



# MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN JEWISH ROMANCE

edited by  
**CAROLINE GRUENBAUM**  
 and **ANNEGRET OEHME**

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Dedicated to A, E, and M,  
our daughters and favourite distractions.



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We are indebted to the Institute of Sacred Music at Yale University, and especially to Dr. Eben Graves, for hosting our conference on “Jewish Romance in the Middle Ages: Literature, Piety, and Cultural Translation,” in October of 2020, and to the Stroum Center for Jewish Studies at the University of Washington and the Judaic Studies Program at Yale for their additional support. The Stroum Center also provided generous financial support for printing costs. Although we had planned for lively in-person discussions, we made the discussion to switch to an online format during the early throes of the pandemic. Our contributors seamlessly and without complaint shifted the format of their talks significantly to accommodate a conference on Zoom. Their understanding and patience throughout this process has been a guiding force.

We are indebted to Dr. Kinga Dévényi who generously allowed us to use marvelous images from illustrated Hebrew manuscripts in the Kaufmann and Goldziher Collections at the Library and Information Centre of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences for our conference and for the cover of this book.

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# THE ZOHAR AS MEDIEVAL JEWISH ROMANCE

EITAN P. FISHBANE

IN RECENT YEARS, scholarship on the *Zohar*—the masterpiece of Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah, composed for the most part in late thirteenth and early fourteenth century Castille, modern-day central and north-western Spain—has moved decidedly to greater appreciation and understanding of the *Zohar* as a work of literature and poetics in addition to its long established status as a classic of mystical theology, hermeneutical creativity, myth, and many other dimensions of the history of ideas. Indeed, this has been a centrepiece of my own research and writing for many years.<sup>1</sup> In addition to studying

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I This research culminated in the publication of my monograph, *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), and is now represented in new research I am conducting into the *Zohar* as mystical poetry. Select examples of other important work on this approach to the *Zohar* include Mati Meged, *The Darkened Light: Aesthetic Values in the Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Sifriyat Poalim, 1980); Yehuda Liebes, “The Messiah of the Zohar: Toward the Messianic Image of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai,” in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honor of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 87–236; Liebes, “Zohar and Eros” [in Hebrew], *Alpayyim* 9 (1994): 67–115; Ronit Meroz, *The Spiritual Biography of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2018); Nathan Wolski, “Mystical Poetics: Narrative, Time and Exegesis in the Zohar,” *Prooftexts* 28 (2008): 101–28; Joel Hecker, “Kissing Kabbalists: Hierarchy, Reciprocity, and Equality,” in Leonard J. Greenspoon, Ronald A. Simkins, and Jean A. Cahan, eds., *Love—Virtual and Real—in the Jewish Tradition* (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2008), 171–208; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being: Kabbalistic Hermeneutics and Poetic Imagination* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Jonatan Benarroch, *Sava and Yanuqa: God, the Son, and the Messiah in Zoharic Narratives* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2018); David Greenstein, *Roads to Utopia: The Walking Stories of the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Michal Oron, *Window*

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**Eitan P. Fishbane** is Professor of Jewish Thought at The Jewish Theological Seminary. A former division chair for Jewish Mysticism at the Association for Jewish Studies, Fishbane is Chair of the Oxford Interfaith Forum on Mysticism and Book Review Editor on Jewish Mysticism at *The Marginalia Review of Books*. His publications include *The Art of Mystical Narrative: A Poetics of the Zohar* (Oxford University Press, 2018) and *As Light Before Dawn: The Inner World of a Medieval Kabbalist* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). His most recent book is *Embers of Pilgrimage: Poems* (Panui Poetry Series, 2021). Fishbane is a recipient of the Charles A. Ryskamp Fellowship of the American Council of Learned Societies (2011). Among his works in progress is a monograph entitled *The Sabbath in Hasidic Thought*.

an array of narrative form-critical phenomena in regard to the *Zohar's* use of fiction and storytelling, I also sought to situate zoharic poetics in the broader landscape of Iberian Jewish and Christian literature.

In this essay, in keeping with the theme of this volume, I shall offer several frames of interpretation through which zoharic poetics—in the intersecting genres of narrative fiction and prose poetry—may once again be seen as a literary product of the *Zohar's* times, in this instance as a literary landscape that reflects elements and tropes of medieval romance literature, even if decidedly transformed to align with the larger symbolism and purposes of kabbalistic thought and practice. As I see the matter, there are a number of intriguing correlations between romance literature as it was developed in several cultural contexts and the thematics and forms of the *Zohar*. These lines of connection support the idea that a range of structures, images, and motifs attributable to and associated with classic medieval romance were accessibly percolating in the cultural-folk atmosphere of various European geographies of this time, including Iberia, as well as the strong likelihood that literary and material artifacts containing these forms and motifs made their way across Europe, specifically from Jewish centres in Ashkenaz to those in Sepharad.<sup>2</sup>

It is well established now that cross-pollinations of culture through the movement and migration of people between Ashkenaz and Sepharad was far more common than was thought in prior generations of scholarship on medieval culture and history. This was likely the case with the core Arthurian legends of chivalric romance, probably including the highly significant

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*Into the Stories of the Zohar: Studies in the Exegetical and Narrative Methods of the Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2013); Biti Roi, *Love of the Shekhinah: Mysticism and Poetics in Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University Press, 2017); Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), translated by Nathan Wolski; Hellner-Eshed, *Seekers of the Face: Secrets of the Idra Rabba (The Great Assembly) of the Zohar* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021), translated by Raphael Dascalu; and many other works I have listed elsewhere. See the bibliography in Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 9–17. Some of this scholarship explicitly brings the methodologies of literary studies to bear on the *Zohar*, and some appreciate the text in this spirit by implication; I contend, however, that explicitly and systematically situating the *Zohar* within the scholarly study of poetics and its attendant academic research is a major imperative in and of itself, as opposed to characterizing a piece of research part of the literary approach merely because it addresses related corpora, forms of rhetoric, and themes.

**2** Ashkenaz corresponds to the Jewish communities in northern Europe, and Sepharad to the communities in the south, especially from Spain.

Hebrew translation of a Franco-Italian manuscript of Arthurian romance dating to the year 1279.<sup>3</sup> The timing both of the Hebrew version of *Melekh Artus* and of the known circulation of various structures and themes of chivalric romance earlier in the thirteenth century in Spain<sup>4</sup> are highly instructive and telling in the attempt to situate the literary dimensions of the *Zohar* into this textual and folkloric constellation.<sup>5</sup> The origination of structural

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**3** See Curt Leviant, ed. and trans., *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2003), and the chapter in this volume by Rella Kushelevsky. For a description of movement of Arthurian texts from France to Italy, see Daniela Delcorno Branca, “La tradizione della Mort Artu in Italia,” *Critica del testo* 7 (2004): 1000–1023.

