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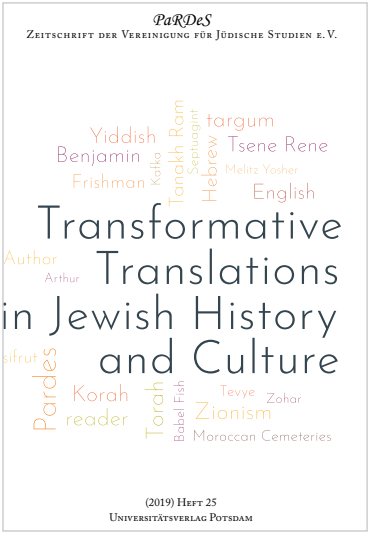

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The Book of Radiance

by Eitan P. Fishbane

Review of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, translation and commentary by Daniel C. Matt (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press), vols. 1–8, $ 60, vol. 9, $ 80.[1]

I.

Daniel Matt's magisterial translation of the Zohar begins:

> "Rabbi Hizkiyah opened: '*Like a rose among thorns, so is my beloved among the maidens*' (Song of Songs 2:2). Who is *a rose*? Assembly of Israel. For there is a rose, and then there is a rose! Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white, so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion. Just as a rose has thirteen petals, so Assembly of Israel has thirteen qualities of compassion surrounding Her on every side. Similarly, from the moment *Elohim* (God), is mentioned, it generates thirteen words to surround Assembly of Israel and protect Her; then it is mentioned again. Why again? To produce five sturdy leaves surrounding the rose. These five are called Salvation; they are five gates. Concerning this mystery it is written: *I raise the cup of salvation* (Psalms 116:13). This is the cup of blessing, which should rest on five fingers – and no more – like the rose, sitting on five sturdy leaves, paradigm of five fingers. This rose is the cup of blessing."

I will return to the meaning of this deep and dizzying passage: What is the "Assembly of Israel" and what does it have to do with the lover and beloved of the Song of Songs? Are roses both red and white? And so on. But first let us ask a more general question: What is a great translation?

In his classic essay "The Task of the Translator," Walter Benjamin distinguishes between a translation that successfully transfers information from one language to another and the far more profound kind of translation that

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arises from the organic life and afterlife of a great work of art. Such translation is part, in fact a necessary part, of the cultural unfolding and flowering of the original work:

> "The history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations. Where this last manifests itself, it is called fame. Translations that are more than transmissions of subject matter come into being when in the course of its survival a work has reached the age of its fame […] [S]uch translations do not so much serve the work as owe their existence to it. The life of the originals attains in them to its ever-renewed latest and most abundant flowering."

The lifeblood of the original work – that which motivates the act of translation in the first place – spreads through the arteries of a living cultural organism, wherein the past is made present again and again. The great translation of a classic work depends not only on its ability to accurately capture the meanings of words for the reader unable to access the text in the original but also on its ability to render what Benjamin called "the unfathomable, the mysterious, the 'poetic,' something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet."

The *Zohar* is not only the central classic of the Kabbalah, it is one of the most extraordinary productions of human creativity in the history of the world. But it was not until our own time – some seven hundred years after its original composition – that this work found its great translator in Daniel Matt, who has succeeded masterfully in recapturing and conveying the unfathomable, mysterious, and, especially, poetic aspects of this "book of radiance" (the literal meaning of *Sefer ha-Zohar*). In fact, Matt's first translations from the *Zohar*, published some 35 years ago in the Paulist Press Classics of Western Spirituality series, were in verse. Thus, he translated the beginning of the *Zohar*'s commentary on Genesis 1 as:

> "When the King conceived ordaining
> He engraved engravings in the luster on high.
> A blinding spark flashed
> within the Concealed of the Concealed
> from the mystery of the Infinite."

The *Zohar* itself was not composed in verse, but in Matt's early effort he was already working to capture a deep truth about this transcendent text, with its

unique, sparkling language, symbolic imagery, and poetic cadence. (His equally brilliant prose translation of these lines is: "At the head of potency of the King, He engraved engravings in luster on high. A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed, from the head of Infinity.")

II.

