is, He showed to him the destruction of the Temple."[268]

Alongside these legendary echoes of the destruction of the Temples of Jerusalem, the idea of a cosmic deconstruction also appears in the literature of Late Antiquity. In one of the first Haggadic collections, the Genesis Rabbah, a commentary on the story of creation, some rabbis exchange short comments of daring cosmogonic invention: "And there was evening (Gen. 1.5), Rabbi Yehudah ben Simon said: 'Let there be evening' is not written here, but And then there was evening: hence we know that a time-order existed before this'. Rabbi Abbahu said: 'This proves that the Holy One, blessed be He, went on creating worlds and destroying them until He created this one and declared, 'This one pleases Me; those did not please Me.'"[269] The image of these preceding

[267] Cf. mTa'anit IV.6. The same rabbinic sources discuss the conventional character of the date, e.g., in tTa'anit IV.10 and bTa'anit 29a. According to Flavius Josephus, *De bello Judaico* VI.250, the fire was set to the second Temple "the tenth of the month of Loos" (equivalent to Av: *Antiquitates Judaicae* IV.84); after having described the agitated phases of the destruction, the historian adds: "However, one cannot but wonder at the accuracy of this period thereto relating. For the same month and day were now observed [...] wherein the holy house was burnt formerly by the Babylonians." (*De bello Judaico* VI. 268: cf. *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus,* trans. W. Whiston, 2 vols., (London, 1849) vol. II, p. 393).

[268] Genesis Rabbah XXI.8.

[269] *Ibid*. III.7. Rabbi Abbahu's interpretation is taken up again in Genesis Rabbah IX.2; Ecclesiastes Rabbah III.1; *Pesikta Rabbati* XI; *Tanḥuma*, *Tazria'* 9; *Midraš Tehillim* XXXIV.1; *Midraš zuṭa*, *Eccl*. III.2.

creations, rejected and destroyed, surfaces here for the first time, and represents a radical development in Biblical narration. In fact, the midrašic text transposes the divine destruction from the historical level to the cosmogonic one, substituting the idea of castigation (where God destroys to impose a punishment) with the notion of divine choice among various attempts at creation. With an explicit reference to an aesthetic judgment—"this one pleases me, those did not please me"—the midraš shows us the Lord following his own tastes, much like an artist who selects their best design. Nevertheless, since, for God, scheme and realization coincide—in the immediate flash of a glance—his choice necessarily involved the destruction of the previously conceived worlds.

This notion from Genesis Rabbah is so risky that the Jewish mystics of the following centuries attempted to give it a less disturbing explanation. "Why is it that the Lord, blessed be He, created worlds only to destroy them?" asks the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) at the end of the thirteenth century; "Would it not have been better if he had not created them at all?" The *Zohar*ic response was formulated according to the Biblical pattern of punishments, and the cause of the destruction of the worlds was attributed to the impious' repudiation of the Torah. That is to say that the *Zohar* preferred to return to the more common idea of destruction originating from the faults of man, refusing the paradoxical affirmation of the midraš, according to which God destroyed his own creation's "experiments" as a matter of free choice.

After this mention in the *Zohar*, the annihilation of worlds by God became one of the recurrent themes in Kabbalistic thought, where it was associated with the dynamism of the sefirot. Beginning at the end of the sixteenth century, this symbolism developed further in the Lurianic Kabbalah. Here, each sefirah is represented as a vase that receives a portion of the divine energy; according to Luria and his disciples, the image of the destroyed worlds is equivalent to the depiction of the cosmic vases that break under the unbearable impact of the supernal light, giving rise to the propagation of evil throughout

creation.[270] This is essentially a metaphor for the inadequacy of creation, used to describe the incommensurability of celestial energy with respect to the cosmos. During the first descent of this energy, only the vases of the highest sefirot were capable of gathering the supernal effluvia, while the vases situated after the third sefirah, binah (intelligence), broke, provoking a cosmic overturning. After this breakage, the light ascended again, and then descended once more with less potency, to be finally gathered by all of the containers and to give life to the existing creation. Nevertheless, at the moment of the first breach, some particles of light remained trapped among the fragments of broken vases and were not able to rise up again. This exile of the divine light among the ruins of the lower sefirot, in a damaged and incomplete condition, is therefore—in Kabbalistic thought—the origin of evil, because it represents the trace of an "aborted creation." The task of recovering—by means of righteous acts—the divine sparks in the desolate backdrop of matter, to liberate them and allow them to rise again, awaits man.

The Jewish mystics therefore imagine the destruction of the worlds as an intimate necessity of creation, since the primordial rupture actually makes possible the realization of ethical behavior: thanks to this, the imperfect cosmic order can be restored, and the destruction of the world redeemed.

[270] Ḥayyim Vital, *`Eṣ Ḥayyim* II.1.4, ed. Brandwein, vol. I, p. 113a. About this see also the entry *Tiqqun*, Ornament, Restoration.

## חושן Hošen
## Breastplate

The breastplate of judgment (ḥošen ha-mišpat) is described, in a long passage of Exodus dedicated to the garments of the high priest, as perhaps the most precious ornament among the entire sacerdotal apparatus. It was an object square in form—a span shall be its length, and a span shall be its breadth—realized in fine linen and through skilful work. The decoration, executed on double fabric, essentially consisted of twelve rare stones inserted in settings of gold, organized in four rows of three stones each, presumably all of equal carats, upon which the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were engraved like signets. The breastplate was then completed with a complex working of chains, twisted like cords, of pure gold, of some rings of gold and with a lace of blue, which served to fasten it to the front of the priest's ephod, just above the girdle (Exod. 28.15-28).

In spite of this detailed description, the exact appearance of the handwork remains difficult to grasp, just as it proves arduous to identify its precise symbolic meaning. In the passage's conclusion, the Biblical author attributes to the breastplate the function of a commemorative sign: And Aaron shall bear the names of the people of Israel in the breastplate of judgment upon his heart, when he goes in to the holy place, for a memorial before the Lord continually (Exod. 28.29). In an abrupt change of tone from the preceding description, the breastplate is now set in relationship to the priest's heart: the engravings on the stones seem here to allude to an inner meaning, which entrusts to the priest the task of carrying—not only on his garments but also in his conscience—the knowledge of the unity of the tribes of Israel. Nevertheless, in the immediately following sentence, the sibylline mention of the mysterious ancient means of divination used by the Jews to know the Lord's will about future events appears:

the so-called urim e tummim, which would have been placed on or above the breastplate of judgment.[271]

Considering this last detail, it seems probable that one of the main functions of the breastplate was divinatory: the term mišpaṭ, which constantly accompanies ḥošen, should then be understood as a "judgment" that could have been obtained with the help of a wonder of supernatural origin. A confirmation of this hypothesis can be drawn from an early extra-Biblical testimony on the breastplate, contained in the Antiquities of the Jews by Flavius Josephus (ca. 38 – after 100), which states, "for God declared beforehand, by those twelve stones, which the high priest bore on his breast and which were inserted into his essÂn,[272] when they should be victorious in battle; for so great a splendor shone forth from them before the army began to march, that all the people were sensible of God's being present for their assistance. Whence it came to pass that those Greeks, who had veneration for our laws, because they could not possibly contradict this, called that breastplate the Oracle." Still, Flavius Josephus added, the miraculous phenomenon had ceased long ago: "Now this breastplate, and this sardonyx, left off shining two hundred years before I composed this book, God having been displeased at the transgressions of his laws."[273]

Josephus also offers important evidence on the identification of the stones that appeared on the breastplate, since he translates the Hebrew names listed in the Bible into the corresponding Greek terms, thus permitting a connection with the Hellenistic mineralogical tradition.[274]

[271] Cf. Lev. 8.8: *And he put the breastplate on him; also he put on the breastplate the Urim and the Thummim.*

[272] *EssÂn* is the rendering in Greek characters of the Hebrew *ḥošen*.

[273] *Antiquitates Judaicae* III.216-18. A similar divinatory procedure is also mentioned in two Qumranic fragments: cf. *Testi di Qumran*, ed. F. García Martínez, $Italian ed. C. Martone, p. 457 (1Q29 and 4Q376).

[274] *Antiquitates Judaicae* III.168; *De bello Judaico* V.234. For a summary table of the terms employed in the masoretic text and of the variants adopted in the Septuagint and by Josephus cf. Flavius Josèphe, *Les Antiquités juives*, text, translation and notes by E. Nodet, vol. II, (Paris, 1990), p. 160. The possible identifications among the Hebrew names, the Greek renderings and modern

The inventory of the twelve gems which appears in the book of Exodus is in fact difficult to decipher, because there is no other ancient repertoire of Hebrew gemology. Only on the basis of the Greek translations has it been possible to achieve an interpretation of the Hebrew terms, and to recognize in odem (sardion, sardonyx) the carnelian, in the piṭdah (topazion, topazos) the olivine or peridot, in the bareqet (smaragdos) the emerald, in nofek (andrax) a red garnet, in the sappir (sapfeiros) the lapis lazuli, in the yaḥalom (onuchion, onux[275]) the onyx, in lešem the amber (ligurion, liguros) or, according to others, the essonite;[276] ševo (achatÂs) is uniformly interpreted as "agate," while aḥlamah (amethystos, amethysos) is amethyst, taršiš (chrysolithos) citrine quartz, šoham (bÂryllion[277], bÂryllos) aquamarine, and yašefeh (iaspis) green jasper.

Even in the Greco-Roman era, speculations flourished on the symbolic meaning of this rich apparatus of stones, and the explanation was especially sought in the system of astral correspondence. Without a doubt, the clearest explanation of the breastplate as an allegory of the zodiac is proposed by Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE – 50) in his treatise De specialibus legibus (On the Special Laws), where he writes: "On his chest [of the priest] there are twelve precious stones of different colors [...] fashioned as an

gemological definitions are in part taken up by G. F. Kunz, *The Curious Lore of Precious Stones*, (Philadelphia, 1913), pp. 290-301, who distinguishes between the breastplate in use in the first Temple and that which would be adopted after the return from the Babylonian exile.

[275] The Septuagint and Josephus seem to invert *yaḥalom* with *yašefeh*, as the latter evidently corresponds to *iaspis*, which the Greek texts lists nevertheless in the second row, instead of the fourth.

[276] The Septuagint, Josephus and the Vulgate agree on the translation of *lešem* as *ligurion* (or *liguros*, Lat. *ligurius*), the name indicating amber. Since, nevertheless, in the list of the twelve gems situated at the base of the celestial Jerusalem contained in Revelations (21.19-20) *lešem* corresponds to *huakinthos*, it has been connected also with the ancient "hyacinth," that is the essonite granite. On this point see G. Devoto and A. Molayem, *Archeogemmologia. Pietre antiche, glittica, magia e litoterapia*, (Rome, 1991), p. 78.

[277] In the translation of the Septuagint, *avne šoham* of Exod. 28.9 is rendered nevertheless as *lithous smaragdou.*

emblem of the zodiac. For the zodiac also consists of twelve animals, and thus divides the four seasons of the year allotting three animals for each season."[278]

This idea was probably not only widespread in the Hellenistic tradition, since it is also to be found in the Midraš Tanḥuma, a rabbinic text written in the early Middle Ages using considerable material from Late Antiquity: "All the Lord's works, blessed be He," says the text, "correspond to the twelve tribes: twelve constellations, twelve months, twelve hours of the day, and twelve of the night, twelve stones worn by Aaron."[279] In this passage, the series of gems of the breastplate are considered to be an almost visible compendium of the cyclical nature of time, in a clear outcome of cosmological character, marked by the common denominator of the number twelve.

Yet the majority of the Jewish exegetes preferred to remain faithful to the direct relationship between the gems and the tribes of Israel sanctioned by the Bible, as demonstrated by the effort of identifying each mineral with the name of the corresponding tribe. Thus the Aramaic translators of the Bible set themselves the task of rendering the equivalences, attributing, for example, to Ruben the carnelian, to Simeon the olivine, to Levi the emerald, and so on, until completing the entire scheme of symbolic pairs.[280]

In Numbers Rabbah, one of the later midrašim, written in Europe at the height of the Middle Ages, the correspondences between the stones and the people of Israel became the starting point for a vast digression, which also involved the ensigns of the various tribes, and the emblems

[278] *De specialibus legibus* I.87.

[279] *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, *Wa-yešev* 9.

[280] Cf. Targum Neofiti I. Exodus, translation and introduction by M. McNamara, and notes by R. Hayward; *Targum Pseudo-Jonathon. Exodus*, translation and notes by M. Maher (Collegeville, 1994), pp. 114-15, 240-41. Cf. also the Targum of Songs 5.14, which recalls, to a great part, names of gems taken from Arabic. W. Bacher, "Une ancienne liste des noms grecs des pierres précieuses relatées dans Exode, XXVIII, 17-20," in *Revue des études juives*, 29 (1895), pp. 79-90, studied the most ancient midrašic list of correspondences between the names of the stones and the tribes, contained in Exodus Rabbah XXXVIII.8.

that were embroidered above them: "There were distinctive signs for each prince; each had a flag of a different color, corresponding to the precious stones on the breast of Aaron [...] Reuben's stone was ruby (odem)[281] and the color of his flag was red; and embroidered thereon were mandrakes. Simeon's was topaz and his flag was of a green color; the town of Shechem was embroidered thereon." [282] The superimposition of the images—which continues for many paragraphs, reviewing all of the tribes of Israel—gives rise here to a branching structure, which proceeds along lines of metaphoric equivalence among diverse levels of reality, even managing to accommodate the imagery of bestiaries and the exotic geography of the Middle Ages. In this narrative, the stones of the breastplate assume the value of a symbolic center, also fundamental for the choice of banners,

which reflect the gems, at times in detail worthy of a medieval lapidary: the agate is thus transposed to the banner of Gad, which "was not white nor black but a blend of black and white," while the amethyst is reflected in a cloth "like clarified wine of a not very deep red,"[283] and

[281] For the translation of the passage of Numbers Rabbah, probably dating from the second half of the twelfth century, the correspondences between the Hebrew names and gems taken from medieval authors (different in part from those of the most ancient period) have been adopted, as suggested by J. Ruska, *Das Steinbuch des Aristoteles. Mit literargeschichtlichen Untersuchungen*, (Heidelberg, 1912), pp. 53-55, and M. Zonta, "Minerology, Botany and Zoology in Medieval Hebrew Encyclopaedias," in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 6 (1996), pp. 311-13 (in these studies no correspondents are found for *bareqet*, *nofek*, *yaḥalom*, *taršiš*, *yašefeh*). For some notations on the gemological knowledge widespread in the Jewish world of the Middle Ages cf. also M. Steinschneider, "Lapidarien, ein kulturgeschichtlicher Versuch," in *Semitic Studies in Memory of Rev. Dr. Alexander Kohut*, ed. G. A. Kohut, (Berlin, 1896), pp. 42-72; S. García Albiol, "Las piedras preciosas ne el Ša`ar ha-Šamayim de Geršom ben Šelomoh y sus paralelismos con el Lapidario de Alfonso X El Sabio," in *Miscelánea de estudios árabes y hebraicos*, 39/2 (1990), pp. 263-315.

[282] Numbers Rabbah II.7. This late midrašic text took its inspiration from Targum pseudo-Jonathan to Num. 2.3-25.

[283] The comparison between "clarified wine" and the color of the amethyst also recurs in the Hebrew lapidary contained in ms. Mich. 169 of the Bodleian Library of Oxford, attributed to Berekyah ha-Naqdan. According to the correspondences indicated by Ruska, *Das Steinbuch*, p. 53, and of Zonta, *Mineralogy*, p. 311, *aḥlamah* was the same as "hyacinth" and turquoise in the Middle Ages

the emerald is accompanied by a flag "a third white, a third black, and a third red."[284]

At the close of the thirteenth century, ḥošen, or more precisely its Aramaic equivalent hošna, was employed in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) as an element of a complex manifestation of the sacred, centered around a mysterious figure, adorned with the breastplate and seated "on a holy glorious throne."[285] In this Kabbalistic transposition, the sacerdotal ornament becomes the outfit of an angelic figure, perhaps to be identified with Meṭaṭron, the prince of the divine Presence, often depicted as seated on the throne of glory. Even if the *Zohar*ic prose is extremely cryptic, the text seems to convey a sefirotic metaphor. The celestial archon—who probably impersonates an aspect of the sefirah of the kingdom, malkut—regulates the movement of the other, lower sefirot, which "look at the breastplate, and take the order from it either to enter or depart. They lift up their eyes and behold a shining plate flashing towards six hundred twenty sides."[286] Passing from the liturgical level to the cosmological one, the author of the *Zohar* transforms the twelve stones into instruments of a silent divine language that regulate the flow of celestial energy, marking the rhythm by prodigious alternation of rapid lights and opaque intervals.

The divinatory function of the breastplate is also very much alive in the *Zohar*, as demonstrated in another passage of the work, which describes the ornamental apparatus of the high priest. The text narrates how, in the process of putting on the twelve stones, the priest was somehow protected by the Šekinah, the divine Presence, and how the letters engraved on the stones could, if need be, assume relief, and at the same time become luminous: "Observe that all of those stones"—continues the text—"possessed miraculous powers. Thus, when they became luminous, the face of the High Priest was likewise illumined.

[284] Numbers Rabbah II.7.
[285] *Zohar* II.15b.
[286] *Ibid.*

The luminous letters shone and stood out. In a similar way, the shining of the High Priest's face was a sign that the luminous letters were of a favorable meaning; thereby it was known whether the High Priest was righteous or not."[287]

This excursus on the breastplate is actually build around the theme of the attraction among the different levels of reality, in a semantic continuity that extends from the material objects, the gems, to the face of the man that wears them, all the way to the supernatural manifestation of the Šekinah. Thus, the splendor of divine protection reflects from level to level to confirm the propitious character of the presage, while the absence of light is, implicitly, the sign of an inauspicious event. Part of this general pattern is also the fortune-telling specificity of the gems, which, in the imagination of the author of the *Zohar*, become miraculously animated, projecting the engraved letters, and transforming the inert mineral material into a lively apparatus for the manifestation of truth.

The interpretation of ḥošen according to the criteria of magical attraction continued well into the sixteenth century, when it found a clear theoretical expression in the Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates) of Mošeh Cordovero. At the beginning of the chapter dedicated to the mystical meaning of colors, Cordovero studied the intimate relationship between

the visible tones and hidden celestial energies, explaining how various tints have the power to attract a corresponding sefirotic force by way of an immaterial affinity. According to the Sephardic mystic, "he who had to attract, for instance, the influence of divine rigor, is advised to dress in red and to draw a red figure, and he must do the same for all the other energies, covering oneself in white when in need of compassion and mercifulness."[288] The influence of colors was also certainly well-known among those who made amulets, an occupation probably very common among the Jews of the sixteenth century: "We

[287] *Ibid*. II.230a.
[288] *Pardes rimmonim* X.1 (*Ša`ar ha-gawwanim*), ed. Munkács, vol. I, fol. 59b.

see"—writes Cordovero—"that those who engrave names on amulets make them red if they are meant to indicate rigor, white if they are to attract mercy, and green are those that allude to compassion. All based on the true teachings concerning the making of talismans."[289] At this point in the treatise, Cordovero seems to feel the necessity of providing a theoretical foundation for the empirical magic. This is the reason why he turns to the Biblical precedent of the breastplate, following it up with a quick notation of scientific character: "The most reliable testimony of this is constituted by the stones of the breastplate, the twelve gems connected to the influence of the twelve tribes of Israel from a supernal place. It is not necessary to linger on this subject since the scholars of nature affirm that, if a man fixes his own eyes on a great abundance of running water, white bile arises in him."[290]

The singular matching of the two sources—the one Scriptural and the other gleaned from the medical tradition—indicates a new sensibility which began to make inroads in the sixteenth century, even in the closed world of Jewish mysticism. The ancient ḥošen is interpreted in light of an already modern experimental empiricism, and its consequences are compared to the measurable effects of human physiology, as if the sacerdotal apparatus was thought of as an archetype of a symbolic therapy for the soul.

[289] *Ibid*., fol. 59c.

[290] *Ibid*. Cordovero probably has in mind here the passage from the *Comment to the Pentateuch* of Baḥya ben Ašer on the relationship between the colors of the gems and the attributes of each tribe.

עיר ʿIr
City

The first builder of a city mentioned in the Bible is Cain: And Cain knew his wife; and she conceived, and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch (Gen. 4.17). In this verse, the Scriptures prefigure the archetypical destiny of the city, connecting it unexpectedly to conception and ancestry. As if they were consecutive stages of a single act, the union of Cain and his own wife, the conception of the son, and the edification of the city, begin the story of human descent and the intricate genealogy that fills the following chapters of Genesis. The idea of the Judaic city is therefore born under a double sign: the attribution to Cain gives it, from the beginning, a negative tone, which will return in more than a few episodes; at the same time, the name of a son given to the first urban structure anticipates the strong emotional feeling that characterizes the city in Biblical poetry.

In fact, the cities of the Scriptures are frequently described as living beings with their own inclinations, fears, and vanities in daily life. In some cases, this personification is achieved through a metonymic displacement that attributes to the place the actions of its inhabitants. This happens for example in a passage of Amos, where the desperation of the citizens due to drought turns into a bewildered roving among the villages: And I made it rain upon one city, and did not make it rain upon another city [...] So two or three cities wandered to one city, to drink water (Amos 4.7-8). Likewise we find an agitated scene of Isaiah, in which the outskirts of Jerusalem, terrorized by the approach of the enemy, cry out and flee: Lift up your voice, O daughter of Gallim; cause it to be heard to Laish, O poor Anathoth [...] Madmenah is removed (Isa. 10.30-31). In another passage, Isaiah almost imagines that Tyre begins to sing a sorrowful song to itself, wandering its own streets: After the end of seventy years it shall be Tyre as in the harlot's song. Take a lyre,

go about the city, you harlot that has been forgotten; make sweet melody, sing many songs, that you may be remembered (Isa. 23.15-16).

The identification of the city with the harlot represents the extreme outcome of the feminine symbolism of ʻir, which can be detected in the many expressions that designate towns as daughters. Zion is thus called daughter of Zion,[291] and Babylon, daughter of Babylon, to indicate, through the evocation of a young girl, the collective identity of the inhabitants of the place.

In the Biblical imagery, the relationship between the idea of the city and the feminine also derives from the emotion of beauty that a town is capable of arousing. Few Biblical pages contain praise more intense than the one Ezekiel dedicates to Tyre: O Tyre, you have said, I am of perfect beauty. Your borders are in the midst of the seas, your builders have perfected your beauty. (Ezek. 27.3-4). These sentences, which in the prophetic text are directly attributed to God, serve to render the city's tragedy even worse. It is in fact pride, born of the knowledge of its own beauty and power, which leads Tyre to disgrace, bringing eternal ruin: How are you destroyed [...] the renowned city, that was strong in the sea (Ezek. 26.17). Insolence seems to be the true dark side of the city, the inevitable fault that goes with the impression of power aroused by human settlements. The proud cities are therefore perverse cities, and God has a terrible punishment in store for them.

The most complete Biblical expression of this double urban symbolism, which opposes power and beauty to a guilty haughtiness, is Jerusalem, which is seen at once as the archetype of perfection—ʻir ha-Elohim, the "city of God"—and as an immoral place, destined for destruction. The city, often designated with the name Zion,[292] was founded, confirms the Bible, by the Lord.[293]

[291] According to W. R. Stinespring, "No Daughter of Zion," in *Encounter*, 26 (1965), pp. 133-41, the expression *bat Ṣiyyon* should be rendered "daughter Zion."

[292] On the hypothesis about the etymology and on the Biblical uses of the term *Ṣiyyon* see W. H. Mare, s.v. "Zion," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. VI, pp. 1096-98

[293] Cf. Isa. 14.32.

The psalms in praise of Zion, partially bound to the pilgrimage towards the city, represent a literary genre in itself, in which Jerusalem is transfigured, even being depicted as rejoicing in an abundance of water that certainly does not belong to the real topography of the place: There is a river, whose streams make glad the city of God, the holiest dwelling place of the most High (Ps. 46.5).[294] In such emotive geography, the water that irrigates Zion can also be read as a metaphor of celestial protection. The image of the place is bathed in an allusion to the divine, as explained in a verse of Isaiah: But there the glorious Lord will be to us a place of broad rivers and streams; wherein shall go no galley with oars, neither shall gallant ship pass thereby (Isa. 33.21). The identification between God and his city, seat of the cult in the Temple of Solomon, reaches fulfillment in a passage of Psalms, in which the architectural inspection of the masonry walls culminates in a direct invocation of the divine himself: Walk about Zion, and go around her; count her towers. Mark well her bulwarks [...] That this is God,[295] our God for ever and ever (Ps. 48.13-15).

However, these praises of Jerusalem precipitate fast-paced scenes of destruction, which envelop the city in overwhelming suffering. From time to time it is compared to a furnace in which metals are gathered to be molten,[296] or to the pot in which there is filth, from which, even if it is submitted to a violent fire, *its filth is not gone!* (Ezek. 24.6). Jerusalem, the city [that] sheds blood in its midst (Ezek. 22.3), expiates the historical memory of its many destructions. Its first, in 587 (586) BCE,

[294] The interpretation of the passage is very difficult. For a hypothesis of ample emendation of the masoretic text, see M. J. Dahood, *Psalms I*, (New York, 1965-66), pp. 276-82; cf. also G. Ravasi, *Il libro dei salmi*, vol. I, pp. 830-31; C. L. Seow, s.v. "Deep, The," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. II, pp. 125-26. According to post-Biblical tradition, the rock of the foundation of the Temple of Jerusalem closed the water of the abyss: cf., e.g., *bBerakot* 3a.

[295] *That this is God*: in Hebr. *ki zeh Elohim*, variously translated. In any case, the identification of God with his city is anticipated in verse 4: *God is known in her towers as a sure defense*.

[296] Cf. Ezek. 22.19-20.

which echoes throughout many Biblical passages, becomes the paradigm for all successive desolations.

Post-Biblical Jewish literature generally interpreted the destiny of the holy city in light of its definitive fall at the hands of the Romans. The events of 70 CE, and the further calamity caused by the revolt of Bar Kokva in 132-135,[297] changed, in Jewish consciousness, the symbolic meaning of the city, fading the invectives of the prophets against the sins of Zion, leaving space for the transfiguration of Jerusalem into a mythical and timeless structure. In the vast Talmudic and midrašic corpus, in which hundreds of passages concerning the holy city appear, the actual conditions of the place are not spoken of, except in a few cases;[298] its past is commemorated or its future fortunes are illustrated with extreme richness of details.

This process manifested itself first of all in the idea of Jerusalem as center of the world. This notion, often repeated in Jewish prose, at times reached remarkable expressive results, as in the Talmudic tale attributed to Šemu'el ha-Qaṭan—who lived in the early part of the second century—where it is formulated in strongly anthropomorphic language: "This world is similar to the pupil of a man's eye: the white part is the ocean that encircles the land, the dark part is the world, the little figure reflected in the pupil is Jerusalem. The face of this figure is the Temple."[299] Zion is also considered the prototype of earthly beauty, as another passage of the Talmud affirms: "Ten measures of beauty descended to the world: nine were taken by Jerusalem, and one by the rest of the world."[300]

The Haggadic tales of Late Antiquity developed to a great extent the theme, already dear to the Biblical prophets, of the future Jerusalem, which the Lord will rebuild in the age to come: the city will be of boundless dimensions, surrounded by a wall of fire, and will rise up to

[297] See also the entry *Mašiaḥ*, Anointed, Messiah.

[298] For a narrative development of the theme of the destruction of Jerusalem see, e.g., *bBerakot* 3a.

[299] *Derek Ereṣ zuṭa* 9.

[300] *bQiddušin* 49b.

heaven.[301] The Talmudic treatise Bava Batra affirms that it will rise "three parasangs"[302] into the air, while in a passage of Song of Songs Rabbah—a midrašic collection probably compiled towards the middle of the sixth century—"Jerusalem is destined to expand and ascend until it reaches the Throne of Glory."[303] The extreme consequence of this transfiguration is the supernal Jerusalem, "constructed on high, in direct correspondence to the earthly. Concerning it, the Lord, blessed be He, decreed that the Šekinah would not be entered until the time that the lower Jerusalem was built."[304]

The idea of a celestial model, of which the early settlement is nothing but a reflection, reinforces the bond that unites the Lord to the holy city; in fact, the Jewish exegetes attributed to God a direct participation in the mourning for the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem. In connection with the well-known verse of Psalms, If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning (Ps. 137.5), the Midraš Tehillim explains: "The subject of this sentence is the Lord, blessed be He, which means: I will not forget you."[305] This grammatically strained interpretation, which ascribes directly to God the intent of the prayer, manifests a recurrent theme of post-Biblical thought, which sees in the participation of the Lord a symbolic comfort for the trauma of the Jewish calamity.

Throughout Late Antiquity, and well into the medieval period, the image of Jerusalem maintained strong mythical characteristics, and was continually pushed towards a meta-historical space. Yet everyday life in the Diaspora required Judaism to measure itself against other urban realities, more specific in literal details but symbolically more ambiguous. In these cities, difficult relationships with majority cultures arose, among other things, from the perception of living

[301] Cf., e.g., *Pesikta rabbati* XXXV.2.
[302] *bBava Batra* 75b, which takes its cue from Zech. 14.10: *And she shall be lifted up.*
[303] *Song of Songs Rabbah* VII.11.
[304] *Tanḥuma*, ed. Warsaw, *Pequde* I; cf. *bTa'anit* 5a.
[305] *Midraš Tehillim* CXXI.3.

contexts. In fact, the wanderings of exile multiplied, in an abnormal manner, the problems and rites of settlement, repeating an infinite number of times the complexity of choosing a place to settle and of being able to identify with this place. Medieval Jewish literature offers rich evidence about the cautious movements of small groups towards the unknown of a new abode, and shows the progressive transformation of Jewish feeling with regard to the city. The most important text is perhaps, from this point of view, the Sefer ḥasidim (The Book of the Pious), a collection of religious instruction, of legends and historical tales, written in the German milieu between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries. The cities described in the work are generally small or medium-sized villages, almost always inhabited by predominantly Christian groups, whom the Jews approached with suspicion but also with remarkable pragmatism: "Those who travel to a region to determine where to resettle, will have to examine how the area is inhabited, the mentality of the Christians, and their attitude concerning sexual behavior. It should be taken into account that the Jews who reside in a city, their sons and their daughters, will behave in the same manner as the Christians. In each place, in fact, the habits of the Jews resemble those of the Christians."[306] The advice about the choice of location also dwells on details to do with the construction of the synagogue, the creation of a Jewish cemetery, the possibility of carrying out butchering rituals, and the relationships to be established with the Christian authorities and powerful religious orders. Many pages are dedicated to the security of the settlement: grouping the Jewish homes into a compact, and therefore more easily defended, nucleus is advised.

In contrast to a Jerusalem made completely interior and transfigured, these fragile medieval cities of the Sefer ḥasidim were rooted in the methodical search for an equilibrium, in the knowledge that the Jewish identity could be protected only through tireless

[306] *Sefer ḥasidi*, ed. J. Wistinetzki, (Frankfurt am Main, 1925), p. 321, n. 1301.

attention to the threats that issued from the surrounding environment, but also in the opportunity that this environment could offer.

The symbolism of the settlements of the Diaspora from the Middle Ages on was therefore that of the city within the city, adding the metaphoric topography of Jewish rites and customs to the strong structure of non-Jewish history.[307] If Jerusalem is, in Jewish imagery, the exemplary city, the dwellings of the Diaspora are precarious transpositions of it, the stages of a return that will be postponed throughout history.

In the texts of the medieval Kabbalah, this topography of exile was at times conceived as a sort of mystical encampment that formed a circle around Jerusalem. At the end of the thirteenth century, Yosef Giqaṭilla—refined codifier of the Kabbalistic doctrine—wrote in his *Sefer ša'are orah* (The Book of the Gates of Light): "All the Jews who live in the Diaspora are arranged around Jerusalem, at the four corners of the world, and the city is situated at the center. For this reason, those who live in exile in the east pray turned toward the west, toward Jerusalem, and those in the north direct themselves toward the south. It follows that all the Jews who pray in the lands of the Diaspora send their orations to Jerusalem and to the Temple, and from there the prayers ascend to the presence of the Lord, blessed be He."[308] A prayer repeated daily by the entire Diaspora keeps Jerusalem at the geographic center of the Jewish world: an imagined city, and at the same time the only metropolis at the heart of the exile.

[307] Cf. G. Busi, "Il costume ebraico come immagine della diaspora," in *Per una storia del costume mediterraneo*, II, ed. J. Vibaek (Palermo, 1996), pp. 76-83.

[308] *Ša'are orah* 2, ed. Ben Shlomo, vol. I, p. 143.

Kesef כסף
Silver

The word kesef, which in Hebrew means "silver," but also, in a more general sense, "money," appears in the Scriptures for the first time in connection with Abraham. When the patriarch goes up out of Egypt toward the Negev, the text of Genesis almost smugly notes: And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold (Gen. 13.2). In the following chapters, which contain the Biblical epic of Abraham, kesef frequently returns to underline the merchant's prosperity and the audacity that characterizes his personage. Genesis 17.23 mentions the servants he bought with his money, and further, in chapter 20, Abimelech gives Abraham a thousand pieces of silver, in reparation for the wrong committed against Sarah. Upon the death of his wife, Abraham acquires a piece of land to bury her: And Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the hearing of the Hittites, four hundred shekels of silver, current money among the merchants (Gen.23.16). No time is wasted on the details of the scene, only on the timeless gesture of the counting, in the presence of witnesses, of an agreed upon amount. In a final scene, which represents in a certain sense the patriarch's leave-taking, his servant presents the gifts for Rebecca, Isaac's future wife: And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebecca (Gen. 24.53).

In all of these statements, silver represents a tangible sign of wealth, and the recourse to it marks the pacific consolidation of Abraham's role in the new land. The act of buying the piece of land for the burial by means of counting out four hundred shekels of silver—that is, not with weapons but through a commercial transaction—remained the symbol of Abraham's fortunes. In fact, the historical events that would follow transformed the place—which contains the cave of Macpela, seat of the tomb of the patriarchs and matriarchs—into a place of devotion not only for Jews but also for Muslims: in the traditions bound to the sanctuary, the echo of that peaceful acquisition persisted for a long

time. Even in the sixteenth century, an Italian traveler in the Holy Land, the erudite Rabbi ʻOvadyah of Bertinoro, having arrived close to Macpela, was so struck by a very unusual custom that he wrote about it to his father: "Every day"—writes ʻOvadyah—"they hand out bread and lentil soup to the indigents [...] as much to the poor Muslims as to the Jews and the Gentiles, in honor of Abraham our father."[309]

The bond between silver and wealth is nevertheless not only confined to the story of Abraham, but appears in other Scriptural passages. In Isaiah, the prosperity of the future age is indicated with, among other things, the promise of the substitution of iron with silver—and for iron I will bring silver (Isa. 60.17)—while, in various places in Proverbs, the preciousness of silver serves as a poetic comparison which suggests the merit and rarity of wisdom: Happy is the man who finds wisdom [...] For the merchandise of it is better than the merchandise of silver (Prov. 3.13-14); And to get understanding is preferable to silver (Prov. 16.16).

Some Biblical comparisons involving silver are based on a characteristic aspect of the process of metalworking—refinement—which consists in separating the noble part from the slag. In the ancient world, this procedure must have been a daily sight, since the silversmiths worked in open workshops on public streets.[310] The Scriptures thus use the familiar image of silver smelting to describe the way God gives trials to man. In some cases, the result of the trial is negative, and the slag is not eliminated, as in a passage of Jeremiah, in which the prophet alludes to the disgrace of the Hebrew people in the eyes of the Lord, offering at the same time a vivid picture of the problems associated with refinement: *The bellows blow fiercely, the lead is*

[309] E. M. Artom and A. David, "Rabbi `Ovadyah mi-Barµenura we-iggerotaw me-Ereṣ Yiƀra'el," in *Jews in Italy. Studies Dedicated to the Memory of U. Cassuto on the 100th Anniversary of his Birth*, (Jerusalem, 1988), p. 80. Cf. `Ovadyah Yare da Bertinoro, *Lettere dalla Terra Santa*, introduction, translation, notes and appendix, G. Busi, (Rimini, 1991), p. 46.

[310] Cf., e.g., for Late Antiquity, the testimony of *Genesis Rabbah* LXXXIV.5: "A blacksmith whose forge opened on to the street, while the workshop of his son, a goldsmith, was open opposite him."

*consumed by the fire*; the refiner melts in vain; for the wicked are not removed. Base silver shall men call them, because the Lord has rejected them (Jer. 6.29-30). In other cases, however, the sieve gives origin to a new purity: And I will bring this third through the fire—we read in Zechariah with regard to the Hebrew people—and will refine them as silver is refined (Zech. 13.9).

Silver refinement as a symbol of spiritual purification was transmitted directly from the Scriptures to the post-Biblical tradition. In a saying attributed to Rabbi Tanḥuma, who lived in the second half of the fourth century, the sojourn of the Jews in the desert following the exodus from Egypt, was a liberation of Israel from the slag, or rather, from the defects acquired during the long period of slavery.[311]

The poetic fantasy of Yannay, probably active in the sixth century in the Land of Israel, produced a similar image. In Yannay's verses, the placing of the sieve into the fire is a test that marks the long tribulations of the Jewish people: "Our soul is sick, our spirit is broken. We have been assayed in the fire and tested in water. / In joy, in afflictions, in our homeland and in exile. / And yet, twice a day, morning and evening, we recite / Listen, o Israel, the Lord our God is the only Lord."[312] To indicate the trial by flame, the poet resorted here to the technical term ṣrf, which literally designates the smelting of metal by the hand of the smith, and which, in this case, makes an expressive contrast with the hardening in water. In this poem, a significant example of the piyyuṭim of the classical period—a refined, formal equilibrium is born from the syntactical and rhetorical parallel: silver, subjugated to the force of opposing elements, which give to it brilliancy and durability, is compared to the Jewish people, tested by the changing fortunes of exile that strengthen their faith.

Along with this symbolism of silver—which can be defined as "historical" inasmuch as it alludes to the worldly fortunes of Israel—in post-Biblical literature we find metaphors inspired by the preparation

[311] *Numbers Rabbah* VII.1.

[312] *Piyyuṭe Yannay*, ed. M. Zulay, (Berlin, 1938), p. 335. The final prayer is the *Šema'*, the profession of Jewish faith, based on *Deut.* 6.4.

of silver objects, characterizing the origin of the cosmos. In the midraš Genesis Rabbah, we find an uncommon interpretation of a passage of Proverbs, proposed by a rabbi of the third century: "Rabbi Ḥama ben Ḥanina commented: 'Take away the dross from the silver (Prov. 25. 4).' Rabbi Eli'ezer said: 'This may be compared to a bath full of water, in which were two beautiful bas-reliefs; as long as it was full of water the work of the bas-relief could not be seen, but when the plug was removed and the water emptied, the bas-relief could be seen. Even so, as long as formlessness and void were in the world, the work of heaven and earth could not be seen; but as soon as formlessness and void were eradicated from the world, the work of heaven could be seen.'"[313] As if moved by ingenuous amazement, the rabbi of the midraš here compares the chaos and the formlessness of the Biblical tale to the finishing bath of silver manufacture: the result is an unusual cosmogonic narrative, where the Creator removes from the world the initial shapeless mass to allow the perfection of his own work to shine.

The mystical literature of the following centuries further developed the symbolism of silver, establishing a series of constant correspondences between the metal and divine attributes. Toward the end of the thirteenth century, in the pages of the most representative text of the Sephardic Kabbalah, the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), silver became the sign of the mercy of God,[314] which, together with the complementary and contrasting principle of rigor (symbolized by gold), rules the world. Thus, silver is considered to correspond to the right side[315] of the cosmic diagram, which represents mercy, and, among the cardinal points, the south.[316] In the same work, the refinement of silver is compared to the purification of the body after death. Introducing a comparison displaying alchemical influence, the author of the *Zohar* imagines the Creator as operating on the mortal remains of man, much like the artisan who works on unrefined silver:

[313] *Genesis Rabbah* X.2.
[314] Cf., e.g., *Zohar* II.129b.
[315] *Ibid.*, II.138b.
[316] *Ibid.*, I.83b.

"Which operations does the artisan use to extract silver from its earth-encrusted origins? He puts it first of all in a lit oven to remove the earthly impurities. Thus the silver remains but not completely pure. What does he do then? He puts it back in the oven and frees it of slag [...] to achieve pure silver without residue."[317] In the same way, God puts the body underground a first time "until it is completely decomposed and all evil impurity has been removed from it." Since the purification will nevertheless still not be complete, men, resurrected in a future era, hide themselves in the depths of the earth a second time, to escape from the terror of the final events, until the body becomes like silver, "splendid like the light of the sun and like the radiance of the firmament."[318] In this passage of the *Zohar*, the refinement of silver becomes a metaphor for the eschatological vicissitudes, imagined as a resurrection followed by a phase of concealment before the final redemption.

In the Kabbalah of the sixteenth century, the handling of silver was employed to evoke the diffusion of the divine energy in the cosmos, at first overflowing and then forced within the limits of matter. The main author of this symbolic transposition was Ḥayyim Vital, student of Yiṣḥaq Luria and methodical organizer of his doctrine. He combined in a single comparative structure two conceptual spheres which were at first sight very distant from one another: the dynamics of the sefirotic equilibrium and alchemical empiricism. According to Lurianic theosophy, the descent of the celestial forces toward the lower worlds was, at the beginning, so powerful that it shattered the sefirotic vases,[319] causing some light particles to remain imprisoned among the fragments of the cosmic destruction. The following restoration of the equilibrium of the worlds was only possible through a complete separation of the luminous component from the inert matter: the seven lower sefirot, explains Vital, "showed some scoriae, mixed with the

[317] *Ibid.* I.116a (*Midraš ha-ne'elam*) .

[318] *Ibid.*

[319] On the so-called "shattering of the vases" and their successive restoration, see the entry *Tiqqun*, Ornament, Restoration.

elements of holiness. For this it was necessary to clean and purify the holy part, to discharge the residues. It is in fact well known that, among the scoriae, which are extracted from pure silver, fragments of silver particles always remain; it is thus necessary to cleanse it a second time, in order to extract also the little bit of silver that had remained."[320]

In the imagination of this mystic, who was also an expert alchemist, the repair of the worlds, and their purification from the persistence of evil, was therefore conceived as an enormous display of metallurgy which allows for the reintegration of cosmic harmony through the same methods and the same prudence suitable for a silversmith.

[320] '*Eṣ Ḥayyim* XVIII.5, ed. Brandwein, vol. I, p. 264b.

Kisse כסה
Throne

Among the objects spoken of in the text of the Bible, the throne has perhaps the most distinctive metaphoric vocation, and is more often employed as a sign of power than described as a physical article. Only on one occasion do the Scriptures linger over the details of a regal seat: the one Solomon builds to boast his wealth. The king states of his throne that the like of it was never made in any kingdom. It must have been a refined, chiseled work, since it was made of ivory, and covered in a layer of the finest gold, which added splendor and opulence. It was furthermore regarded as an architectural structure, which had six steps [...] and there were arm rests on either side [...] and two lions stood beside the arm rests, surrounded by other symbols of regality and might: And twelve lions stood there on one side and on the other upon the six steps (1Kings 10.-201820).[321]

A trace of historical vividness can also be found in another Biblical mention of the throne, a scene of patriarchal tone, where the kings of Israel and of Judah watch, each on his throne, the omens of the prophets, having put on their robes, in a threshing floor in the entrance of the gate of Samaria (1Kings 22.10).[322] The remaining Biblical references to earthly thrones seem bereft of physical relief, and the sovereigns seated upon their high-backed chairs are simple portraits of their function, without colors or attitudes. Thus, for instance, Pharaoh measures his superiority over Joseph through the dignity of the throne: Only in the throne will I be greater than you (Gen. 41.40). The same abstract use of the word is also to be found when, at the moment of the Jewish exodus, fortunes are reversed and the first-born of the Pharaoh who sits upon his throne dies at the hand of the God of Israel, just as

[321] The same description appears in a parallel passage of 2Chron. 9.17-18.

[322] Cf. also 2Chron. 18.9.

the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the mill (Exod. 11.5), and the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon (Exod. 12.29).

In contrast to the thrones of the kings of other nations, which are subject to the alternation of fortunes, the throne of the king of Israel is established before the Lord forever (1Kings 2.45), on the basis of the relationship between this sign of regality and the divine choice of the Davidian dynasty. In the Biblical exaltation of the king of Israel, the building of the Temple willed by Solomon and the throne, inasmuch as it is a symbol of dynastic continuity, represents a whole, as a promise of the Lord affirms: He shall build me a house, and I will establish his throne forever (1Chron. 17.12).[323]

Although this guarantee of stability derives from divine protection, the king can benefit from it only if he exercises justice, which is, in the tradition of the entire ancient orient, the attribute specific to the one who is seated on the throne. So recalls a passage of Proverbs: It is an abomination to kings to commit wickedness; for the throne is established by righteousness (Prov. 16.12). The sovereign performs this function as a vicar of God, who is the supreme judge, and who scrutinizes from his celestial throne the conduct of men, imposing punishment for reprobates and rewards for the righteous.

The attribute of divine justice characterizes many of the Biblical descriptions of the celestial throne, in which it coexists with more specifically theophanic connotations belonging to the description of the Lord of Israel as a meteoric divinity: Clouds and darkness are around him; righteousness and judgment are the foundation of his throne (Ps. 97.2). Although at first seemingly enigmatic, this passage of Psalms consistently connects the symbolism of the throne with the atmospheric symbolism of clouds. In fact, it clarifies the idea, expressed several times in the Bible, that the throne of judgment remains, hidden from the eyes of men, behind a perturbed and dark sky. It therefore stands to reason that, in the most ancient mythical substrate, the Lord was considered to be sitting in judgment when the

[323] Cf. 2Sam. 7.13.

tempest obscured the earth, throwing men into bewilderment and anxiety. This concealment of the throne occurs in several passages, as for example in Job, where the protagonist, speaking of the formidable divine superiority, affirms that God closes in the face of his throne, and spreads his cloud upon it (Job 25.9). In a passage of Ecclesiastes, it is the divine wisdom itself that exclaims: my throne is in a cloudy pillar (Eccles. 24.4).

Another image that forms part of the same conceptual sphere of the towering divine figure in the rage of the tempest is the one of he who "sits between the cherubim," that is of the Lord seated among winged beings: The Lord reigns; let the peoples tremble; he sits between the cherubim; let the earth be moved (Ps. 99.1). The mention of the winged creatures implies a reference to movement, since, as other Biblical passages demonstrate, the notion of the cherub is tied to the dynamism of the wind and storm, and often constitutes the vehicle upon which God travels in the sky: Darkness was under his feet. And he rode upon a cherub, and did fly; and he was seen upon the wings of the wind (2Sam. 22.10-11).[324] The celestial throne must therefore have been endowed with motion, as we can also deduce from a later passage of Proverbs, preserved only in the Greek Septuagint, which even makes the blowing of the tempest the base of the throne: "He set his throne upon the winds."[325]

[324] Cf. also Ps. 18.11, as well as the ample analyses conducted by M. Metzger, *Königsthron und Gottesthron. Thronformen und Throndarstellungen in Ägypten und im Vorderen Orient im dritten und zweiten Jahrtausend vor Christus und deren Bedeutung für das Verständnis von Aussagen über den Thron im Alten Testament*, 2 vols., (Kevelaer, Neukirchen, and Vluyn, 1985). The arguments with which Keel and Uehlinger , *Göttinnen*, pp. 190-91, reject the relationship between the throne, the cherubs, and the manifestation of the god of the tempest do not seem well-founded.

[325] The verse appears in the version of the *Septuagint*, in Prov. 8.27. On the variations of the book of Proverbs in Greek, cf. E. Tov, "Recensional Differences between the Masoretic Text and the *Septuagint* of Proverbs," in *Of Scribes and Scrolls* [...] *Studies* [...] *Presented to J. Strugnell*, ed. H.W. Attridge, et al., (Lanham, 1990), pp. 43-46.

Although implied in many places, the idea of a throne constituted by cherubs is never explicitly expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures, although in the Greek patristic tradition the expression thronos cherubikos, "cherubic throne," frequently recurs, indicating the divine throne hidden among the clouds.[326] Nevertheless, even in the Biblical descriptions of the ancient apparatus of the sacred ark, two cherubs of gold appear, made from a single piece of the ark as part of its cover, who stretch out their wings on high and whose faces are turned toward one another. From above the cover, which is placed upon the Ark of the Covenant, the Lord talks to Moses from between the two cherubim. The symbolic function of the two winged images was thus to hold the Lord, who, although invisible, was seated upon them as on a real throne.[327] Moreover, the structure of the ark was mobile, and was therefore apt to represent the procession of the divine throne, according to a ritual narrated in the first book of Chronicles: And David went up, and all Israel, to Baalah [...] to bring from there the ark of God the Lord, who dwells between the cherubim (yošev ha-keruvim) (1Chron. 13.6).

As related by the Biblical tale, the ark, dominated by the two cherubs—which was a fundamental element of the cult before the

[326] Cf., e.g., John Chrysostom, "In ascensionem Domini nostri Iesu Christi, sermo IV," in *Patrologiae cursus completes* [...] *series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, (Lutetiae Parisiorum, 1859), vol. LII, col. 800; though the direct reference is to the ascension of Jesus (Mark 16.19, Luke 24.50-52, Acts I. 9-14), the text preserves a clear echo of the theophany of the Old Testament. The other attestations of the *thronos cherubikos appear* in Epiphanius, *Homilia I In festo palmarum*, in *Patrologiae*, (Lutetiae Parisiorum, 1864), vol. XLIII, col. 437; *id.*, *Homilia V. In laudes Mariae*, *ibid.*, col. 488, 492-93, 497; and in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Lithurgy*, *ibid.*, (Lutetiae Parisiorum, 1858), vol. XXXVI, col. 704 (*ho epi thronou cheroubikou epochoumenos*).

[327] The image of the empty throne seems to be of Mesopotamian origin; cf. H. Danthine, "L'imagerie des trônes vides et des trônes porteurs de symboles dans le Proche-Orient ancien," in *Mélanges syriens offerts à M. R. Dussaud*, (Paris, 1939), vol. II, pp. 857-66; R. de Vaux, "Les chérubins et l'arche d'alliance, les sphinx gardiens et les trônes divins dans l'ancien Orient," in *id.*, *Bible et Orient*, (Paris, 1967), pp. 231-59; G. Garbini, "Troni sfingi e sirene," in *Annali dell'Istituto Orientali di Napoli*, 41 (1981), pp. 301-7.

construction of the Temple—was later included in the structure of Solomon's Sanctuary, and situated in the debir, a place built for this purpose, where two other cherubs were placed, made of olive wood, each ten cubits high and covered in gold (1Kings 6.23-28). The symbolism of the divine throne was thus integrated into the architectural structure of the Temple, still retaining its sense of mobility, at least as far as we can judge from the prophetic visions, where the seat of the Lord of Israel is almost always characterized by the idea of a potential or visible motion.

The book of Ezekiel opens, for instance, with a powerful sensation of energy, created by the four living creatures who support the throne and move accompanied by a thunder of wings similar to the noise of great waters (Ezek. 1.5-24). Here the apparition of the throne retains the salient traits of the atmospheric theophany—according to the words of the prophet, It had brightness around it. As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain. Behind this coruscating brilliance the appearance of the divine throne is nevertheless that of a serene sky, symbolized by the material of which it is made; like lapis lazuli (Ezek. 1.26-28).[328]

In opposition to this, the throne seen by Daniel flares up in a flash of fire, and he imagines it as moving on flaming wheels: His throne was like a fiery flame, its wheels like burning fire (Dan. 7.9). This detail of the wheel reveals a striking symbolic persistence.[329] In fact, wheels are related to this seat, which is clearly a throne of judgment, situated at the center of a celestial gathering, ready to weigh the conduct of men: They sat in judgment, and the books were opened (Dan. 7.10). The juxtaposition of the throne and the wagon, already implied in Daniel, reappears explicitly in a text discovered in the caves of Qumran, a part of the hymns that were recited by the members of the community in

[328] This detail has a parallel in the vision of the throne seen by Moses and his companions in Exod. 24.10.

[329] The wheels of the divine throne are a *topos* of mystical Jewish literature: cf., e.g., "Barayta de-ma'aśeh merkavah 7," in *Batte midrašot*, ed. Wertheimer, vol. I, p. 61.

the Sabbath liturgy. The song describes how the angels exalt the divine glory, and reworks the elements of Ezekiel's vision with original poetic additions. For example, one of these elements sees the cherubs prostrate themselves in front of God and rise again to the "sound of a divine silence. Consecrating the image of the throne of the wagon [which is] above their firmament."[330] The throne here is the object of angelic benediction, and assumes the function of a fulcrum of the entire celestial apparatus.

In the rabbinic tradition of the first centuries of the Common Era, the structure of the throne became increasingly more complex, growing rich in details of additional parts, and acquiring previously unknown functions; it even assumed the role of a center of the cosmogonic creation and, at the same time, of the machinery for the angelic liturgy. In this process of conceptual expansion, the form of the throne seems to be divided into two great parts, one below and one above.[331] So, "under the throne" there is an almost inexhaustible deposit of material, used by God in the building of the world, for example the dust that he "took and scattered on the water, so that the Earth was produced,"[332] or the snow through which "the surface of the earthly garden was formed."[333] Under the throne, the Lord also keeps a series of objects to show to his human interlocutors: in the midrašic tales embellishing the legend of Moses's ascension to heaven, God

[330] C. Newsom, *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice. A Critical Edition*, (Atlanta, 1985), pp. 303 (text), 314 (commentary); cf. García Martínez, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Translated*, p. 429. The expression *kisse merkavah* is also attested to in the literature of the *Hekalot*: cf. *Synopse*, par. 932. See also the "Alfa beta de-rabbi 'Aqiva," in *Bet ha-Midrasch*, ed. Jellinek, vol. III, p. 36. Menaḥem Recanati speaks of a "throne of the wagon" in his *Commentary on the Daily Prayers*, ed. G. Corazzol, (Turin, 2008), p. 37*.

[331] The idea of a doubling of the divine throne into two separate seats was already present: "One for justice and one for grace" (*bḤagigah* 14a).

[332] *Genesis Rabbah* XIII.1. On this point, see also the entry *'Afar*, Dust.

[333] "Seder gan 'Eden," in *Bet ha-Midrasch*, ed. Jellinek, vol. III, p. 132.

sometimes extracts a skull of fire to explain a rule of alimentary purity,[334] and sometimes a coin, also of fire, which serves as a sample of the money to be employed in the redemption of the soul.[335] In the lower part of the throne, providential means of escape also open up, such as the "wicket" that the Lord opens to allow a bewildered Moses to flee from heaven and elude the angels, who, invidious of his glory, want to kill him.[336] The throne actually seems to be the only place of refuge from the intrusive enterprises of the divine servants. In fact, when the angry angels "closed all the windows of heaven" to impede prayers from reaching God, "What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He dug an opening for his prayer from under the Throne of Glory, that the angels could not reach."[337] The lower section of the seat is moreover mobile, and can be lowered toward the earth, so that Moses can grasp it;[338] it is, simultaneously, sonorous, since praise to God continuously rises from it.[339] A river of fire then departs from the base of the chair, produced from the sweat of the ḥayyot, the "living beings" to whom the strenuous task of supporting the celestial machine is entrusted.[340] The base of the throne also preserves the light of the first day of creation, placed therein for the righteous of the world to come,[341] in addition to the radiant souls of the pious, which are "placed under the throne of glory."[342]

Compared with the richness that marks the lower part of the seat, the one above it seems enveloped in an aura of indefiniteness,

[334] *Leviticus Rabbah* XIII.4.
[335] *Numbers Rabbah* XII.3.
[336] *Exodus Rabbah* XLII.4.
[337] *Ruth Rabbah* V.6.
[338] *bSukkah* 5a.
[339] "Sefer Ḥanok," in *Bet ha-Midrasch*, ed. Jellinek, vol. V, p. 171.

[340] *Genesis Rabbah* LXXVIII.1.
[341] *Pesikta Rabbati* XXXVI.1.
[342] *Deuteronomy Rabbah*, ed. S. Lieberman, (Jerusalem, 1940), *We-zo't ha-berakah* 1; cf. also *Tanḥuma*, ed. Buber, *We-zo't ha-berakah* 5; *Tanḥuma*, ed. Warsaw, *We-zo't haberakah* 6; *Midraš zuṭa to Ecclesiastes III.21*; *bŠabbat* 152b.

beginning with the divine figure, who is more often hinted at than described. In a singular passage of the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Yišma'e'l ben Eliša' tells of having entered the innermost part of the Sanctuary to offer incense and having seen "Akthri'el Yah, the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne," who says to him, "Išma'e'l, My son, bless Me!" The rabbi answers the invitation with a long invocation of mercy. No details are attributed to the divine figure, only a brief gesture in which "He nodded [...] with His head" to Išma'e'l.[343]

More lively is the representation of the God of Israel seen by Rabbi 'Aqiva at the height of a mystical ascent narrated in the Sefer merkavah rabbah from the early Middle Ages: "I saw him, the Lord [...] when he reached out his hand, his right one, and struck the throne of glory with it, saying: 'Aqiva, my son, this throne of glory, on which I sit, is a precious furnishing, created by my hand, my right one."[344] Since one swears with the right hand, the divine gesture takes on the meaning of a promise of salvation for Israel, of which the throne is taken as a testimonial pledge.

In the course of the Middle Ages, the idea of the divine throne lost the visual prominence that had characterized it throughout Late Antiquity. The image of the throne, as a destination of mystical ascensions and as an object of meditation, was progressively replaced by a more abstract notion, by a sort of allegory of celestial majesty. Perhaps the most explicit example of this transposition of the throne to an almost metaphysical level is contained in the Guide of the Perplexed, written at the end of the 12th century by Moses Maimonides. The philosopher radically altered the ancient conception of kisse, defining it as "the attribute of His greatness and sublimity; this ought not to be imagined as a thing outside His essence or as a created being from among the beings created by Him, so that He, may He be exalted, should appear to exist both without a throne and with a throne."[345]

343

344

345 *Guide of the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al- ḥāirīn*) I.9.

Although it diminished the evocative efficacy of the object, the Maimonidean interpretation rendered the notion of the throne conceptually more audacious, in that it is no longer "a thing outside" of God. Part of the divine essence, the throne was no longer an exterior furnishing, as sublime as it may have been, but a true predicate of the supernal transcendence.

In the classical phase of Kabbalistic thought, which achieved its fullest expression during the thirteenth century, the divine throne was also, for the most part, interpreted in metaphorical terms. Nonetheless, in contrast to Maimonides's conception, it was not seen as a unity, but rather was incorporated into the various degrees of the sefirotic diagram. In the thirteenth century Kabbalistic writings, for example in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the term kisse underwent a symbolic oscillation in order to represent different sefirot. The throne was sometimes compared to the heart, and therefore connected to the sefirah binah (intelligence), which depended on the mind (identified with ḥokmah, knowledge); in other cases, however, it signified tif'eret (beauty), or, more frequently, malkut (kingdom), the celestial place where the energy of the superior sefirot was contained, resting on it as upon an immaterial seat. The sefirotic symbolism was also attributed to the separate parts of

the throne, and in particular to the four ḥayyot which sustained it. This led to the paradox that the lower part could symbolize a higher sefirah than the one indicated by the upper section of the throne itself.[346]

In a later era, during the sixteenth century, kisse found a new, powerful, conceptual prominence in the writings of the converso

[346] Cf. *Zohar* III.234a (*Ra'aya mehemna*). According to the traditional scheme, summed up by Cordovero in his *Pardes rimmonim* I.1 (*Ša'ar 'eŝer we-lo teša'*), (Munkács), vol. I, fol. 2b, the four *ḥayyot* corresponded in fact to *ḥokmah* (face of man), *binah* (eagle), *ḥesed* (lion), and *gevurah* (bull). A long list of various qualifications of *kisse* already appears in the "Masseket *hekalot*," in *Bet ha-Midrasch*, ed. Jellinek, vol. II, pp. 40-41. On the Kabbalistic "multiplication" of the throne, see also Ṭodros Abulafia, *Ša'ar ha-razim*, ed. M. Kushnir-Oron, (Jerusalem, 1989), p. 104.

mystic Šelomoh Molko, who developed in his Sefer ha-mefo'ar (The Splendid Book) a conception of the throne with clear contours, based on a simple symbolic equivalence. For the young thinker, in fact, "the Israelites are the throne of glory of the Lord, blessed be He."[347] In other words, according to Molko, the community of Israel can be conceived as the earthly projection of the archetype of the celestial throne. On the sefirotic level, this correspondence could be expressed through the bond between Israel and the sefirah malkut (kingdom)—responsible for the political fortunes of nations—which, after the destruction of the Temple and the end of Jewish independence, withdrew its influence from the Jewish people in order to shower it upon other peoples: "Even if the Israelites are the throne"—Molko asks himself—"what advantage do they derive from it, lacking as they are in celestial influence? It is as if the throne of the kingdom is in one city but the king resides in another, so that at first no advantage comes from the throne."[348] Seized by the dream of reestablishing the Messianic throne, the young converso ended up binding his destiny to that of the false Messiah Dawid Reuveni, and held his convictions even to the most extreme conclusion of accepting the penalty of death, which was inflicted upon him at the stake in a public square in Mantua.[349]

[347] *Sefer ha-mefo'ar*, ed. Y. Adari, 2 vols., (Jerusalem, 1989), vol. I, p. 87.
[348] *Ibid.*, p. 133.
[349] Cf. Busi, *La qabbalah*, pp. 81-82.

כוס Kos
Cup

In the Hebrew language, kos, "cup," causes future fortunes to resound. The Scriptures mention it for the first time in a dream concerning the anguished doubt of Pharaoh's cupbearer, who has fallen into disgrace. One can almost hear the agitated tone of his voice when he, in a palace prison, tells the vision to Joseph: And Pharaoh's cup was in my hand; and I took the grapes, and pressed them into Pharaoh's cup, and I gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand (Gen. 40.11). The insistent flashing of the cup, in which the indecipherable destiny of the dreamer is concealed, pervades the verse, which is submitted to the haunting power of dreams. Only Joseph understands: And Joseph said to him, This is the interpretation of it [...] within three days shall Pharaoh lift up your head, and restore you to your place; and you shall deliver Pharaoh's cup into his hand (Gen. 40.12-13). The tale's nucleus is the gesture of holding the cup, since he who has it in his hand controls fate; thus Pharaoh, in the Biblical story, will actually decide to redeem the servant: And he restored the cupbearer to his butlership again; and he gave the cup into Pharaoh's hand (Gen. 40.21). The act of the cupbearer, who passes the chalice from his hand to the Pharaoh's, in turn alludes to the transmission of control over destiny.

The symbolism prefigured in this dream returns in other passages of Biblical poetry, where kos and yad, "cup" and "hand," are frequently coordinated in a single unity which expresses dominion over future events. God himself is sometimes evoked as he who bears a cup in hand, and with it prepares man's destiny: The Lord is the portion of my inheritance and of my cup; you maintain my lot (Ps. 16.5). Furthermore, in the prophecy of Habakkuk, the divine chalice is called the cup of the Lord's right hand (Hab. 2.16), and is usually connected with the idea of bewilderment and castigation: For in the hand of the Lord there is a cup,

with foaming wine; it is well mixed; and he pours from it; but the wicked of the earth shall drink and drain it to the dregs (Ps. 75.9).

It is, however, in the prophetic texts, and particularly in the books of Isaiah and Ezekiel, that the motif of the cup as the icon of destiny assumes a full literary function. In a passage of Isaiah, the suffering of the defeated nation is represented as a delirium of drunkenness, whereby the Lord's hand forces Jerusalem to drink the cup of his fury (Isa. 51.17). The destruction continues until the chalice has been emptied; only then does the Lord retrieve the cup, to pass it to the next person destined for calamity: Behold, I have taken from your hand the cup of staggering, the deep bowl of my fury; you shall no more drink it again (Isa. 51.22). The description of the fatal cup reaches yet more dramatic tones in Ezekiel, where the defeat of Israel is epitomized by the tragic ritual of an emptied and shattered cup: With the cup of horror and desolation [...] You shall drink it and drain it out, and you shall break its fragments in pieces, and tear your own breasts (Ezek. 23.33-34).

Biblical statements of the positive meaning of the cup are more unusual. The expression "the cup of consolation," which appears in the book of Jeremiah,[350] refers to an ancient funeral custom, according to which those in mourning were offered bread and wine.[351] The bread was called, in this case, "bread of agony,"[352] while the wine was contained in a cup intended symbolically to temper the pain. Similarly, a passage of Psalms seems to allude to the cup used during the thanksgiving sacrifice: I will raise the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of the Lord (Ps. 116.13).

The positive meaning of kos took predominance in post-Biblical literature, where the term was almost always connected to the thanksgiving benediction for food and the Passover liturgy. In fact, the chalice is an important element of the eulogy that concludes Jewish

[350] Jer. 16.7.
[351] 2Sam. 3.35.
[352] In Hebrew *leḥem 'onašim* (Ezek. 24.17); cf. Hos. 9.4. *leḥem 'onim*.

meals.[353] On this point, the Babylonian Talmud describes in minute detail the characteristics of the cup, and the gestures that accompany the ritual: "Ten things have been said in connection with the cup used for grace after meals. It requires to be rinsed and washed, it must be undiluted and full, it requires crowning and wrapping, it must be taken up with both hands and placed in the right hand, it must be raised a handbreadth from the ground, and he who says the blessing must fix his eyes on it. Some add that he must send it round to the members of his household."[354] The blessing over the cup is considered extremely important by the tradition, as affirmed again in the same passage in a saying attributed to Rabbi Yoḥanan: "Whoever says the blessing over a full cup is given an inheritance without bounds, as it says, And full with the blessing of the Lord; possess thou the sea and the south (Deut. 33.23)."

The subject of the cup of the blessing aroused deep mystical reflections during the Middle Ages. A passage of the *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Trustworthy Shepard), which belongs to the second phase of elaboration of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), is in fact dedicated to an accurate exegesis of the Talmudic teachings about the ten prescriptions relating to the cup. The Kabbalistic speculation here establishes a parallel between each of the cup's attributes and a particular level of theosophical symbolism. First of all the word kos is compared, through the gimaṭreya, to the divine name "Elohim", which has an equal numerical value to it.[355] This passage is followed by a metonymic movement from cause to effect: kos also becomes the superior spirit that proceeds from Elohim. Such a semantic interplay takes advantage of the possibilities offered by the word kos, which can designate both the container and its contents. At once object and liquid, kos sums up the divine spirit from which the soul descends, the soul itself, and even the man who deserves that soul. In fact, on the

[353] For a discussion of the obligations pertaining to the cup of the benediction, see Yosef Caro, *Šulḥan 'aruk, Oraḥ Ḥayyim* 182.

[354] *bBerakot* 51a.

[355] Both *kš* and *'lhym*, in fact, have the value 86.

Talmudic prescription, according to which the chalice must be rinsed twice, the author of the *Ra'aya mehemna* comments: "It was decreed that the cup must be rinsed and washed, which is to say that it should be rinsed on the outside and washed on the inside. The secret meaning is that the object must be the same inside and outside. He who aspires to the superior spirit that arises from this chalice must have a pure soul inside as well as outside."[356]

In the *Zohar*, the icon of the cup is also employed in another context, namely in describing the destiny of the soul in the afterlife. The author imagines that an angel waits for the souls of those "who were condemned to death by a Jewish tribunal or by other nations" at the threshold of a palace of light: "He opens the eastern door and lights them up; he gives them life, which comes from that door. In the hand of that guardian there is a cup of life, full of light, which takes the name cup of consolation (Jer. 16.7), cup of life. Since in fact they drank at first from another cup, they rendered themselves worthy of this one."[357] This representation of light is complemented by a symmetrical description of the punishment inflicted on the evil, in another palace, built in hell. When the dead arrive at this dwelling, the guardian angel greets them with *the bowl of staggering* (Isa. 51.17 and 51.22), into which "three bitter drops, one called 'discord,' the other said to be 'more bitter than death' and the third named 'dregs,' have been poured."[358] In this case, too, kos symbolizes destiny, in a reworking of the ancient motif of death as the consumption of a beverage.[359] Moreover, the encounter with the celestial guardian who offers the potion represents the final

[356] *Zohar* III.245b (*Ra'aya mehemna*).
[357] *Ibid.*, II.246b.
[358] *Ibid.*, II.264a.
[359] According to the Talmud (*b'Avodah zarah* 20b), "When a sick person is about to depart, he [the angel of death] stands above his head-pillow with his sword drawn out in his hand and a drop of gall hanging on it. As the sick person beholds it, he trembles and opens his mouth [in fright]; he then drops it into his mouth. It is from this that he dies"; cf. also *Kallah rabbati* 52b.

stage of the ultramundane voyage that brings the soul into a new dimension.

This *Zohar*ic interpretation amassed a vast fortune in the later Kabbalistic literature. It was taken up again, almost literally, during the second half of the sixteenth century, by Mošeh Cordovero in his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates),360 while another famous Kabbalist from Safed, Ḥayyim Vital, reinterpreted the theme of the cup of staggering, applying it to the archetypical death of all of humanity, that is to say, to the transgression of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. In fact, according to Vital, the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge was in reality nothing but a "turbid wine, full of sediment [...] Adam and Eve drank a cup of staggering of that wine, a portion of the external forces, called 'part of death,' and thereby rendered themselves guilty, and brought death upon themselves."361 Carrying the symbolic vocation of kos to its extreme consequences, the Kabbalah makes it into the instrument of the very beginning of man's destiny, projecting the complex metaphorical representation of the cup into the primeval conceptual space of the Garden of Eden.

## לילה Laylah
## Night

"What difference is there between this and all other nights?" This question, which is repeated year after year during the ritual celebration of Pesaḥ, the Jewish feast of Passover, summarizes the nocturnal epic of the exodus, with which the Bible describes the sudden liberation of the Jews from Egyptian slavery. The symbolism of Pesaḥ is emphasized by the word laylah, "night," which recurs five times, defining the divine intervention in a sequence of excited actions. The tale is divided into

two distinct scenes, almost two different nights that run parallel, one marked by the Jews' prearranged actions, the other dominated by the terror that befalls the Egyptians: For I will pass through the land of Egypt this night, and will strike all the firstborn [...] both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgment; I am the Lord (Exod. 12.12). Following precise divine instruction, the Jews mark the door posts and jambs of their houses with lamb's blood to protect them from the passage of the angel of death. This action has the value of an apotropaic ritual, which dispels death through its own signs.362 By the Lord's orders—none of you shall go out from the door of his house until the morning—the Hebrew quarters are deserted and, at midnight, the land succumbs to the divine revenge: And Pharaoh rose up in the night [...] and there was a great cry in Egypt; for there was not a house where there was not one dead (Exod. 12.22-30). As if the event had needed to remain completely in darkness, Pharaoh hurriedly summons the Israelites in order to expel them: And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, Rise up, and get out from among my people. With breathless gestures, the Egyptians incite the Jews, attempting to send them out of the land in haste, trying to dispel them as one would dispel a frightening, nocturnal terror (Exod. 12.31-33). In the conclusion of the episode, the night reappears as the interpretive key, and as the element that unites the past event to the duty of memory: This is a night of watching kept to the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout their generations (Exod. 12.42).

The story of the exodus encapsulates a significant part of the Biblical symbolism of the night, characterized by danger and menace, and generally felt as the dominion of fear and anxiety, although sometimes offering protection in its darkness. If nighttime is, in fact, in

the Bible, when enemy dangers are most frequently encountered, it is nonetheless the moment that permits escape, transforming the anguish of the victims into liberation.

The night is the theatre for the brisk ambushes of guerilla warfare, or for raids on cities—permitting easier conquests as the guard is less alert—and is also the occasion for theft and deadly traps: The murderer rising with the light kills the poor and needy, and in the night he is like a thief (Job 24.14). In the many war scenes narrated in the historical books, the fighters often act at night, to benefit from its advantages and to obviate their own numerical inferiority. In some cases it is the Lord, who recommends this tactic, alerting the Jewish leaders: And it came to pass the same night, that the Lord said to him, Arise, get down to the camp; for I have delivered it into your hand (Judg. 7.9); in other cases, nocturnal sorties are the fruit of the warriors' astuteness, as in the tale of the revolt of the Shechemites, in which Zebul instructs Abimelech: Now therefore rise up by night, you and the people who are with you, and lie in wait in the field (Judg. 9.32). Nocturnal flight is also often the only escape that remains to the defeated, as in the desperate attempt of King Zedekiah to leave Jerusalem, which had already fallen prey to the Babylonians: And it came to pass, that when

Zedekiah the king of Judah saw them, and all the men of war, then they fled, and went forth out of the city by night, by the way of the king´s garden, by the gate between the two walls; and he went out the way of the Arabah (Jer. 39.4).

Yet darkness is not inhabited only by fear and danger in the nights, against which it is necessary to defend oneself with a sword at one's side (Song 3.8); it also arouses visions in which the Lord shows himself to man, to disclose the future to him and to advise him. The "nocturnal vision" frequently occurs in the Bible, linking the patriarchs of Israel (such as Jacob) and the pagan prophets (such as Balaam); the zeal that takes hold of Elijah and the allegoric premonitions of Daniel. So, in the nocturnal silence, the divine call can resound, as for example when God orders Jacob to accept Joseph's invitation to Egypt: And God spoke to Israel in the visions of the night, and said, Jacob, Jacob [...] fear not to

go down to Egypt (Gen. 46.2-3). Alternatively, the hollow spaces of dreams can expand into scenes in which the travails of nature anticipate the disruption of events: I saw in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of heaven stirred up the great sea (Dan. 7.2). The night is, in this sense, knowledge, since it permits a direct relationship with the divine that seems impossible during the day. In fact, the nighttime hours bring an intuitive awareness which is often entrusted to a dream, though sometimes also to a silent meditation or to song and praise. The unconsciousness of sleep seems almost to be a form of divine guidance, which unravels the intricacy of conscious actions: I will bless the Lord, who has given me counsel; my insides363 also instruct me in the night seasons (Ps. 16.7). Nocturnal solitude gives rise to the search for God, often only intensely alluded to: With my soul have I desired you in the night; yes, with my spirit within me I seek you (Isa. 26.9).

In some places in the book of Psalms, this colloquium with the divine develops into a prayer, which during the night

becomes song: At midnight I will rise to give thanks to you because of your righteous judgments (Ps. 119.62).364 This individual devotion also provides a glimpse of a collective custom, that is of the celebration of religious festivals after sunset: You shall have a song, as in the night when a holy solemnity is kept; and gladness of heart, as when one goes with a flute (Isa. 30.29). The religious function of the nocturnal song is also demonstrated by a passage of the book of Job, in which the joyous hymns are said to derive directly from God, who gives songs in the night (Job 35.10). In the original Hebrew of this verse, God is called noten zemirot ba-laylah, which literally means "he who gives songs in the night," bearing a double meaning of causing a hymn to be heard in the darkness,365 or causing song to be born in the singer, almost entrusting it to him by inner suggestion.366

Finally, the nighttime provides for the expression of sexuality, as the time for legitimate conjugal unions or for forbidden relations, which find protection in the pause of social activities. The first erotic event played out at night in the Scriptures is precisely the tale of a

transgression. The protagonists are the children of Noah, who are accomplices in the intoxication of their father in order to lie with him. The word laylah is, in this case, repeated three times, in three consecutive verses, both to underline the setting that renders possible the sisters' plan, and to emphasize their pride about the incident: The firstborn said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night[367] with my father; let us make him drink wine this night also; and you go

in, and lie with him, that we may preserve seed of our father (Gen. 19.34).

In other Biblical episodes, the night is also a time that is longed for, as the natural moment to fulfill desires. It is again an agreement between two sisters—this time Rachel and Leah competing for Jacob—to arrange for the coming night and for the sexual union with the man. The agreement has almost the tone of a commercial transaction. Ruben, son of Leah, found some mandrakes, and Rachel, in order to have them for herself, is disposed to hand over her husband for a night: Therefore he shall lie with you to night for your son's mandrake (Gen. 30.15). In the evening, when Jacob came in from the fields, Leah went out to meet him and invited him to her: You must come in to me [...] And he lay with her that night (Gen. 30.16). The post-Biblical tradition goes as far as to formally rule out the possibility of sexual relations during the day, relegating it to immoral behavior. In fact, according to a maxim contained in the Babylonian Talmud, "It is forbidden to perform one's marital duty in the day-time [...] The night is thus set aside for conception but the day is not set aside for conception."[368] Rabbis' convictions regarding this issue were so strong that they even personified nocturnal conception, imagining an angel in charge of the union between man and woman, named Laylah—"Night"—who "takes up a drop [of sperm] and places it in the presence of the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, 'Sovereign of the universe, what shall be the fate of this drop? Shall it produce a strong man or a weak man, a wise man or a fool, a rich man or a poor man?'"[369]

The invention of the angel Night was part of the many legends of Late Antiquity featuring nocturnal wonders, as well as of the emphasis

that the rabbis of the age placed on the idea of the wondrous as an attribute of darkness. The long inventory

of miracles recorded by the Haggadah includes rivers that flow only at night (such as the Jordan in the midraš Genesis Rabbah),370 and demons such as Igrat, daughter of Maḥalat, who travels by night with her carriage,371 or another supernatural being named Šimadon, who goes around killing newborns who still have not had their umbilical cords cut.372 A nocturnal instrument is the harp which hung above David's bed, and which, at midnight, when touched by the north wind, "played of itself. David arose immediately and studied the Torah till the break of dawn."373

Along with this narrative expansion, in the Judaism of the first centuries of the Common Era, the night also underwent an allegorical interpretation, casting it as the image of the existing world, while the day symbolized the world to come. The correspondence between darkness and historical reality was born from the experience of exile, and received ample treatment in numerous texts, from its first Talmudic references to its richest early medieval developments. In the midraš Song of Songs Rabbah, probably composed towards the middle of the sixth century, the succession of exiles is thus assimilated into a chain of nights that follow one another, at first with short intervals of light, but becoming increasingly rapid and oppressive: "Sovereign of the Universe, formerly Thou wert wont to give light to me between one night and another—between the night of Egypt and the night of Babylon, between the night of Babylon and the night of Media [...] but now that I sleep neglectful of the Torah and the precepts, one night follows immediately on another."374 In a work of a later period, the Alfa

beta de-rabbi 'Aqiva (Alphabet of Rabbi 'Aqiva), written around the eighth century, attention is instead focused on the equivalence between nocturnal dangers and the menaces of foreign governments, which are represented as animals waiting in ambush in the darkness: "This world is compared to the night, and the sovereigns of the nations are equal to beasts that leap out of the woods, thus all [...] the powerful

of the earth, when the reign of the Messiah comes upon them, will return to their woods, to their dens."375

The Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages also addressed the night, in which they sought a favorable dimension for communicating with God. They emphasized the spiritual values, and the possibilities for concentration, afforded by the nighttime. A long oration on the night is thus found in the Kitāb al-hidāya ilā fara'iṯ al-qulūb (The Book of Instruction on the Duties of the Heart) of Baḥya ibn Paquda, a philosopher who lived in Muslim Spain in the second half of the eleventh century. Written in Arabic in around 1080, the text was translated into Hebrew about a century later with the title Ḥovot ha-levavot, becoming a classic manual of Jewish devotion thanks to its clear exposition of the inner obligations and of the moral value of duties. Baḥya discusses the advantages of nocturnal prayer in a chapter dedicated to the "true love of God," explaining that "it is purer than prayer conducted during the day, for different reasons. The first reason is that the bodily desires for food and drink are lesser during the night, the second is that in the night one has more time at one's disposal [...] Third, guests must not be welcomed at night [...] The fourth reason is that in the night the senses repose from perception [...] the fifth is that at night, when man remains mostly alone, he distances himself from hypocrisy [...] and finally the night is the moment in which lovers remain alone and those who are dear to one another find a little solitude."376 This passage provides the ancient Jewish custom of nocturnal devo-

tion with the precise demonstrative structure of medieval thought, which sees in the intensity of the oration a series of causes as much physical as social and cultural. The concluding observation borrows a concept widespread in the mystical Islamic tradition, namely the individual relationship between the devotee and God experienced as an amorous meeting, as found in the canons of Sufi spiritualism.377

Along with this conception of the night as time directed inwards, medieval Jewish speculation also developed the cosmological value of the alternation between light and darkness, rendering the cyclical

absence of the sun almost a location in the universe's geography. For El'azar of Worms (ca. 1165–ca. 1230), "Night" is, for example, the name of the nocturnal course of the mystical river Dinur, which symbolizes the sun's voyage. In fact, according to El'azar, the travel of the sun follows the course of this flaming river, which winds through the regions of the daytime sky in order to penetrate, after sunset, an invisible space, where it changes its own name to "Night" and advances into a landscape that is "all water, proceeding in a sort of marsh."378 In the map of the world preserved by this Ashkenazic mystic, "night" is thus the epithet of a hidden region, dominion par excellence of the mysterious and unknowable, like a hidden cave that receives the solar disk after it has fallen at the horizon.