**4** See the remarks and sources in Sara Offenberg, *Up in Arms: Images of Knights and the Divine Chariot in Esoteric Ashkenazi Manuscripts of the Middle Ages* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2019), 9n28. Also see Offenberg, “Illuminated Knights and Tales of Romance” in this volume; as well as Tova Rosen, “Love and Race in a Thirteenth-Century Romance in Hebrew, with a Translation of The Story of Maskil and Peninah by Jacob Ben El’azar,” *Florilegium* 23 (2006): 155–72.

**5** The scholarly literature on the widespread nature of Jewish familiarity with romance literature in general, and Arthurian romance in particular, is substantial, but I shall cite just a few examples to underscore the point and the consequent likelihood that the authors of the *Zohar* too were well acquainted with this phenomenon. As I noted in my *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, chap. 6, the authors of the *Zohar* were very likely familiar with and influenced by the literature of the dominant culture, an assertion most basically supported by kabbalist Isaac Ibn Sahula’s authorship of *Meshal haQadmoni*, and the high likelihood that he was involved with, or at the absolute least well-acquainted with, the authors of the *Zohar*, particularly his fellow townsman, Moshe de Leon. Representative examples of scholarship on the familiarity of high medieval Jews with Arthurian romance include: Rella Kushelevsky, “Jews Reading Arthurian Romances from the Middle Ages: On the Reception of Chrétien De Troyes’s Yvain, the Knight of the Lion, Based on Manuscript JTS Rab. 1164,” *AJS Review* 42 (2018): 381–401; Hayim Pesah and Eli Yassif, *The Knight, the Demon, and the Virgin: A Selection of Hebrew Stories from the Middle Ages* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Keter, 1998); Ivan Marcus, “‘Why Is This Knight Different?: A Jewish Self-Representation in Medieval Europe,” in *Tov Elem: Memory, Community and Gender in Medieval and Early Modern Jewish Societies: Essays in Honor of Robert Bonfil*, ed. Elisheva Baumgarten, Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, and Roni Weinstein (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2011), 139–52; Eleazar Gutwirth, “Chivalry and the Jews in Late Medieval Spain,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies* 98 (2021): 315–37. Both Gutwirth and Nathan Wolski (whom Gutwirth cites plentifully) suggest the later impact of certain passages and motifs in the *Zohar* on the writing and content of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. I deal with many of these themes in their high medieval context in *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, which is not noted in Gutwirth’s article. My suggestion in the present essay is that the thematics of medieval romance and chivalry were likely shaped by a literary folk-culture that also produced *Melekh Artus*, and I argue for the broader contextualization of zoharic themes such as the journey, anagnorisis, and much more in chapter 6 of *The Art of Mystical Narrative*.

features of romance in Old French literature, which gradually shifted its setting to the court of King Arthur in the poetic writings of Chrétien de Troyes, and like the geographical migration of kabbalistic ideas and centres, passed through the fluid zones of literary folk culture in Sepharad (Spain and beyond) and Italy. Thus, the appearance of the Hebrew translation *Melekh Artus* in Italy was likely in turn derived from a French original.<sup>6</sup> In short, the tales of the knight-errant, the hero in quest of an ultimate spiritual goal (The Holy Grail), one who engages in courageous battle for the sake of a desired and noble lady almost certainly penetrated the cultural *imaginaire* of Spanish Jews, perhaps most significantly as filtered through the Hebrew writings of Judah al-Ḥarizi,<sup>7</sup> Solomon Ibn Gabirol,<sup>8</sup> and Isaac Ibn Sahula, author of *Meshal haQadmoni* as well as a kabbalistic commentary on the Song of Songs, fellow townsman of Moshe de Leon, and probable participant—at least to an extent—in the authorship of the *Zohar*.<sup>9</sup> Given all these pieces of circumstantial evidence, in addition to the 1279 provenance of *Melekh Artus* in Italy, it is highly likely that motifs and structures of chivalric romance were known among Iberian Jews in general and the authors of the *Zohar* in particular—at least indirectly and through social context.<sup>10</sup> A variety of

**6** See Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, 2–3. For a different view of the question of an Italian intermediary for the text, see Caroline Gruenbaum, “The Quest for the ‘Charity Dish’: Interpretation in the Hebrew Arthurian Translation *Melekh Artus* (1279, Northern Italy),” *Medieval Encounters* 26 (2021): 517–42.

**7** For discussion of a related literary structure in al-Ḥarizi’s *Taḥkemoni* in which the Hebrew language comes to the poet personified “in the form of a woman and charges him to gird his loins and battle zealously on her behalf, to bring dignity to the Holy Language, which has fallen into decline,” see Jonathan Decker, *Iberian Jewish Literature: Between Al-Andalus and Christian Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 131.

**8** On Ibn Gabirol’s use of the motif of the quest for the beloved maiden as well as the trope of by the poet girding his loins to “do battle” for wisdom, see Joseph Tobi, *Between Hebrew and Arabic Poetry: Studies in Spanish Medieval Hebrew Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 229–92.

**9** Regarding the role and comments of Ibn Sahula, see the important remarks by Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279*, 52–53. For my own broader discussion of Ibn Sahula, his writings, and his likely connection between the frame-tale literature of the *maqamat* and that of the *Zohar*, see Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 386–97. See also the chapter by Revital Refael-Vivante in this volume on *Meshal haQadmoni* as a Jewish romance.

**10** On the development of romance literature in Iberian Jewish literature, see David A. Wacks, “Toward a History of Hispano-Hebrew Literature in Its Romance Context,” *eHumanista* 14 (2010): 178–209. In particular, Wacks draws important attention to the works of Judah al-Ḥarizi, Joseph Ibn Zabara, Isaac Ibn Sahula (particularly

influential kabbalistic personalities, among them Abraham Abulafia and his disciples, migrated back and forth between Italy and Spain, further substantiating the notion that ideas and folk motifs moved across these parts of the Jewish world, just as they did among Christian and Muslim authors.

