

“Go You Forth!”: The Construction of Meaning in the *Zohar*

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A Thesis

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ABSTRACT

“Go You Forth!”: The Construction of Meaning in the *Zohar*

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The thesis examines the hermeneutic structure of the *Parashat* “Lekh Lekhah” of the *Zohar*, arguably the most influential work of Jewish mysticism. The thesis argues and demonstrates that the *Zohar* continues the modes of classical midrashic exegesis through the incorporation of common stylistic and formal hermeneutical elements. At the same time, the thesis will also claim that the skillful use of hermeneutical and rhetorical techniques allows for the unique concealment and disclosure of esoteric-kabbalistic meaning. In order to show the idiosyncratic relationship between mystical content and narrative elements, the thesis focuses on the detailed examination of four areas: (1) the use of frequently recurring rhetorical and linguistic formularies in the text; (2) narrative characters and personalities; (3) the significance and depiction of theurgical activities; (4) the presence of various intertexts incorporated into the substructures of the *Zoharic* narrative.

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CSABIKAMNAK FOR THE MANY YEARS

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What we read is only what we write daily into the lack
of the book: lack which is not its margins, but the traces of words
buried within each word, sign on top of sign, which our eyes,
dazzled by what is hidden, bleach with access light, bleach,
as time bleaches our hair, even to transparency.

Thus the Jew bends over his book, knowing in advance that the book always remains
to be discovered in its words and in its silences.

-Edmund Jabes, *The Key*¹

1.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

There is a general consensus in the scholarly literature that the interpretative mode of the *Zohar* continues the general hermeneutic principles prevalent in classical midrash.² The discursive style of presentation that ostensibly characterizes the principal exegetical stance of the *Zohar*, can be distinguished from the rhetorical composition of other texts of Jewish mysticism written predominantly in an apodictic or descriptive manner. In fact, most mystical works from late antiquity through the Middle Ages up to the early modern period reflect either the former or the latter approach to exegesis. These binary interpretive postures cut across historical periods and therefore one may argue that they are predicated as much on external intellectual, social and historical influences as on the inherent theological attitudes of a given authorship to the Biblical canon.³ As such, the theological assumption manifested in the use of rhetorical elements and the general construction of midrashic exegesis emphasizes multiplicity, fluidity and creativity to

¹ Excerpt from Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick, eds., *Midrash and Literature*, p. 350.

² See, for instance, J. Dan, "Midrash and the Dawn of Kabbalah", p. 127 and M. Idel, "Midrashic Versus Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics: Some Comparative Reflections", p. 54.

³ M. Idel, "ibid", p. 46 and 54-55.

textual analysis.⁴ By contrast, the apodictic style of writing is more conducive for the advancement of complex and systematic theological ideas that are presented as definite, conclusive and authoritative.⁵ These two seemingly irreconcilable attitudes towards exegesis are in fact successfully harmonized in the narrative of the *Zohar*⁶ where the monolithic depictions of Divine attributes and processes are interspersed with the juxtaposition of the vibrant and dialogic exchanges of rabbis.

While there are a number of works analyzing the thematic content of the *Zohar*, there is no systematic attempt in the English-language literature to comprehensively assess the relationship between the rhetorical elements and the semantic aspects of text. Although a number of 19th century scholars including Heinrich Graetz, M. H. Landauer, Aaron (Adolph) Jellinek pursued important critical work on the *Zohar*, more extensive research was inaugurated in the 20th century by the scholarship of Gershom Scholem. Scholem's study of the *Zohar* is important in two ways. First, he undertook to establish the authorship of the *Zohar* and second, he explored and systematically presented some

⁴ In a recent article Herbert Basser discusses the ambivalent role of midrash in medieval commentaries. His survey of a variety of sources leads him to conclude that midrash as a form of interpretation was not entirely obliterated from the exegetical repertoire of medieval commentators. Instead, while many of these authors such as Rabbi David Kimhi, felt uncomfortable at times with the "mythic" aspects of midrash, at other times, it is precisely the mythic dimension of midrash that they invoke in their commentaries to the Bible. See H. Basser, "History of Interpretation to Judges 5:4-5".

⁵ Thus, the mystical-magical tracts of late antiquity such as the *Heikhaloth* texts and the *Sefer Yetzirah* share common hermeneutic traits following the apodictic style with medieval kabbalistic works such as those produced by the Provencal and Geronese schools of kabbalah in the 12th and 13th centuries as well some later pieces written by the sixteenth century kabbalists of Safed. By contrast, classical midrashic works redacted in the early Middle Ages manifest considerable exegetical similarities not only with the *Book Bahir*, the *Zohar* and the school of Nachmanides but also with important writings produced by Hasidic masters in the 18th and 19th centuries. See, M. Idel, "Midrash versus Other Jewish Hermeneutics", p. 54.

⁶ It is Idel who points to this important aspect of the *Zoharic* hermeneutic (see "ibid", p. 55). He further notes that the development in midrashic discourse was impeded by the emergence of well defined theological systems in the course of the Middle Ages.

of the central theosophic concepts and ideas in the text.⁷ His comprehensive comparative examination of the works of the 13th century kabbalist, Rabbi Moses de Leon, and the *Zohar* led him to revise his earlier thesis which accorded an ancient authorship, that of the second century Sage, R. Shim'on bar Yohai, to the text and conclusively ascribe the work to Rabbi Moses de Leon.

Scholem's prominent student Isaiah Tishby expanded on earlier research in the areas of both authorship and kabbalistic themes. His three-volume anthology is organized around the presentation of his analytical insights on key themes and topics in the text and supporting excerpts cited from the zoharic corpus.⁸ More recently, Yehudah Liebes has proposed a novel approach to understanding the authorship of the *Zohar*. He has argued that the main body of the text, the *Idrot* and the *Sifra de-Zeniuta* were composed by multiple authors who belonged to a group of kabbalists in Castile. He further notes the prominent status of the kabbalist, Rabbi Todros Abulafia, and claims that he may have been the charismatic personality upon which R. Shim'on bar Yohai's portrayal in the *Zohar* was based.⁹ Pinchas Giller's scholarship examines themes and symbols in focused sections of the zoharic corpus.¹⁰ As this short survey attests there is a need in the scholarly literature for a systematic analysis of the rhetorical composition of the *Zohar* that might not only facilitate our understanding of how and by whom the text was

⁷ See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 156-243. The first section of his *Zohar* scholarship is focused on discussing his researches and ultimate findings regarding the author of the *Zohar* while the second part is devoted to the discussion of prevalent kabbalistic themes and concepts in the text.

⁸ I. Tishby and F. Lachower, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, Vols. I-III.

⁹ Y. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, especially section "How the *Zohar* was written", p. 85-138.

¹⁰ See P. Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine*, and, *Reading the Zohar*. It should be noted that in the former work Giller devotes a short section to a general discussion on language mysticism in the context of theosophical kabbalah with an emphasis on the role of *kinnuyim* or symbols in the *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* and the *Ra'aya Meheimna* (p. 7-20).

composed but also strengthen our knowledge regarding the general theological position of the authorship who brought us this principal text of Jewish mysticism.

This thesis aims to explore the complex relationship and interface between rhetorical constructs and semantic dimensions in the *Zohar's Parashat Lekh Lekha* with a particular focus on identifying the extent and the means by which the *Zohar* incorporates exegetical elements from other midrashic sources into its own narrative. At the same time, the thesis will demonstrate that the *Zohar's* interpretive system is idiosyncratic in that while it integrates some facets of established associative techniques and formulaic constructs prevalent in midrashic works, it is in no means limited by them. On the contrary, in the *Zohar's* creative hermeneutics all aspects of traditional and innovative exegesis are activated and endowed with spiritual meaning from verse associations, rhetorical formularies and grammatical inconsistencies to numerology (*gematria*), theurgic activities and narrative characters. Underlying the *Zohar's* profound similarity and disparity with traditional midrashic exegesis is a unique theological predisposition according to which the Torah is not merely a text with social, historical and intellectual connotations, but rather it is “an absolute book which is both identical with and descending from Divinity”.¹¹ Thus, hermeneutics and theology are closely intertwined in the *Zohar* with a didactic overtone: the study of Torah is both an intellectual and a pneumatic activity that ultimately requires the exegete to transcend the finite aspects of the text as he/she moves between the Divine and the mundane realms.

¹¹ M. Idel, “Infinities of Torah in Kabbalah”, p. 152.

The nexus among Torah, Midrash and Zohar

Etymologically, the Hebrew word midrash derives from the word 'drash' meaning "to search out", "to research". Scholars generally agree with the definition of Barry W. Holtz that midrash denotes both a unique manner of interpretation applied primarily to the text of the Bible and the canonized compendia of such interpretations often referred to as the midrashic corpus and including major compendia of rabbinic exegesis such as the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds.¹² While no scholar would question the existence of this large compendia of extra-Biblical interpretive material it is much more problematic to precisely delineate the term midrash and, more importantly, to understand how and why midrash emerged within Judaism.

The emergence of midrash is intertwined with a defining process in Jewish history, the canonization of the Bible. In traditional Judaism the Torah is regarded as the Revealed word of God that was communicated to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moreover, the Revelation on Sinai comprised two simultaneous events: the transmitting of both a Written and an Oral Torah. The dual aspects of Revelation became a defining feature of Judaism resulting in an apparent dichotomy: on the one hand, the Torah is fixed, complete, perfect and authoritative. On the other hand, a detailed reading of the Biblical text reveals numerous contradictions, irregularities, incomplete stories and unclear *Halakhic* procedures. Thus, in order to understand God's Revelation and to be able to carry out His commandments it is not enough to merely read the Biblical text. Equally imperative and indispensable is the proper and thorough interpretation of the written word of Scripture. The rabbis have declared themselves as the guardians and transmitters

¹² B. W. Holtz, *Back to the Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, p. 177.

of the Oral Torah which comprises the correct and authoritative exposition of the Bible. In contradistinction to the rigidity of a written text, oral exegesis is characterized by a more flexible dynamics that allows for the coexistence and juxtaposition of often opposing view points. Thus, the Word of God fixed in a corporeal text is complemented by the infinity and fluidity that is inherent in the interpretation and exegesis of this text.

It is, therefore, not surprising that when the rabbis decided to write down and canonize the Oral Torah following the destruction of the Second Temple and under the duress of volatile political, social and historical circumstances, they adopted a form that reflected the multifarious character of oral exegesis. Thus, midrashic works do not present monolithic, homogenous and doctrinal expositions of Biblical passages but rather they seek to impart a way of thinking, a mode of understanding the Biblical text.¹³ The goal of midrash is not the crystallization of a particular dogma but rather, as noted by Steven Fraade, the “re-presentation” of the Biblical text, the extra-Biblical traditions and the socio-cultural context in which the text and commentary were produced.¹⁴ Furthermore, as the Bible can be divided thematically into two distinct categories, narratives and laws, similarly, midrashic exegesis also reflect in their interpretive style the subject matter they are commenting on.

In order to understand the complexity of defining midrash it is useful to contrast the definitions offered by Isaak and Joseph Heinemann on the one hand with those of Daniel Boyarin and James Kugel, on the other hand. As Boyarin argues, Isaak Heinemann and Joseph Heinemann represent two extreme yet very characteristic

¹³ See J. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash”, p. 91.

¹⁴ S. D. Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifrei to Deuteronomy*, p. 25-68.

approaches to the study of midrash.¹⁵ Adopting the theoretical framework of the influential Isaak Heinemann midrash can be defined as a kind of subjective historiography through which the rabbis sought to describe the history of the Bible via their own idiosyncratic understanding of the text. Thus, Isaak Heinemann transposed his own critical stance towards the scientific objectivism of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* onto his reading of the midrashim whose compilers, the rabbis, he regarded as the 'true historians' who were able to go beyond the mere facticity of Bible and thus were able to understand and communicate the spiritual essence of Biblical stories and characters. As Boyarin points out, the methodological shortcoming of Heinemann's approach lies precisely in the almost exclusively subjectivist stance he accords to the rabbis. This fails to account for the influence of important external factors such as the social, historical, cultural and political reality that characterized the context in which these rabbis produced the midrashic texts. Thus, in Heinemann's reading there is no real demarcation between Bible and midrash; rather, they are part and parcel of the same timeless and incorporeal aspect of Revelation. Moreover, midrash is seen an extension of the Bible not from without but from within; not transposing new meaning unto the text but rather interpreting what is already there. The rabbis hold the key to the correct interpretation of the Bible because, unlike the modern-day historian who is removed from, and external to, Revelation, the rabbis are links in the chain of Revelation and thus view the Biblical text from within this tradition and not from without.

Joseph Heinemann's definition of midrash is diametrically opposed to Isaak Heinemann's. He focuses on the rabbis' position as members and active participants of their immediate society. As such, the socio-cultural and political dynamics prevalent at

¹⁵ D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, p. 1-21.

the time left their imprint on, and influenced the production of, these midrashic texts. In Joseph Heinemann's reading the contextual and the specific are adumbrated over the continuous and the universal. In his reading the midrashic narrative is reduced to a mere framework which the rabbis employed in order "to take a stand on the burning questions of the day, to guide the people and strengthen their faith".¹⁶ It follows from his statement that the task of modern theory and analysis of midrash is to identify and uncover the larger social-political context to which the rabbis are responding. Textual details and intricacies, the subtle relationship between midrash and the Bible are largely overlooked and bypassed in Joseph Heinemann's analysis. Therefore, meaning in midrash is constructed primarily not from the hermeneutic analysis of the text but rather it is derived from the context, the ideological and theological presuppositions that underpin the actual midrashic text.

Daniel Boyarin's definition of midrash selectively builds upon the theoretical framework of his scholarly predecessors, both Isaak and Joseph Heinemann, by creatively augmenting their theoretical insights with his own analytical prowess. He agrees with Isaak Heinemann's assertion that there is an important relationship between midrash and the Biblical text and at the same time he acknowledges Joseph Heinemann's thesis that affirms the influence of ideological and theological concerns on the creation of rabbinic texts. Most importantly, however, Boyarin claims that midrash is "reading", "hermeneutic, as generated by the interaction of rabbinic readers with a heterogeneous and difficult text".¹⁷ He departs from the traditional dichotomization of subject (interpreter) versus object (interpreted), the former perspective exemplified by the

¹⁶ D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, p. 3.

¹⁷ D. Boyarin, "ibid", p. 5

scholarship of Isaak Heinemann and the latter by the theory of Joseph Heinemann, and adopts a new theoretical framework in which both subject and object are subsumed under the common concept of “intertextuality”.

Boyarin’s theoretical framework is predicated on the assumption that all artistic, literary or historical compositions are “representation of the past by the present”¹⁸ implying that all creative endeavors are influenced by an array of literary, cultural, socio-political, theological and ideological presuppositions. He defines “intertextuality” by three fundamental characteristics: a) any created text contains latently or deliberately layers of previous rhetoric; b) texts are often “dialogical” and hence may reflect an abrogation of their own arguments or that of other texts; c) texts are informed by prevailing ideological, theological or cultural conventions which are in turn reflected in written compositions.

In addition, sacred texts, such as the Bible, also reflect the above described tripartite notion of intertextuality. It is precisely because of the intertextual nature of the Bible that midrash, delineated by Boyarin as “radical intertextual reading of the canon”, emerges. Boyarin’s notion of intertextuality imposes considerable limitations and constraints on any given text. Ideas and thoughts are always communicated and filtered through human systems that are shaped by socio-cultural forces and politico-historical conditions which in turn circumscribe the totality of texts. The logical conclusion of Boyarin’s theory is that there is no such thing as a perfect Torah: even if the Torah had been revealed by God it consequently lost its Divine and infinite character by passing through the agency of a human being who is inadvertently influenced by external socio-cultural and political influences at the time of canonization. Therefore, he says “the

¹⁸ D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, p. 12.

Torah, owing to its own intertextuality, is a severely gapped text, and the gaps are there to be filled by strong readers”,¹⁹ in this case by the rabbis who brought us the Midrashic corpus. Thus, midrash according to Boyarin, is but a corrective effort that seeks to “fill the gaps” of the Biblical text.

James Kugel’s definition of midrash helps to elucidate the relationship between Revelation and interpretation, on the one hand and the Biblical text and midrash, on the other hand. Kugel argues that the Revealed Word of God must always be mediated through the agency of an intermediary entity or being that is appropriately situated in close proximity to both the Divine and the human realms. In pre-Exilic times this mediator was the prophet who was uniquely suited to receive the Divine Word and in turn both to conceptualize and present it for human “consumption” and understanding. However, with the decline of prophecy and the permanent condition of Exile the task of mediating between the Divine Word and its meaning became increasingly more complex. Revelation became a fixed canonized text while prophecy metamorphosed into interpretation. Whereas the Prophet was equally close to both the human and the Divine realms, later exegesis was more removed from the Divine Word and more closely associated and bound up with the understanding of the canon of the Biblical text.

The shift from Prophecy to interpretation gave rise to three distinct modes of exegesis each seeking to capture the true meaning of the text: the allegorist, the apocalyptic and the midrashic. The allegorist approach to the Bible, exemplified by Philo of Alexandria, emphasizes the timeless and universal quality of the Biblical narrative and characters that are portrayed as signifying the human soul and its journey. Thus, the allegorist does not differentiate between Biblical time and the present as the latter is seen

¹⁹ D. Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash*, p. 16

as a mere continuation of the past. In contrast to the allegorist, the apocalyptic interpreter of the Bible sees a pronounced dissonance between the idealized past and a troubled and imperfect present. Thus, the solution for the apocalyptic exegete is the hope and anticipation of the future that will reenact the perfect state of the past and thereby will redeem the present.²⁰

According to Kugel's definition, the midrashic approach differs from the other two interpretations of Scripture mentioned above in one important detail, namely the attitude towards time: for the midrashist Biblical time "overwhelms the present; the Bible's time is important, while the present is not".²¹ Thus, although he draws a distinction between the allegorist and apocalyptic versus the midrashic approach to the question of time, it is clear that these first two readings can in fact be construed as "genres" of midrashic reading provided that their exegeses are based on the Biblical text. Kugel, contrary to Boyarin, locates midrash at the very core of rabbinic culture where, in the absence of prophecy, it becomes the foremost mediator between Revelation and Tradition: "for at heart midrash is nothing less than the foundation-stone of rabbinic Judaism, and it is as diverse as Jewish creativity itself".²² Hence the defining characteristic of midrash is its close affiliation with the Biblical text and a relentless aspiration to create meaning from the inconsistencies, the omissions and the fragments of Scripture.