Towards the middle of the thirteenth century, the idea that the symbolism of the night could be closely bound to prophetic inspiration, or, better stated, to the vision of all of the prophets (with the exception of Moses), became popular among the Sephardic Kabbalists. In fact, according to a concept expressed

in the Sefer ha-emunah we-ha-biṭṭaḥon (The Book of Faith and Trust), attributed to Ya'aqov ben Šešet (mid-13th century), Moses reached true knowledge of God during the day, thanks to a direct rapport with the sefirah tif'eret (beauty), while the other prophets perceived divine reality as if through an opaque mirror "that is called 'night.'"379 Although in a very different context from that imagined by El'azar of Worms some decades earlier, night once again became a conceptual place. In this case it designated the aggregation of celestial forces with a level of intensity corresponding to the sefirah malkut (kingdom), whose astral symbol is the moon.

In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), which, at the end of the thirteenth century, summarized the mystical Sephardic doctrines, night retained a strong spatial connotation, but was also transformed into the setting of a celestial meeting between God and the souls: "Therefore every night the souls of the righteous mount on high, and at the hour of midnight the Holy One, blessed be He, comes to the Garden of Eden to delight Himself with them. With which of them?

Rabbi Yosi said, 'With all: both with those whose abode is in the other world and with those who are still in their dwellings in this world.'"380 The author then explains how the souls of the deceased are already in the garden, while those of the living detach themselves from the body during sleep, in order to rise to their celestial origin. In the celebration of this nocturnal meeting, a particular function is also entrusted to "all the truly righteous [who] arise at midnight to read the Torah and to sing psalms." The earthly recitation of the sacred text then becomes a reason for pleasure for "the Holy One, blessed be He, and for all the righteous in the Garden of Eden that listen to it." Moreover, it becomes a source of protection for those who dedicate themselves to nocturnal study, since, in this way, "a certain grace is imparted to them by day."381

During the second half of the sixteenth century, Ḥayyim Vital reinterpreted these *Zohar*ic images in his fundamental exposition of the teachings of his master Yiṣḥaq Luria. For the rich narrative of the medieval text, Vital substituted a mystical physiology described in an objective tone, which singularly contrasts with the utopian connotations of the *Zohar*ic night. Nighttime here becomes the occasion for an essential regeneration of man's equilibrium, and for the efficiency of his cognitive faculty, since "the soul of man, which resides in the brain, rises every night [...] is impregnated, inside malkut, with a full pregnancy, thus fully renewing itself."382 In the Lurianic cosmology, the nighttime is therefore the right moment for the divine masculine principle to join with malkut, the feminine; the feminine, becoming pregnant, restores life to the souls that have taken refuge there, and that are now able to descend again at the end of the night, with new energy. For this reason, the night assumes the symbolic connotation of an upward elevation, and in particular of a movement in the only direction that guarantees man the restitution of his spiritual integrity.

Lev לֵב
Heart

The heart, lev, recurs in the Hebrew Scriptures more than 750 times.383 This large number of instances makes lev one of the most frequent common nouns in the Biblical text, behind such fundamental words as melek, "king," and 'am, "people," but ahead of many other very often used words such as mayim "water," and har, "mountain."384 With lev, Hebrew designates the center of man's interior, as the seat not only of the will, of the passions and courage, but also of consciousness and memory. At times it becomes a sort of secret complement, or double, of the external part of the body (for which the term baśar, "flesh" is used), or of certain individual parts of the body, such as the head, eyes, ears, mouth, hands, limbs, and even bones: Set me as a seal upon your heart—we read in Songs (8.6)—as a seal upon your arm. The heart is the hidden root of human actions, and directly presides over each of the parts which allow for the external expression of its aptitudes and decisions. The heart can become the direct subject of some of the senses, such as sight and hearing: My heart has seen much, affirms Ecclesiastes (1.16) with disenchantment; Give therefore your servant a heart that listens (1Kings 3.9), Solomon asks of the Lord.

In some Biblical passages, moreover, the heart quivers, warms up, shatters, melts like wax, or, on the contrary, hardens like stone. In Psalm 22, for example, the image of the heart that melts like wax under the flame of a fire is at the center of a singular comparison between psychological confusion and the

fleeting character of the elements: I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint; my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; and my tongue cleaves to my jaws (Ps. 22.15-16). Ezekiel makes the heart of stone the representation, which has since become paradigmatic, of insensitivity and the incapability of listening to the divine message: A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put inside you; and I will take away the heart of stone from your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh (Ezek. 36.26).

In Jeremiah's invective against Israel, a final order is addressed to the people: Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, and take away the foreskins of your heart [...] lest my fury come forth like fire (Jer. 4.4). The circumcision of the heart is perhaps the most extreme stage of the symbolic process, which attributes visible traits to that which is interior, since the profound decision in favor of conversion to God reaches the point of assuming the same attributes with the manifest sign that sanctions Israel's pact with the Lord.385

In a figurative sense, the heart is also used in expressions that indicate the deepest parts, or the middle point, of a whole; thus, for example, the expressions "the heart of the sea,"386 "in the heart of the days,"387 and "in the heart of the enemies"388 define an almost physical lowering into the midst of elements and situations.

The phrase "speak with a double heart"389 indicates insincere and deceitful speech. In this formulation, the division of the heart represents the contrast between honest intentions and the deformation of reality, caused by a sort of inner diffraction,

in which the personality loses its center and surrenders to falsity.390

Finally, the heart is the focus of the divine gaze which inquires into the conduct of man: You have tested my heart; you have visited me in the night; you have tested me, and found nothing; let my mouth *not transgress* (Ps. 17.3). The text here conveys the idea of an almost anxious inquiry that unfolds in the silent interval of the nocturnal hours, when mental defenses seem to be lowered. God's scrutiny—like a crucible that separates slag from precious metal—determines the heart's purity or impurity. Therefore, the man who sets off to walk along the path of interiority must penetrate the heart, imitating the impassioned attention that God dedicates to the world's creatures, to delve into the deep water that, in another Biblical image, preserves the inclinations of the human spirit: Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out.391

The rabbis of the first centuries gave this passage a reading that made the descent into the heart one of the most fascinating themes of Judaism. The image of the heart of deep water is in fact used to describe the passion that tormented Joseph during his meeting with his brothers. The episode (Gen. 44) contains a long dialogue, in which Judah, in order to understand Joseph's true intentions and to induce him to reveal them, revisits all of the phases of the conversation, as well as his brother's actions. His attention to detail is rather uncommon for the Biblical text. Grasping the thrust of the passage of Proverbs that affirms, Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out, in the midraš Genesis

Rabbah, Judah's effort, which forces its way into his brother's memories, is compared to a long rope that draws water from a deep well. "This may be compared to a deep well full of cold and excellent water, yet none could drink of it. Then came one who tied cord to cord and thread to thread, drew up its water and drank, whereupon all drew water thus and drank thereof. In the same way Judah did not cease from answering Joseph word for word until he penetrated to his very heart."392

The Biblical tale can therefore be read as an anticipation of the rabbinic method of exegesis and teaching, where words are the

instruments that allow one to venture beyond appearance, towards deep consciousness. Much like Judah, who, in urgent circumstances, finds the strength to rouse Joseph, the Jewish masters discussed the Scriptures with intense emotion, as if questions needed to be asked all together and all at once, in order to penetrate the surface of the text. Since this method did not follow an abstract, rational line, but relied on the heuristic capability of the inner dialogue, this exegetical course became a genuine way of the heart.

From the Middle Ages, the Kabbalists adopted the image of the heart to describe the radiation of the divine force throughout creation. This transformation of the human organ into a cosmic symbol originates from the correspondence between the numerical value of the word lev (lb, 32) and the thirty-two ways of wisdom. In fact, according to the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation)—one of the oldest Jewish mystical texts—the creative force of God diffuses through the cosmos by the thirty-two paths, thanks to which each particle of creation receives the energy that sustains it. Since the letters used to indicate the number thirty-two are, in Hebrew, the same as those that designate the heart, the passage from the dynamic notion of the ways of wisdom to that of a pulsing heart of creation seemed completely natural to the first Kabbalists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The metaphor of the heart actually appears several times in the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), a fundamental mystical text, probably written in the twelfth century. Here the heart is the center that gathers God's hidden energy and then spreads it in all directions. By means of numerical correspondence, the Bahir connects lev and kavod, the divine glory (kbwd is also equal to 32), thus making the heart the source of supernal light: "Rabbi Reḥuma'y affirmed: 'Glory (kavod) and heart (lev) are one: glory derives its name from its higher function, the heart from its lower function.' That is to say the glory of the Lord and the heart of heaven (Deut. 4.11)."393

In his commentary on the Sefer yeṣirah, Moses Nachmanides (1194-1270) developed the symbolism of the heart in a singular way: developing the notion of the heart as the seat of the will,394

Nachmanides makes it the point of both departure and arrival of the entire cosmic cycle. The divine heart, he writes, "is in fact that which supports everything, as long as the will dwells in it. Lev (lb) will change into bal (bl), 'not,' when the will turns back, causing the return of all things to their essence, like a person drawing breath into himself."[395] Thanks to this play of correspondences between lev and the Hebrew negation bal, the heart, inasmuch as it is the principle of divine construction, also becomes here the origin of deconstruction, that is to say of that de-creation which, according to the Kabbalah, will obliterate the world at the end of the present era: like a man's breathing, the breath of the cosmos is articulated in two phases, but—contrary to what happens in physical experience—a disintegrating inhalation follows a life-giving exhalation.

If, for Nachmanides, the binary rhythm of the heart symbolized a flow between positive and negative, in other texts of the Jewish tradition, lev became an image of the simultaneous presence of two elements. Within the vast span of his writings, Ḥayyim Vital, the famous student of the sixteenth century mystic Yiṣḥaq Luria, left a dissertation on the double nature of the heart. In his capacity as a physician, he begins with a physical fact: "It is known," he writes in the Sefer ha-derušim (The Book of Explanation), "that the heart has two cavities, one on the right and one on the left, which refer to the two hearts of evil and good inclinations, and correspond to the two daughters of Israel, the lower Šekinah and the higher Šekinah."[396] In this way, the heart's "positive" part becomes the sign of the supernal Šekinah (the Divine Presence), corresponding to the sefirah binah (intelligence), while the "negative" heart refers to the lower Šekinah, that is to the sefirah malkut (kingdom).

Vital's Kabbalistic elaboration leads to the extremes of plays on references—initiated by the rabbis of the Haggadah[397]—between the heart and the two antithetical and complementary principles of creation. Continuing his treatment, he finally affirms that the heart of the right side indicates the Tetragrammaton, and is equivalent to the figure of Abel, while the heart of the left side represents the name

Elohim, and corresponds to Cain. Therefore, the Lurianic Kabbalah does not hesitate to trace a continuous line between the ethical conflict of the human experience and the opposition of the celestial principles: the material world, with its tendency to evil and death, descends from the left heart of creation—that is, from the name Elohim, which constantly occurs in the Biblical tale of Genesis—while the right heart is the transcendent princi-

ple of divinity, which gives origin to the beneficial and vital impulse.

"The one and the other heart"—concludes Vital—"correspond to two trees, the tree of knowledge and that of life." In this passage the right heart is compared to the tree of life, while the left represents the tree of knowledge, whose fruit was consumed by Adam and Eve.398 By this last correspondence, Vital identifies the physical center of man with the middle point of the entire creation, extending the boundaries of the heart up to the mythical space of the garden of origins.

לילית Lilit

Demon of constant presence in the nightmares of the entire ancient Orient, Lilit appears only once in the text of the Scriptures, briefly mentioned in the book of Isaiah. In the description of the desolate landscape of the land of Edom after the Lord devastated every corner of it in order to punish the sinners, the prophet lists the disturbing figures that populate the ruins. Counted among the savage beasts, Lilit is a true malign spirit, a spectral being who seems to emerge from the desert fantasy: And thorns shall come up in her palaces, nettles and brambles in its fortresses [...] The wild beasts of the desert shall also meet with the jackals; the wild goat399 shall cry to his fellow; and Lilit also shall rest there, and find for herself a place of rest (Isa. 34.13-14). This terrifying female figure, whom Jewish folklore imagines with long, thick hair and endowed with wings, seems here to find respite for a short moment from her incessant flight.

Already present in the Sumerian epic of the third millennium BCE, with the name ki-sikil-líl-lá, this demon returns in the Akkadian texts, sometimes referring to the dominion of the tempest winds but, more often, she appears as a sign of disturbance and sexual transgression, in the guise of an insatiable female.400 The prophet Isaiah could count on the powerful evocative capacity of even the mention of her name, even if the spirit's physical traits probably already seemed, in the ancient world, inconstant and elusive. Symmachus' Greek version of the Bible, for example,

renders Lilit as lamia, demonstrating an identification between the frightening being of Semitic legend and the evil demon of popular

Greek belief,401 which lived only in woods or crevasses and tried to kill children.402

In the Jewish tradition, Lilit moved rapidly and traveled with the wind, taking its somber sound as her vehicle. The name's etymon was sometimes connected to the root yll, which means "to lament," "to wail," almost as if a sinister groan constantly accompanied her roaming.403 Nevertheless, the sound of this troubling demon's name also recalled another Hebrew word, laylah, "the night,"404 and, indeed, darkness seemed to be her preferred domain of action, when solitude rendered her victims more vulnerable.

The rabbis of the post-Biblical literature provided plentiful instructions for evading Lilit's menaces, above all advising people to avoid lonely places. In the treatise Šabbat in the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Ḥanina, who lived between the end of the third and the beginning of the fourth centuries of the Common Era, admonishes: "One may not sleep in a house alone, and whoever sleeps in a house alone is seized by Lilit."405 Another

Talmudic passage traces an unusual parallel between Lilit and the negative aspects of femininity, enumerating among its condemnations of the woman's condition the fact that "she grows long hair like Lilit."406 In an odd exchange of attributes, the long, unkempt hair of the demon becomes the model for female hair, and not vice versa, signifying the archetypical function of a perverse femininity that will characterize Lilit throughout the entire subsequent Judaic tradition. Lilit does not fail to insinuate herself even into the difficult moment of birth, at times giving life to monstrous fetuses, depicted as having half human and half demonic features: "Rabbi Yose stated, 'It once happened [...] that a woman aborted the likeness of Lilit, and when the case came up for a decision before the Sages, they ruled that it was a child but that it also had wings.'"407

The demon assails newborns by preference. In the midraš Tanḥuma, composed in the early Middle Ages but containing extensive ancient material, it is affirmed that "when she does not find anything else, [she] turns against her own children."408 Lilit is also recognized as having

the capacity to procreate, although a malediction has hung over her progeny since the beginning of creation. In the Alfa beta de-Ven Sira (The Alphabet of Ben Sira), composed in the East, probably in the eighth or ninth century, it is stated that "when the Lord, blessed be He, created the first man, he said: It is not good if he remains without a companion, and therefore He created a woman for him, and she was also made from the earth, to whom He gave the name Lilit."409 But the demon's rebellious spirit manifested itself immediately, and she began to argue with her companion, saying: "'I do not want to lie underneath,' while he, in response, sustained: 'I am the one who does not want to lie

underneath, but on top, since you are destined to be underneath and I on top.' She answered: 'We are not different from one another, since we both originate from the earth.' But they could not agree, and when Lilit realized this she pronounced the ineffable name and went flying around the world."410 To induce her to return, the Lord's angels set off in pursuit of her and threatened her that "a hundred of her children would die every day [...] but she answered them: 'Leave me alone, since I was created precisely to threaten newborn males until the eighth day after their birth, and the females to the twentieth.'"411 When the angels heard this response, they compelled her to swear that she would not bring harm to babies for whom angelic images or names had been written upon amulets placed for their protection.

The legends of Lilit were amplified and enriched still further in Kabbalistic literature, which adopted this ancient oriental demon as a many-sided queen of evil. At the end of the thirteenth century, the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) made, for example, Lilit the usual companion of Samma'el, the malign adversary of Israel. The two are represented as joined in a diabolic embrace: Samma'el rides his mate, who assumed the form of a camel or a serpent.412 This couple, Samma'el and Lilit, symbolically contrasts with the mystical union of the Šekinah (the Divine Presence) with her bridegroom, in that it pairs evil and harmful: "As it happens in the side of holiness, in the other side there are male and female as well, united together. The female of Samma'el is called 'serpent', 'prostitute wife', 'end of every flesh', 'end

of days.' The two evil spirits are linked together; the male spirit is subtle, while the female spreads below through many ways."413 Samma'el is called

"subtle" here inasmuch as he symbolizes the spirit of evil, while Lilit, in her dominion of negativity, is entrusted with more concrete, specific matter.

In the mystical speculation of the fifth and sixth centuries, Lilit's apparitions multiply to the point of originating an intricate superimposition of personages and a variety of Lilits, each in charge of a particular demonic sphere. According to Mošeh Cordovero, who wrote in the sixteenth century, drawing upon rich medieval material, there are "two Lilits, one small and one large. The bigger is the companion of Samma'el, woman of whoredom, while the smaller is the concubine of Asmodeus."414 Of the "small Lilit" it is said "that she has a charming female shape from the head down to the navel, while from the navel down she is darting flames."415 In order to gain her favor, Samma'el enters into discord with Asmodeus, an inferior demon, "to whom harmfulness is conceded the second day of the week only."416

Regarding the "bigger" Lilit, Cordovero adds the tale of a special function of hers, which she carries out on the day of Kippur. On the occasion of this festival she goes to the desert, together with 480 warriors, her subordinates, in order to clash with another of Samma'el's concubines. The two ranks confront each other, singing songs in the Hebrew language, and "there in the desert, they fight against each other, until their voices rise up to the sky and shake the earth. The Lord, blessed be He, does all of this so that the accusers do not bring injury to Israel."417 Since during the festival of Kippur the Jews admit their sins to God, it is necessary that the demons

לויתן Liwyatan
Leviathan

It is God himself who describes, with an abundance of details, the portentous appearance of Leviathan. In an ample passage of the book of Job, the Lord challenges the protagonist to contend with the enormous strength of this aquatic monster, king of all ferocious beasts (Job 41.26). The Biblical text, reaching here a summit of lexical richness sparing no descriptive minutiae, reviews the animal's members one by one, representing its movements with swift animation: He makes the deep boil like a pot; he makes the sea like a pot of ointment. After him he leaves a shining wake; one would think the deep to be hoary (Job 41.23-24). Even when it moves in water, the Leviathan is presented as a shining apparition that spurts fire and flames: His sneezings flash forth light, and his eyes are like the eyelids of the morning [...] His breath kindles coals, and a flame goes out of his mouth (Job 41.10-13). In this passage, the primordial dragon—which later exegeses would sometimes identify with the crocodile—symbolizes the unbridgeable gap that separates man from the numinous force of nature.

In other places in the Scriptures, Leviathan is even a multi-headed monster that becomes the central figure in a titanic struggle against the divine. Following a pattern of primeval battle that can be found throughout the entire ancient Near East, in Psalm 74,418 God's heroic gestures at the beginning of creation are described:419 You parted the sea by your strength;

you broke the heads of the crocodiles in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan, and gave him for food to the people inhabiting the wilderness (Ps. 74.13-14). This representation, set in a mythical past, provides a counterpoint to the prophecy of Isaiah, in which God's battle with Leviathan alludes to future events: On that day the Lord with his hard, great and strong sword shall punish Leviathan the flying serpent, Leviathan that crooked serpent; and he shall slay the crocodile that is in the sea (Isa. 27.1). The killing of Leviathan is presented here as the crowning achievement of the events that, in the age to come, will mark the redemption of Israel and its liberation from the people who oppress it. The monster of the origins is thus transformed into a metaphor for evil. Behind the hyperbole of the fantastic animal crowd the swarms of pagan peoples who will be punished and annihilated in the time to come.

The terrible aura of portent, struggle, and death that surrounds many of the Biblical descriptions of Leviathan eases up in a passage of Psalm 104, a long hymn to God the creator, which represents one of the most relaxed moments of Biblical poetry. The vision of God playing with the marine monster culminates in a series of images that describe the harmony of creation and the beneficial rhythm of the day and the seasons: So is this great and wide sea, where there are innumerable creeping things, living things, both small and great. There go the ships; and Leviathan which you have made to play in it (Ps. 104.25-26).420

An animal endowed with such extraordinary attributes could not fail to capture the imaginations of the exegetes of the subsequent ages.421 In fact, in the texts of rabbinic literature, some of the Leviathan's characteristics undergo a further legendary

revision. During the first centuries of the Common Era, narratives flourished concerning improbable encounters with this primordial monster, involving Jewish sages in the course of voyages at sea. In the treatise Bava batra of the Babylonian Talmud, which gathers various traditions regarding the Leviathan, one reads, among others, the tale of Rabbi Safra, a sage who lived in the first half of the fourth century, who was also an active merchant.422 "Once we traveled on board a ship"—narrates the rabbi—"and we saw a fish that raised its head out of the sea. It had horns, on which were engraved: 'I am a minor creature of the sea, I am three hundred parasangs [in length] and I am [now] going into the mouth of Leviathan.'"423 In another passage of the Talmud, one can read the story of two sages at sea: while one is sleeping, the other, who had remained awake, suddenly shudders. Rabbi Eli'ezer then woke up and asked his companion: "'What is the matter, Joshua? What has caused you to tremble?' He said unto him: 'I have seen a great light in the sea.' He said unto him: 'You may have seen the eyes of Leviathan, for it is written: His eyes are like the eyelids of the morning (Job 41.10).'"424

The marine monster also appears in some narratives concerning the future era. According to the midraš Leviticus Rabbah, Leviathan and Behemoth—another legendary inhabitant of the sea—engage in a battle to entertain the righteous of the world to come, similar to the shows of the gladiators that took place in pagan cities.425 At the end of this titanic fight, both of the animals are dead, and with the meat of the Leviathan the Lord lays a banquet for the righteous. Even the pagan Anthony, who in the Haggadah personifies the legendary type of Roman

emperor, would ask the Jewish sages to be allowed to eat of Leviathan, something that would naturally be denied to him.426

In ancient times, the figure of the gigantic marine serpent probably also carried a suggestion of sexual symbolism, even if Jewish folklore allows only some fleeting hints to shine through. In the midraš Genesis Rabbah, the Leviathan is, for example, denied sexual desire,427 while, in another version of the same legend, God created both a male and

female Leviathan: "And had they mated with one another they would have destroyed the whole world. What [then] did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He castrated the male and killed the female, preserving it in salt for the righteous in the world to come."428 The image of Leviathan's flesh conserved in salt is perhaps the echo of a motif that filters through from other passages of the Haggadah. In fact, the mythical animal was sometimes identified with the Dead Sea (which is called Yam ha-melaḥ, "sea of salt," in Hebrew), so that the Jordan River is said to flow "into the mouth of Leviathan."429 Nevertheless, the real reason for the killing of the female is provided in a peculiar marginal note by the rabbis of the Talmud: "There is Leviathan whom Thou hast formed to sport with, and with a female this is not proper."430

The verse of Psalms that mentions the Lord spending his time with Leviathan also offers a cue for a surprising description of how God organizes his day. According to Rav, the great Babylonian sage who lived in the third century of the Common Era, "The day consists of twelve hours; during the first three hours the Holy One, blessed be He, dedicates Himself to the Torah, during the second three He sits in judgment on the whole world [...] during the third quarter, He is feeding the whole world [...] during the fourth quarter He is sporting with Leviathan." [360] In this way, Rav solves the hermeneutical problem represented by the divine game, with the smiling affability typical of the Haggadic tales.

In the medieval era, with the establishment of Kabbalistic thought, the mythical image of the marine dragon also found its way into the theosophical structure of the world of the sefirot. In the early thirteenth century, Leviathan appears in a commentary on Song of Songs of 'Ezra of Gerona, in which it is placed in a relationship to the sefirah of the kingdom, malkut, represented by the Šekinah, the divine Presence. Leviathan's play is then assimilated into the angelic liturgy, which the mystical tradition imaged as happening around the divine throne: "And God created the great crocodiles, and every kind of

360

creature that live in the waters (Gen. 1.21). This refers to the four encampments that surround the Šekinah, and with regard to which it is said: and Leviathan which you have made to play in it (Ps. 104.26). The Lord, blessed be He, created it to praise and exalt [the Šekinah] with songs and praise."[361] In this passage, the legendary character of the monster of the abyss almost vanishes in a symbolic transfer of the image toward the ultramundane sphere, in which Leviathan assumes traits of a rarefied angelic nature.

Much more definite, and more often inclined to narrative renderings, is the presence of the dragon in the pages of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), composed toward the end of the thirteenth century. Here its rapid appearances animate the course of theoretical speculation. In this work, Leviathan often plays the role of a menacing and destructive creature which can be roused either by the actions of man or by the ineluctable recurrence of the cosmic cycle. When, for example, a blasphemy is pronounced, lurid spirits grab hold of it, and with it "reawaken the serpent called Leviathan that crooked serpent (Isa. 27.1), with the aim of heaping maledictions onto the entire world."[362] In another passage, the story tells of how, "on a certain day, the Leviathan goes out in the great sea, which is all boiling. The fish flee to one side or the other, but when he reaches the gate of the abyss he begins to rejoice and the waves become still [...] he takes a precious stone out of the water [...] only on that day [...] on the occurrence of the destruction of the Temple."[363]

In the section of the *Zohar* titled *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shepherd), we find an allusive verdict on Leviathin's sefirotic position, hidden beneath the typical symbolic vocabulary of the work. "Who is the Leviathan? [...] It is he whose level corresponds to the median column and the Righteous: of which it is said: We consider the body and the covenant to be one."435 Since the "median column" indicates the sefirah of beauty, tif'eret, and the Righteous designates that of the

361

362

363

foundation, yesod, the aquatic beast represents in this case, simultaneously, the union of these two different levels. On a physical level, too, this conjunction signifies the equivalence between the human body and the circumcised male member, a sign of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.[364]

A long discussion on the metaphoric meaning of Leviathan is contained in the Sefer be'er ha-golah (The Book of the Well of Exile) of Yehudah Löw ben Beṣal'el, who was active in Prague in the sixteenth century. According to this erudite rabbi, known by the acronym "Maharal", the traditions relating to the marine dragon allude to God's involvement in earthly affairs. On the basis of an etymology also proposed by other interpreters, Maharal derives the word Liwyatan from the root lwh, which means "to unite," and affirms that the monster's name already alludes to the concept of union. He then takes up once more the Talmudic parable of the four phases of the divine day, interpreting it as the Lord's increasing intimacy with his creatures. The true union with creation will nevertheless occur only in the final quarter, namely, in the three hours reserved for playing with Leviathan. The legendary beast therefore represents the greatest level of God's bond with the world, while all other beings unite with the supernal principle in decreasing measure, depending on their level of completeness.

Maharal's analysis continues with an exegesis of the verb that, in the text of Psalms 104, designates God's play with Leviathan. Since le-śaḥeq in Hebrew means both "to play" as well as "to laugh," the verse of the psalm becomes the cue for some observations on laughter: "The essence of laughter," the Prague sage comments, "is the union of the will with an object," and "laughter in itself has nothing negative." He maintains therefore that laughter, as much as joy, is completely positive, since it indicates "the state of fullness." According to Maharal, laughter alone denotes in a perfect way the Lord's bond with creation, as demonstrated by the verb chosen by the author of the psalm, who did

364

not write that God "delighted" with Leviathan, but precisely that he "laughed" with him.437

A Kabbalist who lived in Mantua between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, Menaḥem ʻAzaryah of Fano, left behind an interpretation of the smile of Leviathan that seems conscious of Maharal's teaching, even if it is transfigured on the eschatological level. In a passage of his ʻAśarah ma'amarot—a summa of the esoteric doctrines present in Italy at the end of the Renaissance—Menaḥem of Fano writes that Leviathan "laughs" at accepting inside himself the precepts that the righteous of Israel would have carried out, but which they were not able to observe because of the impediments of persecution and exile. In the world to come, the righteous, he adds, will be able to

לוחות Luḥot
Tablets

In the Biblical Hebrew, luaḥ indicates a polished tablet, at times made of wood, but more often cut in stone. When it is employed in the plural, luḥot, it designates, by way of antonomasia, the durable material chosen by God to contain his teachings. The term luḥot is mentioned for the first time in the book of Exodus, in a fast-paced sentence pronounced by the Lord to summon Moses to Sinai: Come up

to me into the mount, and be there; and I will give you tablets of stone, and the Torah, and commandments which I have written; that you may teach them (Exod. 24.12). Arriving in front of God, Moses receives a detailed series of oral prescripts concerning liturgical instruments, sacred ornaments, and on the consecration of priests, as well as the observance of the Sabbath, and finally, only at the moment of departure, he receives artifacts of explicitly divine origin: And he gave to Moses [...] two tablets of Testimony, tablets of stone, written by the finger of God (Exod. 31.18). Almost as if to emphasize their role as a tangible pledge of the transcendent, some verses later the tablets are described in detail, in a prose that lingers in repetitive formulas: And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved upon the tablets (Exod. 32.16). The scene then becomes occupied with Moses's worried return to the encampment, where the festive celebration of the golden calf is underway. Approaching the camp, he saw the calf, and the dancing [...] and he threw the tablets from his hands, and broke them beneath the mount (Exod. 32.19).[365] Destroyed by Moses's rage,

these first tablets disappear from the Biblical narrative and, to know their fate, it is necessary to await the legends that flourish around them in the later folkloric tradition.

To replace the shattered tablets, the Lord orders Moses to cut two others, thus introducing a substantial difference from the previous ones, for which the Lord had also provided the material support: Cut two tablets of stone like the first; and I will write upon these tablets the words that were in the first tablets, which you broke (Exod. 34.1). Moses has a single night to construct the two stone tablets: And be ready in the morning, enjoins the Lord, and present yourself there to me in the top of the mount (Exod. 34.2). Even though the Lord promised to write the commandments on the stone with his own hand, this time he seems more inclined to act through Moses. In fact, after having talked to him at length, he says: Write these words; for according to these words I

365

have made a covenant with you and with Israel (Exod. 34.27). A long period of meditation and penitence is nevertheless necessary for Moses before he is able to undertake a task of such grave responsibility. He was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights; he did neither eat bread, nor drink water, and only after this abstinence was he prepared to write upon the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments (Exod. 34.28).

In the description of the same events that we find in Deuteronomy, Moses tells the story with some variations, adding, among others, the detail of the wooden ark that needed to be constructed, still according to divine command, in order to place the tablets there: Cut two tablets of stone like the first, says the Lord, and come up to me into the mount, and make an ark of wood (Deut. 10.1). This time, though, God fulfills his promise and writes the ten commandments on the new tablets before restoring them to Moses. And I turned myself, continues the prophet, and came down from the mount, and put the tablets in the ark which I had made; and there they are, as the Lord commanded me (Deut. 10.5).

The term luḥot would not be taken up again in the entire Bible,440 except in one passage of the first book of Kings, which relates the transfer of the ark into the Sanctuary: There was nothing in the ark save the two tablets of stone, which Moses put there at Horeb (1Kings 8.9).[366]

Numerous tales of the post-Biblical era discuss the characteristics and destiny of the tablets, particularly the first ones, which, having being broken, marked a sort of mythical trauma in the events of Israel.[367] They were thus imagined as made from the most precious material possible: in stones of sapphire, which came from the throne of glory, weighing "forty se'ah."[368] The writing that was inscribed upon them, moreover, "could be read both from inside and from outside; e.g.,

366
367
368

nebub (nbwb)[369] would be read buban (bwbn)."[370] Based on a complex calculation, the rabbinic tradition also fixed the date on which they were broken: the 17th of the month of Tammuz, an ill-fated day for Israel, on which, in addition to this, five misfortunes occurred.[371]

According to another legend, included in the Talmud and repeated in various later texts, the fragments of the first tablets were hidden in the ark, together with the new Decalogue,[372] but, at the moment they were shattered, the letters written on them took flight and returned to their place of celestial origin.[373] Those tablets had an extraordinary power, since, as another Talmudic passage affirms, "If they had not been broken the Torah would never have been forgotten in Israel [...] No nation or tongue would have had any power over them."[374]

Even in ancient times, the question was posed: if the division of the divine message on symmetrical backgrounds may allude to a more profound teaching, why there were two tablets? Philo of Alexandria offered a philosophical solution, maintaining that the tablets were "equal in number to the parts of the soul, the rational and the irrational, which had to be instructed and corrected [...] and in the same way there is an equal division, into two groups of five, of the ten commandments that are inscribed on the tablets."[375]

The interpretation in the midraš Exodus Rabbah proposes instead a cosmic reading of the image: "Why two tablets? To correspond with heaven and earth, with a bride and bridegroom, with the two groomsmen, and also with this world and the world to come."[376]

A symbolic connection between the tablets and the soul reappeared in the Middle Ages, in the thought of El'azar of Worms (ca. 1165–ca. 1230), who nevertheless elaborated an idea completely independent of

369
370
371
372
373
374
375
376

that of Philo. In his treatise, dedicated to the soul, entitled *Ḥokmat ha-nefeš* (The Doctrine of the Soul), El'azar wrote that, "when the letters left the tablets, they fell and broke and, in the same way, when the soul leaves the body, it falls."[377] The cue for this parallel comes from an ancient legend which tells that Moses, having reached the encampment where the celebration of the golden calf was taking place, noticed that the words had vanished. The breakage would therefore have been caused by the removal of the written text itself, which constituted the tablets' spiritual support. The explicit mention of the divine fabrication of the tablets supplied El'azar the occasion to establish another parallel between the tablets and man, inasmuch as both demonstrate an essential similarity to the divine principle. Employing a typical exegetical method, El'azar constructs the comparison by simply bringing together two different scriptural passages: "And the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God (Exod. 32.16) exactly as it is written *in the image of God created He him* (Gen. 1.27)."[378] Although the mystic of Worms provides only a hint here, his intuition delves deeply into the meaning of the dramatic breakage of the tablets, which comes to assume almost the importance of a physical death, caused by the sudden dissolution of celestial energy.

Some of the major Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages sought to give a metaphoric interpretation to God's direct intervention in the creation of the tablets of the Decalogue, since it was evident that a literal interpretation of the Biblical text would imply an anthropomorphic aspect of the Creator. The image of God having drawn the letters with his own hand was thus understood as a creative act accomplished by means of words: "When we say that God created the tablets, and he wrote them with engraved writing, we understand this to mean that He did so as He created the sky, namely only with his word."[379] In this passage, taken from the Sefer ha-Kuzari (Kuzari) of the

377
378
379

Sephardic philosopher Yehudah ha-Lewi (before 1075–1141), the tablets of the alliance are inserted into God's cosmological design. They are placed on the same level of natural reality as the sky or waters of the origins, which the Lord gave rise to through his own voice, without the aid of other instruments. "The writing of the ten commandments"—continues ha-Lewi—"was engraved on them in the same way in which we say that he parted the sea [...] since the actions of creating and constructing that are attributed to the Lord, blessed be He, do not require means, nor secondary causes, as required by the operations of creatures."[380]

Devised to resolve an exegetical dilemma, this reading of the symbolism of the tablets at the cosmological level created in reality a new conceptual icon, a sort of natural Decalogue, almost as if the divine artifact could be perceived in the same way as a mineral concretion, upon which the letters of the Jewish laws had been placed ab aeterno. In the second half of the twelfth century, implicitly repeating the passage of Yehudah ha-Lewi, Moses Maimonides wrote in his Guide of the Perplexed, "this existence [of the tablets] was natural and not artificial, for all natural things are called the work of the Lord."[381]

It was in following the outline indicated by these philosophical reflections that the Sephardic Kabbalists of the thirteenth century imagined an intimate connection between the first divine tablets and the manifestations of creation. In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), composed at the close of the thirteenth century, the first tablets of stone given to Moses by God represent the harmony of the cosmological order, while their destruction at the foot of the mountain corresponds to an alteration of the natural equilibrium: "When Moses broke the tablets [...] the Ocean overflowed its borders and was on the point of flooding the whole world."457 At that point, the prophet, according to the author of the *Zohar*, burned the golden calf, precisely to placate the fury of the abyss, and sprinkled the ash on the waters,

380

381

attempting to appease it with this gesture of reparation: "Then he stationed himself before the waters of the Ocean and said: 'Waters, waters, what would ye?' And they answered: 'Was not the world established by and on the

merit of the Holy Words engraved upon the tablets? And now, because the Israelites have denied the Torah by making the golden calf, we desire to overwhelm the world.' Then Moses answered them and said: 'Behold, all that they have done in connection with the sin of the golden calf is delivered unto you; is it not enough that so many thousands of them have perished for their sin?'"458 The ocean was placated only after Moses had sprinkled some of its water on the precise place where the golden calf had burned, in this way purifying the transgression and remedying the destruction of the original tablets.

In the Kabbalah of the following centuries, the two tablets frequently assumed the role of sefirotic symbols, and were inserted into a dense weave of theosophical correspondences. Around the middle of the sixteenth century, in his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates), Mošeh Cordovero delineated the relationships between luḥot and the various levels of the emanations, beginning with the fundamental equivalence between the two tablets of stones and the sefirot hod (splendor) and neṣaḥ (eternity), which represent the two attributes by means of which the Torah was given to Israel. The position of the tablets inside the ark also offered the Sephardic mystic the opportunity to see other symbolic connections. Since the ark represented malkut (kingdom), it was possible for him to use it to evoke the descent of hod and neṣaḥ towards this final and lowest dominion: "From the point of view of the Torah that is written on them, the tablets originate from tif'eret"—continues Cordovero—"[...] and correspond finally to the waw and to the he of the Tetragrammaton."459 The specific material of the artifact—the stone that was broken in Moses's rage—is substituted here by the luminous substance of the divine sphere, and projected

onto a timeless background, where the relationships between the celestial levels replace the historical narratives of the Bible.

According to the Hasidic mystic Naḥman of Bratslav, who lived between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the breaking of the tablets was the archetype of every successive destruction and, above all, of the devastation of the Temple at the hands of the Romans. For this reason, their restoration was a Messianic task, which could only be accomplished by means of a profoundly symbolic action. Naḥman identifies this act with singing: "Through singing it is possible to unite two distant things, which appear to be opposites [...] and this is why King David wrote the book of Psalms, which include ten different types of melodies [...] Thanks to it [...] the shattered tablets can be restored so that they have the strength to support the light of the letters of the Torah."460 For the mystic of Bratslav, the disintegration of the first Mosaic tablets represents the sanction of an unbridgeable hiatus between the divine and the human. It is therefore not possible to remedy it through the intellect, but only through the emotional rapture of music, which permits the disharmony of history to be overcome, and the restoration of the full integrity of the supernal emanation.

Magen מגן

Shield

In ancient Hebrew, the image of the shield is bound up with the idea of dignity and ornament, to the glitter of gold and the glow of copper, much more than it is to battle scenes. Shields were, in fact, often made from precious materials, meant more to demonstrate wealth and prosperity than to serve in battle. Golden shields are mentioned with unusual frequency—when compared to, for example classical literature461—in the Bible, such as those seized by David from the King of Zobah (2Sam. 8.7), or the five hundred shields, large and small, made for Solomon's treasury from beaten gold. The Scriptures also tell, with great precision, the quantity of gold used by Solomon, namely six hundred shekels for each large shield (ṣinnah) and three minas for each of those smaller (magen)462 (1Kings 10.16-17).

Solomon's precious shields became, in their turn, war booty, when they fell into the hands of King Shishak of Egypt, who in the fifth year of King Rehoboam [...] came up against Jerusalem; And he took away the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king's house [...] and he took away all the shields of gold which Solomon had made (1Kings 14. 25-26). King Rehoboam replaced them with shields made in bronze and committed them to the hands of the chief of the guard, the supervisor in charge of the entrance to the regal residence. The quick substitution of these parade shields was proba-

bly due to their importance in court rituals, since the king was received into the Temple with them: And it was so, when the king went to the house of the Lord, that the guard carried them, and brought them back to the guard chamber (1Kings 14.28).463 From their many Biblical mentions it can be deduced that the custom of hanging shields on walls, in particular on the external walls of buildings and on city walls, was as much for decorative purposes as to demonstrate the military strength of garrisons. In praise of Tyre, Ezekiel remembers the pride of the Phoenician army, full of foreign mercenaries, who used to hang their shields around upon [...] walls in such a way that made [...] perfect the

beauty of the city (Ezek. 27.11). Even in the middle of the second century BCE, when the Maccabees restored the Temple of Jerusalem, after having renovated the entrances and the halls, they decked also the forefront of the temple with crowns of gold, and with shields (1Mac. 4.57). The shields were a beautiful sight in the citadel of Jerusalem, as well as the so-called Tower of David, which for this reason became a proverbial example of magnificence, and would even be quoted in praise of the mistress in Song of Songs: Your neck is like the tower of David built with turrets, on which hang one thousand bucklers, all of them shields of mighty men (Song 4.4).

Besides these recurrences, the notion of the shield was especially applied in the Bible in the sphere of the divine, to signify the secure protection granted by the Lord to the Jews. The model of this metaphoric use of magen is offered by a sentence that the Lord addressed to Abraham in a vision: Fear not, Abram; I am your shield, and your reward will be great (Gen. 15.1). This peremptory statement—which follows a modest war episode—sounds like an anticipation of the future and furthermore a promise of shelter based on an exclusive relationship between God and the descendants of Abraham. The word magen here is a direct appellative of the Lord, which he ascribes to himself

even before the circumstances confirm it.464 The divine shield is therefore an immaterial premonition, directly connected to faith, as declared once again by the closing of the passage, where it is said that Abraham believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness (Gen. 15.6).

The conviction that the divine word is in itself a defense is actually a more general theme in Biblical imagery. It emerges in several passages, for example in Psalm 18, where one sentence flows from the concept of imrat Yhwh, the "Lord's word," to magen: As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the Lord is proven; he is a shield to all those who trust in him (Ps. 18.31). In the Book of Psalms, the sense of expectation of divine protection appears many further times, emphasizing the image of the shield that indicates a topos of ancient

poetry. Our soul waits for the Lord; he is our help and our shield (Ps. 33.20), confirms a psalm of praise; elsewhere God is even called to brandish two different types of shields, borrowing a distinction from the military lexicon: Take hold of shield (magen) and buckler (ṣinnah), and stand up for my help (Ps. 35.2).

The book of Psalms finally proposes a double characterization of the Lord as sun and shield (Ps. 84.12), implicitly attributing to magen the solar value that must have been common to the ancient perception of the object.465 The symbolism of light, also inherent in the custom of covering the shield with shiny material,

and of sometimes anointing it,466 receives religious sanction in this psalm: the divine shield seems, for a moment, to be identified with the light of the sun. On the other hand, it should be remembered that, in the ancient Near Eastern world, the sun, illuminating man's path, was also perceived as a guarantee of rectitude and, in a metaphorical sense, of the defense of the righteous.467

The visual correspondence between the form of the sun and the symbolic one—even before the functional one—of round or oval shields was quite widespread in antiquity, and also inspired some literary texts of the classical tradition. In a celebrated passage of Ovid's Metamorphosis, for instance, Polyphemus compares his own solitary eye first to a shield, and then to the sun that "see[s] from the sky, All things on earth": "Upon my brow I have one single eye"—the Cyclops asserts, in fact—"But it is huge, like some vast shield [...] Yet the sun's orb is one."468

The Virgilian "sidereal shield" used by Aeneas, and "shining" before the battle with Turnus (in the XII book of the Aeneid), was also interpreted by Servius, the grammarian of Late Antiquity, as an allusion to the sun, which seems in effect to symbolically dominate the entire scene, and which is recalled first by the hero in his invocation, "All-seeing sun, and thou [...] Propitious now, and reconcil'd by pray'r."469

Post-Biblical Jewish literature has abundant other examples which conceive magen as connected to natural phenomena. For one, in the

midraš Exodus Rabbah the equivalence between shield and clouds can be found, inserted in a detailed characterization of the meteoric attributes of Yhwh: "His bow is of fire, His arms

are flame, His spear is a torch, His shield is the clouds; His sword is lightning."470 Along with this connotation of the shield of the tempest, which closely recalls the aegis of Zeus, and Athena of Greco-Roman culture, the symbolism of magen developed above all in its metaphorical meaning of protection earned through prayer, or more simply in an appellative of the prayer. For example, commenting on the psalmist's expression His truth shall be your shield and buckler (Ps. 91.4), the authors of the midraš Esther Rabbah formulate a clear comparison between the effectiveness of weapons in war and the apotropaic virtue of prayer: "This refers to prayer which protects against trouble as a shield protects in battle."471

In its purely metaphorical use, the divine shield multiplied, taking on an efficacy that exceeded spatial and chronological boundaries. It became a timeless, collective protection and even, according to one midraš, "many shields": "Abraham said before the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Sovereign of the Universe, for me Thou art become a shield, and for my descendants wilt Thou not be a shield?' The Holy One, blessed be He, replied to him: 'For thee I am but one shield, as it says, I am thy shield, but for thy descendants I will be many shields, as it says, Whereon there hang a thousand shields. All the armor of the mighty men (Song 4.4).'"472

The term magen often returns in Jewish prayer, with clear reference to the power of divine protection. The word appears, for instance, in the oration that opens the 'Amidah, the main section of daily service in the synagogue: "O King, helper, savior, and shield. Blessed art thou, o Lord, shield of Abraham, forever brave, O Lord, who reviveth the dead and prodigy of salvation." Already known in the Talmudic era as magen Avraham, "shield of Abraham," this invocation has a counterpart in

the formula recited after the reading in the synagogue of the prophetic books, which is called magen Dawid, "shield of David," due to its concluding words, "Blessed are you, Lord, shield of David."473

It was probably this daily contact with the notion of divine protection accorded to the patriarch Abraham and to King David that, in the Middle Ages, inspired the idea of a material instrument of defense, a sort of amulet, a precisely defined magen Dawid, endowed with magical properties and capable of protecting the Jews. A shield of David inscribed with the divine name of 72 letters is spoken of in a magical dissertation on the Hebrew characters, known as Alphabet of the Angels, which was probably composed in the early Middle Ages.474

It was only during the twelfth century that this shield started to be connected with the six-point star, which consisted of two crossed triangles, an image to be found designed at first, rather than realized in many different materials. A very ancient sign, diffused throughout various cultural spheres, the hexagram already sporadically appeared on Jewish artifacts in Late Antiquity, including for instance in a fresco in the Capharnaum synagogue, and in a tomb in Apulia dating from the sixth century—although at that time its symbolic value was not yet taken into consideration in Judaic texts. In the early fourteenth century, the magen Dawid began to appear in manuals of magic and, in the middle of the same century, it was officially inserted into the insignia

of the Jewish community of Prague.475 All of which is to say that the adoption of the hexagram as a distinctive sign of Judaism must be considered a medieval and modern phenomenon. Since we do not find substantial theoretical traces of this, the reason for such an occurrence should perhaps be sought in the relatively neutral character of the symbol and in its geometry, particularly consonant with the aniconic tendency. It is interesting to note that while the Hebrew designation of the hexagram as the "shield" of David refers to its function, its common designation as "star" of David alludes to its visual features, thus emphasizing the symbolism of light, which probably pertains to the original origin of the sign.

The success of the emblem in Jewish material culture was matched by a substantial silence in theosophical texts, always reluctant to attribute a conceptual status to magic. Nevertheless, some salient

features of the speculations on the idea of the shield, present in the writings of the Kabbalists of the medieval and modern eras, suggest that, from the late thirteenth century, the formal structure of the hexagram influenced, whether more or less consciously, a transformation in how magen was approached. In this period, the idea of the shield's having a composite character started to spread, considered an expression of the union of two divine forces; one deriving from a higher level of emanation and the other close to an inferior dimension. This symmetrical composition of two elements is particularly evident in the hexagram, whose structure is born from the superim-

3 1thth

248

position of a triangle with the point facing upward onto one with the point facing downward.

In a similar way, in the pages of the *Zohar*ic literature—dating from between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries—the semantic unity of magen was divided into a pairing, envisaging the union of the lowest sefirah, malkut (kingdom), with the supernal levels of emanation. From a theoretical point of view, this gemination was corroborated by the Biblical expression sun and shield (Ps. 84.12), in which the Kabbalists saw, instead of a synonymy, the mark of two diverse sefirot: tif'eret (beauty), usually bound to the sun, and malkut, whose protective function with regard to man recalled the idea of the shield. In their turn, the two sefirot corresponded to the Tetragrammaton and to Elohim. Their union thus came to restore a perfect and complete appellative: "The sun contains the mystery of the [divine] name Yhwh, wherein is the abode of the rest of all of the grades"—it is stated in the *Zohar*—"whereas magen contains the

mystery of the [divine] name Elohim [...] The two together, sun and shield, constitute the mystery of the complete [divine] name."476

In the *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shepherd), a corollary text to the *Zohar*, the twofold nature of the shield was instead formulated according to a different conceptual perspective, which associated the word magen with kokav, "star"; "Kokav (kwkb) separates into kb and kw, that is sun and shield, Yhwh Ševa'ot, the Lord of the hosts."477 This division of the word kokav gave rise to the consonant pair kb, which designates malkut, and that of kw, which has the numerical value 26, and is thus equivalent to the Tetragrammaton (Yhwh); in the resulting linguistic play, the image of the star superimposes that of the sun and of the shield.

The *Zohar*'s argumentation established a decisive transformation in the meaning of magen, which became, in the Kabbalistic lexicon, the sign of the intersection of two different sefirotic levels. Later interpreters worked in the wake of this tradition. Mošeh Cordovero, for instance, towards the middle of the sixteenth century, saw in the star mentioned in the *Ra'aya mehemna* a mediating function between the right and left sides of the emanation.478

More ample and innovative was the reworking offered, about two centuries later, by the Hasidic rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, who inserted magen into the complex mechanism of the Lurianic Kabbalah, according to which the divine levels closest to man are a kind of container for the superior levels, which contract in order to find shelter in them.479 On the basis of such an assumption, magen was thus identified with a "vase," namely with the sefirah malkut, which "serves to conceal the light and the vital force that emanate from the name Yhwh," or from the sefirah tif´eret. Commenting on the Biblical expression sun and shield, Schneur Zalman affirmed that "shield means a covering for the sun, in order to protect the creatures and enable them to endure it [...] As the covering protects from the sun, the name of God, Elohim, protects the name of the Lord Ywhw, blessed be He."480 In this way, magen acquired the function of attenuating the

overflowing energy of the emanation, as if the shield no longer served as a defense against evil but to circumscribe human finiteness.

מלאך Mal'ak
Messenger, Angel

Angels live from distance, since they are entrusted with the task of dissimulating the unbridgeable space that separates God from men. The Hebrew word mal'ak contains the root *l'k, which means "to dispatch";481 going to and fro between heaven and earth, angels transmit the transcendent down to the realm of the everyday. The actions they perform and the words they pronounce, very similar to human words and deeds, nevertheless bear the sign of the divine, especially in the unstable extent of their appearance—they punctually vanish after the short interval of a few sentences, leaving a rift that reality slowly heals. Angels speak, and at times their words echo in dreams;482 they move, preferably in conjunction with the flicker of a flame. An angel flits in the fire that appears to Moses in the bush,[483] while the angel that dances in front of SamsonSamson's parents disappears in fire: when the flame went up toward heaven from off the altar, that the angel of the Lord ascended in the flame (Judg. 13.20).

In order to draw closer to man, angels choose humble corners of the landscape, against the rural backdrop of ancient Israel. The celestial envoy who lays a trap for Balaam's donkey

,

hides in a path of the vineyards (Num. 22.24),484 while the angel given the task of speaking to Gideon sits under a terebinth [...] in Ophrah (Judg. 6.11). In the second book of Samuel, an angel sets up by the threshing place of Araunah the Jebusite (2Sam.24.16), and finally Zechariah, in his vision, describes the angel of the Lord who stood among the myrtle trees (Zech. 1.11).

At times the celestial messengers remain silent in the presence of men, but their menacing image is enough to manifest God's rage. Brandishing swords, they draw them and return them to their sheaths on divine command—David lifted up his eyes, *and saw the angel* of the Lord standing between the earth and the heaven, having a drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem [...] And the Lord commanded the angel; and he put his sword back into its sheath (1Chron. 21.16-27)—or they strike those deserving punishment: And David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who struck the people, and said, Behold, I have sinned (2Sam. 24.17). For their war-like virtues, which mostly characterize their tasks in the Scriptures, God's envoys nevertheless sometimes substitute delicate acts of protection: For he shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways. They shall carry you up in their hands (Ps. 91.11-12).485

Appearing from far away, beyond the limits of the visible, angels often seem to personify an intimate faculty of man, which divine intervention reawakens. They provide the prophets with the key to understanding visions: When I, Daniel, had seen the vision, and sought to understand it, then, behold, there stood before me one having the appearance of a man. And I heard a man's voice [...] who called, and said, Gabriel, make this man understand the vision (Dan. 8.15-16). The celestial messenger here has the semblance of a man, and sym-

bolizes the intensification of a human attitude: he almost represents an unexpected kindling of comprehension, which marks the bursting forth of the transcendent into everyday experience. This angel is

somehow similar to an internal illness into which man pours a great deal of his energy; not by chance, after having seen and heard Gabriel, Daniel affirms: And I Daniel fainted, and was sick several days.

Gabriel and Michael are the only angels to whom the Scriptures explicitly refer by name. Both such incidences occur in the book of Daniel, which was probably influenced by the detailed Mesopotamian angelology. The names of the angels would, in fact, only became thoroughly diffuse in Hebrew literature in Late Antiquity, and in particular in the Talmudic and mystical texts written in the Babylonian Jewish settlements. Some rabbinic appeals were also written against an excessive faith in the intervention of angels. These pleas betray a concern with reconciling the exaggerated development of angelology with the secret of divine transcendence, so that angels did not obscure the unicity of the Lord of Israel. In the Jerusalem Talmud, God is attributed with claiming his own right to a direct relationship with the believer: "If misfortune befalls a man, he does not call to Michael or Gabriel; he calls to me and I will answer him immediately."486

The flourishing of angelic appellatives nevertheless also projected its influence, so to speak, backwards, on the Biblical narratives that had anonymous angels as protagonists. For example, the treatise Bava meṣi'a affirms that the three messengers who go forth from Abraham to carry the news of the birth of Isaac were Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, and that it was Gabriel, with Michael's help, who destroyed Sodom.487

In both the Talmud and the coeval mystical literature, a very important role is held by an angel whose name shows a Judeo-Hellenistic ancestry. In fact, Meṭaṭron probably originates from the Greek metathronos, "he who is close to the supernal

throne,"488 and designates a celestial archon to whose custody the entire supernal palace is entrusted. At times also called "prince of the world" or "prince of the visage," he is, at the same time, the repository of knowledge, he who imparts mystical teaching and unveils the path to those who want to ascend to the vision of the divine throne. In the Alfa beta de-rabbi 'Aqiva (Rabbi 'Aqiva's Alphabet), a midraš probably

dating from the eighth and/or ninth centuries, praise for the extraordinary appearance of Meṭaṭron is attributed to God himself: "I elevated his stature higher than any other, seventy thousand parasangs [...] I turned his flesh into torches of flames and the bones of his body into embers of fire, I gave him the features of lightning, I transformed the light of his eyelids into a light that does not vanish."489

Popular Jewish legend moreover assigned an angelic magnitude to each of the manifestations of nature: Yurkami is thus the prince of hail,490 Ridyah that of rain,491 the sea depends on Rahav,492 while Laylah oversees the night493 and conception;494 finally, Dumah is, sometimes, named as the angel of death.495 It was important to be aware of the various angelic patrons of natural phenomena, since this meant being able to invoke them in situations of need, to ask them to intervene, when required, in the course of events. Literary testimonies and archeological finds which demonstrate a large number

of amulets bearing the names of angels attest to how the magical use of names, diffuse through all of the ancient traditions, was also well known to Jewish customs.496

The Jewish rabbis proved to be aware of the inconstant character of the names and functions of the angels, which varied according to local traditions and schools: "There is no permanent name, but a continuous change"—states the midraš Genesis Rabbah—"the present name [of an angel] not being the same as he may bear later on, for it says: And the angel of the Lord said unto him: Wherefore ask you after my name, seeing it is hidden (Judg. 13.18)."497 The names of the celestial messengers were above all enigmatic, since to know them meant that one attained dominion over the reality of which they were in charge. On the other hand, these changeable names were connected to fleeting words, and whoever invoked them had to adapt each time to the different circumstances.

Judaism therefore bound the fates of the angels to the passing manifestation of a voice, forbidding them the attribute of duration, in order to deny them the status of definitive patrons of reality: "From every utterance that goes forth from the mouth of the Holy One,

blessed be He," states the treatise Ḥagigah of the Babylonian Talmud, "an angel is created,"498 but this being persists only until that emission of the voice continues: "A celestial company," affirms another Talmudic passage, "never repeats twice God's praises [...] The Holy One, blessed be He, creates a new company of angels every day, and they utter song before Him and then depart evermore."499 The angels are here like the celestial echo of the divine word: created by God

through the voice, they immediately return to him with a praise, and then disappear.

These intermediate changing realities, which crowded the space between earth and heaven, were thus connected to the divine rhythm of the cosmos, the understanding of which seemed to be beyond human doctrine. It was not by chance that the Kabbalistic tradition assigned complete mastery of all angelic names to the primordial man, Adam, who, before the transgression, was in possession of the key to occult knowledge. The angels' dominion through their appellatives was part of the archetypical knowledge, and of the harmony between human intellect and the essence of creation that the expulsion from Eden interrupted. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, a passage of the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor) thus declares: "Come, behold. Adam knew every angel [...] and he knew their names in relationship to their function, and he called them accordingly."500 The author furthermore expresses, in the course of the text, the conviction that the mystic could recuperate at least in part, thanks to the practice of the esoteric doctrine, some of the paths that connect the angels to the changeable equilibrium of reality: "For each of their missions there is a moment and prearranged time, and a precise constellation, a fixed day and a star."501

But to achieve dominion, even if partial, over the angelic powers, it was not enough to study their names and their relationships; in fact, every magic process could have a positive or negative result according to the performer's intention. The moral quality of the adepts, and of their practices—which were not to be motivated by economic interests,

but only by the desire to aid one's fellow man—was therefore considered by Judaism to be fundamental in deciding between the legitimate and illegitimate. The ethical motivation of theurgical actions was at the basis of the remarkable development of the so-

called practical Kabbalah well into the modern era; even important exponents of Jewish orthodoxy regarded themselves as authorized to profess it, and to continue to pass along orally, from teacher to student, the methods and invocations most suited to knowing the secrets of future events and to magically intervening in reality.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, Ḥayyim Vital, disciple of the celebrated Yiṣḥaq Luria, attributed a very important role to angelology in his writings, distinguishing between true angels and the fallacious deception of impure spirits: "There are absolutely sincere angels [...] there are others that partly lie, and finally some that are completely deceitful."[502] The reason for these differences rested, according to Vital, in the origins of the celestial intermediaries, which depended on the actions and the attitudes of humans. Indeed, the Lurianic mystic thought that the creation of the angels depended above all on human study and prayer, as well as on human observance of the Judaic precepts: "Good and bad angels are created from the word of man, according to the quality of human actions. In fact, he who disinterestedly studies the Torah will obtain a supernal, saintly angel, and completely trustworthy [...] if instead that man has some wicked aspect, or his study is not completely sincere [...] the angel will also reunite good and evil within it."[503] The elusive angelic essence is, in this work, almost a halo that encircles the actions of men, a force that emanates from their discourses and reflects them, with a humble but pitiless fidelity. The Kabbalistic angels seem therefore to have chosen intimacy with mundane things, to the point that their attitudes render them more similar to servants, ready to mimic the imperfect behavior of their masters, than to coruscating, celestial spirits.

Man מן
Manna

The appearance of manna provokes astonishment among the Jews: And when the children of Israel saw it, they said one to another: 'What is it?' for they knew not what it was (Exod. 16.15). This What is it? expressed in the Bible with the uncommon form man,504 contains the popular etymology of the term "manna", which designates the heavenly food that the Lord gave the Israelites to eat during the forty years of wandering in the desert. As if to emphasize a sense of curiosity with regard to an unexpected phenomenon, the Scriptures are profuse in details and comparisons that attempt to assimilate the unusual features of manna into something familiar: And when the dew that lay was gone, behold, upon the face of the wilderness there lay a small round thing, as small as hoarfrost on the ground (Exod. 16.14), and further, in a parallel passage: And the manna was as coriander seed, and its color as the color of bdellium (Num. 11.7).505 The taste is also evoked by way of simile: Its taste was like wafers made with honey (Exod. 16.31), and elsewhere: *And the taste of it was like the taste of fresh oil* (Num. 11.8).

All of these quite specific details quickly gave rise to the search for natural explanations for the wonder of manna. Each such explanation identified it with a resin produced by the trees of the desert region, with a type of lichen, or with the sugary secretion of certain insects.506

Although these natural phenomena could be made to fit with the way manna is described, the Bible offers a complete symbolic transfiguration, making it a continuous miracle, obedient to the rhythms of Jewish ritual. Indeed, manna is first of all subordinate to the law of the Sabbath, since, as Moses points out, Six days you shall gather it; but on the seventh day, which is the Sabbath, in it there shall be none

(Exod. 16.26). The double portion that falls on the desert on the preceding day corresponds to the portion omitted on the Sabbath, so that the sanctification of the day of rest can nonetheless be accompanied by the usual abundance of food. Moreover, the divine character of the manna is expressed in its prodigious capacity to satisfy each person's needs, independently of the quantity gathered: And when they did measure it with an omer, he who gathered much had nothing over—narrates the Scriptures—and he who gathered little had no lack (Exod. 16.18).

The harvest takes place in the morning, when the earth is still covered with dew, while the heat of the sun thaws the manna. The connection with dew is repeated many times in the Biblical text, as for instance in the book of Numbers, which states And when the dew fell upon the camp in the night, the manna fell upon it (Num. 11.9). The relationship to the dewy, nocturnal cloak seems to belong to the deepest substratum of the idea of manna, and connects it to other ancient conceptions of the origin of honey. For Aristotle, "honey is what falls from the air, especially at the risings of the constellations and when the rainbow descends; on the whole there is no honey before the [morning] rising of the Pleiades. [The bee] makes the comb [...] from flowers [...] but honey it does not make; it fetches in what falls [from the air], as is proved by the fact that beekeepers find the hives full of honey within one or two days)."507 Therefore, in ancient thought, the atmosphere, sat-

urated with vapor, produces food, in a process of invisible transformation.

While Aristotle solves the question in naturalistic terms, Judaism posits a mysterious celestial apparatus, induced by God. In a psalm, in which the narrative of Exodus is recalled, the production of manna is the result of a divine order: Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven, and rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the grain of heaven (Ps. 78.23-24). Thanks to God's intervention into the machinery of the world, the clouds do not produce rain, but rather this extremely thin bread, which

the same psalm would afterwards call, with a poetic expression, leḥ em abbirim, "the bread of strong people."

The term šeḥaqim, employed here for "cloud," actually presents a curious assonance with šḥq, "to mill, to grind." This caused the exegetes of the post-Biblical tradition to develop the idea of great heavenly mills that ground the manna that eventually fell for the Jews. As stated in the Ḥagigah treatise of the Babylonian Talmud, "Šeḥaqim (clouds) is that in which millstones stand and grind manna for the righteous."508 But it is not only the initial working of manna in heaven that gives rise to narrative—many Haggadic legends tell stories about the prodigious distribution of food to the Jews, and about the transformation that it underwent once it reached the earth. Another Talmudic treatise affirms that "Unto the righteous [the manna] fell in front of their homes; the average folk went out and gath-

ered, whereas the wicked ones had to go about to gather it."509 To the righteous the manna appeared as bread, to the common people it was dough for cakes, but the wicked ones had to grind it in a hand mill.

Perhaps manna's most surprising aspect was its capacity to assume a variety of flavors, in a way that, according to the Talmud, evoked the inconstant nature of a demon: "Just as the infant finds very many a flavor in the breast, so also did Israel find many a taste in manna as long as they were eating it [...] even as the demon changes into many colors, so did manna change into many tastes."510 Together with manna, according to various sages, the most disparate things fell on Israel, from "precious stones and pearls," to "adornments for women," and "the ingredients for a loaf," along with meat, wine, and spices. The effect of the manna once ingested was also extraordinary, since it was not expelled with excrement but "absorbed by the two hundred forty-eight members" of the human body.

Manna thus initiated an unusual metabolism, which was more suitable to angels than to man. In the Babylonian Talmud, it is defined as "the bread upon which the angels of divine service feed," with an implicit assimilation between the exodus generation and the

supernatural character of the celestial hierarchy. Later texts also dwell on the use of manna as angelic food, as for instance the collection of magic and cosmogonic traditions called Sode razayya (The Most Arcane Secrets), traditionally attributed to the Ashkenazic mystic El'azar of Worms (ca. 1165–ca. 1230). In this work, the absorption of manna within the Israelites is compared to the way in which the divine messengers eat, and their mounts of fire "who eat coals in their cribs, even if they do not need to eat." In fact, as "manna was absorbed by the body's members, in the same way they did not feed out of weakness but to strengthen their

bodies," consuming the same luminous substance of which they are made. This short mystical hint seems to suggest the idea that eating manna leads to a dematerialization of the body and its assimilation into the divine light.

Toward the middle of the thirteenth century, the Sephardic exegete Moses Nachmanides (1194-1270) elaborated this concept in his Commentary on the Torah, discussing in particular the relationship between the splendor of the divine presence and the scattering of the celestial food upon the Jews: "It is known," writes Nachmanides, "that manna contained a deep meaning. Our rabbis alluded to it in the treatise Yoma [...] [affirming that] it refers to the bread eaten by the angels of service [...] Manna comes, in fact, from the heavenly light which materialized according to divine will, so that the men who ate it consumed the same substance as the angels."511 According to the Sephardic rabbi, manna was actually nothing other than an earthly reflection of the supernal light of the Šekinah, which descended toward men, since they could not lift themselves up to the heavenly dwelling. "There are," continues Nachmanides, "those who cannot always receive the light of the Presence, but have to sustain themselves with something that is the material manifestation of this light [...] and that is to say with the fundament of the manna that is the supernal radiance."512

These statements allude to the process of bringing manna into the center of Kabbalistic theosophy, where it represents the descent of the

divine influence towards the lowest sphere, that is, towards the sefirah of the kingdom, malkut. In this way, in the school that flourished around Nachmanides, the symbolism of angelic food underwent another development, which is testified to in the Me'irat 'enayim (The Elucidation of the Eyes) of Yiṣḥaq of Acre, composed between the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries. According to the

Kabbalist of Acre, manna "was emanated by the sefirah of eternity neṣaḥ, which represents the side of mercy and is therefore white, and it is likewise known that eternity was attributed to Moses our master, of blessed memory, thanks to whom manna descended from heaven."513 He then comments on the words of Nachmanides, saying, "It may be that the rabbi, in the assertion [...] that the manna is the supernal radiance, is referring to the radiance that the Šekinah receives from the side of mercy, that is to say, from the side of the sefirah of eternity." The hesitative expression at the beginning of this sentence is then immediately corrected with a typical, hermetic note: "All of the words of the rabbi are comprehensible to him who is endowed with intellect, and do not require explanation." Notwithstanding this note from Yiṣḥaq, the role of the term man remained rather unstable in the Kabbalistic lexicon, assuming somewhat different functions among the various Kabbalistic authors.

A Kabbalistic version of the image of the clouds that grind manna appears in the *Sefer ša'are orah* (The Book of the Gates of Light) by Yosef Giqaṭilla (1248–ca. 1325), one of the major exponents of the mystical Castilian school at the end of the thirteenth century. "It is known," he writes, "that the two attributes of eternity (neṣaḥ) and splendor (hod), corresponding to the name Yhwh Elohim Ševa'ot, are called clouds (šeḥaqim), and constitute the two dwellings that prepare manna for the righteous: for this they are called 'grindstones' (šeḥaqim)."514 The Talmudic cosmology of the manna's celestial preparation is transposed here onto the hierarchical pattern of the sefirot. Thus the sefirot of eternity and splendor refine the energy that derives from heaven like

two grinding wheels of a mill, combining in this action the attribute of mercy, characteristic of the first, with the rigor of the latter.

Probably during the same years, and in the same circle of Giqaṭilla, the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) was written, a work that expounds the Kabbalistic teachings in an Aramaic full of allusive images. In this text, manna is included in a list of spiritual foods, in which it represents a kind of intermediate level. The assumption is that "each food found in the world comes from heaven," which is to say that each form of life exists only by way of celestial influence. For the common people, this influence is coarser, while the manna that fell to the Israelites during their desert sojourn "was a finer food, emanating from the sphere of 'Heaven,' and was assimilated by the soul more than by the body." Nevertheless, an even more immaterial food exists, "the food of those absorbed in the Torah, which nourishes only the soul and the spirit, but not the body, coming as it does from the sphere of 'Wisdom' (ḥokmah)."515 Even if this *Zohar*ic passage maintains the relevance of the events of the exodus, the historical symbolism of manna diminishes here almost to the point of becoming an abstract level of the scale of emanation, halfway between the pure spirituality of the sefirah of wisdom and the sphere contaminated by mundane reality.

A similar de-contextualization of the Biblical notion of manna appears clearly during the sixteenth century in the work of Mošeh Cordovero (1522-1570), a brilliant arranger of the *Zohar*ic doctrine. In the Pardes rimmonim, written by Cordovero at a young age, manna takes part in the depiction of the union between the masculine principle of the sefirah tif'eret and the feminine malkut. The joining of the sefirot is described with the typically allusive language of the Kabbalah, which simultaneously implicates several levels of representation: "Manna is the influence exercised by the heavens that correspond to tif'eret, while the clouds (šeḥaqim) are the sefirot of eternity and of splendor that correspond to the testicles that produce

semen, 'grinding manna for the righteous,'516 that is to say, for the sefirah of the righteous (yesod) and for that of righteousness

(malkut)."517 In addition to the abstract entities indicated by their names, Cordovero also evokes a strongly physical reality, in which the energy of the male reaches the celestial female in the form of semen, by means of yesod, which is the mystical epithet of the virile member. In this chain of metaphors, manna is explicitly assimilated into sperm, in a radical estrangement from Biblical antecedent.

In the Lurianic tradition, which became prevalent in Jewish mysticism during the final decades of the sixteenth century, the image of manna occupies a relatively minor position, even if we can find some complex descriptions of the Kabbalistic meaning of the celestial bread. Perhaps the most peculiar passage is contained in the Sefer peri ʻeṣ Ḥayyim, attributed to Avraham ben Eliʻezer ha-Lewi Berukim (ca. 1515–1593), a Kabbalist of Safed who was very close to Luria: "The clouds (šeḥaqim) are the two houses of the world of creation in which manna is ground. And who are those that grind it? They are those who bear afflictions for the Lord, blessed be He."518 While in Cordovero's version, the "mills of manna" were an element of the anatomy of the celestial macroanthropos, in this text of the Lurianic School the scene is transferred to an ultramundane setting, where the task of grinding manna is entrusted as a reward to the martyrs of the Jewish faith. The text goes on with a tale of strongly hermetic tone, based on a typical Kabbalistic pun: "Since they sacrifice their inclinations and suffer the yoke of persecutions [...] immediately after death they rise to that dwelling and there refine manna, which corresponds to the two letters mem and nun [...] which have to be softened since they are very hard.519 Then came Haman the evil and the letter he was added to him, in such a way that all the force of theslag of all the menacing powers was contained in him."520 The term man (manna) is reduced here to the alphabetic component of the letters mem and nun,521 and then changed into the sequence he, mem, nun, read as Haman (Aman), the name of the wicked persecutor of the Jews in the book of Esther. Overturning the preceding hermeneutic tradition, manna is unexpectedly transformed here into a perfidious enemy, whom the

righteous grind, reducing it to dust and transforming it into regenerative food. 522

In this reworking, conceived in late sixteenth century, the manna that restores Israel becomes a sublimation of evil forces, personified by the dark notable of the Persian court, who bears in his name an allusion to the celestial bread. Just as in the Biblical event, the threat represented by Haman is converted into the death penalty of the wicked, and into the joy of the Jewish people; in the heavenly machinery the slag and afflictions are reduced to a fine dust, which falls to the Earth again as a benediction.

משיח Mašiaḥ
Anointed, Messiah

A young prophet appears before the heads of the hosts of Israel sitting in council; with an excuse he attracts the attention of the commander and retires with him into a house. Here, he suddenly pulls out a jug of oil and pours the contents on the head of the chief, pronouncing the ancient formula of investiture: Thus said the Lord God of Israel, I have anointed you king over the people of the Lord, over Israel (2Kings 9.6). After a few sentences, in which predictions of a bloody destiny and civil war accumulate, the youth opens the door and runs away, while Jehu, the consecrated, returns to the other officials.

Worried and suspecting a trick, they ask him: Why did this madman come to you? Nevertheless, as soon as they hear the tale of the unction, they change their mind, take their clothes and put it under him on the top of the stairs, and blew with the šofar, saying, Jehu is king! (2Kings 9.13).

The author of the second book of Kings presents the tense stages of this episode as a stratagem willed by God to create a new sovereign, who takes revenge on the impious descendants of Ahab, who was at that moment on the throne of Israel. The stark contrast between the ambiguous conduct of the prophet—who flees, almost afraid of the consequences of his own actions—and the effect of the unction—immediately accepted by the elderly army officials, however ill-disposed they are towards the young "madman"—demonstrates the exceptional symbolic value that the Bible attributes to investiture with oil, a true gesture of transformation of reality.

Various figures have, in the Scriptures, the task of consecrating with oil, although it is mostly a vicarious act, performed on behalf of God. Often, as happens to Jehu, a prophet, who follows precise divine inspiration, pours the liquid, but sometimes

267

the active subject can even be a group, such as the men of Judah, who reunite in Hebron to anoint David king (2Sam. 2.4). Moses is entrusted with the task of anointing his brother Aaron, conferring on him the priesthood of Israel, since, according to Exodus and Leviticus,523 the sacerdotal office also required the manifest sign of oil.

The Bible emphasizes the strongly sacred meaning of the unction and places under the same symbolic sign the consecration of priests and sovereigns, as well as of the objects to be used by the cult. A

substantial identity among the various types of anointments is demonstrated, for instance, by the sequence of liturgical acts performed by Moses, according to the narrative of Leviticus: Moses took the anointing oil, and anointed the Tabernacle and all that was in it, and sanctified [...] and anointed the altar and all its utensils [...] and he poured of the anointing oil upon Aaron's head, and anointed him, to sanctify him (Lev. 8.10-12).

The sacredness of the gesture is also clearly expressed in the passages that comment on the investiture of the kings of Israel—in the case of David's unction by Samuel, the Biblical author refers to the spirit of the Lord that takes possession of the monarch: Then Samuel took the horn of oil, and anointed him [...] and the spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward (1Sam 16.13). The use of oil signaled thus not only the bestowal of a special dignity, but also the proximity of the anointed to the holy sphere, and therefore a special protection from the Lord.

In the religious conception expressed by the Bible, the anointment was thus a sacred principium individuationis, which immediately distinguished objects or persons, as if isolating them from a context and manifesting them to observers. The

consecration through oil imitated a downward movement, which symbolically made visible the last stretch of the descent of a superior force. As a passage of Psalms recalls,524 the liquid had to be poured starting from the head, since this was the first seat of the changed condition. In a continuous line, the ointment then flowed onto the body and garments, with an effect of physical estrangement and an all-pervasive transformation. The composition of the ointment also held a particular meaning, which appeared in the formula described in the book of Exodus. With the ability of a refined aromaticist, the Lord tells Moses the list of spices to add to the oil: Take you also to you the best spices [...] pure myrrh [...] sweet cinnamon [...] sweet calamus [...] cassia [...] oil olive. And you shall make it an oil of holy ointment (Exod. 30.23-25). Even if scholars generally consider this passage to belong to a relatively late period,525 the widening of the symbolism of the unction

towards the conceptual area of scent and vegetal richness helps in grasping the complex meaning of the pouring of oil, as a bestowal of vitality, aimed at giving to things or persons a sort of fullness—not only metaphorical but also physical.

The main meaning of anointment was thus to establish a new state, through an external act, which made the consecrated, at least temporarily, a passive subject, nominated to an exceptional status that he could neither choose nor refuse. The religious connotation of the gesture is emphasized by the fact that it was usually a prophet who did the anointing. This also means that the figure of the prophet was predominant in the political act of the investiture of the king. It has been questioned whether such a cir-

cumstance corresponds to actual historical reality, or if it was rather the fruit of the desire to sanction the predominance of the prophets over the sovereigns. In fact, the purely passive role of the latter in the anointment ceremony would have relegated the monarchical institution to an openly subordinate position.

It is certain, however, that unction as a sign of political investiture was widely known in the ancient Orient. In Egypt, for instance, vassals and functionaries were anointed at the moment of nomination, while the Hittites used oil to designate the regent, who helped the sovereign before succeeding him.526 Indian culture also preserves this custom; in fact, the Sanskrit verb abhiṣic, "to bathe" or "to anoint," is usually used to describe the investiture of sovereigns, kings, and queens. The Mahābhārata, a classical text of Indian literature, offers a broad survey of ritual appointments through unction—those who anoint are either the monarchs themselves, who invest their own successors with royal dignity, or attribute to their subordinates commanding functions,527 or the citizens,528 who select a monarch, or the Brahmans, representatives of the priestly caste, on behalf "of the four Vedas,"529 that is, of the sacred power of the ancient writings. The work also contains a

range of references to consecration rituals, which involved the use of various substances which were to be added to oil. A poetic passage of

the III book describes an unction enriched with fragrant herbs and rice, which renders the head of the consecrated "like a moon with traces of clouds."530 The composite character of the ingredients of the unction seems therefore to also belong to a symbolic background common to many ancient traditions.

In the Bible, consecration with oil is indicated with the verbs yṣq, "to pour" and mšḥ, "to anoint." While the first suggests the idea of the flow of liquid, in the etymological substratum of mšḥ an action of the hand's finger is also evoked, that is, the act of smearing, and perhaps of tracing a sign with the ointment. In the passage of Leviticus where Moses legitimates his brother, the two terms are used one after the other, probably alluding to a double act thereby, first of pouring and then of rubbing: he poured of the anointing oil upon Aaron's head, and anointed him, to sanctify him. On this Scriptural basis, the post-Biblical Jewish tradition maintained that two different signs were traced out with the oil: a crown for the king and a sign similar to the Greek letter chi for priests.531

The nominal form of mšḥ is mašiaḥ, which has the passive meaning of "anointed," referring to the persons whose attributes change through consecration. The word mašiaḥ is thus bound above all to kings, as well as to Jewish progeny, such as Saul, David, and Solomon, and to non-Jews, as in the case of Cyrus, who in Deutero-Isaiah is called anointed by the Lord (Isa. 45.1).532 Ha-mašiaḥ "the anointed," in Leviticus533 is the high priest, who, on the basis of this prerogative, is subject to

special norms of expiation and purity. In a single Biblical passage the two anointed, the priest and the monarch, are joined in one syntagma, which fuses them into a single representative function: These are the two anointed ones,534 who stand by the Lord of the whole earth (Zech. 4.14). This sentence is an allusion to the couple formed of the high priest Joshua and by Zerubbabel, who served as vassal king to the Persian monarch. Zerubbabel was the last descendent of the Davidian dynasty invested with a political role, and was also the last sovereign to whom the Hebrew Bible attributed consecration with

oil.535 In all of these statements, anointment is always attributed to historical characters—or those considered as such—in the actual possession of their functions.

It was only in a fairly late epoch, and in extra-Biblical sources, that mašiaḥ would be associated with the figure of a future king, a "Messiah," who would restore, by divine will, the sovereignty of the Israelite kingdom. In fact, while in the Scriptures—and particularly in the so called "Messianic" texts—the hope that the Davidian dynasty could regain an effective dominion over Israel and over Judas (as well as returning to exercise control over neighboring nations) was expressed, the new royal guide was never identified with the term mašiaḥ, proof that the word was, at that time, still connected to the actual practice of royal authority.