Like the Arthurian literary framework and its legacies in other Christian European and Judeo-Arabic contexts (discussed in the work of Jonathan Decker and others),<sup>11</sup> the characters of the *Zohar* set out and are led on a grand quest for personal and communal transformation by a larger-than-life hero of sorts, the saintly Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai. Indeed, the journey of the hero and the idealization of battle for the sake of the vulnerable female is a mainstay of chivalric literature as well as of the *Zohar* (though in the case of the latter, the female in need of protection via battle is the intra-divine dimension of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Feminine).<sup>12</sup> In juxtaposing these literatures, however, it is important to recall the manner in which several models of the heroic in Arthurian literature and legacy, including the paradigmatic figures of Lancelot and Guinevere, were in many instances imbued with symbolization and allegorization as well (e.g. the tension between worldly quest and the allegorization of the romance quest in its Christian context, including Lancelot as fallen human nature, as well as the quest for love and its true meaning, reflected in prominent and influential works such as the *Roman de la Rose* and the *Libro de Buen Amor*).

As far as general comparisons and correlations between medieval romance and the *Zohar*, it is likewise important to underscore the central

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important as I noted above for the zoharic nexus), and Todros Abulafia (the non-kabbalistic troubadour poet, to be distinguished from Rabbi Todros Abulafia the prominent kabbalist). I also develop some of these connections between the kabbalistic personalities of Castille (viz. Ibn Sahula, Moshe de Leon, and others) and the broader literary culture in this time and place (with special attention to al-Ḥarizi, Ibn Zabara, Juan Ruiz, and others)—noted above—in Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 336–411.

**11** See W. H. Jackson and S. A. Ranawake, eds., *The Arthur of the Germans: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval German and Dutch Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020); Decker, *Iberian Jewish Literature*, 111–24; and Wacks, “Toward a History of Hispano–Hebrew Literature in Its Romance Context,” discussed above.

**12** It is also worth noting that in at least one instance the mystical companions are depicted as those who, through their all-night study on the eve of the holiday of *Shavuot*, accompany and escort the *Shekhinah* to her wedding ceremony to her male consort, *Tif'eret*, on the morning of *Shavuot*. See *Zohar*, 1:8a. Another prominent use of this motif is in the *Zohar*'s representation of the descent of the *Shekhinah* into the earthly realm of Shabbat eve, invulnerable to the aggression of the demonic Other Side (*Sitra Aḥra*) on Shabbat, as mentioned below.

element of medieval romance with regard to its setting and its idealization—particularly its romanticization of classical antiquity. This is especially significant for the *Zohar* in a number of respects regarding its construction of pseudepigraphy as fictionalized, romanticized history. Here too the motifs of the marvelous and the fantastic come into play: features that were key elements of medieval romance, especially through the Celtic tradition that partially inspired it, and key elements of the *Zohar* as well.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the *Zohar*, of course, we note a transformation of primarily secular motifs into a highly religious and theological system, of thought and mythic drama. What is more, an additional notable correlation between the Arthurian romance tradition and the narratives of the *Zohar* is the manner in which articulation, often exclamation, is made of the need for courage, of the imperative to overcome fear, to press on with the quest, as well as the experience of fear and potential danger (e.g. being lost in the mountains, other instances of quaking with fear, and so on).

Let us also underscore here the correlation between the *Zohar* and the broader romance tradition as it is manifested in the characterological dynamics of anagnorisis and the discovery of wisdom—moral and spiritual—in the form of a guileless fool, one who turns out to be a sage of great magnitude.<sup>14</sup> This is a particularly prominent theme in Eschenbach's *Parzival*, and consequently in the impact that this major work had on subsequent literary renditions of romance.<sup>15</sup> To quote the lucid remarks of the editors of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the matter:

The story of the ignorant and naive Parzival, who sets out on his adventures without even knowing his own name, employs the classic fairy-tale motif of “the guileless fool” who, through innocence and artlessness, reaches a goal denied to wiser men. Wolfram uses Parzival's dramatic progress from folk-tale dunce to wise and responsible keeper of the Grail to present a subtle allegory of man's spiritual education and development...

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**13** See discussion of this phenomenon in Richard Walter Chamberlin, “The Marvelous as Allegory in Ulrich von Zatzikhoven's *Lanzelet*” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1997); Stéphanie Perrais, “The Fantastic in French Arthurian Romances: Discourse Renewal and Timelessness” (PhD diss., Pennsylvania State University, 2007). On the extensive use of the fantastic in the *Zohar*, see Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 223–79.

**14** See my discussion of this literary feature in Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 128–52.

**15** See, for example, Dennis Howard Green, *The Art of Recognition in Wolfram's Parzival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).



Parzival, epic poem, one of the masterpieces of the Middle Ages, written between 1200 and 1210 in Middle High German by Wolfram von Eschenbach. This 16-book, 25,000-line poem is in part a religious allegory describing Parzival's painful journey from utter ignorance and naïveté to spiritual awareness. The poem introduced the theme of the Holy Grail into German literature, and it is considered to be the climax of medieval Arthurian tradition. It questions the ultimate value of an education based solely on the code of courtly honour, and it takes its hero beyond the feudal world of knights and lords to the threshold of a higher order.<sup>16</sup>

Two final features are worth emphasizing in this section: the first is the significance of rose-symbolism as it was developed in the romance tradition, most prominently so of course in the enormously influential *Roman de la Rose*. The rose (שושנה) as a naturalist symbol of the supernal Divine Feminine, the *Shekhinah*, is pervasive in the textual landscape of the *Zohar*, where a variety of reflections are developed on the subject, often utilizing the terminology and imagery of the Song of Songs in cultivating exegetical homilies and symbol-laden metaphysics. I have discussed this symbolism and literary usage in my previous work, specifically addressing there the potential correlations between the *Zohar* and the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>17</sup> The second element of correlation we may note is the pervasive manner in which the dramatic theme of separation and reunion in medieval romance structures the quest narratives of the *Zohar*—the ways in which the companions rejoice and lament over the recurring process of separation and reunion both from their fellow mystic companions, but most of all from their master teacher, Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai,<sup>18</sup> where a sense of longing and lament is often evoked in his absence, and rejoicing occurs in his presence.<sup>19</sup> A particularly prominent and dramatic motif in the *Zohar* is the exuberant and celebratory way in which the mystic friends mark the moment of their reunion with and greeting of fellow mystic travelers through variations on

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**16** See *Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, [www.britannica.com/biography/Wolfram-von-Eschenbach](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Wolfram-von-Eschenbach) and [www.britannica.com/topic/Parzival-epic-poem-by-Wolfram-von-Eschenbach](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Parzival-epic-poem-by-Wolfram-von-Eschenbach).