²⁰ See J. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash", p. 80-84.

²¹ See J. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash", p. 90.

²² See J. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash", p. 92.

The nexus among three different texts, the Bible, midrash and the *Zohar* finds expression in the concept of canonicity, sacredness and holiness.²³ Boaz Huss notes that the process of canonization is synonymous with the double aspects of closure and authority, definition and immutability.²⁴ Thus, a canonized text can be differentiated from other written works based on the authority it is endowed with as reflected in various areas of life such as legal and moral ideals and queries, historical and socio-political issues and at times future or “eschatological events”. In addition, because a canonized text is regarded as a closed corpus to which nothing more could be added, the way to represent the text anew for each and every generation was only through exegetical creativity which, in turn, functioned as a means of self perpetuation and the continuity of the religious community.²⁵

Furthermore, Scripture, midrash and the *Zohar* are defined as “sacred” writings and are regarded as textual intermediaries between the human and Divine realms imbued with sacred content. Such texts are perceived as originating from the metaphysical realm having been transmitted directly from God.²⁶ As such, the close affinity between the exegesis of a sacred text and prophetic activity diminishes the ontological gap separating the Creator and the created being.²⁷ Interpretation of a sacred text becomes a “pneumatic”²⁸ or experiential activity sharply differentiated from philosophic rationalism that characterizes many works of medieval and modern exegetes. Thus viewed, the

²³ B. Huss, “*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth centuries”.

²⁴ B. Huss, “*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth centuries”, p. 259.

²⁵ B. Huss, “*ibid*”, p. 260.

²⁶ B. Huss, “*ibid*”, p. 262.

²⁷ B. Huss, “*ibid*”, p. 262.

²⁸ See M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, p. 234-249.

solidified, canonized text constitutes the opening for the creation of new and infinite meaning.

Boaz Huss draws attention to the third crucial perception of a text, namely the notion of a holy book. He differentiates a holy text from sacred and canonized works based on the criteria that the former is fundamentally defined by its meta-textual character. Thus, the holiness is derived primarily from such non-semantic elements as the sound and shape of letters or even from the book as a physical object.²⁹ Based on this notion of sanctity, both the Torah and the *Zohar* are called holy books while the midrash is not.³⁰ This fundamental distinction between the *Zohar* and midrash will be commented upon and illustrated in the course of this thesis.

The holiness of the *Zohar* stems from its unique approach to and perception of the Bible. The kabbalist builds on the fundamental rabbinic dictum that the Torah is both canonical, meaning authoritative, and sacred, implying that its content is divinely inspired. In addition the Torah is holy, that is, it cannot, and should not, be understood simply as a summation of its semantic units. Letters, words and verses are regarded as mere physical manifestations of invisible transcendent potencies that are concealed within them. When viewed kabbalistically, the Torah is a living entity that reflects the manifestation of the Divine Anthropos. The kabbalistic treatise, entitled *The Book of [Divine] Unity*, expresses this unique perception of Torah: “All the letters of the Torah, in all their shapes... *all of them constitute the very shape of God*”.³¹ Thus, for the kabbalist

²⁹ B. Huss, “*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives of the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth centuries”, p. 263.

³⁰ Huss notes and demonstrates in his article that important social and religious factors are involved in determining the holiness of a particular text. In fact he traces the development of the perception of the *Zohar* and concludes that its regard as a “holy” text was defined as late as the 17th century (“*ibid*”, p. 299).

³¹ M. Fishbane, *The Garments of Torah: Essays in Biblical Hermeneutics*, p.43

passing through the various dimensions of the text constitutes the very ritual of unification with the Divine. The visible word is internalized through mystic contemplation while the physical aspects of the text are dissolved as the kabbalist enters a dimension in which ultimately he/she becomes unified with God. The mystic's first step, therefore, is to pass beyond the outer layers, the "garments" of Torah: "Woe to the wicked who say that Torah is merely a story! They look at this garment and no further. Happy are the righteous who look at Torah properly".³² The disrobing of Torah is simultaneous with the hermeneutist's movement from beyond the physical manifestation of the text to the revelation of the spiritual essence concealed within it. It is this unique kabbalistic hermeneutic that I will now set out to explore and define in the *Zohar's Parashat Lekh Lekha*.

Outline of Content

The following chapters will examine the structure and the narrative construction of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* in the *Zohar*. More specifically, Chapter 2 will provide a detailed overview of the use of frequently recurring rhetorical and linguistic formularies in the text. The goal of this chapter is to demonstrate how the narrative is constructed to generate multiple layers of meaning through the skillful use and manipulation of the particularities of the language. In Chapter 3 the thesis will scrutinize two characteristic features of the zoharic narrative: the personalities of the ten itinerant rabbis, R. Shimon bar Yohai and his circle of Companions, as well other secondary characters who appear in the text such as an impoverished school teacher, village dwellers and small wonder-

³² D. Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, p. 45.

speaking children. In addition, I will discuss the various types of theurgic activities prevalent in this section of the *Zohar*. My underlying assumption is that the rhetorical function of both the narrative personalities as well as the theurgic actions is a preface to important underlying theological-kabbalistic postulates. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the presence of various intertexts incorporated into the substructures of the zoharic narrative. I will also address the limitations of textuality within the context of the kabbalistic hermeneutic.

2.

Chapter Two: The use of linguistic and rhetorical formularies

The *Parashat Lekh Lekha* in the *Zohar* starts with two separate openings by R. Abba and R. Yose respectively before the explicit invocation of the Biblical base verse Genesis 12:1, “YHVH said to Abram, ‘Go you forth!’”. Such openings constitute the fundamental unit in the narrative structure of the *Zohar*. In this specific instance R. Abba’s opening is followed by a dialogical discourse in which another Companion, R. Hizkiya, joins him. Conspicuously however, R. Yose’s opening is not joined by any other Rabbi thus he remains the sole named voice in that section of the narrative. This difference as we shall see can be closely linked to the thematic difference that characterizes the two openings.

On the one hand, the dialogue between R. Abba and R. Hizkiya resembles a conventional midrashic discourse that begins the exegetical process by invoking a Biblical verse (Isaiah 46:12) that is far removed in terms of its location in Scripture from the verse at hand. Both rabbis deconstruct this verse by associating its key concepts with terms that will inform their subsequent exegesis of *Parashat Lekh Lekhah*. R. Abba highlights the importance of the expression “far from righteousness” (*tsedaqah*) in the invoked verse and offers an interpretation according to which righteousness is equated with Torah. R. Hizkiya picks up from here and brings in yet another remote Biblical verse that also contains the word righteousness spelled (*tsedeq*), Psalm 45:8: “You loved *tsedeq*, righteousness, and hated wickedness”.³³ He does so not to contradict but to supplement R. Abba’s statement while at the same time bringing both verses in direct

³³ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 1-2.

association with the story of Abraham: the protagonist of the Biblical story loved *tsedeq* and as a result he was drawn to *tsedaqah*, a linguistic signifier that R. Hizkiya through the network of double associations connects with the blessed Holy One, on the one hand, and with peace “*shalom*”, on the other: “‘Far from righteousness’, for they refuse to draw near the blessed Holy One. Being ‘far from righteousness’, they are far from peace, for they have no peace”.³⁴

This dialogue teaches two important lessons. First, it highlights the distinction between *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah*, two words seemingly sharing the same literal meaning, yet signifying different kabbalistic entities. According to R. Joseph Gikatilla, a renowned 13th century Castillian kabbalist, the use of the word *tsadiq* signifies the attribute of *Yesod* or “foundation” throughout the Bible suggesting that it is through this Divine attribute that all blessings are channeled from the superior to the lower regions of the world.³⁵ Gikatilla further notes that within the kabbalistic network of linguistic signifiers the word *tsadiq* can be broken down into three distinct aspects: *tsadiq*, *tsedeq*, *tsedaqah*, the last one constituting the fusion of the former two.³⁶ Thus, both the *Zohar*’s and R. Gikatilla’s hermeneutic postures exhibit common aspects of an elaborate system of kabbalistic codes in which the esoteric reading of a Biblical word may not directly coincide with its established meaning but rather elicits other semantic associations not open to those who are unfamiliar with the “subcodes” of anagogic interpretation.³⁷

Second, the dialogue also teaches at the theosophical level that Abraham’s love of *tsedeq* preceded the beginning of his journey to be drawn near the blessed Holy One

³⁴ D. Matt, *ibid.*, p.1.

³⁵ Gikatilla derives it from Proverbs 10:12: “The Foundation of the world is the righteous one”.

³⁶ J Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p. 60.

³⁷ See Betty Rojzman, “Sacred Language and Open Text”, p. 167.

signified by *tsedaqah*. This constitutes an important expansion on the original Biblical narrative which makes no explicit mention of Abraham's attitude and life at this early stage of the story. Moreover, the differentiation between the two aspects of *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* conveys the message that before God would intervene in the unfolding of the Biblical events, before He would reveal Himself to Abraham, the protagonist had to have developed a fundamental attachment and predisposition to the aspect of righteousness called *tsedeq*. In fact, as the exegesis later clarifies, Abraham's love of *tsedeq* is the foundation of the entire story, and as we shall see, also the foundation of the world. The *Zoharic* narrative unpacks the kabbalistic content latent in the orthographic nuances of the Biblical words. Far from equating *tsedeq* and *tsedaqah* the *Zohar* demonstrates that thematically the latter is predicated on the former just as at the level of the Biblical narrative Abraham's arousal towards God precedes the Divine response, "Go you forth".

R. Yose's opening further develops the associative chain linking the Biblical signifier *tsedaqah* with the theme of the endurance of the entire world. In his opening invocation the former discussion of rabbis Abba and Hizkiya is elevated to the cosmic level. His Biblical proof-text is Psalm 84:2, which he uses as a point of departure to contrast the yearning of the soul of the righteous with the indifference of those who do not "contemplate the service of the blessed Holy One".³⁸ The reader already knows from R. Abba's earlier opening that Torah was equated with *tsedaqah* thus R. Yose's exposition builds on, and incorporates elements of, associations already established by the previous two speakers. However, in contrast to rabbis Abba and Hizkiya, R. Yose's narrative abstracts away from the Abraham story as he elucidates the theological implication of Israel's attachment to *tsedaqah*. In his mythic narrative, the ramifications

³⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 2

of Torah study are transposed onto the metaphysical realms of creation: “For when the blessed Holy One created the world, He made the heavens of fire and water commingled as one, but they did not congeal. Afterward they congealed and endured through supernal spirit”.³⁹ R. Yose delineates the cosmic significance of Torah as the sole mediator between the mutually incompatible elements of fire and water and, as such, the foundation of the world. The last portion of his exposition heightens the urgency of the significance of Torah study as he projects it back from the primordial past of creation to the immediacy of the present: “All stands upon Torah, for when Israel engages in Torah, the world endures and pillars stand firmly in place”.⁴⁰

R. Yose’s subsequent exegesis further develops the theme of Torah study by employing the metaphor of the pillar that emphasizes the structural and thematic interdependence of the heavenly and earthly spheres and equates the righteous studying Torah with the trees in the Garden of Eden. The rhetorical device of a metaphor, however, is merely the starting point for R. Yose as his narrative gaze penetrates into the heavenly realm to give an animated account regarding the pivotal role the righteous play in all aspects of the cosmic drama. They are portrayed not merely as pillars but also as trees whose sole purpose is to sing the praises of God: “Then those trees of the forest will sing for joy before YHVH”.⁴¹ They are addressed by a heavenly herald as “the holy ones of the Most High”, a phrase that is also used in the Biblical Book of Daniel to refer to Israel.⁴² The *Zohar*, however, in contrast to Daniel, is very specific about whom this Biblical epithet designates with a clear allusion to the kabbalists: “those among you,

³⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 2

⁴⁰ D. Matt, “*ibid.*”, p. 2

⁴¹ D. Matt, “*ibid.*”, p. 3

⁴² See D. Matt, “*ibid.*”, p.3 note 15, the phrase is found in Daniel 3:4 and 7:18.

whose ears have been penetrated by spirit to listen, whose eyes are open to see, heart receptive to know”.⁴³

It is not surprising that R. Yose’s exegesis continues with a highly cryptic depiction of completely abstract images of numbers, colors and unspecified entities: “One ascends to one side, one descends to the other, one enters between two. Two crown themselves in three, three enter into one”.⁴⁴ At this point, the contextual and literal levels of traditional hermeneutics are transmuted into the anagogic or esoteric analysis in which Biblical verses and concepts signify complex processes among the *sefirot*, the “hypostatic emanation”⁴⁵ of God. The narrative however, does not stagnate in the metaphysical realm for too long before it is returned by R. Yose to the Biblical base verse of Genesis 12:1, a rhetorical bravado through which it unites the various contextual levels of the text with the meta-textual aspects of Divine auto-genesis.

The introductory narrative of the *Zohar* to the Biblical *Parashat Lekh Lekha* functions as a proem. As noted by Joseph Heinemann proems constituted an important rhetorical formula available to the traditional exegete for linking diverse, “seemingly unrelated”⁴⁶ segments of the Bible as a way of elucidating the base verse through its latent association with another verse of the Bible. The use of proems were effective not only during the presentation of synagogue sermons but also within the narrative framework of text, attested to its frequent utilization not only within classical midrashic works such as *Genesis Rabbah* but also in such mystical compendium such as the *Zohar*. The proem is a valuable rhetorical device in two interrelated aspects: first, its use

⁴³ D. Matt, “ibid.”, p. 3

⁴⁴ D. Matt, “ibid.”, p.3

⁴⁵ P. Giller, *The Enlightened Will Shine*, p.7.

⁴⁶ J. Heinemann, “The Proem in Aggadic Midrashim”, p.103.

underscores the organic unity of the Biblical corpus. Second, the juxtaposition of disparate Biblical verses enhances the reader's understanding of the base verse.

In the *Zoharic* introduction the proem form is used first by R. Abba's initial invocation of Isaiah 46:12 which sets the tone for the subsequent juxtaposition of the righteous and the "stubborn-hearted".⁴⁷ R. Hizkiya and R. Yose build on R. Abba's theological association as they extend R. Abba's rhetoric to the Biblical base verse, the context of Abraham's desire to "draw near the blessed Holy One".⁴⁸ Thus, similarly to R. Hizkiya's statement that Abraham had to love righteousness, *tsedeq*, before he could be drawn near to *tsedaqah*, R. Yose also maintains that the righteous have to sing the praise of God before they would be addressed by God in turn. At the same time while R. Yose's discussion pertains not to the earthly but to the heavenly realm, the Garden of Eden, it also points to the important nexus that links these two realms. The actions of the righteous in the physical world have repercussions for the righteous in the heavenly realm with whom the blessed Holy One "delights".⁴⁹ Therefore, R. Yose states that when "the truly virtuous... arouse themselves with Torah",⁵⁰ that is to say they are attached to righteousness as Torah has earlier been equated with righteousness by R. Abba, "the blessed Holy One and all the righteous in the Garden of Eden listen to their voices".⁵¹ It is not surprising that R. Yose alludes specifically to the Song of Songs, a book which describes the most intimate relationship between God and Israel in support of his claim. This Scriptural association strikes a direct cord between the realm of the Companions who engage in Torah, in other words *tsedaqah*, and the realm of the Biblical address by

⁴⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ D. Matt, "ibid.", p. 1.

⁴⁹ D. Matt, "ibid.", p. 2.

⁵⁰ D. Matt, "ibid.", p. 4.

⁵¹ D. Matt, "ibid", p. 5.

God to Abraham, “*lekh lekha*”. Just as the sentence “You who dwell in the gardens, companions listen for your voice, let me hear!”⁵² (Song of Songs 8:13) constitutes an invocation and invitation for the Companions to stir themselves and engage in the study of Torah, so does the Biblical base verse “Go you forth”⁵³ (Genesis 12:1) constitutes a direct address by God to Abraham, who had loved *tsedeq*, to stir himself.

According to James Kugel, the starting point for the construction of a narrative that unfolds as the midrashic exegesis is always a particular word or phrase in the Biblical text.⁵⁴ We find several examples in *Lekh Lekha* in support of this thesis. Most prominently the phrase “Go you forth”, “*Lekh Lekha*” (Gen 12:1),⁵⁵ after which the section is entitled, serves as the catalyst for five different narrative expansions. The first interpretation of the phrase, introduced by R. Yose, begins by situating Genesis 12:1 in the overall Biblical context of the previous verses that describe the death of Haran, Abram’s brother, and the departure of Terah, Abram’s father, together with his family from the city of Ur. It is worth noting here that while other midrashic sources such as *Midrash Rabbah* and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* go to considerable length expounding the story of the ten trials of Abraham and the subsequent death of his brother Haran,⁵⁶ the *Zohar*, instead, focuses on a few important inconsistencies in the Biblical story. The first problem is posed by the death of Haran in the presence of his father, Terah, because, according to the *Zohar*, “until that day no one had ever died in the lifetime of his father”.⁵⁷ Of course an elementary knowledge of the Bible is sufficient to know that this

⁵² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

⁵³ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 5.

⁵⁴ J. Kugel, *In Potiphar’s House*, p. 253 identified with the third of his Nine Thesis of midrash.

⁵⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ See *Pirke de R. Eliezer*, p.187-222, *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 56-57.

⁵⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

is plainly wrong if one reads the Bible chronologically. For instance, the first death in the Bible occurs with the fratricide committed by Cain while Adam, the father to both Cain, the murderer, and Abel, the victim, is alive. Surely, the *Zohar* cannot be oblivious to such important and obvious Biblical precedents. It is important to note, however, that the text seems to apply a particular interpretation of the original word that we find in Genesis 11:28 denoting Haran's death: the expression used there is "*al paney*", which literally means "in the presence of Terah".⁵⁸ This does not necessarily have to mean in the lifetime of Terah, the literal meaning of the passage could refer to the death of the son taking place in the physical presence of the father.