Thus, for instance, confronted with the Assyrian menace, Isaiah used the metaphoric terms ḥoṭer and neṣer, that is, "offspring" and "scion" (of the house of David),536 in prophesizing the rise of a new heir who would once again take over the government and exercise justice. On the other hand, Ezekiel, during

the Babylonian exile, imagined the coming of the future David as the coming of a ro'eh, namely a "shepherd" for the flock of Israel.537

It is necessary at this point to turn to the writings uncovered in the Judean desert at Qumran, datable from between the second century BCE and the first century CE, to find the use of the Hebrew mašiaḥ in reference to a figure destined to come at the end of time to restore an age of justice. The Rule of the Community, preserved in a text from the first half of the first century BCE, speaks of the "Messiah of Aaron and Israel,"538 suggesting the coming of a pair of anointed persons, in some way modeled on the Biblical diarchy of Joshua and Zerubbabel.539 Moreover, the Rules of the Congregation contains a passage that projects the norms of the Qumranic community onto an eschatological level, describing a future ritual meal at which "[the mes]siah of Israel," begot by God, will participate together with the "chief [priest] of all the

congregations of Israel," the heads of the tribes and the congregations, the sages and the learned.540 Furthermore, in a commentary on the benediction of Jacob contained in Genesis, there is a prediction of the coming of "the Messiah of justice, the branch of David." Even if rooted in Biblical imagery, the expression "Messiah of justice"541 seems innovative and directly connected to the ideology of the Qumranic community. In the texts of this milieu, the expression "the anointed of the holy spirit" can be found several more times, even if outside of the Messianic context, affirming the

idea of a purely spiritual consecration which consents to "see the truth" and to transmit it to others.542

The form messias, the transcription into Greek characters of mešiḥa, that is to say of the Aramaic equivalent of mašiaḥ, appears for the first time in the Gospel of Saint John. The evangelical text itself annotates the word—from which the English "Messiah" will also descend—with the Greek christos, "anointed," the epithet used for Jesus some fifty times in the Gospels, and about five hundred thirty times in the entire New Testament. The character of the anointment of Jesus is never explicitly expressed in the Gospels, even if it is possible to find an allusion to it in the episode of the synagogal reading at Nazareth, when Jesus rose to read, "And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor (Isa. 61.1) [...] And he closed the book [...] And he began to say unto them, this day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4.17-21). The anointment Jesus seems to attribute to himself here is thus the spiritual one543 of the prophet. Thanks to this anointment, he knows and can therefore teach, heralding future events. Nevertheless, the Gospels also develop the theme of the regal Messianic nature of Jesus, recalling his connection with the house of David by means of the genealogy related at the beginning of Matthew.544 In fact, the inclusion of Jesus into the line of descendants of the sovereigns of Israel is an explicit legitimation of his

kingly role, even if the relationship of the anointed with David is formulated in problematic terms and

with a substantial distance from the pharisaical belief in the "anointed, son of David."545

From a lexical point of view, the New Testament literature offers a repertoire of qualifications of the word Christos in expressions inspired by the Hebrew tradition, but which are at the same time clearly innovative—for example the sentence ho Christos ho huios tou Theu tou zõntos, "The Anointed, son of the living God,"546 or the sequence Christos Kurios, "Anointed Lord,"547 which can be found alongside the traditional Judaic expression Christos Kuriou, "Anointed of the Lord," the latter a translation of the Biblical Hebrew, mašiaḥ Yhwh.548 Finally, the Gospels contain many allusions to the rich Messianic ferments that ran through Judaism of that age. These were connected to the activity of presumed Messiahs, for whom Jesus reserves the epithet pseudochristoi: "For false Christs and false prophets shall rise, and shall shew signs and wonders, to seduce" (Mark 13.22).

The oldest rabbinic source in which the term mašiaḥ is found with explicit reference to an age of redemption for the Jewish people is the Mišnah, probably composed in the third century. Here yamot ha-mašiaḥ, "the days of the Messiah," are mentioned, alluding to a future dimension.549 Later texts of Judaic literature enrich the description of the Messianic era with

many particulars, often related to the troubles and sufferings that would accompany the transition toward a new earthly dominion of Israel. In Late Antiquity, the time of the Messianic coming was thus imagined as a succession of extraordinary events, a progressive intensification of wars and prodigies, to which the name "Messianic pains" was sometimes given. In some sources the redemption of the Jews was placed at the end of a symbolic period of seven years: "But a Master has said, 'In the sixth year will be thundering, in the seventh

wars; at the end of the seventh the son of David will come.'—War is also the beginning of redemption."550

A relevant characteristic of the Messianic time would be a general inversion of the criteria of daily life, almost as if the fall of the world and of the Jews themselves into the realm of evil was the indispensable condition for a sudden and definite restoration of divine law. "Rabbi Yehudah said"—as stated in the Babylonian Talmud—"'In the generation when the son of David comes, the house of assembly will be for harlots, Galilee in ruins, Gablan lies desolate, the border inhabitants wander about from city to city, receiving no hospitality, the wisdom of scribes in disfavor, God-fearing men despised, people dogfaced, and truth entirely lacking.'"551

Therefore, in the Talmudic sources, and in the most ancient midrašim, Messianic expectation seems connected with a spatial-temporal dominion in which the gestures of the Messiah stand out as at a distance and, in a certain sense, abstract.

21

276

While the epoch-making upheavals were carefully described, the specific figure of the Anointed was often only briefly hinted at, and almost completely lacked characterization and psychological relief. In this regard, the heredity of the tragic failure of the revolt against the Romans, led by Bar Kokva (in 132-35) perhaps weighed heavily. In fact, many rabbis had enthusiastically supported it, and its catastrophic conclusion caused an aftermath of disillusionment and bitterness. At the end of the war, with the fall of Betar, the last stronghold of the rebels, Bar Kokva, to whom Messianic traits had initially been attributed, was bitterly criticized: "When Rabbi 'Akiva beheld Bar Koziva552 he exclaimed, 'This is the king Messiah!' Rabbi Yoḥanan ben

Torta retorted: 'Akiva, grass will grow in your cheeks and he will still not have come!'"553 Even if the defeat of Bar Kokva was primarily a military failure, some rabbinic traditions attributed it to the lack of exceptional quality of the leader, who was supposedly missing divine charisma.554

It was actually believed that the Messiah, son of David, had to have such extraordinary endowments, as, for example, being able to judge men solely by smell,555 even if this attribute belonged more to the realm of miracles than to that of a royal personality. In the same realm of abstraction belong the numerous speculations on the names of the future king of Israel, partially based on the Messianic epithets contained in the Scriptures, but often born of new verbal associations; thus such appellatives can be

found as Bar Nafle,556 Šiloh, Yinnon, Menaḥem, or, even, of "Leper," to signify the sufferings the Messiah would have to endure in the future age.557

Along with the figure of the Messiah, son of David, the Jewish rabbis also speak of a Messiah, son of Joseph, descended from the line of this patriarch or, according to other texts, of that of Ephraim, who was charged with gathering the tribes of Israel in consideration of the final wars. In some ancient texts558 this second personage was defined as mešuaḥ milḥamah, "anointed for the war," and identified with the priest who, according to Deuteronomy, had the task of exhorting the Jewish troops before battle.559 The pair formed by the Messiah, son of David, and the son of Joseph reintroduced, in a certain way, the ancient model of two anointed persons, even if the representative of the priesthood had assumed above all the traits of a military guide.

The anonymous author of the Sefer Zerubbavel (The Book of Zerubbabel), who probably lived in a Byzantine region between the end of the sixth and the beginning of the seventh centuries, organized in a narrative structure the various traditions concerning the end of time, which made a fragmented appearance in the literature of Late Antiquity.560 The very short text tells

of a vision in which the Biblical Zerubbabel and the angel Meṭaṭron561 reveal to the protagonist the succession of Messianic phases, characterized by an epoch-making struggle by the two Messiahs of Israel against Armilus, son of Satan and of a female statue of stone. At the same time emperor and demon, Armilus—whose name seems to be the Semitic transposition of Romulus—at first reunifies the entire world under the control of Rome and succeeds in killing the Messiah, son of Joseph, who confronted him in Jerusalem. Only at this point does Menaḥem ben 'Ammi'el, the royal Messiah, who had been in hiding together with his mother Ḥefṣivah since the time of David, appear in the holy city. After a series of vicissitudes, and after having convinced the learned of Israel of the authenticity of his mission, Menaḥem is finally able to get the better of Armilus and his army, entering Jerusalem and restoring services in the Temple.562

This event, narrated in a suggestive style and clearly influenced by the fighting between the Byzantine and Sasanian emperors, soon became quite popular as a model for the subsequent Jewish apocalyptic tradition, to the point that the majority of Messianic works mirror to a large degree the imagery of the Sefer Zerubbavel. These narrative transpositions of the eschatological expectation show a clear predominance of the fantastic elements over the doctrinal and religious ones. Typical in this sense is the Sefer otot ha-mašiaḥ (The Book of the Signs of the Messiah)—belonging to the early Middle Ages—where ten signs are listed that mark the beginning of the Messianic time. In a crescendo of natural events, which include a suffocating heat and bloody rain, the book finally describes

the sounding of the angelic trumpets and the apparition of the Davidian Anointed and the prophet Elijah.563

A similar tendency toward the fantastical is also found in later medieval and early modern tales about the false Messiahs. They often depict characters who are eager to amaze their contemporaries, in order to induce in them dreams of redemption, but always

subsequently disavowed by reality. In the Sefer massa'ot (Itinerary), probably written in the second half of the twelfth century, Binyamin of Tudela describes the false Messiah Dawid Alroy as a sort of magician, even if very erudite. Binyamin narrates the events surrounding him with a curiosity mixed with disapproval, and depicts this adventurer as showing "signs by pretended miracles to the Jews. He said: 'The Holy One, blessed be he, sent me to capture Jerusalem and to free you from the yoke of the Gentiles'." Imprisoned by the king of Persia, Alroy freed himself through an incantation, and, "having reached the bank of a river [...] took off his mantle, and spread it on the face of the water to cross thereon."564 A similar sense of deep estrangement still prevailed at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the story of the deeds of another pseudo-Messiah, Dawid Reuveni. Dawid boasted that he was the brother of the king of Ethiopia, and arrived in Europe to raise an army against the Turks, but ended up in a Spanish jail of the Inquisition.565

Compared to the proliferation of legendary narratives, in the Middle Ages the theoretical treatment of Messianism was rather limited. The greatest effort towards giving order to the Messianic idea came from Moses Maimonides, who treated the subject in his vast juridical codex, composed in rigorous Hebrew

and entitled Mišneh Torah. Maimonides sanctioned first of all the duty of Messianic belief, affirming that "whoever does not believe in the Messiah or does not await the coming violates not only the faith in the prophets, but in the Torah and in Moses, our master."566 Nevertheless, to trust in the Messiah does not mean, for the Sephardic thinker, awaiting a natural catastrophe or a sudden mutation of human history, but simply to hope for an age when political independence will be achieved, when it will be actually possible to apply fully Jewish law and, above all, to study it. Maimonides's Messiah is first a rabbi, "wiser than Solomon and a great prophet almost like Moses [...] who will teach all the people [...] and every nation will come to listen to him."567

Maimonides's resolute favoring of the moral importance of the future king, even over his political importance, profoundly influenced

later Judaic thought, leaving its traces on mystical literature as well. The Kabbalistic texts of the end of the thirteenth century amply utilized the figure of a Messiah who headed the heavenly academy, following the discussions among the rabbis and taking an active part in their display of mystical erudition. In the rich prose of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the appearance of the king among the scholars is described as announced by the ringing voice of a herald: "'Make room, make room, for King Messiah is coming to the Academy of Rabbi Šim'on' [...] The Messiah then entered wearing the heavenly diadems of the supernal assembly." This celestial sovereign "puts his seal on all of the expositions that issue from the mouths of the masters,"568 corroborating, with his approval, their correctness.

The Kabbalists also introduced the image of the Messiah into the sefirotic structure, attributing to it the function of representing the sefirah malkut (kingdom). The conceptual connec-

tion with the lower level of emanation did not consist only in the obvious assonance between the mission of the future king and the attribute of majesty of malkut, but also in bringing out the passive character of the symbolism of the Anointed. As in the heavenly scheme, the sefirah of the kingdom was mostly imagined as passive, and as dependent on the celestial effluvium; thus, the Messiah derived his own anointment from an external agent, who poured the divine spirit over him. "It is strange that the Messiah should be called 'poor'"569—states another passage of the *Zohar*—"[...] it is because he has nothing of his own, and he is compared to the holy moon above, which has no light save from the sun."570 The force of the emanation therefore corresponds metaphorically to the oil of the anointment, but also to the splendor that radiates from the sefirah tif'eret (beauty), the sun, towards the moon, malkut.

In the later development of the Kabbalistic doctrine, we find the theme of the inner perfection of the Messiah, necessary for the beginning of the new historical order. This idea was thoroughly formulated in the second half of the sixteenth century by Ḥayyim Vital, systematic organizer of the thought of the rabbi of Safed, Yiṣḥaq Luria.

Vital inserted the Messianic idea into the complex system of the redemption of the worlds which constituted the central point of the Lurianic Kabbalah, and which was imagined as a reappearance of the original harmony of cosmic light. The success of the Davidian king was seen as the result of a double action, conducted on the one hand by the mystics, and on the other by the Messiah himself. According to Vital, the Kabbalists could create the necessary conditions for the coming of the redeemer of Israel by way of concentrating on the liturgy. In this way they would redeem the divine particles imprisoned in the lower levels of reality. At the end of this long process, which would be prolonged over generations, even the last spark of light would be liberated from the constrictions

of matter, and the cosmic structure would return to a state of perfection. The metaphor most frequently used by Vital to indicate this process is that of a cosmic man, whose figure would have been completely restored to the light, so that "when the sparks that are in the feet are purified and rise, the entire man will be restored and the Messiah will come."571

Along with the mystics' collective task of Messianic restoration, the Lurianic Kabbalah also predicted specific individual acts of the Anointed, who needed to achieve the perfection of his own personality. According to the description given by Vital in the Sefer arba' me'ot šeqel kesef, "the king Messiah will in truth be a righteous man, born of an earthly father and mother [...] worthy of meriting, through his works, a soul, a spirit, a superior soul, life, and oneness, and completely holy." The Messiah was thus no longer the purely passive subject of the sefirotic dynamism, but a conscious protagonist of the new era, who had the responsibility of earning the final confirmation of his task. In fact, he could reveal himself only when he was capable of receiving the supernal soul, held in store for him from the beginning of time: "On that day, at the end of time, his soul will be given to that righteous man, placed in the garden of Eden, and he will be worthy of being the redeemer."572

Lurianism had attributed to the Messiah a precise individual role, and this new theoretical approach had consequences for the fate of Šabbetay Ševi, the most important Messianic figure of modern Judaism. A troubled personality, a victim of sudden changes of mood, and instinctively inclined to theatrical and provocative gestures, this Jew of Smyrna (1626-1676) managed to attract many followers throughout the entire Diaspora. Ševi personified the Kabbalistic Messiah, and was able to earn himself authority, even if temporary,

based only on the symbolic meaning of his actions, without relying on any political investiture. The success of the movement was mostly due to the work of Nathan of Gaza, who elaborated a complex interpretation of the biography of the alleged Messiah, inspired by the principles of the Lurianic Kabbalah. Šabbetay's provocative gestures—including the paradox of his conversion to Islam—were here read as a journey toward inner redemption, a descent into the abyss of negativity through which the protagonist exorcised evil, first of all in himself and then in the world. This image of the Messiah, which Nathan carved out of the concrete events of Ševi's life, carries the Lurianic premise to its extreme, giving the Kabbalistic Anointed the responsibility of penetrating to the source of affliction. If, in the Lurianic vision, the supernal soul descended directly from the light of the Garden of Eden toward David's heir, for Nathan, Ševi had to extricate his own soul from the qelippot, the dark "husks" that dulls the divine principle. This would have occurred at the cost of an enormous effort, through a succession of partial victories and unexpected falls, as if the anguished series of Messianic wars had been transposed into the heart of the Messiah: "The Lord, blessed be He, submits him to tremendous trials. How many times, after he had risen to the heavens, did he fall again to the depths of the great abyss and the serpents provoked him, saying to him: 'Where is your God?' [...] Yet nevertheless he remained firm in his faith."573

Ševi's apostasy marked a sudden disillusionment for most of his followers, and demonstrated to all of Judaism the dangers of a Messianism based on the exaltation of an ambiguous personality. In the

second half of the seventeenth century, and at the beginning of the eighteenth, Messianic themes were consequently treated with careful discretion—with the exception of the subter-

ranean activity of those who had nonetheless remained faithful to Ševi—and there were no new pseudo-Messiahs.

Nevertheless, the image of the Davidian king retained an important role in Hasidism, often appearing in early sources about the founder of the movement, Yiśra'el Ba'al Šem Ṭov. According to the ḥasidim, the privilege of meeting the Messiah was reserved for exceptional personalities, first among them to Ba'al Šem himself, who on more than one occasion seemed to consider the encounter with the eschatological king as the fundamental moment of his inner experience. For the Hasidic rabbi, the Messiah was a mystical interlocutor, situated in the visionary space of the heavenly Academy, attainable only through a difficult ecstatic journey.

Among the very few writings directly attributed to Ba'al Šem, the description of an itinerary towards the Messianic dwelling appears, narrated in first person to his son-in-law. The document, which has the incoherence of a deeply emotional memory, speaks of an ascent from world to world, "along the column574 that is well known to those familiar with grace." After having passed through many levels, and having seen "a great number of souls of the living and the dead, known and unknown," continues Ba'al Šem, "I entered the house of the Messiah, where he was studying the Torah with all the wise men and the righteous [...] I saw that they rejoiced greatly but I did not understand the reason, and feared that they delighted at my death. They made me understand that I was not dead [...] but even today I do not know the reason for that joy." The Messiah is

therefore the source of consciousness and, at the same time, its legitimation; even if he does not have an earthly personality, he is here the center and is, so to speak, the end of the entire mystical search: "I asked him," says Ba'al Šem, "'When will you come, Lord?' And he answered: 'You know it will be at the moment in which your teaching

becomes manifest, spreads throughout the world, and the source will flow from all I have taught you, so that they can also achieve the reunification and rise again as you have done. Then the coverings of evil will dissolve, and the time of proper order and salvation will arrive.'"575 The ascent to the supernal palace, which even causes the protagonist to lose control of his own physical aspect, seems therefore to be essentially a dislocation in consciousness which is necessary to reach a new state of awareness. The meeting with the Messiah here exhibits characteristics of an inner monologue, where the Davidian Anointed seems above all to embody the sublimation of a cognitive project.

Maṣṣah מצה
Unleavened Bread

The alimentary taboo against leaven is one of the most ancient features of Judaism, and the secret of its symbolic value seems hidden in an almost unattainable past. From year to year, on the eve of Pesaḥ, every trace of leavened food (ḥameṣ) must be removed from the Jewish home and, for seven consecutive days, only maṣṣot,576 an unleavened bread made from flour and water, can be eaten.

Several Biblical passages provide the cue for this tradition, which is generally connected with commemorating the harried departure of the Israelites from Egypt. Unleavened bread is considered to be a memory of the frugal meals consumed by the Jews pursued by the Egyptians, of a moment when there was no time to prepare the usual leavened bread: And the people took their dough before it was leavened, their kneading troughs being bound up in their clothes upon their shoulders [...] And they baked unleavened cakes of the dough which they brought forth out of Egypt, for it was not leavened; because they were thrust out of Egypt, and could not remain, neither had they prepared for themselves any provision (Exod. 12.3439).

As a matter of fact, the Biblical tales probably derive from the superimposition of two originally distinct recurrences, Pesaḥ, and the festival of unleavened bread (Exod. 12.17),577 which belonged to the most ancient agrarian calendar. Set in

the spring month of Aviv, at the beginning of the grain harvest, the festival of unleavened bread requested abstention from leaven, together with a pilgrimage. It perhaps represented a form of reconciliation with nature and an invocation of the abundance of the harvest.578 The prohibition of leaven probably meant a symbolic pause between the preceding harvest, already exhausted, and the new one, which was to be propitiated through this rite of passage. Thus, the entire collective took on the burden of temporarily abstaining from fermented food, as if yeast (śe'or) were a sign of a past, or a disturbing element which could interfere, by way of simile, with the delicate process of utilization of the newly matured crop.

However, the Bible also preserves the notion of a more general impurity of leaven, and of its exclusion from the sphere of sacrificial

offerings. According to Leviticus, no meal offering presented to the Lord shall be made with leaven; for you shall burn no leaven, nor any honey, *in any offering of the Lord made by fire* (Lev. 2.11). The flour offerings at the Temple were therefore unleavened, and as such were consumed by the priests after the ritual, so that it was possible to deduce a connection between the absence of leaven and the area of the sacred, which needed to remain uncontaminated by the mysterious force of the adulteration of fermented substances.579

On the other hand, the symbolic abstention from fermented flour was not only characteristic of ancient Israel. In fact, in the Roman religion, the priests of Jupiter (flamines Dialis) were also not "permitted to touch flour mixed with leaven,"580 as Aulus Gellius in his Attic Nights recalls, even if he does not offer any conceptual explanation for this rigid prohibition. The general norms of conduct for the priests of Jupiter—which included, among other things, the obligation to bury their own nail and hair cuttings, and the prohibitions against seeing or naming raw meat, pruning a vineyard, or passing beneath its shoots—seem to belong to the sphere of protection of the most striking manifestations of fertility, or also, on the contrary, of the signs of death. The primary ground for the religious taboo against leaven, in the Roman as well as Jewish traditions, can therefore be attributed to an autonomy of the sacred, which risks losing power through contact with lower and, so to speak, concurrent and transient forms of vital energy.

In the later Judaic tradition, the idea of leaven was frequently associated with the sphere of sin; that is, with a moral contamination regarded as the origin of transgressive behavior. Paul adopts this general attitude in the First Epistle to the Corinthians, when he opposes "the leaven of malice and wickedness [...] with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth,"581 while the Gospels of Matthew and Mark attribute to Jesus the admonition, "Take heed, beware of the leaven of the Pharisees, and of the leaven of Herod."582 A similar image is also found in the Babylonian Talmud, where leaven is used to

allude to the evil inclination that corrupts, leading man's conduct astray: "Rabbi Alexandri, on concluding his prayer, used to add the following: 'Sovereign of the Universe, it is known full well to Thee that our will is to perform Thy will, and what prevents us? The yeast in the dough.'"583

The Jewish rabbis of Late Antiquity drew up a thorough set of rules concerning the substances and foods that had to be eliminated with regard to Pesaḥ because they could have contained traces of ferment. Thus the removal was established of "Babylonian batter, barley beer, Roman vinegar, Egyptian barley wine, the dyers' broth, the flat bread of the cooks, and the glue of the writers. Rabbi Eli'ezer teaches: women's cosmetics as well."584 While the prohibition against keeping and consuming leaven was valid for all seven days of the Passover festival, the duty to eat unleavened bread was limited only to the ritual of the first night; it was considered optional on the other days.585 In any case, the consumption of the maṣṣot was considered a very important act, capable of securing divine benediction, as God himself affirms, according to the Midraš Tanḥuma: "Thanks to the merits of the unleavened bread, I will consecrate the bread."586 According to the legend, the use of unleavened bread was instituted in honor of Sarah, who "prepared [unleavened] cakes for the angels of service, so they did not have to touch bread."587

With the emergence of the Sephardic Kabbalah during the thirteenth century, Jewish thinkers further analyzed the ancient symbolic dichotomy between leavened and unleavened bread, to which they attributed an important place in the representation of the two dominant forces of the divine, mercy and rigor.

As the rabbinic tradition had attached leaven to the negative part of man, the new theosophical doctrine of the Kabbalists transposed this metaphor to the celestial forces, considering ferment as an allusion to the obscure supernal energy entrusted with the task of judging and punishing. Towards the middle of the thirteenth century, the Sephardic exegete Moses Nachmanides briefly referred to this mystical secret in his Comment on the Torah, writing that "the prohibition of leavened

dough was perhaps due to the fact that it meant the attribute of rigor,"588 that is, an aspect of the divine influence which was to be tempered with mercy, symbolized by the maṣṣot.

Nachmanides' comments were taken up again at the end of the century by another commentator close to his school, Baḥya ben Ašer, who extolled the pedagogic value of unleavened bread. According to Baḥya, maṣṣot serve to remind the Israelites "not to rely only on the attribute of rigor,"589 and not to believe that the liberation from Egypt was exclusively the work of the harsh justice of the Lord, since, on the contrary, divine intervention was also inspired by the reconciling impulse of mercy.

The work in which the maṣṣah found its most ample mystical interpretation was the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), a fundamental compendium of Kabbalistic knowledge, written at the end of the thirteenth century. In the *Zohar*, unleavened bread is no longer an element of a static dualism, instead designating a divine level inside the process of emanation. "Now this bread of affliction"—it is written in the first volume of the work—"is called maṣṣah, symbolic of the female principle, which without the male principle is in poverty. Thus Israel was first brought near the grade symbolized by maṣṣah. But afterwards God caused them to enter other grades, until the male principle joined the female principle, and so maṣṣah received the addition of the letter waw, symbolic of the male principle, and became converted into miṣwah (command, precept)."590

Employing a typical Kabbalistic lexicon, this *Zohar*ic passage intends to evoke the solitude of the sefirah malkut (kingdom), as a symbol of the community of Israel, which exile had separated from the Lord. Starting from the equivalence between unleavened bread and the sefirah malkut, the author of the *Zohar* first endows the word maṣṣah with a sexual meaning, and connects it to the divine "female" without her bridegroom. Then, while reuniting with the male, which in the sefirotic plan is equivalent to tif'eret (beauty), the maṣṣah / malkut acquires its graphic symbol, namely the letter waw, which—among the four consonants of the Tetragrammaton—precisely symbolizes tif'eret.

The result is a word play by which maṣṣah (mṣh) changes into miṣwah (mṣwh, the precept).591 This means that the giving of the divine law (the precepts) to Israel is the archetype of the restoration of the sefirotic equilibrium, and of the union between malkut and tif'eret.

Along with these conceptual developments, which pertain to the theoretical sphere of Kabbalistic theosophy, the *Zohar* also contains a narrative reworking of the prohibition against leaven, which gives life to the surprising representation of evil as an increasingly widespread and pervasive ferment. In this case, the duty to eat unleavened bread is compared to the Biblical order to construct no molten gods (Exod. 734.17), since "If one eats leaven during the Passover, it is as though he worshipped idols." Abstention from leaven would, then, have been a sort of medicine imposed on the Jews after the long dwelling in Egypt, where they were under the immediate influence of idolatry and were contaminated by the destructive "ferment" of the pagan cults. "For when Israel went out from Egypt," continues

the author of the *Zohar*, "they emerged from the dominion of the Egyptians, from that dominion which is called 'leaven'; for the 'evil inclination' operates in man and grows in him like leaven in the dough: it enters into him and, little by little, extends its influence until his whole self is permeated by it."592

The metaphor offered here by the *Zohar* is based on the principle of the assimilation of destructive influences, as if perversion were a food that takes refuge in the body and silently pervades it. The remedy, therefore, also needed to be a mystical engulfing of the good that, through the icon of unleavened bread, removes the tenacious energy of negativity.

Mayim מים
Water

With a nonchalant anachronism, Pharaoh's daughter, who has just found the baby Moses, allows herself a word play in Hebrew, deriving the name of the future leader from the root mšh, which means "to rescue (from water)."593 In the Biblical tale, the name Moses is thus the result of a spontaneous exclamation that connects the protagonist to the dominion of water: And she called his name Moses; and she said, Because I drew him out of the water (Exod. 2.10). From the basket smeared with bitumen and tar and hidden in the rushes of the Nile to the waves of the Sea of Rushes,594 which he parts with a gesture of the hand, and finally to the desert water rendered drinkable, or made to flow from the rocks, all of the events involving Moses are subject to the symbolism of water, conceived as a dynamic force of the fates.

In fact, in the salient episodes of the cycle of Moses, water always appears when destiny swells before the prophet, with signs that seem

to verge on misfortune. In the Bible, water is sometimes conceived as a dangerous instrument, sometimes as an object of dispute—since it is essential to survival in the desert—but Moses is always able to use its force to his own advantage. With water, he upsets the course of events and

transforms it towards the good, which finally results in a sudden salvation. After escaping the Pharaoh's capture for having killed an Egyptian, Moses's first act in the land of Midian was, for instance, to sit down by a well (Exod. 2.15). Here again he receives fortune's favor from the water, since, for helping the seven daughters of the local priest to water the flocks, defending them from the bullying of the other shepherds, he is able to marry Zipporah, and can thus count on the valuable protection of the Midianites.

The tale of the crossing of the Red Sea is marked by Moses's capacity to dominate the threat of the waves, with a gesture of magical character that is suggested to him by the Lord: And lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it (Exod. 14.16). Like an agreed upon signal, at the moment of Moses's gesture, the Lord stirs up a strong east wind that, blowing all night, transforms the sea into dry land. The transit narrated in Exodus occurs at night, and seems imagined as an advancing from west to east against the impetus of the wind, between two walls of water. The next morning, Moses stretches his hand out over the sea again; the Egyptians fled towards it; and the Lord overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea, victims of an uncontrollable terror of divine origin. The episode represents a sort of negation of the nature of the sea, which is transformed into an earthly path and which, instead of being plowed by boats, is passed over by the Hebrews as well-traveled ground. In this overturning of the elements, water is subject to the imagery of a people bound to the earth, for whom a passage through the sea is more an amplification of the idea of a ford than an expression of a habit of navigation.

Again under exceptional circumstances, the Israelites' crossing of the Jordan River, guided by Joshua, is also presented as a real fording, following a procedure that symbolically corresponds to the antecedent

of Exodus. Here again it is God who assures the safe passage through the water, even if it is no longer the leader's gesture that divides the waves, but rather the

295

presence of the holy ark, in front of which the waters which came down from above stood and rose up in a heap [...] and those which came down toward the sea [...] failed, and were cut off (Josh. 3.16). In this case, too, the river crossing during flood season has the aim of guaranteeing a military advantage to the Jewish army, who are heading to the steppes of Jericho to fight against the Amorite kings and the Canaanites. These latter enemies were actually so frightened at the news of the miracle that they did have any spirit left in them any more, because of the people of Israel (Josh. 5.1).

To violate water is therefore often part of a collective strategy, but can also be the sign of an individual's spiritual force, and can even be one stage of a mystical journey. This is what happens in a second miraculous crossing of the Jordan—here the protagonist is Elijah, who took his mantle, and wrapped it together, and struck the waters (2Kings 2.8), causing them to part so that he, together with Elisha, might cross. This individual wonder, by way of which teacher and student cross the water's course, immediately precedes the prophet's abduction to the sky, in the whirlwind announced by a chariot of fire, and horses of fire (2Kings 2.11). Frightened by the vision, Elisha at first tears up his garments, but then gathers up Elijah's fallen mantle, and with it returns across the Jordan, managing to separate the waters once again, thus inheriting Elijah's miraculous powers. In fact, those who were in Jericho saw him, they said, The spirit of Elijah does rest on Elisha (2Kings 2.15). The conquest of spiritual power is represented here by

means of the protagonist's return journey: Elisha is the only person in the Bible to attempt a return across miraculously separated waters.

On a ritual level, the crossing of water and, more generally, bathing, have a purifying function in the Scriptures. They usually prepare one for an encounter with the divine, but also remove accidental contaminations, or contaminations deriving from illness or sin. According to the book of Exodus, a basin of bronze, containing water to wash with, was placed near the altar. The priests

296

needed to cleanse themselves with that water before entering into the tent of the meeting. By means of sometimes very complex rites, lepers, those who had contracted a sexual disease, menstruating women, or, finally, anyone who had been contaminated through contact with a cadaver, needed to be purified with water. Contact with the sacred could also give rise to a state of impurity, again to be removed with the lustral liquid. This was the case with the man who assumed the task of leading the scapegoat into the desert, and who, after completing his mission, had to wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water, and afterwards come into the camp (Lev. 16.26).

In the book of Numbers, an ordeal with water is described, intended to prove the infidelity of a woman suspected of adultery. In this case the husband was to bring his wife in front of the priest, who verified her guilt by making her drink the water that causes the curse, composed by mixing water with the dust that he found on the floor of the tabernacle. According to Biblical law, in case of guilt, the effect of the water would be such that her belly shall swell, and her thigh shall fall, while, if the woman was pure, then she shall be free, and shall conceive seed (Num. 5.27-28).

Another important aspect of the symbolism of water in the Scriptures is its quality of being a primordial element, present from the beginning of Genesis, where the aquatic abyss has the role of original matter in which the spirit of God floats. From the indistinct mass of primordial liquid, God derives, through an order, the two seas of the higher and lower waters, placing the firmament between them: And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters (Gen. 1.6).595 From this first separation, a gathering of the terrestrial water into a single place follows, causing the appearance of dry ground, and giving origin to the actual

features of the world: And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas (Gen. 1.10).

It was precisely the cosmogonic function of water that aroused the most interest in the authors of the post-Biblical era, who added to the tale of Genesis a series of legends and mythological developments, thus creating a sort of narrative cycle dedicated to the primordial waters. Scattered throughout the texts of the first centuries of the Common Era, we can find numerous tales of creation in which God subdues the waters to his own will and imposes order upon them, conquering their rebellious spirit.596 According to the midraš Genesis Rabbah, composed at the beginning of the fifth century, the primeval division provoked, for example, the mourning of the waters, which did not want to separate and only grudgingly submitted to the divine decision: "The upper waters parted from the nether waters with weeping."597 Another midraš, the Seder rabbah di-Bere'šit (The Great Order of Creation), explains that God created the firmament to hinder the passionate love the waters had for each other: "The upper waters are masculine and the lower feminine, and wanting to make love risked destroying the world, since they rose to the mountains and went down the hills, chasing after the female waters, until the Lord, blessed be He, reprimanded them [...] and placed a border between the one and the other."598

Among the inventions of the Haggadah, there is also a disrespectful dialogue between the waters and God, which results in their punishment. This story is retold in the Midraš Konen, a text from the early Middle Ages: "He said to them: 'Separate in two parts: half of you will rise, half will go down below.' Even knowing this, they all rose up. The Lord, blessed be He, said to them [...] 'You all rose up!' The waters repeated: 'We will not go down.' Demonstrating such shamelessness in the presence of

Creator, they were thus called 'impudent waters.'" God's reaction came without delay, and "He extended his little finger and lacerated them in two parts, so that half fell down, even if they did not want to." Extremely irate, the Lord "would have liked to burn them, but they presented themselves supplicant at his feet. He thus said to them: 'You know I intend to have my children pass among you. If I want to make you sea, I will make you sea, if I want to make you land, land you will be.' No sooner said than done, the Lord, blessed be He, set this condition with them."599

In these tales, water, as a rebel element, seems to be the personification of an acosmic principle which opposes the divine order, and thus represents a threat to the stability of creation. In fact, in another legend—which appears in many variations, from the Talmudic era down to the late Middle Ages—Satan himself assumes the semblance of an impetuous watercourse, thus endangering the lives of Abraham and Isaac, who are on their way to the sacrifice on Mount Meron. Trying to stop them, Satan changed "into a great river," making himself increasingly deeper as the two tried to wade across it. When the water had already reached their necks, Abraham invoked the Lord. "Immediately the Lord, blessed be He, reprimanded Satan and the water dried up into the ground, so that Abraham and Isaac found themselves on dry land."600

Water as a symbol of obstacle also returns in the Talmudic Ḥagigah treatise, in which we find a text that can be considered one of the most meaningful examples of Jewish mysticism. A section of the work is dedicated to a tale in which the adepts, to achieve the vision of the

divinity, need to pass a sort of test of water and give a correct interpretation to the sudden appearance of the celestial waters. In this well-known sto-

ry, four rabbis enter into the pardes,601 where Rabbi ʻAqiva instructs his companions, "When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not, Water! Water! For it is said: He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before my eyes (Ps. 101.7)."602 With his words, Rabbi ʻAqiva apparently tries to forewarn of a misunderstanding, a false perception that could lead to the belief that marble is water, an element foreign to the heavenly dwelling. That is, the adept who finally arrives at the heart of the divine space should not react to a purely visual stimulus, and should not invoke the liquid component that likely accompanied him on the preceding stretch of the ecstatic journey.603

To the sages of the subsequent Jewish tradition, the heart of the occult teaching of Rabbi ʻAqiva seemed to lie in its iteration of the word "water." They therefore concentrated their attention on such reduplication, trying to find in it one more meaning, beyond the simple value of interjection. One of the most original interpretations of the esoteric teachings of Rabbi ʻAqiva was that of Moses Maimonides, who, towards the end of the twelfth century, included the passage in a complex philosophical discussion on the nature of water, understood as an elementary principle as well as a specific component of mundane reality. In fact, according to Maimonides, the word "water" indicates two different notions in the Bible—one referring to the potential element situated in a separate sphere above the earth, and the other employed to describe earthly waters. When the creator established the firmament to separate the waters from the waters, writes Maimonides, this "[does] not refer

300

merely to a division in place [...] the correct interpretation is that He made a natural division between both of them." To support this idea, the philosopher cites the Talmudic passage of the pardes, implying that Rabbi 'Aqiva's prohibition alludes to the non-comparable character of the higher and lower waters. In this light, the exclamation "Water! Water!" should be prohibited because it affirms the equality of two diverse levels of reality, attributing to the element placed above the heavenly vault the improper name of "water": "Reflect, if you are one of those who reflect, to what extent he [Rabbi 'Aqiva] has made clear and revealed the whole matter in this statement, provided that you consider it well; understand all that has been demonstrated in the Meteorologica, and examine everything that people have said about every point mentioned in that work."604 With this affirmation, Maimonides brings about a decisive transposition of the text from the mystical dominion to the philosophical one, rendering Rabbi 'Aqiva as almost an advocate of the Aristotelian doctrine, evoked here in reference to the Stagirian's work on natural phenomena.

The Maimonidean exegesis had the effect of introducing into successive literature a stable correspondence between the Talmudic anecdote and the division of water into high and low. Singular results are to be found above all in the works of the Kabbalah. Thanks to a typical Kabbalistic method, Maimonides's idea was integrated into a notion that, although reworking the philosopher's argument, inverted its symbolic meaning. What, for Maimonides, was a substantial semantic diversity became for the Kabbalists an identity between the superior and inferior principles. Therefore, the prohibition against exclaiming "Water! Water!" was now understood as recalling the unity of divine emanation. This development of the symbolism of water offers a clear example of the origin of many Kabbalistic metaphors that, although often deriving from philosophical

argumentation, achieve completely unprecedented results, even those which conflict with their very premises.

Thus the exponents of the Sephardic Kabbalah read Rabbi ʻAqiva's injunction in the light of sefirotic symbolism, attributing the double mention of water to the sefirot ḥokmah (knowledge) and malkut (kingdom). The most complete exposition is found in the Tiqqune he-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor), written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, in a passage presented as a revelation of a hidden secret: "Indeed the marble stones are the two yod included in alef, one high and one low, and therefore there is no impurity [...] nor distinction between water and water, since everything is united and originates from the tree of life that is the waw placed at the center of alef."605 The graphic form of the Hebrew letter alef, which is taken as a symbol of unity, is dissected here into three parts: two yod transversely separated from a waw, to indicate the two poles of ḥokmah, which represents the higher waters; and malkut, the lower waters, divided by tif'eret (beauty), which is equivalent to the firmament. In the same way, the two yod are in reality a single letter—the two waters are essentially united and joined in their purity, and therefore do not have to be separated by a double mention.

In the middle of the sixteenth century, Mošeh Cordovero, in his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates), dedicates a long commentary to this passage of the Tiqqune ha-*zohar*, summarizing its salient traits to define the symbolic value of water. He also offers a theoretical justification of the connection between purity and the supernal union: "It is in fact not necessary to distinguish if not in an impure place [...] since in the pure place, in which there are pure marble stones, one should not exclaim: Water! Water! [...] these waters are in fact in the emanation, and for this reason they have to remain indistinct."606 The passage of the Tiqqune ha-*zohar*, as well as Cordovero's commentary, explore the theosophical meaning of the symbolism of water, inscribing it in the design of divine emanation, and transforming it into a metaphor of conceptual distinction between purity and impurity.

The work of Naḥman of Bratslav, a Hasidic rabbi who lived between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contains a discussion of the

psychological implications connected with Rabbi ʻAqiva's mystical prohibition, resolving it, perhaps for the first time, on the psychological level rather than that of knowledgeable counsel or an initiation procedure. Starting from physiological considerations, the ḥasid of Bratslav described a long conceptual process, culminating in an emotional evaluation of the sentence "Water! Water!" Naḥman would interpret this exclamation as "guarding against lies [...] that correspond to tears and thus to salt water. When a lie is spoken, it results in turbidity in the blood, which produces black bile: and it is from the excess of the latter that tears derive their origin, as far as causing the eyes to ache."607 Consequently, for Naḥman, the double mention of water did not derive from a fallacious external perception, but manifested an inward turbidity, a physical impurity manifested through crying. Undergoing an unusual symbolic transposition, Rabbi ʻAqiva's prescription here represents not only the moral imperative not to lie, but also a prohibition against crying, as if the uncontrolled expression of emotions is an insincere act that subjects one to the dangers of confusion and rebellion.

## מנורה Menorah
## Candelabrum

From time to time, Elisha traveled to the city of Shunem. To welcome him properly, a wealthy woman proposed that her husband should build a little chamber in their home, since she was convinced that he was a holy man of God. In the place that was prepared for the prophet she arranged a bed, and a table, and a stool, and a lampstand (2King 4.10). The lamp, which was most likely as much a sober necessity as the other furnishings, is called a menorah. It is only in this passage, in all of the Scriptures, that a profane light is designated by this term, which normally refers to the sacred candelabrum that, according to Biblical tales, represented one of the basic elements of the Jewish religion, from the time of the desert to the destruction of the Second Temple. While the lamp prepared for Elisha receives only a modest mention, the menorah of the liturgy is described in the Bible in unusually minute detail, appropriately so for an object believed to have been forged from a celestial model.

Indeed, the first plan for the candelabrum originates directly from God, who showed it to Moses on Sinai, explaining its details with the care of a master goldsmith. The main characteristics of the artifact were that it be of pure gold and hammered workmanship, and crafted from a single piece. The decoration of the base, of the shaft, and of the six branches was to be made in the shape of almonds, with their bulbs and their flowers (Exod. 25. 31-40), covering the lamp with an abundant richness of vegetation. According to Leviticus, Moses's menorah was placed in the Tent of Meeting, on the southern side and in front of the golden table with the bread of presen-

306

tation: its lights burned from the evening to the morning (Lev. 24.3), that is to say, perhaps only at night.608

The Biblical authors do not dwell on the function of the candelabrum in the archaic rite. For this reason, since the ancient era only hypotheses, at times contrasting, have been advanced to explain the symbolic meaning of the object, which was generally considered as a metaphor for the sky and the seven planets.609 Whatever the case, the original meaning of the candelabrum was certainly connected to its formal characteristics, as well as to its placement in the Tent of Meeting, and to the times at which it was lit.

Thanks to its shape, the menorah was a kind of epitomized representation of vegetal nature, and its nocturnal lighting prolonged this aspect into the hours of darkness, making the candelabrum a sign of the persistence of natural energy, offered as testimony to the Lord. The memorial function of the candelabrum and, at the same time, its value as a silent sacrifice of light, are confirmed by its symmetrical position with respect to the table with the twelve loaves, which were replaced each Sabbath to recall the tribes of Israel to God and thus guarantee prosperity.610 The spatial link between table and menorah established an equivalence between the two objects of the cult, rendering them expressions of the same level of the sacred.

In this metaphoric sphere, the lighting of the menorah was clearly a complementary attribute to the permanent value of its tree-like form, and served to guarantee its effi-

cacy during darkness.611 The symbolism of the number seven, which characterized the candelabrum, also accords with the idea of a

cyclical completeness of nature, which the Near Eastern traditions usually expressed by heptads.

While the Biblical texts concerning the Mosaic institution of the cult speak of a single menorah, the passages relating to the first Temple mention various sacred candlesticks, perhaps in proportion to the lavish pomp of the edifice, which was intended to show the prosperity of the Israelite dynasty. The Bible narrates that Solomon made, in addition to some other furnishings, lampstands of pure gold, five on the right side, and five on the left, before the sanctuary, with the flowers, and the lamps, and the tongs of gold (1King 7.49). The parallel passage in the book of Chronicles does not provide any of the artifacts' details, but generically affirms that the new menorot were made according to their form (2Chron. 4.7), thus implying that they followed Moses's model. This absence of details seems to suggest a transition from the importance of the single ancient menorah to a primarily ornamental treatment of the ten candelabra desired by the king, about which the Bible does not, in contrast, offer any liturgical directions. This apparent contradiction did not escape the rabbis of the post-Biblical tradition, who believed that Moses's menorah continued to be used in the first Temple, and that it retained its central position, but that it was surrounded on the right and the left by the ten new candelabra.612

In either 587 or 586 BCE, the first Sanctuary was destroyed at the hands of the Babylonians, who conquered Jerusalem and vanquished King Zedekiah.613 Towards the end of the same century, after the Persians took over from the Babylonians, it became possible to embark on the reconstruction of the Temple, despite suspicions and difficulties. It was at this time that the prophet Zechariah mentioned the candelabrum in one of his visions, offering a complex interpretation which combined elements of primitive vegetal symbolism with astral ideas, and with an allegory of historical character. Zechariah tells of having seen a lampstand all of gold [...] and seven lamps on it [...] two olive trees by it, one upon the right side [...] the other upon its left side

(Zech. 4.2-3). To these initial visual details, characterized by the symmetrical presence of trees on both sides of the menorah, two more layers of interpretation are added. These are suggested by the angel who deciphers the vision at the request of the prophet: the seven lamps are thus identified with the eyes of the Lord, which run to and fro through the whole earth (Zech. 4.10), likely evoking a solar metaphor, while the olives are the two anointed ones, who stand by the Lord of the whole earth (Zech. 4.14), an image which most likely refers to Zerubbabel and Joseph, that is, to the governor of Judea and the high priest employed in the reconstruction of the Temple.614

In the Second Temple, perhaps only a single menorah was used, although the literary documentation on this point is neither contemporary with the Temple itself, nor always in agreement. The first book of the Maccabees, as well as Flavius Josephus, speak of only one candelabrum with regard to the profanation of Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the restora-

tion of the Temple carried out by the Hasmoneans in 164 BCE.615 Josephus also provides some valuable details on the ritual of the menorah, specifying that three candles "needed to shine for God on the sacred candelabrum the whole day, while the others were lit in the evening."616 However, it must be noted that, in the corresponding rabbinic sources, at first two lamps are mentioned, and then just one, which would have remained lit during the day.617 Josephus further attests that Pompey would have seen the candelabrum on the occasion of his incursion into the Temple in 63 BCE, even if the Roman general "touched nothing due to his respect for religion."618 Remaining in the Temple until its destruction in 70, the menorah was finally carried to Rome to enrich the victors' triumph. Indeed, the most celebrated image of the Jewish candelabrum stands out in a frieze of the arch of Titus, where the artifact of imposing dimensions rests on a double hexagonal base, brought in triumph by soldiers girdled with laurels.

Even after the events of 70, representations of menorot were common, in artifacts of daily use as well as in sarcophagi, catacombs,

and synagogal decorations, in which the candelabrum often appeared together with other objects of

sacred use, such as the lulav and the šofar.619 This circumstance seems to indicate that the menorah bore a certain function in the synagogal liturgy of Late Antiquity,620 although the rabbinic sources do not offer any solid evidence in this regard.621 The Jewish sages insist, rather, on the unique and inimitable character of the candelabrum used in the Temple, which was not to be replicated in any way: "A man may not make [...] a candlestick corresponding to the [sacred] candlestick, but he may make one with five or six or eight lamps, but with seven he should not make, even of other metals."622 According to the rabbinic conception, in fact, at least for the entire duration of the exile, the end of the Temple service entailed the exhaustion of the practical function of the menorah, which would be substituted with faith and prayer: "The Israelites," states the Pesikta de-rav Kahana, "declared in the presence of the Lord, blessed be He: 'We made a menorah for you at the time of Moses, and it is extinguished; we made ten in the days of Solomon—those are also extinguished. Since then, we await only your light.'"623 Only in the age to come could the splendor of the candelabrum be restored, or even symbolically increased sevenfold, as God affirms in the midraš Exodus Rabbah: "[Because] you have made a candlestick for Me, I will cause it to shine for you sevenfold in the Messianic Age."624

This transposition onto the metaphorical level, which began in Late Antiquity, as well as the exclusion of the menorah from the

synagogal and domestic liturgies, probably explains the relative rarity of lamps with seven branches among Jewish artifacts, and the predominance of the object in two-dimensional representations of purely symbolic character. Nevertheless, during the following centuries, some of the meanings attached to the Temple menorah were transferred to two objects broadly used in daily Jewish religion: the lamp of ḥanukkah and the ner tamid.

The term ḥanukkah (literally "dedication," "inauguration") denotes the festival that commemorates the re-consecration of the Temple in 164 BCE. On each day of this celebration, it is customary to light one of the lights of a candelabrum called ḥanukkiyyah, composed of eight small spouts, and commonly a ninth, called šammaš, which serves to carry the flame to the others. This custom is documented from the end of the first century, and supposedly derives from a miracle that occurred on the reconquering of the Temple by the Hasmonean troops: arriving at the sanctuary, the Jewish soldiers found a small quantity of oil, enough to illuminate the menorah for one day only. Thanks to a miracle, however, that small amount was enough to keep the sacred lamp lit for eight days.625

In the celebration of ḥanukkah, which is unknown to the Hebrew Bible, it is possible to detect a concomitance, at least with regard to time, with the celebration of the winter solstice, widespread in various ancient traditions. But the legend of the prodigious oil nevertheless creates a symbolic connection between the eight lights of the ḥanukkiyyah and the menorah of the Temple, as if the hieratic ceremony was, at least in part, transposed to the domestic candelabrum.626

The ner Tamid (literally "perpetual light") is a part of the synagogal furnishings: a single lamp, usually hanging from the ceiling, which is always kept lit in front of the Torah ark. Until a recent era it was fed, like the ancient menorah, with olive oil and, in a certain way, conveyed the constant presence of the candelabrum within the simplest dimensions of the synagogue. In particular, the ner tamid recalled the light of the candelabrum of the Temple that, according to rabbinic sources, also remained lit during the day, and served to light other wicks during vespers. It offered "testimony to mankind that the Divine Presence rests in Israel"627 without ever diminishing.

In the Middle Ages, with the establishment of the Kabbalistic lexicon, the image of the menorah was enriched by an important connection to the doctrine of the sefirot, inspired in a particular way

by the object's seven components: it was natural for the Kabbalists to use the branches to allude to the seven lower sefirot, from ḥesed (mercy) to malkut (kingdom), while also establishing a distinction between the central trunk and the six side branches. In this subdivision, in fact, we find a reference to the particular status of malkut, identified with the middle lamp, predominant over the others.

The symbolic interpretation of the formal structure of the candelabrum is expressed well by 'Ezra of Gerona, one of the foremost exponents of the early thirteenth century mystical school. In his Dissertation on the Precepts, he affirms, "the menorah has seven branches, of which six depart from the central one, indicating that this is the fundamental element from which the others descend. The lights are turned toward the one at the center, which is called the 'western lamp,' since the Šekinah is to the west. The candelabrum is to the south, according to the model of 'radiant light'; this is all clear."628 With the expression

"model," in Hebrew dugmah, the mystic of Gerona refers to the archetype of the candelabrum, which is to say that it likely refers to the sefirah binah (intelligence)629 or, in other words, to the unitary force that embraces the lower emanations.

As a symbol of the relationship between binah and the seven lower sefirot, the menorah also plays a central role in the doctrine of the Sefer ha-temunah (The Book of the Figure), written perhaps at the beginning of the fourteenth century,630 in an extremely cryptic style which renders it one of the most difficult texts of the entire Kabbalistic tradition. In accordance with medieval theosophy, which tended to hold all of the implicit expressive potential of the Biblical images, the author also gives a sefirotic interpretation of the making of the candelabrum from a single piece of gold: "From the light of faith"—the author states—"(man) contemplates the light and the secret of the figure [...] This is the interior temple [...] from which the three Sabbaths of the Lord derive: the jubilee, the sabbatical year, and the fiftieth day, which is the sefirah of intelligence, from which the seven complete Sabbaths also proceed [...] all emanating from the pure candelabrum, of

a single piece, worked from a hammer."631 This passage alludes to a symbolic equivalence between the menorah and the sefirah of the intellect (binah), from which seven lower levels issue, descending towards matter, from which, in turn, they rise again, to return to the absolute indistinctness of the divine.

Unity in difference seems tightly bound up with the intimate essence of the candelabrum, and the idea is discussed again, although in a completely different register, by a Jew who lived in Italy between the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth, 'Ovadyah Sforno. He treated the ritual import of the candelabrum in his celebrated Commentary on

the Pentateuch. "When the flames of the six lights turn toward the central stem," writes 'Ovadyah, "all seven lights shine, causing a heavenly splendor to fall upon Israel, so that the light of the right and that of the left direct themselves towards the light of the central branch, which is the essence of the menorah. The same occurs to those turned to the right, looking after eternal life and to those turned to the left, dedicating themselves to earthly matters, still serving to aid 'whoever is to the right': all must express the will of the Lord."632 The expression "turn to the right and to the left"633 is used here, in an unusual way, to indicate the diversity of conduct between those who pursue only religious ends and those who are immersed in the cares of the world. Thus the fundamental attitudes of the human spirit correspond to the two sides of the candelabrum, although Sforno emphasizes, once again, the unity of the whole: since the menorah implicitly represents the community of Israel, it is necessary that the most properly religious soul, as well as the most mundane of the Jewish people, find a purpose and a common equilibrium, symbolized by the orientation of the lights toward the central axis of the lamp.634

At the height of the sixteenth century, the Kabbalist Mošeh Cordovero proposes, in his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates), a brilliant, graphic rendering of the menorah as an image of the unification of the divine force. In Cordovero's scheme, the six lateral branches of the candelabrum correspond to the sefirot, from

ḥesed (mercy) to yesod (foundation). He joins each of them with a group of three letters, which he main-

tains represent the levels of the emanation according to the order of the alphabet. The central axis of the candelabrum is thus dominated by the letter alef, which designates the highest sefirah, keter (crown), while the name of the lowest sefirah, malkut (kingdom), is inscribed on the base.635

The latest phase of the allegorization process of the candelabrum occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, with Mošeh Ḥayyim Efrayim of Sudylkow, one of the most esteemed masters and preachers of the Hasidic movement. In his Degel maḥaneh Efrayim (The Ensign of the Camp of Efrayim), he presented a long dissertation on the mystical meaning of the seven lights, which were compared to souls; their being lit alludes to an elevation toward the level of perfection. To illustrate this concept, the rabbi of Sudylkow refers to the ancient service of lighting the menorah, which was reserved for the priestly class, or to "Aaron, who had the function of the 'bride's mate' and thus spared no efforts in bringing the souls of Israel to the Šekinah."636 According to the Kabbalah, the Šekinah (also identifiable with the sefirah malkut, "kingdom") lacks genuine light, shining only by reflecting the higher levels of emanation. In the same way, the lighting of the menorah aims at a higher level that infuses the necessary energy into the soul-lights. "Whoever wants to cause the Jews' souls, defined as 'lights,' to rise toward the front of the menorah"—continues the sage of Sudylkow—"in the way that the seven lights shine [...] should act like one who is united to the truth [...] Aaron, in fact, always followed the attribute of truth, and only in this way could he elevate the souls and bring them closer to the truth itself: the intelligent will understand."637 This last esoteric sentence refers to the imagery of the *Zohar*ic Kabbalah, where the "attribute of truth" is the epithet of the sefirah tif'eret

מרכבה Merkavah
Chariot

Emblem of regality and warlike valor, the chariot is chosen in the Hebrew Bible to signify the prestige of sovereigns and to describe agitated scenes of battle.

Joseph's favor with the Pharaoh is evidenced by his being bestowed the honor of the second chariot in the royal procession, which the subjects must kneel down in respectful homage to upon its passing: And he made him to ride in his second chariot; and they cried before him, Bow the knee; and he made him ruler over all the land of Egypt (Gen. 41.43). The chariot is in fact a sign of power, and confers upon him who drives it a clear supremacy, both in and out of battle.

The privilege of a chariot is thus reserved for select warriors and for the leaders who, thoroughly visible to the entire camp, conduct the battle. To abandon the chariot therefore means a renunciation of the fight, as in the case of Sisera, head of the king of Hazor's troops, defeated by Deborah. It is said that Sisera, consumed by fear, alighted down from his chariot, and fled away on foot (Judg. 4.15), marking, with this gesture, the defeat of his own troops. In another battle, described in the first book of Kings, the last day of Acab, sovereign of Israel, is one of slow agony on his own battle chariot. Struck by an arrow, the king was propped up in his chariot [...] and died at evening; and the blood ran from the wound into the midst of the chariot (1Kings 22.35). The image of the king on the chariot is so necessary to sustain the soldiers

in battle that the injured sovereign is not given assistance, but cruelly left at his place until evening, when there went a proclamation throughout the camp around sunset, saying [...] And the king died (1Kings 22.36-37). The passage concludes with a final image that projects onto the royal chariot the fate of a dark curse: And one washed the char-



iot in the pool of Samaria; and the dogs licked up his blood; and the harlots washed themselves in it; according to the word of the Lord which he spoke (1Kings 22.38).

But, perhaps more than any other, the episode that connects the representation of the military chariot to the idea of an unexpected disaster is that of the destruction of the Egyptian army, sent in pursuit of the Israelites. Having entered with their chariots into the sea, rendered dry by divine intervention, the Egyptians are struck by the Lord: And took off their chariot wheels, that they drove heavily (Exod. 14.25). This wonder, which transforms the high-speed vehicles into ungovernable and useless objects, prefigures the final catastrophe; when the waters returned, and covered the chariots, and the horsemen, and all the army of Pharaoh that came into the sea after them; there remained not so much as one of them (Exod. 14.28).

An oblique symmetry connects this military defeat in the Red Sea to another parting of waters, and to the contemporaneous apparition of a heavenly chariot. In this episode, the prophets Elijah and Elisha had just passed over the Jordan, through miraculously divided waters,639 when there appeared a chariot of fire, and horses of fire, and separated them one from the other; and Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven (2Kings 2.11). With a mysterious gesture, Elisha, in order to find the

fiery coach, instead of looking for it in the sky, turns to the river's water and asks: Where is the Lord God of Elijah? And when he also had struck the waters, they parted to one side and to the other; and Elisha went over (2Kings 2.14). In this episode, the chariot appears for the first time in the Scriptures as a celestial vehicle.

In two other passages, the chariot is explicitly an apparition of the Lord of Israel, in descriptions employing the theophanic value of natural phenomena. The clouds are, first of all, the "divine chariot," in accordance with a conception also attested to in other Near Eastern traditions: Who makes the

clouds his chariot—states in Psalms 104.3—who walks upon the wings of the wind.640 The term employed here is rekuv, a hapax legomenon derived from the same root, rkb, "to ride," from which merkavah, the usual term for "chariot" also derives.641 Rekev, another synonym, is employed instead, among others, in the description contained in Psalm 68, in which the heavenly procession is portrayed in its slow and imperious advance: The chariots of God642 are twice ten thousand, thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in the holy place (Ps. 68.18).

Neither the word merkavah, nor any of its equivalents, recur in the masoretic text of the tale of Ezekiel's vision, which the post-Biblical tradition considered the most important passage of the Scriptures concerning the divine chariot.643 The enigmatic apparatus seen by Ezekiel, described as a manifestation of divine glory, is in fact never explicitly called a "chariot," even if the

presence of the gleaming wheels and their movement naturally recall the theophany of the chariot of the Lord of Israel: The appearance of the wheels and their work was like the color of an emerald [...] When they moved, they moved from any of their four sides; and they did not turn when they moved. As for their rims, they were so high that they were dreadful; and the rims, around the four, were full of eyes (Ezek. 1.16-18).

Beginning in the third and fourth centuries of the Common Era, the text of Ezekiel was interpreted in an esoteric key. These speculations on

the subject were designated, in Hebrew literature, as Ma'aśeh merkavah, "The Work of the Chariot" (or "The Tale of the Chariot"),644 and were probably confined to narrow circles, about which only very fragmentary information is available. As proof of the theories of these Jewish mystics, however, there remain a certain number of texts—few more than fifteen in all—that describe various aspects of the ultramundane journey towards the contemplation of the heavenly chariot. The merkavah thus became, at once, supernatural vehicle, and the destination of the journey; these two functions are superimposed in an intuitive manner, without the literary works providing any systematic or coherent explanation. Likely taking a cue from the beginning of Ezekiel—The heavens were opened, and I saw visions of God (Ezek. 1.1)—the mystics strived to arrive at a higher sphere through a process of concentration and of descent into interiority. This inward itinerary is defined in the sources as "the descent into the merkavah," and is configured as a walk of the soul, accomplished through silence and

meditation. On this point, the Hekalot zuṭarti, one of the main works of merkavah mysticism, states: "You must try to understand that which is in your heart and to remain silent. In this way you will merit the beauty of the merkavah [...] Hide the thing, so that you will not be banished from the world."645

The voyage into an unfamiliar space closely evokes the mythical archetype of the sun's nocturnal journey. In the ancient world, the sun was pictured as plowing the thick expanse of the ultramundane, advancing through a dense darkness full of dangers and crossing the frightening ocean of the afterlife.646 No less menacing is the vision that awaits the mystic of the merkavah, since the divine chariot and its horsemen together unite the most terrible attributes:647 "Their horses are horses of darkness, shadow, death and haze, horses of fire, of blood and hail, horses of iron and fog; the horses upon which they ride are close to

2

322

fodder-troughs of fire, full of juniper coals, and they eat burning branches of the trough."[648]

Along with this igneous symbolism, the merkavah recalls more than a few elements connected with the representation of the ultramundane waters, whose sound echoes through the description of visions: "Like the voice of the seas, like the roar of the rivers, like the waves of Taršiš when the south wind beats them, so is the song that resounds around the throne of glory."[649] To "descend in the merkavah" also entails confronting these dangerous waters. In the same way, the use of the verb "descend," which in Hebrew usually indicates embarking and traveling over the sea,[650] recalls the ancestral contamination between chariot and boat which appears in numerous ancient descriptions of the divine chariot.[651]

The chariot is therefore a metaphor for the journey towards the unknown and, at the same time, alludes to the authentic vehicle used in the mystic's inner journey: the heart. Indeed, the descent in

the chariot acts, metaphorically, as a descent into the abyss of the heart, a silent search in the waters that, according to Jewish tradition, conceal the knowledge contained in them.

In the medieval Kabbalistic tradition, this interpretation of the merkavah as the fullness of an inner state was deepened further still. The most ample examples of this are offered, towards the end of the thirteenth century, by the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), in which the merkavah is most frequently used to represent the idea of completeness. Mošeh de León, the presumed author of large sections of the work, subdues the symbolism of the chariot to the dominion of the number four, which epitomizes the four spatial directions and the four

constitutive elements of reality.652 This idea, which mystically elaborates an observation already contained in the Guide of the Perplexed of Moses Maimonides,653 gives expression to some passages of great suggestive force in which the representation of the heavenly chariot is created, yet continually varied: "And what are these four letters? ahavah,654 'love,' which form a supernal chariot. They constitute the linking of all things into a perfect whole. These four letters are the four directions of the love and joy of all of the limbs of the body without any sadness at all."655 The term ahavah here assumes the metaphoric value of the spreading of the divine energy throughout the entire cosmos: the letters that constitute the word evoke the expanding of emanation towards the cardinal points, and thus symbolize both the totality of space and the all-pervasive divine love.

Only a few years after the composition of the *Zohar*, the idea of the chariot as a metaphor of a state of mind was resumed by the Italian Kabbalist Menaḥem of Recanati, who, in the introductory remarks to his Peruš ha-tefillot (Commentary on the Daily

Prayers), thus writes: "And since God, blessed be He, desiring to favor them, created in the body of man a sort of secret and marvelous limbs, imitating the Work of the Chariot. And if man is able to purify one of his limbs, this transforms into a kind of throne for the higher and inner limb that is called by the same name: eye if it is an eye, hand if it is a hand, foot if it is a foot, and so on [...] In this regard, our rabbis of blessed memory have affirmed that the patriarchs are the heavenly chariot."656

During the liturgy, the pious Jew can, according to Menaḥem, attain such concentration in his own body so as to make it the support of the higher reality. In doing so, the chariot's movement can stop, having attained a perfect correspondence between high and low, under which each part of man is united to a corresponding divine attribute. Such a connection will be stronger and greater according to the level of holiness achieved; in this sense, the patriarchs who, according to Jewish tradition, arrive at maximum human perfection can claim to be the true terrestrial supports of the divine merkavah.

Thanks to the mystics' meditation, the physical dimension of the ancient battle chariot is therefore mutated into the symbol of an inner energy, which stops for a moment in the equilibrium of consciousness.

## מזוזה Mezuzah

Varied in shapes and made from the most diverse materials, from wood to silver, stone to velvet, and sometimes in glass or pottery, the mezuzah has, over the centuries, been perhaps the most widely-found Jewish object. The essential part of the mezuzah, a small roll of parchment, on which two Biblical passages are written, is placed inside cases of varying size and attached to the door frames of every Jewish home. Even if they are for the most part protected by long, simple rectangular boxes, mezuzot have often been inserted, over the course of time, into very elaborate holders and decorated with figures of fish, shells, heraldic symbols, and elements of Jewish ritual, such as the sefer Torah or the aron ha-qodeš. In their richest and most magnificent forms, as well as in their poorest materials, mezuzot transpose into everyday life the religious duty articulated twice in Deuteronomy,

where God enjoins the writing of the divine precepts upon the posts of your house, and on your gates (Deut. 6.9 and 11.20).

The literal meaning of the word mezuzah is, in effect, "doorpost," and it is in this sense that it is found may times throughout the Bible. In the tale of Exodus, the two side posts (Exod. 12.7 and 12.22) were, together with the architraves of Jewish houses, the places that the Israelites needed to mark with the blood of the sacrificial lamb so that the angel of the Lord could recognize their dwellings and spare them from destruction. In Biblical symbolism the post therefore possesses a distinct semantic function which manifests externally the recondite nature of the house.

If the night of Exodus had the character of a tragic and exceptional event, the task of announcing the Jewishness of dwellings had an enduring value, which the rabbis of post-Biblical times detailed with precise norms, making an effort to spec-



ify how the Scriptural order should be put into practice. While the Samaritans remained faithful to an archaic interpretation, making their mezuzot from stone, engraving upon them the Ten Commandments, the rabbinic literature asserted that parchment made from the skin of a pure animal should be employed, upon which the two texts of Deuteronomy, in which the prescription appears, are written.657 The practice of making mezuzot from stone is also discussed in the Babylonian Talmud, where it is established that the Biblical expression write them (Deut 6.9) implies the use of ink, and therefore excludes the possibility of engraving them "upon a stone and [setting] it up upon the threshold."658

The rabbinic texts also indicated the buildings upon which the mezuzot were to be placed, and the precautions to be taken in making them and in maintaining their condition. These obligations were restricted to the buildings that were used for habitation, and so excluded the Temple locations intended for the cult659 and synagogues;660 what's more, the texts say, the "straw-magazine, the stable, the wood-shed, and the store-house are exempt from the mezuzah, even if the women make use of them."661 According to some, the mezuzah needed to be placed on the arches of the entrance, while others considered these to be exempt.662 In the case of a rented house, the task of putting up the mezuzah was the duty of the tenant,663 while the owner of the property needed to provide an appropriate place to accommodate it.664 It was likewise nec-

essary to periodically inspect the mezuzot: "an individual's [house] should be examined twice every seven years, and [...] public buildings twice every fifty years."665 In connection with this, there was a tribune who was surprised by the quaestor while he was examining the mezuzot "in the upper market of Sepphoris," and who, suspected of illicit practices, was punished with a fine of a thousand silver coins.666

The rabbis reasserted the importance of the precept of the mezuzah with maxims and anecdotes, affirming, among other things, that "he who is observant of [the precept of] mezuzah will merit a beautiful dwelling."667 One of the most significant tales of the symbolic value of the mezuzah is contained in the Jerusalem Talmud. According to this tale, Artaban sent Rabbi Yehudah haNaśi a gift of "a stone of incalculable value," asking in exchange an object equally as precious. Rabbi Yehudah thus sent him a mezuzah. Astounded, the king said to the rabbi: "'I gave you a precious object and you reciprocated with an object that is worth pennies.' 'That which is precious to you is different from that which is precious to me'—answered Rabbi Yehudah—'and besides, you have sent me something that I have to keep guard over; I, on the other hand, reciprocated with an object that will protect you while you sleep.'"668 The meaning of the episode recalls the apotropaic value of the mezuzah, which seems to be intrinsic to the object: in this

case, in fact, the mezuzah provides protection of a magical character even over a non-Jewish sovereign.

Belief in the efficacy of the mezuzot was widespread among the Jews of the Middle Ages, who considered them capable of keeping evil spirits away from houses. To this aim, the divine

name Šadday was written on the back of the parchment, which was believed to be especially apt in "defending from those who bring misfortune," as the Ashkenazic mystic El'azar of Worms recalls between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries. "The name Šadday is written on the mezuzah"—continues El'azar—"and then a hole is cut in the metal that covers it, so that the word can be distinctly read, and can dispel the beings that cause harm."669

This magical substratum remained alive in the successive Kabbalistic doctrine, where it was united with a more abstract sefirotic conception. For the Kabbalists of the second half of the thirteenth century, mezuzah would so far as become an appellative of the sefirah malkut (kingdom), which was also marked by the holy name Šadday. Since, in the pattern of the emanation, malkut represented the entrance to the supernal world, it was believed that the mezuzah placed on the posts of Jewish houses alluded to the mystery of the sefirah, in their capacity as the threshold and protection of the divine. On this subject, the Sephardic Kabbalist Yosef Giqaṭilla wrote: "Because this attribute [malkut] is the gate through which to enter to the name Yhwh, it was decreed that Šadday be put on the mezuzah, on the external part of the parchment, corresponding with the short text written on the inside."670 Giqaṭilla's hermetic language here alludes to the symbolic double import of the mezuzah, which, through its parchment's two sides, represents the union of malkut (Šadday) with the sefirah tif'eret (beauty, Yhwh), thus also signifying the sexual union of the male and female principles.

Giqaṭilla's approach was developed in the contemporary *Zohar*ic literature, using a mixture of theosophical notions and folk-

loric elements, in which the mezuzah was given a central place in a kind of mystical dramatization. In a long excursus contained in the

section of the *Zohar* titled *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shepherd), the symbolic value of the object is interpreted on two parallel levels, one of speculative character and a second, which proved more popular, that constitutes a short compendium of medieval demonology. After having asserted that "the mystery of faith is that the mezuzah comprises the male and female in a single unity," the author continues by recalling that near every door "awaits a demon, endowed with harmful powers, which places itself on the left side." By raising the eyes toward the right posts and observing the mezuzah, a person is protected from the demon, which can do nothing against the divine name written on it. A problem nonetheless seems to arise in the moment in which, leaving one's own house, one finds oneself with the demon to one's right and the mezuzah to one's left, in the apparent impossibility of lifting one's gaze toward the protective object. But the demon is also deceived in this case, since evil spirits are always attracted to the left part of man, which represents his "evil inclination," and so must always attack from that side. Thus the demon, moving to the left, finds itself in front of the mezuzah, in such a way that "it cannot approach the man and harm him, and he can exit and escape." If there is no mezuzah, passage through the door is very dangerous, since "the evil inclination and the demon make a common front and extend their hands onto the head of man."671

The Kabbalists of later centuries continued to describe the world as populated by harmful spirits from which it was necessary to defend oneself through amulets, and therefore through the mezuzah, which established a clear separation between the protected space of the house and the external sphere, more vulnerable to the forces of evil. For one, a theoretical treatment on the apotropaic effects of the artifacts attached to the posts of Jew-

ish doors is found in the work of Avraham Azulai, a Kabbalist who lived in Morocco and in the Land of Israel between the end of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. According to Azulai, "the forces of rigor do not have license to enter into a private home if not to carry out a very precise mission," while the streets of the

city are traveled by a host of vindictive spirits, which wander freely, each in search of its own victim. When the divine rigor rages, it is thus preferable not to venture into public places, to avoid coming across one of the demons in waiting and being struck by them "as by a stone that constitutes an obstacle along the way." "When a man dwells in his own home"—continues Azulai, contrastingly—"the precept of the mezuzah protects him from these forces and their effects," achieving a double result: on the one hand it prevents the inhabitant of the house from being struck by the threat directed against others, and on the other, it also guarantees that "he does not damage other people [...] denying evil a basis in him and a place in which to realize itself."672

If the first part of Azulai's argumentation, concerning the defense against external influences, adheres to the *Zohar*ic tradition,673 the second comment represents an innovation that deeply enriches the symbolic value of the mezuzah, now also conceived as a shield that thwarts negative internal forces, preventing them from having free rein outside of the home. To the traditional function of tutelage in the domestic sphere is added, in this way, the idea that the mezuzah also serves to filter the negative energy that starts with the individual and makes its way to the collective, as if the Hebrew words written on the parchment could capture and annul every disharmony caused by evil.

## מגדל Migdal
## Tower

In contrast to many Jewish symbols, which often remain verbal images, the tower demonstrates a singular aptitude to become a specific object. Elaborate towers with Gothic profiles, made from silver

and used as containers for perfume, were first used, in the Sabbath liturgy during the Middle Ages, to celebrate the havdalah, the rite of separation between festive and working days. From then on, the form of the tower remained one of the most common in the production of containers for beśamim, Jewish spice holders. Other towers, in gold, at times decorated with precious enamels, adorned wedding rings for the synagogal rites, beginning at least in the sixteenth century and continuing well into the modern era.674

Many centuries earlier, when the rabbis of the Haggadah needed to imagine the symbols used by David in minting his royal money, they supposed that a representation of a tower was among them. Genesis Rabbah, a midraš of Late Antiquity, states: "And the fame of David went out into all the lands, which means that his coinage was current. And what was its effigy? A staff and a wallet on one side, and a tower on the other, corresponding to, Thy neck is like the tower of David, builded with turrets (Song 4.4)."675

The Hebrew term migdal, which designates the tower, also recalls in its etymon the object's shape, connected as it is to

the root gdl, "to grow, to expand."676 Migdal has no proper synonyms except for ṣeriaḥ, which is, however, used very rarely in the Scriptures.677 Some terms nevertheless approach it through semantic affinity: meṣudah, for example, the Biblical stronghold of David, and ṣur, which means "rock," but also frequently "fortress."

In the Biblical text, migdal appears for the first time in the book of Genesis, in connection with the well-known episode of the Tower of Babel, which is named in two consecutive verses: in the first, the inhabitants of the region of Sennaar decide to construct a city and a tower, whose top may reach to heaven, while in the next passage it is affirmed that the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the sons of men built (Gen. 11.4-5). At the very moment in which the aim of the tower's construction is expressed, the Bible also foretells its corresponding divine punishment, the confusion of languages and the dispersion of mankind: Let us make us a name, lest we be scattered

abroad upon the face of the whole earth (Gen. 11.4). The divine punishment is then described, provoking exactly what they wanted to avoid: So the Lord scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth; and they left off the building of the city (Gen. 11.8).

It did not escape the rabbis that the Scriptures explicitly mention only the abandonment of the city's construction and not that of the tower, which would thus appear to have been built. The midraš Genesis Rabbah says that "Rabbi Huna said in Rabbi Idi's name: 'When one ascends to the top [of the tower], he sees the palm trees below him like grasshoppers.'"678 In the same midraš, the name that the men proudly search for, as expression of genuine power, is explicitly identified with the idolatrous cult: "And let us make a name. The School of Rabbi

Yišma'el taught: A name means nought else but an idol."679 The rabbis could not accept the idea of a human construction that pretended to symbolize the achievement of divine knowledge, and that even presented itself as a visible substitute for one of God's names.

In the book of Proverbs, the idea of a true name, as opposed to the false one of the Tower of Babel, is also found: The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous runs into it, and is safe (Prov. 18.10). Here the tower became a visible attribute of the God of Israel's power: the authentic name is the invocation of the Lord, who assures protection to the faithful. Thanks to this enunciation, the tower—which, in the episode of Babel, was a clear image of the pagan cult—was readmitted into the sphere of Jewish symbolism. Migdal was therefore used in the post-Biblical tradition in a series of positive qualifications of divine potency, and of the moral attributes of the protagonists of Jewish history. In the midraš Exodus Rabbah, comparison with the tower serves, for example, to express the stability of the righteous with respect to the precarious destiny of the impious,680 while in the Midraš Tehillim, of the early Middle Ages, the expression mighty tower refers to "the Messiah King, who will become [for the Jews] like a tower."681

In the Hebrew lexicon of the first centuries of the Common Era, the word "tower" indicated containers of various natures, including a sort of medicine cabinet, dressers, and perhaps even hanging baskets.682 It

is likely from this daily use that a famous Talmudic expression was born, often discussed in later exegetical and mystical literature: the Babylonian Talmud

speaks of two Biblical personages, Doeg and Ahitophel,683 who were able to devise four hundred juridical norms on a "tower flying in the air."684 The obscurity of this expression, which probably alludes to an exceptional command of the juridical doctrine, brought in its wake a proliferation of images, no less fantastic than that which they tried to explain. The flying tower became, for the twelfth century commentator Šelomoh ben Yiṣḥaq (Raši), the Hebrew letter lamed, which is elevated on the line above the other letters.685 According to another interpretation, again quoted by Raši, the norms devised by Doeg and Ahitophel would have referred to the ritual purity of objects that were held in containers called "towers," and suspended "in air" outside of the home.686

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, in the Kabbalistic prose of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), migdal became the starting point for narrative inventions in which the relationship between the sefirot assumed the traits of complex allegorical events. A long passage from the third book of the work contains a description of "a mighty tower, which is the cupboard where the Sefer Torah is preserved, representing might." Later on in the tale, the tower is magically lifted up by a bird, which carries it before the Messiah, so that he may read the sacred text; then "the door, in the middle [opens], in which the form of light of the Sefer Torah is contained [...] [and the Messiah], in a gentle voice, pronounces a secret comment on the Scriptures." When the reading is finished "this door closes [...] and the tower flies back to its true place."687 In this case, Migdal evi-

dently represents the sefirah of the kingdom, malkut, which serves to keep guard over the Torah and which is, at the same time, the level of emanation that corresponds to the Messiah. But the representation of the tower here also acquires genuine expressive autonomy,

becoming a type of mechanical apparatus that animates the scene of the heavenly reading of the Bible.

In the reworking of the *Zohar*ic doctrine proposed in the sixteenth century by Mošeh Cordovero, the sefirotic role of migdal is enriched with fresh correspondences. Along with its consonance with malkut, Cordovero emphasizes other symbolic outcomes, affirming, for example, that the flying tower could be identified with the sefirah of the crown (keter), "that is suspended and bends" towards the sefirot of knowledge (ḥokmah) and of intelligence (binah), even if "in other cases, this name [the tower that flies] indicates binah, since tif'eret (beauty) [above which it soars] is called 'air.'"688 The oxymoron of the flying tower became, in this way, an expression of sefirotic dynamism, and could be adapted to the ever-changing relationships among the levels of emanation.

The mobility of migdal was also preserved in the Kabbalistic doctrine of Yiṣḥaq Luria, which, at the end of the sixteenth century, gradually took the place of Cordovero's teachings. In the Lurianic system offered by Ḥayyim Vital, the tower that flies in the air thus designates the various sefirot, including that of the foundation, yesod, which "is called tower [...] and is suspended in the middle, according to the force of the illumination that descends toward it from the two heavenly configurations, which bear and maintain it there, so that it does not fall down."689 The image of the tower serves here to designate the state of temporary aggregation of the forces of emanation,

while the concept of suspension emphasizes the harmony of the contrasting forces which maintains the delicate sefirotic equilibrium.

A celebrated Lithuanian mystic, Šelomoh ben Ḥayyim Eliašov (1841-1926)—a late, but keen commentator on the Lurianic writings—introduced the icon of the tower into the dynamic of the primordial contraction (the ṣimṣum), which, according to Luria, brought about the hollow space that was to filled by creation. At the center of this representation, the tower's movement came to symbolize the motion of descent of the divine force following the first contraction: the "flying tower" refers to the sefirah malkut, which descends, in successive

contractions, from the mystery of the En sof, down to the restricted dominion of the lower worlds. Eliašov concludes a vivid description of the vertiginous descent of the celestial flow from world to world with the image of the tower: "It is the secret of the tower that flies in the air, the mystery of the ṣimṣum, that it is the place that sustains the whole world."690

## מילה Milah
## Circumcision

On the way back to Egypt, after the revelation of the burning bush, the Lord suddenly appeared to be angry with Moses, so much so that he went towards him and sought to kill him. To avert this event, his wife Zipporah promptly intervened and took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and threw it at [Moses's] feet. The woman accompanied this act with a ritual formula, which spontaneously issues from her lips: Surely a bridegroom of blood are you to me. The action's

effect is immediate—the Lord lets Moses go, and the episode is suddenly concluded as it began, with a final sentence that seems to be a gloss directed at the ancient readers of the Bible: Then she said, A bridegroom of blood you are, because of the circumcision (Exod. 4.24-26).