**17** See Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 173–80, 256–59.

**18** See the development of this theme in non-zoharic Spanish Romance literature in Alan D. Deyermond, “The Lost Genre of Medieval Spanish Literature,” *Hispanic Review* 43 (1975): 231–59, specifically 233. Cf. John K. Walsh, “The Chivalric Dragon: Hagiographic Parallels in Early Spanish Romances,” *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies (Liverpool)* 54 (1977): 189–98.

**19** I have discussed this dynamic at some length in Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 58–84.

the exclamation: “How joyous it is to see the face of the *Shekhinah!*,” referring to the face of the human mystic friend whom they encounter, or often more erotically, “How happy am I to kiss the face of the *Shekhinah!*”<sup>20</sup>

The point mentioned above regarding the experience of and triumph over fear through courage is particularly telling and will be one of the motifs that I will elaborate upon in greater detail. Indeed, the quest for ultimate mystical wisdom frequently involves the overcoming of fear and ideals of courage and persistence in these travels. In this regard, it is important to note the language of battle and warrior combat for the sake of Torah and the Divine Feminine, the *Shekhinah*, in the mythically dense “*Idra Rabba*” (Great Assembly) and “*Idra Zuta*” (Small Assembly) literature of the *Zohar*, two of its more dramatic and messianic sections. What is more, this noble combat for the sake of the *Shekhinah* is elsewhere vividly bound up for the zoharic myth-makers with the ongoing battle with the dark side of the demonic presence *Sitra Ahra* (“Other Side,” “the mythic force and hypostasis of evil in the metaphysical realm”), particularly in the chivalric sense of theurgically rescuing the pure *Shekhinah* / Divine Feminine—the proverbial Damsel-in-Distress sought and rescued in the Arthurian context by the knight errant—from the defiling and harmful clutches of this evil Other Side. Among the many cases that demonstrate this point in the zoharic corpus, it is particularly worthwhile to highlight here the freedom from sexual harassment and impurification by the *Sitra Ahra* that the *Shekhinah* experiences at the entrance of the Sabbath on Friday eve, a time in which the *Shekhinah* comes to dwell with the Jewish people, most vividly in the form of crowns of light that settle on the heads of the male kabbalists—part of the metaphysical-psychic drama in which an extra soul settles upon the Jew for the duration of the sacred seventh day.<sup>21</sup>

A major feature of Arthurian chivalric romance is, of course, its dramatization of the courageous battle that must be undertaken as a pillar of the knight’s quest and in pursuit of his purpose to rescue his lady in distress. The *Zohar*, like *Parzival*, the German epic poem considered to be a quintessential medieval Arthurian romance,<sup>22</sup> adapts the literal story of the knight errant into that of a knight or knights in service of a purpose, indeed a

**20** See, for example, *Zohar*, 3:59b.

**21** See *Zohar*, 2:135b, and see discussion above at n. 12.

**22** See W. H. Jackson and S. A. Ranawake, eds., *The Arthur of the Germans: The Arthurian Legend in Medieval German and Dutch Literature*, and in particular Timothy McFarland, “The Emergence of the German Grail Romance: Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*,” in *The Arthur of the Germans*, 54–68. Cf. the illuminating entry by the Editors of the

Female persona, beyond the terrestrial domain. Perhaps the most striking and theatrical of all is the opening of the *Zohar*'s "Idra Rabba" (Great Assembly), in which the urgent project of cosmic-divine repair, part of the grand drama and prelude to messianic redemption, falls on the disciplic circle of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai:

תניא אמר ר' שמעון לחברייא עד אימתי ניתיב בקיימא דסמכא חד, דכתיב (תהלים קיט:126) עת לעשות ליי' הפרו תורתך. יומין זעירין מארי דחובא דחיק, כרוזא כל יומא קארי ומחצדי חקלא זעירין אינון ואיניהו בשולי כרמא, לא אשגחן ולא ידעין לאן הוא אתר כמה דיאות. אתכנסו חברייא לבי אדרא מלבשין שריין ורומחי. אזדרו בתקוניכון, בעיטא בחכמה בסוכלתנו בדעתא בחיזו בידין ברגלין. אמליכו עליכון למאן דברשותיה חיי ומתא למגזר מלין דקשוט דקדישי עילאי צייתן להו וחדאן למנדע להו ולמשמע להו. יתיב ובכה, אמר ווי אי גלינא ווי אי לא גלינא.

It has been taught: Rabbi Shimon said to the Companions, How long will we sit on a single-based pillar? For it is written: *Time to act for YHVH—they have violated Your Torah* (Psalms 119:126). Days are few and the creditor is pressing. A herald proclaims every day, but Reapers of the Field are few and at the edges of the vineyard, not noticing or knowing properly where the place is. Gather, Companions, at the threshing chamber, wearing coats of mail and lances [מלבשין שריין ורומחי]: Arm yourselves with your equipment [אזדרו בתקוניכון]: with counsel, wisdom, understanding, knowledge, vision, hands, and feet. Proclaim as your king the one who has the power of life and death, so that you may decree words of truth, to which holy ones of the Highest listen, which they delight to know and hear." He sat down and wept. He said, "Woe if I reveal! Woe if I do not reveal!"<sup>23</sup>

In this famous scene, the kabbalists are presented as an order of knights called upon to do battle for the sake of the ultimate goal, which for the *Zohar* is the redemptive repair of the divine realm, the inner Faces of Divinity and its dimensions as *sefirot*. In the opening exclamation of Rabbi Shimon, he is tormented over whether to speak the ultimate mystical secrets ("Woe if I reveal! Woe if I do not reveal!") because he feels the imperative to heal the broken state of the cosmos, most specifically the endangered state of *Shekhinah* brought about because of the sins and violations of the people, and therefore the urgent need to effect kabbalistic repair (תיקון) through

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*Encyclopedia Britannica Online*, [www.britannica.com/topic/Parzival-epic-poem-by-Wolfram-von-Eschenbach](http://www.britannica.com/topic/Parzival-epic-poem-by-Wolfram-von-Eschenbach).

**23** *Zohar*, 3:127b. In this essay, I have utilized the zoharic translations of Daniel Matt (and where relevant those of Nathan Wolski and Joel Hecker) in his magisterial *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*. For the piece cited above, see Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 8:318–20.

the dramatic mystical study by the master and his disciples (as expressed through the biblical quotation from Psalms).