The *Zohar* does not explain this striking inconsistency at all yet it is difficult to assume that the author had no additional explanation to offer. In R. Moses Cordovero's commentary on the *Zohar*, section *Lekh Lekha*, we find an interesting solution to this puzzle. Indeed, Cordovero admits and provides ample support to show that a number of sons cited in the Bible, in fact, died in the lifetime of their fathers. However, he also claims that the *Zohar* is correct in so far as it may suggest that in all other instances the sons died, in the lifetime of their fathers, after a prolonged and fruitful life. In contrast, Haran died young "in his vigor" an occasion without precedent in Cordovero's assessment:

And there was none (who died in the lifetime of his father). Astonishing! Here is the example of Eber who begot Peleg and lived for 430 years after begetting Peleg. And the days of Peleg in total were only 239 years- a case when in fact he died in the lifetime of his father. Similarly, Mehabel, Enoch, Lamech and Cain died in the lifetime of their father for they (all) lived before the Flood. It is possible with some difficulty to reconcile (this inconsistency) for Peleg did not die as a result of a shortened life but rather in a ripe old age. Haran, however, died before Terah, his father, while in his youth. Thus, the example in Scripture,

⁵⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

“Haran died...” implies that he was killed and burned while in his vigor. (*Or Yakar*, p. 124).⁵⁹

The second noteworthy puzzle in R. Yose’s remarks corresponds to a barely noticeable discrepancy in the description of Haran’s death. According to the *Zohar*, “When Abram was cast into the fire, Haran was killed, on account of which they left”.⁶⁰ If Haran died because he was cast into the fire and was therefore burned, why does not the *Zohar* say so explicitly? The narrative, in fact, seems to imply that Haran’s death was contingent on Abram’s entering the fire. This is an example of the *Zohar*’s departure from conventional Rabbinic lore,⁶¹ according to which, Abraham’s casting into the fire by King Nimrod preceded that of Haran. Because Abraham emerged unscathed by the flames, Haran, who was initially undecided about whether or not to follow the King or his brother, decided to follow Abraham.⁶² Clearly this is not the meaning that the above quoted zoharic sentence conveys. The grammatical structure of the sentence may in fact conceal an interpretation of the Biblical passage that the author of the *Zohar* leaves unexplored. Interestingly, Cordovero also remains silent on this conspicuous sentence.

The third Biblical inconsistency that forms the basis of R. Yose’s exposition pertains to Genesis 11:31 where the beginning of the sentence, “And Terah took”⁶³ does not correspond with the second half of the sentence, “and they went with them”.⁶⁴ The *Zohar* highlights that since the subject of the sentence is Terah, it would be grammatically consistent that Abram, Lot and Sarai were departing from Ur with him

⁵⁹ This segment from *Or Yakar* is rendered into English by me.

⁶⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

⁶¹ See *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:13, *Midrash Rabbah*, “Genesis” (Noach), 38: 13-14. It is interesting to note that while the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* does allude to Abraham having been cast into the fire, it makes no specific mention of either Nimrod or Haran’s own demise in connection with Abraham’s trial (see p. 188).

⁶² *Midrash Rabbah*, “Genesis” (Noach), 38: 13-14.

⁶³ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 6.

("ito"); instead, the Biblical passage reads "with them (*itam*)".⁶⁵ It is this grammatical inconsistency that provides the foundation for the mystical-theological exegesis by R. Yose. Accordingly, although Terah "takes" the others with them in the conventional sense of the Biblical passage, in the *Zoharic* understanding Terah and Lot merely join Abram and Sarai, the two key protagonists in the *Zohar's* mythic universe. This novel interpretation of the Biblical passage implicitly reconfigures the original meaning of Haran's death. Thus, Haran's demise becomes a catalyst not only for Abraham's movement away from Ur but also for Terah's decision to move with him.

The third and last layer of R. Yose's exegesis transposes the Biblical text unto the *sefirotic* realm of the kabbalist. The language of the pericope immediately reflects this change: the exegete's focus penetrates into the esoteric layers of Scripture using a more abstract and veiled language of discourse. However, there is no detailed explanation of either the *sefirotic* symbols or how the previous textual analysis is related to this more abstract discussion: "Come and see: An entity above is not aroused until there is first aroused below that upon which it may abide. Mystery of the matter: Black light is not joined with white light until She is first aroused. Once aroused, white light immediately abides upon Her".⁶⁶ This enigmatic passage exposes the ultimate conjecture of the kabbalistic authorship: the Biblical story and its characters are but cognomens and signifiers of events and processes that take place in the *sefirotic* realm.

Rabbi El'azar continues R. Yose's esoteric exegesis by offering a novel understanding of the Divine command to Abraham. In his narrative expansion the Biblical protagonist, Abraham, is transfigured into a cosmic being/force bestowed with

⁶⁵ Genesis 11:31.

⁶⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 6-7.

the arcane knowledge (*Rucha de-Hachmata*) of creation.⁶⁷ The verbs used by R. El'azar to describe the activities of Abraham are all associated with the idea of creation: “*yada*”, he knew; “*tsaraf*”, he refined, tested; “*sachal*”, contemplated and “*taqel*”, weighed, balanced.⁶⁸ These concepts in R. El'azar's interpretation of Abraham draw on similar ideas expressed in the important kabbalistic work, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, where the Patriarch is depicted as engaged in the process of creation: “When Abraham our father, peace unto him, gazed, looked, saw, probed, understood, engraved, carved, permuted, formed and succeeded [in creating], then the Lord of all, blessed be He, manifested to him, embraced him upon the head and called him ‘Abraham, My lover’ (Isaiah 41:8)”.⁶⁹

While the *Zohar* clearly incorporates earlier kabbalistic texts and ideas, the exegesis offered by R. El'azar is both innovative and insightful. His interpretation focuses on the dichotomy between Abraham and “the wicked”,⁷⁰ this latter category is embodied most powerfully by King Nimrod but Abraham's father, Terah and his brother, Haran, are also depicted as belonging to this group. According to R. El'azar, the difference between Abraham and his contemporaries lies in his unique ability and desire to seek beyond the limitations of his rung, identified in the text as “the inhabited world”,⁷¹ which Nimrod and Terah were content to rule and abide by. Thus, according to the kabbalistic interpretation of the Biblical narrative, at the *sefirotic* level the protagonists Abraham, Nimrod, Terah and Haran embody supernal forces. Similarly, just as the Biblical characters are equated with cosmic entities, their action, idolatry, the main charge leveled against Nimrod, Terah and Abraham's contemporaries, has metaphysical

⁶⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], www.sup.org/zohar. p. 3.

⁶⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], www.sup.org/zohar. p. 3.

⁶⁹ *Sefer Yetzirah*, p. 28.

⁷⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 11.

⁷¹ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 9.

connotations denoting the transgression of a supernal entity's attachment to its own powers. Thus, the figure of Abraham counterbalances the actions of Nimrod and his associates not only in the physical but also in the *sefirotic* realms as he realizes the limitations of his own abilities and seeks to find and join the blessed Holy One, the supreme Ruler above all other heavenly powers. The Biblical command, "*lekh lekha*", then can be considered as an answer to Abraham's search and an imperative to move beyond and away from the given and the familiar as expressed in the fourfold Divine order "go you forth", "from your land", "from your birthplace" and "from your father's house" only to be recompensed by God with a set of four promises.⁷² As such, God's utterance "*lekh lekha*" meets Abraham on his search to discover the ultimate source of wisdom and thus this phrase constitutes both a command and a promise- Abraham is required to reject the knowledge he is already familiar with in order to refine himself and acquire a more complete wisdom promised on faith by God.

Structurally R. El'azar's exegesis is completed by his father, R. Shim'on who further infuses the Biblical text with mystical meaning. According to his rendering, God's fourfold promise to Abraham constitutes the four legs or foundation of the Divine throne the centre of which is Abraham. Each Biblical segment of the promise becomes a sign that points to a *sefirotic* analog: "I will make of you a great nation', from the right side" (*Hesed*); "I will bless you', from the left side" (*Gevurah*); "I will enhance your name'", from the aspect of the middle" (*Tiferet*); "You will be a blessing', from the aspect of the land of Israel" (*Malkhuth*).⁷³ Thus, at the meta-textual level God's commands and

⁷² These promises are enumerated by R. El'azar each one counterbalancing one of the Divine commands: "I will make you a great nation"; "I will bless you"; "I will enhance your name"; "You will be a blessing". See D. Matt, *Zohar*. p. 10.

⁷³ Quoted from and discussed by Daniel Matt *Zohar*, p. 10 notes 68-72.

promises to Abraham culminate in the perfect array of the throne for the *sefirah, Binah*, often associated in kabbalistic symbolism with the concept of the ‘womb’ from where all creation commences.⁷⁴ Therefore, it is clear that creation is predicated on the perfect array of lower *sefirot* which, as R. Shim’on’s analysis confirms, is the essence of Abraham’s journey. Similarly, just as at the meta-textual level the *sefirah, Binah*, is crowned by the proper arrangement of the lower *sefirot*, at the hermeneutic level R. Shim’on’s interpretation of the Biblical text the crowns his sons R. El’azar’s initial interpretative endeavors.

The next Scriptural exegesis is imbedded in a shift in the narrative framework. Three rabbis (Yehudah, Yitshak and Hizkiya) are depicted as sitting together with R. Shim’on and his son R. El’azar. The departure point for hermeneutical exposition is a grammatical puzzle in the text that is raised by R. El’azar: since Abraham did not leave alone from Haran why is God’s command in the singular addressed particularly to him and not in the second person plural related also to the others (Terah, Sarah, Lot) accompanying him? It is important to pause here for a moment to examine in more detail how the answer to R. El’azar’s question is constructed in the *Zoharic* hermeneutic. There are four distinct solutions offered by seemingly anonymous speakers. According to Daniel Matt these responses can all be ascribed to R. Shim’on.⁷⁵ However a closer look at the formularies introducing each exegetical explanation may lead to a different conclusion.

⁷⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 10, n72.

⁷⁵ See D. Matt, *ibid.*, p. 11, n77.

The first formulary, “*amar leh*”, “he said to him”,⁷⁶ introduces a level of interpretation that is largely based on conventional midrashic depictions of Terah as selling idols and therefore his leaving Ur was instigated by saving his life from the angry citizens of Ur rather than by a genuine commitment to God.⁷⁷ I propose that the second formulary, “*patach v-amar*”,⁷⁸ “he opened and said”, indicates a new speaker. This formulary is used frequently in the *Zohar* its rhetorical function within the text is to introduce a Biblical passage that is often at a certain remove from the Biblical verse under consideration. In this particular context, the verse invoked is Job 38:15, “The wicked are denied their light, and the upraised arm is broken”.⁷⁹ It is this verse that is deconstructed by the speaker and its constituent parts are recycled to apply to the current exegetical context. The speaker employs yet another recurring formulary “*hai kara ukhmua, aval*” “this verse has been established, but...”,⁸⁰ employed frequently throughout the *Zohar* to signify a departure from the conventional and established interpretation of a given verse while at the same time opening up discourse to a mystical conjecture. Indeed the speaker proceeds to construct a new semantic unit in which the phrase “the wicked” denotes “Nimrod and his contemporaries” and the “upraised arm” also refers to Nimrod.⁸¹

The next speaker is denoted by the insertion of the formulary “*davar aher*”, “another word/alternatively”.⁸² He continues to build upon the same verse from Job utilized by the previous exegete but in addition to that he further deconstructs the original

⁷⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], www.sup.org/zohar, p. 4.

⁷⁷ See *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 310-311.

⁷⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], www.sup.org/zohar, p. 5

⁷⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 11.

⁸⁰ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 11.

⁸¹ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 11.

⁸² D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 12.

verse and expands its meaning. According to him, “the wicked” is “Terah and his household”, “their light” (a phrase which the previous speaker ignored in his analysis) signifies Abraham while the expression “upraised arm” is identified by Nimrod. According to this interpretation then Terah is a subset of the larger evil which is Nimrod and both are punished by the removal of light from their midst. It is apparent that as the narrative progresses the exegesis becomes more and more removed from the literal reading of the text since here Abraham is no longer discussed as a being but rather as “light”.

This notion of the identification of Abraham with light is further pursued by the last explicator denoted by the formulary, “*tu patah v-amar*”, “again he opened and said”.⁸³ A new Biblical verse Job 37:21 “Now they do not see light that is brilliant in the Skies, and a wind passes, purifying them”⁸⁴ is deconstructed by the exegete for the construction of a novel interpretation. The speaker here develops a rather elaborate and complex kabbalistic exegesis based on R. El’azar’s question that is very difficult to understand within its immediate context. However, a reference to another important kabbalistic work, the *Book Bahir*, may shed light on this passage. The clue seems to be the Hebrew word “*bahir*” (brilliance) invoked by the speaker through the verse from Job. The *Book Bahir* makes reference to a primordial Light that emanated from God but “there was no place for it in the world”.⁸⁵ The *Book Bahir* draws on this concept when

⁸³ One might question whether this speaker could be considered as identical to the previous one since at the literal level the formulary may imply similarity due to the word “again”. However, I maintain that this is yet another speaker since the content of his exposition is at considerable variance from that of the previous speakers. In addition, he brings to the discussion a new verse from the Bible.

⁸⁴ My translation.

⁸⁵ *Book Bahir*, p. 25. “Rabbi Berachiah said: What is the meaning of the verse (Genesis 1:3): And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light? Why does the verse not say, ‘And it was so?’

elucidating the problems of God's simultaneous presence and absence in the world directly related to the idea of *tzimtzum*. Thus, the act of creation necessitated the Divine withdrawal of this Primordial Light a process often depicted as a straight line in the midst of a black circle.⁸⁶

Returning to the zoharic passage it becomes more lucid that Abraham is the vessel or place through which God's light can be manifest while the black circle around this light is occupied by Nimrod, Terah and their assembly. This is substantiated by the actual zoharic sentence: "for the blessed Holy One sought to attach Himself to Abraham with/ through that supernal light, to cause Himself to shine there".⁸⁷ The last section of this interpretative excursus turns even more cryptic and problematic to decipher without recourse to a wide array of kabbalistic ideas. Aryah Kaplan's helpful notes to the *Book Bahir* certainly shed light on this section. He highlights two terms of significance *Tohu* and *Bohu* which appear first in the context of primordial creation. While conventionally these terms are used interchangeably referring to general forms of desolation and chaos, kabbalistically they denote two distinct and dialectically opposed processes. Kaplan points out that the term *Tohu* stands for those shattered *sefirotic* vessels that were unable to contain the magnificent downpour of Divine Light. Subsequently these pieces descended into lower spiritual realms where they constituted the essential components of evil. Since, however, these shattered fragments have originated from the supreme

What is this like? A King had a beautiful object. He put it away until he had a place for it, and then he put it there. It is therefore written, 'Let there be light, and there was light'. This indicates that it already existed", p. 10

⁸⁶ *Book Bahir*, XXXiii.

⁸⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], [www. sup.org/zohar](http://www.sup.org/zohar), p. 5

primordial *sefirot* they await to be restored to their original state of perfection.⁸⁸ In contrast to *Tohu*, the term *Bohu* represents the state of actualization or rectification, a process by which the Divine *sefirot* are harmoniously arrayed to both receive and radiate Divine Light. Even at the etymological level the difference between the two terms underlies their semantic disparities: thus, *tohu* denotes confusion and confounding, while *Bohu* signifies completion read as *bo-hu* (“it is in it”).⁸⁹

This short digression into kabbalistic theosophy is rudimentary for the understanding the final segment of the last speaker’s exposition. The exegete clearly builds on the reader’s prior familiarity and knowledge of complex kabbalistic ideas in order to relate his rather unconventional understanding of Terah. It is also important to point out that he does not contradict the previous three speakers. He does not deny that both Terah and Nimrod embody wickedness, a claim set forth by the previous expounders. Instead, what he does is to qualify and elucidate what wickedness means in the kabbalistic context which is pivotal in understanding why God did not include Terah when he addressed Abraham in Haran. Using the distinction between the concepts of *Tohu* and *Bohu*, as already hinted at above, let me attempt to deconstruct the meaning of this cryptic passage offered by the last interpreter.

Since *Tohu* is characterized by a state of confusion and confounding and at the same time it is the source of all evil, Nimrod and Terah represent precisely this shattered state of the *sefirotic* vessels. The theme of confusion as related to Nimrod is further supported by the Biblical story of Babel since it was due to Nimrod’s building the Tower

⁸⁸ See *Book Bahir*, p. 89. It is important to emphasize here that A. Kaplan uses kabbalistic concepts and terminology that he derives largely from Lurianic teachings. However, I find his notes particularly useful in highlighting the dichotomy between *Tohu* and *Bohu* which I think is applicable in the context of the *Zohar*.

⁸⁹ See Kaplan’s description and notes for a more detailed exposition of these two concepts (*Bahir* 88-91)

that the languages of the people were confounded. On the other hand, and in the midst of the disrupted and blemished state that characterizes the domain of Nimrod and Terah, Abraham represents the beginning of the process of reparation of chaos and wickedness and the restoration of these shattered vessels to their original unblemished state. “‘And a wind passes cleansing them’, for later Terah and his whole household returned to God, as it is written: ‘and the souls they had made in Haran’” (Genesis 12:5).⁹⁰ The commentator here interweaves a segment from the verse taken from the Book of Job and uses the Biblical verse from *Lekh Lekha* to support his point. Semantically, Terah, and all those associated with him called “household”, constituted the soul or souls (the original Hebrew phrase is in the singular, *nefesh*) that were purified in Haran. Interestingly, at the end of Genesis 11:32 the Scripture states that Terah dies in Haran. The question emerges: if, as this commentator asserts, Terah was purified in Haran then what sense can we make of his death. Moreover, since Abraham was 75 when he left Haran then Terah must have been 145 at that time, yet the Bible says that Terah lived for 205 years. Thus, there is an apparent discrepancy of 60 years.