This story is one of the most obscure of the entire Scriptures, and seems to be a relic of an ancient idea of circumcision, very different from the one widespread in the long history of Judaism. Zipporah's action seems, in fact, to be an act of substitutive magic, aimed at averting Moses's punishment for having procreated without having been circumcised, even if the ambiguous formulation of the Hebrew could also allude to divine wrath at the son's lack of circumcision. Certainly the episode unfolds around a masculine passivity that throws Zipporah's resolute initiative starkly into relief. We do not know if there was a time in which the formula "bridegroom of blood" was actually pronounced in a ceremonial context, concomitant to a wedding or immediately preceding it, for example. Nevertheless, the idea that, among the Jews—as in many traditional societies—circumcision was also a rite of passage towards the age of marriage seems to be confirmed by the etymon of the Hebrew term ḥatan, "bridegroom," which is close to the Arabic



verb ¨atana, "to circumcise," and which therefore presupposes a precise relationship with sexual maturity.691

The episode with Moses is, however, unusual with respect to the dominant symbolic connotation of milah in the Jewish tradition, as sanctioned by the conversation between God and Abraham in the seventeenth chapter of Genesis. Addressing the patriarch to ensure a

prosperous future for him, God prescribes the observance of a pact extending to all of Abraham's descendants: Every male child among you shall be circumcised [...] and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. And he who is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every male child in your generations (Gen. 17.10-12). This divine order, which accompanies the promise of Sarah's maternity, seems to have a double meaning: on the one hand, it is addressed to Abraham and all of the males of his house, while, on the other hand, it more precisely concerns the children of future generations, for whom circumcision is fixed for the eighth day after birth. The true protagonist of the new pact is thus the son promised to the elderly patriarch, as God himself specifies shortly after: But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year (Gen. 17.21). Furthermore, the Biblical author underscores the exceptional importance of the episode's divine intervention, making of Abraham's adherence to the milah an exemplary event: And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old [...] And all the men of his house [...] were circumcised with him (Gen. 17.24-27).

Only in one other case do the Scriptures mention the circumcision of male adults, this time in connection with the decision taken by Joshua concerning all the people who were born in the wilderness on the road as they came forth out of Egypt, those [who] were not circumcised (Josh. 5.5). Here this refers to a reparatory gesture for an omission that would have seriously impaired the religious integrity of the Israelites. Once the operation has been performed, in fact, the Lord says to Joshua, This day have I rolled away the reproach of Egypt from off you (Josh. 5.9).

A final, metaphorical use of the verb mwl, "to circumcise," appears in Deuteronomy to express God's intervention in the hearts of the faithful. Its implicit sense in the statement God will circumcise your heart, and the heart of your seed (Deut. 30.6)692 is that of the removal

of the inner obstacles that come between man and his comprehension of the divine teachings. It was precisely this figurative sense that inspired the Christian allegorization of the Jewish precept, as expressed in many places in the New Testament, and in particular in Paul's writings: "Circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in letter" (Rom. 2.29).693

In the Hebrew literature of the first centuries of the Common Era, the milah had a very significant role as a sign of assertion of Jewish identity. From a juridical point of view, the rabbinic texts sanction the obligation of circumcision on the exact expiration of the eight days, to the point that this precept prevails over that of the Sabbath.694 Besides legal details, the precise mode of execution of the circumcision was established and, at the same time, its symbolic value was

affirmed, thanks to a series of homiletic teachings that attributed to the rite the meaning of a fulfillment of the order of the universe.

In the Mišnah it is affirmed that "circumcision is great because, if it were not, the Lord, blessed be He, would not have created the world."695 Likewise, in the subsequent Haggadic tradition the exclusive connection between God and the Jewish people is reasserted many times. According to the midraš Genesis Rabbah, Abraham's acceptance of circumcision was decisive for the course of history, since his refusal would have resulted in the destruction of creation: "'If circumcision is so precious'," asks the patriarch, "'why was it not given to Adam?' Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: 'Let it suffice thee that I and thou are in the world. If thou wilt not undergo circumcision, it is enough for my world to have existed until now, and it is enough for circumcision to have existed until now, and it is enough for circumcision to have been forlorn until now.'696 Only after the milah would Abraham have been considered perfect, since this precept "counterbalances all the [other] precepts of the Torah."697

The legendary developments of the post-Biblical tradition enriched with new particulars the mysterious episode of the circumcision performed by Zipporah, clarifying that Moses's antagonist on this occasion was not God, but Satan. According to some, the divine

punishment was directed against the son, while others imagined a fight between Moses and two furious angels, Af and Hema, who loomed up in front of him "and swallowed him up, leaving nought but his legs."698 For this, Zipporah touched the prophet's leg with the son's prepuce. Some rabbis made an effort to introduce circumcision into a more complex theoretical structure, also attempting to justify

the mutilation inflicted upon the physical integrity of a man. A first interpretive line, which already appears in Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE – 50), saw in the precept a way of limiting concupiscence, thanks to the "excision of the pleasures that delude the mind."699 This explanation was resumed in the Middle Ages by two protagonists of Jewish philosophy, Yehudah ha-Lewi (before 1075–1141) and Moses Maimonides (1135/38–1204), who both saw in it a way to resolve the logical contradiction inherent in the ancient religious symbolism of milah. Yehudah ha-Lewi does not hesitate to admit that the practice is "far from common sense and has no influence on the public realm,"700 but that it is "a divine sign that God put on the strongest member of concupiscence to defeat it."701 In a conceptual transposition that had a deep influence on later mysticism, ha-Lewi added that the milah was, for Abraham, a "sign that he and his seed were united to the divine principle,"702 almost as if the subtraction of a physical part was compensated by the addition of a spiritual element.

In a long passage of the Guide of the Perplexed dedicated to the subject, Maimonides follows ha-Lewi's approach, adding a series of physiological and moral considerations. In addition to attenuating desire, in fact, he asserts that circumcision is "a corporeal sign" for those who "believe in God's unity," or a distinctive mark of Abraham's descendants. The philosopher interprets the interval of eight days from birth with arguments gleaned from medieval physiology: "all living beings are very weak and exceedingly tender when they are born, as if they were still in the womb. This is so until the seven days are

past. It is only then that they are counted among those who have contact with the air."703

While the philosophers' arguments reconcile, not without a certain embarrassment, the milah with a hermeneutical pattern of rationalist imprint, Jewish mysticism easily inserts this observance into the representation of the relationship between man and the divine. The oldest, and at the same time most important text, in this sense, is the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation), probably written between the beginning of the sixth century and the second half of the seventh. In this work, circumcision is considered to be a point of contact between the pattern of the ten divine forces, called sefirot, and the human body: "Ten sefirot without definition: ten corresponding to the number of the fingers, five against five, and the covenant of the oneness is placed in the center, [as expressed] in the circumcision of the tongue and the mouth, and in the circumcision of the foreskin."704 On the physical level, milah is thus the center of the corporeal axis, but also becomes, through metaphorical transposition, the point of unification of the transcendent forces, until finally constituting a true principle of aggregation of consciousness. The Sefer yeṣirah thus implicitly transforms the precept of circumcision into a starting point for meditation, indicating the path to be followed in order to move from human to divine reality.

The medieval Kabbalah contains various attempts to detail the sefirotic structure, beginning from the conceptual fulcrum of milah. An example of this is offered, in the middle of the thirteenth century, in the Commentary on the Sefirah yeṣirah by Moses Nachmanides, who begins by identifying a correspondence between the diagram of the sefirot and the

human body. With a significant inversion of the positions of the various sefirot and man's members, Nachmanides connects the sign of circumcision with the highest level, ḥokmah (knowledge), while setting the lower levels, binah (intelligence) and tif'eret (beauty) respectively in the mouth and tongue. The three circumcisions are furthermore linked with the three letters of the divine name: "The pact of the One is fixed at the center of the circumcision of the member, in the tongue and the mouth, to signify that in those three places a perfect

unification was achieved. In the circumcised member, which has the form of a yod, it alludes to the unification of the sefirah of knowledge (ḥokmah); in the tongue, which is in the guise of waw, it indicates the central line in the great Name;705 in the mouth, then, which is the hole whence the discourse exits and has the occult form of a he, it means the unification of the sefirah of the intelligence (binah)."706

Despite Nachmanides' interpretation, the majority of Kabbalists gave milah a sefirotic value different from that proposed in this passage, and generally placed it in relationship to yesod, the "fundament," or the supernal "righteous." Earthly circumcision was thus considered to be an image of a celestial motion that, by removing the "husks" of evil, made possible a union between the heavenly masculine element and the feminine, symbolized by malkut (kingdom).707 Observance of the precept could thus favor a harmony in the emanation that would, in its turn, radiate down to the earthly sphere.

This meaning of fullness is well illustrated, at the end of the thirteenth century, by the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), who mystically interpreted the addition of the letter he to Abraham's name, according to the will of God,

at the moment of his circumcision: "The reason why the name Abraham occurs for the first time in connection with the circumcision is that when he was circumcised he became associated with the letter he, and the Šekinah rested on him."708 The he is here considered the sign of the sefirah of the kingdom (malkut), which joined with the patriarch as a manifestation of the divine fullness after he had agreed to follow the precept. The milah—inasmuch as it is a requisite for the ritually pure sexual union—thus also became necessary in order to attain communion with the transcendent.

The *Zohar* also contains a rich number of legends concerning to the rite of circumcision. According to one of these tales, already attested to in the early Middle Ages, the prophet Elijah would usually have been there to assist with the ceremony, even if invisible to the participants; for this a chair was prepared especially for him and left empty, from which he would observe the rite of the milah.709 The author of the

*Zohar* transposes this theme into a moving scene in which Elijah goes to and fro between heaven and earth, travelling as quick as an angelic creature. As soon as the Lord sees the beginning of a rite of circumcision, He calls Elijah, who "traverses the world in four sweeps and presents himself there." "For this reason"—continues the text—"we have been taught that it behooves the father to prepare an extra chair for his honor, and to say, 'this is the chair of Elijah'; and if he neglects to do so, Elijah does not visit him nor go up and testify before the Almighty that the circumcision has taken place."710 Since Elijah was, in the Kabbalistic tradition, the

one who carried the revelation of divine secrets to the mystics, the tale also recalls the gnoseological function of the milah, almost as if the rite could impart a sapiential legitimation to the pious Jew.

A biographical transposition of the Kabbalistic interpretation of circumcision is clearly discernable in an event in the life of the Portuguese Jew Šelomoh Molko, born around 1500 in a family forcibly converted to Christianity. A young secretary to the king's court, Molko decided to revert to Judaism, driven above all by the suggestive personality of the pseudo-Messiah Dawid Reuveni. As Molko himself relates, he resolved to circumcise himself: "One night I carried out the rite of milah, no one was there with me. The Lord, blessed be He, in virtue of his Name, helped me and healed me, even if the pain was almost unbearable and I fainted. The blood flowed almost as if from a spring, but He who is merciful and a trustworthy healer cured me in no time."711 The traumatic event marked a decisive turning point in the youth's life. In fact, Molko was forced to flee Portugal and seek refuge, first in the Ottoman Empire and then in Italy. Nevertheless, the narrative's emphasis is not so much on the consequences of the action, but on the effect of the circumcision, which assumes the traits of a genuine initiation into the secret meaning of the Torah: "As soon as I received the seal of my Creator," continues Molko, "terrible things appeared to me, great and profound, and unattainable secrets were revealed to me. I was made aware of the hidden knowledge of the holy Kabbalah, and of the powerful permutations of the sefirot. I saw the

treasure of wisdom and my heart radiated from the Torah of our God."712

If, in the traditional case of infant circumcision, the relationship between milah and access to the occult doctrine had the symbolic value of a potentiality that the child would have

Naḥaš נחש
SERPENT

The serpent, in Judaic tradition, guards the dominion of the supernatural. Besides the consonant sequence nḥš that indicates the reptile, as well as the practice of magic,713 we encounter a constellation of words, similar in sound and spelling, which also evoke, in addition to some attributes of the serpent, the idea of the incantation.

Lḥš, for example, is the hiss that the snake emits before attacking, but also the soft murmuring with which the enchanter inveigles men and animals, and ḥrš indicates deafness (a characteristic traditionally attributed to the serpent), as well as the slight rustling of woods and a magician's skill.

In the Biblical text, the serpent, upon its first appearance, is the symbol of the enchanting eloquence that causes Eve to fall into sin, and its voice echoes in the Garden of Eden, while in Jeremiah the sinister hiss of the snake is compared to the sound of an advancing army, which resonates throughout the entire world.714

The figure of a serpent, realized in bronze, stands out in a singular episode narrated in the book of Numbers: And Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he looked at the serpent of bronze, he lived (Num. 21.9). The motionless banner erected by Moses in the desert acted, therefore, with its

reddish glow, as an antidote to the fiery serpents sent by God to castigate the Jewish people. Since bronze is called neḥošet in Hebrew, the expression "bronze serpent" is enlivened by a sonorous alliteration, which reinforces the symbolic relationship between the serpent and the metal.715 It was thus believed that a simple glance in the direction of the figure sufficed to cure the mortal bite, thanks to a sort of reversal of the very ancient belief in the capacity of serpents to kill from a distance with a single look, or with the fatal heat of their breath.716

The prodigious nature of the serpent is also at the center of the Biblical tale concerning Aaron's staff. In Exodus, the Lord instructs Moses and Aaron so that they can compete victoriously with the proverbial magical abilities of the Egyptians: When Pharaoh shall speak to you, saying, Show a miracle; then you shall say to Aaron, Take your rod, and throw it before Pharaoh, and it shall become a serpent (Exod. 7.9). As is well known, Aaron follows the divine command, achieving the miraculous

transformation. When, however, the Egyptian enchanters also succeed in turning their rods into snakes, the superiority of the Hebrew

magic has an eloquent confirmation: Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods (Exod. 7.12).

Taking a cue from the clear magical connotation that the serpent has in the Scriptures, post-Biblical Jewish literature became populated with various reptiles, endowed with extraordinary virtues. According to the midraš Tanḥuma, for example, the serpents that the Jews meet in the desert at the time of the Exodus were as large as the beams of a house.717 The same text tells of certain vipers that, "when they fix upon the shadow of a bird flying in the air, it is immediately bewitched and falls."718 The Babylonian Talmud furthermore speaks of women who give birth to monstrous serpents with human eyes,719 and of the unnatural union of a serpent with a species of lizard, from which a wild donkey was created.720 In the literature of Late Antiquity, the serpent essentially kept its connotation as an enemy, an evil animal to which the Scriptures attributed responsibility for the expulsion from Eden.

Some texts of the Judaic tradition nevertheless contain statements of regret for the ancient alliance that, at the beginning of time, united reptiles to men. The Babylonian Talmud affirms, in fact, "Rabbi Šim'on ben Menasya said: 'Woe for the loss of a great servant. For had not the serpent been cursed, every Israelite would have had two valuable serpents, sending one to the north and one to the south to bring him costly gems, precious stones and pearls.'"721 In another place in the same work, the trace of this legendary servile serpent appears in the interpretation of a dream in which a reptile changes into a

source of extraordinary profit: "If one sees a serpent in a dream, it means that his living is assured; if it bites him it will be doubled; if he kills it he will lose his living."722

In the daily experience of Late Antiquity, a snakebite represented an almost certain threat of death. Indeed, another passage of the Babylonian Talmud, contained within the Yoma treatise, describes a frantic search for a remedy to remove the poison, and for a physician to assist the injured. Even if a violation of the Sabbath was permitted to attain the necessary aid, the proposed cures seemed marked more by

magic than science: "tear open a hen for him, or cut leek from the ground for him."723

The folkloric reworking of the motive of the serpent continued throughout the entire Middle Ages, during which the Jewish legends added new particulars to the Biblical meeting between the tempter and Eve, even introducing a peculiar overlap between the serpent and the camel. The Pirqe de-rabbi Eli'ezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eli'ezer)—a Haggadic collection, probably composed in the eighth century—affirms that the serpent of Genesis was, in reality, similar to a camel; with the aim of persuading man to transgress the divine order, Samma'el, the prince of evil, jumped on the back of the serpent-camel "and rode it."724 It was thus Samma'el himself who spoke to Eve, while the image of the animal, which in the Scriptures is of primary importance, assumes a secondary role.

The combination of serpent and camel became one of the recurrent motifs of medieval Judaic literature, with even Maimonides dedicating a passage of his philosophical Guide of the Perplexed725 to this curious product of popular fantasy. The splitting of the Biblical serpent into two figures—the animal being ridden and his demonic rider—proved to be particularly functional in medieval thought, since it allowed for the placement

of the personification of evil at the center of the tale of the expulsion from Eden. In fact, in Maimonides, the episode underwent a strong allegorization, so that the meeting with the serpent came to symbolize the original complicity between the sensitive faculty (Eve) and the imaginative (the serpent Samma'el) to the detriment of intelligence, represented by Adam. From a mythological tale, the Genesis narrative is thus transformed into a depiction of the contrasting attributes of man and of the danger represented by the predominance of imagination over rational control.

On a very different level from the one chosen by Maimonides for his refined theoretical speculation, the Ashkenazic authors of the Middle Ages continued to attribute to the serpent the traditional function of magical symbol par excellence. In a passage of the Sefer ḥasidim (The

Book of the Pious), which describes the beliefs that were widespread in twelfth and thirteenth century Rhineland, the extraordinary power of the snake's eyes is attributed to the dignity enjoyed by the reptile before the transgression: the serpent was originally similar to man, but acquired its current aspect as punishment for the sin that it committed. However, not even divine wisdom could achieve what was considered to be precluded even to the best magician, namely the changing of the eyes. The reptile thus kept human eyes: "The serpent"—the text states—"originally walked on two feet, and its appearance recalled that of man. It is known that what is capable of changing a man into a wolf, a cat, or a donkey cannot change the pupil of an eye. In the same way, when the serpent was changed, its eyes were not."726

The theme of transformation following sin made the reptile a kind of precursor to every successive change, an effective symbol of the passage between different states of nature and spirit. In the Kabbalistic literature of the medieval era, and in particular in the *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shep-

herd), a text belonging to the *Zohar*ic literature, written at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the snake symbolizes the continual change of man's spirit, at times inclined to evil and at other times directed toward good. The author takes a cue from the Biblical tale of the rod that Moses and Aaron change into a snake in front of Pharaoh, and which then resumes its original form, which would then serve Aaron in striking the water and turning it into blood. In this mystical conception, just as the rod could change states several times, so could the soul transform itself from an angel to a demon, and likewise back into an angel through repentance, and then once more into a demon through sin: "This demon is like Moses's rod, which changes into a snake and then returns to a rod. In the same way, the demon changes into an angel and from an angel back into a demon according to man's actions."727

In the work of Yehudah Löw ben Beṣal'el, the celebrated Maharal of Prague (ca. 1525–1609), the symbolism of the serpent was once again considerably reworked. "He who does not bow down before the Lord,

blessed be He"—states the Sefer netivot 'olam (The Book of the Ways of the World)—"will not be able to stand erect, but will have his vertebral column turned into a snake." The author's reflection, based on an ancient Talmudic legend,728 extends to the man who does not humble himself before the Lord the same malediction pronounced against the serpent after the transgression in Eden: upon your belly shall you go, and dust shall you eat (Gen. 3.14). The Maharal continues with a detailed discussion of the likeness between serpent and man: "If in fact there had not been some bond between man and the serpent," he observes, "the latter would have been able to go along with him to tempt him [...] Further indication of this relationship is the fact that man was established as king of the earthly world, just as the serpent, before

being damned, was the king among animals."729 According to Rabbi Yehudah, man is therefore similar to the reptile, since they share the regal attribute, as if the serpent were an emblem of sovereignty. The Maharal finally concludes by affirming that "When man dies and his body becomes undone, a serpent is born from the dorsal spine, since the one and the other are tightly joined. These things are well-known among the wise."

This explicit reference to the sages of the epoch indicates how the author took inspiration from the world of the natural sciences of the sixteenth century, which were still steeped in magic. The ancient idea of the serpent's royal importance in fact probably reached the Maharal through contact with alchemy texts which were widespread in Rudolf's Prague, in which the fabled reptile called the basilisk (literally "the little king") appears several times. When reduced to ashes, this snake of prodigious faculties—capable of killing with only a look—became one of the ingredients that served in the production of gold. According to an alchemical formula of the sixteenth century (which was also transmitted through the Hebrew language), the basilisk was born from the decomposition of organic substances, and its menacing and terrible form was the result of a long process of transformation of matter.730

With the image of an extreme mutation to which the spine would have been subjected after death, the erudite rabbi of the sixteenth century united, in the changeable figure of the serpent, its religious symbolism and the alchemical transformation of the elements.

Nešer נשר
EAGLE, GRIFFIN

The mention of nešer, the Biblical bird that tradition identifies with the eagle,731 almost always recurs in the Scriptures as an introduction to an explicit or indirect comparison. Its solitary flight in the sky, its sudden and frightening descent on prey, and its unattainable solitude make the eagle a ready and effective metaphor. Its looming often evokes the appearance of an enemy army, which rushes unexpectedly, evoking terror, as in a passage of Deuteronomy—The Lord shall bring a nation against you from far, from the end of the earth, which will swoop down like the eagle (Deut. 28.49)—or in one of Habakkuk—Their horsemen [...] shall fly like a eagle hastening to devour (Hab. 1.8).

If the bird is, on the one hand, the paradigm of cruelty, on the other the care that it shows for its young is a topos of care and dedication, thereby recalling God's protective relationship toward Israel. The simile of the eagle is thus used in the ancient poetic composition called Song of Moses, which represents the Jewish population in the confused solitude of the desert: He found him in a desert land [...]

he led him about, he instructed them [...] As an eagle stirs up its nest, flutters over its young, spreads out its wings, takes them, bears them on its pinions (Deut. 32.10-11). The act of carrying eaglets, elaborated here in naturalistic detail, is elsewhere the beginning of a strongly symbolic enunciation, through which the bird becomes a divine vehicle. In the evocation of the children of Israel's exodus from Egypt, the Lord recalls the miracle he performed: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings, and brought you to myself (Exod. 19.4). The text distinguishes between the means and the goal of the action: while the eagles' wings indicate through metonymy the vehicle of the miraculous liberation from slavery, the goal of the flight is in fact God himself. The expression brought you to myself—instead of the more obvious "I carried you out of Egypt"—indicates the celestial journey represented by the eagle, the outcome of which will be proximity to God.

The echo of the symbolism, widespread in the entire ancient world, of the heavenly eagle, capable of guiding man to an ultramundane space, can be sensed in this passage. In Mesopotamian literature, in the second millennium BCE, the eagle is the prodigious means by which Etana, King of Kiš, penetrates heaven in search of the plant of fertility,[732] while, in the classical tradition, it is Zeus's eagle that kidnaps Ganymede so that he can become the cupbearer of the gods.[733] In this way, the mythical bird is often an instrument of an upward journey or, better, a journey toward an immaterial dominion.[734]

31

358

In the ancient imagination, the eagle is often united with the traits of other animals, or with anthropomorphic elements, and serves as the origin of the fantastic birds and winged monsters that so often recur in

Near Eastern glyptics. The face of an eagle should probably be included within this tradition of Mesopotamian origin, along with those of the cherub, lion, and man, which Ezekiel attributes to the cherubs (Ezek. 10.14),735 as well as the allegorical figure imagined by Daniel, perhaps alluding to Babylon: The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings; I looked till its wings were plucked off, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made to stand upon its feet as a man (Dan 7.4). The figure of the eagle recalls the idea of might and majesty and, in the medley of forms, is indicative of the element connected to air and the sky; the presence of the bird in fact contrasts with human features and those of terrestrial animals (the lion), signifying the tension between their heights and the transcendental outcome of the entire personification.

Ancient religions attributed a solar symbolism to the eagle, also largely testified to by archeological discoveries in the Mesopotamian and Syrian regions which reveal a constant association between the bird and deified representations of the sun in its various aspects. This connection could not have been unknown to Judaism in the Hellenistic era, even if the rabbinic current energetically opposed it, going so far as to remove the images of solar eagles that appeared in synagogues, and eliminating references to them in literary texts. Flavius Josephus (ca. 38–after 100) relates the most celebrated episode of this struggle against this symbol, in which the Pharisees incited the population to destroy the golden eagle placed by King Herod above the great door of the Temple. In an excited scene, Josephus tells that "they therefore let themselves down from the top of the temple with thick cords, and this at midday, and while a great number of people were in the tem-

ple, and cut down that golden eagle with axes. This was presently told to the king's captain of the temple, who came running with a great body of soldiers, and caught about forty of the young men, and brought them to the king."736 In front of the popular assembly that followed this rebellion, which culminated in the condemnation to death of those who actually carried out the act, as well as its instigators, the king accused the rebels of sacrilege, thus demonstrating that, at least for

some of the Jews of the time, the solar symbol of the golden eagle was legitimate and even sacred.

The Pharisees' opposition to Herod's eagle was certainly motivated, in addition to animosity toward the sovereign, by the desire to scrub out every sign that could recall the pagan cults.737 In the treatise in the Mišnah on the idolatrous cults, which reflects the orientations of rabbinic Judaism of the second and third centuries, this aversion even received a juridical sanction: "All images are prohibited because they are worshiped once a year. Such is the statement of Rabbi Me'ir; But the sages declare: [an image] is not prohibited except one that has a staff or bird or orb in its hand."738 This is probably a reference to the widespread iconography of Zeus and his oriental correspondents, characterized by the attribute of the eagle, which was identified as one of the peculiar traits of non-Jewish representations.

It was only with the end of Eastern paganism and the establishment of the Muslim dominion in the seventh century that the image of the eagle would return to occupying a significant role in Jewish texts. Between the end of the seventh and the beginning of the eighth centuries, perhaps also

influenced by Arab folkloric traditions, the bird would in fact become a recurring element of legends involving Solomon as protagonist, a paradigm not only of the wise and knowledgeable sovereign, but also of the enigmatic figure of magician. For one, Ecclesiastes Rabbah, probably composed at the beginning of the eighth century, states that "Solomon possessed a large eagle upon which he rode, and traveled to Tadmor in the wilderness and returned in one day."739 The destination of the king's fantastic voyage does not, however, seem fortuitous, since it was precisely at Tadmor, the Semitic name for the Syrian oasis of Palmyra, that the divinity cult of Malakbel and Ba'alšamin, distinguished by the attribute of the eagle, was continued for centuries.740

In another tradition, exemplified in the coeval Targum šeni to Esther, Solomon's throne is adorned with twelve golden eagles, facing as many lions. When the king wants to climb upon his high-backed

chair, "the sixth eagle takes hold of him and lifts him to sit down [...] The large eagle then flies around it, takes the royal crown and places it on the king's head [...] Finally, the lions and the eagles surmount the structure to make shade for his head."741 Solomon's eagles, which in this case act with the composure of palace masters of ceremonies, could, on other occasions, talk with the sovereign and answer his queries. Thus, in the Ma'aśeh ha-nemalah (The Story of the Ant), a work probably inspired by an Arabic original,742 we find the story of how Solomon reaches a mysterious golden dwelling with the help of demons. Unable to enter the house, he asks an eagle of "seven hundred years" for advice, although the eagle is unable to help him. It calls "its older brother, two hundred years older," and then a third brother, one thousand three hundred years old, which finally indicates to the king an old entrance, since covered with dirt. On the iron door there is an inscription left by the ancient inhabitants, on which, with difficulty, the tragic events of the place can still be read: "We make it known to you, o men, that we lived in this banquet room, in prosperity and in delight, for many years. When the famine came, we ground precious stones instead of grain, but they were of no use to us; we thus left the dwelling to the eagles and we lay down on the ground."743 Eagles dominate the entire narrative space here, carrying out not only the function of talking animals, but also fulfilling the role of guardians of a closed and prohibited place.

These early medieval stories thus introduced into Judaism a characterization of nešer that was previously foreign to it, a result of a medley of folkloric motifs involving the eagle as the "hero's helper" and as custodian of an ultramundane space.744 Remaining faithful to this strongly fantastical connotation, in the subsequent centuries the eagle would remain a familiar figure in Jewish legend.

At the end of the thirteenth century, a recollection of the midrašic precedents flourishes in certain mystical tales contained in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), in which the eagle becomes the messenger of a secret symbolic truth. In a long narrative insert contained in the second volume of the work, King Solomon appears

again, riding on the back of an eagle, which flies in the sky until reaching a mountain, inside of which mysterious beings reveal magical secrets to him. The king conjures up the bird at sunrise with a rite, during which, after having turned first to the east and then to the south, and finally to the north, Solomon concentrates "with lowered eyes and raised head" until he sees two columns coming toward him, "one of

fire and one of clouds,"745 on which an eagle is posed, "with the right wing on the column of fire and with the body and the left wing on that of clouds," and carrying two leaves in its beak. The archaic representation of the raptor with a branch in its beak is employed here in a Kabbalistic interpretation, since the two leaves represent two different demonic levels: the king, in fact, smelling them, recognizes that one comes from the fallen one and the other from the one who has his eyes *open* (Num. 24.4), that is, from the angels 'Uzza and 'Azza'el, whom God expelled from heaven, and who now perform the function of guardians of magical knowledge.746 The columns of fire and clouds are a metaphor of the Šekinah747 and, at the same time, of malkut (kingdom), the tenth and lowest of the sefirot, through which knowledge finally reaches man. Although conserving its own power of representation, the story is an allegory for the journey through the celestial levels which man must complete to achieve knowledge. After having recived the power of tif'eret (beauty—the east), of ḥesed (mercy—the south), and of gevurah (might—the north), the king, thanks to the eagle, plunges into the dominion of malkut, by means of which he is able to reach the arcane.

In the Kabbalah of the following centuries, the symbol experienced another transformation, passing into a more circumscribed metaphorical function. The many mentions of the eagle that can be found, from the end of the sixteenth century, in the writings of the Lurianic School, no longer belong to a narrative strategy,

But instead repeat a single image, to the point of turning it into a sort of descriptive topos of the intra-divine life. In the exposition of the Lurianic teachings, and in the work of Ḥayyim Vital, an expression is encountered several times that has the typical tone of mystical jargon,

and which evokes a notion without expounding it in an explicit way: bi-beḥinat ha-nešer, "according to the eagle's appearance." Behind this enigmatic expression a reference to the Biblical comparison As an eagle stirs up its nest (Deut. 32.11) is concealed, as well as an allusion to the relationship that binds the sefirah binah (intelligence) to the six successive sefirot (from ḥesed to malkut). According to this Kabbalistic conception, the influence of the sefirah binah serves to protect the entire structure of emanation from the threat of evil, or rather from the "external forces" that try to break into and disrupt the sefirotic structure. Rather than expressing this idea with abstract language, Vital resorts to the likeness of the eagle, which has the value of invoking a Scriptural precedent and of infusing the teaching with symbolic vigor.

As often occurs in the Lurianic corpus, the key to resolving the enigma is actually preserved within the center of the text itself, which offers, almost unexpectedly, the intimate motivation for the allegory: "As the eagle spreads its wings to protect its young, so that another bird does not carry them away, so does the heavenly mother, the binah of the emanation, because even she does not fear the foreign forces."748 The raptor's protective act, bending over its own clutch, is here the archetype of the secret of divine emanation; the Lurianic eagle is, at the same time, much less and much more than the solar eagle, since, without betraying the Biblical metaphor, it hovers in the timeless dimension which precedes the drama of the origin of the worlds.

## נידה Niddah
## MENSTRUATION

An obscure etymological bond unites niddah, commonly used to indicate menstruation, and the root ndd, which means "wander,"

"roam," and also, in a figurative sense, "flutter, fly about."749 Menstrual blood seems therefore to be understood, in the Hebrew language, as a fluid that moves in the body, and whose appearance, carefully observed for its premonitory signs, causes the woman, and whoever comes into contact with her, a cyclical impurity. By extension, niddah designates various types of contamination, as for example that of plundered possessions of war (which must be purified before they can be used),750 or, in a general sense, immorality or sin. The semantic domain of niddah is therefore unambigiously negative, and implies the idea of a violent physical repulsion that entails segregation or condemnation. According to the Judaic conception, this impurity is nevertheless not a definitive and irreparable state, but rather an unavoidable aspect of reality, which can be resolved with a series of symbolic, as well as practical, actions.

In a long chapter, the fifteenth of the book of Leviticus, the Scriptures precisely define how menstrual impurity manifests itself, and the proper Jewish conduct in the face of it. Here the female loss of blood is related to gonorrhea and the male seminal emission, almost as if impurity itself is born from the appearance of bodily fluids connected to the sexual realm. Nevertheless, among the various impurities, some levels of difference exist: the man infected with gonorrhea is impure for the duration of the illness, while whoever enters into contact

with him—sitting where he was sitting, or touching him—only remains impure until sunset. After recovery, to regain purity, seven days must be counted, and on the eighth a sacrifice of expiation needs to be performed. Seminal emission renders a man impure only until evening, while the carnal union of man and woman is purified with water, and entails contamination only until sunset. The female flow is considered a sort of temporary illness of the woman, which renders her impure for seven days. Whoever touches the woman is impure until evening; whoever unites with her during menstruation shares her impurity for an equal period of seven days.751

Leviticus finally specifies the symbolic reason for the rules surrounding menstruation: Thus shall you separate the people of Israel

from their uncleanness; that they die not in their uncleanness, when they defile my Tabernacle that is among them (Lev. 15.31). The reference to the divine abode renders explicit the sphere to which the impurity relates, that is, of the liturgical service, in which man enters into direct contact with the transcendent. The danger of contamination is therefore considered a serious risk, and the mention of death recalls the gravity with which Judaism has traditionally considered this norm.

The symbolism of the term niddah seems therefore to essentially relate to the danger that arises in cases where areas that should remain separate come into contact. Just as exterior manifestations of the bodily fluids connected with sexuality are impure, so is the mixture of male semen with menstrual fluid, which connotes a surely sterile union. In this sense, what is impure is the encounter between the potential life of the sperm

and the implicit temporary death inherent in the menstrual fluid. This ancient, funerary symbolism of menstruation is confirmed by the affinity that connects the Biblical prescriptions relating to the impurity of corpses with those to be observed with regard to the feminine cycle. Similar to menstruation, the corpse carries a ritual impurity that lasts seven days, and which is removed by means of a bath performed with water, significantly called me niddah ("water of impurity," or literally "of menstruation").752

The post-Biblical tradition accentuates the idea of danger, and even of death, connected to the menstruating woman, commonly defined as niddah. In the Yoma treatise of the Babylonian Talmud—composed around the sixth century of the Common Era—it is explicitly confirmed thus: "One who had intercourse with a menstruating woman is like one who was made unclean by a corpse."753 Meanwhile in the Pesaḥim treatise, the simple passage of the woman into this condition is considered a foreboding of death or of grave misfortune: "If a menstruating woman passes between two [men], if it is at the beginning of her menses she will slay one of them, and if it is at the end of her menses she will cause strife between them."754

In the Talmudic literature, the idea is advanced further that the woman's recurrent "sickness" is the consequence of the malediction pronounced against Eve, as a result of her sin: "Rabbi Yiṣḥaq ben Abdimi stated: 'Eve was cursed with ten

curses, since it is written: I will greatly multiply the pain of your child bearing, in sorrow you shall bring forth children (Gen. 3.16), which refers to the two drops of blood, one being that of menstruation and the other that of virginity.'"755 Nonetheless it should be observed that, even if the sign of blood accompanies both of these moments of female life, only the menstrual fluid is considered impure, while "the blood of virginity" does not contaminate the spouse.756

In the Talmudic Ketubbot treatise, the missing appearance of blood at the moment of the first union offers the cue for an apologue, whose true symbolic center nevertheless seems to be the menstrual problem. In the tale, a newlywed goes to Rabban Gamli'el the Elder, saying to him, "'I have had intercourse [with my newly-wedded wife] and I have not found any blood.' She [the wife] said to him, 'My master, I am of the family of Dorkati, [the women of] which have neither blood of menstruation nor blood of virginity.'" After conducting an investigation among the relatives of the wife, the rabbi ascertains that this woman was speaking the truth, and so conveys to the husband, "Go, be happy with thy bargain. Happy art thou that thou hast been privileged [to marry a woman] of the family of Dorkati."757 This apologue thus seems to represent an escape into imagery in which sexual relations are unburdened of rigid observations of menstruation. At the episode's conclusion, however, the sense of reality regains its voice, with an observation that somewhat tempers the negative symbolism of the feminine cycle—"Rabbi Ḥanina said: 'Vain consolation Rabban Gamali'el offered to that man [...] As the leaven is wholesome for the dough, so is blood wholesome for a woman [...] Every woman who has abundant blood has many children."758

A midraš of the fifth century preserves a rare but important projection of the image of the menstrual blood onto the cosmological

level. In Leviticus Rabbah, in fact, the red light of the sun at sunset is unexpectedly compared to menstrual flow: "The globe of the sun (ḥammah) never sets before becoming a kind of spot of blood. What is the proof? The sun which comes forth like a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man when he runs his course (Ps. 19.6). 'Course' denotes no other than that of women; as you read, *And it ceased to be with Sarah after the course of women* (Gen. 18.11)."759

The emergence of an ancient mythological substratum is confirmed here by the use of the word ḥammah, which is gendered female, to indicate the sun. On the one hand the image is consistent, inasmuch as, according to the sages of the Haggadah, it is a feminine sun that, coloring the sky red, recalls the idea of menstrual blood. On the other hand, its evocation of the verse of Psalms produces a strong hermeneutical tension that evokes the idea of a hermaphrodite sun, since the "course" is attributed to a masculine sun that comes out like a bridegroom from the nuptial bed. It should furthermore be remembered that the image of the "grain of blood" has a genuinely technical meaning, in that it recalls a norm of Jewish law according to which the beginning of menstruation is established from the appearance of a drop of blood at least as large as a grain.760

The process by which menstrual symbolism was transposed to the cosmic, only alluded to in the midrašic literature, became increasingly evident in the writings of the medieval Kabbalah. In fact, for the medieval mystics, menstruation served to define the negative and demonic sphere, expanding the meaning of human

experience to the ultramundane forces of evil and corruption. At the turn of the thirteenth century, in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the process of symbolically extending menstrual impurity already seems complete, so much so that a union with a woman during her period becomes one of the archetypes of negative activity, through which the man foments the demonic forces of the "other side," the siṭra aḥra. "Alas, then, for a man who touches such a woman at that time"—we find in the third book—"for through this sin he awakens the supernal serpent and casts filth into a holy place, and punishments are

let loose on the world and all is defiled."761 To transgress the norms of female purity thus means committing a grave sin, whose consequences extend all the way to the highest sphere. In another passage, contained in the section of the *Zohar* entitled *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shepherd), copulation with an impure woman is even compared to an idolatrous cult, which violates the essential principle of separateness between the God of Israel and alien divinities. In a very significant way, the author introduces menstrual blood in a list of negative realities, which includes obscurity on a cosmic level, idols in the religious sphere, and sexual contamination on the human level.762

The approach of the *Zohar*ic literature would be taken up again by many Kabbalists of the following centuries, who would enrich the comparisons between the dominion of evil and menstruation with other details. In the Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates) by Mošeh Cordovero—composed in the middle of the sixteenth century—the author offers, among other things, a complex description of the wicked man who, through his sins, contaminates his own soul, rendering it akin to a menstruating bride: "The sinner, with his unclean, filthy acts, exercises an influence [...] more bitter than death [...] than the wife who

menstruates and affirms: I saw a red lily!"763 The image of the bride contaminated by sin refers to the individual spirit, as well as to the celestial bride, or to the community of Israel, which is often represented as a lily, and which, following the predominance of the negative influence of transgression, is forced to separate from its own Lord.764

In Cordovero's age, the allegorical interpretation that likened the community of Israel to a woman struck with impurity was already fairly widespread, and it could also be found in the Biblical commentary of the great rabbi Yosef Caro (1488-1575), an older contemporary of the author of the Pardes. There Caro turns to the metaphor of menstruation to describe the Jewish exile: "The Scriptures," writes the author in his Sefer toledot Yiṣḥaq, "compare the impurity of Israel to

that of menstruation [...] and not to that caused by the cadaver. While, in fact, the priest cannot enter into the house where there is a cadaver, he is allowed to enter where a woman during her cycle can be found, and stay with her; in the same way the Lord, blessed be He, causes the Šekinah to hover above the Jews, even if they are impure."765 Caro continues by noting that, while death's impurity is lasting, that of menstrual flow is temporary,766 and that, as

the woman regains purity, so will Jewish imprisonment have an end: "The Lord, blessed be He, will redeem us and render us pure, as is written I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean (Ezek. 36.25)."767

The complex symbolic stratification associated with niddah is finally found again in one of the most important texts of religious literature of the first half of the seventeenth century, the Sefer šene luḥot ha-berit (The Book of the Two Tablets of the Covenant), written by Yeša'yah ben Avraham Horowitz (1565?–1630), rabbi and Kabbalist, who lived in central Europe and died in the Land of Israel. In a discussion concerning the meaning of Pesaḥ, Horowitz inserts a short sentence, of strongly esoteric tone, in which the celebration of Passover is connected to the purification from menstruation: "On the first day of Pesaḥ, the Jewish people completely delivered themselves to the power of the heavenly principles and ended the impurity of the menstruation, even if not definitively. In fact, they had to count the days of purification before uniting themselves to the Lord's name in the reception of the Torah."768 The initial assertion of this passage expresses the Kabbalistic reading of the departure of the Jewish people from the land of Egypt; seen, on the cosmic level, as the end of the rule by foreign powers. Indeed, for the Jewish mystics, the historical liberation of Israel is nothing but the earthly reflection of a heavenly event, in which the dominion of the angel of Israel succeeds over the predominance of the angels of the Gentiles.

On a metaphorical plane, the end of exile corresponds, therefore, to the end of a woman's impurity, almost as if the blood smeared on the architraves and jambs, marking the Jewish homes, on the night of the

tenth plague was the last sign of an impurity to be amended. Nonetheless, the exodus from Egypt is followed, in the Biblical tale, by a long wandering in the desert, before the Lord's revelation, which is commemorated by

the Jews with the festival of Šavu'ot (the day, as Horowitz refers to it, "of the reception of the Torah"769). As such, the time in the desert, before the revelation of the Decalogue, is equated with the woman's period of purification, in which she counts the days that separate her from reunification with her husband. From a distressful daily experience, the isolation and the female silence connected to menstruation are thus symbolically transfigured into the silence and bewilderment of all of Israel.

## אור Or
## Light

The words of the Scriptures often seem to become more transparent, as if to filter the light of the theophany. Having reached the threshold of the divine, the Hebrew prose lingers, hesitates in allusive images, which then dissolve in a glow: For with you is the fountain of life; in your light shall we see light (Ps. 36.10). The second hemistich of this verse of Psalms is composed, in the original, of three words only, which evoke a single sound: be-orka nir'eh or. Or, "light," marks the beginning and the end of the short sentence, as if suspended around the verb r'h, "see," which, with or ('r ), shares two of its three root letters. The splendor of which the passage speaks seems to have no physical center, abstracted as it is from every reference to heavenly bodies; yet it is a light that, filling every space and penetrating the shadows, allows man to see.770

God, as read in Job, uncovers deep things from darkness, and brings out to light the obscurity (Job 12.22). If the obscurity can be brought to light, this means that darkness must also be read as a provisional state of glowing since, behind every appearance of reality, the Biblical imagination intuits an immaterial armature of light. The divine brilliance is therefore made of a subtle substance that impregnates the most varied manifestations of nature, from dew, which in Isaiah is called the dew of light (Isa. 26.19),771 to the clouds, full of distilled light that shines with the sudden flash of lightning (Job 37.15)),772 to

the light of my countenance (e.g., Job 29.24) that manifests a favorable attitude, or to that of the eyes that is gone in the affliction (Ps. 38.11).

The words Let there be light (Gen. 1.3) are the first pronounced by God in the book of Genesis. The creation of heaven and earth, narrated in the opening verse of the Biblical text, in fact, is shrouded by an

absolute silence. It is only with light that the series of divine orders that call the cosmos into existence gets under way: And God said, Let there be light. The word or is repeated five times in three verses. The light of the beginning is nevertheless not the radiance of the stars, since these will be evoked only in the fourteenth verse. It is an essential splendor that is determined by a single adjective: And God saw the light, that it was good (Gen. 1.4). For the long duration of the first half of the fourth verse, the light, exclusive object of the divine vision, is only good; it is a brightness that does not have any limits, not even that of the separation from darkness, which will be reached at the end of the sentence: God divided the light from the darkness.

The Scriptures do not make explicit reference to the undivided light of the first day of creation, but the representation of an uncorrupted light remained imprinted in the imagination of the rabbis of the post-Biblical tradition, who constructed numerous legends of forceful narrative vigor around it. A text contained in the Babylonian Talmud,773 and often recalled later, tells how the image of a man is silhouetted in the light of the first day, and who, thanks to the light, can see in every direction, and who extends, with his own gigantic figure, throughout the entire universe. The motifs of the cosmic man and that of the undivided light seem in fact to overlap in a single mythical representation: the man of light that pervades all of space. The body of the Adam ri'šon (the primordial Man) thus symbolizes the unlimited radiation of light, and its enormous size is equivalent to the unbear-

able brilliance, the source of which the eye is not able to fix.774 Nevertheless, when the original light shatters, leaving space for intervals of darkness—so that the day without limits is followed by the alternation of light and darkness, and the motionless perfection of the beginning is succeeded by the movement of the stars—the primordial man also loses his extraordinary dimensions, and his limbs shorten, assuming definite shape. To explain this contraction of the Adam ri'šon, the rabbis appealed to the idea of "corruption": "The first man [extended] from the earth to the firmament [...] but as soon as he sinned,

the Holy One, blessed be He, placed His hand upon him and diminished him [...] but as soon as the Holy One, blessed be He, beheld the generation of the Flood and the generation of the Dispersion, and saw that their actions were corrupt, He arose and hid [their light] from them."775

This parallel with other ancient traditions demonstrates that this singular cosmogonic tale actually alluded to the establishment of time, whose existence is rendered possible by the alternation of the diurnal realm of light with nocturnal darkness, mimed by the animation of the enormous human figure. The theme of the archetypical transformation of the primitive man, foreign to the Genesis narrative, emerges in fact from a mythical substratum widespread in the entire ancient Orient. While, in the Haggadic tradition, the fragmentation of light was made to correspond to a reduction of the primordial man, other cultures imagined his body as dismembered and scattered throughout the cosmos, or subjected to a suffering that brought death with it. In the Indian tradition, for example, the body of Púruṣa (the "Man"), consecrated in offerings, merges into the yearly

succession of seasons,776 while in the Zoroastrian tradition, Gayõmart, the primordial man, awakened from a dream of divine origin, assists at the first setting into motion of the stars.777

Even if other traditions speak of a sort of sacrifice or of a disorientation of the cosmic man, while rabbinic literature relies on the Biblical notion of "guilt," the idea of a transformation of the archetypical Adam remains, who develops alongside the emergence of time, as well as a "concealment" of the undivided light of the first day.

The connection between the figure of man and the solar year also appears in another Talmudic tale attributed to Śimla'y, a sage who lived in the second half of the third century. The passage contains a teeming conceptual store, in which a number of Jewish precepts—established here for the first time—constitute the semantic framework for the symbolism of light and man. The ritual prescriptions that regulate Jewish life come to epitomize the entire story of the transformation of

light, and of the archetypical Adam: "Rabbi Śimla'y, when preaching, said: 'Six hundred thirteen precepts were communicated to Moses, three hundred sixty-five negative precepts, corresponding to the number of solar days [in the year], and two hundred forty-eight positive precepts, corresponding to the number of the members of man's body.'"778

In the early Middle Ages, a new symbolic value of or joins these speculations on the light of the origins, derived from the meeting of Jewish thought with the Greek-Arabic philosophical tradition. As early as the tenth century, Jewish philosophers would even adopt some of the themes of the Hellenistic doctrines and, in particular, the concept of emanation, which describes the diffusion of divine energy within the cosmos. The metaphors of light typical of the emanation theories find ample reception in Jewish literature, for example in the work of Yiṣḥaq Israeli (ca. 855 – ca. 955), a physician and philosopher born in Egypt, who lived in Kairouan in the Maghreb. Going back to Neoplatonic sources, known to him through Arabic texts, in the Kītab al-awāhir (Book of Substances), Israeli described the separation of beings from the "first cause" as a progressive decline of light, in such a way that the lowest nature was the darkest: "The closer a thing is to the first perfect cause—that is, pure splendor and complete beauty—the greater is its light and brilliance [...] the more distant it is, the more its light is diminished and ignorance and shadow are increased."779

This notion experienced much popularity throughout the Middle Ages and was taken up again, with variations, by some of the most important philosophers—including Šelomoh ibn Gabirol, Yehudah ha-Lewi, and Avraham bar Ḥiyya780—who made light the measure of proximity of the divine and the intermediary of the manifestation of the unknowable. With the emergence of the Kabbalah at the beginning of the thirteenth century, recalling the phenomenology of light became fundamental in the treatment of the sefirotic structure of the world, in language that combined philosophical expressions with the ancient Biblical and rabbinic terminology. The light of the Kab-

balists was therefore the incorporeal aspect of the emanation, even if it also preserved the salient features of the Scriptural tale of creation and the almost anthropomorphic attributes of the Talmudic legend.

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, in the Idra rabba (The Great Assembly)—one of the most esoteric sections of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor)—the divine light, having spread throughout the celestial spaces, set off along six hundred thirteen paths, taking the form of the cosmic macroanthropos, identified here with the Ze'er anpin. This was at once the Kabbalistic equivalent to the primordial man and a figure of the sefirotic framework: "Among the hair runs a path that illuminates two hundred seventy worlds, and from it shines the way of the Ze'er anpin that gives light to the righteous of the future world, as it is written: But the path of the just is like the shining light, that shines more and more until full day (Prov. 4.18). This path is divided into the six hundred thirty-three ways of the Scriptures." The numerous Jewish precepts are changed, in this way, into a series of luminous paths, so that each of the Judaic norms of behavior can be read as a varied gradation of the heavenly brilliance.781

In other sections of the *Zohar*ic literature, or, and its Aramaic

equivalents (for example nehora), became attributes of different sefirot, following the principle according to which superior levels are privileged with an increasingly intense splendor. The brightest light was thus attributed to the sefirah of the supernal crown, keter 'elyon, which—as stated in the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor)—"is the primordial light, brilliant and transparent [...] in the presence of which no brilliance shines, since everything grows dim in the face of it."782 Further levels of celestial forces descended in turn from this sublime light. These were conceived as increasingly

faint lights, or as ever more distant reflections, which captured only flashes from the highest sefirah.

The Kabbalistic works of later centuries remained faithful to this medieval imagery, usually referring back to the *Zohar* in particular. The sixteenth century mystic Mošeh Cordovero thus compared the

proceedings of the sefirot "to a sun ray, which strikes a shiny surface, so that the light is reflected back to it and returns to its source. The same thing occurs to the sefirot that descend, down to malkut (kingdom), where the light rests and then gradually returns, to its source."783 The path of emanation is therefore, for Cordovero, the descent of light, which goes so low as to graze the realm of the material, albeit touching it with only the faint consistency of a reflection.

Yiṣḥaq Luria—whose teachings, in the second half of the sixteenth century, deeply influenced the Kabbalistic doctrines—also regarded light as the web of the entire cosmic structure, making of or a malleable material, dense like a liquid and animated by a continuous and pulsating movement. The beginning of all that can be conceived was, in fact, for Luria, nothing other than the oscillation of light, initially all-pervasive and unlimited, but then recalled by God to himself, in order to create a space apt for the manifold. Reality was thus imagined as a provisional absence of light, and material things, which became possible thanks to the temporary darkness, were given an inextinguishable desire to reunite with the heavenly radiance.784

In this way, the entire Lurianic history of the worlds consisted in a progressive restoration of the luminous energy that moved through successive levels, giving life to the mystical body of creation. Even with certain changes due to the later Kabbalistic lexicon, strongly inclined to abstract formulations, the Lurianic configuration of the cosmos remained faithful to the traditional idea of a macroanthropos of light that attracted, in the design

of its limbs, the full heavenly energy. According to Luria, the light of the En sof, the unknowable essence of the divine, rushed to reoccupy the vacuum granted to reality, and followed the contours of a human profile, causing them to emerge, one by one: "And the first circle, the closest to the En sof, is called the crown of the primordial man. After it, this line [of light] spreads further [...] and generates, inside the first, a second circle, which is called the circle of knowledge of the primordial man."785

Hasidic literature of the eighteenth century took up from the *Zohar*, and from the Lurianic writings, the concept of the enormous figure of light, adding to it a marked ethical value. In this way the cosmic light assumed a definite anthropomorphic connotation, since every part of creation was seen as a reflection and a completion of the human work: "In truth this light"—says Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1745-1831)—"shines and spreads upward without limits or boundaries to give life to a infinite number of hidden worlds, as stated in the Idra rabba. But when it descends downward [...] it divides into six hundred thirteen particles, in correspondence to the precepts of the Torah. These are nothing else than the different means of diffusion of the light of En sof, blessed be it, to illuminate the higher spirit of man, composed of two hundred forty-eight limbs and three hundred sixty-five nerves. The descent and downward diffusion of light, towards that for which it was created, formed, and made, is aimed at the higher spirit, since man, as is known, is the purpose of everything."786

With a now-complete symmetry, the six hundred thirteen paths of light correspond here to the physical man, who is formed by an equal number of corporeal elements, as well as to his soul, whose subtle form is shaped by them. According to Hasidic thought, the fulfillment of the Torah, which is articulated in six hundred thirteen actions to be followed, and prohibitions to be

Qešet קשת
(Rain)bow

Formidable weapon, capable of projecting into space the power of the warrior, the bow occupies a prevalent place in Biblical representations of virile strength. Qešet, together with ḥerev, the sword, is the hero's attribute, and is celebrated in war chants. In the elegy that takes the name The use of the bow (2Sam 1.18), it is affirmed of Jonathan that his bow turned not back (2Sam 1.22), and similarly, in defining Joseph's talent, the Scriptures make note that his bow abode in strength (Gen. 49.24).787

The ability to shoot with a bow is often considered a true gift, which the warrior receives in a mysterious way: it is God himself who, in a passage repeated in the book of Psalms (18.35), as well as in Samuel (2Sam. 22.35), teaches [...] hands to war; and trains [...] arms to bend a bow of bronze. The figure of the valiant man is only an earthly metonym of the warrior God, and valor in battle has its archetype in divine prowess; indeed, the angry and threatening God of many Biblical passages moves with the gestures of an implacable archer. In the lament for the destruction of Jerusalem, one reads, for example, that God bent his bow like an enemy (Lam. 2.4), while later in the same book the celestial wrath becomes a weapon directed against the people of Israel: He has bent his bow, and set me as a mark for the arrow (Lam. 3.12).

The representation of the divine archer, who from his invisible dwelling hurls misfortune upon man, was born from a very ancient

personification of nature's forces, according to which the god of the tempest took up the bow to throw upon the earth not only thunderbolts, water, and hail, but also sickness. This was, for instance, the case with the Canaanite god Rešef, divinity of war, epidemics, and illness, who in epigraphical sources is also called "Rešef of the arrow."788 Likewise Qaus Quzaḥ, a pre-Islamic divinity of the storm, shot hail with his bow, then hung it on the clouds, and thus gave rise to the rainbow.789

From this mythical conception of the archer divinity, the Hebrew Bible preserves, on a lexical as well as narrative level, some rare but fundamental fragments. The same root, yrh, indicates in Hebrew "shoot an arrow" as well as "cause rain to fall."790 In a theophany of archaic tone, the solemn gait of the God of Israel is described, among the earth's rumblings and the

tempest of water, with the bow stripped naked (Hab. 3.9), ready to fling darts, a furious and menacing sign for men and things.791 The divine manifestation is situated here in a dark inversion of the natural order, and the celestial archer's arrows bring illness with them: Before him goes pestilence, and burning coals go forth at his feet (Hab. 3.5).792

The God who speaks to Noah after the deluge also seems to preserve the attributes of an atmospheric divinity, still armed with the bow with which he provoked the terrible cloudburst that inundated the earth. To reassure the patriarch that the water of the deluge will no more exterminate men, God mentions the term qešet three times, and the absence of any other detail seems to indicate that the bow is well known to Noah: I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a sign of a covenant between me and the earth—the Lord says, and then repeats—The bow shall be seen on the cloud, and again, The bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant (Gen. 9.13-16). Although the exegetical tradition identified this sign of the covenant with the physical phenomenon of the rainbow, the text of Genesis does not permit a univocal interpretation, since it simply uses the term "bow," taking care to emphasize, at each mention, the relationship between the divine weapon and the cloud: the bow is

"in" or "on" the cloud, and it is through the cloud that God observes it.793

Only in the book of Ezekiel do we find an explicit correspondence between qešet and the rainbow. Here the prophet introduces the image of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain. However, this image, evoked for a moment in its physical reality, is only the first part of a comparison aimed at the divine: So was the appearance of the brightness around it—continues the text—This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord (Ezek. 1.28). The arc among the clouds is therefore similar to kavod, the radiant glory, or, to put it another way, it is glory itself, whose appearance was unbearable for the prophet, and who, upon seeing it, fell upon [his] face.

The post-Biblical Jewish tradition transformed Ezekiel's gesture into the archetype of the behavior to be followed in the face of a rainbow; in the Berakot treatise of the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Yehošua' ben Lewi, active in the first half of the third century, exhorts: "One who sees the rainbow in the clouds should fall on his face, as it says, As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud, and when I saw it I fell upon my face."794 The arc cannot, in short, be simply looked at—to fix upon the colors would seem to signify a lack of respect towards the divine glory.

Despite the precedent it offers, Ezekiel's behavior does not seem enough to explain the strong taboo imposed by the Jewish rabbis on the rainbow. The bowing, together with the prescription to withdraw the gaze, recalls in fact a gesture of adoration, rooted perhaps in an ancient pagan custom. The Talmudic sages superimposed onto it their own mystical interpretation: they themselves note, in fact, that "In the West [Palestine] they cursed anyone who did this, because it looked as if he was bowing down to the rainbow; but he certainly spoke a blessing [...] 'Blessed is He who remembers the Covenant.'"795 According to a

common pattern in the Jewish tradition, the probable pagan origin of the gesture is thus neutralized through the benediction that accompanies it; it is no longer directed at the physical phenomenon, but to the God of Israel, in that it is he who presides over nature.

A second reason for the visual removal of the rainbow can be detected in the symbolic relationship that connects the arc to the virile member.796 Qešet, which memorializes the divine covenant, was in fact associated with another symbol of the alliance between God and man: the circumcised virile member, which bears the "sign of the sacred covenant," ot berit qodeš.797 In the Hebrew of Late Antiquity, qešet was thus employed, in a metaphorical sense, to allude to the penis, as is often evident in the Talmud and the midrašim. The Soṭah treatise of the Babylonian Talmud contains, for example, a reworking of the Biblical tale of the offer that Potiphar's wife makes to Joseph, in which the expression his bow abode in strength (Gen. 49.24) would be interpreted as an allusion to the patriarch's virile strength: "Rabbi Yoḥanan said in the name of rabbi Me'ir: '[This means] that he had an erection and he spread his semen between his hands."798 In another Talmudic passage, to indicate the condemnation to impotency of the one who observes his own nudity, Rabbi El'azar says that "Shame shall empty his bow,"799 thus

implying a parallel between the prohibition against looking at one's own genitalia and that against staring at the rainbow in the sky.

In the Kabbalah, this sexual metaphor served as a guide for the construction of the cosmic symbolism of the bow and clouds, through a transposition of the Biblical image: the bow came to represent the higher male principle, while the clouds represented the female one. At the end of the thirteenth century, the union between the bow and the cloud alluded, in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), to the harmony between mercy and rigor, and to the mitigation of divine disdain toward the earth. This union, essential for the salvation and preservation of the world, was nevertheless shrouded in an aura of mystery, since the cosmic joining of the two principles is conceived as a supernal intimacy, which needed to evade the human gaze. Thus the sexual substratum present in the rabbinic prohibition of looking at the rainbow became explicit in the formulation of the *Zohar*ic text: "Hence it is not permitted to gaze at the rainbow when it appears in the heavens, as that would be disrespectful to the Šekinah."800

Nor did the *Zohar* neglect the symbolic function of the rainbow's colors, which assume within the work the value of an ornament worn by the celestial bride in preparation for the encounter with her companion. Based on a word play between qešet and the almost homographic root qšṭ, "adorn," the author imagines the Šekinah showing herself adorned in her regal dress for the Lord, who, seeing her, puts aside all wrath and is joyfully disposed.801 The bride's seduction entails the salvation of the world, and it is for this reason that the colors of the rainbow, which allude to the loving supernal rendezvous, are a sign of God's promise of the redemption of mankind.

Using a distinction repeated several times in the *Zohar*, the shades of the rainbow are grouped into three main colors: green, red and white, which correspond to the three patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: "The white is Abraham, who was whitened by the light of the fire. The red is Isaac, while the green is Jacob, who comes between the two colors."802 Behind this alternation of the three hues it is not difficult to detect an allusion to the same number of sefirot, that is to ḥesed (mercy, white, Abraham), paḥad (fear, red, Isaac), and tif'eret (beauty, green, Jacob).803

In the later Kabbalistic tradition, the task of clothing the Šekinah with its splendid attire was entrusted to man, who was considered capable of accomplishing this operation of cosmic importance through prayer. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, Naḥman of Bratslav, one of the greatest sages of the Hasidic tradition, provided an intense interpretation of the correspondence between the symbolism of the colors of the rainbow—of *Zohar*ic derivation—and tones of voice. The true rainbow, according to Naḥman, is in fact prayer, and its tonalities are the modulations in which the song cloaks the liturgy: "The intonation of the melody is equivalent to the three colors of the arc, as the voice contains fire, water, and spirit, which correspond to the three fathers, and the fathers represent the three tones of light. For this reason, whoever pronounces the letters of prayer with a melodious, clear, and perfectly pure voice, dresses the Šekinah in shining cloaks,

so that the Lord, blessed be He, sees it and the king's wrath [is] pacified (Esther 7.10)."

From a purely visible reality, qešet is transformed, in the work of Naḥman, into an experience of collaboration with the divine, which involves various sensory faculties: not only seen but also recited, the rainbow of the Hasidic liturgy assumes the

## קול Qol
## Voice

The Lord's voice, which echoes through the Garden of Eden, provokes fear in Adam and his companion. Frightened of their own nudity, they rush to conceal themselves among the trees: And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day; and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden (Gen. 3.8). This verse represented a dilemma for the Jewish tradition, since the voice here seems to have its own independent nature, abstract from any word. It will only be in the following passage that the Scriptures mention the divine discourse itself: And the Lord God called to Adam, and said to him, Where are you? (Gen. 3.9).

If the Lord had yet to address Adam, what was the voice that sounded in the garden? To resolve this paradox, the Jewish exegetes

located in the voice the subject of the sentence, picturing his sound almost as a hypostatic form of the divinity that "walked" in Eden.804 Such an interpretation—based on the figurative use of the verb hlk, "walk," which, in the Bible, is also employed to indicate the diffusion of a sound805—nevertheless does not completely resolve the text's open question.

A sound that is sensed before God has even spoken suggests, in fact, a strong synesthesia that characterizes the

Hebrew notion of qol. This term, which designates not only an articulated sound but also an indistinct noise (such as that which rises from a crowd), seems to define a quality of the person or thing to which it refers. With qol, Hebrew identifies the emotional wave that emanates from an entity, which the observer can detect immediately, even before perceiving its sound. In the Scriptures, the voice is also intended as a visible quality, almost as if its echo gives rise to a visual reaction instead of an auditory one.

This contamination between vision and sound is one of the decisive traits of the entire Jewish symbolism, and is a foundation of aniconism. In the Jewish tradition, depictions of the divinity are prohibited because it is considered sacrilegious to compel the incommensurable nature of God inside the material lines of an image. This prohibition, which rabbinic Judaism has defended with particular diligence, nonetheless leaves room for a certain kind of compensation, whereby the expressive power that other cultures leave to figures is transferred to the abstract force of sounds. This is possible thanks to the symbolic ability to change visible perceptions into sonorous ones, and vice versa, leaving open a continuous exchange between sensory spheres.

Judaic culture is, in this way, aware that it is possible to "see" a voice, but also that the complexity of an object can be restored through its sound, not only as a simple verbal substitute, but as the fruit of a deeper perception. It is noteworthy that the second Scriptural mention of the word qol, which occurs only shortly after that of the divine voice in the garden, refers to a mute object: What have you done?—the Lord asks Cain—The voice of your brother's blood cries to me from the ground

(Gen. 4.10). In this passage, it is the indelible image of crying blood, and its qol, the emotive voice, which distinctly reaches all the way to God.

Conversely, in the Biblical tales, God's manifestation is sometimes accompanied by the appearance of the voice, which is "seen" by the people. When the Decalogue is enunci-



ated in the twentieth chapter of Exodus, this occurs as follows: And all the people saw the thunderings,806 and the lightnings, and the sound of the šofar, and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they were shaken, and stood far away (Exod. 20.18). In this passage, the semantic exchange between vision and sound predominates, since two of the three theophanic attributes have purely sonorous substance and can only be seen inwardly. The resulting effect accentuates the emotions at the manifestation of the divinity.

The most important text in reconstructing the ancient symbolism of God's voice is without a doubt Psalm 29, in which the syntagma The voice of the Lord (qol Yhwh) recurs seven times:807 The voice of the Lord is upon the waters [...] The voice of the Lord is powerful; the voice of the Lord is full of majesty. The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars [...] the voice of the Lord divides the flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness [...] The voice of the Lord makes the hinds to calve, and strips the forests bare (Ps. 29.3-9). The possibility of seeing sound is expressed here by the roar which accompanies the motion of water—the river, announced in advance by its rumble—and by the whirling of the wind. Qol thus represents the union of visible and sonorous qualities that, better than anything else, alludes to the divine; the voice of physical portents through which God manifests himself is

an inarticulate sound that comes first, preserving a richer and deeper energy than the word itself.

In this psalm, the voice is therefore the secret power within every motion, and the seven voices follow one another with the accents of an ancient hymnodic wisdom, thanks to which the

divine sound completely encircles the one who prays. The number seven, which emphasizes the integrity of a cycle, symbolizes the complete inventory of the visible voices of nature, whose conception probably derives from the theophanic representations widespread in the literature of the ancient Near East.

A significant parallel to the Biblical text is found, for example, in an Akkadian divinatory formula, in which the appearance, at once visible and sonorous, of Adad, the Mesopotamian god of the tempest, is described: "The thunderbolt flashed from south and north towards the east and west, the thunderbolt flashed seven times. Adad roared one, two, three, four, five, six, seven times."808 Such manifestations of divinity through the voices of nature supplied by the pagan religious hymns were therefore admitted into the Biblical poetry and re-attributed to the god of Israel. They were accepted by Judaism for their capacity to evoke, without any image, the transcendent force of the divine.

The post-Biblical tradition remained faithful to the perceived superiority of the indistinct sound of the origins, which afterwards weakened, finally changing into the articulate discourse of men. In a passage of the midraš Genesis Rabbah, Abba bar Kahana, a rabbi who lived at the end of the third century, tells a parable about the primordial waters: "Similarly, at the very beginning of the world's creation, the praise of the Almighty ascended from nought but the water [...] Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'If these which have neither mouth nor speech praise Me, how much more [will I be praised] when

man is created!' [...] but the generation of the flood arose and rebelled against Him [...] Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Let these be removed and the former arise and come [in their place].' Hence it is written, And the rain was upon the earth forty days and

forty nights (Gen. 7.12)."809 The tale goes on to compare the praise expressed by the noise of the abyss to deaf courtiers who celebrate their king through gestures, while the rebellion of man is compared to knowledgeable orators who, rather than praising their Lord, want to usurp his valor. For the rabbi of the Haggadah, the sound of the water was a more apt expression of God's glory than the insincere words of man, and non-verbal language was superior to any refined language.

In Kabbalistic thought, the symbolism of the voice was applied to the different gradations of divine energy represented by the sefirot. In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor)—whose author, at the end of the thirteenth century, reworked with literary skill the reflections of the first Jewish mystics—we find a presentation of qol as a metaphor for the transcendent. While the seven lower sefirot, from ḥesed to malkut, are defined as "seven voices," their supernal origin is called "Great Voice [...] great inner voice that cannot be heard,"810 following the principle that the least verbal articulation corresponds to the highest level of divine force. The author expounds, furthermore, on the nature of the inward voice, "which exists in the thought but cannot be seen or heard. When it issues, it discloses itself just a little in a murmur, which still cannot be heard: it is the 'Great Voice,' a tenuous whisper."811 The mystical discourse proceeds here by way of antithesis, opposing the divine greatness of the voice to its feeble sonorous quality. The letter chosen to represent it is the he, which, in the

Hebrew language, is pronounced with a quick, almost imperceptible, aspiration: "When it rises in the throat"—the *Zohar* continues—"[the inner voice] produces a he, in a murmur, and then continues to flow, without interruption."812

Therefore, according to the *Zohar*, it is from the inarticulate sound that the perceptible voice of reality derives. Contrary to the symbolism of light, in which the supernal radiance increasingly loses potency in its descent towards the material world, in the Kabbalistic description of the emanation through the voice, the highest level, the closest to the divinity, is a silence that gradually changes into a continuous but extremely faint sound. Only at the end of this process will the merging

of the celestial voice with sensible reality give life to an articulate language, clearly audible but at the same time distant from the creative energy of that first whisper. In the reflections of the Jewish mystics, the inarticulate sound of the origins becomes the unstoppable murmur that gives origin to reality, an incessant wind that resounds in the voice of the world.

רימון Rimmon
Pomegranate

When Solomon wanted to decorate the tops of the Temple's columns, he imagined festoons glowing red with pomegranates: And he made chains in the inner sanctuary, and put them on the heads of the pillars; and made a hundred pomegranates, and put them on the chains (2Chron. 3.16). The same fruit, with its unmistakable form, adorned the robe that the priest wore to officiate at the cult, whose rich trim, prescribed by God himself, lit up in purple tones: And beneath upon its

hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, and of purple, and of scarlet, around its hem; and bells of gold between them (Exod. 28.33). In the temple, the motif of the pomegranate was therefore a salient visible characteristic, and represented an element of formal continuity in the cult's apparatus. From archeological discoveries, we know that handles of pomegranates also topped the priests' ceremonial scepters, and that the fruit appeared in pedestals for censers, probably part of the officiates' accoutrements.813

The image of the fruit remained a constant in Jewish liturgy: the singular artifacts, called rimmonim, "pomegranates," which, even today, overhang the handles of the Sefer Torah, in fact derive, although somewhat transfigured, from the Biblical description of the priests' robes. The parchment of the Biblical text is rolled around two wooden poles (and wrapped in fabric, called me'il in Hebrew, like the robe of the ancient priest); above these, two silver caps, often turreted and almost always fitted with bells, are placed. In more than a few cases, the

image of the pomegranate's fruit or flowers appears in the decorative elements of the caps, but examples exist in which the ancient term rimmonim still corresponds to the actual shape of the object.814

In present-day Judaism, the pomegranate retains, at least in part, its evocative force, which in the mystery of its form symbolizes multiplicity. In many Mediterranean traditions, the unusual contrast between the fruit's severe skin and the prosperous abundance of its bright seeds confers on this fruit a much greater importance than that of its alimentary value. The narratives about the pomegranate that recur in the Homeric poems, in representations of Aphrodite, or in the tales of the rape of Persephone by the lord of the netherworld,815 are expressions of the wonder of fertility and of the forces that oppose it. In Greek and in Semitic languages, the terms for the fruit themselves bear a phonetic affinity, which seems to mark an ancient symbolic koiné: from the Greek roiai and rimbai to the Hebrew rimmon, the Arabic rummān and the Mandean rumana, the fruit's names are

variations on the same sound and a common definition.816 Similar metaphors, which make the pomegranate an important element not only of religious symbolism, but also of poetic qualifications of beauty, correspond to this phonetic similarity.

In Biblical poetry the fruit is employed to magnify feminine beauty. In two places in Song of Songs, the beloved's rosy

cheekbones are compared to those revealed by the splitting of a pomegranate:817 the Hebrew expression pelaḥ ha-rimmon, usually translated as "a slice of pomegranate," in fact precisely designates the opening of the mature fruit, through which the promising rows of seeds can be glimpsed under the skin.818 But it is not only this image, certainly ancient, that makes the pomegranate a recurring motif of the book of Songs; in the eighth chapter, the bride confides to her beloved: I would give you to drink of spiced wine of the juice of my pomegranate (Song 8.2), while to the husband is attributed, in the sixth chapter, a refined description of spring: I went down into the garden of nuts to see the fruits of the valley, and to see if the vine had blossomed, to see if the pomegranates were in bloom (Song 6.11). Indeed, the flowering of the pomegranate announced, and marks to this day in the Land of Israel, spring's full bloom, and the end of the rains, which will not begin again until October.819 Pomegranate trees, with their exuberant flowers, are already considered in the Bible to be the pride of the Jewish land, so much so that Deuteronomy includes them in a list of the seven species that constitute the merit of Israel: A land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and fig trees, and pomegranates; a land of olive oil, and honey (Deut. 8.8).

In the post-Biblical tradition, the pomegranate maintained its value as a good omen, and its meaning as a sign of prosperity and abundance. In a long Talmudic excursus on the interpretation of dreams, the good fortunes told by the pomegranate are listed on the basis of a correspondence between the richness of the fruit and the value of the Torah: Rabbi Zeyra, a sage who lived at the beginning of the fourth century, affirms: "If

one sees pomegranates in a dream, if they are little ones, his business will be fruitful like a pomegranate; if big ones, his business will increase like a pomegranate. If they are split open, if he is a scholar, he may hope to learn more Torah, as it says: I would cause thee to drink of spiced wine, of the juice of my pomegranate (Song 8.2); if he is unlearned, he may hope to perform precepts, as it says: Thy temples are like a pomegranate split open (Song 4.3)."820 The symbolism of the pomegranate refers here to different components of Jewish society, in that it includes not only those who are involved in economic activity, but also both the studious and the multitude of uneducated Jews, who in the Talmud are designated with the expression, 'am ha-areṣ, "people of the land."

This metaphoric polysemy also guaranteed the fruit an important part in successive Judaic literature. The expression rimmon male, "full pomegranate," became, for example, a frequent term of praise for a culturally gifted person or someone distinguished by religious devotion. Moreover, the mystical exegetes attributed new meanings to the image of the pomegranate, further intensifying the connection between the form of the fruit and its symbolic value.

In the third volume of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor)—composed in Spain at the end of the thirteenth century—a description of the radiant apparatus with which the Šekinah, the supernal bride, prepares to meet her beloved, is found; in this case the intimate meeting symbolizes at once the union of the community of Israel with God, and that of the sefirah malkut (kingdom) with tif'eret (beauty). The author of the *Zohar* imagines that the celestial queen is crowned "with a diadem of four colors, which flash to all four sides of the world [...] On the top of the crown there are four walls with towers [...] Under the crown are bells of gold, a bell on this side and a bell on that, and a pomegranate in which are a thousand bells,

each one flashing white and red. This pomegranate is divided into four quarters and is open so that the bells can be seen. There are three hundred twenty-five bells on each side, and all four sides of the world

are illuminated with the radiance of each quarter. As it is written: Thy temples are like a pomegranate split open (Song 4.3)."821

In this passage, although echoing the Biblical description of the priestly robe, the fabric's fringe is transformed into the pendants of a crown, which shine with the intensity of a flame, as in a sort of stunning theatrical costume, in which the fruits, rather than being silently spaced between the bells, accommodate a sound within them, almost changing their seeds into chimes. The author epitomized, in a single object of mystical import, the pomegranate's attributes of multiplicity and the sound of the pendants, giving life to a prodigious red and white cosmic machine, composed of seeds and tinkling bells of gold.

Ruaḥ רוח
Wind, Spirit

Onomatopoeia of a sudden burst of wind, ruaḥ announces itself as a word of surprising semantic mimicry, which can extend from the unknowable divine space down to the pulse of life and the passions of the human spirit.822 Measured against the force of the Hebrew, the words that have been employed to translate ruaḥ into other languages seem imperfect, provisional reductions of overly circumscribed entities. The symbolism of ruaḥ is, in fact, by vocation all-comprehensive, and tends to penetrate into the deepest recesses of reality, since it indicates the dynamic principle of all things.

In ancient Judaic thought this same energy animated nature, the movement of the body, courage when faced with danger, or fear that induces escape, the desire for knowledge, and perseverance in rectitude. Like an impulse to ceaseless movement, ruaḥ is the elusive vehicle of the divine, the tremor that agitates the spirits, the crash that destroys trees and houses, the misfortune that alters destinies, and the protection that leads to victory. Among human experiences, ruaḥ is perhaps the most divine, and God clenches it in his fist like a weapon and a gift.

When it is a vital impulse, ruaḥ merges with breathing—God the Lord [...] he who gives breath to the people upon it, and spirit to those who walk in it (Isa. 42.5)—and continues as long as existence persists, since upon death it returns to its Creator: and the spirit returns to God who gave it (Eccles. 12.7). When it is identified with inspiration, ruaḥ fills minds,

conferring a lucid comprehension of reality. At times it drives men to announce divine will, like prophets capable of foretelling future events: And I have filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all kinds of workmanship (Exod. 31.3 and 35.31); And the spirit of the Lord will come upon you, and you shall prophesy with them, and shall be turned into another man (1Sam. 10.6).

Ruaḥ is sometimes a fervor that incites physical clashes, assists armies in battle, and heroes in duels, as in the case of Samson who rushes at the lion with bare hands – *And the spirit of the Lord came mightily*

*upon him, and he tore him as he would have torn a kid* (Judg. 14.6)—but it can also be an uncontrollable fear, a perturbation that saddens the soul, a torpor that impedes actions, or even an instinct to prostitution. King Saul's melancholy is the fruit of an evil spirit that torments him, and that finds comfort only in David's harp (1Sam. 16-19); the Egyptians' military failures are caused by a spirit of confusion (Isa. 19.14), and the tribulations of the Israelites are fueled by a *spirit of deep sleep* that closes the eyes and dims the brain (Isa. 29.10). The spirit of harlotry leads the Jews astray, inducing them into the idolatrous cult, distancing them from God (Hos. 4.12 and 5.4).

Finally, when it is wind itself, ruaḥ seems to play games with man's destiny, throwing it into confusion like the chaff which the wind drives away (Ps. 1.4), or offering mortals a useless and vain recompense: Behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun (Eccles. 2.11). An unstoppable and incomprehensible force, the wind accompanies the manifestation of the Lord of Israel, in his ancient guise as god of the tempest, who walks upon the wings of the wind; Who makes the winds his messengers (Ps. 104.3-4),823 from whom the foundations of the world were laid bare [...] at the blast of the breath of his nostrils (2Sam.

22.16),824 or who punishes the impious by the blast of his anger (Job 4.9). The breath of his mouth (Job 15.30) is divine chastisement,825 which dries up everything, but also an impetuous storm, accompanied by snow and hail: Fire, and hail; snow, and vapors; stormy wind fulfilling his word (Ps. 148.8).826

Ruaḥ Elohim, "wind of God," is the substance of the origins that, at the beginning of Genesis, hovered upon the face of the waters (Gen. 1.2). The mysterious essence of ruaḥ is, in this case, a faint persistence that seems to protect the unlimited extension of the primordial ocean.827 The Hebrew language sums up, in this single word, the rashness of a vortex that becomes almost motionless, the breathing of the water, and the animating force of the Creator, ready to disclose itself according to a design already completed in each of its parts.

The various translators could only approach this passage by way of approximation, in any case losing something of the original idea contained within it. In the Greek version of the Bible, ruaḥ Elohim thus became pneuma Theou, embodying a first radical distancing from the atmospheric physicality of the Hebrew; in fact, although pneuma can also signify "wind," each translation of the term in the Septuagint employs a metaphorical sense of ruaḥ, while elsewhere employing anemos to convey meteorological wind. A similar process of allegorization can also be found in Jerome's Latin Vulgate,828 and even in the versions closer to the original language, such as the Aramaic Targumim; although remaining faithful to the image of the wind, both attenuate the implicit anthropomorphism with a periphrasis that underlines the

benevolent character of divine emanation: "a wind of mercy from the presence of the Lord blew on the surface of the waters."829

In the rabbinic exegesis of the first centuries of the Common Era, the semantic spectrum of ruaḥ seems to have contracted; indeed, the Jewish sages abandon some of the Biblical uses of the word in favor of others, in particular those bound to the cosmogonic aspect of the expression ruaḥ Elohim. The Talmudic treatise Ḥagigah recalls for example that Ben Zoma, a rabbi who lived in the second century, connected the expression to the esoteric teaching of the Ma'aśeh be-re'šit (The Work of Creation), attributing to the divine spirit the function of separating the still indistinct masses of the abyss and the celestial waters: "I was gazing between the upper and the lower waters, and there is only a bare three fingers' [breadth] between them, for it is said: And the spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters—like a dove which hovers over her young without touching [them]."830

In the midraš Genesis Rabbah, composed at the beginning of the fifth century, this image is read allegorically as a reference to the Messianic time: "And the spirit of God [...] this alludes to the spirit of Messiah [...] In the merit of what will [this spirit] eventually come? [For the sake of that which] hovered over the face of the waters."831 As if this creative act was the archetype of the eschatological redemption,

ruaḥ is here audaciously attributed not to God, but to the Messiah, to whom a task of cosmic magnitude is entrusted.