The sense of emergency that is felt and declared by the characters of the *Zohar* has to do with the overwhelming dominance of *Din* (Judgment), as a direct result of previous neglect of the Torah (itself an earthly representation of the supernal Divine Feminine), and of the need for the gathered kabbalists to act to activate the forces of Love and Compassion that flow from *Arikh Anpin* (“The Long Face”; a term for the highest dimension in the sefirotic realm of Divinity, perhaps also rendered as “The Face that is Slow to Anger”) above to balance out the destructive powers of Judgment and severity. These members of the zoharic fraternity are, in the words of Melila Hellner-Eshed, “the heroes of the *beit midrash* (study house) at war...warriors of the Torah and the *Shekhinah*.”<sup>24</sup> As Hellner-Eshed further puts the matter, “The knights of this order carry the weapons and ammunition of their personalities—wise counsel, discernment, heart.”<sup>25</sup> In a larger sense, their chivalric quest, their battle, involves the use of Torah with mystical exegesis and symbolism to counter the dangerous forces of severity and destruction in the cosmos, to ultimately rescue *Shekhinah* from the harm of this rageful side of the supernal mythos (represented by *Ze’ir Anpin*, “The Small Face”) by activating the loving and calming forces of *Arikh Anpin*, which will bring the judgment, severity, and anger to a balanced state of tranquility, thus rescuing the endangered Divine Damsel in distress (*Shekhinah*), and simultaneously securing the repair of a cosmos off-balance through sin and neglect of Torah.<sup>26</sup> Their words of Torah are their most powerful weapons in this knightly battle.

A parallel representation of proper mystical intention and hermeneutical words as akin to the lances and weaponry of knightly battle for the sake of *Shekhinah* is also observable in the much-discussed *Yanuqa* (“The Youthful Prodigy”) pericope of the *Zohar*—the extended scene that stars a wun-

**24** Melila Hellner-Eshed, *Seekers of the Face*, 149.

**25** Melila Hellner-Eshed, *Seekers of the Face*, 149.

**26** This important point about the imperative of stimulating the metaphysical force of Torah within *Arikh Anpin* to calm the anger of *Ze’ir Anpin*, to overflow with love and grace, extrapolated from the biblical exhortation, “Time to act for YHVH—they have violated Your Torah,” was first discussed by Yehuda Liebes in his classic article, “The Messiah of the Zohar: Toward the Messianic Image of R. Shimon bar Yoḥai,” in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 166–69.

derkind child-mystic master. Following a stunning display of mystical erudition and exegesis by the child prodigy, the visiting kabbalists first express wonder:

תוהו ר' אלעזר ור' אבא ור' חייא. אמר רבי אבא זכאה ארחא דא וזכאה חולקנא דזכינא למיחמי דא. אתקינא פתורא כמלקדמין. אמר חכימין קדישין תבעון נהמא דקרבא ופתורא דמאני קרבא או תבעון לברכא למלכא בכל מאני קרבא דהא פתורא לא אסתליק בלא קרבא. אמר ר' אלעזר ברא רחויא חביבא קדישא הכי בעינן דהא כל זייני קרבא אשתדלנא בהו וידענא לאגחא בחרבא ובקשתא וברומחא ובאבנין דקירטא ואנת רביא עד לא חמית היך מגיחין קרבא גוברין תקיפין דעלמא. הדי ההוא ינוקא, אמר ודאי לא חמינא אבל כתיב (מלכים א כ:11) אל יתהלל חוגר כמפתח. אתקינא פתורא בנהמא ובכל מה דאצטריך. א"ר אלעזר כמה חדו אית בלבאי ברביא דא וכמה חדושין יתחדשון על פתורא דא, ועל דא אמרית דידענא דזגי פעמוני רוח קודשא הוו אזלין ביה. אמר ההוא ינוקא מאן דבעי לנהמא על פום חרבא ייכול. הדי ר' אלעזר. אהדר וקריב ינוקא לגביה, א"ל בגין דשבתת גרמך אית לך למיגח קרבא בקדמיתא, ואנא אמרית בקדמיתא דקרבא ליהוי בתר אכילה אבל השתא מאן דבעי סולתא יתלה מאני קרבא בידוי. אמר ר' אלעזר לך יאות לאחזאה מאינון מאני קרבא דילך.

Rabbi El'azar, Rabbi Abba, and Rabbi Ḥiyya were amazed. Rabbi Abba said, "Happy is this journey! Happy is our share, that we have been privileged to see this!"

They set the table as before. He said, "Holy wise men, do you prefer bread of battle and a table with weapons, or do you prefer to bless the King with all weapons of war, since a table cannot be elevated without battle?"

Rabbi El'azar replied, "Beloved, dear, holy son, we prefer the latter. For look, we are familiar with all weapons of war, and we know how to fight with sword, bow, lance, and slingstones; and you're a little boy—you haven't yet seen how the mighty warrior of the world wage battle."

The child rejoiced. He said, "Of course, I haven't seen. But it is written: *Let not the buckler of armour boast like the unfastener*" (1 Kings 20:11).

They arranged the table with bread and with all that they needed.

Rabbi El'azar said, "How much joy there is in my heart because of this little boy! How many innovations will be created at this table! That's why I said that I knew that bells of the Holy Spirit are ringing within him."

The child said, "Whoever wants bread, let him eat by the mouth of the sword."

Rabbi El'azar rejoiced. The child approached him again, and said, "Since you bragged about yourself, you should wage battle first. Before, I said that the battle should follow the meal; but now, whoever wants fine bread should dangle weapons from his hands."

Rabbi El'azar said, "It is fitting for you to display some of your own weapons."<sup>27</sup>

27 Zohar 3:188b; Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 7:266–67.

The rhetoric and imagery of knightly battle by the kabbalists clearly channels and emulates the broader contextual tropes of medieval chivalric romance, though here the metaphorical if putatively potent weapons of Torah—words as substitutes for literal deadly weapons such as swords. Here it is instructive to cite the assessment of Norman Roth, specifically regarding the thirteenth century, in his essay on “The Civic Status of the Jew in Medieval Spain”:

The Jews of Spain had absolute freedom and jealously guarded their right to bear and use weapons...Our sources are replete with references to individual Jews getting into fights with swords, often in the synagogue and even on the Sabbath when carrying weapons was strictly forbidden...We know that there was never any prohibition against Jews carrying weapons anywhere in Spain at any time, unlike Germany, at least where such prohibitions were early enacted. It is well known, for example, that Jews fought on both sides, with Muslims and Christians, during the campaigns of the *reconquista*. Jews were also given castles to garrison and maintain throughout Spain.<sup>28</sup>

The scholarship developed here by Roth is, in my view, strikingly important for the choice of rhetoric that is utilized by the authors of the *Zohar* in the *Yanuqa* pericope and elsewhere. According to Roth, the use of actual weapons—even the imperative and responsibility to do so in many cases—by Jews in medieval Spain, and particularly in the thirteenth century, underscores that the idea of mystical Torah as weapons of battle was a transfiguration of a highly familiar fact of medieval life in general, and Jewish life in particular. It was not merely metaphorical or symbolic for a medieval Spanish Jew to speak of knowledge and skill in the use of arms and swords in particular; these were everyday features of Jewish life and garb. Nevertheless, the incorporation of that imagery into a tale of quest, spiritual truth, and ultimately defence of the divine *Shekhinah*, seems to be a clear adaptation of knightly romance and chivalric narrative, albeit one where skilled sacred *hermeneutics* consciously substitutes for skilled sword-fighting.