While neither the Bible nor the zoharic exegetes comment specifically on this inconsistency we are given a glimpse of a likely resolution in the last sentence “and concerning Terah: ‘As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace’ (Genesis 15:15)”.⁹¹ This particular passage is spoken by God to Abraham yet the commentator here applies it as if it were addressed to Terah. The *Midrash Rabba* resolves this apparent puzzle by stating that “the wicked, even during their lifetime are called dead”⁹² implying that because Terah was wicked he was identified as dead even while alive for those 60 years.

⁹⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p 12

⁹¹ D. Matt, *Zohar* p. 12

⁹² *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 315

In the analysis of the zoharic commentator, however, Haran seems to represent an intermediary stage, both at the narrative and also at the *sefirotic* or cosmic level associated with Abraham's journey, within the transformative process of *Tohu* into *Bohu*. Thus, Terah has been earlier identified as the symbolic representation of the state of *Tohu* and as such the death of Terah denotes the cessation of the stage of *Tohu* and its sublimation into the stage of *Bohu* exemplified by Abraham. From this it follows that Terah becomes subsumed under those who accompany Abraham from Haran to the land of Canaan. Thus, Terah ceases to be a separate entity and therefore he ceases to be mentioned separately from this point on in the narrative. His existence becomes part and parcel of Abraham's. This is further substantiated by the exegete's use of Genesis 15:15: God's words to Terah are concealed within a narrative that is apparently directed at Abraham.

In the next exegetical segment the narrative unfolds as a dialogue between R. El'azar and R. Abba signaling a shift away from the previous narrative scene of five rabbis. The thematic content mirrors the change in the narrative as the discourse is centred on a new Biblical base verse "And Abram went as YHVH had told him" (Genesis 12:4). R. El'azar opens by contrasting the use of two verbs both of which express a movement from one place to another: "*va'yelekh*" and "*va'yetsu*". As R. El'azar points out these two verbs are interspersed in the Biblical narrative describing Abraham's journey from Ur to Canaan.⁹³ From here R. El'azar does not proceed to discuss the possible implications of the use of the two verbs but rather decisively veers away from that deliberation and moves to establish an immediate association between the movement

⁹³ This is a brief summary of the occurrence of these verbs in the Biblical text:
 hkh: Genesis 11:31, 12:1, 12:4, 12:5
 yetse: Genesis 11:31, 12:4, 12:5

of Abraham and that of Lot based on the use of the same word “*va’yelekh*” for the movement of both characters (“and Lot went, *va’yelekh*, with him”).⁹⁴ According to R.El’azar, Lot went with Abraham in order to learn from him. Thus, his analysis establishes a semantic association between walking (*hlkh*) and learning. Furthermore, since the word *va’yelekh* also describes Abraham it is assumed in R. El’azar’s exposition that Abraham’s walking also signifies the associative-twin concept of learning. This thesis is strengthened by R. El’azar’s next exposition that extols those who walk and “learn the ways of the Blessed Holy One”.⁹⁵ Walking and learning are further associated with the concept of judgment: those who walk in the ways of God and learn them are called “happy” for they are aware of the consequences of their actions.⁹⁶

R. El’azar proceeds to illustrate his theological and didactic lesson by back-referencing to a verse in the Book of Job: “By hand every human seals, so each person will know his deeds” (Job 37:7). The formulary, “*hai kara okhmoa aval ta haze*”, “this verse has been established, but come and see”,⁹⁷ signals that R. El’azar is departing from conventional rabbinic tradition in order to open up a mystical understanding of the verse. Furthermore, as in the previous analytical segment this remote verse is again introduced by the formulary, “*patah v-amar*”.⁹⁸ His short theological discussion that follows the latter formulary is centered on describing the reckoning of judgment at the time of a person’s death. His aim is to show that not a single deed is overlooked at the time of judgment and a person is required to acknowledge each one whether committed by body

⁹⁴ Genesis 12:4.

⁹⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 13.

⁹⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 13.

⁹⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], [www. sup.org/zohar](http://www.sup.org/zohar), p. 5.

⁹⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 13.

or soul. Furthermore, judgment, according to R. El'azar, is reckoned from both body and soul.⁹⁹

This latter concept is not entirely innovative and the *Zohar* here displays absorption of ideas from other sources. The notion of the body and soul being judged not separately but concomitantly is a theme incorporated into the parable of the blind man and the cripple found in the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 91.a-b. It is important to observe that while the Talmud employs the rhetorical technique of a parable, the *Zohar* relies on an apodictic style of interpretation. The use of the formulary which we have encountered before, “*ta haze*”, “come and see”,¹⁰⁰ signals a shift within R. El'azar's narrative framework and introduces a new interpretation which interlinks the fragments of the themes he had discussed earlier (i.e. Lot going with Abraham, learning and judgment). He further juxtaposes the righteous one who “learns in this world the ways of the blessed Holy One so that he can walk in them”¹⁰¹ symbolized by Abraham with the wicked who “stiffens his neck and refuses to learn”¹⁰² embodied by Lot. His theological message foreshadows R. Abba's question a few sentences later: if Lot was wicked, then what motivated Abraham to take him along on his journey?¹⁰³ R. El'azar's response seems clear and concise: if the righteous were to abandon the wicked then the latter would cause even greater damage, therefore the righteous should keep the wicked close. However, upon a more unconventional reading of R. El'azar's words “for if he abandons him, then he will go and destroy the world”¹⁰⁴ the meaning is equivocal as the pronouns

⁹⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 13.

¹⁰⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 14.

¹⁰¹ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 14.

¹⁰² D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 14.

¹⁰³ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 15.

¹⁰⁴ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 14.

designating wicked and righteous are unspecified thereby allowing for a sense of latitude as to their precise meaning. Therefore, it is possible to render R. El'azar's exposition as saying that if the righteous abandons the wicked, then he/she, the righteous, will destroy the world by causing a separation between himself/herself and his/her antithesis, the wicked. The formulary "come and see" is repeated again to introduce a Biblical example of the Prophet Elisha's punishment of his servant Gehazi (2 Kings 5). R. El'azar does not elaborate on enlightening the reader regarding the details of the Biblical example cited nor about its connection to his theological thesis discussed earlier. Two important assumptions account for this lack of further detail: one, the *Zohar* assumes that the reader is already familiar with both the Biblical context and rabbinic interpretation of the story of Elisha and Gehazi both of which are indispensable for the nuanced understanding of his theological exposition; secondly, the *Zohar* is not willing to enforce a doctrinaire understanding upon the reader but rather invites the reader to construct meaning by using the raw materials supplied in the narrative of the *Zohar*.

Thus, the first reading of the Elisha-Gehazi example would substantiate the apparent claim of R. El'azar according to which the wicked Gehazi after being punished by Elisha departed and assisted King Jeroboam in the construction of the golden calf thereby bringing destruction and punishment upon Israel.¹⁰⁵ However, let me propose an alternative interpretation which may have equal validity due to the ambiguous nature of the narrative. Accordingly, it is Elisha's separation from, and punishment of, Gehazi that led to disastrous consequences. By contrast, and in opposition to Elisha, Abraham held

¹⁰⁵ Daniel Matt draws attention to rabbinic sources that allude to Gehazi's assistance to King Jeroboam. This in itself is an interesting anachronism for according to the chronology of the Bible King Jeroboam precedes the incident between Elisha and Gehazi. Yet it seems that the *Zohar* bases its exegesis on this particular rabbinic source. See D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 15.

Lot close steadfastly until the time that it became impossible for them to dwell together and a separation was inevitable. Yet even at the time of parting Lot agreed to their separation and chose his dwelling place freely rather than Abraham rejecting him and forcing conditions upon him as it becomes apparent in later narratives of the *Zohar*.¹⁰⁶ Thus, the example of R. El'azar in fact supports his thesis by constituting a counter-example that demonstrates what happens when the righteous separates from the wicked. This important detail however, can be easily bypassed by a reader who is unfamiliar with and uneducated in conventional Biblical and rabbinic lore.

Following R. El'azar's univocal exegesis the narrative is broadened to include R. Abba. It is interesting to observe that while the previous exegetical segment included five voices, here the discussion is pursued only by two. In addition, the rather long narrative following R. El'azar and R. Abba's dialogue is conducted solely by R. Shim'on. The number of voices in a given exegetical section may point to more general organizing principles that guided the editors/composers of the *Zohar*. Thus, according to one hypothesis the increase in the number of voices present in a given narrative is commensurate with the possible variety of exegetical possibilities. Alternatively, a univocal voice may signal authority of opinion, one which cannot be undermined, opposed or questioned because it is recognized not only as authoritative but as sacred coming directly from the source. As such this latter voice maybe likened to prophetic speech. It is not surprising that R. Shim'on embodies this authoritative univocal speech in the *Zohar*. His position among the Companions is similar to that of the Biblical Prophets who acted as conduits between the earthly and Heavenly realms translating Divine speech into the language of the human world. R. Abba empathically expresses the Companion's

¹⁰⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 42-43.

appreciation of R. Shim'on: "Woe when you depart from the world. Who will radiate Torah? Happy is the share of the Companions who hear words of Torah from your mouth!"¹⁰⁷

The apparent contrast between the authoritative and univocal exegesis of R. Shim'on the one hand and the dialogical, often innovative, discourse among the Companions on the other bears close resemblance to the relationship between the Written and Oral traditions of the Bible. Thus, there is a perpetual oscillation in the zoharic narrative between establishing a fixed and authoritative exposition while at the same time allowing for multiple perspectives and contradictory opinions to be voiced. Similarly, the Written and Oral Torah are also interdependent as the monolithic and univocal written text begs for completion through an often heterogeneous, diverse and multi-vocal Oral exegesis while the point of departure for the Oral Tradition is inevitably the written text itself.

On yet another level, there is a distinct paradox between Revelation that is described as having occurred at a fixed time and place in the historical past, its content having been predetermined through the medium of the fixed text, and the mystic's desire and yearning to stand on Sinai again and receive God's word anew. In the *Zohar Lekh Lekha* this tension is clearly denoted at the end of the *parashah* with R. Shim'on's decision to reprimand the residents of *Kefar Tarsha*, a village where R. Abba and R. Ya'akov interrupted their journey, for revealing prophetic insights based on intuition without having recourse to the restraint of the authoritative tradition. His remedy consists of sending them to the Babylonian academy so that they could "learn those ways, so

¹⁰⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 33

words will be concealed within them”.¹⁰⁸ R. Shim'on's verdict dichotomizes the demarcation between revelation and concealment, the latter aspect constituting an integral aspect of Torah and Revelation must be controlled and channeled by authority: “For words are revealed only among us, since the blessed Holy One has authorized us to reveal them”.¹⁰⁹

The extended univocal exegesis of R. Shim'on seems to be deliberately placed at this section of the narrative as it constitutes both the concluding and the ultimate reading of the first large thematic unit of *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. The subsequent thematic sections move away from the theme of “*lekh lekha*” beginning with what constitutes the next important subject matter, Abraham's descent to and return from Egypt. At the conclusion of the first thematic unit the exegetical process can be described as circular: the introductory proem, “Listen to me, you stubborn-hearted, who are far from righteousness (Isaiah 46:12)”,¹¹⁰ sets the general context for the entire exegetical unit which both starts and ends with a discussion and exploration of the multifaceted meaning of the beginning of the Biblical pericope, “And YHVH spoke to Abraham ‘Lekh lekha’”.¹¹¹ In the first instance R. Yose opens the exegesis of this verse, the interpretation of which, after successive dialogical discourses among the Companions, is culminated in R. Shim'on's singular authoritative exposition before the narrative moves unto to the new theme of Abraham's departure to Egypt.

In his exposition, R. Shim'on introduces a number of novel concepts and methods of exegetical techniques that we have not yet seen in this *parashah* before. As

¹⁰⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 115.

¹⁰⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 115.

¹¹⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 1.

¹¹¹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

such, these methods suggest that they can and should only be used by someone as well versed in mystical exegesis as the leader of the Companions was. The first such technique is the use of *gematria*, an interpretative technique used often by mystics and kabbalists, to uncover hidden relationships and associations between words in the Biblical text that share the same numerical value. R. Shim'on applies *gematria* as he offers a solution to a question that had not yet been raised by the other rabbis on the base verse of *Lekh Lekha*, "Why does the first revelation of the blessed Holy One to Abraham open with *Lekh lekha*?"¹¹² Indeed, R. Shim'on fundamentally reformulates and reproblematicizes the base verse. The blessed Holy One could have revealed Himself to Abraham in an infinite number of ways; there are plenty of examples for such instances of revelation to meritorious individuals throughout the Bible. The Divine imperative, "*Lekh lekha*", however is only addressed to Abraham. Clearly, R. Shim'on suggests by the re-examination of the base verse that there was something unique in God's relationship to Abraham that merited this particular way, and not another mode, of Divine revelation.

As a possible solution to the puzzle R. Shim'on looks at the numerical value of the sum of the letter in the phrase "*lekh lekha*". Since it amounts to exactly one hundred it signifies both the age at which Abraham would engender a son and concurrently the total "*sefirotic possibilities*"¹¹³ contained within the last *sefirah* of *Malkhuth* the attainment of which would enable Abraham to be properly joined to the blessed Holy One. Thus, the use of *gematria* enables R. Shim'on to draw attention to two points of equal significance. First, that there are associative relationships concealed between various parts of the Bible

¹¹² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 15.

¹¹³ See Matt, *Zohar*, note #111, p.16: "*Shekhinah*, last of the ten *sefirot* and the first rung of spiritual ascent. The decade of the *sefirot* squared equals 100, alluding to all the *sefirotic possibilities* contained within *Shekhinah*."

that can only be uncovered by the use of techniques that go beyond the traditional repertoire of conventional Bible commentary. Second, that the Biblical text requires at times hyperliteral understanding that abstracts away from the apparent contextual and semantic elements of the text in order to project unto a different dimension where an imperative such as “*lekh lekhal*” signifies *sefirotic* entities and processes.

Furthermore, it is apparent that R. Shimon’s use of *gematria* assumes that the reader of the text is at best well-versed and at least familiar with such modes of exegesis. However, R. Shim’on makes an explicit statement about the care that one must exercise when using *gematria*. Far from concluding that his solution is all-inclusive, he rebuts himself by opening with the formulary, “*ta haze*” “But come and see” to state that “Whatever the blessed Holy One does on earth is entirely a mystery of wisdom”.¹¹⁴ That is, according to R. Shim’on, even a skilled kabbalistic exegete proficient in the exegetical use of *gematria* is, nevertheless, greatly limited in understanding the reasons and motivations behind Divine Revelation.

The zoharic narrative is further sustained by R. Shim’on’s reexamination of verbs used to describe Abraham’s movement on his journey. He builds on earlier exegesis of Rabbis El’azar and Abba regarding the possible meanings of these verbs denoting motion, and sets out to establish why the Biblical verse reads “*va’ya’avor*”¹¹⁵ when the semantic context of the verse really calls for the use of the verb “*va’yelekh*”. In contrast to Rabbis El’azar and Abba, R. Shim’on finds the solution for the Biblical puzzle in the hyperliteral dimension drawing on various mystical and intertextual traditions according to which the word “*va’yelekh*” alludes to Exodus 14:19-21 which, when read in a

¹¹⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 16.

¹¹⁵ The full verse reads: “Abram passed through the land” (p. 16)

particular order, comprises the 72-letter-name of God traditionally regarded as alluding to the delimitation of the universe by God.¹¹⁶ As previously shown, R. Shim'on's purpose is not to give a detailed introductory lesson to a novice uninitiated in such matters, therefore, his exposition does not give further detail about the possible kabbalistic implications of the 72-letter-name of God. Instead, he merely presents these ideas to the reader who needs to continue to fill in the gaps in his own knowledge through further reading or oral teaching.

However, from the viewpoint of the construction of meaning R. Shim'on's analysis is of great importance and should not be easily dismissed. Accordingly, by highlighting the associative correspondence between Abraham's movement through the land and the Divine name linked with setting the limits of the universe, the Biblical text reveals a novel dimension, according to which, Abraham's journey through the land signifies the Divine delimitation of the Universe. While it is difficult to ascertain the source of R. Shim'on's esoteric insights, there is an interesting hint in his narrative to a composition called *The Book of Rav Yeiva Sava* which the Companion's regularly reference throughout the *Zohar*. According to Daniel Matt it is impossible to determine whether this book as well as other materials mentioned in the *Zohar* actually existed or were merely invented by the editors or writers.¹¹⁷ Judging from the title, *The Book of Rabbi Yeiva*, the Revered (literally, grandfather) this may have been a manual used by kabbalistic circles and study groups. The fact that it is referenced several times in the *Zohar* by both the Companions and R. Shim'on suggests that it may have been known not

¹¹⁶ Matt shows in detail the identifiable sources which establish the explicit association between the word "va-ya'vor" and the 72-letter-name of God. See note 118, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 17.

only to the writers or editors of the *Zohar* but also to the audience for whom the text was composed.

There are two additional observations to make regarding R. Shimon's rhetoric. His meta-textual reading of Abraham's extensive journey throughout the land of Canaan is predicated on the grammatical irregularity, the use of the feminine suffix of "he" as opposed to the logically requisite masculine suffix of 'vav' signifying "his tent":

"'He spread (*oholoh*), his tent' [Gen.12:8], spelled with a (*he*)".¹¹⁸ While R. Shim'on conspicuously points out that the letter 'he' does not really belong in the sentence he stops short of providing an explicit account for this grammatical inconsistency. Instead, he offers an interpretation of the sentence that fills this apparent textual gap by correlating the letter 'he' with the *sefirah* of *Malkuth/ Shekhinah* through identifying the tent with the spread of the "Kingdom of Heaven with all its linked rungs".¹¹⁹ Since the *sefirah* of *Malkuth* is generally characterized by including within itself the combinations of all the other higher *sefirot*, the reference to the *Shekhinah* in R. Shim'on's discussion is unmistakable. This interpretive technique allows him to activate levels of meaning that would be impossible to do at the level of the literal meaning of the text.