Along with this exegetical rethinking, ruaḥ also undergoes a creative development in the Haggadic literature. For the first time, it is explicitly connected with a particular type of inner

faculty of the spirit. The oldest passage in which this new interpretation appears is probably that contained in the midraš Genesis Rabbah, where five appellatives appear, referring to the vital breath that God infused in Adam at the moment of creation: "The breath of (nišmat) life (Gen. 2.7). It has five names: nefeš, nešamah, ḥayyah, ruaḥ, yeḥidah."832 This sequence of terms is not organized according to a precise hierarchy, but is presented as an enumeration of synonyms, each of which is attributed with a peculiar nuance of meaning: "Ruaḥ"—explain the rabbis—"is given these names because it rises and falls," since the incessant movement of the wind is imitated in the bodies of living beings.

During the Middle Ages it was precisely the connotation of ruaḥ as an appellative of the soul that roused the most interest; the term became a significant element of Jewish philosophical speculation, and assumed the importance of a technical term, valuable for transposing into Hebrew the analytical lexicon of the Hellenistic doctrine. In the early Middle Ages, after the encounter with Greek philosophy, the Jewish thinkers gave a precise order to the subdivision of the soul, in which ruaḥ came to represent the intermediate level of a tripartite division of the inner faculties, in imitation of the speculative tradition of the classical world. As Plato had distinguished between the rational, passionate, and appetitive souls, and Aristotle had identified the rational, sensitive, and vegetative souls, Jewish philosophy would also affirm a subdivision into three levels of the inner faculty, at times reconciled somewhat reluctantly with the five denominations of the rabbinic tradition.

The three parts of the soul already had an important role in the reflections of Sa'adyah Ga'on (882 – 942), according to whom "nefeš

refers to the faculty of desire [...] ruaḥ to that of anger and of passion [...] while nešamah indicates the cogni-

tive capacity."833 Departing from Sa'adyah's text, ruaḥ would keep its place in the middle, serving as a necessary link between the principle of the lower spirit, shared by all living beings, and the cognitive force, belonging only to the one who has achieved spiritual perfection.

Its role as a mean function between two strongly unequal extremes characterized the symbolism of ruaḥ in all of medieval speculation, which, in describing its characteristics, sometimes adopted the language of physiology. In the Sefer ha-kuzari (The Book of the Khazar) by Yehudah ha-Lewi (before 1075–1141), for example, ruaḥ carries out an essential task for the organism, since it represents the means by which the spirit unites with the intellect. In a long discussion on the human limbs and their relationship with the heart, the author maintains that "the divine component resides in the spirit that receives the intellect," even if it can receive it only by means of the "warm natural spirit" (ruaḥ), which is an elusive connective element, similar to the immaterial force that unites "the flame with the tip of the wick."834

The Kabbalists seized upon this mediating function of ruaḥ, making of it an important element of the description of the sefirotic world. This process of mystical transposition was already manifest in the writings of the Sephardic School of the mid-thirteenth century, in which the three levels of the individual soul became celestial depositories, to which all of the souls of the world were entrusted. In a short, anonymous cosmological treatise, three "treasures" are mentioned, which contain the levels of the soul and which correspond to binah, the sefirah of intelligence, to yesodtif'eret (foundation-beauty), and to

malkut (kingdom). According to this text, the treasure in which "the spirits" (ruḥot) are set serves as an intermediary between the higher and lower souls, "as the air has the task of mediating between fire and water."835 Coherently developing the premise of the medietas of ruaḥ,

the author identifies its symbolic equivalents in the sefirah tif'eret (joined here with yesod) and in the air element, both characterized, in their own conceptual sphere, by the metaphor of a composition of opposites.

Several decades later another Sephardic Kabbalist, Yosef Giqaṭilla, added more links to this chain, enumerating further intermediary levels in order to emphasize the symbolic meaning of equilibrium. According to Giqaṭilla, ruaḥ corresponded to the Levite tribes, who were entrusted with the mediation between the kohanim and the rest of Israel; among the divine names, he chose the Tetragrammaton, since it is situated between the Supreme Ehyeh and the epithet Adonay, while among the elements he preserved the correspondence with air, which balances water and fire. *Ruaḥ* was then the bond that joined man to the tree of life and that allowed him to return, after death, to the heavenly source, individuated in the sefirah binah (intelligence). However, this last bond was extremely tenuous, and one which man's conduct could sever: "If the soul sins, meriting punishment", the mystic affirms, "behold that he is severed from ruaḥ, to which he was united, losing the recompense and the way to reascend to the future world."836

In the same years in which Giqaṭilla wrote his own work, and in a circle likely very close to him, the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) was taking form; here the symbolism of ruaḥ underwent other narrative developments. The most important such novelty consists in a description of the three levels of the soul through a metaphor of light, whereby each level corresponded to a star or to the aspects of flame: "the soul (nefeš ),

which has sway by night [...] the spirit (ruaḥ), which has sway by day [...] There is still a third aspect, which should dominate these two and cleave to them as they to it, and which is called "higher spirit" (nešamah)."837 While the lowest level corresponds here to the moon, ruaḥ is attributed to the sun, the celestial body traditionally connected to tif'eret (beauty), and which—since the ancient age—performed the function of mediator and regulator of the cosmos. In a second comparison, the soul is subdivided into the three colors of the lamp:

"For nefeš [...] the dark light at the bottom of the candle-flame, which clings to the wick [...] becomes a throne for the white light above it. When both are fully kindled, the white light becomes a throne for a light, which cannot be fully discerned, an unknown something resting on that white light, and so a complete light is formed. So it is with the man who attains perfection and is called 'holy.'"838

In the *Zohar*ic text, clear echoes of the preceding literature can be sensed and, in a particular way, of the passage in which Yehudah ha-Lewi had already referred to the simile of light. Here, however, the comparisons now acquire a peculiar mystical tone, aimed at indicating the path to spiritual perfection through an intimate bond with the sefirot. Only by following the mysterious path that rises from malkut to tif'eret, then ascending to binah, is the mystic able to complete his soul, which has its center of equilibrium in ruaḥ.

In the later Kabbalistic writings, the position of ruaḥ in the sefirotic diagram was specified with other details, thanks to which the term once again included in its symbolism the characteristics of atmospheric wind. In the mid-sixteenth century, Mošeh Cordovero indicated the various features of ruaḥ according to the predominance of the diverse sefirot: "At times ruaḥ is called ṣafonit, 'north wind,' since it derives nourishment from the sefirah of might, which is the north [...] when instead it draws

from the sefirah of mercy it is called ruaḥ daromit, 'south wind,' because there it is the south."839 Exploiting the double meaning of "spirit" and "wind" admitted by ruaḥ, Cordovero extended its symbolic spectrum in a process of mythmaking that recovered the meteorological energy of wind.

In the second half of the eighteenth century the Hasidic master Dov Baer of Mezhirech, in a cryptic Kabbalistic homily, discussed the pair ruaḥ / tif'eret, which became the goal of a mystical journey aimed at restoring harmony with the divine. He maintained that the means of overcoming one's own negative instincts consist in "praying with rapture, so as to mix together love and fear and [...] to unite with ruaḥ, which is called the attribute of tif'eret [...] in which all levels are unified,

love as well as fear."[840] In this case ruaḥ is the result of a composition of opposites, in which the dark side of creation also serves as a dynamic force, becoming an instrument of the redemption of man. With the symbolic iconography of ruaḥ, Dov Baer epitomizes his inner search, which derives the force necessary to unify with the divine from the equivocal inconstancy of opposites.

Ša'ar שער
Gate

In the symbolism of ša'ar, the "gate," there is an ambivalence between real and metaphorical topography. The gate of the house, of the Temple, and of the city, ša'ar is in fact—together with its synonyms delet and petaḥ[841]—also a cosmological entity, which bounds the sea or the reign of the dead, and furthermore a seal to the soul, which separates the secret of interiority from visible gestures. The gate is an object inclined to engage in discourse, to transmit messages, and even to speak, lament, and cry. Animated gates are found in the book of

Isaiah, where the prophet calls on them to participate in the terror that overtakes the Philistines on the arrival of the Assyrians—Howl, O gate; cry, O city; you, the entire Philistia (Isa. 14.31)—and likewise when Zion lies devastated: And her gates shall lament and mourn; and she being desolate shall sit upon the ground (Isa. 3.26).

This metonymic extension of the image of the gate as a representation of the feelings of an entire society derives from the daily experience of ancient cities, in which the gates, animated by trades and traditionally used as meeting places, were indicators of the collective mood. The obligatory point of communication between urban and rural residents, gates were the haunts of the idle, ready to spread rumors and give life to malice: Those who sit in the gate speak against me—laments the psalmist—and I am the song of the drunkards (Ps. 69.13). Conversely, a good reputation at the city gate was the greatest sanction of honest conduct: Give her of the fruit of her hands;

and let her own deeds praise her in the gates (Prov. 31.31). The gates were also sites of the administration of justice, where the sages gathered: Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land (Prov. 31.23).

In the Temple, too, these entrances constituted not only a structural element but also an emotional symbol, full of the sacral character of the place, and almost participating in liturgical events. In the text of one psalm, the gates are exhorted to rise up to offer an access more worthy of the Lord's ceremonial entrance—Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O everlasting doors! And the King of glory shall come in (Ps. 24.7 and 24.9)—while in another psalm the imposing entry of the people into the Temple is accompanied by voices of jubilation: Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise; be thankful to him, and bless his name (Ps. 100.4). Another reference to the connection between procession and the symbolism of the gate is contained in Psalm 118, which preserves two epithets perhaps once reserved for the gates of the Sanctuary, ša'are ṣedeq, "gates of righteousness," and ša'ar la-Yhwy, "gate of the Lord": Open to me the gates of righteousness; I will go into them, and I will praise the Lord;

This is the gate of the Lord, into which the righteous shall enter (Ps. 118.19-20).

If the gates of the city and those of the Temple indicated, respectively, the public dominion of repute and that of the liturgy, the shutters that protected the houses were the sign of domestic safety and also of the intimacy of family, which could never be legitimately violated. Spying into others' entryways could even be treated with the severity of adultery, as a verse of Job recalls: If my heart has been deceived by a woman, or if I have laid wait at my neighbor's door; Then let my wife grind for another, and let others bow down upon her (Job 31.9-10). But the body also has a gate which needs to be guarded, so that the soul's aptitudes do not manifest themselves too liberally and rash intimacies do not result in danger: Do not trust your



friend; do not put your confidence in a guide; guard the doors of your mouth from her who lies in your bosom (Mic. 7.5).

The Bible mentions, moreover, various cosmic gates in the world, beginning with those used by the Lord to confine the waters at the moment of creation: Or who shut up the sea with doors, when it broke forth, as if it had issued from the womb (Job 38.8). In the original Hebrew, the sea literally bursts forth from a uterus (reḥem), and is therefore compared to a newborn that must be restrained so that it does not invade and submerge the world. The Hebrew furthermore specifies here that the sea is held in place by two doors (delatayim), perhaps intended as two battens, as the bars mentioned in the following verse seems to suggest: And prescribed bounds for it, and set bars and doors, And said, Thus far shall you come, but no further; and here shall your proud waves be stayed? (Job 38.10-11). Thanks to these

robust battens, the menacing abyss is reduced to order. In this pattern of victory over aquatic chaos by the regulating divinity, the echo of an ancient mythology still resounds.842

God controls atmospheric phenomena through opening other gates in the sky. The Scriptures recall this cosmological apparatus in connection with the providential falling of manna, attributed to the Lord's direct intervention using the celestial gates: Though he had commanded the clouds from above, and opened the doors of heaven, And rained down manna upon them to eat, and had given them of the grain of heaven (Ps. 78.23-24). Finally, there is a hidden entrance for men that no living person has ever seen, which opens wide at the dwelling of the deceased: Have the gates of death *been opened to you? Or have you seen the doors of deepest darkness?* (Job 38.17), the Lord asks Job, with the aim of reminding him of the limits of human experience.

A long sapiential tradition, which went back to the Sumerian age, had actually made the entrance to the afterlife a topos of

the unobtainable, which only divine beings could approach, and even these with the risk of remaining prisoners of the dominion of death. The Mesopotamian goddess Inanna/Ištar was, for example, the protagonist of a dangerous descent through seven gates of the house of the netherworld, where she encountered death, although only temporarily. As recounted in a mythological text from the second millennium BCE, "When Ištar reached the gate of the netherworld, / she said [these] words to the gatekeeper, / 'Gatekeeper! Open your gate for me! / Open your gate for me that I may enter! / If you will not open the gate that I may enter, / I will break down the door, I will smash the bolt, / I will break down the frame, I will topple the doors.'"843 The door that here seems to be closed in hostility to the goddess serves to impede the living's access to the afterlife, as well as the dead's return.

These ancient Mesopotamian patterns involving an impassable threshold likely took root in the Hebrew imagination, which nonetheless left open the possibility of a return from the afterlife: Be gracious to me, O Lord; consider my trouble which I suffer from those who hate me, you who lift me up from the gates of death (Ps. 9.14 (Ps.

9.14). Although the descent to the limits of the netherworld has here the metaphoric sense of a deep affliction, the image of the devotee that God liberates from the gates of the afterlife also assumes a clear eschatological significance in its suggestion of mythical reascent from the realm of the dead.

References to the gate of Gehenna as the extreme limit of mundane experience are also repeatedly found in post-Biblical Judaic literature; this gate was the last stage at which man's repentance was possible, before he would be cast down into the dark space of punishment. According to the Babylonian Talmud, the wicked did not "repent even at the gate of Gehenna," though this extreme rebellion was considered characteristic of pagan

Sinners; meanwhile, the Israelites would meet Abraham, who "comes, brings them up, and receives them."844

According to some folkloric traditions of Late Antiquity there were three gates of Gehenna, "one in the wilderness, one in the sea, and one in Jerusalem;" to these, some added a fourth, situated not far from the Holy City, localized, with curious detail, "in the Valley of Ben Hinnom," where there were "two palm-trees [...] and between them smoke rises [...] and perhaps this is the gate of Gehenna."845 In symbolic correspondence with the infernal entrances, the gates of gan 'Eden were then imagined as situated in a fantastic geography of pleasant places, access to which was, however, almost impossible for man: "[As to] Paradise, Reš Laqiš said: 'If it is in the Land of Israel, its gate is Bet Še'an; if it is in Arabia, its gate is Bet Gerem, and if it is between the rivers, its gate is Dumasqanin.'"846

According to the Talmud, the privilege of reaching the gates of Eden was granted only to Alexander the Great, who discovered it by pursuing a sort of magical journey. In the course of his wanderings, after having received wisdom from some African women, Alexander sat down next to a well to eat. When some salted fish that Alexander had carried with him were washed in the well water, they emanated a sweet smell: "This shows," he said, "that this well comes from the Garden of Eden." "Some say," continues the tale, "that he took some of the water and washed

his face with it; others say that he went alongside it until he came to the door of the Garden of Eden." Here he cried, "'Open the door for me.' They replied, 'This is the gate of the Lord, [the righteous shall enter into it].' He replied: 'I too am a king; I am also of some account, give me something.'"847 Although he was unable to enter into the garden of paradise,

Alexander finally obtained proof that it was the place that he sought, drawing a moral lesson. Although somewhat incoherent, the tale seems to suggest a sort of path of initiation through the water, with which Alexander washed himself, or followed, perhaps into subterranean regions, before finding himself in front of the prohibited gate.

That gates could mark the steps in an otherworldly journey is confirmed by early medieval texts that are known as Hekalot literature, and which contain descriptions of the Jewish mystics' inner voyages.848 In the Sefer hekalot rabbati, which offers an exemplary narrative on these visionary journeys, the adept is instructed on how to go beyond seven gates, guarded by proud and menacing archons. He must show them the seals of passage, each with an inscription appropriate to the level that he had to surpass, taking care not to violate the rigid initiation ritual: "Rabbi Yišmaʿe'l said: 'When you go and are at the gate of the first sanctuary, take the two seals in your two hands, that of Ṭwṭrwsy'y Y'y and that of Swry', Prince of the Presence. Show that of Ṭwṭrwsy'y Y'y to whoever is to the right, and that of Swry' to whoever is to the left: immediately Rhby'l, the prince who is in charge at the first sanctuary [...] and at the right of the gate, and Ṭwphy'l, the prince who is on the left of the gate with him [...] will take hold of you [...] and present you to Ṭgry'l, the prince who is in charge at the gate of the second sanctuary."849 This scene recurs at each level, until the mystic reaches the seventh gate and, out of fright, seems to fall upon the threshold. The archon of the seventh house supports him, together with the "sixty three guardians of the gates of the seven sanctuaries, and they all help him and say to him: 'Do not be frightened [...] enter and behold the king in his beauty.'"850

In the Hekalot, passing through the gate is thus the moment of greatest tension, but at the same time the sign of a victory, obtained through wise instruction and the mastery of one's own reactions. This succession of tests summarizes, in fact, all of the difficulty of ecstasy, as if the symbolism of the gate was the most suitable for expressing the grip of anxiety that seems to intervene irremediably between the adept and his destination.

A theosophical interpretation of consciousness as divided into fifty gates appeared in the Kabbalistic literature of the thirteenth century. This idea was based on an explanation of a Talmudic saying, according to which "fifty gates of understanding were created in the world, and all were given to Moses save one."851 Since Hebrew uses the same term, ša'ar, both for "degree" and "gate," the Kabbalists transformed this rabbinic saying into the concrete representation of fifty entryways, through which the sefirah of intelligence, binah, spread its influence throughout creation. The doctrine of the fifty gates, already suggested in Moses Nachmanides' Commentary on Pentateuch,852 was definitively established in the Sephardic Kabbalah by Yosef Giqaṭilla, Mošeh de León, and by the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), taking its place as a recurring depiction of the relationships among the higher and lower levels of emanation. The sefirah binah—denied to Moses, and therefore to human comprehension—was thus identified with the fiftieth gate, since it represented the point of passage between the non-dualistic sphere of the higher sefirot and the manifestation of the divine energy in the lower reality. The importance of this interpretive pattern is demonstrated by the caution with which the Kabbalists made reference to it, in large part in quick allusions, and often recalling the necessity of other verbal explanations: "This subject cannot be included"—writes Yosef Giqaṭilla—"if not by means of the oral teaching of the Kabbalah and, in effect, the

essence of such a concept contains the order of all of the hidden worlds."853

From the allusions in the Kabbalistic works of this period, although scattered and fragmentary, it is possible to identify an articulate and

very complex symbolic structure. The number fifty recalled, for example, two Biblical notions: on the one hand, fifty days had to elapse, according to Leviticus (23.15-16), between Jewish Passover and the celebration of the weeks (Šavu'ot), while, on the other hand, after the completion of fifty years, the Bible prescribed the celebration of the jubilee, with remission of debts and rest from cultivation. These parallels further enriched the evocative substratum of the symbolism of the gates, so that the fiftieth, binah, became the point of arrival of a long mundane cycle, and was transformed into an eschatological term. The chain of equivalences between the gates and cosmic epochs was, for example, announced in a passage of the Idra rabbah of the *Zohar*, in which the arrival at the final level of binah was seen as the reestablishment of the divine harmony: "Fifty gates: these gates close the fifty days of the Torah,854 the fifty years of the jubilee, and the fifty thousand generations upon which God will cause the spirit to return and repose."855

The work that made the most far-reaching use of this symbolism was the Sefer ha-temunah (The Book of the Figure), a text of very obscure style and uncertain origin, which reveals a strong Messianic tension. According to the anonymous author of the book, the fifty gates are subdivided into seven groups of seven, each of which is dominated by a sefirah and made up of seven thousand years. History is thus expressed as a succession of seven eras, true weeks of the world, which culminate in seven successive Sab-

baths, during which creation temporarily returns to a state of disorder. This turning of the destinies and of the celestial attributes would reach its end upon entrance through the last gate, the year of the grand jubilee, when everything would present itself in the form of the sefirah of intelligence, which will open to welcome the exhausted matter of the cosmos: "Each of the Sabbaths of the year, in each of the many worlds, has a peculiar force [...] At the head of each of them there is one arising from the fiftieth gate, in such a way that all the years of remission, composed of forty-nine parts, are joined together in a single force inside the gate [...] At last, the sefirah of intelligence will be the

end of all the gates, and the soul of all [...] Then the great horn will blow, and the dispersed and exiled from all the worlds will arrive there, according to the immense number of deeds."856

The emotive tension of this passage derives from the sudden appearance of the last gate, up to that moment invisible and inaccessible. Although it is the outcome of a long process, the final symbol of the journey, by way of binah, seems to have neither temporal depth nor visible substance: the gate of the end is in fact described only with an insistent sound, beyond which every perception disintegrates.

## שבטיון Sabbaμyon

Several paragraphs of Pliny the Elder's Natural History are dedicated to a fantastic hydrography, in which the celebrated Roman author lingers over news of rivers that, together with the fish that live in them, change locations; over water in which it is possible to drown amid burning flames; and over springs that dry up for twelve or twenty days, and that are bad omens when viewed in their dry state. A short sentence concludes this list of natural mirabilia, as if to say that the last

river of which the author speaks is also the most indecipherable: "In Judea there is a river that dries up every Saturday."857

After Pliny, Flavius Josephus also tells of the wonder of this river of the Sabbath. In The Jewish War, he allows himself a digression on the singular characteristics of this course of water, introducing it with a touch of verisimilitude. To Josephus, it was Titus, traveling through the cities of Syria, who caught sight of the river, "that runs between Arcea, belonging to Agrippa's kingdom, and Raphanea. It has something very peculiar in it; for when it runs, its current is strong and has plenty of water; after which its springs fail for six days together and leave its channel dry, as any one may see; after which days it runs on the seventh day as it did before."858 Josephus is careful to add that this is not occasional, but rather a recurring phenomenon: "It has also been observed that it keeps this order perpetually and exactly; whence it is that they call it the Sabbatic River, that name being taken from the sacred seventh day among the Jews."859

These two classical sources seem to anticipate the future destiny of the Sabbaṭyon, a fleeting invention of a contradictory religious geography. In fact if, for Pliny, the river found peace only

on the Sabbath, for Josephus, on the contrary, it ran precisely on the festive occasion but was silent during the course of the profane days. In the long history of this mythical course of water, the most conspicuous element of continuity is its name, which, from the Greek Sabbatikon, would be transposed into the Hebrew Sabbaṭyon, or Sambaṭyon, and would represent the Jewish realization of the folkloric topos of the intermittent river. The two hypotheses above on its cyclical nature are both valid from a symbolic point of view, inasmuch as they resolve the opposition between the Sabbath and the profane time. The option, already proposed by Pliny, of the water's sabbatical peace is in a certain sense the most literal, since it transposes to nature the repose prescribed by the Torah, but the idea of the aridity of the ferial days also has an implicit metaphorical force, directed as it is towards the expectation of the beginning of the sacred time, during which the river concedes its waters' richness.

The Jewish sages of Late Antiquity seemed to prefer thinking that the Sabbaṭyon remained faithful to the Halakah and reposed on the seventh day. This prodigious phenomenon could thereby be invoked in arguments against the pagans, to prove the divine origins of the Jewish Sabbath. It is in this apologetic sense that Rabbi ʻAqiva mentions it, to silence the insistent questions of a skeptical Turnus Rufus, who asks: "'Wherein does this day [the Sabbath] differ from any other?'—'Aqiva replied: 'Wherein does one man differ from another?' [The Roman replied:] 'Because my Lord [the Emperor] wishes it.' 'The Sabbath, too,' Rabbi ʻAqiva rejoined, 'then, is distinguished because the Lord wishes it so.' The Roman replied: 'I ask this: Who tells you that this day is the Sabbath?' 'Aqiva answered: 'Let the river Sabbaṭyon prove it.'"860

In its first Haggadic appearances, the Sabbaṭyon was enriched with fantastic details, becoming a river not of water, but a deafening torrent of stones, as if to render its flow even

more laborious. In the midraš Genesis Rabbah it is affirmed that the river "carries stones the whole week but allows them to rest on the Sabbath."861

The geographical site of the river would go on to be driven far from the familiar lands imagined by the classical authors, so that the Sabbaṭyon would represent, in Judaic imagery, the remote boundary preventing the exiled of Israel from reuniting. According to Rabbi Yehudah, who lived in the fourth century, in this way the mystery of the tribes of the northern kingdom, to whom the Bible refers in somewhat vague terms, could be explained as the deportation at the time of the Assyrian conquest: "Rabbi Yehudah ben rabbi Simon said: 'The tribes of Judah and Benjamin were not exiled to the same place as were the other ten tribes. The ten tribes were exiled beyond the River Sabbaṭyon, whereas the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were dispersed in all countries.'"862 A popular belief held that the dispersed tribes would reunite with those of the south (Yehudah and Benjamin) in the future, but that this would happen only in the Messianic age, since the Sabbaṭyon seemed impassable, at least during the natural course of history; the impetuous current of stones by its nature impeded wading,

while the inviolability of the Sabbath would not permit the pious Israelites to cross it on that day.

By the early Middle Ages, the course of the stones was no longer considered to be a sufficient obstacle to the search for the lost tribes, and an opportunity presented itself through another fantastic expedient. In the book of the adventures of Eldad the Danite—a work of true utopian geography, conceived perhaps in the ninth century—the narrative center is occupied precisely by the Sabbaṭyon, which interposes itself between the tribes of the sons of Moses and the descendants of the other four lineages (Dan, Naftali, Gad, and Ašer), who are imagined as living on the oth-

er side of the river, "on a flat and empty stretch where neither twigs, nor brambles and not even grass grows." Undoubtedly the most beautiful description of the Sabbaṭyon can be found in this work: "That river of pebbles and sand thunders six days of the week, as the work is done, but on the šabbat it rests, it stops. Immediately a fire blazes up around the river, from the evening of the šabbat until the end of the šabbat. That fire burns with high flames and no one can approach the river, and on one bank and on the other, for about a mile, the fire devours everything that had taken root in the surroundings, rendering the earth desolate as a desert."863 The imagery of fire here clearly recalls the other mythical river of Jewish tradition, the Dinur, which in the Babylonian Talmud flowed terrifyingly from God's throne, descending all the way to Gehenna.864 This supernatural sabbatical fire, as a manifestation of the divine, marks out the dwelling of the lost tribes in the inviolability of the sacred.

The myth of the Sabbaṭyon was developed by the subsequent medieval literature, above all by the Biblical exegetes, who spoke of it to illustrate the fate of those exiled from Israel. It is thus mentioned in Dawid Qimḥi's commentary on Isaiah,865 and with particular attention in Nachmanides's commentary on Deuteronomy, in which an attempt at an etymological explanation also appears: "They call it Sambaṭyon," writes the rabbi of Gerona, "because of its rest on the Sabbath, since in

that language866 the šabbat is called Sabbat, as in Arabic, and it is customary to add the suffix yon to nouns."867

During the Middle Ages the Sabbaṭyon legend was so widespread as to penetrate into esoteric circles, as demonstrated by the biography of Avraham Abulafia (1240–after 1291), the

celebrated mystic of Saragossa who, at a very young age, set off in the direction of the mythical river and the lost tribes: "I was twenty years old when the spirit of the Lord incited me to leave and head directly for the Land of Israel, by way of sea and land: my intention was to reach the Sabbaṭyon river."868 This simple mention of the river was evidently enough to evoke, for Abulafia, the justification of an inner project, in which reaching the distant destiny also meant a journey of spiritual searching.

The pattern of the intermittent river is also present, even if only in short allusions, in Kabbalistic literature. At the beginning of the fourteenth century, although not explicitly naming it, the author of the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor) seems to have had the Sabbaṭyon in mind in a passage constructed—somewhat enigmatically—on the idea of the river of the emanation that, from the sefirah binah (intelligence) descends down to malkut (kingdom), at times full of water and at other times dry. "When the Jews sinned on earth"—the text reads—"that river withered and dried up, at the time of the first and second Sanctuary, and the Šekinah also remained parched and dry, since they caused the heavenly sources to abandon them."869 The drying up of the flow of the emanation is thus, for the Kabbalists, a state of cosmic indigence that causes damage in the supernal sphere as in the terrestrial, since the sefirah malkut, no longer fed from the higher levels of the sefirotic tree, ceases to transmit its influence to man. It is however still possible, for the author of the Tiqqune, to set the celestial river flowing again on the occasion of the Sabbath: "He who fulfills the joy of the Sabbath sprinkles the dalet [namely the Šekinah] [...] which fills up and is called 'river.'" The Kabbalistic symbolism here accords with the ancient imagery reported

by Flavius Josephus, that is, with the correspondence between the fullness of the river's flow and the sacrality of the Sabbath.

But the literary dominion in which the Sabbaṭyon found its most generous reception was without a doubt that of travel literature, in which, beginning in the second half of the twelfth century, a mention of the fantastic stream became almost obligatory. The Ashkenazic traveler Petaḥyah of Regensburg already spoke of it as he set off around 1175 toward Crimea, Kurdistan, and finally the Land of Israel. In accordance with the Biblical antecedents on the deportation of the twelve tribes, Petaḥyah situates the Sabbaṭyon in Media, "about forty days"870 from the tomb of Ezekiel, which was traditionally situated between the Habor and Euphrates rivers.871

In successive centuries the legendary river underwent a movement toward the west, in this respect following the fate of the myth of Prester John, initially located in central Asia, then moved towards India, and finally placed in Ethiopia.872 In 1434, Eliyyah of Massa Lombarda sent a letter to Italy from the Holy Land, on the conditions of the Jews in the Near East. Here, although he does not offer the precise location of the Sabbaṭyon, he seemed to think that it was to be found "in India, which is in the distant east; opposite it, to the west, is Ethiopia."873

The river was, then, "in some distant region," but probably in Ethiopia, according to 'Ovadyah of Bertinoro, who in 1488-89 would comment to his Italian correspondents on the many legends that were circulating in Jerusalem of an independent Jewish realm. After having spoken of the sources of the Nile, 'Ovadyah men-

tions that, "fifty days walk into the desert, there is the famous river Sabbaṭyon, which circles and encloses like a thread the country where the Israelites reside."874

With a corresponding intensification of the Messianic expectation, after the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, news of the Sabbaṭyon became the object of growing attention, since it was believed that the return of the lost tribes could be a sign of the next coming of the Messiah. In the first decades of the sixteenth century, news of a prodigious eastward advance of the exiled Jews spread

throughout the Diaspora and, in some cases, was connected with a change in the river's periodic regime. In a letter by an anonymous Italian Jew at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it is affirmed that, according to voices originating from Alexandria of Egypt, "the Sabbaṭyon river has taken to drying up, in an exceptional manner with respect to the norm; Monday, Thursday, and Saturday, evidently by divine will [...] thus one hundred two myriads of Jews could cross it."875

The extreme point of the Sabbaṭyon's geographical dislocation towards the west was reached in the seventeenth century, when some advanced the hypothesis that the indigenous people of the New World were descendants of the lost tribes.876 A variant of this belief was proposed in 1644 by a converso of South American origin, a certain Antonio Montezinos, who tells to the leading figures of the Jewish community in Amsterdam of having encountered four mysterious personages on the banks of a South American river, who spoke Hebrew and who confided to him that they were descendants "of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."877 According to Montezinos, the Israelites of

the new continent had been at war for a long time with the "Indians," until the latter had recognized their superiority, and agreed to conceal the secret of the Jewish presence from the Spanish invaders.

This tale would probably have remained relegated to the curiosities of a prodigious epoch of legends, if it had not offered the cue for one of the most important books of the Jewish seventeenth century, the Esperança de Israel, published by Menaššeh ben Yiśra'el—one of the leading figures of Jewish cultural life in Amsterdam—in 1650. In this work, the author reviews all of the literary documentation on the existence of the dispersed tribes, at the same time confirming "the hope of Israel," the Jewish faith in the next coming of the Messiah. Menaššeh thought that the Native Americans could not be descendants of the Jewish tribes, and that the Sabbaṭyon was not in America but rather, as tradition suggested, in Asia, "not far from the Caspian Sea." "In any case"—he continues—"it seems to actually exist somewhere and that some of the ten tribes are hidden there."878 His conviction

was not shaken by those who objected that, if they really existed, more would be known of the lost tribes. "There are many things," he retorts, "that we know and however the origins of which elude us. Is it perhaps not true that we are still to this day ignorant of the source of the four rivers Nile, Ganges, Euphrates, and Tigris? And then there are many unknown lands."879 This erudite Jew of the seventeenth century thus found another way to rescue the utopia of the Sabbaṭyon from the increasingly narrow circle of geographical reality, in a flight towards lands still unknown, which represented the final material protection of the myth.

Šaḥar שחר
Dawn

The dawn is situated under the sign of ambiguity. In the Biblical prose, šaḥar denotes the moment of passage from darkness to light, and it carries both of their messages. The three-letter Hebrew word (šḥr), brusque in tone, includes in its etymon the concept of obscurity: šaḥar actually means "dark," whereas the English "dawn" manifests rather the incipient light. The Hebrew places the emphasis on the expectation of light, that is, on the moment that precedes its manifestation. Šaḥar is the promise of the end of the night, usually announced by the song of the birds, which, still shrouded in darkness, introduces the day. The Aramaic synonym of šaḥar, ṣafra,880 also indicates a melodious whistling,881 and recalls, in the succession of its consonants, the word ṣippor, bird. Even if of masculine gender (as with laylah, night), šaḥar also demonstrates feminine traits, for example in the Song of Songs

(6.10), where the beloved looks forth like the dawn,882 and in Psalm 110.3, in which even the womb of the morning is spoken of.883

The semantic richness of the Biblical notion of dawn is also expressed in some evocative locutions: ayyelet ha-šaḥar, "the hind of the dawn" (Ps. 22.1); kanfe šaḥar, "the wings of the

morning" (Ps. 139.9) and *afafe šaḥar*, "the eyelids of dawn" (Job 3.9 and 41.10). While the image of the "eyelids of dawn" recalls the personification of daybreak widespread in other cultures of the ancient Near East,884 the "wings of the dawn" transform into a delicate graphism the fine line of light that parts the horizon at daybreak. The "hind of the dawn," mentioned only once, in the introductory verse of Psalm 22, probably indicated the melody with which the choir director struck up the song itself. In everyday language, this last expression would go on to designate, simply, the dawn, the meaning still preserved in literary Judaism. The Jewish tradition of Late Antiquity gave to this enigmatic expression a reading based on the multiple meanings of the Hebrew qeren, which means "horn" and "antler," as well as "ray of light": "Just as the antlers of the hind branch off this way and that way"—we find in the Babylonian Talmud—"so the light of the dawn is scattered in all directions."885

Another poetic locution relating to daybreak that does not appear in the Biblical text, but which occurs several times in the pages of the Talmudim and midrašim, is 'ammud ha-šaḥar, "column of the dawn."886 This unprecedented image of a column of light, which slowly rises in the sky until standing out against the horizon, was used by the Jewish sages to designate the rising of the stars: "The rising column of the moon," explains the Babylonian Talmud, "is different from that of the sun. The light column of the moon rises straight like a stick, the light column of the sun [the dawn] irradiates in all directions."887 The column of the dawn is therefore the image of the very near apparition of the

nascent sun, when the diurnal light has still not settled down into a unified center.

In Jewish religious practice, the dawn punctuated liturgical time and marked the first offering to the Lord after the night. When the Jerusalem Temple was still in operation, the first of two daily sacrifices was completed in the morning, while the second took place at sunset.888 The dawn offering was therefore a testimony of thanksgiving for the night's leaving and the promise of the new day, while the evening sacrifice was somehow a propitiation for the imminent transit to darkness. In ancient times, individual and collective prayer accompanied the public sacrificial ceremony. Following the destruction of the Sanctuary, prayer replaced the rite of offering.

Judaism attributed the institution of the dawn prayer to Abraham, while Isaac established the afternoon prayer, and Jacob that of the evening.889 Abraham is, what's more, the only patriarch with regard to whom the Scriptures repeat three times that he rose early in the morning. The first of the three passages describes him as intent on going to the desolate spectacle of Sodom and Gomorrah devastated by divine wrath; the second depicts the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael;890 and the third morning episode describes the departure of the silent procession that started off toward the sacrifice of Isaac.891 It was at the devastated city that Abraham, according to the Babylonian

Talmud, recited for the first time the prayer of the dawn, facing that dark land from which the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace (Gen. 19.28); meanwhile, in the other two circumstances, the dawn seems to be the symbol of a suspended time, in which the outcome of events is still undecided.

The post-Biblical Jewish tradition saw Abraham's rising at daybreak as the sign of his religious zeal, since at dawn each believer seems invited to encounter the divine. As the Talmud teaches, "The whole day is valid for circumcision, but that the zealous are early [to perform] their religious duties, for it is said: And Abraham rose early in the morning (Gen. 22.3)."892 Nevertheless, daybreak is not only the time for man's ritual and prayer, but is the time when the celestial messengers intone their song of praise. According to the Haggadah,

each dawn God gives rise to a company of angels, who lift up their prayer: "The Holy One, blessed be He, creates a new company of angels every day, and they utter song before Him and then depart [evermore]."893

In a passage of the Jerusalem Talmud—in which two sages who lived at the end of the second century are the protagonists—the dawn became, moreover, the representation of the redemption of Israel. A conversation in front of the spectacle of daybreak is described: "Rabbi Ḥiyya Rabba and Rabbi Šim'on ben Ḥalafta were walking in a valley, at the break of day, when they saw the hind of dawn with its light. Rabbi Ḥiyya said to Rabbi Šim'on: 'The liberation of Israel will be altogether similar.'"894 The image of the dawn's gradual appearance here becomes a metaphor for the Messianic age, which will announce itself first of all with weak signs, progressively acquiring an unstoppable force, much like the sun's blazing light at the height of the day.

In the Midraš Tehillim, a text elaborated during the early Middle Ages, in part using materials from Late Antiquity, this Talmudic notion was further enriched with a reflection on the darkness that seizes the world in the moments that precede the reappearance of light: "Why is the liberation compared to the dawn? Since there is no darker hour than that before dawn. If the wheel of the sun rose in that moment, when the creatures were still immersed in dreams, they would all be left blinded."895 According to the ancient Jewish rabbis, the complete darkness that precedes the appearance of the new day is therefore comparable to the afflictions of Israel, which will be so bitter at the coming of redemption that a sudden passage to the Messianic joy would be unbearable.

The Kabbalah of the following centuries deepened the image of a darkness that lasted until almost beyond the threshold of light, making the Messianic dawn the time of final anguish, in which the hope of redemption seemed to continually sink. In the Midraš ha-ne'elam (The Hidden Midraš)—a text from the late thirteenth century, included in editions of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor)—one reads: "They

were still walking, when they saw the dawn appear black. Ḥizqiyyah said to Rabbi Yose: 'Come, behold! When the redemption of the Israelis will be achieved, the hour in which the sun will shine of the liberation, affliction upon affliction will befall them, darkness upon darkness."896 The setting of this story is the same as the episode narrated in the Jerusalem Talmud, but here the author of the Midraš ha-ne'elam creates further a parallel between the darkness of the dawn and the series of catastrophic events that Judaism defined as "Messianic labor pains." By repeatedly playing on the etymon of the word šaḥar, he depicts, with rapid strokes, a world in the grip of ravages that foretell and accompany the arrival of the Messiah of Israel into history: in that moment, which corresponds to the dawn of a new order, everything will seem

black, since an analogous haze will obscure Israel as well as its enemies: "Those that hate Israel will know renewed pains, so that their faces will turn black like the bottom of the pot." The morning darkness (identified by the recurring *Zohar*ic expression qadruta de-ṣafra) thus represents a time of difficult struggle by Israel for its redemption, when all, for a moment, seems lost.

In the complex symbolism that pervades the pages of the *Sefer ha-zohar*, the image of the forces of evil that battle against Israel is also identified at times with the mysterious protagonist of the nocturnal fight against Jacob, considered Esau's guardian spirit, that is, with the evil Samma'el. Samma'el deals his final attack precisely at the break of day,897 even attempting to unite with the force of the prayer that Israel raised to God in order to level his accusations and to bring discredit onto the faithful ones. Samma'el's dominion is nevertheless bound to darkness, since the light of day causes him to succumb. While the angel seems to have the upper hand during the night, when the first light finally bursts through it is Jacob who gets the better of him and compels him to flee: "But when the blackness of the early dawn passed," a passage of the *Zohar* narrates, "he made a great effort and grasped his opponent, whose strength at the same time gave out, his dominion being only the night, whereas Jacob has ascendancy in the daytime.

Hence he said: Let me go, for the day breaks (Gen. 32.27)."898 The patriarch's battle with the mysterious antagonist is thus resolved at the appearance of the dawn and with the angel's hasty retreat.

In the Kabbalistic literature that followed the *Zohar*, the concept of šaḥar tended all the more toward abstraction, and was included among the appellatives used to define the sefirot. A concise formulation of the role of dawn in the pattern of emanation was offered by the Kabbalist Mošeh Cordovero towards the middle of the sixteenth century. He attributed the dawn to the sefirah of eternity (neṣaḥ), clearly distinguishing it from the symbolic value of the morning, which he identified rather with mercy (ḥesed): "The morning and the dawn are two different levels; the first refers to Abraham, while the second is placed in eternity. The morning is in fact characterized by full light, which spreads, while the dawn is the moment that precedes the splendor of the day, when the column of the dawn begins [to appear] [...] The term šaḥar derives from šaḥarut, 'blackness': therefore, even if it is white, it seems black, with respect to mercy, and it is due to this that the sefirah of eternity is called 'black.'"899

Here the traditional value of expectation implicit in the Hebrew notion of dawn receives a theoretical justification, based on the relationship between the two contiguous sefirot: in the pattern of the emanation, the sefirah of eternity is in fact placed below that of mercy and, precisely for this reason, seems more obscure and disempowered. The blackness of the dawn is thus revealed, in the Kabbalistic secret, as an extreme offshoot of the heavenly brilliance, of which it marks the provisional fall, and whose imminent reascent it anticipates.

Śaṭan שטן
Adversary

Angry at Balaam, God dispatches his angel to lay an ambush along the path as an adversary against him (Num. 22.22). To indicate this threatening angelic figure, who stands with his sword drawn in his hand (Num. 22.23), the Biblical author uses, for the first time in the Scriptures, the term śaṭan, which thus serves to denote the menacing enemy, intent on putting up an insurmountable obstacle. At first only Balaam's timorous she-ass took notice of the angel, and twice tried to avoid him, until the Lord's envoy placed himself directly in front of her, with insolence, and stood in a narrow place, where there was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left; at that point the ass [...] fell down under Balaam.

This episode takes less the tone of a tragedy than that of amusement or farce; in fact Balaam, exasperated, strikes the ass [...] And the Lord opened the mouth of the ass, and it said to Balaam, What have I done to you, that you have struck me these three times? And Balaam said to the ass, Because you have mocked me. Only at this point does the Lord open the eyes *of Balaam*, who sees the angel, falls to the ground and listens to the reprimand: Behold, I went out to withstand you, because

your way is perverse before me; And the ass saw me, and turned from me these three times; if it had not turned aside from me, surely now also I would had slain you (Num. 22.26-33). The angel, who seems almost to play with the she-ass, embodies some of the fundamental attributes of the Biblical śaṭan. As God's envoy, whose command he faithfully obeys,900

his aim is to dissuade Balaam from pursuing a perverse way, to prevent him from falling into irremediable error. With the weapon of provocation, the adversary rouses the anger of his victim, thereby opening his eyes.

In Hebrew, therefore, the noun śaṭan means "one who sets oneself against," and "adversary," but also takes on the generic sense of an enemy in battle. Thus, in the book of Kings, this word indicates the enemies of Solomon,901 while in the books of Samuel śaṭan is David—defined as such by his Philistine antagonists902—as well as, in a collective sense, those rebellious ones who oppose the return of David himself.903 In two passages, the noun is employed in a technical sense of "one who prosecutes in judgment." In this case śaṭan is portrayed standing next to the accused, intent on listing the offences. In the book of Psalms, this disagreeable function is attributed to an evil man—Appoint a wicked man over him; and let the prosecutor (śaṭan) stand at his right hand (Ps. 109.6)—while, in the vision of Zechariah, the heavenly accuser is placed next to the high priest Joshua to denounce the sinners: the prosecutor (śaṭan) standing at his right hand to thwart him (Zech. 3.1). The arrangement of these personages, who take on the objective of a ritual judiciary, seems to attribute to the śaṭan the almost stereotypical role of a "collaborator" with the law.904

In the book of Chronicles, śaṭan is a hostile being, whose presence brings serious damage to the Jewish population: And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to make a census of Israel (1Chron. 21.1). Satan, who is already clearly personified here, seems to have the task of instigating nega-

tive conduct, since the tragic death of seventy thousand Israelites will result from the census.905

Satan performs an essential role in the beginning of the book of Job, since his presence is the origin of all of the misfortunes that befall the protagonist. In this case, he wears the garb of one who insinuates doubt, and who, with divine permission, verifies soundness in order to test Job's true integrity. The first paragraphs of the book add new particulars to the characterization of this dubious and ubiquitous angel, who appears before the Lord in the flock of bene Elohim, "the divine beings."906 Satan is the only one to whom God speaks, asking him two times: Where are you coming from? Satan gives the same answer twice: From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it (Job 1.7). A restless wandering in fact continuously carries the Accuser along the paths of the earth in search of deception and of insincerity. This is why—the Biblical author seems to suggest—he saw Job's prosperity and conceived the doubt now expressed to the Lord: But put forth your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face (Job 1.11).

This attribute of ceaseless movement, at times frenetic and uncontrolled, will go on to be a constant characteristic of the Jewish Satan, including in his treatment in post-Biblical literature. In fact, one of his preferred occupations is that of joining travelers as an unfaithful escort, always ready to lay snares for his companions. In the treatise Šabbat of the Tosefta, Rabbi Yose ha-Gelili—who lived at the beginning of the second century—warns wayfarers against making their journey with the impious, since they are always side by side with "the angels of Satan": "If you see that a wicked person is setting off on a journey and you want

to travel the same road," it is stated, "arrange to leave three days earlier, or three days after him, in order not to travel together, since the angels of Satan[907] go with him."[908] In a passage of the Jerusalem Talmud Rabbi Lewi maintains moreover that "Satan is there to accuse in three circumstances: next to anyone walking alone on the street,

next to anyone who sleeps without companions in a dark house, and close to anyone who ploughs the great sea."909

In his continuous movement from place to place, the angel of evil seems nevertheless to prefer circuitous routes and, rather than walking, he advances with the convulsive rhythm of a dance. In the treatise Berakot of the Babylonian Talmud, it is affirmed that "a black ox and in the month of Nisan" is extremely dangerous, "because then Satan is dancing between his horns."910 This demonic dance, however, accompanies not only animals, but is also intertwined around men, in particular when they are about to commit a sin: "For when a man is on the way to commit a sin Satan dances before him until he completes the transgression; and after he has destroyed him he informs him."911 The satanic dance therefore seems aimed at increasing the confusion of someone already on the verge of sinning, and at precipitating the fall.

If to proceed in a straight line is indicative of justice, the work of evil will be, on the contrary, a swerve along side paths. In the second half of the twelfth century, the great thinker of Sephardic origin, Moses Maimonides, identified this fatal wandering precisely in the etymon of the word śaṭan. "Know that," he writes in the Guide of the Perplexed," the word śaṭan derives from the verb śaṭah, to turn away [...] I mean to say

that it derives from the notion of turning away and going away. Satan is he who indubitably turns people away from the ways of truth and makes them perish in the ways of error."912 This passage from Maimonides is based on the identification of Satan with the yeṣer ha-ra', the "evil inclination," which, according to Judaism, dwells in man and derives from one's evil side;13 in this way, the figure of the demon is pushed towards the subaltern role of a component of an imperfect human nature.

Other texts, especially those of mystical intonation, explicitly affirm Satan's connection with the transcendent sphere, even where this requires the author to confront the theological paradox of an evil "divinity." In the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), probably composed in the second half of the twelfth century, Satan is even

considered an attribute of the God of Israel, inasmuch as he guides the spirits that hinder moral conduct and bring misfortune to men: "When they see that a man sets off along an honest path, and walks along it, they hate him. What is it? It is Satan. This teaches us that the Lord, blessed be He, has an attribute whose name is 'evil.' It is located in the north [...] that is to say that every evil that happens to any of the earth's inhabitants comes from the north [...] Why is it to the left? Since it does not have power throughout the world, but only in the north."914 The angel of evil here is a true cosmic force, which even has its own fixed position in the metaphysical geography of the world: the north, from whose dark and hidden influence every misfortune originates. The relationship between the north and the left becomes clear once the east is assumed as a point of reference, towards which an imaginary observer is turned—at his left will therefore be the north, whose negative meaning combines well with the ancient connection between evil and all that comes from the left.

In the medieval Kabbalah, Satan's role was increasingly mixed with that of Samma'el, archon of demons and companion of the diabolical Lilit. Samma'el borrows many of his external attributes from Satan, and more than a few of his tasks as a patron of impiety. In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), for example, the satanic function was almost always left to Samma'el, whose devious character was already clear from his eyes: "his eyes are squinty, dark in color, and cannot look straight."915 The inseparable union between Samma'el and Lilit was actually a common feature of the Kabbalistic representation of evil, which embraced male insolence as well as the dominion of female deviousness.

Jewish folklore, on the other hand, was able to invent diverse spirits for each manifestation of negativity, in a multiplication of names and attributes that thronged the so-called siṭra aḥra, "the other part." In his Pardes Rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates)—written in the middle of the sixteenth century—the Kabbalist Mošeh Cordovero, for example, introduced Satan by the name "Gamgima." Since one reads in Job that, together with the angelic procession, also Satan (Job 1.6)

presented himself before God, Cordovero employs a word play between the demonic epithet and the term gam, which in Hebrew means "also,"916 to describe the devil's aptitude for insinuating himself anywhere, by means of every impious human statement. Under Gamgima there are in fact "a great number of angels of misfortune, whose task is that of understanding every indecent or bad word that is pronounced by men, to conserve it," and to use it to spoil "the holy words, as for example the verses of the Torah or the prayers."917

Mixtures between holiness and evil were a recurring theme in the later Kabbalah, occupying a prominent place in Hasidic reflections on impiety and how to evade it. In one of the classic texts of Hasidism, the Ma'or wa-šemeš (The Light and the Sun) by Qalonymos Kalman Epstein of Krakow (d. 1823), the symmetry between the two forces of reality, the holy side and the satanic, thus became the object of a detailed digression: "It is known that 'the other side' is always in front of holiness like a monkey in front of man. When someone wants to enter into holiness [...] 'the other side' prepares to war against him and to confound him. Therefore one must keep one's eyes open, because as soon as the accusers see which gate he is walking towards to the cult of the Lord, they rise up to impede his entrance."918 According to Epstein, who was renowned as a ṣaddiq, that is, a "righteous person," inclined to ecstatic forms of prayer, the devotee must be ready to elude the forces of evil by staging a swift escape towards the holy side: "One must always choose another path or another door to defeat those who want to confound and accuse us, in order to throw them in turn into confusion."919

It is possible, then, to flee from Satan, a master in the diversion and ruin of men, only by incessantly changing one's conduct and constantly choosing a new door to the divine. The deluded demons are left to wait near the old entrance, deceived through their own deception.

## ספירה Sefirah

The origins of the word sefirah, in the Judaic lexicon, are humble ones, of a daily computation that measures a period of waiting. Between the second and sixth centuries, in the juridical texts of the Mišnah and the Talmud, sefirah denotes the counting of days that must pass, numbered in their regular time as symbolic intervals. The period of seven or thirty days that marks mourning after death,920 the woman who counts the seven days of her own menstrual impurity,921 or the community that measures the interval of seven weeks between Passover and the celebration of Šavuʿot922 correspond to as many sefirot, ephemeral pieces of an inner and collective calendar.

Besides this link with cyclical time, sefirah is also used in Talmudic literature to mean "recording" and "writing." When the rabbis discuss the requirement of a get, the document of divorce, and specify which kinds of written documents are valid, they use the locution li-sefirat devarim to refer to "the writing down of circumstances."923 From the context it is clear that sefirah connotes here the general idea of writing, as opposed to any specific method of keeping records.

The author of the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation), who probably lived in the Land of Israel between the sixth and seventh centuries, was perhaps the first to situate the sefirot in a precarious equilibrium, suspended between silence and the flow of words, between the infinite and the creation. ʿEśer sefirot belimah, "ten sefirot

without determination," is the paradoxical identity of a measure that cannot be stabilized,

almost as if it were the invisible necessity of things. Abandoning, at least apparently, the dominion of the number seven that marked the ancient reckoning, the sefirot would then be identified with ten, and, through this re-identification, embellished with the prerogative of sacredness. This change in numeric value declares the passage of the concept of sefirah from the human to the divine. The counting to which the term alludes is no longer only that of the biological rhythm of impurity, or of the religious calendar—it is the enumeration of the universe, which expresses itself according to the consecratory formula of ten. The tenth shall be holy to the Lord (Lev. 27.32), the Scriptures enjoin, giving voice to the conviction that runs throughout ancient Judaism, that ten reflects the mystery of divine unity within the multiplicity.

Furthermore, the sefirot are belimah, "without determination," that is, empty of words, like an intuition of unstable immobility. In choosing this enigmatic term, the author of the Sefer yeṣirah certainly had in mind its unique Biblical occurrence, in which belimah is the frightening void that accommodates divine creation: He stretches out the north over the void, and hangs the earth upon nothing ('al belimah) (Job 26.7). The sefirot are therefore made of a hollow substance, capable of receiving every modification of the real. It is quite possible that their undetermined nature points to a pre-semantic status. If they are essentially elements of a mysterious divine writing—as the Talmudic import of the word sefirah would suggest—such a writing still precedes human language; it is a kind of preparatory sketch of creation engraved in the raw essence of the cosmos.924

When the rapid prose of the Sefer yeṣirah lingers over a digression on the nature of the sefirot, the sentences proceed as though going backwards: "Close your heart from thinking, and close your

mouth from speaking. And if your heart is running, it should return to the place that it left." The sefirot here are not yet the emanatory principles of the later Kabbalistic tradition, but an array of ungraspable

apparitions, animated by the impetuousness of the angels, who are the shuttle between the world and the divine throne: "And their measure is ten but they are infinite. Their end is fixed in their beginning, and their beginning in their end."925

In the paragraph that solidifies the description of the sefirot, a heterogeneous list captures their dissolution into one another, from the vertiginous loftiness of the divine spirit to natural elements, and further to coordinates of spatial directions: "These are the ten sefirot without determination. One: the spirit of the Living God. Two: air from the Holy Spirit. Three: water from air. Four: fire from water. And the Height, and the Depth, and the East, and West, and the North, and the South." The sefirotic movement, at first preserved in the immobility of the divine spirit, expands in the impulse of the second spirit. The coming of the water from the spirit marks that motion's turning to liquid, which in fire will stir, to then rise, descend again, and spread to the four cardinal points of the horizon.

The sefirot delineated in the Sefer yeṣirah do not yet possess either the names or the full traits that they will acquire in the mystical literature of the following centuries. Nevertheless, in this speculative text of Late Antiquity, Jewish mysticism found its own language, a formula that would permit the articulation of the divine: the sefirot already enter the external world of the elements and the affections of the spirit in an arrangement that can be transmitted from master to pupil.

Beginning from at least the tenth century, many interpreters struggled with the meaning of the Sefer yeṣirah. The major difficulty consisted in making clear the links that connected the sefirot, and in imagining the ways in which they could have been situated

in the cosmos. While the unknown author of the work, in indicating the passage from one sefirah to the other, used the simple preposition "from"—"air from the Holy Spirit [...] water from air [...] fire from water"—the later exegetes constructed increasingly more complicated systems, rich in details, in the process of which they also utilized more than a few philosophical terms.

Since the Early Middle Ages, the Jewish mystics concentrated on the sefirot precisely because they seemed able to fill the gap that separated God from the world. However, these mystics found themselves confronted with the problem of reconciling the sefirotic sequence with the Biblical teachings on creation, and of explaining the unexpected passage from the one to the multiplicity.

For Šabbetay Donnolo—a physician and philosopher who lived in southern Italy (913 – ca. 982)—the enunciation of the Sefer yeṣirah, "air from the Holy Spirit," alludes to a dilation of the creative energy in the cosmos, almost as if God, like a skilled glassworker, blew into the world to make it assume the desired form: "The glass artisan, when he wants to make a glass object, takes a metal instrument hollowed from one end to the other and then molten glass [...] and then blows [his own] spirit from his mouth [...] so that he derives from the glass the desired object [...] in the same way God [...] with his tremendous force, made the spirit go out from the spirit and the cavity of the world stretched until he said: Enough!"926

If Donnolo's unusual comparison reinterpreted a fragment of daily life of Byzantine Italy, the commentaries by other authors confronted the sefirot with the philosophical lexicon, above all Neoplatonic, which had spread throughout Jewish circles thanks to the mediation of Islamic culture. In a similar vein to the Neoplatonic conception of emanation, according to which the passage of celestial influence through the lower levels occurs without diminishing the source, the Jewish thinkers attributed to

,



the sefirot an immaterial development of light in light, and of reflection in reflection, which does not endanger the energy of the first

emanator. In one of the so-called Sifre ha-'iyyun (Books of the Contemplation), composed on the Iberian peninsula in the course of the thirteenth century, one reads that "God's forces are emanated from his oneness as the light of the eye comes from the black of the pupil, and proceed from one to another as smell from smell and flame from flame; they progressively emanate, so that the force of the emanator passes into the emanated, without the first being diminished at all."927

During the Middle Ages, the meaning of "sphere," and in particular of "astral body", would be attributed more and more to the Hebrew word sefirah. In fact, the symbolic connection that united the sefirot to the bright celestial bodies may already have been present in the Hebrew etymon of the word, and the assonance with the Greek sphaira likely influenced the Sefer yeṣirah's author.928 From at least the beginning of the eleventh century, sefirah was thus also employed to mean "planet," with the Sephardic exegete Avraham ibn 'Ezra picking out astronomers with the expression ḥakme ha-sefirot, "the learned of the spheres."929

The Kabbalists proved to be fully aware of the affinity between the sefirot of the mystical theosophy and the spheres of the astronomers and philosophers, and made use of the diagram of celestial orbits to enrich the sefirotic symbolism with a higher theoretical dignity. In a passage of his Sefer hayiḥud (The Book of Unity), the Kabbalist Ašer ben Dawid—who worked in southern France during the first half of the thirteenth century—explains the sefirot more philosophico, borrowing the Aristotelian terminology found in Moses Maimonides's Guide of the Perplexed. "The philosophers," affirms Ašer, "called these ten

sefirot 'spheres,' giving to their whole the name of the sphere of intellect. Each of these has one that moves it, with the exception of the tenth, which is not to be moved, nor does it move anything, since everything exists thanks to its force [...] The author of the Sefer yeṣirah and the philosophers agreed that they number ten, but that the tenth—which cannot be understood—caused everything to arise with its primordial enunciation. Only the names attributed to them change."930 This passage of Ašer ben Dawid is a clear example of how

the mystics of the early thirteenth century used philosophy: with a strong tendency to bring harmony to diverse doctrines. Every decade seemed to them to suggest the sefirot, and Greek philosophical theories, too, transmitted through Islamic channels, served to broaden the doctrine of intradivine life.

This tendency to read every text in a Kabbalistic key led the mystics to also reinterpret many elements of the Haggadah, as well as some fundamental Biblical tales, from a sefirotic perspective. A passage of the first book of Chronicles (29.11), in which David blesses God by listing his attributes, provided the Kabbalists with the names of the major parts of the sefirot: Yours, O Lord, is the greatness (gedullah), and the power (gevurah), and the glory (tif'eret), and the victory (neṣaḥ), and the majesty (hod); for all that is in heaven and in earth is yours; yours is the kingdom (mamlaka), O Lord, and you are exalted as head above all. These appellatives were attributed, in descending order, to six of the seven lower sefirot. Between hod and malkut (kingdom)—as the tenth was most frequently called—yesod, the sefirah of the foundation, was situated, while for the highest three the most commonly occurring terms were keter (crown), ḥokmah (wisdom) and binah (intelligence). Along with alternative denominations, including ḥesed (mercy) in the place of gedullah, or paḥad (fear) instead of gevurah, the sefirot were given a wide variety

of metaphorical names, bound to the Biblical world but also to nature.

Particular attention was dedicated, for instance, to the sequence of the days of creation in the tale of Genesis, which gave rise to a parallel with the linking together of the sefirot. In Moses Nachmanides's Commentary on the Torah, completed in the second half of the thirteenth century, the primordial days thus become as many sefirot, which God entrusted with the formation of the world: "In the deeper sense, the sefirot emanated by the Holiest are called 'days,' since every order that brings into being an existence is called 'day.' There were six days of the creation [...] because the word 'day' is not used for the first

three sefirot. The explanation concerning the sequence of the verses is sublime and occult and our knowledge of it is smaller than a drop in the great sea."931 Rather than an obstacle to the mystical interpretation, the discord between the number of days and the number of sefirot allows Nachmanides to pay tribute to the mystery that represents the most intimate vocation of the Kabbalah. According to the Sephardic exegete, three of the ten sefirot are concealed, and only the six lower ones are manifested in the visible world. He does not feel compelled to remind the reader that there is still one missing from the calculation, most probably malkut, the kingdom, which corresponds to the Sabbath.

To venture among the names of the sefirot, and to discover new ones within the depths of ancient literature, was considered one of the most effective Kabbalistic practices, and one which the rabbis recommended to their students as a meditation exercise: a single sefirah could be, at the same time, a day of the creation, a Biblical personage, an animal, a color, an hour of the day, a letter of the alphabet, a cardinal point, or a place, and the intimate understanding of this manifold nature was considered the only way to live the experience of the refraction in creation of a

level of divine energy. "And now," one reads in a fragment of the great Castilian Kabbalist Avraham Abulafia, "my son, put your mind to apprehending first of all the names of the sefirot, in order to receive from them the divine influence. You should first of all unite with each sefirah, and then with all of them together [...] begin therefore by uniting with the tenth sefirah, which is the first and closest to us."932 In this way, the sefirot do not just mark the descent of divine emanation towards the world, but can also be changed into a ladder, upon which man can ascend. What's more, they are not only confined to the macrocosmos, but rather pervade each individual, and can be reached through meditation. In the teaching of Abulafia, the descent into one's interiority is transformed into an upward impulse, through which it is possible to travel along the path of divine emanation.

Beginning in the second half of the thirteenth century, the Kabbalists proposed various systems of correspondences between the

vital centers of the body and the levels of the sefirot; concentrating on himself, the mystic could discover that the body and the rhythm of the spirit were regulated by the attractions and repulsions of the sefirotic structure. In the version preserved in the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor), dating from the beginning of the fourteenth century, an unusual sequence is encountered, reaching from the right arm to the heart and then dissolving in the mystery of the supernal sefirah: "Ḥesed is the right arm, gevurah the left, tif'eret is the torso, neṣah and hod the two legs, yesod is at the bottom of the torso, the sign of the sacred pact, malkut is the mouth, which they call the oral Torah, ḥokmah is the brain, the inner thought, binah corresponds to the heart and through it the heart understands [...] keter 'elyon is the crown of the kingdom."933

In this representation of the sefirotic body, a medieval transposition of the ancient astral melothesy, according to which the stars presided over man's limbs, is discernible. In fact, the sefirot, almost celestial bodies without matter, also kept vigil over these physical attributes, connoting them in their singularity as well as in their reciprocal relations.

Since the beginning of the thirteenth century, at the time of the first decisive diffusion of the Kabbalah in southern France and throughout the Iberian Peninsula, the Kabbalists proved to be aware of a contradiction intrinsic to the sefirotic model as a pattern of universal knowledge. This problem was born from the perception that the gnoseological value of the sefirot, in order to be all-encompassing, also needed to extend to the dark regions of evil and impurity. But, far from ignoring this difficulty, they sought to use it as the basis for further symbolic investigation, and took to discussing the so-called emanation from the left, the siṭra aḥra, whereby the sefirotic order was also imposed on the demonic dominion. It was therefore believed that the sefirotic levels articulated not only the rhythm of good, but also the activity of evil, which was imagined as descending towards the world and returning to heaven through negative sefirot, inauspicious replicas of the positive emanation. The sefirot of evil did not possess the serene

harmony of the holy ones, nor their immaterial luminosity, even if they at times assumed the same names.

When Mošeh Cordovero, in the middle of the sixteenth century, collected in his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates) the names of the angels that personified the sefirotic hierarchy of evil, he warned the reader not to be surprised "if you find the name el in the attributes of impurity, since, as there is El, God, in the holy part, there is also a foreign god [in the dominion of the negative]." The sefirot of the left were therefore often indicated with the names of the evil angels, which sometimes repeated, with deceptive assonance, the theophoric suffix el, "god" (Teo'mi'el, 'Ugi'el, Sitri'el, Ga'aš kaleh, Gew lahav, 'Orevzoreq, Samma'el, Gamli'el, Lilit), but

453

whose only aim—the Sephardic mystic continued—"was to exhaust and destroy the holy part, never to be, and reduce its control."934

In the second half of the sixteenth century, in the thought of Yiṣḥaq Luria, who cemented the great creative season of the Kabbalistic circle of Safed, the sefirot grew in number and filled all of the innumerable worlds of the mystical heaven. The pages of the 'Eṣ Ḥayyim (The Tree of Life)—a fundamental work in which Ḥayyim Vital divulged the teachings of Luria—vibrate with the motion of the countless sefirot, which, saturated with light, succeed in finding their places in a series of increasingly lesser dimensions: "Truly, it is clear and evident that different types of worlds exist, emanations, creations, formations, realizations, thousands upon thousands and myriads upon myriads [...] and behold, each of these worlds is divided into ten sefirot, and each particular sefirah, in every world, is in its turn divided into ten sefirot; all are in the form of a circle, one inside of the other [...] akin to the

figure of the spheres depicted in the books of astronomy."935 Moving from sefirah to sefirah, the Lurianic mystics could, in this way, penetrate the recesses of knowledge and into the interstices between thing and thing, or raise themselves up to the secret of the first emanation, sure to find everywhere the same familiar presence; the sefirotic decade was, at the same time, the universal rhythm of creation, the key to knowledge, and the guide for the conduct of man.

Thanks to its large framework and to the care with which it expounded the minutest details of the mystical edifice, the Lurianic doctrine quickly dominated the Kabbalah, pervading the entire Judaic tradition with its lexicon and myths during the entire seventeenth century, as well as the first half of the eighteenth. The supremacy of Lurianism, however, also carried with it a progressive withering of the creative energy of the Kabbalists, who often preferred to remain faithful to the authoritative Lurianic

symbolism instead of renewing its language or attempting new paths.

It was only in the second half of the eighteenth century, when the Hasidic movement struck Hebrew mysticism with the charisma of its sages and with new communal experiences, that the sefirotic schemes underwent a reevaluation and further transformation. One of the most radical novelties in this context was probably provided by Dov Baer of Mezhirech (d. 1772), first spiritual heir of the founder of Hasidism, Yiśra'el Ba'al Šem Ṭov. Also known as "the great Maggid," he left an original rewriting of the relationship between the sefirotic representation and cognitive intuition. Central to the exegesis of Dov Baer is the second sefirah, ḥokmah, or the knowledge that, according to the Kabbalistic tradition, contains the plan for the creation of the world and therefore guides man's understanding. Although without ever explicitly manifesting the novelty of his thought, the great Maggid changes an essential particular in the connotation of this sefirah: for him, the epithet ayin "nothing" is befitting of ḥokmah, which earlier Kabbalists usually applied to the highest sefirah, keter.936

This symbolic shift, apparently minor, sets in motion a true theoretical revolution, because in this way ayin, nothing, becomes the attribute of wisdom: "Knowledge"—writes the rabbi of Mezhirech—"is the root, the support of everything, and all of the transformations that occur in the world would not take place without it, that is to say, without the nothing."937 It is therefore in the welcoming sefirotic space of the nothing that things lose their identity for an instant and it is from this space that they reemerge with a new nature: "Everything," continues Dov Baer,

21

455

"[...] has to pass through the level of ayin, 'nothing,' to become a different thing."938 According to the Hasidic sage, this immaterial passage that presides over the becoming of reality can be returned to during meditation: the sefirah ḥokmah is thus be visualized as an inner door, the door of ayin, which engulfs things only to restore them, imbued with knowledge.

In the work of the rabbi of Mezhirech, the doctrine of nothing furthermore assumes a strong magical connotation: the ability to transform things, causing them to be reborn with a new nature, can be used by the ṣaddiq, the righteous Hasidic one endowed with a charismatic personality and extraordinary powers. In contemplation, he can seize upon an object and, after having carried it to nothingness, transfer it back to reality, completely different, thus miraculously changing substances and reversing the course of events. "The same is said"—affirms Dov Baer—"of miracles of every type that derive from a change of the laws of nature: it is necessary that the thing is lifted to the sefirah ayin, and that the influence descends from there, in such a way that it demonstrates the wonder."939 In this later outcome,

connected to the personality of the thaumaturgist rabbi of Mezhirech, sefirotic thought reached its most extreme formulation: thanks to an extraordinary power of concentration, and thanks to the knowledge of the mechanism of the sefirot, the mystic could in fact "even change God's thoughts," setting reality to zero to understand and regenerate it.

## שחוק Šeḥoq
## Laughter

Abraham's laughter—the first to resound through the Scriptures—is a quiet impulse that the patriarch almost hides while prostrating himself before God. The promise of a son, which still has no name, sparks a smile of timorous incredulity on the face of the old man: Shall a child be born to him who is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear? (Gen. 17.17). Announced by laughter, the entire episode of Abraham's son would be denoted by a recurrence of the Hebrew root ṣḥq, which indicates laughter as much in its cheerful aspects as in the more bitter sense of derisive and hostile mockery.

The name of the child, Yiṣḥaq (Isaac), which means "he will laugh", epitomizes the salient moments of his life, often marked by the unexpected appearance of a joke. To the laughter of the father is immediately added that of the mother, which would become perhaps the most celebrated female reaction of the entire Scriptures; Sarah is in

fact no less incredulous than Abraham and, like him, laughed within herself, saying, After I am grown old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? (Gen. 18.12). The woman's laughter, even if held inside, arouses God's resentment, causing a singular change in the narrative rhythm, through a series of rapid exchanges in which, three times, the word ṣḥq will return: And the Lord said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh [...] Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, No; you did laugh (Gen. 18.13-15). While Abraham's laughter went unnoticed, Sarah's sounds were irreverent enough to provoke the vexed divine reply, which seems to establish a sort of male complicity. Sarah's jocular reply is actually characterized by a psychological nuance that is part of the prohibited sphere: her mind

457

races first of all to the thought of pleasure940 that she will obtain from the conception of the son, and the laughter that emerges from her is therefore connected to the realm of sexuality. A similar dynamic will appear again upon the birth of the son: And Abraham was a hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, God has made me laugh, so that all who hear will laugh with me (Gen. 21.5-6). While the Bible recognizes the man's pride at his son, the joke, whose object is the material and bodily dominion of birth, concerns the wife.941

As if Sarah were to experience a full host of tribulations of laughter, a new episode casts her as the protagonist of a cross reaction to other people's laughter: Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had born to Abraham, mocking [...] And she said to Abraham, Cast out this slave and her son (Gen. 21.8-10). She who had welcomed with a

flash of irony the news of her future maternity is transformed here into a jealous and resentful woman, ready to punish a child's joke harshly.942 While the Hebrew text of the Scriptures offers no explanation for Ishmael's laughter, the Greek translation of the Septuagint (taken from Jerome's Latin translation) discloses that the reason for the laughter of the Egyptian servant's son

was none other than his brother Isaac: the Greek adds another five words, sufficient to reveal an intimacy between the two brothers, who were becoming increasingly close and dangerous in Sarah's eyes—paizonta meta Isaak ton uion autēs—"who played with Isaac, her lad."943 The verb paizomai, which here renders the Hebrew ṣḥq, captures the sense of infantile play, and establishes between those that participate in it a relationship among equals. It seems therefore to be precisely this familiarity between brothers, which cancels out the differences between the legitimate son and the natural one, that provokes the resentment of the lady of the house. The Hebrew omission of this reference to Isaac, which was extant at the time of the Greek translation, was probably due to the desire to remove every trace of a troublesome mixture between the lineage of Isaac and that of Ishmael.944

In the course of the Biblical narration, Isaac appears in another episode that is marked by the presence of the verb ṣḥq. The son of Abraham and Sarah, already an adult, and settled in a hostile Philistine environment, is described this time in an intimate scene. Fearing the foreign people among whom he lives, Isaac pretends that Rebecca is his sister, but, one day, It came to pass [...] that Abimelech king of the Philistines looked out a window, and saw, and, behold, Isaac was playing (meṣaḥeq ) with Rebekah his wife (Gen. 26.8). A single glance is enough for the king to understand the nature of their play, and that the two are not at all siblings: Certainly she is your wife; and why did you say, She is my sister? Isaac and Rebecca's laughter is therefore an amorous skirmish that, according to the code of

conduct of ancient society, was legitimate only between married couples.

Not by chance, Potiphar's wife also uses the verb ṣḥq to indicate Joseph's alleged sexual traps: The Hebrew servant, whom you have brought to us—the woman affirms—came in to me to mock me (le-ṣaḥeq bi) (Gen. 39.17),945 where the mocking euphemistically implies a sexual trap. At the end of the nineteenth century, in the Arabic Bedouin use, laughter between a man and a woman was still the prerogative of the married couple, as the English traveler Charles M. Doughty reports in his celebrated Travels in Arabia Deserta: "Zeyd and Hirfa were as Isaac and Rebecca; with the Bedouin simplicity they sat daily sporting lovingly together before us, for we were all one family and friendly eyes."946

However, the gamut of meanings of ṣḥq (and the similar root śḥq) in the Biblical text goes beyond the limits of individual experience, and includes the social occasions of performances and festivals, extending as far as man's relationship to God, and to the divine attitude with regard to earthly events.

"Laugh," in the Bible, also metaphorically denotes the entertainment of onlookers at a performance, as in the case of Samson, who is called from prison to amuse the Philistines with games,947 or likewise the participation in collective song and dance, often to the sound of musical instruments. This occurs when David, celebrating the arrival of the holy ark in Jerusalem, together with all of Israel, played (meśḥaqim, lit. "laughed") before the Lord on all manner of instruments made of cypress wood (2Sam. 6.5). Laughter here denotes the loss of inhibitions, and indeed provokes the reprobation of Michal, Saul's daughter, who reproaches David for having uncovered himself

31

460

today in the eyes of the maidservants of his servants, as one of the low fellows shamelessly uncovers himself (2Sam. 6.20).

When one "laughs" toward the Lord—in religious enthusiasm—God also laughs in one's face, or, to put it better, "derides" evil from the heights of his celestial dwelling. To this meaning of śḥq the root lʿg is added, which evokes a harsh and pitiless derision. This feature of the Hebrew idea of the divine finds its roots in the topos of the Near Eastern religions, where the gods display a superior mockery towards mortals. As early as the fourteenth century BCE, for example, in the epic of Ugarit, the goddess Anat breaks out in noisy laughter that underlines her desire to carry out a vendetta against Aqhat, the man who refused to give her his ark: "She broke into hearty laughter, but in her heart she was conceiving a plan: 'Watch out for me, Oh, hero Aqhat [...] if I encounter you again on the path of disobedience [...] I myself will cut you down at my feet, precisely you, the most gracious and strongest of men!'"948 In Anat's laughter there is the sense of the haughty security of a god that knows humans' fates before they occur.

Just as the laughter of the pagan gods was directed at men to emphasize their insecurity and conceit, the God of Israel laughs at terrestrial misfortunes, demonstrating an unexpected attitude of derision with regard to human events. But in contrast to the Ugaritic poetry, in which sarcastic threats originate from a goddess's caprice, in the Bible the laughter of Yhwh is usually a sign of impending punishment for evil carried out by men, or against the enemies of Israel. Thus, in a psalm, the Lord shall laugh at him [the wicked]; for He sees that his day is coming (Ps. 37.13), and, in another, He who sits in the heavens shall laugh: the Lord shall have them in derision (Ps. 2.4), referring to the kings of the earth, and to the rulers [who] take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his

anointed (Ps. 2.2).949 To this laughter of derision, the terrifying manifestation of Yhwh's wrath follows, who shall speak to them in his wrath, and terrify them in his fury (Ps. 2.5).

In a parallel passage, the Lord's irate words—called in aid against the enemies—are compared to the fire [that ] burns a wood, and to the flame [that] sets the mountains on fire, and divine reprisal is described in tones of cataclysms, which strike the earth with [...] tempest, and terrify them with [...] storm (Ps. 83.15-16). The ancient atmospheric manifestation of the gods, upon whose laughter the sky lights up in thunder and lightning, seems to re-emerge in Yhwh's sarcasm, which announces words of fire and tempest. God's laugh here has the force of a hidden metaphor, exploiting the intuitive parallel between the outbreak of laughter and the shooting of thunderbolts. In contrast to other traditions, such as that of ancient India in which the laughter of lightning is the propitious manifestation of light and the promise of restorative rain,950 the atmospheric theophany of Yhwh is a devastating force that subverts human destinies.

In post-Biblical literature, the space left to laughter seemed to decline due to the general tone of austerity that dominated rabbinic Judaism after the destruction of the second Temple and the failure of the anti-Roman revolt. Since the time of exile was not a happy time, every manifestation of joy seemed improper to the Jewish sages, who prohibited banquets, songs, and pub-

lic celebrations, and even tended to discourage joking. Any joke seemed, in fact, to be an offense to the condition of Israel in the Diaspora, and it was even feared that laughter could provoke another divine punishment: "On the day that Rabbi laughed," states the Nedarim treatise in the Babylonian Talmud, "punishment would come upon the world. So he said to Bar Kappara [who was a humorist], 'Do not make me laugh, and I will give you forty measures of wheat.'"951 Although the comical behavior of Bar Kappara ultimately got the better of the rabbi's austerity, provoking a resounding laugh, this passage

confirms the negative connotation that in those centuries was attributed to humour.

The image of laughter would then usually be accompanied by a contrasting cry, to somehow reinforce the antithesis between the suffering of the present and the eschatological future of joy. The figure of a man who cries and laughs at the same time often recurs in the Talmudic texts, and in the midrašim, in such a way that cheerful occasions become reasons for sorrow and vice versa. The rabbis are often represented as crying and laughing at the death-bed of a colleague,952 they lament at a wedding ceremony,953 or they observe a mysterious boy who laughs and cries while gathering herbs in a field: "'Why are you crying?' He replied: 'For the glory of my father's house which has departed.' 'And why are you laughing?' He said to me: 'Because it is stored away and kept for the righteous in the time to come; and because in the end God will cause His sons to rejoice—may it speedily come!'"954

The general attitude of grief for the exile of Israel is shared by God himself, who, according to the texts of Jewish literature of Late Antiquity, abstains from laughter, preserving it for the

single day of the final punishment of the gentiles: "Rabbi Yiṣḥaq affirms that 'Only on that day is there laughter for the Holy One, blessed be He!'"955 The rabbis of the Talmud and the midraš even substituted the image of a God who laughs with a personification of the Torah, which scoffs at the ungainly deceptions improvised by man. The midraš Genesis Rabbah, probably composed at the beginning of the fifth century, states: "The Torah laughs at men. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Judah: 'Thou didst deceive thy father with a kid of goats; by thy life! Tamar will deceive thee with a kid of goats.'"956 The divine sarcasm here is substituted with an ironic design of the fates, which repeat acts and situations, altering their meaning, thus punishing a sin with the same means that originated it.

In the early Middle Ages, a new element would be added to the reflections on the laughter of man and God: the idea of the laughter of malign forces, which make fun of human transgressions and fears. In

Deuteronomy Rabbah, a scene is described in which Samma'el, prince of evil and angel of death, waits for the soul of Moses "like a man who has been invited to a wedding feast," hoping to appropriate it, saying: 'When will Michael be weeping and when will I be filling my mouth with laughter?'"957 Even if, in the end, Moses is able to entrust his spirit directly to God, who welcomes it with a kiss, from this moment on the sardonic grin of the angel of evil remains a recurring theme in the representations of the troubles that the spirit of man comes to expect in the suffering of death.