As just mentioned above, in the case of the *Yanuqa* scene cited above, the kabbalists’ weapons of battle are their mystical words of Torah, understood by the zoharic kabbalists to be of immense theurgic and cosmic potency; what is more, as I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>29</sup> the members of the zoharic fellowship frequently asserted that the study of mystical Torah, particularly

**28** See Norman Roth, “The Civic Status of the Jew in Medieval Spain,” in *Iberia and the Mediterranean World of the Middle Ages: Studies in Honor of Robert I. Burns*, ed. P. E. Chevedden, D. J. Kagay, and P. G. Padilla (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 2:145–46.

**29** See Fishbane, *The Art of Mystical Narrative*, 405–11.

with fellow kabbalists, when they were on the road and therefore vulnerable to physical attack, functioned as a kind of protective coat of armour.<sup>30</sup> Their very act of study would invoke the presence of *Shekhinah* who would act as a protective force along the dangerous journey. It should be noted that this motif and belief is somewhat ironic in this case, since at least at some level they believed the armaments represented by their words of mystical Torah would guard the *Shekhinah* herself from the dark and dangerous wiles of the demonic Other Side (*Sitra Ahra*). This formulation of the kabbalistic knightly quest—one that participates in the sword-armed protection of the angels in Matronita's (*Shekhinah's*) celestial army cited below; or reflected in the kabbalist as valiant persistent suitor of the *Shekhinah* hidden in the tower of her castle, also cited below—is decidedly different from the seemingly inverse image of *Shekhinah* being invoked through Torah study to protect *them*, the human kabbalists. Nevertheless, the commonality lies in the identification of mystical hermeneutical speech (uttering words of esoteric Torah) as a means of protection and battle; the mystical discourse itself is equated with the swords, shields, lances, and coats of mail of knightly battle for a noble aim.<sup>31</sup>

There is a kind of swagger and even arrogance in the rhetoric cited above involving the *Yanuqa* and the visiting kabbalists, Rabbi El'azar, Rabbi Abba, and Rabbi Ḥiyya. The ability to skilfully string together clever and deep words of mystical Torah carries the valence of a kind of machismo, a display of masculinity and its attendant tropes of bravery, toughness, and battle. This portrait of masculinity is of course hardly limited to medieval discourse, but it is certainly a feature of it in this era. In this scene, the table in its sacrality (one that had been underscored by the earlier much-discussed rebuke by the *Yanuqa* of the adult kabbalists regarding the proper way to engage in the ritual of hand-washing [*netilat yadayyim*] prior to the blessing and taking of bread at the table).<sup>32</sup> The declaration that “the battle should follow the meal”

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**30** In addition to the passage cited *in extenso* in this essay, the use of various key Aramaic terms to denote arms and armour can also be found in an array of other zoharic texts. See, for example, *Zohar*, 2:66a and 3:210b.

**31** On the use of the imagery and symbolism of battle and armour in the *Yanuqa* narrative, see in particular Jonatan M. Benarroch, *The Yanuqa of Rav Hamnuna Sava: Analysis and Critical Edition of the Yanuqa Story* [in Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2019), 69–72. Also see Jonatan M. Benarroch, *Sava and Yanuqa: God, the Son, and the Messiah in Zoharic Narratives*, 48–56 [in Hebrew].

**32** On the broader zoharic symbolism surrounding the significance of *netilat yadayyim*, see Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 151–52. Regarding the *Yanuqa* scene, see Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 119–21, 170–71. On the

refers to the imperative to engage in words of (kabbalistic) Torah after eating at the table as a further means of sanctifying the meal and to mark the performance of Torah-speech as a modality of battle and jousting, perhaps with a view to the belief that words of Torah had a potent effect upon the cosmic order and the divine domain. Indeed, as is declared in the opening lines of this scene, the kabbalists believed that they were obliged to “bless the King with all weapons of war, since a table cannot be elevated without battle”; the implication being that the blessing of Divinity and the sanctifying elevation of the table where food is eaten must be brought about through “battle,” which is a reference to the discourse of mystical Torah. The idea that a meal must be accompanied by words of Torah is a classical rabbinic teaching,<sup>33</sup> carried forth by the Zohar and others, but this text shifts this standard component into the rhetoric of conflict and armoured battle—a marker of the way the powerless medieval Jew asserted power, as well as how the tropes of knightly chivalric romance permeate the zoharic imagination.

The *Yanuqa*'s own statement, “Whoever wants bread, let him eat by the mouth of the sword,” indicates that the sacred drama of the meal is centred around the sword-jousting of Torah-speech, and, what is more, that the act of eating the bread is merited or earned through the battle-inflected performance of mystical Torah discourse.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, the offering up of kabbalistic Torah as performative drama is tellingly characterized here as a display and disclosure of “weaponry,” a highly masculine inflected theatre of one male showing his “peacock feathers” to the other males in attendance at the feast—the performative showing of skill in kabbalistic Torah discourse as a ritualized substitution and stand-in for the display of the impressive and potent adornments of knightly battle (“Rabbi El’azar said, ‘It is fitting for you to display some of your own weapons’”). The idea that there is a performative display of masculinity in which kabbalistic Torah study is laced with erotic elements accords in evocative ways with some of the insights developed by Elliot R. Wolfson.<sup>35</sup>

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theme of *netilat yadayyim*, also see Jonatan M. Benarroch, *The Yanuqa of Rav Hamnuna Sava*, 22–26, 30–32.

**33** See M. Avot, 3:3, where the imperative to include words of Torah when three people have shared a meal together is asserted with urgency and passion. What is more, this mishnaic dictum in its original formulation is offered in the name of none other than R. Shimon!