At the same time, it is important to note that R. Shim'on's hermeneutic observation is not entirely novel since noting such grammatical inconsistencies is characteristic of conventional midrashic exegesis. The *Midrash Rabbah* on *Parashat Lekh Lekha*, for instance, also takes note of the discrepancy between the noun (Abraham) and the feminine pronominal suffix in the aforementioned verse. However, according to the solution offered by R. Hanina in *Midrash Rabbah* the 'he' refers to Sarah's tent:

¹¹⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 18.

¹¹⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 18.

“*Ahalah* (her tent) is written; after having pitched Sarah’s tent he pitched his own”.¹²⁰ Thus, R. Hanina and R. Shim’on seem to propose conflicting readings of the same verse. This apparent dichotomy, however, is reconciled by R. Yehudah’s later teaching in the *Zohar* that draws an explicit parallel between Sarah and the *Shekhinah*: “Alternatively, ‘Now I know’,¹²¹ for he saw *Shekhinah* accompanying her”.¹²² Thus, it may be argued that both the conventional midrashic and the mystical zoharic exegesis are distilled from one common source of teaching that establishes an identity between the *Shekhinah* and Sarah. If so, then the difference between the two apparently conflicting interpretations has to do with the depth or level of revelation they are willing to engage in rather than with a difference in content.

The second unique characteristic of R. Shim’on’s analysis pertains to his use, or rather, dramatic transformation of signifiers of direction and place. When describing Abraham’s movement, between Canaan and Egypt, R. Shim’on explicitly strips the signifiers of their literal meaning and identifies them as Heavenly and Cosmic rungs. Thus, Egypt becomes the Garden of Eden; the “Negev”, the South, is identified as Abraham’s own rung, denoted by the *sefirah* of *Hesed*; and Canaan represents the diametrical opposite of *Hesed*, a place cursed and forsaken where famine prevails awaiting its restoration and resuscitation by Abraham.¹²³ The physical manifestation of Abraham’s journey from one place to another “from rung to rung”¹²⁴ is semantically transfigured by R. Shim’on to denote the process of perfecting the Divine aspect of *Hesed*.

¹²⁰ *Midrash Rabbah*, “*Lekh Lekha*”, 39:15-16.

¹²¹ The entire Biblical verse reads: “Now I know what a beautiful woman you are!” (Genesis 12:11).

¹²² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 21.

¹²³ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 19.

¹²⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 18.

The close micro-level textual analysis conducted on the first few extended thematic units of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* has yielded some important findings. First, just as the redactors of both the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmuds relied on the extensive use of formalized rhetorical units of language to build the literary and semantic structure of these texts, similarly, the *Zohar* also incorporates such fixed and recurring linguistic patterns that are indispensable to both the narrative and the semantic composition of the text.¹²⁵ In fact these formulaic constructs are integrated into the fabric of the narrative in a very conscious and systematic manner. As Table 1 (see below, p. 47) clearly demonstrates each one of these literary structures is associated with a specific and consistent rhetorical function.

Second, the explicit parallel between the underlying rhetorical composition of the *Zohar* and that of the Talmudic texts may point to a more general analogy between the mode of writing and editing of these texts. Thus, in line with the argument of Yehudah Liebes,¹²⁶ it is conceivable to hypothesize that just as the Talmuds were written and redacted over a period of time by a group of rabbis similarly, the main part of the *Zohar*, in which the *Parashat Lekh Lekha* is included, was composed and redacted by a circle of rabbis/kabbalists thus attesting to multiple authorship. Certainly the discursive mode of the rhetorical construction of this section of the *Zohar* seems to reflect the presence of not only multiple voices but also the juxtaposition of several levels of analysis.

¹²⁵ See J. Lightstone, *The Rhetoric of the Babylonian Talmud, Its Social Meaning and Context*. I have greatly benefited from Professor Lightstone's comprehensive analysis of the rhetorical structure of both the Babylonian and the Palestinian Talmud. It was his study of the function of structural and dialectical formularies within these texts that propelled me to delve deeper into the literary composition of the *Zohar* to see whether such formularies could also be identified in the *Zohar* and what their specific function is in the overall construction of meaning.

¹²⁶ Y. Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, p. 88. Liebes argues that the *Zohar's* main section cannot have been written exclusively by Moses de Leon. Instead, he proposes an alternative view according to which the *Zohar* is a product of a group of individuals bound together by shared rituals, beliefs and texts.

Third, as I have identified in the introductory section of this thesis, the *Zohar* is a unique literary composition in that its rhetoric manages to seamlessly harmonize the two predominant approaches to Biblical exegesis, the discursive and the apodictic styles. Thus, the exegetical content is not carried only by formulaic constructs such as the ones I have identified in this section of the thesis and tabled below but also by apodictic rhetorical elements such as characters, theurgic activities, and other descriptive elements of the plot. The *Zohar*'s narrative structure in which the abstract, represented by the juxtaposition of ideas, and the concrete, symbolized by characters and activities, are consciously fused thus implies a broader theological message: Torah study is not mere sophistry; it must be reflected in, and translated into concrete actions which, in turn, will have a profound affect on the entire Divine realm. The next section of the thesis takes a closer look at the meaning and function of these two most prominent apodictic rhetorical elements in the *Zohar*: characters and theurgic activities.

Table 1. Recurring formularies and their corresponding function in the *Zohar*'s narrative¹²⁷

Rhetorical formulary	Narrative function
Opened/ Opened saying	Introduces proems; it is always followed by a Biblical verse that is at some distance from the base verse.
Come and see (p.6, 54, 76)	This formulary is used to by an exegete to provide more clarity and exegetical detail to the topic or verse at hand.
Come and see what is written (p. 6, 33, 37)	Allows the speaker to refer back to the base verse in the Biblical text. The exegete uses this formulary to first, refer to a Biblical verse; second, to dissociate the Biblical

¹²⁷ The page numbers I have included in the table are meant to provide a quick reference to the occurrence of these terms in the text and therefore they are not all-inclusive.

	verse from its Scriptural context and conventional meaning; third, to use the verse as a point of departure for the explication of often unexpected and innovative interpretive points.
Another said/ Another opened (p. 90-95, 97, 102)	While keeping the speaker's identity anonymous, these formularies introduce variant readings on the topic or verse at hand by invoking verses other than the base verse from various parts of the Bible and constructing independent units of interpretation around that verse. Although it is clear that these concise analytical segments are closely related to the base verse it is left up to the reader's exegetical imagination to thematically link these interpretive units to the main part of the discussion.
How do we know? (p. 62)	It is used to set the pretext for bringing additional examples from the Bible to support a particular exegetical point.
It has been taught/ (p. 79, 86, 98, 108, 102) The Companions have already established (p. 108)	Refers to established traditional wisdom which the interpreter often abandons for the explication of a new teaching.
It has been taught in the mystery of the Mishnah (p. 77, 85, 86, 105)	Refers to the teachings of a secret Mishnah known to the Companions, however, no longer extant, as noted by D. Matt (p. 77, n597).
Mystery of the matter or word/ Come and see the mystery of the matter (p. 54, 72)	Introduces kabbalistic, often very complex and abstract levels of analysis.
Now, you might say (p. 40, 41, 62, 71, 72, 73, 77, 105, 109)	Draws attention to apparent contradictions only to reconcile such inconsistencies.
Alternatively (p. 44, 45, 46, 47, 50, 51, 58, 59, 60, 63, 69)	Introduces analogous or additional levels of interpretation often by citing a remote verse from the Bible.
Similarly (p. 57, 59, 71)	Establishes a semantic parallel between exegetical units.
These verses call for contemplation (p. 107, 108)	Calls attention to an exegetical difficulty that usually conceals secret wisdom that cannot be revealed and explicated in its entirety by the interpreter.

3.

Characters and Theurgic Activities**Characters**

In contrast to classical midrashic texts, later midrashic works produced largely in the early Middle Ages such as *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* and *Midrash Tanhuma* are characterized by the use of a more elaborate and, at times, mythic narrative structure. It has been argued that these later midrashim in fact constitute an intermediary stage in Jewish thought, a transition from rabbinic to kabbalistic mythic systems.¹²⁸ A central feature of these later midrashim is the insertion of a story within, and as an integral part of, the overall exegetical framework. In fact, the story or myth becomes a new literary device that creates a narrative tension which enables the author to project and convey novel and nuanced meaning complementing or amplifying the traditional rabbinic exegesis.

The *Zohar*, like the above mentioned late midrashic works, presents a narrative in which the exegesis unfolds as a central part of a carefully constructed plot that is both engaging to the reader while at the same time allowing for the manifestation of nuanced and composite levels of understanding. Thus the numbers and names of the rabbis, place names where the rabbis rest or discourse such as villages, inns, fields, and rocks are transposed unto the kabbalistic level as signifiers infused with additional mystic implications. This type of narrative construction differs sharply from other traditional

¹²⁸ J. L. Rubinstein, "From Mythic Motifs to Sustained Myth: The Revision of Rabbinic Traditions in Medieval Midrashim", p. 134.

midrashic works where the semantic is largely driven by the associative combinations of Biblical verses. This important departure in narrative style between classical midrash and the *Zohar* can be attributed to the divergence in the manner of teaching pursued by traditional institutions of learning based on *pilpul*¹²⁹ a largely intellectual practice and sophistry. By contrast, the instruction in kabbalistic circles may have emphasized the unity of the cosmic and physical realms where the multifaceted and multi-layered aspects of the Biblical text were to be understood in totality encompassing all facets of life, including the intellectual just as much as the ethical, ritualistic and religious layers at both the manifest-mundane and also at the concealed-metaphysical levels. As it will become more apparent in this analysis, the stories, peregrinations and characters of the Rabbis in the *Zohar* constitute, in fact, an important literary device for projecting didactic lessons, discussing and illustrating complex kabbalistic ideas, and moral ideals while at the same constructing exegesis on the Biblical base text.

The main characters of the zoharic narrative is a core group of nine rabbis also called the Companions gathered around the prominent figure of the second century Sage, R. Shim'on bar Yohai. Together, the ten rabbis comprise the main exegetical voice of the text. Besides the rabbinic voice, the various exegetical elements and narrative events comprised in the text are filtered through the prism of an additional anonymous third person narrator whose primary narrative role is to link the various disparate elements of exegesis, dialogue, base texts and plot. A third person narrator stands at some remove from the characters and events he/she reports and, therefore, is a useful literary device which allows for a sense of objectivity and control in the construction of the text. In fact, the narrator's voice in the *Zohar* is almost completely stripped of a subjective undertone

¹²⁹ *Pilpul* was a method of learning at rabbinic academies.

as his/her task is delimited to the faithful representation of events, monologues and dialogues.

The number ten, representing the core group of rabbis in *Lekh Lekha*, enjoys special kabbalistic significance as the total number of *sefirot* in the Kabbalistic tree. In addition, just as the *sefirot* are organized in a mutually interdependent but hierarchical relationship to one another, so are the rabbis. Throughout the text they constantly engage and challenge each other in Biblical exegesis and in expounding the secrets of esoteric wisdom. However, as mentioned before, R. Shim'on's theological insights enjoy the utmost reverence among the rabbis and the content of his expositions are regarded as revelatory, beyond challenge, in this section of the *Zohar*. R. Shim'on's leadership is unique, not unlike that of the Prophet Samuel, who simultaneously unites the double aspects of Prophet and Judge. Thus, his prophetic abilities such as his exegetical prowess and extraordinary insights are fortified by his unique capacity as judge to balance the twin aspects of rigor and mercy in order to restore harmony and enact order in both the human and cosmic realms. R. Shim'on's impact is attested to by two important subplots both to be discussed in greater depth below. The first builds on the aspect of mercy and involves Yo'ezer, an impoverished school teacher whom R. Shim'on's advice restores to wealth and position.¹³⁰ The second, drawing on the notion of judgment, is directed against R. Abba and the dwellers of the village of *Kefar Tarsha*, who, at the literal reading of the text, seem to be harshly reprimanded. R. Abba is sentenced to forgetting what he learns for thirty days for withholding matters of Torah, while the villagers are

¹³⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 61.

exiled to the Rabbinic Academy of Babylonia for having divulged secret wisdom too openly.¹³¹

While it is very difficult to establish a clear hierarchy among the other nine rabbis, their names and roles are structurally and semantically significant within the overall plot. These names signify various aspects of God through the inclusion of letters from the *Tetragrammaton*, YHVH, or other known signifiers of Divine names. R. Shim'on's son, R. El'azar's name is constituted by two words, the Divine name *El* and the word *azar* meaning 'to help'. Both R. Abba and R. El'azar play particularly important roles in the unfolding of the narrative. R. Abba, whose name means 'father', is the key figure in one of the two extended subplots that culminates in his union with the *Shekhinah* and his reception of Divine Revelation: "Rabbi Abba's face blazed in fire from rapture of Torah".¹³² Together with R. Shim'on these two rabbis are instrumental not only in the development of the content of the narrative but also in the enactment of theurgic actions (midnight vigil, walking, study) that exemplify righteousness for all to follow. In kabbalistic symbolism these three rabbis may be likened to a *sefirotic* triad in which the three individual *sefirah* influence not only each other but also all those that are beneath them. It is not surprising therefore that no discussion or scene in *Lekh Lekha* is devoid of one of these rabbis. Their teachings and actions permeate every segment of the narrative just as the higher *sefirot* provide sustenance and nourishment for the lower ones.

The remaining rabbis can be divided into two groups. The first group consists of four regularly recurring and interacting rabbis, Yitzhak, Yose, Yehudah and Hizkiya while the second group is comprised of rarely occurring rabbis whose contribution to the

¹³¹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 114-115.

¹³² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 98.

construction of meaning is relatively minimal; these are rabbis Hiyya, Yeisa and Ya'akov. The former Sages are clearly proficient in both the traditional rabbinic exegesis demonstrated by the use of the verse-associations and other rhetorical devices such as proems, as well as in kabbalistic analyses based on a set of predefined *sefirotic* associations and relationships that they augment their discussion of the Biblical base-verse with.

By contrast, the three minor rabbis mentioned above act as conjoiners whose short questions and remarks either connect larger exegetical units together or provide the impetus against which interpretative segments are composed. For instance, R. Ya'akov appears only once in *Lekh Lekha* and the insertion of his short but significant query into the larger narrative unit of R. Abba functions concurrently on two levels. On the one hand, R. Ya'akov draws attention to an important orthographic distinction between the small and large Hebrew letters of 'he' encountered in various sections of the Biblical text. On the other hand, his question regarding this textual peculiarity prompts R. Abba to continue his previous discourse on the relevance of the letter 'he' in connection with Abraham's circumcision. According to his previous exegetical discussion, the letter 'he' was added to Abram's name after circumcision to signify the union between Abraham and the *Shekhinah*, the latter signified by the letter 'he'.¹³³ However, prompted by R. Ya'akov's inquiry, R. Abba, in turn, is challenged to open up the possibility of new dimensions of other kabbalistic implications to this puzzle according to which the small 'he' denotes the *Shekhinah* which corresponds to the Sabbatical year, while the large 'he' stands for the *sefirah, Binah*, identified with the Jubilee year.¹³⁴ This example shows that

¹³³ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 86.

¹³⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 87.

the voices of the last group of rabbis, one of which is R. Ya'akov's, although underplayed in frequency and depth, are nevertheless indispensable for the hermeneutic process: on the hand, they replace monolithic semantic structures with multiplicity and fluidity of meaning and, on the other hand, they join important exegetical units together for the sake of coherence and narrative flow.

The discussion on the narrative voice in the *Zohar's Lekh Lekha* would be incomplete without an additional examination of a voice that is conspicuously absent from this composition, namely that of a woman. This point constitutes an acute dissimilarity from other midrashic works such as the *Babylonian Talmud*, *Midrash Rabbah*, or *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, just to mention a few, where, at least to a nominal extent, the female voice is represented through the character who is either identified as Matrona, or a Roman Lady. Curiously, the issue in this *parashah* of the *Zohar* is not that a woman is completely absent but, rather, that her voice is muted and her persona is defaced. The reader catches a glimpse of her in the long narrative towards the end of the *parashah* when two traveling rabbis, Abba and Ya'akov, overnight in the small village, *Kefar Tarsha*. As they are ready to leave on their subsequent travel, the Host of the house requests the rabbis to stay on for the upcoming circumcision ceremony of his son. To further entice the rabbis to stay behind and continue the study of Torah, the Host makes his request in his wife's name: "For my wife asks this favor of you and the circumcision of covenant of the son born to me- tomorrow will be his wedding celebration".¹³⁵ This quote hints at the presence of a woman who remains unidentified beyond her association with her husband.

¹³⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 89.

By contrast, the *Zoharic* narrative could have easily made accommodations for the female voice by including her personal invitation of the rabbis within the narrative framework. This, however, is not the case, instead her import and identity as a woman is clearly subsumed within her husband's relationship with the rabbis. Nevertheless, it is perhaps not without significance that the presence of the feminine, the wife, is included in a section of the narrative preceding the revelation of the *Shekhinah*, God's presence, gendered female, with whom the village dwellers and R. Abba unite at the apex of the plot. The association between the concealed, voiceless wife and the *Shekhinah* is further supported by the choice of words used by the text: 'ishah' or 'wife' is replaced by the more ambiguous term "beita"¹³⁶ or "house", and the possessive suffix specifying the owner of the house is omitted; in its place we find the vague expression, "de-ha beita",¹³⁷ signifying "this house".¹³⁸ Metaphorically, the house may allude to the place where the *Shekhinah* dwells and as such the Host is merely portrayed as conveying the invitation of the *Shekhinah* entreating the rabbis to stay and continue the exposition and discussion of Divine secrets.¹³⁹

While there is no separate feminine voice identified, it is important to recognize other marginal voices that are present in the text. One of the most salient and unique aspects of the *zoharic* narrative is the inclusion of children's perspectives and voices. In *Lekh Lekha* these passages, similarly to the above mentioned episode, are contained in the broader narrative context of R. Abba's visit to the village of *Kefar Tarsha*. At the

¹³⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], www.sup.org/zohar, p. 39.

¹³⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], www.sup.org/zohar, p. 39.

¹³⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 89.