Arriving on the heels of a century of kabbalistic creativity in southern France and northern Spain, the *Zohar* is the crowning achievement of medieval Jewish mysticism and perhaps the single most important body of literature – it isn't a book in the conventional sense – in the entire history of Jewish spirituality. While nearly all other kabbalistic works of the period were written in Hebrew and generally claimed by their authors, the *Zohar* was pseudepigraphic and written in Aramaic: It represented itself as the product of the 2nd-century Galilean sage Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. The earliest references that we have to the text describe it as "*midrasho shel Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*," a mystical midrash that had arisen in medieval Castile after centuries of concealment.

The text of this work was new-old – at once infused with the language and texture of ancient tradition and a radically original mode of imagination and expression. The choice of an inventive Aramaic was not only an attempt to reproduce or channel the voices of ancient sages, it was also part of the authors' efforts to cast a veil of mystification and wonder upon its audience – to invite the reader to bask in the mists of spiritual consciousness. Indeed, the *Zohar* is itself a fascinating attempt to translate and express the poetry and mystery bequeathed to it by a distant world.

In the *Zohar*, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai and his disciples read the Bible as a coded, symbolic document in which every element of earthly reality alludes to a hidden mystery within the divine world. These interpretations are interwoven with an episodic tale in which the disciples wander about the ancient Galilee in quest of mystical wisdom. Given that it was written by Castilian kabbalists of the 13th and 14th centuries, what we have in the *Zohar* is thus a deeply imaginative *fictional* creation – an invented world of holy men and spiritual adventures wrought in the fires of stunningly innovative medieval minds.

Let us now return to the opening passage of the *Zohar*. Rabbi Hizkiyah's explication of the famous verse comparing the poet's beloved to a rose among thorns presupposes not only that the Song of Songs is an allegory of divine

love, as the classic rabbinic tradition taught, but that this love is, as it were, *within* God. That is, it is a relationship between certain *sefirot*, which are the 10 divine emanations or potencies, through which the mystery of the infinite is projected into the world. Thus, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai's disciple is reflecting on the inner dynamics of the divine self. The rose, he is telling us, represents the tenth *sefirah*, the *Shekhina*, referred to here as the Assembly of Israel (*Keneset Yisrael*), which is identified with the Jewish people and understood to be female. "Just as a rose among thorns is colored red and white," we are told, "so Assembly of Israel includes judgment and compassion" – that is to say, she receives and filters the divine forces that flow downward from the *sefirot Chesed* and *Gevurah*.

Rabbi Hizkiyah also ruminates on the symbolic allusiveness of the natural world, comments on the mystical meaning of familiar ritual ("This is the cup of blessing, which should rest on five fingers – and no more"), and takes the reader into the transcendent mythology of the *sefirot* – all while weaving together verses from Song of Songs, Genesis, and Psalms. Matt's translation opens up the meaning of the *Zohar*'s original Aramaic while retaining both its spiritual mystique and its lightness of touch. Of special note is his running commentary in the footnotes, which cites rabbinic antecedents and kabbalistic parallels while lucidly explaining the text and often illuminating its broader historical and literary context. Thus he notes that while the "rose" (in Hebrew, *shoshana*) of the verse is probably actually a lily or a lotus, "Rabbi Hizkiyah has in mind a rose," and then goes on to explain what he means by describing it as both red and white:

> "**colored red and white** As is *Rosa gallica versicolor* (also known as *Rosa mundi*), one of the oldest of the striped roses, whose flowers are crimson splashed on a white background. The striping varies and occasionally flowers revert to the solid pink of their parent, *Rosa gallica*. The parent was introduced to Europe in the twelfth or thirteenth century by Crusaders returning from Palestine. Both parent and sport were famous for their aromatic and medicinal qualities. Elsewhere (2:20a–b) the *Zohar* alludes to the process of distilling oil from the petals of the flower to produce rose water, a popular remedy. During this process the color gradually changes from red to white."

The notes that follow explicate the dense web of kabbalistic symbolism embedded in such phrases as "thirteen petals […] thirteen qualities of compassion"

and so on. "A rose blossom," he informs us, "can have thirteen petals in its second tier. […] God's thirteen attributes of compassion are derived from Exodus 34:6–7. […] According to Kabbalah, these qualities originate in *Keter*, the highest *sefirah*, the realm of total compassion untainted by judgment."