This connection between laughter and the demonic sphere was a common element in Jewish literature of the medieval and modern ages, to the extent that unseemly and hostile sarcasm became one of the most immediately recognizable traits of the bewilderment into which the sinner is cast. It is not difficult to find

tales of angels of destruction, who torment the damned in the afterlife with scornful laughter; between the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries one thus reads, in the Sefer ḥasidim, of souls submitted to judgment in Gehenna, where they are "struck with thorns, among the amusements of the archons of evil,"958 while in the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor), composed about a century later, the name "gathering of the jeering" is attributed to the female devil, Lilit, who seduces men with her amorous play.959

Still at the height of the sixteenth century, a refined thinker such as Mošeh Cordovero speaks of a demon that assumes the appearance of a woman in order to kill children: she pretends to "look after them and to laugh together with them, but then suffocates them and steals their souls."960 Cordovero also offers a singular theoretical definition of the affinity between evil and grotesque laughter. According to the Sephardic mystic, the qelippot (the "husks")—which in the Kabbalistic lexicon indicate negative forces—"stand in front of the holy forces like a monkey in front of man. Just like the monkey, which imitates all of man's actions in a grotesque way, wanting to equal them without being able to do so, the forces of impurity reproduce, mockingly, the actions of the holy part."961 The laughter of evil seems here to express an

inadequacy, the nervous admission of the inferiority of sin, which can do no more than ape the positive action of divinity. The sarcasm of the demons is therefore an admission of the ultimate defeat of evil.

Cordovero's vulgar monkey sums up, in its senseless gestures, the negative idea of laughter that dominated Jewish culture for many centuries. The conviction of the rabbis that laughter lacked a positive function, and in turn their commitment to a particular dignity of expression, cast a shadow of suspicion on all playful manifestations, relegating them to the sphere of the illicit.962 Only with the establishment of the Hasidic movement in the eighteenth century in Eastern Europe did a thorough revision of the Judaic concept of laughter and joking occur. The popular nature of the movement, and the inclination of the Hasidic rabbis towards apologue, rendered irony a valid instrument of divulgation of the mystical doctrine. In the tales of the ḥasidim of the eighteenth century, a smile is a desired effect in the listener, dissolving tension and rendering moral teaching more easily accessible.

The provocative personality of Yiśra'el Ba'al Šem Ṭov (ca. 1700–1760), founder of the movement, gave the first impulse to that singular medley of irreverence, enthusiasm, and religious piety that would characterize the spirituality of Eastern European, and specifically Polish, Judaism. In the legend of Ba'al Šem, the very rich, the well-educated, and those who are excessively serious, become objects of a satire which is at times pitiless. The intent was to demonstrate how the pious man can also search for the Lord through the good-natured admission of his own defects and a cheerful disposition of spirit.963 Hasidic laughter is therefore, first of all, a practical bent, which creeps into many aspects of daily life, but there is also no lack, in the more learned authors, of theoretical reflections about the necessity of maintaining a blithe attitude in confronting adversity.

According to Naḥman of Bratslav, a descendent of Ba'al Šem Ṭov active at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, joy is the only instrument that man has at his disposal to

draw nearer to God: "When you are always cheerful you can open your heart and show that which is in it before the Lord, blessed be He, but if you are afflicted with sadness you are not even able to concentrate."964 Instead of a threat to religious devotion, laughter becomes an aid, the only aptitude that permits the soul to search its thoughts. For Naḥman, the journey towards God even passes through futility, which almost assumes the value of a religious precept: "Since, apparently, it is not possible to attain joy if not by means of futile things, it is necessary to become like a madman and give oneself over to laughter. In fact, when man attains joy, the Lord, blessed be He, takes care to protect him."965

Feared for a long time by rabbinic Judaism, laughter now becomes the extreme offering that, although depriving the Ḥasid of the provisional refuge of normality, earns him divine protection.

שכינה Šekinah
Presence

The image of the Šekinah belongs to Judaism's most essential patrimony, and expresses the idea of God's presence, immaterial, yet, at the same time, almost tangible. This feminine word, which in Aramaic expands to the sonorous Šekinta, offers the Jewish tradition the possibility of concisely expressing the emotive intuition of rapport with the transcendent. The term, which does not appear in the Bible, stands out above all others in the Aramaic translations from the first centuries of the Common Era (which take the name Targumim), becoming more frequently used in the Haggadic literature.

The appearance of the idea of Šekinah in the Targumim reflects a change in Jewish religious conceptions, since the relationship between God and man, which no longer has the immediacy of Biblical times, is now expressed through intermediate realities, which attenuate the divine radiance. In the Aramaic versions, the Šekinah is thus interposed in the sentences that put man into direct contact with God, like a veil that permits just a glimpse of an indistinct outline. When, for example, Noah, blessing his own son, prays that God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall live in the tents of Shem (Gen. 9.27), the Targum of Onkelos translates: "The Lord shall enlarge Japheth and make his Šekinta to hover in the tents of Shem." In the Song of Moses, the verse You have guided them in your strength to your holy habitation (Exod. 15.13) is translated in the Targum Neofiti as "You have guided them, with your strength, to the habitation of the house of the Šekinah of your holiness (byt škynt qwdšk)." In the first case, the image of the divinity that shares the tent with the patriarch's son is extended according to a theological scheme, in which the incommensurable distance between God and man appears to be filled by

the protective Presence. While the Bible invoked God's concrete "habitation" through the tent of Shem, in the Targum the Šekinah is made to "hover," as if suspended between the sky from which it comes and the earth over which it presides. In the Song of Moses, on the other hand, the Šekinah slips into the flow of the Biblical sentences as an expressive delay, which permits the translator ample anachronisms. Where the original text expressed the Israelites' joy at having left Egypt towards the land of Canaan, the Targumim's addition opens onto the scenario of the Jerusalem Temple, "the house of the Šekinah," by way of antonomasia, which the rabbinic exegetes saw as implicit in Moses's invocation.

Moreover, the root škn is contained in the etymon of Šekinah, which means "inhabit, dwell," and which evokes a sense of permanent connection between the Jewish people and the divine Presence: the Šekinah dwells where Israel resides, and not in other nations. According to the Berakot treatise of the Babylonian Talmud, Moses asks the Lord "that the Divine Presence should rest upon Israel, and it was granted to him [...] He asked that the Divine Presence should not rest upon the idolaters, and it was granted to him."966

The destiny of the Šekinah and that of Israel are bound up in an indissoluble way, to the extent that the divine Presence follows the Jewish people in their unstable exiles; in one of the oldest midrašim, probably composed at the end of the fourth century, we read: "You will find that any place the exiled Jews went, the Šekinah, so to speak, went into exile with them. They went into exile in Egypt and the Šekinah went there [...] exiles went into Babylon, and it went with them [...] they went to Elam and the Šekinah accompanied them there [...] they were in Edom and it was with them [...] when they return, the Šekinah will return together with them."967 The divine Presence therefore

accompanies the stages of the Diaspora with a movement that recalls a unison distorted by an imperceptible temporal delay: it follows its people with the delay of a shadow, projecting itself towards the sky rather than the earth.

Even if its connection with this collective identity is essential to the notion of divine Presence, many texts from Late Antiquity speak of encounters between individuals and the face of the Šekinah, thus offering early traces of its trait as a consoling allegory of light. When a generation has not been worthy of the Šekinah, rather than hovering over all of Israel, it keeps itself for only a few, or even just for a single righteous person, as the Babylonian Talmud narrates in connection with Hillel the Elder and other sages of legendary piety: "There came a voice from heaven which announced, 'There is in your midst one man who is deserving that the Šekinah should alight upon him, but his generation is unworthy of it.'"968

The apparition of the Šekinah is described at times by the rabbis of the Talmud as a vision in a mirror, which for the most fortunate will be sharp, while for many it will be opaque.969 This metaphor seems related to the idea of the divinity that is reflected on earth, but the mirror suggests the search for a face, which can be seen for a fleeting moment: the countenance of the Šekinah bathed in light is always cited, even though it lacks any anthropomorphic traits. To indicate this notion of light that accompanies the concept of Šekinah, the rabbinic texts almost exclusively use the term ziw,970 the same term that Aramaic and post-Biblical Hebrew also reserve for the radiant

aspect of the face of man, which denotes health, together with a sense of complete happiness.971

From the splendor of the Šekinah the soul nourishes itself. Contemplating it allows one not to feel hunger: Moses lived on it on Mount Sinai, as the midraš Exodus Rabbah recalls, where God promises, "Thou wilt be near Me on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. Thou wilt not eat nor drink, but wilt feast on the splendor (me-ziw) of the Šekinah."972 Equally, the righteous of the future world feed on this splendor, as stated, among other places, in the Berakot treatise of the Babylonian Talmud: "In the future world there is no eating nor drinking [...] but the righteous sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the divine Presence."973

In some legendary developments, the light that emanates from the face of the divine Presence assumes the traits of food reserved for the multitude of angels, thus becoming a true nourishment of immortality, similar to the ambrosia of the classical tradition, to the Avestan haoma, and the Indian soma: "The celestial beings [the angels]"—affirms Genesis Rabbah—"and the terrestrial ones [men] were created at the same time, yet the celestial beings are fed by the radiance of the Šekinah, whereas the terrestrial beings, if they do not toil, do not eat."974

Although the light radiated by the Šekinah is not of this world, it has a physical location in that, according to phrases frequently repeated in the Haggadic texts, "the Šekinah is in the west."975 This affirmation, at first glance surprising, seems to reconnect with the tradition of the Temple of Jerusalem, where the Holy of Holies was situated in the west, the direction

towards which the faithful turned during the cult.976 This suggests the idea that the Šekinah is situated in opposition to the rising sun, and that the devotees, turning towards it during the cult, turned their backs to the sun, instead of placing themselves in front of it, as occurred in the rites of other ancient peoples.977

In the early Middle Ages, under the influence of Islamic theology, Jewish philosophers found themselves confronted with the problem of the anthropomorphic representations of God present in the Bible, and the necessity of interpreting them in terms more consistent with aniconic thought. They therefore sought to attenuate the almost physical traits that the Šekinah had assumed in the rabbinic teachings of Late Antiquity.978 At the beginning of the tenth century, for example, Sa'adyah Ga'on, head of the academy of Sura in Babylon, explains that "the sages defined Šekinah " as a "a nobler form than that of the angels, of magnificent character, splendid with light," which was produced with the Creator's fire, "with the aim of ensuring his prophet that it was actually Him in person addressing the word to him."979 Sa'adyah's intention was evidently that of maintaining a clear separation between

the invisible God and his manifestation of light, which is thus reduced to a sort of

conventional sign, similar to a rhetorical figure of speech. This formulation tended to leave the celestial aspect of the Šekinah in the shadows, pushing it rather towards the terrestrial sphere, as "something created" by God to instruct men and to communicate his will to them.

In the work of another medieval Jewish philosopher, Yehudah ha-Lewi (before 1075–1141), the function of the Presence was also a sort of intensification of man's cognitive faculty, which, thanks to prodigious divine aid, can grasp reality with absolute precision: "One of the great miracles of the Šekinah"—states the Sefer ha-Kuzari (The Book of the Khazar)—"was that [at the time of the exodus] small sins [like spots] were rendered immediately manifest on the walls of the house and on clothes; and if the sins continued, it was rendered manifest on the body [...] the priests were endowed with a sharp consciousness that enabled them to recognize [leprosy] that was of divine origin."980

The idea that the Šekinah represented an increase in human possibilities is expressed in similar terms in the earliest texts of Kabbalistic literature. In the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), probably composed in southern France in the second half of the twelfth century, the Šekinah feeds Israel as water sprinkles the tree: "The forces of the Lord, blessed be He, are placed one inside the other, and resemble a tree. As the tree produces fruit thanks to water, so the Lord, blessed be He, increases the powers of the tree by means of water [...] Thanks to what do the [the waters] flow? Thanks to Israel: when in fact the Israelites are pious and devoted, the Šekinah dwells among them, and in their works, in the bosom of the Lord, blessed be He: he renders them fertile and causes them to multiply."981

The metaphor of the tree clearly expresses the vertical structure that would thereafter constantly characterize the Šekinah in mystical thought. In fact, the Bahir alludes to the tree of the

sefirot, which place themselves one above the other to exercise the celestial rule of the cosmos.982 Within this scheme, the Presence was

habitually identified with the lowest sefirah, malkut (kingdom), the closest to the material world, as it had been, in the Haggadah of Late Antiquity, the divine manifestation closest to man.

During the thirteenth century the Kabbalists set up a system of correspondences between the ancient notion of Šekinah and malkut, transforming this tenth sefirah into the more densely symbolic image of medieval thought. The term Šekinah became a link in the chain of appellatives that connoted the functions carried out by malkut in the dynamic movement of creation. Since they represented a constant becoming, the attributes and names of the Šekinah—and of malkut—were interchangeable, and were often used in sequence, based on the addition of their semantic values. In his Commentary on the Haggadot, 'Azri'el of Gerona, who lived in the first half of the thirteenth century, simply drew distant notions together: "Every time the Scriptures express the concept of 'protection,' it is in speaking of the angel of glory, which our sages of blessed memory called 'cherubs,' Šekinah, or the attribute of rigor."983 'Azri'el passes here from the abstract idea of protection to a personification deduced from the Biblical lexicon, the angel of glory, and then resorts to the vocabulary of the Haggadah, drawing the feminine word Šekinah near to the masculine cherub, and to the theological concept of the attribute of rigor.

This kind of speculation carried with it a change in the concept of Šekinah, to the point that, in modern scholarship, the Kabbalistic notion of the divine Presence is often assimilated and confused with the general characteristics of malkut. On the contrary, although it was introduced into the weave of correspondences of the attributes of malkut, the idea of the Šekinah preserved its own connotations. In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splen-

dor), for example—the great classic that cemented thirteenth century Kabbalah—certain speculations from Late Antiquity often recurred: the Presence "hovers" above the Jewish people, accompanies them in exile, shows its face or, conversely, hides it. The Šekinah represents only one of the aspects of malkut, namely the relationship between the last link of the chain of emanation and the people of Israel;

although conceived within the new Kabbalistic theosophy, this link is expressed through the ancient figure of a divine Presence of light.

The term Šekinah recurs more than two thousand times in the *Zohar*ic literature, clearly demonstrating the emotive intensity of this notion, suspended between a formal fidelity to the past and a strongly innovative theoretical amplification. In the *Zohar*, the divine Presence has a fundamental role, often characterized by striking images and original narrative digressions. One of the most evident novelties in this respect is the opposition between a lower (Šekinta tatta'ah) and a higher Šekinah (Šekinta 'illa'ah).984 According to the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar*, the higher Presence is the sefirotic archetype of the lower one, and is identified with binah, the sefirah of intelligence, through which the influence of the emanation descends down to malkut to feed the terrestrial creatures. This dividing of the concept of Šekinah into two separate sefirotic levels reintroduces the idea—which would also be acknowledged by the mystics of successive centuries—that no aspect of the real can be explained by itself, but rather must be inserted into an articulated composition and repelling of the divine forces. The higher and lower Šekinah represent, in this scheme, principles of feminine character, which in their turn join with a pair of masculine elements: ḥokmah, the sefirah of wisdom at the supernal level, and tif'eret, that of beauty, in the

lowest sphere. The cosmic equilibrium therefore occurs only when the Šekinah, in its two levels, is united with its companion, in purely allegorical terms in the higher level but with strong physical particulars when it comes to the union of the Šekinah with tif'eret. In this last case, the two lower elements are called malka, "the king," and matroniṭa, or likewise "the Holy One" and "the community of Israel," and their union marks the true fulfillment of the divine design: when they are joined "in the embrace, everything is united together without any separation."985

The symbolic function of the Šekinah is not exhausted by its role in the supernatural sphere, but also spans daily religious life, extending even to the amorous relationship between husband and wife. It is

personified in several passages of the *Zohar*, and acts with markedly emotive traits, at times being useful to the devotees, at others punishing the impious. A passage, contained in the second book, tells that "the Šekinah comes and finds in the Synagogue one person who has arrived there before anyone else [...] She becomes closely acquainted with him, and promotes him to the grade of 'Righteous,'"986 while elsewhere the sentence, "I kill with my Šekinah him who is guilty, and preserve by it him who is innocent," is attributed to the Lord.987 The Presence is, on other occasions, a sort of invisible projection of the terrestrial wife: "The time that a man is on his travels he should be very careful of his actions, in order that Šekinah may not desert him." However, the fullness of the divine Presence will be realized only at the moment of the reunion, when the husband returns home and "it is his duty to give his wife some pleasure, because it is she who procured for him that heavenly protection."988 In imitation of the celestial archetype,

the sexual union is seen as an act of religious piety, in which the physical pleasure of the spouse provokes joy in the Šekinah.989

At the end of the sixteenth century, with the popularization of the Lurianic Kabbalah, the sefirotic symbolism of the divine Presence would largely shed the wealth of images that characterized it in the *Zohar*. The Lurianic teaching, which dominated the Jewish esoteric movement of the modern age, was very bold in conception but almost lacking in narrative, and lacking in the animated personifications typical of medieval mysticism. While the Šekinah adopted the role of the first level in the mystical framework of the *Zohar*, in Luria its function is circumscribed above all to the topos of the exile, which is seen as a metaphor for the obfuscation of the celestial light in the lower levels of creation, in a particularly oppressive darkness during the profane time. In Luria's thought, it is only on the Sabbath, that is, when the dominion of the sacred is reestablished, will the Šekinah recover in part its splendor, in a kind of anticipation of the redemption from exile that will be fulfilled in the Messianic era: "And behold, in the ferial days

the Šekinah [...] is in exile between the qelippot990 [...] but on Sabbath it rises from within the qelippot toward heaven and is no longer in exile."991

In some authors of the Lurianic school, the idea of resplendence and obscurity of the Presence was at times treated with surprising results. According to Avraham Azulai (ca. 1579–1643)—a Kabbalist born in Fez, in Morocco, and who moved to the Land of Israel—the declining light of the Šekinah tells the story of the Jewish exile, since, after the destruction of the Temple, the light of the Presence "was lessened and diminished little by little [...] level by level, and in a proportionate measure the light and divine providence become less and disgraces are

strengthened [...] so that we are far from sacredness for a corresponding interval."992 The progressive alteration of the Šekinah's original splendor assumes in this passage traits of physical reality: "Those who know how to calculate and determine the extent of this process," Azulai continues, "how much it is extended, and how much we descend day by day, will know the duration of our exile and the moment of redemption."993 The Presence is therefore assimilated here into a celestial body that, like the moon, has a visible and measurable waning phase.

Intent upon contemplating the sky of history with the instruments of Kabbalistic astronomy, this seventeenth century mystic would not betray the changing nature of the Šekinah, whose slow and inexorable lessening would have to be measured until the final outcome, when the exile would be saturated with the darkness that would herald the Messianic neomenia.

Šel צל
Shadow

The shadow of trees outlines, in the landscape of the Land of Israel, a provident geography of shelter and protection, which invites respite. The Biblical verb most frequently associated with ṣel, "shadow," is ḥsh, which means "find shelter," but also "have faith," and "lean on," thus conveying the idea of a confiding repose, which can also be the occasion for a celebration. In its literal meaning, the shadow of plants is recalled in some Scriptural passages with a vividness that surely reflects the daily experience of the desert landscape. In the lament on Assur, the downcast people are compared to a tree that ceases to shelter those who dwelt under his shadow (Ezek. 31.17), while, in the parable of Jotham, the motif of the shadow serves to suggest a paradoxical, impossible action, that of the bramble that invites the other trees to protect themselves under its hostile thorns: And the bramble said to the trees, If in truth you anoint me king over you, then come and put your trust in my shadow (Judg. 9.15).994

The physical shadow then, figuratively becomes one of the most effective epithets of divine protection. The most frequent locution used

to indicate the shelter offered by God to the faithful is be-ṣel kenafeka, "in the shadow of your wings," which seems to give voice to an ancient mythological substratum, and which implies the image, widespread in the entire ancient Near East, of the winged disc as a symbol of the divine immanence in reality. This image perhaps contains an unspoken comparison between the rhythmic extension of the birds' limbs and the fluctuation of the shadows of things, which shorten and stretch themselves out, according to the turning of the sun.

In the shadow of your wings I will rejoice,995 states a psalm (63.8), to express the idea of the comfort of divine protection and of the peacefulness derived from it.996

In some Biblical statements, ṣel serves to qualify the short and uncertain extension of human life, with comparisons that suggest fragility or consumption. The shadow becomes a metaphor for man's destiny, and human life is compared to the precarious passage of the shadow that at evening, after having extended itself to the extreme, disappears: I am gone like the shadow at evening (Ps. 109.23). Here the Hebrew usage designating the duration of existence with the plural "days" guides the transposition of the shadow from its proper meaning to the metaphorical; the end of life becomes no more than the loss of a single great day to the dark dissolution of the night. In this way, individual shadows are swallowed by an indistinct darkness: My days are like an evening shadow (102.12).997 The idea, largely attested to in other ancient traditions, can be glimpsed here, that life is not only similar to the transitoriness of the shadow, but depends directly on it, since when man is about to die his shadow abandons him. In the book of Job, the end of man is marked by the expression He shall not cast a shadow (Job 15.29),998 to signify the moment of passage, when the figure's visible projection loses its union with light.

In addition to ṣel, Hebrew possesses a specific term, arduous to translate, which indicates the disappearance of the con-

tours of things in the unique darkness of the end: ṣalmawet, considered by the tradition as a composite of ṣel and mawet, "death," is a "shadow-death."999 Even if philologists consider this interpretation

a merely popular etymology, prefering to render the word as a derivative of the root ṣlm, which indicates darkness,1000 the congealing into a single phonetic sequence of the union "shadow-death" finds a surprising parallel in the Vedic tradition.

Among the folds of the poetry of the Ṛg-Veda, a contrary and complementary symbolic sequence suddenly appears—chāyāmṛta—which literally means "shadow-immortality." The Vedic hymn, which ascends to the God whose name is unknown, he "who gives life, who gives strength, and from whom all the gods acknowledge orders"—pauses for a moment at the mystery of his shadow: "His shadow is immortality and death."1001 A primordial symbolism of the shadow's sacredness surfaces in this passage. According to this symbolism, the shadow was considered immortal insofar as it was liberated from the body, but also subject to death in that it was connected to ephemeral existence. Even if the Sanskrit here entirely preserves an enunciation of the double import of the shadow, the Vedic verse seems sus-

pended on the first part of the syntagma, which pivots on chāyāmṛta, "shadow-immortality," and thus emphasizes the aspect that unites it with the splendor of eternity.

On the contrary, traces of the somber "shadow-death" remained in the Biblical śalmawet, which at once means exile from light and the inner desert of anxiety. Śalmawet evokes a frightening passage or a provisional dwelling in which man's limbs are soaked in desperation: Those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death (śalmawet), bound in affliction and iron (Ps. 107.10); this is the lament for the Israelites' state of slavery. After a few verses, however, this image of fatal darkness is reversed through redemption: Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he saved them from their distresses. He brought them out of darkness and the shadow of death, and broke their bonds asunder (Ps. 107.1314).

In ancient times, precisely due to its character of unseizable mobility, the shadow could serve as a metaphor for both life and death, and was able to accommodate the mysterious antitheses of the divine. The inconstancy of the contours of things was, for one, not considered

a simple caprice of light, but testimony to the impulse that God's will imprints on reality. Confirmation of this idea appears in a sequence in sura XXV of the Koran (al-Furqān), in which the attribute of mobility is conferred upon the shadow by divine will: "Hast thou not seen how thy Lord hath spread the shadow—And if He willed He could have made it still—then We have made the sun its pilot; Then We withdraw it unto Us, a gradual withdrawal?"1002 The metaphoric shadow of the Koran hastens behind the sun's motion, even though it could certainly remain immobile; by God's decree it is nevertheless recalled to the sky, to demonstrate its faithful submission to the unknowable.

In the rabbinic traditions of Late Antiquity, which precede this sura by several centuries, the shadow instead appears juxtaposed between present and future, since it serves to describe an actual state that will however be completely transformed by God's intervention. In some midrašic passages, "darkness and the shadow of death" accompany the evil that reigns among men, even though, in the future, the shadow will be removed by the Lord, who will restore the earth to light: "For as long as the Evil Tempter exists in the world," states the midraš Genesis Rabbah, "thick darkness and the shadow of death are in the world; when the Evil Tempter will be uprooted from the world, thick darkness and the shadow of death will pass away from the world."1003 The time of this transformation is the Messianic future, in which Israel's political dignity will be restored, and all nations will be delivered from evil.

In a passage of Leviticus Rabbah, the relationship between the shadow and historical becoming is expressed through the metaphor of the shadow of Esau, the Biblical figure with whom the sages of the Haggadah symbolized the non-Jew: "So also as long as the shadow of Esau endures, so long do Israel appear as if they were wilting in this world. In the World to Come, however, Esau's shadow will go away and Israel will thrive more and more."1004 In this text, the ancient idea of the shadow as a sign of physical persistence coexists with the image of aridity used to indicate evil fortunes; the shadow of Esau thus seems to extend over the entire earth, creating however not a cooling effect, but rather an unbearable heat that burns Israel's vitality.

But the metaphoric resources of ṣel seem almost inexhaustible: in one place in the Genesis Rabbah, the shadow's meaning changes, becoming the symbol of the eschatological future of justice: "As the shadow of the palm and the cedar is cast afar, so is the reward of the righteous far away [in the

future world]."1005 This sentence, which recurs in a long comparison between these two trees and honest men, introduces the notion of the shadow as the anticipation of future events, an idea that would undergo a remarkable development in the following centuries.

Already amply attested in Jewish literature of Late Antiquity, the magical practices of foretelling the future using shadows continued during the entire Middle Ages and, at least sporadically, up until the eighteenth century. The belief that hidden events could be deduced from shadows itself has an extensive meta-cultural history, whose echo can also be sensed in the lexicon of European languages. The English "foreshadow," which essentially means "foresee," recalls for example the tenacious heredity of a divination sought in the seminal uncertainty of semblances, or in the examination of the dark profiles of persons or things.

A ritual necessary to examine one's reflection in the darkness appeared in the Horayot treatise of the Babylonian Talmud, its first instance in a Jewish text. This ritual belonged to the mantic practices that were carried out in the symbolic ten-day period that stretches from the Jewish New Year to the Day of Atonement: "Rabbi Ammi said [...] 'He who desires to set out on a journey and wishes to ascertain whether he will return home again or not. Let him station himself in a dark house; if he sees the reflection of his shadow he may know that he will return home again.'"1006 The Talmud nevertheless adds a sentence that advises against this practice: "This, however, is not a proper thing to do, lest his courage fail him and he meet with misfortune in consequence."

Despite the caution of the Talmudic sages, the interrogation of the shadow must have been fairly widespread among the Jews of the

Mesopotamian region, at least in esoteric circles. In a text that probably dates from the seventh or eight century, we find preserved the

description of a very complicated ritual. The adept prepares for a mystical ascent, whose final aim is to "wear" the name of God, in order to achieve complete dominion over nature. Before confronting the dangers associated with the magical operation, the initiate had to be sure of his own inner energy, and needed to prepare himself with a seven-day fast. He then had to go, by night, close to a source of water and, after invoking a holy name, was to focus on the shadow1007 that would be silhouetted in the air; if it appeared green, the adept would still be impure, and would have to fast for another seven days, but if it appeared red and vivid, he would know that he was pure and ready to carry the divine name.1008

This practice represents the Jewish application of a magical procedure known also to the Indian tradition, where it takes the name of chāyāpuruṣa, literally "man of shadow." Indeed, the Śiva purāṇa (a text that probably dates from the first centuries of the Common Era) prescribes that he who completes the rite wear a white garment, garlands, and scent himself with incense, and then stand with the sun or moon to his back and focus on the color of the shadow in the air: if it is white, he is virtuous; if it is dark, impure; if red, hemmed in by obligations; if yellow, threatened by enemies.1009 Beyond its particular interpretation of the colors, the Sanskrit text seems extraordinarily close to the Jewish document, not least in the transposition of gestures from a purely mantic sphere into a mystical context—in the Jewish sources, the shadow does not

herald only future fates, but measures the intensity of spiritual readiness, much as, in the ritual of the chāyāpuruṣa, the man who is completely able to see his white shadow obtains full consciousness, becoming a yogin.

In addition to the divination according to colors of the shadow, the Śiva puraṇa discusses the prophecy related to any incompleteness of the silhouette, foretelling the loss of faculties within six months for anyone who catches sight of his own shadow lacking the head; if it is

without a chest, his wife will die; if it is without legs, he will lose his property; an absence of feet foretells a journey or exile in a faraway land; and a lack of arms indicates the loss of relatives.

Similarly, the Jewish tradition widely attests to the idea that an incomplete or even missing shadow anticipates the disappearance of the individual, as if the dark silhouette would fly away first and then wait for the body in the afterlife.1010 The conviction that a partial or absent shadow foretells approaching death is documented in certain works by the Ashkenazic Ḥasidim of the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth centuries, even if the tone of these tales makes it clear that these beliefs have a long history behind them. The moment chosen for the observation of the shadow was the evening preceding Hoša'na rabbah, the seventh day of the celebration of Sukkot, on which it was believed that every man's destiny was sealed.1011 "On the evening of Hoša'na rabbah"—writes El'azar of Worms in his Sode razayya—those who have a shadow will

live, while those who do not possess one, and project a small head without a neck, will die within a year."1012

The ritual that helps one to discover defects in one's dark double can be providential, since through fasting and expiation it is possible perhaps to modify the divine verdict. In the Sefer ḥasidim (The Book of the Pious), a rich collection of legends widespread in the Rhine area in the Middle Ages, one reads of a Jew who, on "the evening of Hoša'na rabbah, does not see the shadow of his own head;" very frightened, "he gives himself over to a strict fast together with those closest to him, makes abundant alms, and in this way is able to survive many years."1013 A tale marked by similar ethical concerns is to be found, about a century later, in the work of the Italian Kabbalist Menaḥem Recanati, who inserts a short anecdote into his Commentary on the Pentateuch: "I heard from the mouth of trustworthy and faith-abiding people of a man who had no more shadow and who immediately repented. The Lord then pardoned his sins so that the shadow

reappeared on his head, in the same night, to protect him from evil."1014

Original narrative reworkings of the connection between death and the disappearance of the shadow are present in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the work that crowns the Sephardic Kabbalah of the late thirteenth century. In a passage contained in the first book, for example, the period that announces the end lasts for an entire month from the symbolic night of Hoša'na rabbah, during which the shadow grows faint until it finally disappears: "We have learnt that during

those thirty days the superior soul departs from him every night and ascends to the other world and sees its place there. The man does not know it and is not conscious of it, since he lost control of his soul [...] Rabbi Yehudah said: 'When those thirty days begin, a man's shadow becomes dark and his form is not outlined on the ground.'"1015 Under the conception of the *Zohar*'s author, the shadow is no longer a simple projection of the body, or a magical nuncio of its end, but the indication of a person's vital energy. The shadow is transformed here into a sort of extension of man's intellect, an adrift consciousness, which, in its progressive weakening, follows the annihilation of the mind.

In later mysticism, this *Zohar*ic lesson was generally accepted, even if there were attempts to reroute the symbolism of ṣel in an abstract direction. In the Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates) of Mošeh Cordovero—composed at the middle of the sixteenth century—the shadow became a fundamental element of mystical rhetoric, since through the shadow it was possible to exemplify the nature of the relationship that runs between the divine and human levels. Cordovero intended to confute the idea, advanced by some Kabbalists, that the sefirot could be mirror images of celestial forces, namely a reverse transposition of divine energies. Against this hypothesis, which included the dangerous prospect of an ethical subversion, Cordovero objected that man is not a mirror but a shadow of God, and that his actions therefore do not reflect, but rather project, the divine intention, keeping its original direction: "Man is the heavenly shadow, which is

materialized and becomes bigger in this world [...] it follows that his right corresponds to the right of

the heavenly things and his left to their left, as in the shadow the right corresponds to the right of the source. This is the root and fundament of faith and devotion."1016

The principle sanctioned by Cordovero with such acute intuition restored to the symbolism of the shadow the dignity of a moral metaphor, after a long magical interlude in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. In his Liqquṭe Moharan, Naḥman of Bratslav, a Hasidic rabbi active between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, utilized the image of the shadow to allude to the difficult path of moral perfection which leads to wisdom. Here the use of ṣel belongs to the same conceptual approach as that of Cordovero. According to Naḥman, "all the defects found in man depend on man himself, since the light of the blessed Name always shines on him, and he alone makes a shadow with his evil works," condemning himself to darkness.1017 Šel is a deeply human notion here, identified with the material screen that hinders the completion of God's design. The true shadow is, for Naḥman, ambition, that is, the affirmation of one's self, from which, according to the Hasidic teachings' exhortations, one should distance oneself: "If a man annuls himself to the point of not belonging to this world, he is no longer overcast by shadow and receives the light of the blessed Name that is, in its essence, the glory [...] and for this the wise, who make themselves nothing, become worthy of the glory, since they do not cast shadows that limit it, already being completely free from matter."1018 In the dominion of wisdom, which man can reach only after having annihilated pride, shadows no longer stand out by their profiles, but merge in the unique indistinct splendor of divine will.

Šelem צלם
Image

In the first chapter of Genesis, the divine intention to create man is anticipated by a verb which is unexpectedly made to agree with the plural, described with a hendiadys and finally summarized through a repetition. And God said, Let us make man (Gen. 1.26); here for the first time the plural is welcomed into the tale of creation, and opens a theological question that would persist for the entire history of exegesis. Is it a pluralis maiestatis that expresses the intensity and solemnity of the decision, or is it a recommendation taken from the heavenly court, as Philo's Hellenistic interpretation suggests?1019 It is clear that this resolution seems to lead coherently to the double modality that it realizes: in our image, after our likeness (be-ṣalmenu ki dmutenu). The accumulation of two synonyms—ṣelem and demut—plays on the alliteration of the pronominal suffix nu, "our," and on the variations of the two prefixes be, "in," and ki, "after," which create an effect of slight semantic distortion.

Several interpreters have noted the contrast of exterior form and spiritual archetype in the distinction between "image" and "likeness," although the sequence of terms suggests rather a chronology of aesthetic perception, which first grasps the indistinct outline of an object and then discerns its significant features. The Latin expressions forma et lineamenta or formae figure, which transpose into words the rapid process of visual focusing and inner reassembling that gives spatial depth and emotive relief to perceptions, can be compared to the Hebrew hendiadys of ṣelem and demut.

In contrast to the events of the second chapter, in which God models man from dust, in this first version a creation

devoid of details is arrived at directly, whose meaning is again epitomized in a double sequence: So God created man in His own image,

in the image of God created He him; male and female He created them (Gen. 1.27). The Hebrew sentence here seems subject to a principle of mirroring, whereby an axis of symmetry passes through the repetition be-ṣalmo be-ṣelem, "in His own image, in the image," which not only entails a rhetorical reinforcement but also serves to emphasize the idea of a projection of the original, already implicit in the notion of ṣelem. The pair zakar u-neqevah, "male and female," at the end of the verse, corresponds to the reiteration of the word "image," as if the distinction between the two sexes represents the outcome of the union between the image and the imagined.

The choice of the word ṣelem as a key symbol in the tale of the creation probably indicates an awareness of the great semantic complexity that the word had acquired in the ancient Near East. From its use in other Semitic languages, it is possible to deduce an ample spectrum of meanings corresponding to the root ṣlm, which extend from the generic senses of "statue" and "symbol" to the epithet of divinity, and, frequently, they indicate the heavenly constellations. Thanks to archeological discoveries, we know that in the city of Taymā, situated in northwestern Arabia, the god Šlm was venerated; known in Latin inscriptions as Sulmus, and as Solmos in Greek, the god was represented as a winged disk, and is therefore probably to be identified with a solar divinity.1020 If to this we add, with apparent contradiction, that, in Akkadian, ṣalmo can also mean "dark" and "black," it is possible to hypothesize that the meaning of ṣlm as "image" surfaced from a metaphorical transposition of the bond of the sun with its shadows. Although lexicographers attribute the meanings of "image" and of "darkness" to homophonic but distinct roots,

"ṣlm,"1021 it is probable that the synolon of light and shadow influenced the conceptualization of the relationship between the thing represented and its representation, as an imperfect likeness that permits recognition of the model in the form that imitates it, even if in a feeling of incompleteness.

Biblical Hebrew preserves the memory of the polysemy of

ṣelem since, along with its meaning of "image" found at the beginning of Genesis, other passages suggest a meaning of "reproduction," a "simulacrum" of a divinity, a "specter" of a dream, and, finally, "shadow." In its senses of "reproduction" and "idol," ṣelem is used in the Bible in the plural to indicate the replicas of animals the Philistines used as votive offerings,1022 as well the pagans' images, to which the Biblical authors make frequent polemical reference. In the book of Numbers (33.52), the ṣalme massekotam, "their molten images," are mentioned with reference to the images of the Canaanite gods that Moses orders to be destroyed, while in other passages the simulacra of the pagan divinities seem to recall the idea of destruction, as if they could be named only to directly invoke their breakage.1023 A similar negative import of ṣelem seems to reflect the illusory character of the cult of idols, as well as the imperfect and provisional nature of those simulacra, destined to disappear as insincere semblances.

On the other hand, ṣelem also designates in Hebrew the images of dreams, which vanish upon awakening: As a dream when one awakes; so, O Lord, when you awake, you shall despise their image (ṣalmam: Ps. 73.20).1024 In this verse, which describes the unexpected end of the reprobates, ṣelem is loaded with a destiny of uncertainty, whereby the existence of the wicked is relegated to the dominion of unreality. But it is not only the actions of the impious that are a theater of nocturnal illusions—all of man's vicissitudes can be counted as a roaming marked by a shadowy passivity: Surely every man goes around like a shadow (be-ṣelem)1025 (Ps. 39.7). This is perhaps the point of utmost excursion for the meaning of ṣelem: in fact, two other similar sounding words, ṣel and ṣalmawet, usually designate "shadow" and "fatal darkness" in the Bible.1026

This divergence between the two aspects of ṣelem—the one positive, relating to the narration of the Genesis, and the other negative, connected with the Judaic rejection of idolatry—is deepened in the texts of the post-Biblical literature. The difference between the divine image and the empty simulacra constructed by men is enunciated in a very clear manner in the Midraš Tehillim, a collection composed in the

early Middle Ages, which also employs material dating from Late Antiquity. The divine ṣelem is associated here with the sphere of procreation, to suggest that the heavenly archetype contained in itself the mysterious force that transmits to the offspring not only life but also the traits, the character, and destiny of the parents: "When a man draws a figure on a wall," states the midraš, "this does not

produce another image; man instead is the figure of the Lord, blessed be He, as it is said, God fathered a son in his own likeness, after his image (Gen. 1.27) and also the man generates children in his image, as it is said [Adam ...] fathered a son in his own image and likeness (Gen. 5.3)."1027

The creation of man in God's image therefore seems to seal a certain continuity that also involves the transmission of an identity and of a specific cultural connotation. According to the sages of the Haggadah, ṣelem, as indissoluble union of male and female, is the only one that can claim to be divine: "In our image, after our likeness; neither man without woman nor woman without man, and neither of them without the Šekinah," affirms Rabbi Simla'y, active in the second half of the third century.1028 In this case, the mention of the Šekinah specifically underlines the rabbinic idea of procreation as a sign of divine favor, but also as a duty of the primordial Adam, as well as his successors.

Ḥiyya ben Gamda, another rabbi who lived in the Land of Israel between the third and fourth centuries, recalled the necessity of reconstructing, through marriage, the unity of the ṣelem of Genesis; a man without a wife, he affirms, "is an incomplete man, as it is stated, Male and female He created them and blessed them [...] and called their name 'man' (Adam) (Gen. 5.2), i.e., when they were both as one they were called 'man,' but when they are not both as one they are not called 'man.' Some say that [when unmarried] a man diminishes the Divine Image, as it is stated, For in the image of God made He man (Gen. 9.6)."1029

While in this case, and in other parallel passages, the divine image serves to recall ethical character to the continuity of the family, in a

celebrated text of the midraš Genesis Rabbah, the mirror-like character of ṣelem gives way to an extreme formulation,

making the first creature a composite of man and woman: "Rabbi Yirmeyyah ben El'azar said: 'When the Holy One, blessed be He, created Adam, He created them a hermaphrodite' [...] Rabbi Semu'el ben Naḥman said: 'When the Lord created Adam He created them double-faced, then He split them and made them of two backs, one back on this side and one back on the other side.'"1030 The anacolutha that follow one another in the tale render with immediacy the division of the first human creature into two bodies, almost as two twins that had to be separated after birth. The "androgyne" described by the rabbis of Late Antiquity is not in fact a hermaphrodite, but the physical sum of two people, whose unity can be recomposed only through sexual union.

Elsewhere in the Haggadah, however, the primitive man claims the oneness of his image, lost in successive generations. According to the midraš Deuteronomy Rabbah, Adam said to Moses: "I am greater than you because I have been created in the image of God,"1031 implying that the divine ṣelem was his exclusive prerogative, denied to the rest of humanity. In contrast, another legend specifies that the image was transmitted from Adam to Seth, and from him to Enosh, "but from then onward Centaurs were created.' Four things changed in the days of Enosh: Mountains became [barren] rocks, the dead began to feel [the worms], men's faces became ape-like, and they became vulnerable to demons."1032 This mythical representation of centaurs and the grotesque mention of apes suggest in this case a relationship between the change in man's external aspects and his moral decadence. Indeed, the parable is based on the theoretical assumption that, from the perfect beauty of Adam, the external manifestation of his uncorrupted nature, humanity fell down into deformity, through which the divine mark was disfigured by sin.

In post-Biblical Judaic literature, the dark aspect of ṣelem is connected to the notion of sin and transgression, and to the character of offense to God assumed by the idols forged by man. As told in the midraš Tanḥuma, the images and simulacra of the pagans drive off the

God of Israel, causing the Šekinah to flee: "When they saw that I entered the Temple," God narrates, "Manasseh brought in the idol (ha-ṣelem) to make me leave. At the beginning, they made it with only one face and placed it to the west. The Šekinah took refuge, so to speak, in another corner, in order not to see the simulacrum. When Manasseh became aware of it he made four faces, so that the Šekinah saw it and left."1033 Historical truth and metaphorical transposition merge in this tale, which derives its starting point from the four-faced sculptures so common to the pagan tradition. The multiplication of the image towards the four cardinal points represented the idea of a totality expressed through anthropomorphic or theriomorphic features, and which therefore seemed to constitute the summa of the pagan violation of the aniconic precept.1034

In the Middle Ages, to the meanings of ṣelem a new interpretation was added, which became particularly important in the mystical tradition. In the work of El'azar of Worms, at the turn of the twelfth century, the term assumed the sense of a heavenly prefiguration of man's destiny, of an immaterial model preserved in heaven which determines earthly events. In El'azar, ṣelem has a strong astral connotation, as if the Ashkenazic mystic, through a textual tradition which remains unknown to us, was drawing on the very old Mesopotamian idea of the image as epithet of the constellations,1035 and thus the idea that indi-

vidual fates are not so much written as literally drawn in the sky. In the *Ḥokmat ha-nefeš* (The Doctrine of the Soul), El'azar's most ambitious theoretical work, the celestial ṣelem appears suspended among the angelic and astral natures, corresponding to man's corporeal features: "So God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him (Gen. 1.27). Why is this repeated two times here: in His image. In the image? One is the image of man, while the other refers to the image of the angel of the constellation, who is made in the likeness of man."1036 The two figures reflect one another, so that for each change in the traits of the angel a similar transformation occurs in man, which

can be predicted by one who knows how to decipher the fleeting images in the skies.

The doctrine of the double ṣelem represents the crowning achievement of El'azar's magical thought. For El'azar, to understand reality meant to be able to interpret transient appearances, the sudden and short-lived arrangements of natural phenomena into premonitory drawings of the future. The outlines of man were also considered to be the reflections of archetypes of light that, conceived in the sky much earlier than the creation of bodies, would continue to flash in the world even after dissolution: "For this reason do not be surprised"—continues El'azar—"[...] if at the bottom of a glass the appearance of someone who is already dead or wasted guises can be discerned and appears to still exist, as at the moment of the event, since the heavenly influence maintains the aspect that it had in life."1037

In his Guide of the Perplexed, Moses Maimonides (1135/38–1204) interpreted ṣelem in opposition to such a conception of magical character, which, after El'azar, spread throughout all

mysticism. The first chapter of the work opens precisely with a discussion of the semantic value of the word, which appears to contain the danger of an anthropomorphic doctrine of the divinity. "People have thought," Maimonides affirms, "that in the Hebrew language ṣelem denotes the shape and configuration of a thing. This led them to a doctrine of the corporeality of God, on tale of His saying: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."1038 In contrast to this idea, which for the philosopher represented an aberration of Jewish faith, he redefined the meaning of ṣelem in a purely abstract sense, maintaining that "it is applied to the natural form, I mean to the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is. It is the true reality of the thing insofar as the latter is that particular being. In man, it means the notion from which human understanding derives."1039 To support his thesis, Maimonides also affirms that the Biblical mentions of the word in its sense of "idol" do not refer to the external aspect, but "to the idea believed to have existed in them,"

which is to say to the spiritual meaning of the pagan cult, which was the true object of the Scriptural prohibitions.

The philosopher's brilliant and paradoxical argumentation carried to completion the transposition of ṣelem to a purely metaphorical sphere, in which the original diverse senses of the word were reduced to a single common denominator: neither the divine image nor that of the pagan simulacra have any physical reality, but are only a cognitive framework of reality, the principle of individuation that permits things to exist and, in turn, permits man to know them.

The magical vision of El'azar and Maimonides's austere reflections went on to become mixed, and would become narration in the pages of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), which, at the end of the thirteenth century, mystically summarized the entire body of Judaic knowledge. In this work, the image, often indicated with the Aramaic

term ṣeluma, holds a fundamental role for the life of man. In the author's thought, even before conception, "the spirit which has to descend into the unborn child adorns itself before the Holy King with splendid adornments, with the countenance which it is to wear in this world; and from that aspect, splendidly attired, comes forth the form (ṣelem) [...] and it comes down first to this world at the time of wedded union, from which it is never absent."1040 After birth, the ṣelem accompanies the child and halves as the child grows up: "When man grows and acquires the form in accordance with the holy image, he creates for himself a second image that joins with the first, so that one corresponds to the other. As long as two images exist in man, he is guaranteed existence, his body is alive and the spirit hovers over him."1041

This duplication of ṣelem is affirmed in the *Zohar* without any explanation, displaying the typical reticence of the important passages of the esoteric teachings. It is nevertheless easy to intuit that the establishment of a second image corresponds to the attainment of the age in which man acquires the fullness of his religious duties. In other words, in the *Zohar*ic conception, the additional image consists in a manifestation of greater spiritual intensity, and the way it is described

closely recalls the idea of a subtle body, widespread in other cultural traditions: a sort of aura that radiates from bodies to manifest the holy character. In other cultures (for example, in the Zoroastrian of ancient Iran1042) the ethereal prolongation of matter is thought of as a diffuse radiance, while the author of the *Zohar* speaks of a reduplicated image, which is rather a shade modeled on physical traits, as if life reverberates darkly around the person.

Only men are endowed with this ṣelem, which proclaims their regality in creation, so that "all the creatures of the world,

when looking up toward man, encounter the supernal sacred impress and thus are filled with fear and trembling"; still, the *Zohar* continues, when men transgress the precepts of the Torah, "their appearances transform, and they fear and dread the rest of the animal world, because their supernal form has been changed and has gone away from them."1043 The ṣelem, as a sign that was conferred upon man by God, is therefore an essential but precarious attribute, since sin can disfigure it to the point of cancelling the whole. Lacking in that defense that he unknowingly has, but which is evident to the other creatures, the individual becomes an inanimate simulacrum that waits only to be destroyed.

Šemeš שמש
Sun

In Biblical Hebrew, three different words are used to denominate the sun. Šemeš (the most frequent), is feminine as well as masculine;1044 ḥammah is only feminine, while ḥeres, very rare, is masculine.1045 This lexical richness signals the weight that the ancient Near Eastern tradition gave to the diurnal star, as well as the prominence it maintains in Hebrew. Despite its concern with distinguishing itself from the cults of the neighboring peoples, the Jewish religion shows more than a few signs of the ancient role of the sun as an element of theophany, and as an allusion to the majesty of the Lord. Even if the Scriptures intend to distance themselves from the idea of a cult of the sun, in their opposition to the ancient sun-worshiping faiths, the Biblical authors saw the sun as a manifestation of the invisible God. Therefore, in the Judaic tradition, the denial of the solar cult coexists with the image of the sun as guarantee of the order of creation, and therefore as a sign of the God of Israel.1046

The sun is first of all the representation of justice, since the light of the day, which clearly distinguishes the contours of things and manifests actions, evokes the clarity of rightful judgment. In a celebrated passage of Malachi, God enunciates the parallel between his name and the radiance of justice: But to you who

fear my name the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in its wings (Mal. 3.20). The image of the winged disc traces back to a

common pattern in the eastern tradition that, represented the radiation of the light and the movement of the star in the sky through wings, as well as, allegorically, its function of protection.1047 Other Biblical texts also seem to allude to this idea, joining the emblem of the sun to the protective function that God develops toward the weak and innocent: For the Lord God is a sun and shield [...] no good thing will he withhold from those who walk uprightly (Ps. 84.12).1048

Fragments of a solar mythology common to many cultures appear in other poetic intervals in the Bible, as, for example, in Psalm 19, where the sun is compared to a bridegroom leaving his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man when he runs a race (Ps. 19.6). A mythological elaboration is at the origin of this similarity, present also in other traditions, for example in that of the Babylonians, which venerates Aya as consort of the divine sun,1049 and in the Vedic tradition, in which S½rya, the sun, goes behind "the shining goddess Uṣas as the groom follows the bride."1050

In another passage of Psalms, God places the sun in the firmament so that it rule[s] by day (Ps. 136.8). Yet the Lord is the ruler of the stars and the sky—The day is yours, the night also is yours; you have prepared the light and the sun (Ps. 74.16)—and it is possible for him to intervene at any moment, to use them as signs manifesting his might: he can change direction, accelerate, or even arrest the solar motion altogether. In the book of Isaiah, King Hezekiah, who awaits recovery from a fatal illness, asks for proof of the truthfulness of the promise: And this shall be a sign to you from the Lord, that the Lord will

do this thing that he has spoken; Behold, I will turn the shadow of the degrees [...] ten degrees backward. So the sun turned back ten degrees, by which degrees it had gone down in the dial (Isa. 38.7-8). In the same way, divine intervention can hasten the end of the day, causing the untimely precipitation of the star toward its nocturnal dwelling: And it shall come to pass [...] that I will cause the sun to go down at noon, and I will darken the earth in the clear day (Am. 8.9). The most extraordinary portent is the halting of the sun in the midst of

heaven (Josh. 10.13) for the entire duration of an interminable battle in which Israel avenges itself against its enemies.1051

In Jewish literature following the conclusion of the Biblical canon, the sun also occupied an important position, manifested in some recurrent topoi. A first pattern is the condemnation of the pagan cult of the sun, which offends the God of Israel. In the Babylonian Talmud, it is stated that, "At the time when the sun rises and all the kings of the East and West put their crowns upon their heads and bow down to the sun, the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes at once angry."1052 In this passage—which preserves the memory of the deep connection between the sun's rising and the gesture with which the sovereign placed the crown upon his head—God's disdain for the solar cult is expressed: the Jewish rabbis refuted the pagan identification of the sun, a material and limited body, with God, transcendent and infinite.

In another Talmudic tale, a stereotyped Roman emperor, who insistently asks to see the invisible God, is the main character of an allegory on the inferior role of the sun: "The Emperor said to Rabbi Yehošua' ben Ḥananyah: 'I wish to see your God.' He

replied: 'You cannot see him.' 'Indeed,' said the Emperor, 'I will see him.' He went and placed the Emperor facing the sun during the summer solstice and said to him, 'Look up at it.' He replied: 'I cannot.' 'If you cannot look at the sun, which is but one of the ministers that attend the Holy One, blessed be He, how then can you presume to look upon the divine presence!'"1053

In other rabbinic texts, the sun's transit through the sky was enriched with narrative details that transformed mythological ideas into typically Judaic metaphors. According to a saying attributed to the Babylonian sage Rava (who died in 352), God's direct intervention causes the sun to rise every day, by pushing it out of its abode and striking it with flaming arrows.1054 In other Haggadic narratives of the same period, the sun advances, producing a screeching noise, "along the sky [...] like that of a saw cutting wood."1055 The idea of a sound produced by the sun recurs in further places in the Judaic literature of

Late Antiquity,1056 and seems to preserve a very ancient version of the belief that the motion of the stars produces harmony. In contrast to the Pythagorean conceptions, which made the spheres' movement the foundation of a secret and perfect music, the Judaic comparison between the sun's movement and the intense activity of a saw instead evokes a solid and material sky, typical of the ancient Semitic tradition.1057

Moreover, Judaic literature frequently connects the sun to Jacob. In the midraš Genesis Rabbah—a fruit of the exegetical school of Late Antiquity—in a comment to the verse that introduces the dream of the patriarch, one reads, for example: "And he lighted upon the place, He wished to pass on, but the world became like a wall before him, because the sun was set (Gen.

28.11). The rabbis affirm that this teaches that the Holy One, blessed be He, caused the sun to set prematurely, in order to speak in privacy with our father Jacob. This may be compared to a king's close friend who visited him occasionally, and the king would then order, 'Extinguish the lamps, for I desire to speak with my friend in privacy.'"1058

Further on, in the same midraš, the Jewish sages comment on another dream, in which Joseph, Jacob's son, sees the sun, the moon, and eleven stars prostrate themselves before him (Gen. 37.9). While in the Scriptures Jacob reproaches his son, saying to him: Shall I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow down ourselves to you to the earth? (Gen. 37.10), in the midraš, Jacob's response is more explicit and surprising: "Who revealed to him that my name is 'Sun?'"1059 The emphasis given to the appellative, with reference to Jacob (which is also the eponym of the Jewish nation), marks a divergence between the Biblical prose and the world of the Haggadah, where the solar symbolism regarding the patriarch is rendered completely manifest.

Nevertheless, the connection between Jacob and the sun seems to evoke, more than a blazing diurnal light, a mysterious manifestation of the star in the darkness. In fact, the solar connotation of Jacob seems

constantly destined to a nocturnal setting, which points on the one hand to the ancient myth of the sun's journey after sunset,1060 and on the other to the transfer of the star's light into the reflection of the moon, which is its vicarious and complementary image.

Jacob's nocturnal radiance, often alluded to by Biblical symbolism, as well as by midrašic exegesis, finds its fullest expression in some passages of the work of Mošeh de León, and in a particular way in a few texts of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of

Splendor), which is believed to have been composed by this Spanish Kabbalist at the turn of the thirteenth century. The occasion for illustrating the meaning of Jacob's figure is offered to the author of the *Zohar* by the passage of Genesis in which, describing Jacob's death, the Scriptures use the singular expression He gathered up his feet into the bed (Gen. 49.33). "The words"—the text states—"indicate that the sun was gathered in unto the moon. The sun does not die, but is gathered in from the world and goes inside the moon. Come and see. When Jacob was gathered in, the moon was illumined, and the desire of the supernal sun was awakened for her, because when the sun departs, another sun arises and joins itself to the first, and the moon is illumined."1061

The dark sun of the night performs here the function of the funerary sign, since it alludes to the soul's exit from the body and to its journey to the afterlife, implicitly recalling man's ultramundane journey after terrestrial life. Nevertheless, along his nocturnal way, the sun yields its light to the moon and pours into it a considerable part of the energy that had accompanied it during the day. The fusing of the great star into the minor one thus gives life to the sexual metaphor of the moon's desire for the sun, which marks the close of the *Zohar*ic passage: in its temporary death the sun flows into the moon,1062 and it is as if its radiance impregnates her, causing her to conceive the light of the new dawn.

Seneh סנה
Bush

In the episode of the burning bush, which is one of the most powerful symbols of the entire Torah, the fire represents the first crucial message of Biblical theophany. The bush that burns without being consumed is the great sight that rouses Moses's attention and assumes the value of a divine call. The visible substance of that inextinguishable fire is the first message that the Lord directs at the prophet, and contains in its fullness the intensity of the subsequent revelation. In the silent scene, the only sound that the Scriptures allow to the imagination is the hiss of the tongue of fire that envelops the angel among the brambles. Moses does not answer the vision with a scream, nor with a question, but with an inner decision: I will now turn

aside, and see this great sight (Exod. 3.3). Only at that point does his name resound twice: Moses, Moses.

When the words begin to flow, the image of the shrub in flames, almost inadvertently, disappears. In the space of three verses, the bush is named five times;1063 it will not appear again in the Hebrew Bible.1064 The frequency of word seneh1065 in these few sentences—on average every seven words—

describes a state of intense emotion, in which the bush seems to burst into the center of conscious attention. The term is always articulated in a way that indicates that it refers only to that particular bramble bush, which, among the many that probably filled the landscape, becomes great and portentous. This vision vanishes as rapidly as it emerged. With the first word pronounced by God, the form of the bush fades away, transformed into pure voice. The text continues as precisely as a ritual, and God addresses to the prophet a liturgical instruction: Do not come any closer; take off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground (Exod. 3.5). As soon as Moses follows the divine order, the dialogue with the Lord can finally begin with a description of the stages of the future redemption from Egyptian slavery.

The Biblical vision of the bush is strongly emotive and, perhaps for this reason, lacks descriptive detail: why that particular bramble was chosen is not stated, nor how it appeared, nor the reason for which the prodigious event occurred on that day and on that barren bit of mountain.

To approach these questions, the sages of the post-Biblical tradition returned countless times to that apparition. But, rather than solving the enigma, they transformed the bramble bush into other representations, which reflected the complex sedimentation of Jewish identity. The bush thus became one of the sites of Jewish symbolism, without losing the force of its enigma.

A first interpretive direction saw in the bush a dwelling of the Šekinah, the divine Presence, as suggested in the Scriptural reading. The midraš Tanḥuma maintained, for instance, that it was one of the

Lord's chosen seats to speak to Moses "until the Ark of the Covenant was realized,"1066 thus transforming the bramble into an ancient, albeit provisional, tabernacle.

A second exegesis distanced seneh from the actual circumstances of Moses's vision, transforming it unexpectedly into a representation of the Jewish people. According to the midraš Exodus Rabbah, the Šekinah descended into the bush, since "Just as the thorn-bush is the lowliest of all trees in the world, so Israel were lowly and humble in Egypt." Another rabbi, in the same passage, adds moreover that, "Just as one makes of thorns a fence for a garden, so Israel is a fence to the world." Employing a third comparison, finally, the Rabbah says, "Just as the thornbush grows near any water, so Israel grew only in virtue of the Torah that is called water."1067 For these sages of Late Antiquity, the fact that the bush blazed without burning symbolized the tenacity of the Jewish people, who bore the persecution of the Egyptians without being destroyed by it.

Another line of interpretation overturned this evaluation of the bush, and, relying on the physical character of the shrub, a tangle of branches and thorns, transformed it into a negatively marked element. This interpretation appeared for the first time in a relatively late text—the Pirqe de-rabbi Eli'ezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eli'ezer), composed in the early Middle Ages—but acquired particular vigor in the mystical literature, as well as in later Biblical exegesis. The fire that enveloped the bush "is thus Israel [...] while the bramble designates the nations of the world [...] As the fire of Israel will not consume the nations [...] so will these not extinguish the flame of the Jewish people."1068

The medieval Kabbalists focused their attention on the thorns of the bramble, accentuating this negative interpretation of the symbolism of the burning bush. At the end of the thirteenth century, in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the flame that envelops the plant in Moses's vision came to be identified with the fire of Gehenna, while the thorns represented the wicked who suffer their punishment there. Nevertheless,

since the bush does not become incinerated, the author would conclude the following: "Rabbi Yehudah said: 'We learn from here the mercifulness of the Holy One, blessed be He, towards the wicked. Thus it is written, Behold, the thornbush burned with fire, to wit, to execute judgment against the wicked, but the thornbush was not consumed (Exod. 3.2), indicating that they will not be utterly exterminated.'"1069

In another passage of the same work, the thorns even assume the value of genuine incarnations of evil, so as to represent the two paradigmatic figures of negativity, Samma'el and the serpent, which are described as coiled around the bush. This, in its turn, becomes the image of man, submitted to the flame of divine justice: the flame will destroy the evil part, but leave intact the human inclination toward the good.1070

'Ovadyah Sforno—an Italian thinker of the Renaissance—identified the bush with the evil Pharaoh and the Egyptians, and the Jewish people with the angel of the Lord, who appears in the bramble: "Behold, the thorn-bush burned with fire (Exod. 3.2) under the affliction of the ten plagues [...] around the angel: the bush burst into flames in the fire because the righteous of Israel were inside it, who are the Lord's angels."1071 While in the Biblical episode the fire underlined the sacredness of the place, and prefigured the Lord's word, in these later interpretations the flaring up of the flames in the bush symbolizes the manifestation of the inflexible justice of the God of Israel.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, Ḥayyim Vital—student and exegete of the celebrated Kabbalist Yiṣḥaq Luria—actually interpreted the bush as an apparition of the God who judges, and who prepares to punish Israel's persecutors. With the assistance of the gimaṭreya, he made the total number of all the possible transformations of Elohim (the appellative that, in the Kabbalistic tradition, designates God in his manifesta-

tion of strength and rigor) correspond to the numeric value of the word ha-seneh, "the bush": "The name Elohim gives origin to one hundred twenty permutations, the same value of the word ha-seneh. Moses wanted to approach it to see if all these permutations were

sound and established."1072 The prophet is portrayed here with the aptitude of a true Kabbalist, intrigued by the theoretical problem of the permutations of the divine name: instead of being a miraculous encounter with the supernatural, the theophany of the bush assumes, in this late sixteenth century conception, the characteristics of the mystical practice that sought access to the transcendent in the innumerable combinations of the Hebrew letters.

Finally, perhaps one of the most surprising readings of the image of the bush in flames is that attributed to Yiśra'el Ba'al Šem Ṭov, the charismatic founder of the Hasidic movement, who lived in the first half of the eighteenth century. In one textual commentary on the passage of Exodus, Ba'al Šem's grandson talks of having heard from his grandfather an extraordinary interpretation of Moses's vision and his meeting with God. This short page preserves both the immediacy of the oral preaching and the evocative force of Ba'al Šem's personality. With a few decisive features, the scene is transported to the realm of interiority: the bush that burns on the Horeb is transformed into the profane thoughts that throng the mind during prayer. "The bush in fact represents foreign and evil thoughts," while the flame is the intensity of prayer itself, and Moses's astonishment the surprise of the faithful at the "profound marvel" for the distractions that torment him. Among those digressions, however, the Lord appears; as he calls to Moses from the bush, he addresses the believers, to reveal to them the secret meaning of the occurrence. These unpleasant thoughts—explains Ba'al Šem Ṭov—are "holy sparks," particles of light, contained in the lowest aspects of reality, which, having fallen

Šeqeṭ שקט
Silence

A silent man's eyes follow a female figure intent upon drawing water from a well: And the girl was very pretty to look upon, a virgin, and no man had known her (Gen. 24.16). However, what Abraham's servant considers is not only Rebecca's exterior features, but an entire destiny, that of his own mission and that of Isaac's descendants, as yet inscrutable: And the man wondering at her held his peace, to see whether the Lord had made his journey successful or not (Gen. 24.21). He was probably silent for quite a while, since all of his ten camels managed to drink in that time, before the stillness was broken by a gesture and a question: The man took a golden ear ring [...] And said, Whose daughter are you? (Gen. 24.2223). The silence at Aram Naaraim's well is perhaps the most controlled of the entire Scriptures: not marked by the absence of words alone, but by thoughtful contemplation, in search of visible signs from which to cull the texture of future events.

In the Hebrew text, Abraham's servant is maḥariš, "silent," in a completely particular sense, deaf to the external world and intent on his own thoughts, almost lost in a daydream that keeps him away from words. The consonant sequence ḥrš, which is one of the richest and most troubled of the Hebrew lexicon, means first of all to "trace out a furrow," and therefore to "plow" or "cut into a stone" with skillfulness, but also to "be mute," "be deaf," as well as to "practice incantations" and to "be dense with trees." In this plurality of senses, the Semitic lexicography recognized four homophonic but diverse roots, even if it is possible to intuit a symbolic gradient that, from the muted sound of the engraving of a surface, extends to the magician's whisper and to the profound trace that silence engraves in the soul.

514

In the Hebrew Bible, silence often accompanies concentration and listening, and marks some episodes in which the attention of onlookers is essential for the continuation of the tale. Before promulgating his teaching to the Israelites, Moses invokes silence, saying, Keep silence,1074 and hear, O Israel; this day you have become a people to the Lord your God (Deut. 27.9).

In other cases, the call to silence has a deeper meaning, and can also require the expulsion of bystanders, to make room for a private meeting or confidence. When Aod wants to draw Eglon, king of Moab, into a trap, he approaches him with these words: I have a secret errand for you, O king; who said, Keep silence. And all who stood by him went out (Judg. 3.19). This exclamation of silence, which would cost the life of the sovereign, echoes in Hebrew with a onomatopoetic has!, an imperious interjection to which the Biblical authors frequently return. With has!, which recalls respect for royalty, an attitude of fearful distance is imposed on the subjects, and is thus befitting for those who find themselves in the presence of God.

In three different cases in the prophetic books, the terrible apparition of the Lord is accompanied by the imposition of silence: Hold your peace at the presence of the Lord God (Zeph. 1.7), the prophet Zephaniah proclaims, announcing the coming of the divine punishment; in Habakkuk, God's menacing intervention in human events provokes a sense of mute wonder: The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him (Hab. 2.20); and the relationship between God's presence in the Sanctuary and the order of silence reappears through the words of Zechariah, which add the idea

of a divine "rising": Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord; for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling (Zech. 2.17 [13] ).

These verses seem to imply the idea that men's silence needed to be confronted with God's formidable voice, bursting forth

from the heavenly abode. A deafening theophany of Yhwh is found, for example, at the beginning of a psalm, in which the divine word pierces with the tones of a tempest—The mighty God, the Lord, speaks [...] Our God comes, and does not keep silence; a fire devours before him, and there is a mighty tempest around him (Ps. 50.1-3)—although God, who dominates nature, can also order a sudden calm silence: He calms the storm, so that its waves are still (Ps. 107.29).

The resounding of the divine voice is not, however, only a frightening manifestation of the numinous, since at times it is the guarantee of the good outcome of a supplication. God's silence can be the most distressing response to a prayer, rising like a insurmountable screen beyond which it is impossible to see: Do not keep silent,1075 O God; do not hold your peace and be still, O God (Ps. 83.2), the psalmist invokes, in front of the multitude of enemies that are allied against Israel.

At the same time, in the symbolism of the ancient Near East, silence often has a negative value, and betrays not only the predicament of the one who does not know how to set themselves against misfortune, but also a coming defeat. Defeated cities are silent, as Ashkelon is silenced (Jer. 47.5) by the Egyptian army, or the Moabite settlement of Madmen: You also, O Madmen, shall be brought to silence; the sword shall pursue you (Jer. 48.2). Moreover, silence is frequently the astonished, dumbfounded legacy of death, in which cries of terror and mourning are extinguished: And the songs of the temple shall be wailings in that day, said the Lord God; many will be the dead bodies; they shall be cast out in every place. Silence! (Amos 8.3).1076

The dominion deprived of sounds and words is at times itself the dwelling of the dead. In the Biblical lexicon, dumah—one of the various Hebrew words that indicates silence—becomes the appellative of the afterlife, as in an exclamation of Psalms: Unless the Lord had been my

help, my soul would soon have dwelt in the abode of silence1077 (Ps. 94.17), which the Greek version of the Septuagint translates as parõikēsen tõi hāidēi, and Jerome's Vulgate translates as habitasset in inferno.

In the post-Biblical Jewish tradition, Dumah even became the epithet of the angel of death, to whom the ultramundane fate of most of the deceased was entrusted. According to the Babylonian Talmud, the souls of the wicked and those of mediocre conduct "are delivered to Dumah; these latter enjoy rest, whereas the others have no rest."1078 The angel of the afterlife silently executes his task, while the reprobates await the execution of their punishment with mute resignation. In fact, another passage of the Talmud states: "When a man is sentenced to death for [an offence against] a government, a hook must be placed in his mouth in order that he shall not curse the king, but in the relationship with the Holy One, blessed be He, when a man incurs [the penalty of] death for [an offence against] the Omnipresent, he keeps silence, as it is said: For You silence is praise (Ps. 65.2)."1079

During Late Antiquity, silence generally assumed a positive connotation, as an attitude of communion with the divine and an expression of modesty and individual piety. In a passage of the Mišnah, commented upon in the Talmud, it was affirmed that prayer needed to be accompanied by silent meditation, as "in

ancient times," when the pious would "be able to direct their hearts to God [...] [they] waited in silence for an hour, then prayed for another hour and once again remained in silence for the following hour."1080

The exemplary value of silence would go on to be summarized in some sentences that became proverbs, such as that attributed to Yehošua' ben Lewi, a rabbi who lived in the first half of the third century: "A word is worth a silver coin, but silence is worth two,"1081 and the affirmation contained in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmudim: "For you silence is the best praise."1082 The duty of personifying the quality of silence was entrusted moreover to certain Biblical figures, to whom Jewish folklore attributed the talent of remaining silent in particularly difficult circumstances. It is thus said

that Rachel "made silence her métier," since, "When Leah was being given to [Jacob], she knew it, yet was silent,"1083 thus earning divine favor. According to the Jewish sages, Rachel's example was followed by her descendants, among whom was Esther. Of Esther the Bible says that she had not told her country nor her people (Esther 2.20), and that therefore—the midraš adds—"This teaches that she put a ban of silence on herself."1084 Aaron also belongs to the classification of righteously silent people; according to the midraš Leviticus Rabbah, he was able to remain silent in the face of the death of his own children, even though they had been God-fearing: "When Aaron heard that his sons had been God-fearing, he remained silent, and was rewarded for his silence. Whence [do we know] that he kept silence? Since it is said,

And Aaron held his peace (Lev. 10.3). Whence [do we know] that he received a reward for his silence? From the fact that he was privileged to have the divine utterance addressed to him alone."1085

Some passages of the Haggadah explore the silent theophany of the God of Israel, as the supreme and most intense manifestation of the transcendent. A memorable tale from the Babylonian Talmud speaks of the silence that accompanies the coming of the Lord. Rabbi Šešet, a sage who is blind, and therefore particularly inclined to search for signs of the divine in the wavering of voices, is the protagonist of the episode. One day, in the company of an unbeliever, the rabbi went to await the passing of the king. "'I will show you that I know more than you,' the rabbi says to the unbeliever. The first troop passed by and a shout arose. The unbeliever said: 'The king is coming.' 'He is not coming,' replied Rabbi Šešet. A second troop passed by and when a shout arose, the unbeliever said: 'Now the king is coming.' Rabbi Šešet replied: 'The king is not coming.' A third troop passed by and there was silence (šetiqa). Said Rabbi Šešet: 'Now indeed the king is coming.' His companion said to him: 'How did you know this?' He replied: 'Because the earthly royalty is like the heavenly.' For it is written: Go forth and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And behold, the Lord passed by [...] but the Lord was not in the wind [...] but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and

after the fire a still small voice (1Kings 19.11-12)."1086 In a symbolic mutation that would profoundly influence later mysticism, the still small voice (qol demamah daqqah, literally "subtle, muted voice") of the Bible here becomes a genuine silence (šetiqa), a completely inward and, at the same time, omni-pervasive apparition.

A parallel to the theophany of silence narrated in the apologue of Rabbi Šešet is found in a midrašic description of the setting in which God conferred the Torah upon Israel: "Said Rabbi Abbahu in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: 'When God gave the Torah, no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed, none of the Ophanim stirred a wing, the Seraphim did not say 'Holy, Holy,' the sea did not roar, the creatures spoke not, the whole world was hushed into breathless silence when the voice went forth: I am the Lord your God (Deut. 5.6).'"1087

Medieval philosophical thought accentuated this positive evaluation of silence, which came to be considered as a true liturgical act, the most worthy way for man to celebrate the unknown divine. A meaningful praise of silence, formulated according to the criteria of negative theology, appears in the Guide of the Perplexed of Maimonides, completed at the end of the twelfth century. Here the philosopher affirms that only by contracting discourse to the point of reducing it to contemplation is it possible to approach the transcendent: "We are confounded by his beauty and He is hidden because of the intensity with which He is manifested, like the sun is hidden from the eyes, which are too weak to receive it. The most appropriate sentence, in this regard, appears in Psalms: For You silence is praise (Ps. 65.2) [...] Anything we could say to glorify and exalt him will be, on the one hand, attributable to God but, on the other, it will be inadequate. Thus one should rather maintain silence and rely upon intellectual comprehension."1088 In Maimonides's clear formulation, silence became the only predicable attribute, which contains in itself all the possible qualifications of God, preceding and epitomizing any manifestation.

Similarly, the mystics of the beginning of the thirteenth century searched in the divine quiet for the origin of reality, the seed of life that

would later manifest in the clamor of material existence. In the thought of Yiṣḥaq the Blind, the first great sage of

the medieval Kabbalah, the sound of the Hebrew letter mem—a murmur that fades out—became the seed from which other sounds originate, and to which they return after the word's journey: "Mem silent. Silence. Subtle silence. As it is written: A time to keep silence, and a time to speak (Eccles. 3.7) [...] silence in fact precedes the sound of discourse, from the beginning to the end: ḥšml, and from the end to the beginning: mlḥs."1089 At the end of this short annotation, Yiṣḥaq introduces the relationship between the ḥašmal, "electrum" (a luminescent substance, which, in mystical visions, is materialized in the divine throne) and silence, as if the splendor of too intense a light would correspond to the refraining of the voice. Silence, according to Yiṣḥ aq, is therefore the closest experience to the nature of God, and becomes like a thick material, which conceals itself behind the apparent texture of reality. Like a voice that breaks off from silence to return to it later, life itself is based on the silent divine essence.

In an extreme Kabbalistic conception, related by the same Yiṣḥaq, the ancient equivalence between silence and death is finally reversed, so that death is identified with sonority: "Some claim"—notes the mystic—"that the cause of life is silence, in that it is silent and tenuous, while the cause of death is the reinforcement, the sonority."1090

At the turn of the thirteenth century, in the variegated symbolic universe of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), a transposition of the relationship between silence and the origins of life take on a more explicitly sexual level, namely, that of the union between the celestial male and female. According to the author of this fundamental work of the Sephardic Kabbalah, the hierogamy between the king and his bride, a metaphor for the union between the sefirot tif'eret (beauty) and malkut (kingdom), occurs in a framework of silence, bro-

ken only by a whisper: "We have learned that at that time there is a complete silence throughout the universe because the king is about to join his queen and wants to go silently to her. All his attendants are agog and a whisper runs through them: Behold, the King is about to

meet his Matrona."1091 This absence of sounds serves to deter the forces of evil, always ready to exploit the din of matter, from intruding into the divine union: "Why in silence?"—another passage states—"In order that no 'stranger' should participate in that joy."1092

The idea that the sefirotic union happens in silence passed from the *Zohar* to the writings of later mysticism, although the Kabbalists seemed to consider this circumstance an esoteric secret, which could only be touched upon fleetingly. Thus, for example, in the middle of the sixteenth century, Mošeh Cordovero points to the mystery of the silent, celestial embrace to illustrate the symbolic meaning of an apparently minute detail of Hebrew spelling, the accent atnaḥ, which marks a pause in the recitation of the Biblical text, and whose form suggests to the mystic an erotic reference: "The accent [...] represents malkut, since she opens her legs to receive the seed from her male companion with joy and delight of the heart. Since the union occurs in quiet and silence, the accent takes the name of atnaḥ, which means 'rest,' and represents a silent pause, that is, a lingering on the word."1093 The length of the pause of cantillation is here amplified into a duration without limits, and is transformed into anticipation of an act that reopens the flow of sefirotic energy, bringing the terrestrial world into communication with the celestial. This shows how, in Jewish mysticism, even the smallest graphic signs fixed by the tradition could offer the starting point for unexpectedly deep reflections, covering the long distance that passes between the

delay of a reciting voice and the cosmic union of masculine energy and feminine principle.

Another symbolic function of silence unexpectedly appeared in the Hasidic literature, which blossomed in the second half of the eighteenth century around the charismatic figure of Yiśra'el Ba'al Šem Ṭov. The silences of Ba'al Šem, long and enigmatic, interrupted the legendary tales of his gestures, and were sometimes frightening. The silence in which the Hasidic rabbi at times cloaked himself was regarded with apprehension by onlookers, since it was often accompanied by signs of physical alteration. These pauses of

estrangement, which could last just short intervals or extend over several hours, corresponded to true states of trance, in which Ba'al Šem distanced himself from the present in order to reach the remote archetypes of the past age, or the immaterial dominion of the celestial dwelling. In an tale contained in the Šivḥe ha-Bešṭ (In Praise of Ba'al Šem Ṭov), the sage described how, during a liturgical service of Yom Kippur, a spirit arose in the sky: "He was not accustomed to look in the book to prayer, since Rabbi Ya'qil of Medzhibozh used to recite from the prayer formulary and he repeated after him. When he reached the words: 'Open the door for us,' or 'Open the doors of heaven,' Rabbi Ya'qil pronounced the sentence and then repeated it but did not hear the Bešṭ pronouncing it after him, and therefore remained silent. Bešṭ began to make frightening gestures and reclined backwards to the point of reaching his knees with his head so that they feared he would fall down."1094 The Hasidic silence is therefore configured as an experience of powerful psychological involvement: Ba'al Šem's mute estrangement is not a serene meditation, but the sign of that profound gap that separates the rabbi from the community of his followers.

צימצום Šimṣum
Concealment, Contraction

Although absent from the Scriptures, the verb root ṣmṣm is frequently used in post-Biblical Judaic literature, where it is employed to describe various occurrences of daily life. Its sense of "to cover oneself," hiding the contours of the face, seems to belong to the most ancient semantic sediment of the word, as demonstrated in the Aramaic Targum, which uses it to depict the veiling of a woman.1095 In the Palestine of Late Antiquity, one covered oneself out of modesty,

much like the noblewoman of a parable of the midraš Genesis Rabbah: "This may be compared to a noble lady whom the king ordered to walk before him. She did so leaning on her maid and covered her face (ṣimṣenah). Thus the king saw the maid but he did not see her."1096 The bride, at the moment of the wedding service, also appeared veiled, and showed herself to the bridegroom only in the intimacy of the nuptial chamber.1097 In the Song of Songs Rabbah, another midrašic tale that probably dates from the middle of the sixth century, the Israelites "hide themselves (meṣamṣemin) [...] like a bride"1098 during the enunciation of the Decalogue on Mount Sinai.

From the wrapping in a veil that conceals the features, the meaning of the root ṣmṣm was extended to designate the forced

crouching of a body upon itself, in a reduction of volume that compresses the form: this meaning is evoked in another midrašic passage, where it is said that "the fetus's limbs are pressed (meṣumṣamim) together like a formless object."1099

Light can also be enclosed within a circumscribed visible field, as occurs with the globe of the sun, framed by the opening of the eastern gate of the Jerusalem Temple. In the Jerusalem Talmud one reads that, when "the ancient prophets decided to construct the eastern gate, they made it so that the sun could be concentrated in (meṣumṣemet)1100 it on the first day of the winter and summer solstices,"1101 but they took care that the opening allowed the sun to penetrate through, upon its rising, throughout the year.

The Judaic texts of this epoch demonstrate great attention to the fleeting reality concentrated in a reduced space, as if a ray of light, a shadow, or a cloud of smoke in a limited place marked a symbolic choice. The chosen space was often that of the holy Ark, delimited by the two beams that allowed for its transportation: in this precise space, according to a passage of the midraš Song of Songs Rabbah, the cloud of incense was "held (meṣumṣemet)" during the cult.1102 In another midraš, God's shadow would itself be contracted within the physical limits of the Ark: "Who abides under the shadow of the Almighty (Ps. 91.1) [...] that means, in the 'shadow' which Beṣal'el1103 constructed [...]

in fact, God said [...] I will descend and contract (we-eṣamṣem) my Presence within one square cubit."1104

The limiting, in a circumscribed sphere, of the Lord's infinite nature is one of the central themes of religious symbolism, and is expressed by the Jewish rabbis through a recurring axiom: "The little can hold the much."1105 In fact, the efficacy of the rite is based on the sacredness of the place where it is practiced, that is to say on the conviction that God, even in his transcendence, is always fully close to the faithful.