**34** See the comments on this line by Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 7:267n66.

**35** See Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 368–80.



Indeed, it is important to note that despite the zoharic friends' frequent identification of the face of the other kabbalist as itself the face of the *Shekhinah*, they also clearly viewed themselves as masculine lovers of the heavenly *Shekhinah*, and thus as earthly incarnations of *Shekhinah's* intra-divine masculine lover, *Tiferet*—most paradigmatically so in their construction of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai as the ultimate earthly embodiment of that dimension of Divinity, the *tzaddiq yesod olam* (“The Righteous One, Foundation of the World”).<sup>36</sup> Consider the following passage that underscores this mythic drama:

Matronita has armed camps—bearing sixty faces, all girded with swords, encircling Her. Before Her they go forth, before Her they come in; with six wings they fly throughout the world. In front of every single one, coals of flaming fire—his garments flashing fire. On his back, blade of sword flashing throughout the world, to guard Her, as it is written: *the flame of the whirling sword to guard the way to the Tree of Life* (Genesis 3:24).

Who is *the way to the Tree of Life*? Matronita, who is the way to that great and mighty tree, the Tree of Life. And it is written: *Behold the bed of Solomon! Sixty warriors surrounding her, of the warriors of Israel* (Song of Songs 3:7)—Israel above. *All of them skilled with a sword...* (Song of Songs 3:8). When Matronita moves, they all move behind Her, as it is written: *The angel of Elohim moved...* (Exodus 14:19).

Now She is called *the angel of Elohim*? Rabbi Abba said, “Yes. Come and see! Rabbi Shim'on said as follows: The blessed Holy One established before Him a holy place, a supernal palace, a holy city, a supernal city, called ‘Jerusalem, the holy city.’ Whoever enters the presence of the King enters only through this holy city—following the way to the King, for from here the way of paved—as it is written: *This is the gate to YHVH; the righteous shall enter through it* (Psalms 118:20).<sup>37</sup>

In this passage, though the focus is trained upon the angelic sword-wielding guardians of the *Shekhinah* above, we do observe a conflation of the vision of celestial guardian angels inspired by Ezekiel 1–3 with the Arthurian-inspired rhetoric of the Divine Feminine. The Divine Feminine is in need of protection by these “warriors of Israel...all of them skilled with a sword”—

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**36** On uses of this term and its associations, see Yehuda Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, translated by Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 167n37; 173nn85–86; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 118–20; 150–51n62; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum that Shines*, 337; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden*, 33.

**37** *Zohar* 2:51a; Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 4:252–53.

an image of the masculine Jewish sword-bearing warrior, but one clearly and emphatically transposed onto “Israel above,” a phrase that is used in several places in the zoharic literature to refer to the angels above who mirror, isomorphically, human Israel below. While there is a clear sense in this passage that the mythic portrait is one of a drama in the celestial realm, the *Zohar’s* insistence that the angels in heaven function as direct parallels to human Israel below is on display in several passages, though perhaps most significantly for our purposes in the famous “garments of Torah” pericope located in *Zohar* 3:152.<sup>38</sup> To quote the relevant excerpt which underscores my point:

ת"ח עלמא עלאה ועלמא תתאה בחד מתקלא אתתקלו, ישראל לתתא מלאכי עלאי לעילא. מלאכי עלאי כתיב (תהלים קד:4) עושה מלאכיו רוחות וגו' האי באתר עלאה, בשעתא דנחתין לתתא אע"ג דנחתי מתלבשי במלבושי דהאי עלמא...

Come and see: the upper world and the lower world are evenly balanced. Israel below, supernal angels above. Of the angels it is written *He makes His angels spirits...*(Psalms 104:4). This pertains to the celestial realm. But when they descend below, although they descend, they don garments of this world...

Though this text is exceedingly rich for a variety of reasons, and several scholars, including me, have analyzed it in detail; my particular concern here is with the key statement, “the upper world and the lower world are evenly balanced. Israel below, supernal angels above.” Israel below in this earthly realm corresponds, in the Neoplatonic isomorphic conception of the *Zohar*, to the angels above. This correlation should not be disentangled from the language of sword-bearing guardian angels that we observed above in the passage from *Zohar* 2:51a. The “warriors of Israel” (גבורי ישראל) mentioned in that source refer to the angels in the heavenly realm, but it is not a stretch to say that this mission of protecting Matronita/*Shekhinah* as brave warriors of Israel, adept with sword and shield, is ascribed to the human male kabbalists as well, especially given the several other zoharic passages that depict the kabbalistic companions as escorts, lovers, and protectors of the *Shekhinah*. In one famous case, recounting a zoharic approach to all-night study on the holiday of Shavuot, the male earthly kabbalists, through their intensive Torah study, function as the team that escorts *Shekhinah* to Her bridal canopy on Shavuot morning with *Tif'eret*, the masculine dimension of Divinity and *Shekhinah’s* classic consort. In the text cited above from

**38** Also see Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 8:519.

*Zohar* 2:51a, it is the *sefirah Tif'eret* who is the symbolic referent of the celestial “great and mighty tree, the Tree of Life” in the realm above—the divine dimension that Matronita/*Shekhinah* serves as the “way” toward, the pathway of accompaniment, the channel into *Tif'eret* and the Tree of Life.

Indeed, for the authors of the *Zohar*, this dimension of romance underscores the ever-present metaphysical romance that also lies at the heart of zoharic mythology—the relationship of love, yearning, eros, and unification of the Divine Feminine *Shekhinah* and the Divine Masculine *Tif'eret*, an inner-divine *hieros gamos* that floods the pages and symbolism of the *Zohar*, engaging a powerful hermeneutic of the Song of Songs, of lover and beloved. I mention this last component only in gesture and headline because it must be said to properly account for the nature of the *Zohar* as part of the literature of Jewish romance, even though I do not treat it in depth in this essay. In this element of zoharic romance, the kabbalist once again plays a powerful role in facilitating and bringing about this union of masculine and feminine that lies at the core of a spiritual cosmos in balance and harmony.