In important ways, Matt's project is heir to the tradition of *Zohar* scholarship from its earliest days. One of the great exemplars of early translation of the text into Hebrew is a turn of the 14th-century kabbalist named Rabbi David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, who was the subject of Matt's doctoral dissertation at Brandeis. Among the many other partial translations over the centuries are those made into Latin by or for early modern Christian kabbalists such as Pietro di Galatino and Guillaume Postel through 20th-century productions such as the dry and relatively unusable English Soncino translation (available online) and Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag's *Peirush ha-sulam*. Ashlag, who translated the text into a lucid Hebrew with an embedded commentary, was influenced by the 16th-century Kabbalah of Rabbi Isaac Luria, and his edition was an attempt to disseminate esoteric knowledge to a world that he believed could no longer survive without it. Another precursor to Matt's translation, and for many decades the most significant scholarly translation project devoted to the *Zohar*, was Isaiah Tishby's *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, translated into English by David Goldstein as *The Wisdom of the Zohar*. Tishby translated a wide array of passages, accompanied by informative introductions and extensive annotations. Despite the importance of *Mishnat ha-Zohar* for generations of scholars and students, however, the anthologized texts were ultimately only excerpts from a dramatically larger textual stream. Thus, Matt both continues a long tradition of translation and charts new territory.

When the philanthropist Margot Pritzker (an heir to the Hyatt Hotel fortune) enabled Matt to retire from the Graduate Theological Union and devote two decades of his life to translating the entire Zohar, it wasn't just to fill a scholarly desideratum. It was to continue what Benjamin called the "potentially eternal afterlife" of an undeniably great work.

III.

For much of the 20th century, Gershom Scholem's conclusion that the *Zohar* was largely the work of a mystic named Rabbi Moses de León in late 13th-century Castile held sway over scholarly opinion. Scholem's theory was

compelling and far from unfounded. As Matt notes in the very first footnote to the opening passage just discussed, there is a parallel passage in de León's *Sefer ha-rimmon*, and Scholem and others have noted many parallels of language and doctrine between the *Zohar* and de León's works. In testimony quoted in a late 15th-century text, the kabbalist Isaac of Akko is represented as saying that de León's widow told him that the work was entirely from her husband's hand. The 19th-century Jewish historian Heinrich Graetz, who was opposed to mysticism of all kinds, described the *Zohar* as a forgery. Scholem set out to disprove Graetz but concluded that he was correct in spite of his rationalist prejudices, though Scholem understood well that pseudepigraphy was not forgery but a phenomenon of premodern religious creativity, the spiritual identification of a later author with a revered figure from times of old.

This consensus has been shattered in recent decades. First came Yehuda Liebes's path-breaking theory that a group of Castilian kabbalists including de León, not unlike the imagined circle of disciples around Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, were responsible for the composition of the *Zohar*. More recently scholars have argued that there were likely several groups of authors in successive decades and even generations, each of whom edited and added to what we now know as the *Zohar* (among them, that early translator Rabbi David ben Yehudah he-Hasid). This evolution in the theory of authorship has gone hand in hand with a greater appreciation for the relationship and tension between the existing manuscripts of the *Zohar* and the text as it was first printed in 16th-century Italy.

As the research of Daniel Abrams, Boaz Huss, and Ronit Meroz has shown, prior to the 16th century, there were a range of disparate, overlapping, and incomplete zoharic manuscripts that were weaved together into a new whole by the editors of the Mantua and Cremona printings in the late 1550s. There was no single manuscript still in existence (if there ever was one) that preserved everything we now regard as being a part of the *Zohar*. So what text did Matt translate?

The manuscripts were all incomplete or problematic in different ways. Therefore, it would not do to use one of these as a "diplomatic" text, supplemented by notes indicating manuscript variances, as has become common practice in the production of critical editions. Matt instead chose to use the established printed edition (which was essentially the Mantua printing combined with variants from the Cremona printing) as a starting point,

substituting superior readings from a host of different older manuscripts where he saw fit to do so. Matt has characterized this work as a "scraping away" of accumulated "scribal accretions and glosses" to try to get as close as possible to the elusive original (or, perhaps, *originals*), and he has noted these changes in an online Aramaic edition on the website of Stanford University Press, which itself is a major contribution to scholarship.