The incommensurability between the infinite God and the physical reality of the space of the cult is the subject of a midrašic tale, in which the rabbis provide an explanation based on the refraction of light: "Said a pagan to him: 'Is it possible that He of whom it is written, Do I not fill heaven and earth? (Jer. 23.24) spoke to Moses from between the two staves of the Ark?' 'Bring me a large mirror,' said he. When he brought it he said to him, 'Look at your reflection,' and he saw it, large. 'Bring me a small mirror.' He brought it. 'See your reflection in it.' He saw it, small. 'If you, who are but flesh and blood,' said he, 'can change yourself at will, how much more so He at whose word the world came into existence!'"1106

God's presence is therefore a mirroring of heaven on earth, which reproduces, at the infinitely reduced scale of the Ark, the entire structure of the cosmos. It is therefore possible to understand the way in which constructive details of the Ark—and more generally those of the Temple—could have been considered a re-creation of the cosmic scheme. Thus, in a passage of the Song of Songs Rabbah, the Lord affirms "If thou makest [the likeness of] this heavenly one below, I shall leave my heavenly Council above and descend and contract (u-meṣamṣem) my Presence within the midst of you below. For instance: just as above there are Seraphim standing, so below are acacia trees standing; just as above there are stars, so below there are stars [...] because

the hooks of gold in the tabernacle looked like stars in the firmament."1107

It is the Lord, therefore, who provides a space that can receive him, even if the descent of the Šekinah among the faithful remains a miraculous act that overturns the laws of nature. In a passage of Leviticus Rabbah, the sign that the Šekinah can be found among the people is the prodigious crowding of the Israelites between the two staves of the Ark. Reversing the image, in fact, it is affirmed here that God "crowded them together between the two staves of the Ark [...] so that, seeing that the [space between the] two staves of the Ark held them," they knew that the Šekinah was among them.1108

The idea of the ṣimṣum as a portentous transformation of the divinity was also preserved in the medieval tradition. Nevertheless, the concept established in the Haggadah of Late Antiquity underwent a progressive reworking. In the Biblical commentary of Šelomoh ben Yiṣḥaq of Troyes (known as Raši, 1040-1105), the root ṣmṣm is used to describe the mystery of the divine voice, capable of changing its intensity until it reaches, during the theophany of Sinai, every Jew: "At the moment of the gift of the Torah"—writes Raši—"He contracted (ṣimṣem) his voice according to the strength of the Israelites."1109 The metaphor of the physical contraction of the voice alludes here to the possibility offered to each of the bystanders that they might hear—that is, that they might understand, within the limits of his intellect—the divine message. In Raši's formulation, the emphasis is no longer on the supernatural presence in the cult, but on a kind of descent of the voice to individual listeners, so that the contraction becomes the key to resolving the impossible equation between

the too much of God and the too little of man. The concept of ṣimṣum thus defines the problem of knowledge of the transcendent as a reduction of the numinous to within the confines of human understanding.

In accordance with this hermeneutic development, the earliest recurrence of ṣmṣm in a Kabbalistic text was introduced with regard to the sefirah of knowledge, ḥokmah, which marks the transition between

the mystery of the divine unknowability and the emergence of human knowledge and intuition. A celebrated passage of the Commentary on the Sefer yeṣirah, attributed to Moses Nachmanides (1194-1270), states: "Wisdom. It is the end of all that man can understand through thought. Tradition, in this regard, makes only allusions, since the supernal crown, blessed be He, fills more than the heart can intuit of his glory. He contracted (ṣimṣem) the essence of glory according to the measure of the surfaces of the paroket1110 and of the space of one palm between the two cherubim. The surface of the whole remained completely dark, since the lack of light is darkness. All the radiant light called 'wisdom' spreads out from the source of everything."1111 The contraction here is the mystical ring that links the sefirah of the supernal crown (keter elyon) to that of wisdom. The symbolic space of the ancient midrašic representation, indicated by a reference to the Ark (evoked by the paroket and the cherubim) remains here, but the setting of the discourse is amplified to contain the tale of creation. In fact, the text speaks of the darkness that extends in all directions at the beginning of Genesis, and which fulfills the divine order to make room for light; however, in the Kabbalistic representation, the darkness of the beginnings succeeds the mystery of the primitive light

and appears as if framed between two lights, which are those inexpressible of keter and the radiance of ḥokmah, the sefirah that establishes knowledge. As opposed to the antecedents of Late Antiquity and Raši's doctrine, Nachmanides' ṣimṣum is made of this darkness: it is not the adaptation of the divinity to a circumscribed space, but a traumatic contraction, a narrow passage that leads to negation.

Other texts—datable to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—on the emergence of ḥokmah from a contraction can probably be connected to Nachmanides' sphere. In one of these works—an anonymous fragment—the withdrawal of the divine energy is compared to the holding of one's breath, which plunges the world into fog: "How did He manage to exit and create His world? Like a man gathers breath and concentrates it (u-meṣamṣem) in himself, until the little contains the much, so did He concentrate His light to the size of

one of his palms and the world remained in darkness. Into this darkness He carved the rocks and stones, in order to draw from them the paths called "the marvels of wisdom."1112 In this audacious Kabbalistic interpretation of the thirteenth century, the world, which the ṣimṣum deprives of God's breath, becomes a dense, and at the same time yielding, darkness, in which the Lord—according to images inherited from the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation)—can trace the marvelous paths of wisdom.

In contrast to the works connected with Nachmanides' teachings, speculations on the divine contraction seem very rare in *Zohar*ic literature and, in general, in the works that gave origin to the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor). Yosef Giqaṭilla, for instance, uses ṣimṣum only in one case, to describe the reduction of the influence of binah on the lower sefirot after the damage to the passages of emanation caused by the sins of

men.1113 The term recurs again in the Midraš ha-ne'elam (The Hidden Midraš)—a *Zohar*ic text composed in a Hebrew, of philosophical tone—where the contraction is mentioned in a prayer imagined as directed by King David to the Lord: "You who made the whole world, and the waters that covered all in their great quantity, and then made everything gather itself up again, contracting itself (be-ṣimṣum) all in one place, you now constrict (še-teṣamṣem) your Šekinah, into your house."1114

This reference to the retraction of the waters seems to be an isolated case in the Kabbalistic literature, since the ṣimṣum more often refers to the dynamics of the divine light, as for example in the Masseket aṣilut (Treatise on the Emanation), a short work, probably written in the first half of the fifteenth century, and in certain aspects influenced by the teachings of the *Zohar*. In the Masseket, the divine ṣimṣum explicitly refers to a process of spatial character, which divides reality into two opposing places, one of light and one of darkness: "He knows what is in the darkness, and the light dwells with Him (Dan. 2.22): this means that the Lord, blessed be He, created a place for the light and one for the darkness, the light so the righteous who fulfill His will can enjoy it, and

the darkness to punish the wicked who transgress it. And the light dwells with Him means that the Lord, blessed be He, contracted his light."1115 One gets the impression here that the anonymous author of the Treatise on the Emanation has introduced a substantial change with respect to the Nachmanidean tradition, since the diachronic passage of the unknowable light into darkness, and then into light once again, is placed next to (or perhaps substituted by)

a horizontal movement, in which light and darkness are two poles that separately coexist.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, the idea of ṣimṣum was at the center of the teachings of Yiṣḥaq Luria, the Kabbalist who, more than any other, made use of this image. As can be read in the ʻEṣ Ḥayyim (The Tree of Life), written by Ḥayyim Vital, the most celebrated systematic thinker of Lurianic thought, for the rabbi of Safed the contraction of God makes space for the worlds, which crowd into the vacuous space that accommodates the emanations: "When his pure will conceived the creation of the worlds and produced the emanations, to bring the perfection of his actions into the light [...] the En sof concentrated in the middle, placed at the exact center of his light. The light concentrated and retracted around that central point: exactly from the middle point free space remained, empty, vacuous and hollow [...] a space where the emanations, the creatures, the forms and the realizations could exist."1116

As often occurs in the Lurianic prose, two symbolisms are here superimposed with a contamination of images that amplifies the efficacy of the mystical representation. The modifications of the light are not described according to the natural alternation of light and dark, but are based on spatial categories of opposition between full and empty: the shining contraction does not leave room only for darkness, but above all for a void, almost as if it was a moving of tangible matter. Consistently, the entire process of emanation that follows is characterized by a new expansion of light into the void.

A paradoxical formulation is thus reached: "It is known that each new apparition of light is preceded by a contraction."1117

Since darkness is first of all narrowness and lack of space, the light cannot spread out without contracting itself. Moreover, this process of tightening of the shining source of the emanation is not limited to the beginning of the divine manifestation, but indeed accompanies the entire becoming.

The uninterrupted character of the Lurianic ṣimṣum, even if largely neglected by the most recent popular interpretations, is a basic necessity of the mystical cosmogony, and can be imagined as the pulsating of the divine energy, which descends by way of successive contractions. The ṣimṣum is, then, essentially the light's adaptation to increasingly smaller dimensions in order to be able to flow into even smaller "vases," or, according to another expression frequently employed by Luria, into increasingly narrow "guises."

The canonical interpretation of Lurianism offered by Ḥayyim Vital does not explore the eventuality of the light rising by way of decontraction, that is to say of an inversion of the ṣimṣum, which would allow the divine energy to leave the limits of the lower worlds, returning to its celestial origin. Such a hypothesis does appear, in all of its dramatic power, in a later reworking of the Lurianic doctrine, proposed at the beginning of the nineteenth century by the Hasidic Rabbi Naḥman of Bratslav (1772-1811). In his Liqquṭe Moharan, he applies the notion of ṣimṣum, according to earlier midrašic teachings, to God's descent into the Sanctuary: "The Temple would not have been able to bear his glory and his majesty [...] but for his great love toward Israel He contracted (ṣimṣem) and covered his majesty, to allow his Šekinah to hover in it."

After this affirmation, consistent with the rabbinic imagery, Naḥman continues with an unexpectedly mystical explanation, which transforms the destruction of the Temple into a sort of explosion of the uncontainable majesty of God: "When the Jews sinned in his presence, the Lord, blessed be He, demonstrated and revealed, so to speak, His

majesty and might, and no longer wanted to keep it covered and contracted (u-le-

532

ṣamṣemo), so due to this fullness the Temple was destroyed, since it could not support it."1118 Therefore, as it narrows to descend into the "vases" or "guises," and to reach the material world of men, the celestial energy can also decide to renounce this straining and resume its own radiance in all of its fullness. It is evident that this inversion will have a traumatic effect for the lowest realities, which will be struck down by the limitless expansion of the celestial light.

The Lord's rage that rends the Jerusalem Sanctuary seems to be the unmediated manifestation of the transcendent, which, as such, is neither knowable nor bearable to man. In Naḥman's thought, the contraction of the divinity in the ṣimṣum corresponds to an act of mercy, while the absence of tightening is equivalent to the destruction of earthly reality, broken by divine might.

## ציצית Šiṣit
## Fringe

According to the explanatory principle of the semuḥin, "juxtaposition," two consecutive Biblical passages, even if concerning different subject matter, have an intimate symbolic connection. This mysterious force of attraction seems to be especially at work in the case of the precept of fixing fringes on garments, which in the Bible is preceded by a dramatic description of the violation of the Sabbath, and which is followed by the angry rebellion of Korah and his acolytes. One gets the impression that this ritual prescription, apparently minor and concerning only daily matters, this order to make fringes in the borders of the garments (Num. 15.38), is secretly linked to the sense of the implacable divine wrath, which strikes with death by way of stoning those who transgress the Sabbath rest, and punishes, by engulfing them in the netherworld, the partisans of Korah, guilty of having questioned the authority of Moses and Aaron.1119

In fact, the function of the fringe is explained, in the Scriptures, as a sign that serves as a reminder of divine law: And it shall be to you for a fringe, that you may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of the Lord, and do them; and that you seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, which incline you to go astray (Num. 15.39). This passage of Numbers establishes a single specific detail about the making of the ṣiṣit, ordering that a thread of blue (tekelet) is

put upon the fringe of the borders 1120 (Num. 15.38), while in the parallel

text of Deuteronomy, mention is made of the four quarters of your cloak, to which the fringe must be attached (Deut. 22.12). From these short Scriptural cues, the rabbis of the post-Biblical Judaic tradition derived a vast corpus of ritual norms on how the fringe is to be made, on how to knot it, on the garments to which it was to be attached, and on the religious importance of the precept. The number of strings of the fringe, and the quantity of knots needed to fasten it, were the objects of long halakic discussions, whose results often reflected a plurality of opinions, and of customs that lasted until modern times.1121 In some cases, rabbis were forced to adjust to the material necessities of the times, for example suspending the obligation to dye the strings violet, due to the difficulty of acquiring the dye and its excessively elevated costs.1122

By almost general agreement, women were excluded from the prescription to wear ṣiṣit,1123 since this prescription applied only to male garments which had four sides, and in particular to the rectangular cloaks worn by Jewish men in ancient times.1124 While the Bible generally speaks of begadim, "garments," in the Greek version of the Septuagint the term himation is already used, precisely indicating outer cloaks. In the post-Biblical literature of the first centuries, the precept of the fringe often referred to the ṭallit, that is, to the shawl, usually of wool or linen, which, according to Talmudic norm, should be worn so that "not more than a palm of his under-garment should be visible underneath."1125 The fringe precept thus remained mainly connected to the ṭallit, even when the change of custom in the Diaspora transformed the latter from everyday attire into a special garment to be worn during prayer. The most observant Jews would nevertheless maintain the habit of always wearing an article of clothing decorated with fringe, and would continue to wear on a daily basis, under their clothes, a small rectangular shawl, suitably called ṭallit qaṭan, "little ṭallit," whose use is still established in Orthodox circles.

The rabbis of antiquity repeatedly underlined the importance of the use of the fringe. One even maintained that "The precept of fringes is equal to all [other] precepts of the Torah."1126 That this custom was widespread is demonstrated, among other things, by the evangelical tale in which a woman who was sick for twelve years is healed by having devotedly touched "the fringe (tou kraspedou) of Jesus's garment."1127

A rich series of legends confirmed the material and spiritual benefits of wearing the ṣiṣit, considered a sign of distinction reserved to the Jewish people, whose effects were not limited to the present world, but also reverberated in one's future life. It is said, for example, that Rabbi Šim'on ben Laqiš, who lived in the Land of Israel in the third century, referring to the privileges in store for the Jews in the world to come, maintained: "He who is observant of fringes will be privileged to be served by two thousand eight hundred slaves, for it is said: In those days it shall come to pass, that ten men shall take hold, out of all the languages of the nations shall even take hold of the skirt of him that is a Jew (Zech. 8.23)."1128 Rabbi Šim'on deduces here the number of servants based on a curious mathematical exegesis, in which the ten men mentioned by Zechariah are multiplied by the seventy traditional nations of the world, and then by the four corners of the Jewish garment.

During Late Antiquity, the cosmic meaning of the ṭallit became progressively more precise. God himself was imagined as wearing it, in a gesture similar to that of the pious Jew, who wrapped himself in his shawl to pray: "The Holy One, blessed be He, drew his robe round Him like the reader of a congregation, and showed Moses the order of prayer."1129 In another passage, which refers to Psalm 104, the Lord's mantle is woven of pure light, alluding to the act that gave origin to the cosmos: "The Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself therein as in a robe, and irradiated with the luster of His majesty the whole world from one end to the other."1130 The faithful man who wrapped himself in the cloak could thus recall upon himself the divine light, sharing in that energy used by the Lord of Israel to create the cosmos. The Midraš Tanḥuma recalls that, when the Israelites wear the fringed garment,

when observing it "they have the impression that the Šekinah hangs over them,"1131 as if the fabric were transformed into a device of protection.

During the first centuries of the Common Era, the color of the fringe's strings—the Biblical tekelet—was identified with the hue of the sky and the sea, in a way that reinforced the symbolic bond between the garment and the structure of the world. A celebrated passage of the Menaḥot treatise of the Babylonian Talmud lists a series of chromatic correspondences that extended from the fringe to the ultramundane space of God's throne: "Why is blue specified from all of the other colors [for this precept]? Because blue resembles the color of the sea, and the sea resembles the color of the sky, and the sky resembles the color of the Throne of Glory."1132 The precept of the ṣiṣit thus

assumed an importance that went beyond simple daily experience, since it gave the Jew the opportunity to have at his disposal a visible sign of the divine transcendence.

These precedents from Late Antiquity were developed by the medieval Kabbalists, who were interested in introducing the fringe of the ṭallit into the theosophical pattern of the occult structure of the emanation. In the writings of the Sephardic mystics of the thirteenth century, accentuation was given first of all to the exemplary value of the fringe, considered capable of summing up all other precepts, and therefore serving as an obligatory passage in the contemplative journey toward the celestial sphere. In this mystical function, the ṣiṣit was placed on the same level as the sefirah malkut, which was entrusted with the task of mediating between the lower realities and the higher levels of the divine energy. Towards the middle of the thirteenth century, in his Commentary on the Torah, Moses Nachmanides wrote that "the blue thread alludes to the attribute that contains all things, is in everything, and that is the goal of all [...] the color blue is in fact in itself the compendium of every vision, since from afar everything appears to be this shade."1133

At the end of the same century, in the *Zohar*ic literature, another, even more precise, connotation of the color blue was developed: the

expression of one aspect of malkut. The color would serve to remind the faithful of the Throne of Glory, and therefore of the attribute of divine rigor: "The blue is similar to the Throne of Glory: as this induces the man to follow the honest way to render him pure, so the blue thread conducts man along the good path, since all are obliged to fear this place and to proceed honestly."1134 Therefore, according to the author of the *Zohar*, the blue thread offers the image of one of the forces enclosed in the sefirah of the kingdom, that is, din, the rigorous

judgment, while the white thread—which it is combined with in the ṭallit—represents raḥamim, divine mercy: "two colors are included in the ṭallit, white and blue [...] mercy and judgment [...] the throne of rigor and the throne of mercy."1135

These *Zohar*ic passages, which for several generations constituted the foundation of devotion, accompanied the reflections of the mystics throughout many centuries, who found in it a constant point of reference. In particular, the *Zohar* introduced into mystical Judaism the idea that the fringes of the prayer shawl could serve as a means of communication between the human and the divine, thanks to an allusive energy that transmitted hidden meanings. In order for them to keep their numinous force, it seemed nevertheless necessary that the fringes be the most neutral vehicle, without profane contaminations that could otherwise interrupt the mystical flow between God and the faithful.

The making of the ṣiṣit therefore became the object of particular attention, and it was believed that the fringes needed to be attached in silence, without any foreign thoughts during the work. This idea appeared in a particularly explicit form in the Hasidic circles of Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century, whose spiritual orientations drew largely from the pages of the *Zohar*. In the collection entitled Šivḥe ha-Bešṭ (In Praise of the Ba'al Šem Ṭov), containing numerous legends about Yiśra'el ben Eli'ezer Ba'al Šem Ṭov, the founder of Hasidism, it is thus said that the rabbi of Polonnoye used to pay a gold coin to an old woman to interweave the four ṣiṣiyyot without speaking a word. One day, he was offered some fringes from the Jewish community of Kalisz,

and "he acquired them, since they were very beautiful. Nevertheless, he hesitated to put them on his ṭallit, for fear that they were not tied with devotion." He showed them to Ba'al Šem, "who said to him: 'If you do not

want to put them on your prayer shawl, give them to me, and I will put them on mine.' The rabbi then understood that they had been piously woven."1136 In this tale, the characteristics of ritual purity of the ṣiṣit become an objective quality, which the rabbi is capable of perceiving thanks to his own mystical intuition.

For the ḥasidim of Eastern Europe, the ṣiṣit could also be employed for an act of cosmic redemption, as explained by another rabbi, Lewi Yiṣḥaq ben Me'ir of Berdichev, who lived between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the Qedušat Lewi (The Holiness of Lewi), the rabbi illustrates the extraordinary results permitted by intensely contemplating the fringe during prayer and, in particular, by focusing one's attention on the blue thread. The thread's color could in fact be transformed to "soften the blue," which symbolizes the harsh divine justice, and which, as such, "alludes to darkness." It is therefore possible, by means of inner vision, to take part in the restoration of divine mercy, transforming the blue of rigor "into radiant light."1137 The mystical theosophy of the nineteenth century thus completed the symbolic meaning of the ṣiṣit, making it an austere icon of meditation.

## שופר Šofar
## Horn

The Biblical verse that introduces the theophany of Sinai is constructed with a masterlfully expressive gradation, from the first sound of the thunder to the frightening blowing of a šofar: And it came to pass on the third day in the morning, that there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mount, and the sound of a šofar exceedingly loud (Exod. 19.16). The clangor of the instruments would be the final and most terrible signal of the imminent divine apparition, and the Israelites receive it with a gesture of terror: All the people who were in the camp trembled. In a crescendo of prodigious upheaval of nature, the mountain is enveloped by smoke, which ascended as the smoke of a furnace and is shaken by tremors, while the noise is already deafening: And the voice of the šofar sounded long, and became louder and louder. Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder (Exod. 19.19). When the dialogue begins between Moses and the Lord, the sound of the šofar seems to become more distant, and the text does not mention it again for the rest of the episode.

In the theophany of Sinai, the šofar comes across as a spurious element, the only human artifice in a manifestation of the divine which is entirely described through the signs of a tempest. However, the horn's intrusion1138 into this context of an otherwise totally natural commotion offers a precise indication of the most ancient symbolic value of the object, connected to the idea of a numi-

nous force, and to the powerful sound of wind and thunder.1139 The horn is therefore not, in this case, an object fabricated by man, but an attribute of the Lord of Israel, and, in the Biblical epoch, must have appeared as a completely plausible characteristic of God's irruption in the guise of a vigorous and terrifying hero.

The image of the Lord's advance, accompanied by the sound of the šofar, is preserved in another passage of the Scriptures, in which the prophet Zechariah invokes the arrival of the savior of the Jewish people against the enemies of Jerusalem: And the Lord shall be seen over them, and his arrow shall go forth like the lightning; and the Lord God shall blow the šofar, and shall move in stormy winds of the south (Zech. 9.14).

In Zechariah, the divine šofar explicitly serves to pronounce a signal of battle, acting almost as a model for the military use of the instrument, which is itself often attested to in other Biblical episodes. In the chronicle of the war conducted by the Israelites against the Canaanites, for example, the šofar is entrusted with the task of recalling the soldiers, signaling an imminent battle. The sound of the horn also serves to instill fear in the enemy, and to give the signal for the attack. Gideon throws the Madianite camp into confusion, giving orders to his own men to encircle it, continuously playing the instrument, thus feigning the assault of an imposing army: When I blow the šofar, I and all who are with me, then blow you the šofarot also on every side of the camp, and say, The sword of the Lord, and of Gideon (Judg. 7.18).

In the prophetic books, the sound of the horn often underlines visions of calamity, in which cities seem to suffocate from the enemy menace and their inhabitants prepare for the final resistance, as Amos announces: Moab shall die amidst tumult, with shouting, and with the sound of the šofar (Amos 2.2). In another passage Amos recalls, Shall a šofar be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? (Amos 3.6). Jeremiah exhorts the

inhabitants of Jerusalem to flee, since the šofar gave the signal of an enemy advance: Blow the šofar in Tekoa, and set up a sign of fire in Beth-HaKerem; for evil appears from the north, and great destruction (Jer. 6.1).

In the repertoire of military uses of the šofar, the most singular case is surely the one narrated in the book of Joshua, where the sound of the instrument itself causes the collapse of the walls of Jericho. The complex ritual advised by the Lord envisaged the encircling of the city, carried out by the army for seven consecutive days, while seven priests

carried, before the ark seven šofarot of rams' horns (Josh. 6.4). On the seventh day, the rite was to be brought to an end with the circling of the city seven times, accompanied by a deafening sound: And it shall come to pass, that when they make a long blast with the ram's horn, and when you hear the sound of the šofar, all the people shall shout with a great shout; and the wall of the city shall fall down flat (Josh. 6.5). The hoarse sonorous impact of the horn works here as a kind of war machine, decisive in the success of the magic operation. The voice of the instrument unites with that of the human, and the two timbres mix in a uniquely frightening din, underlined by the word teru'ah, which indicates the shouts as well as the clang of the šofar.1140

Along with this use in times of war, in the Bible the horn also has a religious function, at times alongside metal trumpets called ḥaṣoṣrot.1141 Its call signaled the celebration of the New Year (Lev. 23.24) and inaugurated the Day of Atonement, when the sound of *the šofar throughout all your land* (Lev. 25.9) marked the suspension of cultivation and the remission of debts. While the Scriptures do not mention it, ancient sources also document its use in announcing the beginning and the

end of the Sabbath, as Flavius Josephus recalls in his Jewish War: "one of the priests stood [...] and gave a signal beforehand, with a trumpet at the beginning of every seventh day, in the evening twilight, as also in the evening when that day was finished, giving notice to the people when they were to leave off work, and when they were to go to work again."1142

It would be precisely these liturgical uses that remained alive within post-Biblical Judaism, when the changing conditions of Jewish life, in the Land of Israel as well as in the Diaspora, caused the military functions of the ram's horn to go neglected. During the centuries, the cyclical sequence of the Jewish liturgical calendar was thus marked by the presence of the šofar, which still resounds in the synagogues during the celebration of Ro'š hašanah (New Year), and in underlining other notable events, albeit with variations, depending on the customs of the diverse communities.1143 Therefore, the sound of the horn has for

centuries been the ancient counterpoint to certain salient occasions of Jewish devotion, distinguishing it, through sonorous signs, from other religious traditions.

The symbolic meaning of the šofar's sound was the object of a long exegetical tradition, already blooming in Late Antiquity. The Babylonian Talmud affirms that the sound of the horn at the New Year "brings the remembrance of Israel to their Father in Heaven,"1144 while an interpretation reported by various midrašim associated the liberating power of the horn's sound to the Biblical episode of the sacrifice of Isaac. The Scriptures

state that Abraham, instead of his son, sacrificed a ram, who had remained entangled by its horns in a bush close by. Reworking the Biblical tale, the Jewish sages imagined that the Lord had foretold the patriarch: "Similarly are your children destined to be caught by iniquities and entangled in troubles, but they will ultimately be redeemed through the horns of the ram." This midrašic tale alludes to precisely to the redemption of Jewish New Year, as explained later: "All the days of the year Israel are busy with their work, but on New Year they take their horns and blow before the Holy One, blessed be He, who rises from the Throne of Judgment and moves to the Throne of Mercy, and is filled with compassion for them."1145

According to the Haggadah, the power of the šofar is reserved for Israel, since all other peoples, despite having numerous wind instruments at their disposal, are not capable of moving God to compassion. Rabbi Yo'šiyyah affirms: "But do not the nations of the world know how to sound the blast? What a host of horns they have! What a host of bucinae they have! What a host of trumpets they have! Yet [...] happy is the people that know how to win the Lord's grace with the sound of the horn!'"1146 In a passage of the same midraš, God announces his intention of rendering himself similar to a šofar, to better give voice to Israel's desire for redemption: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: 'If you will amend your deeds I shall become unto you like a šofar. As the horn takes in [breath] at one end

and lets it out at the other,'"1147 thus alluding to the passage from oppression to liberation.

In some texts of the early Middle Ages, the eschatological value of the horn's sound was analyzed, whereby God, on Judgment Day, would reawaken the dead to guide them to theeternal dwelling.1148 In the Alfa beta de-rabbi 'Aqiva, probably written in the eighth century, the divine šofar takes on gigantic proportions, and its prodigious effects are described with a typically medieval lingering on the marvelous: "In which way does the Lord, blessed be He, revive the dead for the world to come? [...] He takes in his hand an enormous horn, as long as a thousand arms of the arm of the blessed Lord, He breathes into it and the sound goes from one end of the world to the other. From the first roar the entire world quakes, upon the second the dust is shaken, upon the third their bones recompose, upon the fourth roar their limbs become warm again, upon the fifth roar their skin stretches out to membranes, upon the sixth roar the spirits and the souls enter their bodies, upon the seventh roar they are alive and they rise to their feet, clad."1149

When, during the thirteenth century, the šofar came to play a part in Kabbalistic symbolism, it was introduced into the sefirotic structure, nonetheless retaining its ancient significance as an attribute of Israel's liberation. The name "great šofar"1150 was thus reserved for the sefirah of intelligence, binah, which represented the point of passage between the constraints of history and deliverance into the divine. In the *Sefer ša'are orah* (The Book of the Gates of Light), written by the Spanish Kabbalist Yosef Giqaṭilla at the end of the thirteenth century, the equivalence between the horn and binah was expressed in characteristic esoteric style. Gigaṭilla suggests, rather than enunciating, various metaphoric connections: "It is known that this sefirah [binah] is called 'great šofar,' and the reason is that it is called 'jubilee.' It is thanks to the great šofar that the

slaves will conquer liberty."1151 The concept of the jubilee serves here as an intermediate term between the abstract notion of the sefirah of intelligence and the specific image of the instrument, not only

because, on the occasion of the jubilee, the horn resounded, but also because yovel—the Hebrew word for "jubilee"—literally means "horn," and is therefore also a synonym of šofar. As usual, the Kabbalistic method proceeds by addition, combining different meanings, thus giving an almost physical relief to the immaterial levels of the emanation.

In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), composed in the same years and within the same surroundings as Giqaṭilla's work, the role of binah in the celestial pattern was also characterised through the playing of the šofar. In a very complex frame, the author combines heterogeneous images, sliding from one to the other with passages of an almost oneiric character. The incongruence between mystical icons provokes a strong sense of estrangement, which nevertheless end in the figure of the horn, the true symbolic outcome of the entire passage. The starting point is a speculation on the letters of the Tetragrammaton (yod, he, waw, he), which merge with the architectonic representations of the celestial world: "The he is the palace, the womb of which was opened by the yod. It is through fifty mysterious gates and forecourts and enclosures that the yod makes an opening and enters that palace, causing the sound to issue from the great šofar. For the šofar was closed on all sides and the yod came and opened it to cause the emission of its sound."1152 Since the yod represents ḥokmah (the sefirah of wisdom), while the first he of the Tetragrammaton symbolizes binah, the metaphor of the penetration of the one into the other alludes to that moment of the emanation when the mysterious divine force rushes, through the passage of binah, into the dominion of the manifestation. Introducing itself in the he, the yod causes a repressed energy to burst forth, which displays itself as

## שושן Šošan
Lily, Rose

The šošan (or šušan) is a flower of all-pervasive symbolic symmetries. Its sonorous essence is obtained through alliteration, with a double šin, which fades out with its final nun. There is an intuitive affinity between šošan and the word šeš, "six," which, in Hebrew, also begins with a double sibilant. This concentration of the evocative value of six is very evident, since the letter waw, enclosed between the two šin, occupies the sixth position in the alphabet, and therefore designates six units, which perhaps originally indicated the number of petals on the most striking variety of lily. The masculine form šošan possesses the double feminine form šošannah, which displays a distinction in genus apparently more consistent with an animate than a vegetal being.1154

The Hebrew šošan is echoed in the ancient Egyptian seššen (sššn), which indicates the lotus of the Nile, and the Greek souson, which grammarians believe to be a foreign borrowing from the purer krinon, "lily."1155 These various linguistic forms are all united in the notion of a flower that excels among the others for the beauty of its form and the purity of its lines, almost a topos of perfection in many cultures, even when set against the different characteristics of each climactic region.

Herodotus already sanctioned an equivalence between the Egyptian lotus and the lily of Greek flora, adding a reference to the rose, and thus anticipating a correspondence that became

common, also in Hebrew, in later centuries. In a description of ancient life on the Nile contained in the Histories, one reads that, "When the river is full and floods the plains, there grow in the water

many lilies, which the Egyptians call lotus [...] There are also other lilies like roses; these grow in the river too."1156

A reference to the Egyptian lotus also seems to be preserved in the Biblical šošan, at least in the architectonic description in which the term serves to evoke the ornamentation of the Temple's capitals, which is given the name ma'aśeh šošan. This expression is usually translated as lily work (1King 7.22),1157 but it is possible instead to grasp from it a reference to the Egyptian capitals in the form of stylized lotuses, as also attested by certain archeological parallels within the Syro-Palestinian region.1158

In any case, in the Bible, šošan refers for the most part to the lily of the valley, which occupies a fundamental place in the symbolism of the Song of Songs. The image of the lily returns in the poetry of this book, eight times in fact, serving several expressive functions, at times as a term of comparison, and at others as a sort of formal seal of amorous longing. The strongest connotation of šošan (and of the feminine šošannah) in Song of Songs is perhaps the contrast between the one and the multiple, in which the lily symbolizes the outstanding character of the beloved with respect to his peers, or serves to accentuate some particulars of the body. The most explicit expression of this literary use of the lily is found in the praise of the bride that appears in the opening of the second chapter—Like a lily among thorns, so is my love among the maidens (Song 2.2)1159—while in the continuation of the text the beloved is described as he who pastures his flock among the lilies

(Song 7.3), and the belly of the loved one as a heap of wheat set about with lilies (Song 7.3).1160 In one case, the flower is used to qualify in detail the appearance of the bridegroom: His lips like lilies, distilling liquid myrrh (Song 5.13).

In a verse of the prophet Hosea, an explicit connection between the lily and the people of Israel appears, a theme that would frequently recur throughout the post-Biblical literature. The image of the flower that regains its strength thanks to the humidity of the night here

represents the rebirth of the Jewish people through divine intervention: I will be as the dew to Israel; he shall flower like the lily (Hos. 14.6).

In the midraš Leviticus Rabbah, probably composed in the fifth century, this same metaphor is expanded through two conceptual oppositions; between Israel and other nations, and between the present world and the future Messianic age: "Rabbi Avin said: 'As in the case of the lily, when the dry heat comes, she wilts, but when the dew comes, she blossoms, so also as long as the shadow of Esau endures, so long do Israel, as it were, appear as if they were wilting in this world. In the World to Come, however, Esau's shadow will pass away, and Israel will thrive more and more.'"1161 The worldly experience of the Jewish people is thus transposed onto a purely allegorical level, in which the phases of history replace the rhythms of nature.

In the Haggadic rereading, the Biblical image of the lily among the thorns similarly defines Jewish exile: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'Go and tell Israel: When you were in Egypt you were like a lily among the thorns. Now that you are entering the land of Canaan you are also like a lily

among the thorns.'"1162 While the figurative language in the Biblical original intended to underline the contrast between the beauty of the beloved and that of other women, the midrašic text strengthens the opposition between Israel and its antagonists, which remain substantially unchanged between Egyptian slavery and the hostile Canaanite environment.

The Haggadic use of šošan is not limited to the Biblical topoi, since it can be said that, in Late Antiquity also, all of the characteristics of the flower were exploited for their metaphoric potential: its elegance and scent were, for example, considered to be on a level with the tables of kings, and worthy of gladdening festive days: "Just as the whole purpose of the lily is to give scent, so the righteous are created only for the deliverance of Israel"—so states the midraš Song of Songs Rabbah—"Just as the lily is set on the table of kings at the beginning and at the end of the meal, so Israel are found in this world and are found in the next world. Just as the lily is conspicuous among plants, so Israel is

conspicuous among the nations [...] Just as the lily is kept for Sabbaths and festivals, so Israel is kept for the deliverance of tomorrow."1163

In another passage, the lily saves the entire garden from destruction. Having found his garden flooded with water, a king had decided to cut it down altogether, and had already called in wood-cutters to carry this out. But when he saw "a beautiful pink lily,1164 he took it, smelt it, and was appeased [...] He said: 'For the sake of this lily let the garden be spared.'" In this case, too, the tale intends to praise Israel, which is again compared to the lily. In fact, the midraš concludes: "In the same way, the world was created thanks to Israel."1165

The most important work of the whole medieval Kabbalah, the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), probably composed in the Iberian peninsula at the end of the thirteenth century, begins with a long speculation on the mystical meaning of the šošannah. The text's starting point is the traditional association between the flower and the Jewish people, but the *Zohar*ic prose quickly becomes animated by unusual symbolic outcomes, alluding to an ethical sense of the flower: "What does the lily symbolize? It symbolizes the Community of Israel. As the lily among thorns is tinged with red and white, so the Community of Israel is visited now with justice and now with mercy; as the lily possesses thirteen leaves, so the Community of Israel is vouchsafed thirteen categories of mercy which surround it on every side."1166 The essential chromatic dichotomy between white and red here recalls the opposition between the two divine forces that shape history: a white mercy, which attenuates conflicts, remedies discord, and an implacable judgment, imagined as the color red of fury.

The mention of the thirteen petals conveys the important and widespread semantic passage, which šošannah underwent during the Middle Ages, taking rom the word's ancient meaning of "lily," to that of "rose."1167 A more complex, Kabbalistic, numerology took the place of the symbolism of six attached to the lily, articulated first of all by the two significant sets of thirteen and five. With a notable exegetical virtuosity, the author of the *Zohar* imagined the rose as if formed by the first verses of Genesis or, more precisely, by the words within them that

came between the two successive mentions of God: "For this reason, the term 'Elohim' (God) mentioned here (in the first verse of Genesis) is separated by thirteen words from the next mention of Elohim, symbolizing the thirteen categories of mercy which surround the Community of Israel to protect it. The second mention of Elohim is separated from the third by five words, representing the five strong leaves that surround the rose."1168 The verses' words thus became as the same number of petals on the symbolic flower, which closes around Israel like a delicate but inviolable barrier of protection.

In another text of the *Zohar*ic literature, the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor), probably composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century, the apotropaic force of šošannah found a further explanation in the correspondence between the components of the corolla and the letters of the Tetragrammaton, yod, he, waw, and he: "The rose has five petals on the inside and five outside, which are equal to the two he, while the stem is the waw, and the pistil is the yod."1169 In this case, the structure of the rose guides the connection with the Hebrew letters, with a movement that originates from the petals, descends along the stem, and returns to the center of the flower. This produces a singular alteration of the original sequence of God's name, which is so to speak rewritten backwards, now placing the initial yod at the end. Far from the result of a simple caprice, this mirrored divine name is fully consistent with the symbolic status of the mystical rose, a visible sign of the sefirah malkut (kingdom). According to the Kabbalistic tradition, malkut is the "opaque mirror"1170 in which the supernal emanation is reflected: the rose metaphorically holds the divine might and manifests its intensity. The diminishing of energy thus corresponds to the withering of the rose, as another passage of the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* states: "When the Sanctuary was destroyed [...] the rose fell among the thorns, but at the timeof redemption it will once again be as the rose of the daybreak."1171

Some centuries later, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the image of the fallen flower reappeared in an allegorical tale on the mystical conquest of the Messianic restoration. Here Naḥman of

Bratslav, the author of the story and one of the principal sages of the Hasidic tradition, reworked the Kabbalistic precedents just discussed. However, he did not reveal his source, thereby leaving the reader with the task of discovering, behind the narrative plot, the esoteric teaching and the erudite origin of his imagery.

The tale narrates, after many vicissitudes, the "king's son" finally arriving at the "throne of the dead sovereign," which evidently symbolize the completion of a kind of initiation journey which aims at the redemption of the Jewish people. Many objects around the throne are described as in disarray, "since the dead king did everything wisely, in such a way that none understood the sense, until an extraordinary sage was to come, capable of acting with determination and of moving everything and restoring to it the order befitting of it." The reader, together with the protagonist, is here being put to the test, to see if he will know "how to understand the meaning of the throne," and to return each thing to its correct place. Approaching the seat, the king's son, "saw that it was high [...] He looked closely and realized that at its summit a certain rose was missing, which, if it were there, would confer upon the throne the power proper to that instrument [...] that began to sound when placed on any type of animal, ferocious beast or bird. He looked again and saw that the missing rose at the top was lying at the bottom. It had to be placed once again at the top." Realizing that the rose had fallen, the sage, personified by the king's son, established that "everything [was to] be put back in its proper order, the rose [to] be taken from the bottom and placed on the top."

Rewarded for his wisdom, the "true son of the king" realized that he had achieved his aim since "all things began to sing a marvelous melody and each fulfilled the function suitable to it. And they gave him reign."1172

The conclusion of this episode shows the true nature of the new king: he is the Messiah, who, with an act of pure understanding, reestablishes cosmic order, giving, at the same time, a new meaning to history. In Naḥman's Hasidic conception, the flower that is returned to its original place corresponds to a crucial restoration of lost integrity, which in

turn gives back to the rose of Israel its function as an ornament of the worlds.

סוכה Sukkah
Booth

The last of the three great recurrences connected to the Hebrew calendar, Sukkot, the Feast of Booths (or of the Tabernacles),1173 celebrated the autumn harvest, and was considered in ancient Israel to

be the most important liturgical occasion of the year. You shall observe the Feast of Booths seven days—prescribes Deuteronomy (16.13-14)—after you have gathered in your grain and your wine. And you shall rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your manservant, and your maidservant, and the Levite, the stranger, and the orphan, and the widow, who are inside your gates.1174 On this festival, which involved the entire population, the collective joy, the dances and songs, expressed the sense of satisfaction of the community, and assured one of abundance.

Also called he-ḥag, the "festival par excellence,"1175 Sukkot seems to have been derived from a Canaanite model, inspired as it was by the culture of sedentary people. The Scriptures narrate that the non-Israelite inhabitants of Shechem also celebrated the grape harvest with feasts,1176 while the young girls of Shiloh would usually come out to dance (Judg. 21.21) among the vineyards. The Jewish custom of attending celebrations with palm, willow, and myrtle branches tied together (the so-called lulav) in one hand, and cedar (etrog) in the other, recalls the cus-

tom of other Mediterranean peoples, as for instance in the Greek festival of Pyanepsion, when they would "carry in procession an olive branch bound about with wool"—which was called eiresiõnē—"crowned with all sorts of fruits, to signify that scarcity and barrenness had ceased."1177

At least during the time following the return from the Babylonian exile, the feast was characterized by the construction of provisional sukkot, booths in which the Jews, leaving their own homes, lived for seven days. According to Leviticus, these temporary shelters were meant to remind the Israelites of life in the desert,1178 although this connection with the exodus actually seems to be a belated historicization of a custom bound to the seasonal cycle of the harvest. In ancient Jerusalem, sukkot were put up between houses, on roofs, in the courtyards of the Temple, and in squares,1179 in an intervention to the urban landscape which must have carried a conspicuous, evocative force. This habit of erecting booths, which was preserved throughout

the centuries of the Diaspora, up until modern times, still marks a symbolic anachronism between the realm of the city and a past considered exemplary, thus manifesting the gap between the present and the religious archetype.

The celebration included many more practices which, even if not prescribed by the Bible, were handed down by the rabbinic literature. While the Scriptures simply order the taking, on the first day, of the boughs of goodly trees, branches of palm trees, and the boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook (Lev. 23.40), post-Biblical Judaic texts preserve the memory of the

custom of holding the fronds in the hand, during a few stages of the Temple services, for all seven days of the festival.1180 The rabbis thus decreed that the four vegetal elements, called arba'ah minim, or "four species"1181—that is, the three types of leaves bound in the lulav, and the etrog, the cedar—were also to accompany the synagogal liturgy, held in the hands of the faithful during the recitation of the Hallel (Ps. 113-118), shaken at the beginning as well as during the reading of the twenty-fifth verse of Psalm 118.1182 An important symbolic meaning was attributed to the union of the four elements, in which the divine level, as well as the archetypal one of the patriarch and that of the common experience of the people of Israel, were reflected. The cedar, for example, was even considered a symbol of God, and, at the same time, of Abraham, while the palm branches were thought to represent Isaac; those of myrtle, Jacob, and the willow, Joseph. According to other interpretations, the etrog represented Israel, and the four elements alluded to parts of the human body: "The rib of the lulav resembles the spine of a man; the myrtle resembles the eye; the willow resembles the mouth, and the etrog resembles the heart."1183

The custom of circling around the altar once a day, and seven times on the seventh day, also dates back to the time of the Temple, the circling being accompanied by the words "O Lord, save, bring prosperity!" or, according to others, "Ani wa-hu, save."1184 This custom was preserved in the synagogue, where it

gave life to a procession around the bimah, the pulpit, repeated seven times on the last day of the celebration, Hoša'na rabbah.

The circling around the altar during Sukkot must have been part of the deepest symbolic meaning of the festival and, according to a legend, was introduced by Abraham himself when he instituted the celebration. In The Book of the Jubilees, probably written at the end of the second century BCE, one reads that Abraham "built there an altar to the Lord [...] and he built booths for himself and for his servants [...] And Abraham took branches of palm trees and the fruit of goodly trees, and every day went round the altar with the branches seven times [a day]; in the morning he praised and gave thanks to his God for all things in joy."1185

Another ritual connected to the Sukkot was libation with water, carried out by the priest in the Sanctuary: there is no mention of this in the Bible, but it was observed with great popular participation, and consisted in the pouring of the contents of a gold decanter, filled from the source of the Shiloh, into a basin on the altar; from here the liquid flowed, mixing with a libation of wine, and ran through a subterranean passage toward the Qidron stream.1186 The purpose of this ceremony—which was opposed by some representatives of the priestly class1187—seems to have been that of earning favour, ensuring the rains for the following winter, in turn guaranteeing the fertility of the harvest. In a passage of the Babylonian Talmud, God turns to the faithful, saying: "Pour out water before me on Tabernacles, so that your rains this year may be blessed."1188

The construction of the booth was also connected with rain, since it was supposed to be a shelter, even though it was not obligatory to remain in the sukkah in the case of violent precipitation. "If rains fell, when may one be permitted to leave [the sukkah]?"—the Mišnah asks—"When the porridge would become spoiled [...] To what can this be compared? To a slave who comes to fill the cup for his master and has poured a pitcher over his face."1189 The sages also established that the booth must have at least three sides and a roof, so that there would be

more shade than sun,1190 and that it was compulsory to eat there on at least the evening of the first day. Such religious duty applied to any Jewish male "who was [old enough] not to be dependent on his mother," while "women, slaves, and young children"1191 were absolved.

The construction of a sukkah was considered an act of piety towards the Lord, as if it were a tabernacle ready to welcome his presence: "Make ye a booth for the keeper that he should look after you," the Lord affirms in the midraš Exodus Rabbah.1192 In exchange, God would protect the righteous of Israel in the Messianic age, under the sukkah of his glory, according to a frequently recurring symbolism,which saw in the earthly shelter an allusion to the protection of the Šekinah.1193

Medieval Judaic exegesis would openly enunciate the parallel between the days of Sukkot and the delight of the blessed in the world to come. In his Commentary on the Torah, Ya'aqov ben Ašer, who lived between the end of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth centuries, relates that, "in exchange for

the seven days in which they live in the shelters, the Jews merit seven canopies, which means: cloud, smoke, splendor, fire, flame, glory of the Šekinah, and shelter of the Leviathan."1194 The repertoire of materials of the celestial pavilions here combine recollections of the story of Exodus (such as the cloud and fire of the divine pillar) with other topoi of eschatological imagery, such as the Leviathan, whose skin even seems to be transformed into a refuge, perhaps more precious than that offered by the divine glory which precedes it in the list. The legend of a series of canopies offered to the righteous in Eden was already attested in the Talmud, as well as in the Haggadic literature of the early Middle Ages.1195 Nonetheless, Ya'aqov ben Ašer here proposes an important theoretical development, reconnecting the legend to the idea of the sukkah, which was thus transformed, by way of symbolic symmetry, into an immaterial structure.

The numeric series of seven was also used by the Kabbalists, who related the celebration of Sukkot to the group of the lower sefirot, from ḥesed (mercy) to malkut (kingdom). At the close of the thirteenth century, the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) adopted,

for example, the sukkah as a symbol of the sefirah of the kingdom, which could gather in itself the preceding six grades of the emanation. Here, the process of mystical aggregation depended principally on the devotee, whose dwelling in the shelter signified first of all the union of man with the divine level of malkut. Strengthened by this communion with the tenth and final sefirah, the Jews—attests the *Zohar*—had to prepare themselves for the other sefirot and to entertain them like guests. This practice was initiated by the legendary figure rav Hamnuna Sava, who, after entering into the sukkah, "used to stand at the door inside and say: 'Let us invite the guests and prepare a table,' and he used to stand up and greet them, saying, 'Sit, most exalted guests,

sit; sit, guests of faith, sit.'" The descent of the sefirot was in fact imagined as the entrance of six Biblical personages: "Abraham and five other guests,"1196 referring to Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and Joseph, each identified with a divine level. The ritual aimed to bring joy to the earth and, at the same time, to delight the celestial spheres so that the faithful could "rejoice in this world and the next."1197

In the *Zohar*ic literature, the booth was not only an instrument of contact with the divine, but also a form of protection, capable of defending the Jew from external influences. As the author of the *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shepherd) recalls, "the sukkah protects Israel" and can for this reason be compared to Noah's Ark, which, according to the Kabbalists, was needed to save the patriarch from the forces of evil. The specific task of the booth would have been that of preserving the occupants from the influence "of all the peoples and their princes,"1198 assuring to the Jews the possibility of remaining faithful to their precepts. The "princes" to whom the text refers are the angelic spirits of the idolatrous nations and, chief among them, their archon, the evil Samma'el, who desired to mix himself among the Israelites in order to render vain their celebration.

In the Tiqqune ha-*zohar* (The Ornaments of Splendor), which, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, would mark the conclusion of the *Zohar*ic collection, the symbolic status of the sukkah is enriched through a connection with the sefirah binah (intelligence), which, in

the sefirotic tree, is attributed with the function of protection. The shelter thus assumed a double referential value, signifying binah as well as its lower reflection malkut: "The supernal mother [binah] corresponds to the refuge of peace (sukkat-šalom) but there is also a lower sukkah [...] the earthly mother [malkut]."1199

Taking this final metaphorical outcome as his starting point, the sixteenth century Kabbalist Yiṣḥaq Luria placed the sukkah at the center of his cosmological reading, in which every act of the Jewish rite represented an image from the history of the worlds. In the systematization of Lurianic thought offered by Ḥayyim Vital, the most representative student of the rabbi of Safed, the shelter was thus integrated into the dynamics of propagation exemplified by the divine light, going first in straight lines and then taking the form of a covering: "Behold that the sukkah corresponds to the enveloping light that makes its way toward the Female [malkut] thanks to the influence of mercy of the mother [binah]."1200

The descent of the luminous energy of binah toward malkut is, in Lurianism, essential for the equilibrium of the emanation, and can be activated through the construction of the shelter, that is, with an act of the faithful one, who thereby directly influences the propagation of the celestial forces: "We Jews [...] sons of malkut [...] we make the sukkah in order to dwell in the shadow of that enveloping light, which spreads within it, going around and circling it like a shelter: thus that curved light radiates upon us."1201 The forms of the sukkah become the same as the protective sefirotic light, so that the mundane and theosophical levels overlap to the point of being identical: the terrestrial sukkah, made from precarious materials, acquires a celestial double and becomes the provisional theophany of light.

סולם Sullam
Ladder

A humble object of daily use, the ladder is named only once in the Bible, in an image that stretches out between heaven and earth: And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven (Gen. 28.12). Marked by an initial wonder, Jacob's vision develops through two additional scenes, both also introduced by the Hebrew term we-hinneh, "and behold": And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it (Gen. 28.12-13). The three marvels lead the patriarch, from the solid ground on which the ladder is placed, up to the Lord, who stands above it as if upon a celestial base. It is certainly no coincidence that the text here employs the same root, nṣb, which means "to stand erect," as a pillar, a statue, or an immobile sentinel at his post, to signify both the stature of the ladder and that of the Lord.1202 While the object seen by Jacob was almost always represented as a ladder with rungs, leaning as it would in daily experience, the use of the technical term nṣb alludes rather to a specifically vertiginous vertical perspective, from which the metaphysical artifact rises straight up, as a stele of stones, without any diagonal projection.1203

At the beginning of the passage, Jacob, who is taken by surprise at the setting of the sun, decides to spend the night, and takes of the stones as his bedside, thus heralding the symbolic tension of the

episode, which will have its solution in the gesture of the patriarch, following the vision. Again, the word "pil-

lar," in Hebrew maṣṣevah, another derivative of nṣh, signifies that the ascent towards heaven is connected to the realm of the mineral by a mysterious relation. In fact, upon reawakening, Jacob stands the stone upright, consecrating it with an ancient gesture that, in the Orient, would still have bound the divinity with a stele: And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon its top (Gen. 28.18).

Throughot the centuries, the ladder that Jacob saw in his dream preserved the full extent of its power of attraction. In the Judaic exegesis, it represented the core of every possible symbolic evaluation of the object, and supplied material for ever-changing interpretations of the enigma posed by the patriarch's dream. The Jewish tradition of Late Antiquity, for example, situated it in the cosmic realm, attributing to each of its rungs a superhuman dimension. The treatise Ḥullin, of the Babylonian Talmud, states: "A rabbi taught: 'What was the width of the ladder? Eight thousand parasangs. For it is written: And behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it (Gen. 28.12). At least two were ascending and two descending, and when they met each other [on the ladder] there were four; and of an angel it is written: His body [...] is two thousand parasangs long.'"1204

These angels of the Lord, who stretch to such a vast expanse of heaven, gave spontaneous origin to comparisons with the stars. Deuteronomy Rabbah, a commentary which was probably written in the ninth century, and which also integrated earlier material, contains Judaic testimony of a representative pattern which was widespread in other ancient cultures, namely the coming and going of celestial bodies on an imagery ladder, on which these abstract entities of light move with human manners: "Rabbi Levi said: 'Not one of the constellations which travel in the firmament can see what is in front of him, but only what is behind

him, like a man descending a ladder with his face backwards.'"1205

In the medieval Kabbalah, the icon of the ladder was associated with the diagram of the sefirot, which arranged them in levels according to a process of elevation towards the initial origin of the emanation. Thus, at the end of the thirteenth century, according to the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), from the lowest and most earthly sefirah, malkut, the energy reaches tif'eret (beauty), which is identified with the manifest level of the God of Israel, and then binah (intelligence), marking the beginning of the manifestation of the divine in the cosmos, and which is therefore "the summit of the ladder."1206 On the other hand, in the section of the work entitled *Ra'aya mehemna* (The Faithful Shepherd), the ladder is instead related to the image of the Šekinah (which in its turn is equivalent to the sefirah of the kingdom), compared in this case to prayer which rises up to the Lord: "He had a dream, and behold a ladder set up on the earth (Gen. 28.12). This refers to prayer, set up on earth, since men begin to sing it on earth, which corresponds to the Šekinah. And it reaches up to heaven, that is, the Lord, blessed be He."1207

The correspondence between the ladder and prayer found reception in the work of Ya'aqov ben Ašer, undisputed sage above all in the halakic tradition, who lived in Toledo between the end of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth. In a passage of his Commentary on the Pentateuch, the author begins by proposing an equivalence between the numeric value of the letters that form the word sullam and those that compose the expression kisse ha-kavod, "throne of glory," and then continues: "The value of sullam is also equal to that of qol, "voice," since the voice of righteous prayer is a ladder upon which the angels rise [...] sullam is moreover equal tomamon, "wealth," as well as to 'oni, "poverty," since the rich will be brought down and the indigent will be exalted."1208 With an extreme use of the gimaṭreya, the term sullam is transformed here into increasingly remote and audacious notions, which range from liturgical experience to a representation of social dynamics; the celestial ladder seems to be used not only by the angels of prayer, but also by the fleeting appearances evoked by the changing of fortune.

Towards the middle of the sixteenth century, in the work of Mošeh Cordovero, a keen systematic thinker of the *Zohar*ic doctrine, the term sullam became a common metaphor used to designate the dynamism of the sefirot. In his Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates), Cordovero regularly used the expression "the ladder" to allude to the constant descent and ascent of the divine energy. He affirmed, moreover, that the sefirotic ladder has one means of descent and another of ascent: "there is no ascent through the levels of the ladder if not by way of the mystery of the left, while descent occurs on the right, which is well-known."1209 This brief and enigmatic annotation contains an interpretive key to the meaning of the three axes of the sefirotic diagram: the sefirot are imaged as placed along three principal lines, according to an abstract representation that is at times designated with the name of the tree of sefirot, but that can also be conceived, and perhaps with more precision, as a ladder. On this ladder, each level is identified with a provisional stage in the perpetual transformation of pure energy towards matter, and of matter towards the immaterial force of the divinity. According to Cordovero, the central principle of the tree—the axis of the ladder's equilibrium—which, from malkut, through yesod, arrives at tif'eret, is therefore an immobile and stabile extension; while the downward flow of

the divine effluvium occurs along the right-hand side of the ladder, the rising of the sefirot follows the left-hand side.

In place of the sculpture-like angelic presences which populated the Biblical tale of Jacob's dream, from this viewpoint the ladder is now filled with the purely verbal substance of the sefirot, whose names move along the rungs that climb up to heaven. While the structure dreamt by the patriarch was deeply connected to the physicality of the place where it appeared, and to the stone destined to be transformed into a stele, the sefirotic ladder of the Kabbalists would be a complex theosophical machine, which would distribute the force of the emanation throughout the cosmos.

Ṭal טל
Dew

Covered with goatskins in order to resemble the hairy Esau, Jacob approaches his father to ask him for the blessing due to the first-born. His garments are fragrant, and remind Isaac of the smell of the harvest: See, the smell of my son is like the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed; Therefore God give you of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine (Gen. 27. 27-28). In the patriarch's invocation, each word weighs as an anticipation of the future, and each is therefore chosen for its exemplary value, intending to guarantee Jacob and his descendants a long destiny of prosperity. The dew of heaven is thus the first term of this essential repertoire of abundance, which in the lands of the ancient Near East depended foremost upon nocturnal humidity.

More than rain itself, which in the Land of Israel completely ceased during the summer months, the dew that dripped in the nocturnal hours ensured the fertility of cultivation, and was therefore considered essential for prosperous human settlement. Blessed of the Lord be his land, for the precious things of heaven, for the dew, and for the deep that couches beneath (Deut. 33.13), exclaims Moses, to draw God's protection upon Joseph; this is the wish, introduced into the long discourse of leave-taking, that the prophet pronounces before dying, and which concludes with praise for Israel, whose skies—affirms Moses—shall drop down dew (Deut. 33.28).

The dew was considered of divine origin, and therefore a possible sign of communication between the Creator and man, which needed to be investigated in order to know the celestial will.1210 Indeed, in

the book of Judges, a singular episode appears in which dew is used as an instrument of anticipation of the future. In order to receive confirmation of protection against the Madianites, Gideon begins a

long conversation with the Lord, in which he tests the divine promise twice: Behold, I will put a fleece of wool on the threshing floor; and if the dew is on the fleece only, and it is dry on all the ground elsewhere, then shall I know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said [...] he rose up early on the next day, and squeezed the fleece together, and wrung the dew out of the fleece, a bowl full of water (Judg. 6.36-37 [37-38]). Still not completely convinced, Gideon asks God for additional proof, which the Lord, with patience, provides for him: Let not your anger burn against me [...] let it now be dry only upon the fleece, and upon all the ground let there be dew. And God did so that night; for it was dry upon the fleece only, and there was dew on all the ground (Judg. 6.39-40). The episode obeys a logic whereby nature's law is toppled. Modifying common meteorological phenomena, the Creator confines the nocturnal moisture, which usually embraces the entire landscape indiscriminately, to a limited place.1211

As a divine instrument, ṭal is then compared to the energy of light, which infuses matter with the vital force. In a psalm, its origin is attributed to daybreak, and it is believed to be capable of infusing its object with the vigor of youthfulness: From the womb of the morning, when the dew of your youth was upon you (Ps. 110.3). The image of the dew, as a metaphor of God's faculty to revive creation, transposes a daily experience onto the level of an immaterial substance, of pure luminous energy. In this symbolic func-

tion, it can even bring the dead to life, as a celebrated passage of the book of Isaiah attests, briefly mentioning a dew of lights1212 as an essential element of the eschatological hope: Your dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew is as the dew of lights, and the earth shall cast out the dead (Isa. 26.19).

The process by which ṭal took on a metaphorical character accelerates in the post-Biblical literature, which would transform the dew into a sort of mystical nourishment, reserved by God for the devotees and the righteous. According to Philo of Alexandriawho expressed the refined allegorical tendency of Hellenistic Judaism, "You

see of what sort the soul's food is. It is a word of God, continuous, resembling dew, embracing all the soul and leaving no portion without part in itself."1213 In this aspect of dew, which covers nature with a thin and continuous coating, Philo recognized an icon of the beneficial influence of the divine Logos, which does not assail man with violence but rather envelops him in a lucid and uniform understanding.1214

The rabbinic tradition explicitly asserted that "the dead do not live if not from dew,"1215 and that this was eternally granted to Israel as a particular gift from the Lord for Abraham's merits: "In the moment in which the patriarch Abraham fulfills my will, I will swear to him that I will never deprive his descendants of the dew [...] What is the proof? As it is said: Thine is the dew of

thy youth, followed by the affirmation: The Lord has sworn, and will not change his mind (Ps. 110.4)."1216

It was, moreover, believed that the divine dew had the special quality of conferring extraordinary powers, much like a balsam that arouses an exceptional force. Upon Jacob, for instance, "an enlivening dew fell from heaven, so that his limbs were invigorated from it: he thus became strong, courageous and mighty."1217 Drawn upon Jacob by Isaac's blessing, the dew becomes, in this passage of the Pirqe de rabbi Eli'ezer, a token of election, almost a patriarchal equivalent of anointment as a sign of regal virtue.

In the medieval mystical tradition, ṭal acquired the value of a transcendent material, which God could employ for many diverse aims. At the end of the thirteenth century, for example, its quality of luminous transparency was exalted by the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), who even imagined lucent tablets of the law modeled in the supernal dew: "The Holy One took two drops [of dew], causing them to solidify and turn into two precious stones. Then He blew on them and they became flat like tablets."1218 In this case, ṭal assumes the characteristics of a diaphanous liquid, which can crystallize and give origin to a specific form. In other passages of the *Zohar*, the dew symbolizes a light that infuses vigor into creation, and

that radiates towards the lowest branches of the cosmic tree, regenerating them. From this premise, the idea of a dew of redemption develops, which, when mixed with the dust of the earth, will bring about the future revival of the dead, while at the same time rendering their new bodies visible: "And at the time when the Holy One will raise the dead to life, He will cause dew to descend upon them from His head. By means of that dew all will rise from the dust, as it says, For thy dew is as the

dew of lights (Isa. 26.19), these being the supernal lights through which the Almighty will in future pour forth life upon the world. For the tree of life exudes life unceasingly into the universe."1219

In the *Zohar*, as well as in other texts of the classical Kabbalah, the symbolic value of ṭal as a dynamic element of the emanation was strengthened through numerical equivalences, and the word was made to correspond to the ineffable name of God itself, or to other even more mysterious divine epithets. Even in its short spelling, ṭal gave origin to a singular quantity of numerical speculations. According to a passage of the *Zohar*, for example, ṭal corresponded to Kwzw, one of the possible permutations of the Tetragrammaton, since both have the numerical value thirty-nine.1220 In the Sefer ha-peli'ah (The Book of Wonder), a text composed at the height of the fourteenth century, "the numerical value of the word Ehyeh is equal, 'based on the small number,' to that of the word ṭal, and this is the meaning of the verse Ehyeh ka-ṭal le-Yiśra'el, I will be as the dew to Israel (Hos. 14.6)."1221

In the Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates), composed in the middle of the sixteenth century by the Kabbalist Mošeh Cordovero, a further correspondence is found: "Ṭal indicates yod, he, waw all together, which gives as a result thirty-nine, and represents the influence of the supernal crown that reaches the sefirah of the kingdom, through the sefirot symbolized by these letters."1222 This means that, passing through

575

ḥokmah (wisdom, which corresponds to yod ), binah (intelligence, he), and tif'eret (beauty, waw), the celestial dew attains malkut (kingdom) and then falls upon the material world. According to Cordovero, this beneficial influence nevertheless clashes with a mirror-like force, designated by the inverse name of ṭal, that is, with the two letters lṭ, "evil surface, bad scourge, with which the thirty-nine calamities are inflicted [...] where Lot comes from, the evil inclination [...] and which are equal to the fulfillment, during the Sabbath, of the forty prohibited works minus one."1223 The double of ṭal is therefore first of all a number, a malign thirty-nine, which recalls the calamities once inflicted upon those guilty of the gravest crimes,1224 or, at the same time, the list of works prohibited on the Sabbath. Through a similar spelling, from lṭ the name of the Biblical personage Lot (Lwṭ) is generated, seen here in a negative light, that is, in virtue of coming from the Canaanite people.

Thanks to these many numerological interpretations, ṭal became a sort of algebraic sign of the emanation, whose evocative value could be turned upside down, inverting the sequence of its spelling. If the semantic part of ṭal, with its meaning of a fresh enlivening covering, effectively represented the restorative force of the divine, its non-semantic components—namely its numeric value and the graphic succession of its letters—symbolized for Cordovero the contraction of the mysterious names of God within the creation.

## תפילין Tefillin
## Phylacteries

Employing a repetition that foretells its symbolic destiny, the duty to place the words of the Torah as a sign [...] upon your hand, and for a memorial between your eyes appears four times in the text of the Bible.1225 The first two such prescriptions occur in the book of Exodus (13.9 and 13.16), where they are formulated in connection with the consecration of the first-born, and with the rites of the festival of the unleavened bread. The remaining two passages, both contained in Deuteronomy (6.8 and 11.18), follow the enunciation of the oneness of the Lord and the duty to love him, as well as the promise of prosperity that derives from divine protection. While these are heterogeneous contexts, in each case the emphasis is placed on the necessity of remembering the divine teaching and of rendering it manifest.

While Exodus prescribes only the placement of something as a sign, Deuteronomy explicitly orders that one "bind it" (u-qešartam), implying the more detailed action of tying the hand and the forehead. And while the Scriptures do not provide further specification, the sages of the Jewish tradition were substantially in agreement in interpreting the prescription in the literal sense, and thus conceived an artifact composed of thin strips of parchment, upon which the four Biblical passages were to be written, which were then to be inserted into small containers, and bound with strings around the left hand and the head.1226

Literary sources attested to this custom, beginning in the second and first centuries BCE, when, in the so-called Letter of Aristeas, it was affirmed that Moses had prescribed not only the carrying of a "symbol of remembrance" upon the garments, and the placing of "the divine

oracles upon our gates and doors," but had also ordered "upon our hands [...] the symbol to be fastened, clearly showing that we ought to perform every act in righteousness."1227 In the first century, Flavius Josephus would again discuss this habit, in fact adding some particulars: "Jews are also to inscribe the principal blessings they have received from God upon their doors, and show the same remembrance of them upon their arms; as also they are to bear on their forehead and their arm those wonders which declare the power of God, and his good-will towards them, that God's readiness to bless them may appear everywhere conspicuous about them."1228

An important piece of archeological evidence for the diffusion of tefillin during the first century has surfaced in recent years from the findings of the Dead Sea, which have restored many parchment fragments containing the texts of Exodus and Deuteronomy in question, as well as some empty containers, and even a complete exemplar of a tefillin for the head.1229 This evidence shows that the sect of Qumran also shared the custom of wearing them, although with some significant variations. In particular, here the Decalogue was included among the texts to be inscribed on the parchment, in contrast to those prescribed by the rabbinic rule.

The New Testament also documents the importance of the custom in the Gospel of Matthew, which preserves a condemnation pronounced by Jesus against the ostentation of the tefillin: "But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments."1230 It should nevertheless be noted that this passage does not condemn the custom in itself, but simply what was considered to be an exaggerated display of piety. The text of the Gospel here employs the Greek word phylaktēria, "amulet," and thus emphasizes the apotropaic value of the tefillin, viewed mainly as an item which protects its wearer.

This protective function was confirmed by the rabbinic literature of the first centuries, which made of the object a portentous sign, capable of striking fear into the peoples of the earth. The Babylonian Talmud

stated, for instance: "And how do you know that the tefillin are a strength to Israel? For it is written: And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the Lord is called upon thee, and they shall be afraid of thee (Deut. 28.10)."1231 According to the rabbis, the use of phylacteries thus transferred a part of the divine power to those who performed the rite, infusing in them the force of the divine name written on the parchment. The same Talmudic text would even extend the use of the tefillin to God, going so far as to speculate on the Biblical passages contained in the celestial phylactery: "Rabbi Naḥman ben Yiṣḥaq said to Rabbi Ḥiyya ben Avin: 'What is written in the tefillin of the Lord of the Universe?'—He replied to him: 'And who is like Your people Israel, a nation one in the earth (1Chron. 17.21).'"1232

The importance of wearing the tefillin was repeated in a great number of texts of Late Antiquity, focusing on the material characteristics of the artifact, as well as the exact circumstances in which it was to be used. According to the

Menaḥot treatise of the Talmud, which contains a vast dissertation on the ritual norms relating to phylacteries, "Whosoever does not put on the tefillin transgresses eight precepts,"1233 since each of the four Biblical verses regarding the injunction is repeated two times—once with regard to the hand, and once with regard to the head. While the Talmudic sages were aware that the details relating to the tefillin did not derive from the Bible, they considered them to be a juridical norm, "instituted by Moses on Sinai," as if the arrangement of the parchments in the containers and their external characteristics stemmed from Moses. The prophet supposedly also instituted the practice of affixing the letter šin to the right and left of the tefillin of the head, and determined that the strings be the color black. According to another opinion, the laces could have been green, black, or white, but not red, since this color could lead to thoughts of the impurity of blood. Some used strings of blue wool. The containers needed to be square and not round, since that would have represented "a danger," and would not have satisfied the precept.1234

The Talmudic sources suggests that the tefillin would have been worn for most of the day, and not just for morning prayer, as in modern custom. According to most of the rabbis, it was forbidden to wear them at night, and "If one was on his way [home], wearing tefillin on his head, and the sun was setting upon him, he should place his hand upon them until he reaches his house."1235 One was also not permitted to wear them on the Sabbath, even if one found some unguarded tefillin on this day and needed to take them home by carrying them on the arm and on the head to avoid them being stolen. The Talmud adds, nevertheless, that this seems to be an excessive concern, because "the majority of robbers [in that district] are Israelites, who would not handle them disrespectfully."1236

In times of anti-Jewish persecution, to wear the tefillin often amounted to exposing oneself to grave danger, as demonstrated by the case of Eliša' "of the wings," the pious Jew who defied the decree of the Roman administration. The "wicked government" had declared that whoever donned the phylacteries would have their head pierced through. Despite this, "Eliša' put them on and went out into the streets. [When] a quaestor saw him, he fled before him, whereupon he gave pursuit. As he overtook him, he [Eliša'] removed them from his head and held them in his hand. 'What is that in your hand?' he demanded. 'The wings of a dove,' was his reply." Eliša' devotion was rewarded, since "He stretched out his hand and lo! They were the wings of a dove."1237

As proof of their extraordinary regard for the tefillin, the Talmudic texts also mention the custom of solemnly swearing upon them, rather than on the Sefer Torah. This practice was reserved "to the wise scholars," as a sign of distinction, since for them the short passages contained in the phylacteries were enough to symbolize the entire text of the Bible.1238

In the mystical tradition, the tefillin entered into the representation of the Godhead, as well as into the discussion of the hidden sense of the liturgy, thus demonstrating a symbolic polysemy which united the angelic sphere to earthly ritual practices. In fact, on the celestial level, the guardian of the tefillin was the angel Sandalfon, whose principal

task was "to weave crowns for his Creator."[1239] Thanks to this work, he was also able to fasten "the tefillin on the head of the rock of the worlds, the Lord, God of Israel."[1240] As recounted in a vision contained in the Sefer Merkavah Rabbah, probably composed in the early Middle Ages, these divine phylacteries had a providential function:

"I saw the king of the world"—Rabbi Yišma'el narrate—"seated on a lofty and elevated throne [...] Sandalfon was his name, and when he wanted Rozey Yhwh, the Lord of Israel, to swear on the tefillin and cause his oath to fall into his hand, he took the tefillin off his head and revoked the decrees for the destruction of the earth."[1241] If, on the one hand, Sandalfon's gesture somehow recalled the ritual of the rabbinic oath, on the other hand the phylacteries worn by God represented the most important element of a rite of eschatological redemption, thanks to which the Jewish people avoided persecution.[1242]

With the first appearance of the Kabbalistic doctrine towards the end of the twelfth century, the tefillin adopted a role within a complex metaphoric structure, at times overlapping with its other components, in a play of references which was often purposely enigmatic. A good example of this multi-faceted symbolism can be found in the first document of the medieval Kabbalah, the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), which sanctions an equivalence between the notions of "throne," "crown," "amulet," and "phylactery." Drawn to the conceptual sphere of keter, the "crown"—listed in a triple gradation—the tefillin here seemed to enter into the symbolic series of the number three, finally equaling the regal throne: "We know [...] that Israel was crowned with three crowns: the sacerdotal crown, the regal crown and—above these—the crown of the Torah. To what can this be compared? To a king who possessed an object, beautiful and fragrant, that he loved very much. At times he put it on his head—they are the phylacteries that are placed on the head—at times he put it on his arm, with the knot of the phylactery of the arm, and at times he gave it to his son, so that he sat with him. Sometimes

it is defined as his throne, since he carried it on his arm as an amulet, as a throne."[1243] Although the passage does not offer a clear

interpretive key, it is evident that, behind this rich sedimentation of images, an allusion to the relationship between the sefirot, and particularly between keter ʻelyon (supernal crown) and malkut (kingdom), also called the "lower crown" or "diadem," is concealed.

The connection between the tefillin and the sefirotic world, which, in the Bahir, was only alluded to, was expressed more clearly in the writings of the Kabbalists ʻEzra and ʻAzri'el,1244 who lived in Gerona in the first half of the thirteenth century. In ʻEzra's Commentary on the Song of Songs, as well as in ʻAzriel's interpretation of the Talmudic Haggadot, the tefillin of the head (or rather, the four Biblical passages contained within them) are in fact ascribed to four sefirot: ḥokmah (wisdom), binah (intelligence), ḥesed (mercy), and gevurah (might). The tefillin of the arm, inasmuch as they are bound to the left limb, are also associated with gevurah, which dominates the left-hand side of the sefirotic tree.

At the end of the thirteenth century, Yosef Giqaṭilla, in his *Sefer šaʻare orah* (The Book of the Gates of Light), expressed a symbolic interpretation of the phylacteries that seems to hark back to a different tradition altogether. Indeed, he explicitly related the tefillin of the arm to malkut (kingdom), which had to "be bound to the higher levels, in order that it could receive from them diverse influences and blessings. For this reason, the Lord, blessed be He, gave Israel the faculty of uniting with the higher levels, and this is the secret called tefillah of the arm."1245 For Giqaṭilla, the act of connecting the phylacteries to the arm provoked an effect on

the celestial spheres, favoring, or even causing, the union of malkut with the sefirot that rise above it: the tefillin thereby become an instrument of cosmic importance, which Israel can use to transcend the mundane and restore a full celestial harmony.

These ideas were developed in the *Zohar*ic literature between the last decades of the thirteenth century and the first half of the fourteenth. The *Zohar* hadaš contains a lively tale of how the Israelites can attract the fullness of the Šekinah—conceived here as the feminine principle equivalent to the sefirah malkut, united with the supernal

male, that is, to tif'eret (beauty). The two sefirot are imagined as doves, "male and female: he who desires to capture both, will first take the female and bind her to himself, so that she calls the male. In this way the Jews must take the holy dove and bind her with the lace of the phylacteries, and she will call her mate [...] when he descends close to her, the one must be bound to the other with the string of the tefillin."1246

Perhaps the most detailed illustration of the mystical meaning of the tefillin appeared in the Ma'areket ha-elohut, an anonymous work, probably composed in the first half of the fourteenth century. The author of this classical Kabbalistic treatise reinterpreted all preceding speculations on the subject, thereby deriving a new map of the symbolic meanings of the phylacteries. Every detail of the artifact, and every act carried out by the one who wears it, found a theosophical explanation here, beginning with the knots that bind the strings to the tefillin of the head, which were interpreted as an allusion to the 'aṭarah, the "diadem," another name for malkut. The strings that come down from the head were seen as the sefirotic influence that descends from the brain—i.e., from tif'eret—towards the lowest levels of the emanation, while the two šin, placed on the sides of the containers, corresponded to the seven lower sefirot; four on the right (ḥesed,

tif'eret, neṣaḥ, and yesod)1247 and three on the left (paḥad, hod, and 'aṭarah). Finally, the sefirah of the diadem appears again in the tefillin of the arm, which are put on before that of the head, since the 'aṭarah is the "corner-stone" of the cosmic edifice, even if "the importance of the tefillin of the head is greater than that of the arm, as the rights prevails over the left."1248

Rather than being fixed within a univocal structure, in the Ma'areket ha-elohut the tefillin form a metaphorical structure which is in constant movement; one sefirah can appear at different points in the diagram without the author expressing any excessive concern about organizing them into a rigid logical scheme. The ubiquity of the symbolic values results in the phylacteries taking on an increasingly evocative power, which almost bind the faithful to a sefirotic

constellation. In this way, one of the most relevant discoveries of the Kabbalistic language finds its confirmation: the possibility of placing one image at different levels of the emanation, thus rendering a striking picture of the unseizable dynamism of the sefirot.

תיבה Tevah
Ark

The Biblical ark of the flood is not a craft constructed to reach a destination, but an image of submission and waiting. Suggested by divine command, it is realized by Noah according to a meticulous plan that eludes human knowledge, and which, in the text of the Scriptures, proceeds by uncommon words, often foreign to the Hebrew lexicon. The name tevah, "ark," itself seems to be of Egyptian etymology and, after the story of the flood, appears only to designate the basket in which the young Moses is abandoned on the river's waters. The word gofer, which designates the "gopher wood" from which the ark was to be made, is also foreign, as are the terms qofer, "bitumen," and the

enigmatic ṣohar, perhaps the opening for light to be put in the roof.1249

Before explaining to him that he must take in a pair of every living being, God, as a prudent master builder, provides Noah with all of the details necessary for the construction of the tevah, including its measurements: Rooms shall you make in the ark, and shall pitch it inside and outside with pitch [...] The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its breadth fifty cubits, and its height thirty cubits. A window shall you make in the ark, and to a cubit shall you finish it above; and the door of the ark shall you set in its side; with lower, second, and third stories shall you make it (Gen 6.14-16). Noah diligently follows all of the Lord's commands and, on the day on which all the fountains of the great deep [are] broken up (Gen. 7.12), he enters the ark with his wife, his children, and every species of

animal. Then the Lord closed him in (Gen. 7.16), to give free vent to his wrath against the wickedness of the human race. For one hundred fifty days, God seems not to care about the fate of Noah and the ark, which floats above the submerged earth; only after having completed his extermination, God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark; and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided (Gen. 8.1).

The Biblical narrative is characterized here by a sense of fatal abandonment to divine will, and by a long interval in which the ark becomes a space of forgetfulness, removed from the overall destiny of destruction but also relegated to an oblivious dimension.

In the ancient Mesopotamian precedent of the story of the flood, preserved in the poem of Gilgameš, the ark is instead at the center of the narrative, and it is Utanapištim, the protagonist corresponding to Noah, who describes the scenes of devastation caused by the unceasing rain. In contrast to Noah, who in the entire episode does not say a single word, Utanapištim is proud of his experience, which he is able to describe with passionate tones, both in the disheartenment of the landscape of death and in the emotion of the subsiding of the tempest. He is able to tell the instant in which he understands that the

wandering of his ship has reached its end: "I opened a vent, on my cheeks fell the sunlight. Down sat I, I knelt and wept."1250

If the Mesopotamian tale likely represents a narrative archetype of the Bible, the Hebrew expression of the topos of the flood makes the God of Israel the true protagonist, and the ark his instrument, of which Noah seems only the patient guardian.

The sages of the post-Biblical Jewish tradition strove to fill the story's silences, imagining life on the ark during the long voyage, and trying to provide psychological relief to the figure of Noah.1251 According to a legend reported in the Babylonian Talmud, precious stones and jewels, capable of emitting an extraordinary light—"bright as the noon"—lit up the darkness inside the ark.1252 Nevertheless, the occupants suffered because of the harshness of the climate, so that—as another Haggadic source states—Noah left "the ark coughing and spitting blood, due to an illness he contracted from the cold."1253 The months that passed on board were very hard, since "neither Noah nor his children were able to close their eyes for the whole time, because they had to feed the wild animals and domestic animals, the birds [...] and some of the animals had to be fed in the second hour of the night, while others were fed in the third." Neglecting this task could have been very dangerous: in fact, when Noah "is late giving the lion something to eat, it bit him with such rage that he left the ark limping."1254 For the entire time he was enclosed in the ark, moreover, "Noah prayed continuously," adapting to the divine prohibition against having sexual relations with his wife, a prohibition which extended to all of the ark's occupants, since, "when the Lord, blessed be He, is intent upon destroying the world, men should not exert themselves to populate it."1255 Only three couples transgress this rule, "and they were all punished—the dog, the raven, and Ham. The dog was doomed to be tied; the raven expectorates [his seed into his mate's mouth]. And Ham was smitten in the color of his skin."1256

In the later midrašic literature, Noah's time in the ark was compared to a stay in prison, from which the protagonist insistently asked to be

liberated. In the Pirqe de-rabbi Eli'ezer, (The Chapters of Rabbi Eli'ezer) a text probably composed in the eight century, one reads, "Noah constantly stood in prayer before the Lord, blessed be He, saying: Lord of all worlds, let me leave this prison, I am prostrate from the stench of the lions, of the bears and leopards."1257 According to the Haggadah, therefore, the condition of the prisoners in the ark was completely unnatural, endangered the physical integrity of Noah and his companions, and was overcome despite moments of discomfort. The ark was, for Noah, an experience of solitude, of interruption of dialogue with other human beings, and of difficult relations with the animals.