¹³⁹ Another possible explanation for the absence of a direct feminine voice may be attributed to the kabbalistic presupposition that the feminine should not constitute "an independent force" (Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, p. 120). Ideally, the feminine should be reintegrated into the masculine thereby reenacting the original androgynous state of the Godhead. For more on the question of gender in kabbalah, see Wolfson, *Circle in the Square*, especially the chapter on "Crossing Gender Boundaries".

rhetorical level, the content of the children's speech is significant in introducing new and original insights into the exposition of the Biblical text while at the thematic level their brilliant ideas and foresight which, however, are devoid of formal training and experience, seem to constitute an important juxtaposition to Abba and Ya'akov, two venerable and erudite rabbis. Thus, during the first evening study session in the village of *Kefar Tarsha*, Rabbis Abba and Ya'akov join the family who have already begun their exposition centered on the meaning of "night" in two interrelated contexts: Abraham's battle with the kings, "The night was divided for them" (Genesis 14:15) and King David's arousal at midnight to engage in the praise and worship of God, "Midnight I rise to raise to praise You for Your righteous judgments" (Psalms 119:62).¹⁴⁰ As the discourse develops, it is actually the Host's unnamed son, "*yanuka*" (child), who offers an unexpected and extraordinary proposition regarding the meaning of midnight. In contrast to his father, who stresses the more traditional association between judgment and midnight, the child constructs his exegesis based on the actual literal manifestation of the word, "*pelagot laila*" meaning "half of the night".¹⁴¹ The child's point here is to state that just as the night is divided into two parts the one preceding and the other succeeding midnight, similarly, the night in its entirety encompasses the twin aspects of judgment and mercy.¹⁴²

It is worth scrutinizing the rhetorical elements in this exegetical segment for a moment as it allows us to understand in greater depth the role of the various narrative characters in the semantic construction of this section of the *Zohar*. As mentioned above, the interpretive discourse is opened up by the Host, the child's father, who, when

¹⁴⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 83.

¹⁴¹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], [www. sup.org/zohar](http://www.sup.org/zohar), p. 38.

¹⁴² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 85.

prompted by R. Abba, explains that his insights regarding the manifestation of judgment at night are derived from the teachings of his grandfather: “I learned this word from my grandfather”.¹⁴³ A few sentences later, like the Host, R. Abba also relies on accepted and established sources of teaching denoted by the formulary, “*ve-ha okeyamna*”,¹⁴⁴ “and we have established” as he corroborates and confirms the Host’s theological observations based on the traditional interpretation of the verse in the kabbalistic circle of the Companions under the aegis and authority of R. Shim’on: “Night entails judgment universally, as we have already established. Certainly so, as aroused in the presence of Rabbi Shim’on”.¹⁴⁵ The aforementioned formulary used by R. Abba has to be distinguished from a similar looking but functionally very different formulary, “*ha okhmoah*”, “this has been established”, also used throughout the text. Thus, that designates wisdom established by traditional rabbinic authorities. So far I have discussed two levels of oral teaching that are identified within the zoharic text: the first one is informed by the transmission of family traditions and teachings and communicated through the narrative character of the unnamed Host. This kind of knowledge is not subjected to critical evaluation or systematization; it is transmitted in the same form as it was received. The second level is characterized by a more formal process of assessment through which certain interpretations are deemed acceptable while others are simply sifted out and rejected to ensure that what is passed on is authoritative and accurate. This type of teaching is represented by the ‘school’ of R. Shim’on and the Companions, and in this particular scene by R. Abba.

¹⁴³ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 83.

¹⁴⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, [Aramaic text], [www. sup.org/zohar](http://www.sup.org/zohar), p. 37.

¹⁴⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 84.

By contrast, the child, and as we shall see later the other three unidentified children, comprise the third level of teaching- that of direct and unmediated prophecy.¹⁴⁶ The child's exposition on the relationship between the words "judgment" and "night" begins in a similar fashion as his father's: "I too have heard that night is royal judgment".¹⁴⁷ It is at this point that his rhetoric is transformed into an autonomous and authoritative voice that no longer receives its content from the established sources of tradition but directly from the Divine source as he proceeds to detail his original insights regarding the meaning of the use of night, midnight and judgment in the Bible as I discussed above. There is another remarkable clue provided in the text that strengthens the association between the child's character and the direct mediation of prophetic wisdom. He is called "*botsina*" by his father a word that means both "lamp" and "spark", often used in the *Zohar* to refer to R. Shim'on, who is called "*Botsina Qadisha*" or "Holy Lamp".¹⁴⁸ By applying the word *botsina* to both R. Shim'on and the child, the *Zohar* establishes a semantic unity between these characters: just as R. Shim'on disseminates the light of Torah to the Companions, the child draws his radiance from the same pool and communicates it to those around him. The major difference between the child and the kabbalistic Master is the level of erudition and experience. Thus, R. Shim'on's wisdom is refined by learning and living and therefore is more contained while that of the child is spontaneous and unstructured.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁶ Wonder speaking children are a characteristic rhetorical feature of the zoharic corpus. The itinerant rabbis meet them in various settings and engage in conversations with them. Inadvertently these children exhibit wisdom that often surpasses that of the rabbis. Although there is an actual section of the *Zohar* entitled *Yenukah*, it seems that there is a broader semantic association among the disparate *yenukah* segments that is worth noting here (see I. Tishby, 1991:3, 197-223).

¹⁴⁷ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 85.

¹⁴⁸ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 84, n649.

¹⁴⁹ The epithet, "*bodzina*", is also applied by R. Yose to refer to Yo'ezer, the impoverished school teacher who is called "*bodzina de-nahir*", "radiant lamp". It seems, then, that there is a special implicit connection

The other three children depicted in the text are also associated with prophecy. They are inserted into the narrative that directly precedes R. Abba's ecstatic union with the Shekhinah. After a night of intense Torah study they are sent forth into the day light to return with a new word of wisdom. When they return their words contain visions of future events: "One of them said, 'This day fire is destined from above!' Another said, 'And in a certain house!' Another said, 'There is a certain old man here destined to be burned by this fire!'"¹⁵⁰ The children's intuitive ability to gaze into the future stuns R. Abba who becomes both frightened and speechless: "R. Abba said, 'May the Compassionate One save us!' Astonished, he could not speak".¹⁵¹ The amazement is certainly felt by the reader as well: what is the *Zohar* trying to achieve by entrusting prophetic wisdom with unlearned and inexperienced children whose words can perplex such a learned scholar as R. Abba?

There are several possible solutions to this puzzle. The children are the fruit of their parents and their unique knowledge may be regarded symbolically as indeed the product of their labor in Torah. The inhabitants of *Kefar Tarsha* live in a place that is both removed from civilization, and cursed by God because of the abandonment of Torah by its earlier Sages. Despite the adverse circumstances, the host of the house and his comrades dwell in this village and engage in the study of Torah at the most conspicuous time from midnight till morning when "the blessed Holy One enters the Garden of Eden to delight with the righteous".¹⁵² By so doing they are undertaking an important theurgic

among the three personalities, R. Shim'on, Yoezer and the *yenuka*, supported by the rhetorical association common to all three of them. According to a possible hypothesis, just as a lamp radiates light, symbolically, these three characters represent different degrees of Revelation depending on the adjectives used in connection with the word, "*bodzina*".

¹⁵⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 97.

¹⁵¹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 97.

¹⁵² D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 2.

task, the purification and restoration of those Divine sparks that are trapped in that land. In fact, the Host explains to R. Abba that far from feeling exiled or banished, they regard their task as a unique mission, a kind of *Kiddush ha-Shem*, to elevate Torah and restore Her to splendor: “This place has refined us for Torah! Our custom every night is half sleeping and half Torah. When we rise in the morning, fragrances of fields and glistening rivers enlighten us with Torah...we strive day and night in Torah, and this place helps us. Whoever departs from here is like one who departs from eternal life”.¹⁵³

Another possible way to answer the above question is by positioning it within the overarching context of the Biblical story of Abraham. The villagers have taken upon themselves the special task to be the guardians of Torah in a place that is devoid of the Torah’s light. They have chosen seclusion and isolation, far from institutions of learning and the other pleasantries that civilization offers. This idea of the villagers’ self sacrifice for the sake of God and Torah is undoubtedly paralleled in the story of Abraham, who also journeys from the safety and familiarity of his birth place to search out the concealed aspects of the world and refine himself for the service of God. Abraham’s relentless attachment and faithfulness are rewarded by God through the establishment of an everlasting Covenant, a unique relationship to be observed not only between God and Abraham but also between God and Abraham’s descendents. Thus, through this Covenant, Abraham’s exceptional agreement with God is extended to all those who like him devote their lives to searching out and pursuing the ways of God. Thus in the zoharic narrative, the children’s unique prophetic abilities may be seen as God’s special recompense for the merits of their parents. As such, just as Abraham’s descendents are

¹⁵³ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 97.

granted a portion of his reward, so do the praiseworthy deeds of the village dwellers manifest in their children.

Finally, let me propose yet another explanation which draws on the immanent theme in this section of the *Zohar* regarding Redemption and Exile. Before the destruction of the Second Temple religious rituals, institutions of learning and the transmission of religious traditions were, to the most extent, centralized with the Temple standing at the pinnacle and functioning as the gateway to God. The destruction of the Temple constituted not only a singular event of the past but became symptomatic of a far greater problem for the Jews: if God was worshiped and approached via the Temple, what recourse can Jews have to God in the absence of a central place of worship and also without a central administrative and religious authoritative body? Rabbinic Judaism constituted one solution to this overwhelming problem. The rabbis claimed to be the heirs to the authentic tradition of the Sinaiic Revelation and therefore uniquely suited to be both the disseminators of the wisdom of Torah as well as the authorities to interpret the laws of Torah in various lands and historical times. However, the rabbis were not the only source of learning; small elite circles proposed alternatives that did not necessarily negate rabbinic teaching, but rather sought to intensify certain traditional understandings of Torah by emphasizing the important nexus between the human and heavenly realms. These esoteric groups, such as the one led by Shimon bar Yohai in the *Zohar*, can be seen as a kind of 'underground resistance movement' whose aim was to change the status quo of the condition of Exile through engaging in a more vigorous pursuit of righteous actions and the study of Torah in all Her magnificent depths and facets.

The dwellers of *Kefar Tarsha* including the small children belong to neither of the above mentioned two groups. They are on the periphery both physically and spiritually. The word *tarsha* means stony, cloddy indicating a place where even the earth is dead, untellable, yielding no life or produce;¹⁵⁴ a village, completely uninhabited except for the enthusiastic group of Jews who dwell there. Yet, this small unnamed group of people constitute not only the epicenter of the narrative but also the medium among whom God's presence, the *Shekhinah*, is revealed as demonstrated by both the children's prophetic utterances and R. Abba's ecstatic experience. The *Kefar Tarsha* narrative is masterfully interwoven into the fabric of the *Zohar* to underline an important theological message: the Divine and earthly realms are reflections of one another and, therefore, if Israel is in a state of Exile, then the manifestation of Divine holiness is also fragmented and dispersed. Redemption must begin in the wasteland, a place that is seemingly the farthest and most removed from God. Accordingly, prophecy is also displaced and is granted to the most unexpected individuals, such as children, in the most remote and unusual places such as *Kefar Tarsha*.

Theurgic activities

In both theosophical and ecstatic kabbalah human actions constitute a vital source of potentially redemptive or destructive outcomes. In the absence of a direct and immediate contact between the Divine and human realms a person's actions are seen as the means by which this separation can be bridged. The commandments of the Torah are regarded as the light that assists a Jew in navigating in the darkness of the physical world

¹⁵⁴ See D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 82, n.631.

towards the source of this light, God. For the kabbalist, theurgic actions are aimed at the restoration of unity among the ten *sefirot* as “the Torah and its precepts are for the sake of unification”.¹⁵⁵ Curiously, however, the kabbalist does not stop at merely observing the 613 Commandments of the Torah, but rather through knowledge of the manifested aspects of intra-Divine processes, he seeks to invent and institute novel forms of activities that are imbued with metaphysical significance.

In *Lekh Lekha* there are three types of mystical activity. The first group which is generally associated with theosophic kabbalah consists of practices that have direct influence on the unification or stimulation of the ten *sefirot*. Specific examples in this chapter are the washing of hands, walking, and midnight vigil. The second type of activities is associated with ecstatic or prophetic kabbalah and is a vehicle for the mystic’s *devekut* or complete cleaving to God. There are two specific examples in the text for such practices: Torah study and the practice of kissing. The third category of theurgic acts that bear special significance in *Lekh Lekha* are derived from *halakhic* precepts and include the observance of Levirate marriage and circumcision. However, these typologies are not clearly demarcated for the same theurgic activity such as circumcision may have bearings on several realms concurrently: first, as one of the positive commandments; second, a symbol denoting the movement from the demonic to the Divine; last, Divine Revelation through the mystic’s unification with God as the object of the obstruction, namely the foreskin, separating God and the faithful is eliminated.¹⁵⁶ Therefore, these categories are not meant to provide a neat and straightforward categorization of the different activities. Instead, they may be helpful to

¹⁵⁵ P. Giller, *Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar*, p. 82

¹⁵⁶ Pinchas Giller details these three basic dimensions of the kabbalistic significance of circumcision in *Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar*, p. 90-93.

bring to the forefront the multifaceted and multidimensional character and significance of these acts that point well beyond their apparent and surface manifestation in the text.

The metaphysical ramifications of washing one's hands are illustrated in the narrative describing an encounter between a poverty-stricken Jew called Yo'ezer and two peregrinating rabbis, El'azar and Yeisa. Yo'ezer, impresses the two rabbis with his extraordinary insights into the mysteries of Torah and the rabbis are astonished to learn that he has lost his work as the teacher of small children to another Rabbi and works as an attendant to R. Yeisa in order to earn his living. Rabbi El'azar realizing the inherent severity of the situation calls on his father, R. Shim'on to rectify the situation. While R. Shim'on prescribes washing of one's hands as a way of overcoming impoverishment, the essence of this teaching is clearly not confined to the actual act of washing hands but can and should be transposed unto the kabbalistic realm where it is closely associated with impacting the unobstructed flow of Divine emanation. In this context, human activity stimulates Divine powers and processes. The washing of the ten fingers of the hand, which, for the kabbalist, represents the ten *sefirot*, arouses the flow of divine blessings.

The subplot of Yo'ezer should not be viewed in isolation but needs to be situated within the overall context of expounding the meaning of the Biblical narrative of Abraham receiving the blessings of bread and wine from Melchizedek, King of Salem. The *Zohar* draws an important parallel between the cosmic story of the Patriarch, Abraham, and the mundane plot of Yo'ezer. Divine blessings can manifest only when harmony has been restored among the *sefirot*. In the Biblical story, Melchizedek, personifies the *Shekhinah* while the images of bread and wine symbolize the balance

between the *sefirot* of *Hesed* (Mercy) and *Gevurah* (Judgment).¹⁵⁷ Only when these diametrically opposite Divine aspects are brought into balance in the last *sefirah* of *Malkuth* can nourishment and sustenance flow unobstructed into the world. Just as Abraham attained the Divine blessings only after his battle with the kings, similarly Yo'ezer had to engage in the washing of his hands in order to be restored to his proper social status. By implication, although he was a learned man he could not stimulate the *sefirot* appropriately in order to affect a balance among them. It is worth noting the presence of two letters from the *Tetragrammaton* in his name: a *yod* and a *vav*. The two letters that are missing to complete the Name are the two 'he's respectively which in fact total exactly ten. Thus, the theurgic activity that R. Shim'on prescribes for him stimulates the harmonious alignment of the *sefirot* of *Binah* and the *Shekhinah* designated by the two 'he's which in turn has positive ramifications in Yo'ezer's personal life: "So it was: from that day on he grew rich, discovering treasure. He would engage in Torah and feed the poor every day, rejoicing with them, smiling at them radiantly".¹⁵⁸

Walking also constitutes a recurring motif in *Lekh Lekha*, and functions as an important practice that is closely associated with the themes of Redemption and Exile. The theurgic ramifications of walking can be summarized in two points: first, the release of Divine sparks from among the unclean sparks of the *kelipot* (husks) and second, the unification of the *sefirotic* diad of *Shekhinah* and *Tiferet*.¹⁵⁹ There are several levels on which the *Zohar* incorporates the theme of walking into the narrative. One aspect is certainly the base text of the Bible, God's imperative to Abraham, "*lekh lekha*", "go you forth", is a call not only to Abraham but, in a broader sense, to anyone how wishes to

¹⁵⁷ See D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 60, n469

¹⁵⁸ D. Matt, *ibid*, p. 61.

¹⁵⁹ E. R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics*, p. 90

cleave to the Divine. In fact, movement whether in the form of walking or not, is the most unifying and central concept of the Biblical *parashah* of *Lekh Lekha*. Naturally, there are important distinctions among his various movements that could be analyzed separately; thus Abraham's stirring and desire for God as opposed to his descent into Egypt may vary due to their semantic and kabbalistic nuances, nevertheless all manifestations of his movements are directed at purification and unification of Divine structures. It is worth quoting from a Hasidic source that incorporates the theme of "*lekh lekha*" and uses the Abrahamic journey as the basis for its formulation of the theological and mystical understanding of movement:

"Go forth (*lekh lekha*) from your native land and from your father's house (Gen 12:1).- after you set yourself at a distance from matter [the masses] to make yourself into form [the elite]...Then you are far from evil and strange thoughts called "your father's house."... And after you are removed from the corporeality of matter... then you attain the level that is known, called the "seeing of the supernal land" i.e., cleaving to God, blessed be He. This cleaving is called ascent ('*aliyah*), for one goes from one grade to the upper grade until one returns to the earth in his death, which is called descent from the level of man to the level of inanimate object. It is all for the sake of purifying the holy sparks from the depth of the shells that are below.¹⁶⁰

In the light of this passage, God's commandment to Abraham, "*lekh lekha*" simultaneously includes the themes of Exile, implied by Abraham's separation from his native land, and that of Redemption through his journey that involves the uplifting of the sparks from the lower realms and the purification of his sefirotic rung.