Not everyone agrees with this "eclectic critical method," since it must be admitted that the base text established by Matt is one that quite likely never existed in this exact form before. In my own opinion, given the choices that Matt had before him, this was the right way to go, since it offers what he regards as the best possible textual reading in each case. When the full textual apparatus is eventually published online, researchers will be able to follow and debate his choices.

IV.

The Zohar: Pritzker Edition itself spans 12 thick and handsomely produced volumes, the first nine of which were composed by Matt and the remaining three by Nathan Wolski and Joel Hecker, under Matt's editorship. (Wolski translated and annotated volume 10, Hecker did the same for volume 11, and the two collaborated on volume 12.) Of particular note in Wolski's work is his elegant translation and learned annotation of *Midrash ha-ne'elam*, thought to be the earliest stratum of the *Zohar*; an especially notable section of Hecker's translation is his richly poetic rendition of the Matnitin and Tosefta sections. In this essay, however, I have chosen to reflect on the accomplishments of Matt in the first nine volumes, which comprise the material often referred to as *guf ha-Zohar* (the body of the *Zohar*), along with several other classic sections. Let us turn now to another famously resonant passage, in which Matt's zoharic English virtually reincarnates the text, emerging organically from the living organism of its source:

> "When Israel enacts the unification of the mystery of *Shema Yisrael, Hear O Israel!* (Deuteronomy 6:4) with perfect intention, one radiance issues from secrecy of the upper world, and that radiance strikes a spark of darkness and scatters into seventy lights, and those seventy flash into seventy branches of the Tree of Life. Then that Tree wafts fragrances and aromas, and all the trees of the Garden of Eden waft fragrances and praise their Lord, for then *Matronita* is adorned to enter the canopy

> with Her Husband. All those supernal limbs unite in one desire, in one aspiration, to be one with no separation. Then Her Husband is arrayed for Her, to bring Her to the canopy in single union, to unite with *Matronita*. Therefore, we arouse Her, saying *Shema Yisrael, Hear O Israel!* (Deuteronomy 6:4) – Adorn Yourself! Behold, Your Husband is near You in His array, ready to meet You. *YHVH our God, YHVH is one* (ibid.) – in one unification, in one aspiration, without separation; for all those limbs become one, entering into one desire. As soon as Israel says *one*, arousing six aspects, all those six become one. This mystery is *vav*, one extension alone, with no other attachment, expanded by all, one. At that moment, *Matronita* prepares and adorns Herself, and Her attendants escort Her to Her Husband in hushed whisper, saying 'Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever!' This is whispered, for so must She be brought to Her Husband. Happy are the people who know this and compose the supernal arrangement of faith!"

The striking poetry of zoharic myth is captured in this description of the divine mystery behind the central Jewish affirmation of faith. Divine emanation is described here as the mysterious emergence of light from the depths of cosmic hiddenness – the striking of that primordial, paradoxical "spark of darkness," a moment of wondrous divine blacksmithing. This image of the cosmic spark of darkness (*butzina de-kardinuta*) appears in several passages as a kind of flashing brilliance in the transcendent universe above, as well as in the deepest recesses of the human contemplative mind.

But here it is the inner-divine Tree of Life that flashes into revealed form as the metaphysical expansion and embodiment of the splintered sparks of supernal darkness. It is a divine sparkling, and then an aromatic overflow, that results from the human act of reciting the *Shema* "with perfect intention." This is theurgic ritual – human actions that provoke reactions in the divine world – at its most dramatic and sensory, at once visual and olfactory. The Jewish people call forth the emanation of luminous divine energies from the upper *sefirot*, and it is the power of their prayerful intention that causes the eruption of an explosive brilliance within God. They ignite the divine Tree of Life, an erotic union of male and female within the dynamic divine self.