This contracting of the psychological space of the ark around the protagonist epitomizes a tradition of substantially negative interpretations of the tevah, widespread among the Jewish exegetes of Late Antiquity and of the beginning of the medieval period. For them, the tale of the voyage willed by divine wrath was a distressing interruption of life's course.

During the thirteenth century, with the establishment of Kabbalistic thought, the symbolism of the ark was subjected to a profound re-evaluation. In contrast to the cramped tevah of the preceding centuries, the ark was imagined as an instrument of protection, capable of delivering the patriarch from the sefirotic influence of the divine rigor. In the *Sefer ha-zohar* (the Book of Splendor), composed at the end of the thirteenth century, Noah's entrance into the ark is described as an epochal event, in which Noah was chosen by God, to save the archetype of the ṣaddiq, the righteous. According to the author of the *Zohar*, the flood's rage expressed the predominance of the attribute of divine rigor, personified by the angel of death: "As soon as the Destroying Angel comes down into this world, whoever does not shut himself in, but exposes himself to his view, forfeits his life, and thus destroys himself [...] Hence it is written of

Noah, and the Lord shut him in (Gen. 7.16), so he did not show himself to the Destroying Angel, and it did not have him in his power."1258 Therefore, in this case, the tevah is a means of concealment, which renders the protagonist invisible to evil and

therefore magically protected. The *Zohar* expresses several times the conviction that the heralds of divine punishment can strike only those who enter within their field of vision, since it was believed that nature's devastating forces were effected through personal contact, guided by an angel who destroyed "anyone who comes before him." "For this reason Noah withdrew himself and all under his charge into the ark, so that the destroyer had no power over him."1259

The interpretation of the tevah given by the rabbi of Prague, Yehudah Löw ben Beṣal'el, called Maharal (ca. 1525–1609), in his Sefer ḥidduše aggadot (The Book of the New Haggadic Interpretations), takes on a symbolic latitude which was in a certain way opposed to that of the *Zohar*ic. Taking as its cue the Talmudic tale about the precious stones that produced light in the ark, the Maharal constructed the idea of a tevah made in the image of the world, and therefore of a mineral substance which had to shine by its own virtues and not with the help of artificial light. "It was necessary"—writes the sage of Prague—"that, as the world has no recourse to the light of any lamp, the ark was illuminated by precious stones, like the sun and the moon that produce their light by themselves."1260 With a sixteenth century sensibility, the Maharal transformed this ancient fairy-tale element into an object of mannerist flavor, similar to the precious artifacts of hard stone that enriched the Prague Wunderkammer of Rudolf II, as if the ark could have epitomized in

itself the mysteries of creation, like a machine imitating nature by divine inspiration.1261

In the late eighteenth century, the metaphorical value of the ark reached an extreme outcome when the Hasidic movement of eastern Europe spread a new conception of the duties of the righteous, and of the necessity of their social engagement. In this light, the tevah was seen as a form of expiation imposed on Noah for his egoistic attitude, which induced him to leave his contemporaries to their destiny, without even trying to dissuade them from sin.1262 This theme would

return many times in the work of the direct student of Ba'al Šem Ṭov, Ya'aqov Yosef of Polonnoye (who died ca. 1782), the first to articulate the theoretical and exegetical fundamentals of Hasidism. He affirms that the Lord told the patriarch to construct the tevah since he had not sought to "set his people on the correct path, in the cult of the Creator, but he was closed in his own dwelling." For this, attests Ya'aqov Yosef, the Lord said to him: "You will be enclosed in the ark and you will suffer. Because you were not the shepherd of men, nor did you guide them, depriving you of sleep to attend to them and to turn them to good, you will become the shepherd of animals and of beasts and you will not sleep for feeding them."1263

Nevertheless, Noah's sin was born from his desire to dedicate himself to the exclusive cult of God and to prayer, and, consequently, "the punishment was also the source of good works with which he attracted to himself the influence of holiness."1264 In the Hasidic vision, the righteous person who refuses to devote himself to man is destined to the ark of solitude; that is, he is destined to close himself in to an exclusive but tormenting relationship with the divine.

## תיקון Tiqqun
Ornament, Restoration

In two parallel verses of the book of Ecclesiastes, the root tqn expresses, with a sense of resignation, the impossibility of modifying a state of fact: That which is crooked cannot be made straight (li-teqon: Eccl. 1.15); Consider the work of God; for who can make that straight (le-taqqen), what he has made crooked? (Eccl. 7.13). Tqn, which means here "to straighten, repair, restore," seems therefore to suggest that any human act would be equal to the transgression of divine will.

Following another mention, again in the book of Ecclesiastes (12.9), there meaning "to collect," or "to order," tqn vanishes from the Scriptures. It reappears, however, in many passages of the post-Biblical Judaic literature and, above all, in the Aramaic translations of the Bible from Late Antiquity, the Targumim. While the three Biblical occurrences themselves display a somewhat limited symbolic spectrum, in successive texts the meanings of the word make up a vast gamut that extends from the governance of a city to the veil worn by a prostitute. The translators, who, during the first centuries of the Common Era, did their best to convert Biblical Hebrew into the popularly spoken Aramaic language, resorted in fact to tqn and its derivatives in rendering a large number of Hebrew words, with a variety of contrasting meanings among them.

In addition to the meanings of "prepare," "arrange," and "render suitable," which can essentially be considered extensions of the Biblical use of the word, the Aramaic Targumim introduced a new meaning, which would accompany tqn in subsequent Judaic symbolism. With this verbal root—and with tiqqun (or tiqquna), its noun form—the Aramaic of the Targumim designated everything that concerns adornment, gathering under a single word the various words that, in the

592

Hebrew Bible, indicated jewelry, the ornamental elements of clothing, and beauty in general. Thus, for example, when Tamar, according to the Hebrew text of the Scriptures, took off her widow's garments, and covered herself with a veil, and wrapped herself (Gen. 38.14), pretending to be a prostitute in front of Judah, the Targum Onkelos states that "she covered herself with a veil and adorned herself (we-ittaqnat)," adding a detail of feminine grace to the woman's gesture.

Thus, the efod, the cloak worn by the priest in the description of Exodus,1265 as well as the jewelry of which the Israelites strip themselves out of fear of God's wrath, following the episode of the golden calf,1266 and finally the "beauty of wisdom" of the King of Tyre in Ezekiel's invective,1267 all became tiqqun.

This expressive richness of tiqqun seems to indicate the various perceptions of beauty that made inroads into Judaism, beginning in the Hellenistic era. That the scattered mentions of adornment in the Hebrew Scriptures were reduced to a single concept1268 signifies the development of a particular synthetic idea of beauty and its cultural function, which was itself probably largely due to the influence of Greek culture. The concept of adornment also began to play a legitimate part in the Hebrew ritual lexicon, indicating the reciprocal action that binds the Lord to the Israelites.1269 In the Midraš Tanḥuma—composed sometime

around the eighth and ninth centuries, but probably an expression of more ancient thought—one of the first appearances of the act of "adorning the bride" appears as a metaphor for religious action: "As I called Israel bride"—affirms the Lord—"I also embellished and adorned the Torah as a bride and [...] I gave it to Moses as a bride."1270

If, in this passage of the Midraš Tanḥuma, the Scriptures, a gift from God to Israel, are "adorned," that is, beautiful and valuable, on other occasions it is Israel that adorns itself with the observance of the precepts, and with prayer, which at the same time are an adornment attributed to God: "This is my God, and I will adorn him (Exod. 15.2),1271 [i.e.,] adorn yourself before Him in [the fulfillment of] precepts," states the Babylonian Talmud.1272 The midraš Exodus Rabbah dwells on the equivalence between the splendor of prayer and a bright garland which crowns the divinity: "When Israel prays [...] the angel appointed over prayers collects all the prayers that have been offered in all the Synagogues, weaves them into garlands and places them upon the head of God."1273 The prayer is not only an earthly ornament that adorns those who recite it, but it is

also effective in the celestial sphere, as a crown that beautifies the divinity.

The exegetical and philosophical literature from the beginning of the Middle Ages did not devote particular attention to the concept of tiqqun, limiting itself mainly to recalling the value of decorum that devotion provides.1274 However, from the beginning of the thirteenth century the correspondence between human and divine adornment would become a central theme of the Kabbalah. Towards the end of the twelfth century, in the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir), a work which marks the passage from ancient mysticism to the new Kabbalistic lexicon, the word tiqqun was used to indicate the symbolic relationship between the earthly and celestial realities. In describing the sefirah of the foundation (yesod), the Bahir speaks of it as a righteous person, "beloved and dear to heaven, beloved and dear on earth, terrifying and majestic in heaven, terrifying and majestic on earth, adorned (metuqqan) and welcome in heaven, adorned and welcome on earth."1275 Although the text does not provide any further explanation for this instance of tiqqun, the concept is evidently based on a symmetry between high and low, thanks to which the archetypal ornament of the sefirah is reflected in human events. An allusion to its meaning of "to be stable," which is the other semantic vocation of the word, is added here to the unquestionable meaning of "adorn." The "righteous person" is in fact "adorned," that is to say, splendid and perfect in heaven. At the same time, the sefirah of the foundation, that that righteous person represents, is firm in the supernal sphere, and it is from it that the earth derives its stability.

This polysemy of tiqqun became very important in the Sephardic Kabbalah of the thirteenth century, where the expressive gamut of the word was the starting point for mystical rethinking.1276 Yosef Giqaṭilla (1248– ca. 1325) is the author who, perhaps more than any other, used the term with virtuosity, employing it, in his *Sefer ša'are orah* (The Book of the Gates of Light) no less than seventy times. In Giqaṭilla's vocabulary, the root tqn means, "establish," "prepare," "institute," "repair," "improve," and "adorn," and thus becomes a true focal point

in the representation of the cosmos and of man's activity. Moreover, the Sephardic Kabbalist acknowledges the value that the word had acquired in the Jewish philosophical literature of Islamic inspiration, in which tiqqun translated the Arabic iṣlāh, in reference to the improvement of the human mind, heart, and conscience.1277 On the basis of this conceptual extension, in the *Ša'are orah*, the sefirah yesod—which in the Bahir was "well adorned" and "established"—becomes a stimulus to the improvement of man, "who makes an effort to correct (letaqqen) and amend his conduct."1278

The main hermeneutical force of Giqaṭilla's work nevertheless consisted in conceiving tiqqun as both a restoration and, at the same time, as an ornament of a cosmic process in which man is the primary actor. He maintained that, at the moment of creation, the cosmos was in perfect equilibrium, and the supernal energy flowed freely from high to low, through the canals of the emanation; nevertheless, "when the first man sinned, the lines were

ruptured and the channels were damaged."1279 In order to bring about the return to original harmony, men, and in particular the Jewish people, needed to commit themselves mystically until achieving a tiqqun, that is, a restoration of the system of correspondences between high and low from which earthly beings derive their nourishment. However, Such amends could be achieved only when the community of Israel "adorns itself with prayer and of the observance of the precepts," thereby causing "the divinity to shine."1280

On the other hand, the enunciation of the names of God is itself considered a symbolic ornament which rises from the earth to give splendor to the celestial sphere, since the Lord "wears all the holy names and the various appellatives, each in the given moment [...] as the bridegroom dresses in ornate garments."1281 In a strongly esoteric remark, Giqaṭilla adds: "We have another great truth to reveal to you—and that is namely that the essence of these splendid celestial ornaments, known as 'beard,'1282 is the secret of beauty."1283

The enunciation of the divine attributes is perhaps one of the most obscure themes of all medieval mysticism. This idea, to which Giqaṭilla dedicates only this single cryptic mention, found a surprising development in the so-called Idrot (Assemblies) of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor). Although meditation on the cosmic figure of God was known to the ancient Judaic tradition, a group of Sephardic mystics at the end of the thirteenth century—to which Giqaṭilla belonged, as well as the

author of the Idrot of the *Zohar*—carried the speculation on the divine attributes to a level of extreme complexity: here the supernal ornaments were visualized as details of a celestial macroanthropos, of which the head, the hair, and the beard were described with care.

Between the idea of an ornament of light and that of a mystical journey among the details of the head and the divine beard, there is a conceptual space that the texts do not clarify. This can be filled by imagining a practice of meditation, shared within a very small group. In fact, the Idrot of the *Zohar* describe, in strongly emphatic tones, a kind of mystical competition carried out among an assembly of learned people, who in turn depict, with a great wealth of details, the qualities of the celestial figure: "When expressed by your mouths"—the Idra rabba states, for example—"each [of these attributes] rises and is adorned (we-itteqan), crowned, and concealed in the mystery of the ornaments of the beard."1284 The thorough treatment of the ornaments of the celestial figure is justified by the conviction that to know the mystical body means in some way to recreate it, causing it to exist in the interiority of the one who contemplates it, as well as in its cosmic dimension. For this reason, in the Kabbalistic tradition that would follow, the study of the Idrot of the *Zohar* was considered a very important and secret practice, capable of symbolically affecting the structure of creation.

However, in the *Zohar*ic literature, the concept of tiqqun (or, more frequently, in the Aramaic in which the main part of the work is composed, tiqquna) is omnipresent. It recurs no less than one thousand five hundred times, substantiating many cosmological descriptions, as

well as the idea of the inner discipline of man. Therefore, in the *Zohar*, the tiqqun is the ornament of the worlds at the moment of their creation, as well as the correction of the defects of the cosmic structure and, on the human level, it amends for sin through the observance of religious duty.

This complex patrimony of speculation remained the foundation of the later Kabbalah, until its ample reworking in the doctrine of Yiṣḥaq Luria, the great sage who died at Safed, in Galilee, in 1572, and whose teachings are known above all through the exposition of his student Ḥayyim Vital (1542-1620). The Lurianic tiqqun seems at first glance to lose one of the two fundamental semantic values elaborated by the preceding tradition: abandoning connotations of ornament, it is identified almost exclusively with the restorative action that follows the cosmic breaking of the vases. In fact, the most innovative idea in Luria's Kabbalah was that of a primordial fracture in divine emanation, described as a descent of light from the celestial source. According to the rabbi of Safed, the supernal radiance, due to its profusion, broke the lowest sefirot, represented as vases that were intended to receive it, meaning that the luminous particles scattered chaotically throughout the entire cosmos. The light then ascended and descended further, now with less intensity, in such a way that all of the sefirotic levels could receive it. This process of attenuation of the divine energy, as well as the recovery of the particles of light projected by the first rupture, took the name tiqqun, which in the Lurianic teaching is configured as a correction of the dynamic expansion of the celestial force. The first tiqqun was attributed to the Emanator, which "decided to restore (le-taqqen) all the worlds, so that they could support this illumination: this occurred by way of [a different] diffusion of light and thanks to the increasing distance of the supernal Emanator, so that the propagated lights weakened. In this way, the existence of the worlds, which were capable of holding the luminous energy, was possible."[1285]

If the initial tiqqun carried the unexpected fulfillment of the emanation, the second process of restoration imagined by Luria is

much more complex. Indeed, the redemption of the sparks scattered throughout the worlds, and trapped among the fragments

of the shattered vases, which in Hebrew take the name qelippot—the "husks" of matter—is still incomplete. According to the rabbi of Safed, two actions can contribute to the tiqqun of the lost lights, one put into practice by those on earth, and the other entrusted to the celestial forces. Through the observance of the precepts, and thanks to prayer, "the righteous [...] cause the holy lights that have fallen to rise from the qelippot."1286 The tiqqun brought about by man has the usual traits of Judaic devotion, but the one caused by the celestial forces is striking in its mysterious and provocative anthropomorphism. In fact, in Lurianic thought, the levels of emanation—represented as immaterial human figures—redeem the light from the depths to which it falls, joining in physical embraces: "It is not possible to purify any spark"—Vital's Eṣ Ḥayyim (The Tree of Life) states—"if not by means of celestial coupling, since the particles rise from below, where they fell, enter into the womb of the celestial female, and remain there for the time of conception, so as to become sweet and to be transformed into semblances."1287

It is therefore through the metaphor of a sexual union that the notion of ornament, apparently dormant in the teaching of Luria, assumes a decisive function in the restoration of the worlds. As in its ancient midrašic conception, and that of the medieval Kabbalah, in Luria as well the celestial tiqqun is based on the capacity of the bride to arouse the desire of the bridegroom by adorning herself: "The supernal male is nevertheless not ready for coupling if the female does not adorn herself, preparing for the union, to please him [...] and it is known that the ornaments of the supernal bride are the souls of the righteous that rise to it [...] and thus permit the union."1288 This Lurianic cosmogony, which seemed confined to an abstract dynamic of the celestial forces, is nonetheless even more explicit than the

preceding Judaic theories about the mechanism of seduction effected by the adorned bride. While the identification of the celestial ornament with the moral perfection of man recalls the traditional

rabbinic imagery, the emphasis placed on the kindling of the passion is a new element, which gives the mystical prose a strong symbolic efficacy. With a bold assimilation of the intradivine life into human psychology, the motor of the cosmic restoration is, for Luria, passion, which in its turn depends on the manifestation of ornament.

As if trying to defend the secret of beauty as the true origin of the restitutio ad integrum of the divine design, the theoretical construction of Lurianism removes tiqqun from the dominion of the present, leaving it suspended between two anachronisms: the promise of pleasure close at hand and the distant expectation of the redemption of the worlds.

## תהו ובהו wa-vohu Tohu
## Chaos and Void

Of the expression tohu wa-vohu, which opens the second verse of Genesis, almost only the sound remains for us. The two terms tohu and bohu, joined by the conjunction wa, "and," seem to be synonyms,1289 used in this passage to describe the condition in which the earth found itself before creation: And the earth was chaos and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And a wind from God moved upon the face of the waters (Gen. 1.2). While the qualifications of the other two primordial realities—the abyss and the indistinct mass of water—are given with clearly recognizable words ("darkness" and "wind"), the exact meaning of tohu and bohu seems to be overwhelmed by the force of a formula folded back upon itself, exhibiting an evocative value rather than a precise semantic connotation. Although the linguistic status of the two terms is unequal—tohu would have, in fact, a relatively broad use in Biblical Hebrew, while bohu would be substantially confined to this verse1290—the expression continued to indicate the

idea of a primordial state, of an absence capable of receiving the order of creation.

Interpreters worked hard to fill in the sonorous material of tohu wa-vohu with cosmogonic details, separating the indistinct unity of the two words into different images of the story of creation. This exegetical effort already had precedent in the Greek version of the Septuagint, which captured an echo of the

Hebrew alliteration in the adjectives aoratos and akataskeuastos, literally "invisible" and "not prepared,"1291 which nevertheless displayed a clear conceptual expansion. The Greek sentence leaves room for a kind of autonomous fragment of the story of creation, since neither of its two adjectives refer to the exact senses of tohu or bohu, but still express the image of an earth hidden by an aqueous vapor, itself still not ready for creatures to inhabit it.1292

Therefore, starting with the Greek version, tohu wa-vohu worked as a verbal icon that exegetes felt at liberty to fill with narrative content, which would work to elucidate the enigmatic tale of the origins of the world. In fact, the Targumim, the Aramaic translations, offer an even more marked expansion, which substitutes the original pair with an entire period: "The earth was desolate and formless, without people and beasts, empty of crops and trees."1293 The earth evoked here is similar to the space of daily experience, but completely lacking in inhabitants. Nevertheless, although many new elements are added to the topography of creation here, the Targumim still exhibit a conceptual adherence to the Biblical context, and still respect the connection of tohu wa-vohu with the earth.

The Alexandrian philosopher Philo instead suggests, however indirectly, a parallel between the expression used in Genesis and Chaos, which the Greek poet Hesiod celebrated as the first manifestation of reality: "Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, secure seat for ever of all."1294 Philo was not moved by a purely exegetical interest, but intended rather to demonstrate the created and indestructible character of the earth. Consequently, he reviewed the

cosmogonic ideas widespread in Greek philosophy and quoted the interpretation of Hesiod's Chaos offered by Aristotle and the Stoics: "Now Chaos was conceived by Aristotle to be a place, because it is absolutely necessary that a place to receive them must be in existence before bodies. But some of the Stoics think that it is water [...] But however that may be, it is exceedingly plain that the world is spoken of by Hesiod as having been created: and a very long time before him Moses, the lawgiver of the Jews, had said in his sacred volumes that the world was both created and indestructible."1295 At this point Philo cited the first two verses of Genesis, implying that the Biblical description hinted at the Hellenistic speculation on the primordial matter. This conceptual passage, introduced almost incidentally, is very significant, since it documents the beginning of a philosophical transposition of tohu and bohu, which would be consistently developed in the centuries that followed.

While they make no mention of the Greek concept of Chaos, the rabbinic interpretations of Late Antiquity do also demonstrate a progressive transformation of the hendiadys tohu wa-vohu into a sort of original cosmic matter, described at times in terms not dissimilar to those employed by the Greek

thinkers. In particular, the notion of the primordial waters makes its way into the Judaic cosmogony, supplanting the original symbolism of tohu and bohu, which was probably connected rather with the aridity of the desert earth. In the Talmudic Ḥagigah treatise, probably composed at the beginning of the sixth century, we find a first fundamental re-reading of the second verse of Genesis, releasing the synonymous pair from their original context: "It is taught: Tohu is a green line that encompasses the whole world, out of which darkness proceeds [...] Bohu, this means the slimy stones that are sunk in the deep, out of which the waters proceed."1296 In each of the two words, two stages of the creation proceed and, at the same time, two archetypical substances are identified—tohu is the immaterial line of the horizon, from which darkness seeps into the sunset, to the point of

completely obfuscating the earth, while bohu acquires a composite nature of stone-water.

One of the oldest documents of Jewish mysticism, the Sefer yeṣirah (The Book of Formation), probably written between the beginning of the sixth and the second half of the seventh centuries, contains a further decisive passage with respect to the identification of tohu wa-vohu with the primitive pregnant humidity: "Water from Spirit. He engraved and hewed in it tohu and bohu, mud and clay. He made them like a furrow, He strengthened them like a wall, He set them like beams, and poured snow upon them, and it was made dust [...] He created from tohu the substance."1297 The work's author, although evidently referring to the "slimy stones" of the Ḥagigah treatise, transforms tohu and bohu into a true mixture of materials that allows the Maker, through a series of manipulations, to impose a structure upon the cosmos. With the conclusive theoretical statement, "He created from tohu the substance," a fundamental temporal sequence is introduced—an initial amorphousness is followed by matter with a shape, raised to the dignity of form.

Yet it was only in the twelfth century, in a text of philosophical character, that tohu and bohu were explicitly identified with the opposition of matter and form. In the Sefer hegyon ha-nefeš ha-'aṣuvah (The Meditation of the Sorrowful Soul), by the Sephardic philosopher Avraham bar Ḥiyya, the second verse of Genesis is inscribed, drawing a bold parallel between the Greek idea of substance and the Jewish cosmogony. Bar Ḥiyya first refers to the thought of the "ancient philosophers" who singled out two elements in the bodies, "which appeared of separate origins [...] the first is called in Greek hyle [...] something that has no semblance or form, but which is able to receive them. The second element is called form, which is a thing that has the power to fill in the hyle with every semblance and image."1298 Following this introduction—which has the merit of divulging in Hebrew the use of the Greek word hyle, "matter"1299—the author refers to the Judaic tradition, to assert its preeminence also in the speculative field. He claims that the conclusions reached by the

philosophers were already contained in "the words of the Torah, which is the source of wisdom: if you will consider them carefully"—he writes—"you realize that the hyle and the form, contained in potential before the creation of the world, correspond to tohu and bohu, of which, according to the Torah, the earth consisted."1300 In order to explain this identification, the Sephardic thinker needed to demonstrate the antinomy of tohu and bohu, attributing to the former word the meaning of "that which has no order or sensibility, awareness, consistency, or usefulness,"1301 while positing the composition of the latter out of the two Hebrew words bo and hu, literally "in it" and "he," together meaning "that which

sustains itself and contains its own force, though it is united to nothing."1302

Avraham bar Ḥiyya was clearly aware of the novelty of his definition, enough to assert that it was "better than all those provided by other scholars"; this connection between the enigmatic Biblical pair and the fundamental concepts of Greek thought would actually acquire a vast following in Jewish literature, in particular with the mystics, who seized upon it and made it the starting point of a cosmological meditation. A direct reminiscence of the Sephardic philosopher's words can already be found in the Sefer ha-bahir (The Book of Bahir)—one of the earliest documents of the medieval Kabbalah, probably composed in the second half of the twelfth century—in which one reads: "The earth [...] was tohu and returned to being bohu. What is bohu? That in which there is substance, as it is written: bohu, bo hu: 'it is in it.'"1303 The redactors of the Bahir added a moral color to the otherwise purely philosophical connotation, assigning tohu to the dominion of evil, and placing bohu in contrast "into peace," based on an intuitive identification of matter with negativity, and form with the positive principle of order and divine stability.

Even the earliest Kabbalistic period is therefore marked by a notion of polarity of creation, which established, between tohu and bohu, a temporal succession and an ethical opposition, as if the primordial formlessness invoked the reparation of the bohu, that is to say, the

redemption from disorder. Tohu was not only amorphous matter, but also an emotional wonder, since the chaos of the beginning did not have order in itself, and was unimaginable for man: "What does tohu mean?"—asks the Bahir—"Something that astonishes men."1304

The idea of a primitive conflict between tohu and bohu also appears in the texts of some thirteenth century mystics,

for example in Moses Nachmanides1305 and 'Ezra and 'Azri'el of Gerona,1306 and was the basis for one of the most eloquent pages of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), at the end of the thirteenth century. The passage is a compendium of all of the preceding literature, from which it produces a composite image, organizing the elements into a lively tale. In the beginning, "snow in water produced slime [...] a mighty fire beat upon it and created a refuse: in this way tohu was originated, the abode of impurity, the nest of refuse. And bohu: what was purified from the refuse and took its dwelling in it [...] when bohu had been separated and purified, there issued from it a great and strong wind [...] and then bohu was separated and purified, and there issued from it an earthquake [...] tohu is a place where there is no color and no semblance, and it is not included in the mystery of the semblance. It seems for a moment to have one, but when looked at again it has none. Everything has a vestment that covers it, except the tohu. Bohu has shape and semblance; stones emerging from the chasm of tohu, but sometimes rising from where they are sunk, and drawing therefrom benefit to the world."1307

As is often the case with the *Zohar*ic tales, the episode permits diverse levels of interpretation. The images, besides having a strong, expressive vigor, reflect the encounter between the sefirotic forces: the snow is thus the symbol of gevurah (might), the sefirah of divine rigor, while the water is ḥesed (mercy), and the union of these two contrasting principles, which takes place in malkut (kingdom), provokes an impurity, from which tohu derives its origin. This refuse is the matter that weighs down malkut and gives refuge to evil; nevertheless, part of it frees itself, a purer part, the bohu, the form,

which reemerges as knowledge and gives comfort to the world, restoring it to order.

When, in the middle of the sixteenth century, Mošeh Cordovero sought to bring order to the *Zohar*ic doctrine, he accepted this meaning of tohu and bohu, making them two attributes of malkut.1308 At the same time, however, he identified bohu with ḥesed, leaving to tohu the task of representing the sefirah binah (intelligence).1309 This process of conceptual elevation reached its culmination in the Eṣ Ḥayyim (The Tree of Life) of Ḥayyim Vital, written in the final decades of the sixteenth century, on the basis of the teachings of the great mystic of Safed, Yiṣḥaq Luria. Vital summoned up the preceding stages of philosophical reasoning, recalling how God had first created "matter called hyle [...] while that which preceded the tohu had the name of 'nothing.'"1310 From this premise, however, an unexpected deduction followed, which projected the expression from the beginning of Genesis to the summit of the worlds: "The En sof is nothing, since there is neither comprehension of it, nor does it have matter or form. And then tohu issues from it, which is keter [crown], and then the bohu, which contains the four elements ḥesed, binah, tif'eret, and malkut."1311 The idea that, from the silence of the En sof, the unknowable aspect of the divine, the formless tohu emerges, seems truly singular, especially considering all of the negative adjectives that accompanied the primordial chaos in the medieval tradition. In fact, the sefirah of the crown, keter, is considered, in the Kabbalah, as the highest level of energy, so dazzling that it transcends any possibility of understanding, and is therefore difficult to reconcile with the obstinate indifference of matter.

Vital's assumption upends, in a definitive way, the conception that saw an ascending motion from tohu to bohu, from the formless to the form and from disorder to order. What he sees is

Yareaḥ ירח
Moon

The Jewish moon has a male side, yareaḥ—in Aramaic, sihara—and a female one, levanah.1312 With a curious grammatical symmetry, the feminine levanah is always close to ḥammah, the feminine for sun, in the Bible, while yareaḥ is constantly united with šemeš, the male companion. The etymon of levanah is clear, since it corresponds, without any alteration, to the adjective "white." More cryptic is the substratum of yareaḥ, which some commentators have related to the root 'rḥ, "wander (through the sky)," but which in fact seems to descend from the very ancient pan-Semitic warī¨ or war¨.1313

Yareaḥ, which is used in the Scriptures much more frequently than levanah, evokes first and foremost the idea of antiquity and duration: May they fear you as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations [...] let there be abundance of peace till the moon is no more (Ps. 72.5-7); It shall be established for ever like the moon, and like a faithful witness in heaven (Ps. 89.38). In the cosmic manifestation of light, the moon is related to beauty, as results from the epithets contained in the book of Songs: Who is she that looks forth like the dawn, beautiful like the moon, bright like the sun (Song

6.10). The moon's changes are associated with the hasty events at the end of time, with the day on which the Lord will bring justice to bear upon the reprobates, when The moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed (Isa. 24.23). In Joel's prophecy, the quiet lunar light

even changes into a dark sign of death: The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and the awesome day of the Lord come (Joel 3.4 [2.31]). At the same time, the fullness of the future age will be marked by a prodigious strengthening of the luminous energy of the star, which, again according to Isaiah, will be equal in force to the sun: The light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun (Isa. 30.26).

Like two aspects of the same whole, in the Bible the moon and the sun are always closely connected. Yet, in the cosmic order conceived through divine will, the sun has the predominant role, while the moon has the task of providing vicarious light during the nocturnal hours. The Biblical authors were careful to underline the fact that the celestial bodies were strictly accessories with regard to the function of God as the cosmic creator and regulator, and thereby distanced themselves from the lunar cults widespread in the ancient Near East.1314 That some practices of lunar devotion were familiar to popular Jewish worship nevertheless seems evident from some passages, as for example that of Job, in which a furtive gesture of adoration is represented: If I have looked at the sun when it shone, or at the moon moving in brightness; And my heart has been secretly enticed, or my mouth has kissed my hand (Job 31.26-27). The kiss, as homage to the moon (or the sun), is actually a gesture attested to in paganism, for example by Lucian and Pliny.1315

In the post-Biblical literature of Late Antiquity, the moon played an important role, as expressed in many folkloric beliefs. From the pages of the Babylonian Talmud, compiled at the beginning of the sixth century, it can be learned that the moon was identified with man's soul1316 and that, according to the Jewish sages, it was created to permit nocturnal study.1317 Moreover, it was believed that "He who is born under the moon will be a man to suffer evil, building and demolishing, demolishing and building, eating and drinking that which is not his, and his secrets will remain hidden: if a thief, he will be successful."1318

To sleep in the shadow of the moon could be a good omen, but only—specifies the Talmudic Pesaḥim treatise—"when [it falls] in the west, but when it is in the east it does not matter."1319 In the Ḥullin treatise, the moon became the protagonist of a heated dialogue with the Lord, known as "the accusation of the moon." Here the moon proudly challenges the role of the sun, and complains about the reduction inflicted upon its radiance by the Creator. To compensate, God assures it that, even if the sun governs the succession of the seasons, the reckoning of the Judaic calendar would depend on it: "'Go and thou wilt rule by day and by night.' 'But what is the value of this?' cried the moon; 'Of what use is a lamp in broad daylight?' He replied: 'Go. Israel shall reckon by thee the days and the years.'"1320

In the Judaic tradition, the moon does indeed hold an important liturgical meaning, in that the origin of the month is established

by the new moon.1321 The new moon's appearance in the sky is a phenomenon observed with particular attention, and Jewish law meticulously regulates the recognition of the neomenia. As early as the second century, the mišnaic treatise Ro'š ha-šanah established the criteria for examining witnesses who had seen the new moon, and for proclaiming the new month. The treatise also tells of the ancient custom of announcing the event to the Jews of the Diaspora through a chain of fires lit upon the hills, so that all of the lands of the exile seemed illuminated "like one bonfire."1322

In the midrašic literature of the following centuries, the legends concerning the moon were enriched with further details. A tale, probably written during the first half of the eighth century, the Pirqe de-rabbi Eli'ezer (The Chapters of Rabbi Eli'ezer), states for instance that the moon's dwelling is placed between heavenly vaults, which are "like two bowls upended one against the other [...] and when the star comes out from them, it resembles a horn: the first night it rises only by one degree, the second by two degrees and so on, until in the middle of the month, when it appears in full."1323

The Judaism of the medieval era accentuated the feminine symbolism of the moon, making the star the celestial image of the

woman, and transfiguring it into the symbol of the community of Israel. The connection between the lunar and the female cycles is clearly expressed in the Sefer ḥasidim (The Book of the Pious), which, between the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries, recorded the folkloric traditions widespread in the Ashkenazic region: "As the moon grows for half the month and decreases in the second half, so the woman can unite with her spouse for half the month, while for the second half she is separated from him, due to menstruation."1324

Around a century later, in the mystical symbolism of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the union of Adam and Eve was compared to the sun-moon couple. Mošeh de León, the presumed author of the most substantial part of the *Zohar*, here evoked what could be defined as a pre-mundane state of the stars: "The sun and moon are closely united, as is written: The sun and the moon stand still in her habitation1325 (Hab. 3.11); similarly Adam and Eve were created as one, as a united couple; and as such God blessed them. For blessing does not reside save in a spot where there are male and female."1326 According to the Sephardic Kabbalist, the unnatural quiet of the sun and the moon, immobile in their mythical dwelling, alludes to the condition of man upon his initial appearance, when he still composed a single hermaphrodite unity.1327 The archetypical conjunction of the stars symbolizes the force of attraction that pushes the two parts to seek each other and reunite.

According to the system of sefirotic correspondences present in the work, the moon is equivalent to malkut, the sefirah of the kingdom, which is also called ispaqlaria še-enah me'irah, that is, "an opaque mirror,"1328 since it has the task of reflecting the light that comes from the tif'eret, the sefirah that symbolizes the sun.

In the later Kabbalistic conception that would be proposed in the sixteenth century by Mošeh Cordovero, the moon became the paradigm of inconstancy. According to Cordovero, it "is at times incomplete and at others full in the secret of the accusation,"1329 since its status still reflects the primordial trauma of the quarrel with the Lord, and of the consequent reduction of its radiance. The rabbi

of Safed interprets the Talmudic idea of the "accusation of the moon" as an adjustment of the sefirotic structure, with which the moon, the symbol of malkut, sought to escape the dominion of tif'eret: "Fundamental characteristics of tif'eret"—one reads in Pardes rimmonim (The Garden of Pomegranates)—"are mercy and compassion, while the attributes of malkut are rigor and might. Before the accusation [the moon] was closely united to its spouse [...] so that the two sefirot exercised a single function."1330 Tired of enduring the supremacy of the male principle of the sun, the moon attempted to impose its own influence of strength and rigor on the cosmos, but this would prove a failed revolt; even after the separation of the two celestial bodies (and their corresponding sefirot), the world, according to Cordovero, would be dominated by the principle of mercy, and for the moon would remain only a nostalgia for the ancient union.

For a late Hasidic sage, the moon became the starting point for a surprising reflection on the precariousness and indeterminacy of Jewish destiny. Šadoq ha-Kohen of Lublin, who lived in the nineteenth century, dedicated a short but intense reflection to the symbolic relationship that binds the moon to the Israelites, comparing the Jewish people to the celestial body that can shine only by reflected light. In his Resise laylah (Nocturnal Drops), one reads that "the Jews are similar to the moon, since they bear defects in themselves, and hope that they are corrected by the Lord, blessed be He."1331 Nevertheless, according to Šadoq, awareness of instability is an advantage in itself, since it permits Judaism to seek an exclusive relationship with the Lord without feigning the false pride of an autonomous perfection. Meanwhile, the other nations are susceptible to this error: "They are similar to the sun, since they have no defect, but in the same way they do not have any completeness; and they believe to be without

Yayin יין
Wine

As if to cancel out the long months of uncertain navigation in the ark, as soon as the deluge stopped, and land had once again been reached, Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard (Gen. 9.20). Despite the apparent quietness of this choice, with this act the patriarch sets a fast sequence of events in motion, which will ultimately lead to the repeated malediction against Ham, his son and Canaan's grandchild. Noah drank of the wine, and became drunk; and he lay uncovered inside his tent (Gen. 9.21). Upon Ham, who saw the nakedness of his father, would thus fall the patriarch's resentment, as the last consequence of his altered state of drunkenness.

The episode marks the entrance into the Bible of the cultivation of the vine and the production of wine, immediately emphasizing its negative effects of menace to decency and sexual license. Still more explicit is the moral of the episode in which Lot's daughters made their father drink wine (Gen. 19.33), to lie with him and have his offspring. To the Biblical author, the mention of the wine, even without mention of its quantity, is enough to justify Lot's recklessness, as if the drink itself signified the loss of inhibitory restraints and a fall into a passive and oblivious condition.

The Hebrew yayin proves to belong to a lexical chain that extends from the Hittite wiyāna, "stock (of a vine)," to the Arabic wain, "black grapes," to the Greek hoinos, and to the Latin vinum, which all precisely indicate wine, in an ancient exchange of the terminology and meaning of viticulture.1334 With a lin-

guistic precision that suggests the importance of the drink in the Biblical world,1335 as well as yayin the word tiroš is found in the Scriptures, which designates the freshly pressed grape juice, the must, which the rarer ‘asis also signifies. The cultural presence of wine extends, in fact, in the Bible, from chronicles of daily life, to the liturgical dominion, and finally to the metaphorical, in similes on destiny, feelings, and beauty.

In narrative sections, the drink for the most part performs a negative function, of upheaval of daily balance—as in the cases of Noah and Lot—but can also be used to make enemies vulnerable through drunkenness, as occurs with Uriah, Absalom, and Elah.1336 A condemnation of the abuse of wine is expressed many times in the books of the Prophets and in the sapiential books of Proverbs, which abound with judgments against the effects of the drink: Wine is a mocker, strong drink is riotous; and whoever is deceived by it is not wise (Prov. 20.1); Be not among wine bibbers; among riotous eaters of meat (Prov. 23.20); It is not for kings to drink wine, or for rulers to desire strong drink (Prov. 31.4).

In many cases, however, wine is also a blessing, and it often recurs in Biblical images of prosperity and peaceful enjoyment of the fruits of one’s labor. Thus Isaac blesses his son, wishing him the fatness of the earth, and plenty of grain and wine (Gen. 27.28), and God himself, in exchange for worship, promises to Israel: You may gather in your grain, and your wine, and your oil (Deut. 11.14). By contrast, a divine curse will predict that men will not delight in their own vineyards: You shall plant vineyards, and dress them, but shall neither drink of the wine, nor gather the grapes; for the worms shall eat them (Deut. 28.39).

Moreover, drink needed to be offered to God in libation; the liquid was poured at the base of the altar, so that the smell remained as a tribute: He stretched out his hand to the cup, and poured of the blood of the grape, he poured out at the foot of the altar a sweet-smelling savour unto the most high King of all (Ecclus. 50.15).1337 In other circumstances, wine was sprinkled on an offering and then burned, as prescribed in the book of Numbers: And the fourth part of a hin of wine

for a drink offering shall you prepare with the burnt offering or sacrifice, for one lamb (Num. 15.5).1338 According to an affirmation in Leviticus, it was prohibited for priests to drink wine or other alcoholic beverages when they were to enter into the Tent of the Assembly, while the Nazarenes were obliged to abstain altogether, in particular those who made a vow of special consecration to the Lord.1340 The libation of wine was widespread in the cults of neighboring peoples, but the foreign customs were condemned, and were emphatically distinguished from those of Israel: Where are their gods—the Lord asks derisively in the Song of Moses—[...] Those who ate the fat of their sacrifices, and drank the wine of their drink offerings? (Deut. 32.37-38).1339

In any case, the states of inner change, pleasures, and physical beauty belong to the vast metaphorical sphere of wine in the Bible. Divine wrath can also assume features of drunkenness, based on a transposition from the human to the transcendent enunciated in a verse of Psalms: Then the Lord awoke as from sleep, and like a mighty man who shouts because of wine. And he struck his enemies backward (Ps. 78. 65-66).1341 Elsewhere, the punishment of reprobates is compared to a full glass, carried by God, which inebriates with misfortune:

Take this cup of the wine of wrath from my hand—the Lord says to Jeremiah—and cause all the nations to whom I send you to drink it. And they shall drink, and stagger, and be crazed, because of the sword that I will send among them (Jer. 23.1516).

Biblical characters can also seem drunk when they are consumed by strong emotions, or when they abandon themselves to intimate contact with the numinous. Whoever approaches God seems, in fact, inebriated, as in the case of Hanna, Samuel's mother, who gets so excited during prayer as to seem mad from wine: And Hanna spoke in her heart; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought that she was drunk (1Sam. 1.13). Jeremiah, too, in the grip of divine inspiration, describes himself as someone who has lost self-control: All my bones shake; I am like a drunken man, and like a man whom wine

has overcome, because of the Lord, and because of his holy words (Jer. 23.9).

It is finally in the Song of Songs that wine becomes a term of comparison to beauty, producing an intensification of the loving language: How much better is your love than wine;1342 while her navel is like a round goblet, that never lacks blended wine (Song 7.3), and her palate like the best wine for my beloved (Song 7.10).1343

Notwithstanding the cessation of sacrificial offerings and libations with the end of the second Temple, the presence of wine in the Judaic liturgy remained. In fact, the drink was regularly employed in the ceremonies of the opening and closing of the Sabbath, and of festive celebrations. The qidduš, that is, the "consecration" at the beginning of the celebration, to this day consists of a prayer recited over a glass of wine, which, according to Jewish law, must have the capacity of a quarter of log.1344 In the same way, the havdalah, the prayer that sanctions the

"separation" between the sacred and profane times at the end of the festivity, centers on wine, with the repetition of the formula: "Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the world, creator of the fruit of the vine." Moreover, according to rabbinic norms, four cups of wine must be drunk during the Seder of Pesaḥ, two at a marriage, and one at a circumcision; a special blessing must also be recited on daily occasions, when wine is consumed.1345

The conflicted symbolic position of wine was already evident in the Biblical world, but was accentuated in Late Antiquity, since the Jewish sages attributed to the drink at times a negative value and at others a meaning of vital comfort and joy. The outright condemnation of wine is expressed in some proverbial sentences, as for example that attributed to Rabbi Me'ir, who maintained that "the thing that most causes wailing to a man is wine."1346 For this reason he thought that the tree from which Adam ate the fruit was in reality a grape vine.1347 According to another legendary tradition, the beverage, dangerous for man, would nevertheless become beneficial in the future world, because of a divine promise: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said: 'Seeing

that in this world wine is a stumbling block for mankind, I shall, in the time to come, make it an object of rejoicing,' as it is said: And it shall come to pass in that day, that the mountains shall drop down sweet wine (Joel 4.18)."[1348]

Wine was positively evaluated above all in its figurative uses,[1349] when it was employed to indicate the sphere of intel-

lectual understanding. In the Mišnah, for instance, in a saying attributed to Yose ben Yehudah, a rabbi who lived at the end of the second century, a good teaching was compared to well-aged wine: "He who learns from the young, unto what is he to be compared? Unto one who eats unripe grapes and drinks wine from his vat. And he who learns from the old, unto what is he to compared? Unto one who eats ripe grapes, and drinks old wine."[1350] The most widespread metaphor in the Haggadic literature was nevertheless that of yayin as a symbol of the Torah, based above all on a comparison that emphasized the energy contained in the Scriptural teachings. As Rabbi Ḥama ben 'Uqba affirms, "Just as wine leaves its mark when drunk, so the words of the Torah leave their mark, and people point with the finger and say, that is a scholar."[1351]

Further narrative transpositions of the topos of wine followed from this symbolic equivalence. The most interesting are perhaps those based on the numeric value of the word. According to the method of the gimaṭreya, yayin is worth seventy, an extremely evocative number in Jewish tradition. In fact, seventy was used to indicate the limitless repertoire of the meanings of the Bible in its whole and, at the same time, in each of its words. To signify the sense of cognitive bewilderment felt by one who delves into intense readings of the Bible, the midraš Numbers Rabbah states, "As the numerical value of yayin (wine) is seventy, so there are seventy modes of expounding the Torah."[1352] But, since seventy was also the equivalent of the word sod, "secret," an ancient number play affirmed, with ironic intention, that "when wine comes in, which is seventy, the secret comes out, which is seventy."[1353]

The connection between wine and the number seventy provided the Kabbalists of the early thirteenth century with the suggestive possibility of making the drink correspond to the sefirah of wisdom, ḥokmah, which was believed to be the hidden source of the project of creation. This idea was expressed by ʻEzra of Gerona in his Commentary on Song of Songs, by means of a numerological device that conciliated the seventy of yayin with seventy-three, the value of the Hebrew word ḥokmah. "We note"—ʻEzra affirms—"that the numerical value of yayin is seventy, and alludes to the same number of names that proceed from wisdom (ḥokmah). The latter equals seventy-three: from the three extra units the root is known."1354 This final cryptic allusion to the "root" of the three entities could refer to the supernal sefirot, keter (crown), ḥokmah (wisdom), and binah (intelligence), set in dialectical tension with respect to the seven lower sefirot, which constituted the sphere of duality. This argumentation was typical of the symbolic syncretism of the Kabbalah, in which apparently unknowable entities could be integrated into the process of grasping the paradox of the divine.

Therefore, thanks to its metaphoric polysemy, yayin could correspond to various different sefirotic levels. In the classical texts of the Kabbalah, for example in the *Zohar*ic literature of the end of the thirteenth century, wine could also indicate the sefirah of intelligence, binah,1355 that of might, gevurah, and even that of kingdom, malkut. However, wine was most frequently linked with gevurah, in an intuitive connection between the intoxicating powers of the drink and the principle of wrath and supernal rigor. The Kabbalistic wine was almost always a liquid of flushed tone, at times even black, intimately bound to the idea of transgression, and rendered even thicker by dregs, which were the physical image of the evil husks. According to

the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), in the Garden of Eden, Eve pressed bunches of grapes to give to Adam: "And in this way brought death into the world. For death was attached to that tree."1356 Expanding the Haggadic theme, the author affirmed that the fruit of knowledge was a cluster of grapes, or rather a thick wine mixed with

the sediment that issued from the left side of the sefirotic diagram, and which was therefore dense with a turbid and violent cognition.

In another passage of the *Zohar*, the Adamic wine was transformed into the same beverage that inebriated Noah, thus providing the impetus for an invention of great mystical force. According to this tale, the patriarch drank because he was driven by the desire for knowledge. Noah wanted "to probe into the sin of Adam, not for the purpose of practicing it, but in order to understand it, and thus warn the world against it. But he did not succeed. He pressed grapes in order to make researches into that vineyard. But when he reached that point he was 'drunken and uncovered' and he lost his balance."1357 Therefore the hidden sense of Noah's drunkenness becomes the protagonist's attempt to descend into the secret dimension of Adam's sin, though yet again the drink of knowledge proved to be too strong for man.

In the later works of the Kabbalah, the evocative value of yayin remained bound to the transgression of the first man, even if further details would be added to the symbolism of pressing the grapes in Eden. With the establishment of Lurianic thought in the second half of the sixteenth century, the metaphor of wine was transposed onto the cosmological level and connected to the chain of anthropomorphic entities that were imagined as descending from the highest point of the emanation toward the lower levels. In fact, in Luria's teachings, the sefirot were also described as parṣufim, figures arranged in a descending

order, in such a way that the feet of one leaned on the other. Among these figures, Leah was present, as a symbol of binah, from whose feet the sefirotic wine flowed: "It is a turbid wine"—writes Ḥayyim Vital, the most famous of Luria's students—"full of sediment, hidden in the Leah's heels, similar to the wine contained in the clusters of grapes, the same that were pressed by Eve with the intention of extracting the impurities. Adam and Eve drunk a corrupted cup of that wine, a portion of the foreign power, called 'side of death,' and thus rendered themselves culpable of death."1358 In the continuation of the text, the most innovative element appears to be a statement of the equivalence

between grape clusters and heels: "Know and see that the word 'anavim ('nbym, 'clusters') has the same numeric value as 'aqev ('qb, 'heel'); for this reason wine is usually drawn from the grape clusters with the heels."1359

Some two centuries later, Naḥman of Bratslav recalled the Lurianic notion of the treading of the sefirotic wine, furnishing it with an interpretation acceptable to the Hasidic mysticism of Eastern Europe. He brought the argumentation directly into the experience of everyday life, since the method of producing the mystical beverage was, for Naḥman, the experience of dancing, which was itself essential to the Hasidic religion. Referring to Ḥayyim Vital's work, the rabbi of Bratslav recalled that Leah's feet contained negative particles, adding that "the action had to be reversed to make the foreign forces escape from there, so that the principle spreads [...] of the wine that delights." Naḥman would then offer unexpected praise for the religious virtue of dance: "This occurs through those who dance, who drink wine [...] and cause it to fall down to the feet, during the dance, so that the foreign forces are expelled. It thus corresponds to the sacred impulse of dance."1360 The Hasidic rabbi finally affirmed

יונה Yonah
Dove

With the regularity of a mantic search, the dove's flight crosses the sky of the deluge three times. Its first release from the ark ends with an act of understanding between Noah and the bird: But the dove found no rest for the sole of its foot [...] then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her into the ark (Gen. 8.9). After the symbolic period of seven days, the Bible narrates its second return, which is marked by one of the most celebrated images of western culture: And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off. Nevertheless, the episode does not reach its conclusion until after a third attempt; another seven days must pass before the dove leaves the ark and vanishes: She did not return back to him any more. The result of the second flight, the green of the olive that shines after the incessant rain, almost canceled from collective attention the last and decisive auspice, obtained only when the bird vanishes from the sky of the tale.1361

The story of the ark offers the first evidence of the ambiguous meaning of the dove in the Biblical tradition, suspended between the hope of life and the omen of death. What Noah insistently seeks, freeing the bird three times, is in fact its departure,1362 while its return with the olive leaf constitutes nothing but an intermediate stage, an imperfect passage that does not satisfy the patriarch, in whom a remote seafaring pru-

dence can be sensed. In fact, according to an ancient Mediterranean belief, reported by Plutarch, the dove that returns is the sign of the swelling of a tempest, while its flying away indicates that the weather is taking a turn for the better.1363

While all of the post-Biblical Judaic literature (and, in turn, the Christian literature1364) was oriented towards assigning an almost exclusively positive meaning of the dove, many Scriptural statements suggest the idea that the bird could originally have had a negative symbolism. The Hebrew word that indicates the dove, yonah,1365 seems isolated in a singular semantic uncertainty. Lacking a sure etymon, it is usually not related to other roots, if not, dubiously, to 'nh, which means "to lament, wail."1366 Not a single lexicographer has pointed out that the term yonah is identical, in spelling and sound, to the active feminine participle of the verb ynh, which means, "to oppress, mistreat, devastate."1367 That the ancient Hebrews could have understood the call of the dove as a sad lament is amply demonstrated by the Scriptures, in which one who wails is habitually compared to yonah. Thus Hezekiah, king of Judea, laments his own mortal illness with a verse whose sound repeats the name and the voice of the bird: Ehgeh ka-yonah, I moan like a dove (Isa. 38.14). In Nahum, the bird's sorrowful tone serves as a vivid description of feminine grief, which is imagined as expressed

with the ritual emphasis of mourners: Her maidens moan like doves, beating on their breasts (Nah. 2.7).1368

Between the fourth and the fifth centuries, in his Latin translation of the Bible, Jerome does not hesitate to associate the dove with warlike images of wrath and the blade, employing columba, "dove," to render the recurrences of yonah that successive translations would interpret as a participial form, meaning "devastating." This results in a series of expressions—a facie irae columbae, a facie gladii columbae, provocatrix [...] columba, "confronted with the dove's wrath," "facing the blade of the dove," "provocative dove"1369—that recalls a symbolism evidently still current for an author such as Jerome, who was usually very well informed about the Judaic traditions of his time.

The image of a violent and irascible dove seems today nothing more than a provocative oxymoron, but this idea was preserved for a long time in Late Antiquity, at least at the pagan margins of Near Eastern culture. Probably around the fifth century, for example, in the Hieroglyphica—a work attributed to the Egyptian Horapollo, dedicated to a symbolic interpretation of the then mysterious writings of the monuments of the Pharaonic age—the icon of the dove bears clear traits of evil aggression: "To signify the ungrateful man who is hostile to kindness done to him, [Egyptians] used to draw a dove. For when the male grows somewhat strong, he drives away his father from his mother and then mates with her."1370 The dove is also a messenger of destruction in the Hindu tradition, which considers it an almost exclusively ill-omened bird. A hymn of the

Ṛg-Veda, and various enchanting formulas of the Atharva-Veda, entreat the divinities to protect the house visited by the bird: "Drive forth the dove, chase it with holy verses [...] Let the swift bird fly forth and leave us vigor."1371

Although it does come across in some pages of the Bible, the dark symbolic value of yonah was overwhelmed by the positive one, affirmed first of all by the Song of Songs and by the Psalms. In the poetry of the Song, the dove is an epithet of the beloved, invoked three times with an intimate yonati, "my dove." One verse in particular derives its force from the appearance of the feminine image behind the traits of a wild dove: O my dove, in the clefts of the rock, in the secret places of the cliff, let me see your countenance, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your countenance is comely (Song 22.14).1372 The association of the beloved with yonah recalls the custom of the peoples of the Orient, who see the dove as an attribute of the goddess of fertility, Ištar, Astarte, Aphrodite, alongside the many other names she had in different lands. From the archeological discoveries of the temples of Astarte in Israel, to the pieces of literary evidence that extend also into the Greek and Latin worlds, the mystery of the divine femininity unites with a recurrent representation of the

dove, which was considered particularly sacred in Syria and Palestine.1373

Nevertheless, the dove of Song of Songs is not the stereotypical one of iconography, but the embodiment of a changeable feeling, expressed in rapid sequences of images: the rhythm of the composition seems in fact to mimic, in its sudden appearances and concealments, the unpredictability of the bird.1374

In Psalms, the term yonah recurs in one of the most obscure verses of the entire Bible: When you lie among the sheep folds you shall shine like the wings of a dove covered with silver,1375 and her pinions with yellow gold. When the Almighty scattered kings in it, snow fell in Zalmon (Ps. 68. 14-15). While the original meaning of this image is irrecoverably lost, the metallic reflections of this silent and motionless bird are perpetuated in numerous interpretations.1376

In post-Biblical literature, the dove would become one of the central metaphors for the community of Israel, and the wings of silver and gold mentioned in Psalms were considered a reference to

the precepts—as a precious gift of divine origin1377—or to the merits of the Jewish people,1378 or even to the plunder that, according to the Haggadah, was stolen from the Egyptians during the exodus.1379 The Jewish sages gave the dove a consistently positive symbolic value, and saw, in the bird's characteristics of modesty, docility, and fidelity, as many allusions to Israel's virtues. In the Song of Songs Rabbah, a midraš probably composed at the middle of the sixth century, one reads: "Just as the dove is chaste, so Israel are chaste. Just as the dove puts forth its neck for slaughter, so Israel [...] Just as the dove makes atonement for the pilgrims, so Israel makes atonement for the other nations."1380

Along with the pronounced allegorization of yonah, the Judaic literature of Late Antiquity also preserves some memories of the magical dove that was widespread in Near Eastern folklore. In the Ḥullin treatise of the Babylonian Talmud, the idolatrous cult of the bird was attributed to the Samaritans, who had found its image at the top of

Mount Gerizim (their sacred mountain) and worshiped it.1381 This is actually a piece of rabbinic evidence, albeit indirect, of the presence in Palestine of idols in the form of the dove, the memory of which seems to have been largely erased by the Judaic tradition.

The prodigious transformation of a gnat into a dove is the subject of a tale contained—in a variety of slightly different versions—in the Talmud, as well as in the midrašic literature. To punish the

Roman Emperor Titus for the destruction of the Temple, God sent a gnat, "which entered Titus's nose and reached his brain." The minuscule insect began to torment the Emperor in various ways, "piercing his brain, devouring it, and growing in size until it became as large as a young dove and weighed two pounds." The emperor, at that point, in order to know "with what the God of this people has punished me," summoned physicians, who split his brain open and found "a kind of young dove." The apologue ends by narrating that, "when the gnat flew away, the soul of Titus also flew to destruction and everlasting abhorrence."1382

In post-Talmudic literature, narrative use of the image of the dove became increasingly rare, apparently saturated by its association with the community of Israel, which recurs on many occasions. Exceptions to this can be found only in the late Middle Ages in the *Zohar*ic literature, characteristically rich with symbolic inventions. The *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) offers new details on the flight of the dove liberated by Noah, and especially on the secret destination towards which it flew, after having left the ark forever. The author of the *Zohar* observes that "the ancients do not speak [of the dove], nor did they know its identity [...] it is in fact written She did not return back to him any more—and nobody knew where she went." In tones of esoteric complicity he affirms: "In truth, she returned to its own place and hid behind the gate."1383 The narrative continues, explaining that this mysterious gate is part of a tower of light, which contains the celestial archetype of the Torah scroll. When the Messiah prepares to read the sacred Scriptures, the dove comes out from

2

636

the tower carrying a diadem in its mouth, and places it on his head. The ending of the Biblical episode is thus transformed into a kind of ceremony, in which the bird, rather than bearing an olive leaf, carries a crown, a sign of the Messianic regality.

If on this page the dove moved almost with the precision of a mechanical apparatus, a long digression, contained in the Midraš hane'elam (The Hidden Midraš), even transforms the dove into a nocturnal bird. This text—included in the editions of the *Zohar*—is characterized by a Hebrew of philosophical tone, and by a symbolic structure that often differs from that of the principal body of the work. With one of the paradoxes that enlivens the prose of the Midraš hane'elam, the dove's daily flight after the flood is recast as the nocturnal transit of the soul, which leaves the inert body of one who sleeps and embarks on a supernatural journey: "Rabbi Yehudah said: 'Come and behold. There is not a night in which man's higher soul, which is called dove, does not leave the body, as is written he sent forth a dove from him (Gen. 8.8).'"[1384] As the task of the Biblical dove was to see if the waters were abated, so in the *Zohar*ic allegory it had to ascertain if "the tempestuous waters" of evil had been placated, or, the author hurries to explain, if the vigor of the "angels of destruction" had subsided. The bird, however, found no rest, since the dominion of negativity hindered it from flying toward the divine sphere; only on the third attempt did it find that the earth has been cleared, signifying that the holy angels had prevailed over those of affliction.

Beyond its immediate meaning, this episode also contains an allusion to the destiny of Israel in exile. The author compares the timid dove to the wild and solar eagle, which represented the Šekinah when Israel was still in its own land. While the eagle dominated in the

splendor of the day—that is, when the Temple of Jerusalem was still in operation—the dove of the exile was forced to change into a nocturnal bird, marked by the

Zahav זהב
Gold

In the Scriptures, the topography of gold is shrouded by an aura of exotic indeterminacy. Gold was, for the ancient Jewish authors, a commodity that came from far away, whose origins were hidden in remote and legendary lands. According to the Biblical tale, gold reached Israel from four places: Havilah, Ophir, Sheba, and Uphaz. Havilah is even mentioned in the tale of Eden, with regard to one of the four rivers that flow out from the garden: The name of the first is Pishon; that is the one which flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold (Gen. 2.11). The location of Havilah has been variously identified with the valley of the Ganges, with a region in Abyssinia, with the Syrian Desert, with a southern Arabian land, or with an area of the Persian Gulf.1385 The gold of Ophir was so famous that the name of the place served, by way of antonomasia, to indicate the metal.1386 Even though the mystery of its location withstood even the most recent historiographical study, the Bible attests that Ophir was reachable by boat. The books of Kings and Chronicles tells, in fact, of a

commercial mission organized by Solomon that departed from the ports of EzionGeber and Eloth, on ships dispatched by the Phoenician king Huram: And Huram sent him by the hands of his servants ships, and servants who had knowledge of the sea; and they went with the servants of Solomon to Ophir, and took from there four hundred and fifty talents of gold, and brought them to king Solomon (2Chron. 8.18). The passage continues, notably,

with the tale of the queen of Sheba's visit to Solomon, with a very great company, and camels that bore spices, and gold in abundance, and precious stones (2Chron. 9.1).1387 In fact, Sheba is the other important source of Biblical gold, evoked by images of commercial caravans, and usually situated by commentators in the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula, roughly corresponding with present-day Yemen. Nothing is known about Uphaz, which is also mentioned, but in some verses of uncertain interpretation.1388

Gold is frequently named in the text of the Scriptures, testifying to its extensive use in the manufacture of objects of daily and sacred use. The Temple coverings1389 and furnishings1390 were of gold, as are some of the votive offerings, including those presented by the Philistines in reparation for the profanation of the Ark: What shall be the guilt offering which we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden swellings, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines; for one plague was on you all, and on your lords (1Sam. 6.4). According to a recurring pattern of religious symbolism, these very ancient votive offerings depicted, in the precious metal, the calamity to be warded off, as if its representation in gold permitted the reversal of its ill-omened meaning.1391

In antiquity, gold was not used for offerings to the God of Israel alone, since the entire pagan Orient used it to worship their gods and to make idols. The use of the metal is in fact at the

center of the celebrated episode of the calf, which was cast by Aaron to satisfy the people's demand. It is interesting that the calf, made from the gold of the Jewish women's and children's earrings, is never explicitly described, but only evoked in an indirect way, through God's

words of rebuke, directed at Moses, and through the sound of the songs that the Israelites began to sing to the statue.

On the other hand, Moses's descent from Sinai toward the pagan feast is recounted with forceful rhetorical gradation: first, he hears the songs, which are performed with a refrain of ancient poetry. It is not the voice of those who shout for mastery, nor is it the voice of those who cry for being overcome; but the sound of those who sing do I hear (Exod. 32.18). Then he suddenly sees the calf and the dancing; the prose becomes agitated, and the furious punishment inflicted upon the transgressors is described in eight actions that unfold in the short space of two verses, rendered even more urgent by the paratactic structure of the Hebrew: Moses's anger burned hot, and he threw the tablets from his hands, and broke them beneath the mount. And he took the calf which they had made, and burned it in the fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it upon the water, and made the people of Israel drink of it (Exod. 32.19-20).1392 This rapid sequence of events captures the reader's attention, almost causing the meaning of the actions described to fade out of focus. After having destroyed the sign, just received, of divine law,1393 Moses demonstrates great skill, burning and melting the golden calf in water, operations that would have required a long time, to say the least, since gold does not burn and is

not soluble in water. The medieval alchemists would note Moses's extraordinary technical ability, and considered the episode proof that he was in possession of the secret of the aurum potabile, long sought after by the adepts of the Great Art.1394

In the post-Biblical literature of the first centuries of the Common Era, the theme of gold was transformed into an almost inexhaustible source of subjects that tended toward the marvelous and gave life to fantastic animals, radiant skies, and landscapes brimming with coins. In a tradition already attested to in the Jerusalem Talmud, and attributed to Rabbi Yehudah ben Pazzi, who lived in the fourth century, the sky was described as a dazzling covering, similar to a lamina of gold, wrought, stretched, and smoothed by the work of the goldsmith.1395

In the midraš Exodus Rabbah—composed in the early Middle Ages, but also containing much older materials—the skies were compared to a golden vase, of the type used in antiquity to heat water, similar to a samovar, which also contained a compartment for embers. At times, the Lord poured destructive fires onto men from this container, while at other times he poured a beneficial dew: "He caused fire and brimstone to rain down upon the people of Sodom [...] Dew also came from heaven, for it says, As dew from the Lord (Mic. 5.6), and so did manna. It can be compared to a cauldron made of gold, from which one can draw either cold [water] or glowing coals."1396

Another passage of the same work speaks of ferocious dogs made from the precious metal, which barked at anyone who approached Joseph's tomb. The sepulchre was "in a royal mausoleum, and the Egyptians had constructed dogs made of gold, which, by means of magic, barked whenever a man approached the sarcophagus. The sound of their barking filled the whole land of Egypt, a journey of forty days."1397 Elsewhere in the midraš Exodus Rabbah, gold became the symbol of mundane prosperity, in contrast to the spiritual reward in store for the righteous in the world to come. The narrative of the passage mixes religious teaching with an enchanted fairy-tale atmosphere, in which the extraordinary power of an old Jewish rabbi gives life to a vivid parable: "The story is told of a disciple of Rabbi Šim'on ben Yoḥa'y who emigrated from Eretz Israel, and who came back wealthy. When the other disciples saw him, they became envious and also desired to travel abroad. Becoming aware of this, Rabbi Šim'on brought them all forth to a certain field near the village of Maron, where he began to pray: 'Field, become full of golden dinars.' Immediately, the soil began to produce golden dinars before their gaze. He then said to them: 'If it is gold that you want, well, take all the gold you want now, but you must know that he who takes riches now is taking his share of the world to come, for the sole reward for studying the Torah is reserved for the world to come,' as the verse says, And she laughs at the time to come (Prov. 31.25)."1398

The authors of the Haggadic texts insistently returned to the fundamental relationship that binds gold to the number seven.1399 In a passage of the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Ḥisda (a sage who lived in the third century) listed the various types

of gold, reorganizing the Biblical denominations of the metal according to the symbolic category of seven. Beyond the improbable etymologies the learned rabbi used, the theoretical pattern is very evident, and consists in the application of the scale of seven to gold, which was usually employed in other symbolic series (including, for example, days and nights, the colors of the rainbow, the planets).1400

The Talmudic analyses of the seven qualities of gold, already rich in fabulous elements, would reappear in later midrašic texts, and in the works of medieval Jewish mysticism, where they would be further enriched with legendary elements. In the midrašim, for example, there is a reference to the mythical wealth of the Roman emperors: "Šaḥuṭ gold is gold that is drawn out like wax. Hadrian had an egg's weight of it; Diocletian had a Gordian denarius weight of it; the present Government has none of it and never had any."1401 What's more, the way these texts detail the processes of gold refinement themselves seem derived from popular imagination rather than from practical metallurgy: "Refined gold. Different explanations of this were given in the schools of Rabbi Yanna'y and Rabbi Yudan ben Šim'on. The school of Rabbi Yanna'y said that they used to cut it to the size of olives and give it to the ostriches to eat, and it issued from them refined. The school of Rabbi Yudan ben Šim'on said: They used to bury it in dung for seven years and it came out refined."1402

Towards the end of the thirteenth century, drawing inspiration from these Haggadic precedents, the author of the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor) proposed a complex mystical interpretation of the seven types of gold, which were organized according to an ascending scale of purity, culminating in the total purity belonging to the supernal gold. This seventh gold is "the best of all species of gold [...] the kind which shines and sparkles,

dazzling the eyes, and he who gets hold of it hides it carefully. From it all other kinds emanate."1403 The comparatively simple list of the qualities of gold were thereby changed into a dynamic process, through which increasingly impure grades of the metal originated from the supernal gold. The metaphor employed here alluded to the motion of the sefirot, and in particular to the relationship that connects the third sefirah, binah (intelligence)—that is, the beginning of the dualistic manifestation of the real—to the seven lower sefirot. Displaying a typical mystical paradox, the purest gold, inasmuch as it is hidden from profane glances, symbolizes at the same time binah and the seven successive sefirot, that is, the seven levels that descend from, and return to, it.

Another text from the *Zohar*ic literature, contained in the collection called *Zohar* hadaš, described Kind David's blond hair by affirming that it had the tones of the "seven types of gold [...] in which the seven sefirot are contained":1404 the iridescent flashing of gold is in this case condensed into the tones of the golden hair of the Biblical king.

The transformation of the symbolism of gold thus arrived at a kind of physiognomical mysticism, whose expressive outcomes extended throughout the Judaic literature of the successive centuries, all the way to the height of the modern era. Between the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth, Naḥman of Bratslav—grandson of Ba'al Šem Ṭov and leading figure of the Hasidic movement of Eastern Europe—used the image of the golden head of hair in an tale that united Kabbalistic inspiration with a lively literary talent. The plot follows the events of ten people at the court of the wise king—a sage of prayer, a warrior, the guardian of treasure, a wise man, an orator, a faithful friend, the king's daughter, a young boy, the queen, and the king—who are dispersed by a sudden, and to the same extent symbolic, catastrophe. After a series of vicissitudes, the ten are finally reuinted, reestablishing the harmony of their initial fellowship. Their recovered harmony evokes the new equilibrium of the Messianic age, in which divisions would be overcome and humanity would be redeemed of its errors, as well as of its yearning for wealth. Towards the

middle of the story, when the tale dwells on the misfortunes that occurred after the separation, the warrior, who encounters the sage of prayer, narrates: "I also passed through each of these places, but I carried with me some golden hairs of the young boy: I took seven, which have all of the shades, and I hold them very dear. I lived in a certain place, eating, as I had to, grass, until I could not find anything else from which to live, then I left. When I left there I forgot my bow." At this point the sage of prayer answered him: "I saw this bow and thought that it had to be yours, but I could not find you."1405 The meaning of the unusual tale can be appreciated only on the understanding that the ten protagonists personify the ten sefirot, of which they bear, as identification, certain attributes. The bow is in fact the sign of the sefirah yesod (foundation),1406 symbolized by the figure of the warrior, while the sage of prayer represents malkut (kingdom), and, on the eschatological level, the person of the Messiah.1407 The young boy represents the sefirah binah (intelligence), and his golden hair alludes to the spreading of the supernal energy toward to the lower sefirot.

Naḥman's literary fantasy transforms the Haggadic theme of the diverse types of gold into an image and into a gesture: even without recognizing its complex Kabbalistic explanation, to the reader remains the enchantment of the act with which the protagonist gathers and guards seven golden hairs.

## זונה Zonah
## Prostitute

The locution iššah zonah, "woman prostitute," in Hebrew, does not only serve to indicate a negative figure. The well-known episode of

Raḥab, who welcomes and hides the scouts sent to prepare the capture of Jericho, is actually transformative for the symbolic meaning of the expression. The Bible dedicates a long passage to Raḥab—something very rare for a woman—relating the dialogue that sees her as protagonist, describing the astuteness with which she advises the bewildered Israelite soldiers on the correct conduct. Raḥab puts at the spies' disposal the most precious thing she has, the protective space of her house upon the town wall (Josh. 52.15). The house's structure is described, in particular its roof, where she hides the Hebrews among the stalks of flax (Josh. 2.6). As reward for this protection, the Israelites guarantee her safety from the devastation of the city; here, again, the prostitute's house symbolizes salvation: Behold, when we come to the land, you shall bind this line of scarlet thread in the window from which you let us down; and you shall bring your father, and your mother, and your brothers, and all your father's household, home to you (Josh. 2.18). With a decisive reversal of this mark of infamy, the prostitute is conceded a red mark that guarantees her salvation, certainly not coincidentally similar to the red sign that had permitted the Jews to escape from the angel of death in Egypt.

The later exegetical tradition at times sought to subvert the scandal of this providential prostitute's appearance into that of the more acceptable figure of a hotelkeeper, who, according to the Targum1408 and

Flavius Josephus,1409 accorded hospitality to the Israelite infiltrators. But, in all of the Scriptures zonah is the epithet for prostitution,1410 in the literal sense, as well as in a figurative sense of tempting infidelity.1411 The meaning of the term seems in fact to tend in the direction of capturing a beautiful but deceptive aspect, and of a shameless charm, aimed at allurement. Zonah, therefore, above all, conveys an appearance that can also deceive; indeed, the word recurs twice in the book of Genesis to designate an unfounded stain on the conduct of virtuous women. Thus Dinah, Jacob's daughter, against whom Shechem commits violence, provokes the retaliation of her brothers: Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot? (Gen. 34.31).

Tamar pretends to be a prostitute to conceive by Judah, but her justification for this action saves her from the death to which she had been condemned, and Judah exonerates her from the accusation of being a prostitute, exclaiming: She has been more righteous than I (Gen. 38.26). It is curious to note that, also in the case of Tamar, the sign of the prostitute, a veil on her face (Gen.

38.15),1412 is transformed into a scarlet thread, which the midwife ties to the hand of the first of the twins to come out of her womb.

The Bible frequently mentions the presence of the prostitute in ancient Israelite society; one reads thus that Jephthah [...] was a mighty man of valor, and he was the son of a harlot (Judg. 11.1), and that Samson went to Gaza *and saw there a harlot, and went in to her* (Judg. 16.1). In Hoshea a prostituteprostitute's price is specified: So I bought her for me for fifteen pieces of silver, and for a homer of barley, and a letekh of barley (Hos. 3.2), while Deuteronomy prescribes: You shall not bring the hire of a harlot, or the price of a dog [a sodomite], into the house of the Lord your God for any vow; for these are both abominations to the Lord your God (Deut. 23.19). In the book of Proverbs, finally, along with some popular assessments of the ambitions and dangers of prostitutes,1413 a long and detailed tale is found of a seduction plotted with consummate ability, by a woman dressed as a harlot, and wily of heart. She is loud and stubborn; her feet do not remain in her house; Now is she outside, now in the streets, and lies in wait at every corner (Prov. 7.10-12). The passage, which proceeds with a tone of literary elegance, lingers on the voluptuousness of the allurement promised by the seductress: I have decked my bed with coverings, with tapestry of fine linen from Egypt. I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes, and cinnamon (Prov. 7.16-17).

A similar atmosphere, in which hired love is united with a description of an almost fairytale luxury, is found, curiously, among the austere pages of the Talmudic Halakah, compiled between the fifth and sixth centuries. The Menaḥot treatise speaks in fact of a Jew who had arranged an appointment with a prostitute, who, "in one of the towns

by the sea [...] accepted four hundred gold [denars] for her hire." Arriving at the pros-

titute's house, he was brought into an interior of great splendor, where there were "seven beds, six of silver and one of gold; and between one bed and the other there were steps of silver, but the last were of gold." The woman awaited him, leaning on the seventh bed, but he, after laying beside her, was overcome with repentance and renounced the intimacy. In the continuation of the tale, the courtesan, struck by the man's conduct, divides her estate into three parts; one third for the government, one third to be distributed among the poor, and one third she took with her in her hand." The story concludes with a legitimate marriage between the two protagonists.1414 The most singular feature of the narrative is the transformation of the loving meeting into a journey of initiation, in which man, to achieve pleasure, must pass through seven levels, arranged in an ascending order. Nevertheless, according to the Talmudic parable, repentance is the end of the journey, as if to exorcise, through the reaffirmation of morality, an education in pleasures of pagan character.

The symbolism of the seven steps, or tests, which must be surmounted to obtain the prostitute's favors, also returns in another Talmudic tale, which concerns the actions of "Rabbi El'azar ben Durdaya, who did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea, who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake." In this case, a curse follows the intercourse: "As he was with her, she blew forth breath and said: 'As this blown breath will not return to its place, so will El'azar ben Durdaya never be received in repentance.'"1415 Nevertheless, after a desperate search of expiation for his guilt, the rabbi's repentance is accepted by divine mercy, at the moment of death.

In this second version, the role of the prostitute changes radically. While, in the first tale, the woman remained struck by the integrity of her interlocutor, so much so that she would change her life and decide

to become his wife, in the events of El'azar ben Durdaya, the prostitute assumes demonic traits, and enticement is transformed into a mortal risk for the soul. The seven beds are substituted here by seven rivers, which Rabbi El'azar crosses at the impetus of his desire, and which anticipate an ultra-mundane space of death and punishment. In fact, the rivers here evoke the transit of the soul beyond mundane time, towards the eternal dwelling, and, in this case, towards a terrifying place of atonement.

The union between the image of the prostitute and the idea of infernal affliction appears, at the end of the thirteenth century, in the *Sefer ha-zohar* (The Book of Splendor), compendium of the Sephardic Kabbalah, in which the Judaic traditions are united with more than a few ideas from both the Christian milieu, as well as Islamic culture, which was still full of life in thirteenth-century Spain. Perhaps taking inspiration from these sources, the author of the *Zohar* depicts a succession of seven infernal palaces, each guarded by a demonic figure.1416 In the sixth palace, "that rises above all the lower dwellings [...] sits the prostitute to deceive the foolish [...] this is the place of all the evil kisses of the foreign harlots, which at first seem sweet."1417 In a transposition of meaning characteristic of the *Zohar*, the infernal dwelling is then identified with its guardian, and even with the latter's actions. The sixth palace is therefore itself the prostitute, who guards it, as well as the kisses that she dispenses to capture the souls of fools. In the system of symbolic correspondences of the *Zohar*, the dangerous prostitute is the yeṣer ha-ra', "the evil inclination," and, at the same time, the angel of death, who chooses to mask himself to better deceive people. After death, nevertheless, the sinner will assist in the ultimate transformation of the temptress: "She will stand in front of man and put on, as a garment, a body of fire, and will carry in her hand a sharp blade."1418

Every beauty has fallen and, in front of the fearful soul, only the flaming glow of condemnation remains. In its dark Kabbalistic representation, the lure of zonah is brought to its conclusion, revealing death and evil. The appearance of the prostitute, as tempting as it is

precarious, is in fact none other than the extreme disguise of the ever-changing deception of matter.

## Transcription and quotations

Hebrew is transcribed according to the following correspondences (the numerical value of letters is given in brackets):

א (alef – 1): ’ (not transcribed at the beginning and at the end of a vocalized word)
ב (bet – 2): b/v (always b in non-vocalized words)
ג (gimel – 3): g
ד (dalet – 4): d
ה (he – 5): h
ו (waw – 6): w
ז (zayin – 7): z
ח (ḥet – 8): ḥ
ט (ṭet – 9) ṭ
י (yod – 10): y
ך) כ in final position: kaf– 20): k
ל (lamed – 30): l
ם) מ in final position: mem – 40): m
ן) נ in final position: nun – 50): n
ס (samek – 60): s
ע (‘ayin – 70): ‘
ף) פ in final position: peh – 80): p/f (always p in non-vocalized words)
ץ) צ in final position: ṣade – 90): ṣ
ק (qof – 100): q
ר (reš – 200) rשׁ (śin – 300): śש (šin – 300): š
ת (taw – 400): t

No distinction is made between plosive and fricative pronunciations of gimel, dalet, kaf, and taw. The masoretic text is quoted according to the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia, Stuttgart 1967-1977. Translations from the Hebrew Bible usually follow the rendering by D. Mandel (Judaic Classics Library).

## Frequently quoted editions of rabbinic and Kabbalistic texts

Avot de-rabbi Natan: ed. S. Schechter (Vienna – London – Frankfurt am Main, 1887).

Bahir: ed. S. Campanini, (Turin, 2005).

Mekilta de-rabbi Yišma'e'l: ed. J. Z. Lauterbach, (New York, 1933).

Midraš Rabbah: Genesis: ed. J. Theodor Ch. Albeck, (Berlin – Jerusalem, 1903 –1936); Leviticus: ed. M. Margulies, (New York, 19933 [1956-19581]); Exodus and Numbers: (Vilnius, 1887); Deuteronomy: (Vilnius, 1887) (if no further indication is given) and ed. S. Lieberman, (Jerusalem, 1940); Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther: (Vilnius, 1887).

Midraš Šemu'el: ed. S. Buber, (Krakow, 1893).

Midraš Tehillim: ed. S. Buber, (Vilnius, 1891).

Midraš zuṭa (Song of Songs, Ruth, Ecclesiastes and Lamentations): ed. S. Buber, (Berlin, 1894 [-1895]).

Mišnah: ed. Ch. Albeck, (Jerusalem Tel Aviv, 1952-1959). Pesiqta de-rav Kahana: ed. B. Mandelbaum, (New York, 1962). Pesiqta rabbati: ed. M. S. Friedmann, (Vienna, 1880).

Pirqe de-rabbi Eli"ezer: ed. M. Higger, in Ḥorev 8-10 (1944-1948).

Sefer yeṣirah: ed. A. P. Hayman (Tübingen, 2004).

Sifra: ed. A. H. Weiss, (Vienna, 1862).

Sifre: Sifre to Numbers: ed. H. S. Horovitz, (Leipzig, 1917); Sifre to Deuteronomy: ed. A. A. Finkelstein, (New York 19692, [1934-391]).

Talmud Babli: (Vilnius, 1880-1886).

Talmud Yerušalmi: (Krotoschin, 1866).

Tanḥuma: (Warsaw, 1881) and ed. S. Buber (Vilnius, 1885). No indication is given when the two texts do not differ.

Tosefta: ed. M. S. Zuckermandel, (Vienna, 1881).

Yalqu Šim'oni: (Warsaw, 1876-1878).

*Zohar*: (Vilnius, 1882).