In the mythic narrative of the *Zohar* the cosmic and the human realms are not separate but rather fused through the activities of the main characters of the plot. Thus, the ten rabbis in the zoharic narrative emulate the example of the Patriarch Abraham, as

¹⁶⁰ Cited from E. R. Wolfson, *Along the Path: Studies in Kabbalistic Myth, Symbolism and Hermeneutics*, p. 95

their kabbalistic discourse and teachings unfold against the backdrop of their perpetual peregrinations and wondering. Their activity is sharply contrasted by the notion of a central and stationary place of learning such as the rabbinic academy to which R. Shim'on exiles the village dwellers at the conclusion of the chapter. It is worth examining this last scene of the plot and its intrinsic relationship to the theurgic activity of walking. As outlined before, the villagers of *Kefar Tarsha* deliberately chose to dwell in a forsaken place in order to redeem holiness that is imprisoned there through the study of Torah. As the narrative demonstrates, their endeavors are crowned with the achievement of uniting with the *Shekhinah* through prophetic experience. However, their stagnant and stationary condition is inherently flawed as evinced by R. Shim'on harsh decree against them. The paradox between the righteousness of the villagers and R. Shim'on's seemingly unfair judgment conceals an inherent theological position.

By exiling the dwellers of *Kefar Tarsha* to the rabbinic academy of Babylonia, R. Shim'on plays on the double meaning of the Aramaic/Hebrew verb *galah* which can mean both to reveal and to exile. According to the dictates of R. Shim'on, the original purpose of the villagers to exile themselves for the sake of Torah must be complemented by their reentry into society with the additional spiritual wealth that they acquired in their state of expulsion. Ironically, they must be exiled again, but this time back to society and the institution of learning. It is the academy that will give them the tools to harness their great wealth of wisdom so that they could learn the art of concealment and revelation and be able to teach it to others. Furthermore, there is another important lesson conveyed by R. Shim'on's rhetoric: esoteric knowledge cannot be confined to either an individual or to a solitary group. Divine revelations and wisdom must be shared and disseminated to

others so that they could also be enlightened and refined by it. The *Zohar* hints at an implicit criticism against either the solitary mystic or sectarian groups who aim at severing ties with the rest of humanity and confining their knowledge to themselves. Instead, it is incumbent on the enlightened to move about just like the rabbis and the Patriarch Abraham and dispense their knowledge in the right place and at the right time.

Furthermore, R. Shim'on's decision to exile the villagers from the Palestinian village to the academy in Babylonia mirrors the historical transition that took place in the transfer of Jewish life and learning from Palestine to Babylonia in the early Middle Ages. Revealed wisdom, symbolized by the dwellers of *Kefar Tarsha*, must also be moved and relocated to the new centre of Jewish Exile where it will bring enlightenment and blessings. There is a notable parallel between the villagers' fate and that of R. Shim'on. According to midrashic sources, R. Shim'on and his son El'azar hid and studied in a cave for a period of 12 years during the Roman persecutions. At the end of that period he left the cave and the first two things he saw, a chicken and a plowing man, were immediately annihilated by the sheer power of his gaze.¹⁶¹ Subsequently, he was ordered back into the cave by God for the world could not endure him just yet. However, as evidenced by the *Zohar* once he did move about in the world his wisdom was so profound that it sustained not only the Companions but the entire generation: "Now I see that even children in the generation of Rabbi Shim'on are worthy of wisdom! Happy are you Rabbi Shim'on! Woe to the generation from whom you depart!"¹⁶²

The midnight vigil as an ubiquitous form of theurgic practice is also central to the *Lekh Lekha* narrative. The act of rising at night to study Torah is not exclusive to the

¹⁶¹ *Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat* 33.b-34.a.

¹⁶² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 85.

Zohar. In the Babylonian Talmud there is a reference to the three watches of the night during which God is depicted as “a roaring lion” who bemoans, so to speak, the destruction of the Temple (Berakhot 3a). It became therefore accepted practice for pious Jews to rise during the night and express grief over the tragedy of the Temple and beseech God with supplications in the hope of speedy Redemption. In fact, the great compendium of *halakhah*, the *Shulchan Arukh* (Orah Hayim 1, 2), also stresses the efficacious aspects of night prayer with relation to redemption and salvation.¹⁶³

In the introductory section of the *Zohar*, mentioned earlier, R. Yose establishes a close conceptual analogy between those who rise at midnight to engage in Torah and the righteous souls who praise God in the Heavens: “At the moment midnight arouses and the blessed Holy One enters the Garden of Eden to delight with the righteous, all those trees in the garden sing praises before Him”.¹⁶⁴ It is precisely this pious act that becomes the hallmark of righteousness and constitutes the common link between such diverse groups and individuals as the itinerant rabbis and the inhabitants of *Kefar Tarsha*. In the construction of the narrative there is a progressive development of the theme suggesting a fundamental association between the judgment of the soul and the onset of night. R. Yose’s initial exposition, mentioned above, provides the thematic conceptual foundation upon which the later exegetical sections of the *Zohar* clearly build. Thus in the narrative that directly precedes R. Abba’s journey to *Kefar Tarsha* the exact same base verse is invoked (Song of Songs 8:13) as in the introductory section by R. Yose constituting a conceptual bridge that establishes a correlation and continuity between these two

¹⁶³ *The Talmud*, quoted from the notes provided by Rabbi Dr. A. Ehrman to Berakhot 3a.

¹⁶⁴ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 2-3.

seemingly remote parts of the narrative. Similarly to R. Yose,¹⁶⁵ R. Yehudah also draws on the same Biblical verse to illustrate the profound importance of engaging in Torah at night, a time associated with the aspect of Divine judgment, which has imminent consequences on the stimulation of Divine mercy and protection: “the blessed Holy One emanates upon him a thread of grace, protecting him throughout the world, for higher and lower beings guard him... If one rises and engages in Torah, then the stream, gushes upon his head, as it were, saturating him...in consequence, he shares in the world that is coming”.¹⁶⁶

The last two theurgic activities that I will focus on are circumcision and the enactment of Levirate marriage, two *halakhically* ordained precepts that play a prominent role in this section of the zoharic narrative. In the *Zohar*'s construction of kabbalistic meaning, Abraham's initiation into a Covenant with God through the act of circumcision, is paralleled in the human realm by the study and labor with Torah that ultimately leads to both the restoration of the *sefirotic* realm as well as to the unification of the mystic with the *Shekhinah*. Just as circumcision reveals the corona of the male penis, similarly the kabbalist's quest to uncover the hidden meaning and essence of Torah ultimately results in a mystic marriage, *hieros gamos*, in which the Divine word and the mystic become one. Elliot Wolfson's observation regarding the important connection between “the vision of the face of the Shekhinah” and “the seeing of the unveiled phallus” is certainly corroborated by the narrative composition of *Lekh Lekha*.¹⁶⁷

The theme of circumcision is embedded into the *Kefar Tarsha* episode which contains a number of important points that are worth examining. The narrative of the

¹⁶⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 2-3.

¹⁶⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 81.

¹⁶⁷ E. R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, p. 369.

story is constructed with great detail. R. Abba, in the company of R. Ya'akov, is on route to his father-in-law's place but has to overnight in the small village of *Kefar Tarsha*. They become acquainted with the host of the house where they spend the night and learn from him, much to their surprise, that this host together with his sons also engages in Torah study each and every midnight. Thus they join together expounding Torah until morning. As rabbis Abba and Ya'akov prepare to take their leave to continue on their journey, the host requests them to stay a little longer and attend the circumcision celebration of his child, to which the rabbis agree. Another night of Torah study follows but this time seven anonymous friends of the host also join the vigil. Each one of these seven individuals offers a unique interpretation about the significance and meaning of circumcision.

This section of the *Zohar* on *Lekh Lekhah* represents the narrative apex and as such the complete fusion of the human, the Biblical and the *sefirotic* realms. The circumcision of the host's son is interfaced by the same act in the Abrahamic narrative resulting in the removal of the "garments of the Shekhinah"¹⁶⁸ the manifestation of which is once again captured at the narrative level in the depiction of R. Abba's ecstatic experience: "So it was, for that day the Companions saw the face of the *Shekhinah* and were encompassed by fire. Rabbi Abba's face blazed in fire from rapture of Torah".¹⁶⁹ The inclusion of seven anonymous speakers, the friends of the host, who expound the seven distinct meanings of circumcision, further sustains the ambiguous multidimensional aspects of the narrative as the reader can no longer differentiate between the physical and the metaphysical levels.

¹⁶⁸ P. Giller, *Symbolization and Theurgy in the Later Strata of the Zohar*, p. 92.

¹⁶⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 98.

The number seven also carries mystical significance and at first sight it suggests an allusion to the total number of lower *sefirot* from *Hesed*, the rung of Abraham, to *Malkhuth*, identified with the *Shekhinah*. There is a close association between the *sefirotic* imagery and the content expounded by these speakers.¹⁷⁰ Since circumcision is explained by them as a process unifying the *sefirotic* couple of *Shekhinah*, gendered female, and her “mate”, *Tiferet*, gendered male, it is not surprising that circumcision concomitantly is the wedding celebration, *hilulah*, of these Divine potencies. This interpretation follows from two earlier teachings by R. Yose and R. Shim'on: the unification of *Shekhinah* (the Divine name *Elohim*) with *Tiferet* (YHVH) stimulates the abundant flow of Divine emanation throughout both the lower and the upper realms. The unification of the entire *sefirotic* structure is completed in the narrative by the appearance and prophetic utterances of the three children. Thus, the zoharic narrative illustrates how circumcision and the study of Torah bring about the unification of both man and God, as well as God's different potencies and emanations. In this context the identification of the circumcision celebration with a wedding when the “face of *Shekhinah* is revealed” becomes meaningful.

The notion of the *halakhic* precept of levirate marriage, *yibum*¹⁷¹, is transfused with cosmic relevance within the general theological framework of the zoharic narrative as evinced by its particular function in the *Parashat Lekh Lekha*. The allusion to the fulfillment of the mitzvah of levirate marriage is inserted into the last portion of the *Kefar Tarsha* episode. Following the elaborate circumcision ceremony and the prophetic

¹⁷⁰ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 90-97.

¹⁷¹ According to Deutronomy 25:5-10, a man, whose brother dies childless, is obliged to marry the widow of his brother. According to kabbalistic teaching, the concept of *yibum* is closely associated with the doctrine of reincarnation or *gilgul* (D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 113, n.878; G. Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 345).

rapture of R. Abba the village dwellers escort him on his way and reveal to him that the reason for the Host's attainment of extraordinary mystical vision lies in his completion of the *mitzvah* of *yibum*: "The master of the wedding celebration- your host- attained all this because he firmly fulfilled a *mitzvah*... My wife was the wife of my brother, who died childless, so I married her. This is the first son she has born to me, so I named him after my brother who passed away".¹⁷² The explicit association at the textual level among the concepts of circumcision, the revelation of the secrets of Torah, mystical unification and Levirate marriage is also born out at the semantic or theosophical level. Just as circumcision facilitates the unification of the *Shekhinah* and the *sefirah* of *Tiferet*, similarly the theurgic act of fulfilling the precept of *yibum* also stimulates metaphysical processes.

For the kabbalists, levirate marriage is identified with the principle of reincarnation and the necessity to provide progeny to the deceased man. It was believed that a man who dies without an offspring is prevented from entering the Garden of Eden. Thus the practice of *yibum* is regarded as the means through which the displaced soul of the first husband is redeemed. At the level of *sefirotic* processes, death without procreation is equal to the loss of masculinity for the soul of the dead husband who is forced to leave the *sefirah* of *Tiferet* and whose soul can only attain to the lower, "women's section" of the Garden of Eden.¹⁷³ There is an underlying analogy between the displacement of the soul of the dead husband and the exiled and destitute *Shekhinah*. Conversely, levirate marriage constitutes a theurgic act that can have profound consequences on the reparation and redemption of not only the lost and forsaken soul of

¹⁷² D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 113.

¹⁷³ P. Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah*, p. 56

the dead husband but, in a more universal sense, even on the reintegration and unification of the *Shekhinah* with its *sefirotic* counterpart, *Tiferet*. As this particular *parasha* of the *Zohar* attests, circumcision may be regarded as an important condition for “the epiphany of God”,¹⁷⁴ however, the consummation of levirate marriage clearly bears greater mystical significance meriting “seeing the Blessed Holy One face-to-face”.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Circumcision, Vision of God, and textual Interpretation”, p 512.

¹⁷⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 113.

4.

Meta-Textuality: The Role and the Limitations of the Intertext

The *Zohar's* exegetical system manifests on three synchronic levels. First, semantic coherence is created by reliance on inner Biblical unity predicated on the intrinsic interconnectedness and logic that characterize the Biblical text which itself can be regarded as the product of a complex and elaborate process of redaction and systematization until its final canonization.¹⁷⁶ Second, the *Zohar* incorporates into its own hermeneutic framework not only the conventional modes of midrashic interpretations based on textual irregularities, *notarikon*,¹⁷⁷ numerical signification of words and letters, and *aggadic* gaps but also themes, symbols and ideas dispersed in various midrashic works. These ancient forms of exegetical techniques may be regarded as establishing continuity between the ancient, authoritative and the medieval, kabbalistic forms of interpretation.¹⁷⁸

The third level of zoharic exegesis corresponds to the “anagogic” or kabbalistic understanding of the text.¹⁷⁹ Anagogy transcends the literal and even the cognitively more abstract dimensions of a text by superimposing an idiosyncratic semantic structure based on a predefined network of associations. The primary purpose of the kabbalist, therefore, is to pierce through the finite aspects of the Biblical text to arrive at the source,

¹⁷⁶ Michael Fishbane, *Midrash and Literature*, p. 36.

¹⁷⁷ “Method of exegesis whereby words are broken up and each letter or syllable is treated as an abbreviation”, *Midrash Rabbah Vol. I*, p. 393 n4.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph Dan, *Midrash and Literature*, p.138.

¹⁷⁹ I am adopting Betty Rojzman’s use the term “anagogic” to stand in for the traditional medieval designator of *sod* implying the last, mystic interpretation of a text denoted by the anagram, PaRDeS. See her book, *Black Fire on White Fire*.

the Infinite, from whence the text derived, by activating and uncovering the latent potency concealed in the various layers of the text. Thus, while the midrashic method seeks to demonstrate the internal consistency of the unity of the Bible, kabbalistic exegesis aims at revealing the paradigmatic analogy between the human and the Divine universe. It is in this context that the various theurgic activities in the *Zohar's Lekh Lekha*, as detailed in the previous section, assume their true significance. The centrality of theurgic actions in the overall context of the narrative hints at an important theological underpinning: there is no real separation or demarcation between subject and object, the kabbalist and Torah. Rather, the Biblical text begs to be internalized by the kabbalist to the point where the text is transmuted into action, and interpretation of Torah is exchanged for living the Torah. In this sense, Torah ceases to constitute an object of exegetical exercise as it is in midrash, and becomes a direct mediating force between God and the mystic.¹⁸⁰

Moshe Idel formulates this fundamental shift from midrashic to kabbalistic exegesis by underscoring the movement from an essentially a text-centered to a meta-textual “pneumatic” approach to the Bible:

Likewise, in kabbalah man's separate identity or self is jeopardized. The divine source of his soul, according to the sefirotic kabbalah, or of his intellect, according to the prophetic brand, endows him with a spiritual affinity to the Godhead. This affinity authorizes, as it facilitates, the emergence of a pneumatic exegesis to be defined against Talmudic-midrashic philologically oriented hermeneutics. The text becomes a pretext for innovating far-reaching ideas which are projected unto the Biblical verses.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ It is worth noting that one of the manifestations of the difference between the midrashic and the kabbalistic forms of exegesis is the conspicuous lack of parables for the elucidation of meaning in the *Zohar*.

¹⁸¹ Moshe Idel, *Infinites of Torah in Kabbalah*, p.153.

It is important to emphasize that the point of departure for exegesis in the case of both the midrashic and the kabbalistic interpreter is the Bible. However, where the two hermeneutic approaches diverge is precisely in their perception of the status of the text. Thus, the midrashist essentially continues to move within the confines and limitations of the text inserting into the gaps and irregularities of Scripture the hermeneutic key of the Oral Torah. By contrast, the kabbalist wishes to transcend the physical boundaries of the Bible in an attempt to restore it to its primordial status by “a virtual closure of the gaps between God, interpreter and Torah”.¹⁸²

It is helpful to formalize the textual and meta-textual hermeneutic stances as horizontal or vertical movements, where these two categories denote the interpreter’s focus. Accordingly, while midrashic interpretation manifests horizontally, that is, its exegetical orientation is focused laterally on the harmonization of textual irregularities present in the Biblical proof-text by reliance on other intertexts, the kabbalistic exegesis is directed both horizontally and vertically. The horizontal dimensions are occupied by the same text-based approach used by the midrashic works, while the vertical axis transcends the text and transposes Torah into meta-textual dimensions. It is with the help of this vertical axis that the kabbalist can advance through concentric layers of meta-textual entities from the physical universe represented by the black letters of the text to the undifferentiated unity of the highest Divine manifestation marked by the “white background”: “The four worlds ABYA constitute the ‘book of heaven’- a white

¹⁸² Moshe Idel, *Infinites of Torah in Kabbalah*, p. 141.

background marked with three colors of ink, in which we recognize the characteristic hues of the three inferior worlds”.¹⁸³

By using the kabbalistic notion of the fivefold emanation of Divine Light, Betty Rojtman draws attention to an intrinsic analogy between kabbalistic hermeneutics and the unfolding of Divine worlds. The initial and requisite stage of creation is defined by the act of Divine contraction or *tsimtsum* by which God retreats His Infinite Light. The emergence of a place devoid of Divine Light constitutes the first phase of the creative process.¹⁸⁴ The primal withdrawal of the Divine is followed by the emanation of Light in two qualitatively distinct manner: first, flowing in a “straight line” (*kav yashar*) from the contracted Divine Light and secondly emanating from “the residual brilliance (*reshimu*) that is left behind in its withdrawal”.¹⁸⁵ The source of Divine flow is characterized by the dual aspects of radiance and absorption, emanation and reception. At the source, this Light is radiant, profuse and disseminating. The more it is removed from its original point of emanation the more opaque, dense and concealed it becomes due to the absorption of much of its luster by the receiving entity.¹⁸⁶ The qualitative transformation of the Divine emanation is reflected in the nature, and characteristic disposition, of the five worlds, the ten *sefirot* and the “modalities of perception associated” with them. Therefore, the highest world *Adam Kadmon*, where the Divine Light is present in its original form, is correlated

¹⁸³ Betty Rojtman uses this text from Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag’s Preface to the Zohar, p. 96, par. 8. The acronym ABYA stands for the four worlds of creation: Aziluth (Emanation), Beriyah (Creation), Yetzirah (Fashioning) and Asiyah (Action, denoting the physical universe). See Rojtman *Black Fire on White Fire*, p. 150.