Matt's own poetic craft is visible in his translation choices here: "*itpaleig le-shiv'in nehorin*" becomes "scatters into seventy lights"; "*inun shiv'in lahatei be-shiv'in anafin*" is translated as "those seventy flash into seventy branches";

and "*ha-hu ilana seleik reichin u-busmin*" is rendered as "that Tree wafts fragrances and aromas." Deep knowledge of the resonance of each Aramaic word is at play here, but so too is the artistry of achieving the cadence, nuance, and crispness of zoharic mythopoesis in English. As with the first example we considered, Matt's richly learned commentary in his notes fills out the picture, citing rabbinic sources and zoharic parallels, and unpacking the bold mythic eroticism of the text: the sacred union between the *sefirot Tiferet* and *Shekhina* that lies at the heart of the *Zohar*. Like his translation, Matt's notes are heir to the grand tradition of *Zohar* scholarship, from Rabbi Moses Cordovero's massive commentary *Or yakar* to the handwritten notes in Gershom Scholem's annotated *Zohar* and the notes to Charles Mopsik's great French translation, *Le Zohar*. Indeed, Matt's commentary may be the most significant and comprehensive line-by-line exegesis of the *Zohar* to ever appear, given its fusion of wisdom gained from the older religious commentaries and the fruits of modern critical scholarship.

V.

Part of the power of the *Zohar*'s myth is the way in which it both explains and infuses religious practice with metaphysical meaning. Thus, for instance, the Zohar emphasizes the deep significance of the requirement that only the Torah reader's voice be heard during the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue. For the Zohar, this ritual stipulation is understood to be a reflection of the inner divine harmony and unity of the *sefirot*: "With the Torah scroll, one voice and one utterance should be heard." After detailing the "arrangement to be prepared by the Holy People on this day and all other days for the Torah scroll," including "a throne (*kursayya*) called 'a reader's desk' (*de-ikri teivah*)," taking out the Torah and laying it on the reader's desk are depicted as directly comparable to the revelation at Mount Sinai:

> "When the Torah scroll is lifted onto there, the whole people should arrange themselves in awe and fear, trembling and quaking, all below, intending in their hearts as if they were now standing at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah. They should listen and incline their ears. None of the people, nor anyone else, is permitted to open his mouth with a word of Torah, and certainly not with any other word. Rather, all of them in awe, as if they had no mouth, as has been established, for it is written: *As*

> *he opened it, all the people stood up* (Nehemiah 8:5); *and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Torah scroll* (ibid., 3)."

In Matt's skilled and artful hands, the English formulation conveys the original *Zohar*'s atmosphere of mystical experience – where the routine ritual of the synagogue is infused with the hush of revelation, the fear of receiving the divine word. The Aramaic phrases *le-sadra garmaihu be-eimata*, *be-dechilu*, *be-retet*, *be-zei'a* are transformed into "should arrange themselves in awe and fear, trembling and quaking."

Once again, Matt's commentary on these pages adds a great deal. Notably, Matt offers a historical textual revision, commenting on a segment of text that is one of the most famous passages in the *Zohar*, known as the "*Berikh shemeih de-marei alma*" (Blessed is the name of the Lord of the universe) because of its prominent place in the Sabbath morning liturgy before the reading of the Torah. Matt argues that this passage is actually a much later addition by manuscript copyists and quite likely not part of the original composition. I will quote the note to give a glimpse of the depth of textual scholarship in his commentary.

> "Remarkably, the prayer (together with the preceding paragraph: 'Rabbi Shim'on said […]') is a later addition to the *Zohar*, as indicated already by Cordovero (*Or Yaqar*) and as evidenced by the fact that it appears in none of the following manuscripts: C9, M5, M9, Ms24, N10, N41, O17, P2, R1, T1, V5, V7, V18, nor in the text accompanying *Or Yaqar*. In O2 a bit of it is inserted by a later copyist, while in the Cremona edition it appears in a smaller, different font. The passage appears in full in the Mantua edition and in nearly all subsequent editions (those that are based on Mantua). In a fifteenth-century kabbalistic manuscript containing various compositions (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale, heb. MS 835, 114b), this prayer is attributed to Nahmanides. Nevertheless, because of the prayer's historical, cultural, and religious significance – and because it is so widely known – I have included it here, placing the entire passage in brackets."

Following this bracketed translation of the "*Berikh shemeih*" passage, Matt renders the continuation of the *Zohar*'s portrait of the Torah reading in which one person should be heard chanting and the rest of the congregation should listen in rapt silence "as if they were receiving it at that moment from Mount Sinai." Only afterward they should hear the voice of its public translation, an old rabbinic custom.