¹⁸⁴ The term *tsimtsum* is most commonly associated with R. Isaac Luria. The writings attributed to the ARI discuss in great detail the doctrine of Divine contraction as a preliminary and essential stage of creation. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, p. 129-135.

¹⁸⁵ B. Rojtman, *Black Fire on White Fire*, p. 150.

¹⁸⁶ B. Rojtman, *ibid*, p. 150.

with the *sefirah* of *Keter* and the modality of essence¹⁸⁷. *Aziluth*, where both the direct and the residual Lights are present is correlated with the *sefirah* of *Hokhmah* and the modality of form. Finally, the three lower worlds of *Beriyah*, *Yetzirah* and *Asiyah* correspond to the *sefirot* of *Binah*, *Tifereth* and *Malkhuth* respectively. The modes of perception in these lower worlds are either by the direct impression of form unto matter, or through matter only. In addition, these three worlds are characterized by both the inflow of the Divine radiance and the absorption of the emanated Light (155).

This foray into the order and arrangement of the kabbalistic universe is essential in order to gain a more subtle understanding of the kabbalistic hermeneutics which gazes into the structure and dynamics of the macrocosm through the various concentric prisms of the text. Thus, Scripture for the kabbalist is but another form of “modality”, an imprint of the underlying mechanisms of the Divine universe. The grammatical, syntactic and semantic components of the Torah are merely the physical fossilization of metaphysical processes, a necessary step in the paradoxical unfolding of Revelation and reception, the capturing the Divine Light at the lowest end of the chain.

And yet, for the kabbalistic sensibility... the ray of light that still filters through the opacity of unsatisfied desires, the thin thread that has *come back* to us after the withdrawal of a sun to the zenith, continues to bear, even in the crudest matter, the first essence, inalienable and perpetuated by the original Light... an intuition of the essence, the presence (even if occulted) of being, self-identical from its source.¹⁸⁸

In the remaining part of this section I will turn to a concrete example from the *Zohar* on *Lekh Lekha* to illustrate and trace the variation in three levels of exegesis: inner Biblical, midrashic, and the kabbalistic. In particular, I am examining how the three

¹⁸⁷ I have adopted Betty Rojtman’s analysis of the unfolding of the creative process. For more detailed description and tables see the concluding chapter of her book, *Black Fire on White Fire*, p. 149-163.

¹⁸⁸ Rojtman, *ibid*, p.161,162

different interpretive treat the motif of Abraham's departure from "Ur of the Chaldeans". As I had discussed at the outset of this section, the *Parashat Lekh Lekha* in the *Zohar* introduces this motif in R. Yose's initial exposition on the Divine imperative, "Go you forth". In its textual Biblical sense, Ur of the Chaldeans signifies a place where Abraham and his family depart from. The *Zohar*, however, suggests something more about Ur in the way Rabbi Abba opens the *parasha*: "Listen to me you stubborn hearted, who are far from (*tsedeqah*), righteousness (Isaiah 46:12).¹⁸⁹ The entire discussion on the meaning of righteousness and stubborn heartedness, that follows this invocation, sets the context in which the story of Ur would be mentioned. Thus, through and inner Biblical association, the *Zohar* implies that Ur of the Chaldeans are somehow related to the tension between righteousness and being "hardened of hearts", a tension that would eventually be resolved by the departure of Abraham and his family. This association of Ur with this conflict arises from the way the *Zohar* associates these seemingly remote Biblical passages. Thus, a new meaning is constructed by relying on the inner logic and unity of Scripture, rather than from the immediate context in which the Biblical phrase occurs.

In the both *Midrash Rabbah* and *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* the textual or horizontal exegesis stems from the semantic ambiguity of the Hebrew word "ur" which may mean fire or flame. The midrashist in *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* translates the verse "And he said unto him, I am the Lord, that brought thee out of the furnace of the Chaldees (Genesis 15:7) clearly identifying Ur not as a name of a geographical location but rather as "furnace".¹⁹⁰ In *Midrash Rabbah*, by contrast, the Biblical verse is not directly commented upon. However, in expounding on the meaning of "And Haran died in the

¹⁸⁹ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 1.

¹⁹⁰ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 420.

presence of his father, Terah” (Genesis 11:28), this midrash also takes the former meaning (fire, furnace), of the word “*ur*”.

At the meta-textual level these midrashic sources construct a new narrative based on the story of Abraham that bears no resemblance to the Biblical story of Abraham. The *Midrash Rabbah* narrates how Abraham was captured and brought before Nimrod, the King of Ur, for his rebellious behavior that challenged the idolatrous practices prevalent in the land. Interestingly it was his own father, Terah, whose business constituted the selling of idols to other people who brought Abraham before the King. In testing the power of the God whom Abraham believed in, Nimrod resolves to cast Abraham “into the fiery furnace”.¹⁹¹ It is worth noting the unusual choice of the word, descent, describing Abraham’s entry into the furnace: “when Abraham descended into the fiery furnace”.¹⁹² In this, the midrash, signifies the simultaneous burning and downward movement of the protagonist. Furthermore, the midrash also documents the fate of Haran, Abraham’s brother who entered the same furnace only after the Patriarch emerged from it unscathed. In contrast to Abraham, who had entered the furnace with a firm resolve and faith in God, Haran was undecided. Instead of believing in God he took a rationally calculated approach which proved to be disastrous for him: “And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah” (Genesis 11:28).

In the *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* the meta-textual narrative weaves the motif of Ur in a large epic description of the ten trials of the Patriarch, Abraham. According to this midrash, after Abraham spent ten years in prison “they sent and brought him forth and cast him in the furnace of fire, and the King of Glory put forth His right hand and

¹⁹¹ *Midrash Rabbah*, p. 311.

¹⁹² *ibid*, p. 311.

delivered him from the furnace of fire”.¹⁹³ It is worth noticing the striking differences between the meta-textual narratives of the two midrashic sources. While the description of the events in *Midrash Rabbah* is filled with human characters (Nimrod, Terah, Haran), their dialogues and choices, the *Pirkede R. Eliezer* places the emphasis on God’s involvement in the deliverance of Abraham from the fire. For example, as the above quote attests, those who take Abraham to the furnace remain anonymous (“they”), and any reference to Haran or Terah is missing. At the same time the reader gets very precise information regarding the manner in which God saves the Patriarch with “His right hand”. The underlying lesson of this midrash is to stress that Abraham had to go through a process of preparation and purification through a series of ten trials of which the events at Ur constituted but one station.

The kabbalistic exegesis builds on the midrashic interpretation of the word “ur” denoting fire/furnace at the textual (horizontal) level,¹⁹⁴ but at the same time it introduces a sense of ambiguity about what exactly transpired: “When Abram was cast into the fire, Haran was killed”.¹⁹⁵ As I have mentioned earlier, the *Zohar* makes it unclear whether Abraham and Haran are two separate characters or not: how can the latter be killed as a result of the former being “cast into the fire”? By introducing this vagueness the *Zohar* adds a further layer of meaning at the textual plane to both the Biblical and the midrashic references to Ur.

At the meta-textual level, the *Zohar* moves beyond the conventional semantic association of the word “ur” with furnace/fire and focuses instead on the dynamic

¹⁹³ *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer*, p. 188.

¹⁹⁴ Michael Fishbane makes notes the dual dimensions of textual analysis identifying the midrashic mode of exegesis with the horizontal and the *Zohar*’s interpretation with the vertical dimension. For more see M. Fishbane, *The Exegetical Imagination*, p. 106-122.

¹⁹⁵ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 5.

processes of *sefirotic* entities. In the kabbalistic rendering, Abraham's departure from Ur is indicative of the invocation of lower arousal that must prefigure arousal above. The Biblical base text describing Abraham's departure from Ur is transfigured into an intricate interplay of Divine Lights:

Black light is not joined with white light until She is first aroused. Once aroused, white light immediately abides upon Her. ... Similarly, once one has aroused arousal, then arousal above is aroused. Come and see: Once it is written: 'They set out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans'..., immediately, 'YHVH said to Abram'.¹⁹⁶

Similarly, in another zoharic passage which culminates in the same Biblical verse cited above ("they set out ...from Ur of the Chaldeans") there is a long and detailed description of Abraham's search for the Supreme Ruler of the universe. This passage is filled with allusions to acts that resonate with the process of Divine Creation described in the short mystical treatise, *Sefer Yetzirah*, where Abraham is depicted as God's friend and aid at certain stages of the creative process:

¹⁹⁶ D. Matt, *Zohar*, p. 7.

Sefer Yetzira

And when our Father Abraham...had come, he beheld, contemplated, studied and understood this; he formed and designed till he had reached it, then the Lord of the Universe, blessed be His name, appeared to him. He took him to his bosom...and called him Abraham His friend. (28)

Zohar

He gazed, tested and balanced to know; ...and knew that just as from that central point of habitation the entire world disseminated in all directions, so too from the power presiding over it issued all other powers appointed throughout the world, all linked to it. Then "they set out with them from Ur of Chaldeans..." (9).

The above discussion on the various levels of exegesis is summarized in the following table.

Table 2. Exegetical layers

	Horizontal/ Textual	Vertical/ Meta-textual
Inner Biblical	Ur = place name	Ur = coexistence of righteousness (cleaving to Torah) and stubborn-heartedness (being removed from Torah)
Midrashic	Ur = furnace, fire	Ur (<i>Midrash Rabbah</i>) = narrative of Abram's descent into furnace on the order of King Nimrod Ur (<i>Pirke de R. Eliezer</i>) = one of ten trials
Kabbalistic	Ur = furnace, fire ambiguity of Abraham's identity	Ur = intra-Divine sefirotic processes/ configurations

5.

Concluding Remarks

This thesis set out to examine the rhetorical composition of *Parashat Lekh Lekha* in the *Zohar* in order to understand the relationship between hermeneutic techniques and the construction of meaning. The modest contribution of this thesis to current wisdom in *Zohar* scholarship lies in highlighting how the skillful use of hermeneutical and rhetorical techniques allows for the unique concealment and disclosure of esoteric-kabbalistic content. The thesis has demonstrated that for the kabbalist, exegesis is concomitant with canonization; interpretation is intertwined with the solidification of the text. The hermeneutic exercise is aimed at alleviating the inherent paradox that characterizes the process of capturing the infinite meaning of the Divine word. The black letters engraved upon white sheets of paper are equally affirming and disconcerting. On the one hand, there is a strong sense in Judaism that the written text of Torah is imbued with the imprint of God and, as such, in spite of their corporeality, the black letters and white spaces act as vessels for the transmission of the Divine cipher. On the other hand, the essence which has been encoded into the written word remains imprisoned and lifeless without the liberating force of interpretation. It is in the intellect or soul of the interpreter that the finite form of Scripture and the infinite essence encoded in it may unite.

The “sealing” of Scripture provoked two simultaneous results. On the one hand, canonization entailed the delimitation of prophetic activity, which constituted an indispensable component in the production of the Biblical text. On the other hand,

authority was revoked from the Prophets and reassigned to the learned interpreters of the canonical text.¹⁹⁷ The rivalry between the schools of the famous *Tanna'im*, Rabbi Akiva and R. Ishmael, is indicative of the general complexity that characterizes the tension between the fluidity inherent in the manifold possibilities of the text and its clearly demarcated and defined boundaries that delimit its openness. The contention between the two rabbis can be contextualized in the broader theoretical stance of two schools of thought: the first, represented by R. Ishmael and later adopted by Maimonides, which argues that any language, including that of Torah, conforms to human modes of communication and therefore will undoubtedly exhibit marks of human imperfection such as seemingly superfluous repetitions as in the phrase Genesis 15:13 “know, you will know”.¹⁹⁸ By contrast, the second school is exemplified by R. Akiva, who maintains that while the Torah shares the external, formal elements of human language, the content of Scripture differs fundamentally and qualitatively from ordinary forms of communication. According to R. Akiva, every single manifestation of language in the Torah, from grammatical inconsistencies to the actual size and shape of letters carries theosophic meaning and must in turn be interpreted. R. Akiva’s hermeneutic posture is shared by the kabbalists, in general, and, as this thesis shows, by the author of the *Zohar*, in particular.¹⁹⁹

The tension between the physical manifestation of the Torah and the need to reveal its latent dimensions is captured in the zoharic allegory of the Torah: “Who is the

¹⁹⁷ Halbertal, *People of the Book*, p. 19.

Halbertal later notes, however, that alongside the authoritative traditions of the rabbis, there was a continuous, albeit marginalized, effort to derive authority directly from Divine Revelation from Talmudic times throughout the Middle Ages (see p.20).

¹⁹⁸ I have used the example quoted by Betty Rojtman, in *Black Fire on White Fire*, p. 8.

¹⁹⁹ Moshe Halbertal, *People of the Book*, p. 37.

beautiful maiden who has no eyes, and whose body is hidden and revealed; She goes out in the morning and hides during the day, adorned in ornamentations that are not”.²⁰⁰ The maiden who lacks eyes is incomplete and her splendor and beauty are diminished until her lover, the mystic, who is depicted as “full of eyes”, is able to restore her sight. This parable suggests an intrinsic relationship between the plain meaning of the text which may seem beautiful but nevertheless remains incomplete in the absence of the wise interpreter, the mystic, who is willing to probe beyond the physical manifestation of the text to uncover its latent metaphysical content. This allegory further suggests that just as the eye reflects received light, similarly, the light of Torah is released and liberated through its internalization within the interpreter.

The *Zohar* departs from both the traditional fourfold way of exegesis referred to by the acronym, PaRDeS, as well from other kabbalistic hermeneutic techniques such as the sevenfold interpretation of the 13th century kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia. The fourfold method of explicating Scripture has been alluded to in the works of medieval kabbalists such as Moses de Leon,²⁰¹ Bahya ben Asher and became a widely established and popular mode of exegesis within Christianity.²⁰² It is assumed that the fourfold layers are arranged in a hierarchical manner in which *peshat* represents the most easily accessible while *sod* denotes the highest and “true” meaning of Scripture.²⁰³ This sharp dichotomization of the various levels of meaning is continued in the exegetical system of the foremost exponent of ecstatic kabbalah, Abraham Abulafia, who continued to devalue

²⁰⁰ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes: Peshat and Sod in Zoharic Hermeneutics, p. 185.

²⁰¹ A. Van der Heide identifies the non-extant book of Moses de Leon called *Sefer ha-Pardes* as the work which may have been the source for the acronym. See p.149.

²⁰² Frank Talmage, “Apples of Gold”, p. 319. The four levels of exegesis consists of “*peshat*”, the plain or literal sense; “*derash*” for conventional midrashic or aggadic interpretation; “*remez*” denotes the allegorical sense and “*sod*” signifies the secret, kabbalistic meaning.

²⁰³ Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden Without Eyes”, p. 156.

the literal-exoteric against the mystic-esoteric meaning of the Bible. He identified *peshat* as constituting on the one hand a necessary component of the text especially for the uneducated majority “who have no analytical skill to distinguish between truth and falsehood”. On the other hand, he regarded it as a hindrance for the learned “who seeks felicity unique to the rational faculty”.²⁰⁴

The demarcation of clearly distinguishable levels of meaning is not applicable to the *Zoharic* narrative. As Elliot R. Wolfson demonstrates, that *peshat* the most basic meaning of the text, is intimately joined with the abstract *sod* as the latter is “organically” contained in the former.²⁰⁵ As such, the hermeneutic goal of the *Zohar* is not the disintegration of various levels within the Biblical text but rather the unification of the disparate elements of blackness (letters, words and sentences) into the primordial unity of the white spaces. The final episode in the *Lekh Lekha* narrative, the climax of the *Parashah*, mirrors the hermeneutic stance of unification at a broader thematic level. R. Shim'on's decision to “exile” the village dwellers to Babylonia is a clear attempt to integrate the previously isolated mystics into the larger community of learned Jews.²⁰⁶ This decision at the very end of *Lekh Lekha* stresses what the *Zohar* regards as the quintessential mandate of a mystical inquiry: the goal of the mystic should not be self-serving enlightenment but rather the pursuit of social and communal responsibility. In other words, the true value of the mystic's enlightenment, revelation and wisdom is

²⁰⁴ *Ibid*, p. 165.

²⁰⁵ Wolfson, *ibid*, p. 187.

²⁰⁶ R. Shim'on's decision might be seen as a theological criticism against such kabbalists as Abulafia who promulgated an isolationist form of kabbalistic practice predicated on the mystic's direct relationship and ultimate union with God. See Moshe Idel, *Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p. 73-145. Curiously, Abulafia's radical mystical techniques of pronunciation and permutation of Divine names seem to forcibly go against the authority of the rabbinic tradition in order reenact prophetic forms of Revelation once again.

measured by the benefit that it brings to the community and not to the individual mystic alone.

In closing, the hermeneutic structure of *Lekh Lekha* is consistent with the overall interpretive posture of the *Zohar*: a continuous oscillation between the well-defined black letters and the potential infinity of the white spaces of Scripture. The *Zohar*'s approach to the Biblical text is deliberate as it reflects the broader theosophic outlook of its authors predicated on the analogy between the hidden and the revealed. The white spaces beckon the kabbalist to embark on the infinite paths of deciphering the hidden Lights of Torah; the revealed black form of the letters work to delimit his/her path. The hermeneutic act of the mystic reflects primordial processes. As *Tohu and Bohu*, are two opposite but indispensable stages of creation, similarly, confusion and vision are necessary and co-existent forces of interpretation. The Torah has remained constant since its canonization; the shape and size of the black letters have been unaltered since the time they were set; only one aspect may change, the white spaces where the gold can be found.

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