All of this is inextricable from the core dimension of romance that is at play in zoharic mythology and storytelling—the dominant theme that the male kabbalist is on a love-quest for the *Shekhinah*, the feminine dimension on Divinity that is manifest in the mystical secrets of the Torah, in various elements of the natural world, and in a pushing of the boundaries of heteronormativity and the zoharic ambiguity of homoeroticism, or at least the force of love in friendship and the gender fluidity in the faces of the male mystic friends whom the wandering kabbalist encounters and greets with love, kiss, and passionate celebration on the road of this quest (“How wonderful it is to see the face of the *Shekhinah*!”). It is relevant and intriguing to note the ways in which this human-divine eros that manifests in the *Zohar* correlates to the troubadour lyric ideal of the man in quest of the lady of a higher social standing than he—in the zoharic case, a metaphysical hierarchy. As has been discussed by other scholars, this further resonates with the zoharic assertion that the male kabbalist is caught between two females, between two wives—the earthly, physical wife that he leaves at home as he sets out on his Torah-quest, and the heavenly, Divine female that he unites with, cleaves to, while he is on the road, and as he penetrates deeper into the hidden mysteries of Torah while on that wandering quest.

In exploring the centrality of this theme to the romance character of the *Zohar*, I turn now to the rather well-known parable of the maiden in the tower in the *Sava de-Mishpatim* section of the *Zohar*, who sends playful signals of love—of hide and seek, of concealment and revelation—to her lover the kabbalist, the mystic knight-like figure (palpably akin to the knight

errant of broader medieval literature, the knight on a quest that demands endurance, chivalry, and courage), who circles about the tower of the castle in search of his true love, the *Shekhinah*, the mystical essence of Torah.

כמה בני עלמא בערבוביא בסוכלתנו דלהון ולא חמאן בארז קשוט באורייתא, ואורייתא קרי בכל יומא בנהימו לגבייהו ולא בעאן לאתבא רישא. ואע"ג דאמינא דהא אורייתא מלה נפקא מנרתקה ואתחזייתא זעיר ומיד אתטמרת והכי הוא ודאי, ובזמנא דאתגלייתא מגו נרתקה ואתטמרת מיד לא עבדת דא אלא לאינן דידעין בה ואשתמודעאן בה. לרחימתא דאיהי שפירתא בחיזו ושפירתא בריוא ואיהי טמירתא בטמירו גו היכלא ואית לה רחימא יחידא דלא ידעי ביה בני נשא אלא איהי בטמירו. ההוא רחימא מגו רחימו דרחים לה עבר לתרע ביתא תדיר זקיף עיניו לכל סטר. איהי ידעת דהא רחימא אסחר תרע ביתא תדיר, מה עבדת, פתחה פתחה זעירא בההוא היכלא טמירתא דאיהי תמן וגלייתא אנפיה לגבי רחימא ומיד אתהדרת ואתכסיאת. כל אינן דהוו לגבי רחימא לא חמו ולא אסתכלו בר רחימא בלחודוי ומעוי ולביה ונפשיה אזלו אבתרה וידע דמגו רחימו דרחימת ליה אתגלייתא לגביה רגעא לאתערא ליה. הכי הוא מלה דאורייתא לא אתגלייתא אלא לגבי רחימא. ידעת אורייתא דהא חכימא דלכא סחרא לתרע ביתא כל יומא. מה עבדת, גלייתא אנפיה לגביה מגו היכלא וארמיזת ליה רמיזא ומיד אהדרת לאתרה ואתטמרת. כל אינן דתמן לא ידעי ולא מסתכלי אלא איהו בלחודוי ומעוי ולביה ונפשיה אזיל אבתרה. ועל דא אורייתא אתגלייתא ואתכסיאת ואזלת ברחימו לגבי רחימא לאתערא בהדיה רחימו.

ת"ח אורחאה דאורייתא כך הוא, בקדמיתא כד שרייתא לאתגלייא לגבי בר נש ברעא ארמיזת ליה ברמיזו. ידע טב, לא ידע שדרת לגביה וקראת ליה פתי, אמרו לההוא פתי דיקרב הכא ואשתעי בהדיה, ה"ד (משלי ט) מי פתי יסור הנה חסר לב. קריב לגבה שרייתא למללא עמיה מבתר פרוכתא דפרסא מלין לפום ארחוי עד דיסתכל זעיר זעיר ודא הוא דרשא. לבתר תשתעי בהדיה מבתר שושיפא דקיק מלין דחידא ודא איהי הגדה. לבתר דרגיל לגבה אתגלייתא לגביה אנפין באנפין ומלילת בהדיה כל רזין סתימין דילה וכל ארחין סתימין דהוו בלבה

טמירין מיומין קדמאין. כדן איהו גבר שלים בעל תורה ודאי מארי דביתא דהא כל רזין דילה גלייתא ליה ולא כסיאת מינה כלום.

Inhabitants of the world are so confused in their minds! They do not see the path of truth in Torah. Torah calls to them every day, cooing, yet they do not want to turn their heads. Although I said that a word of Torah emerges from her sheath, is seen for a moment, then quickly hides away—certainly so, but when she reveals herself from her sheath and quickly hides, she does so only for those who know her and recognize her.

This may be compared to a beloved maiden, beautiful in form and appearance, concealed secretly in her palace. She has a single lover unknown to anyone—except to her, concededly. Out of the love that he feels for her, this lover passes by her gate constantly, lifting his eyes to every side. Knowing that her lover is constantly circling her gate, what does she do? She opens a little window in that secret palace where she is, reveals her face to her lover, and quickly withdraws, concealing herself. None of those near the lover sees or notices, only the lover, and his inner being and heart and soul follow her. He knows that out of love for him she revealed herself for a moment to arouse him.

So it is with a word of Torah: she reveals herself only to her lover. Torah knows that one who is wise of heart circles her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her place, hiding away. None of those there knows or notices—he alone does, and his inner being and heart and soul follow her. Thus Torah reveals and conceals herself, approaching her lover lovingly to arouse love with him.

Come and see! This is the way of Torah: At first, when she begins to reveal herself to a person, she beckons him momentarily with a hint. If he perceives, good; if not, she sends for him, calling him “simple”: “Tell that simple one to come closer so I can talk with him.” As it is written: *Whoever is simple, let him turn here, he who lacks understanding* (Proverbs 9:4). As he approaches, she begins to speak with him from behind a curtain she has drawn, words suitable for him, until he reflects little by little, This is *derashah* (homily). Then she converses with him from behind a delicate sheet, words of riddle, and this is *haggadah* (telling or story).

Once he has grown accustomed to her, she reveals herself to him face-to-face, and tells him all her hidden secrets and all the hidden ways, concealed in her heart since primordial days. Then he is a complete man, husband of the Torah, master of the house, for all her secrets she has revealed to him, concealing nothing...So human beings must be alert, pursuing Torah to become her lover, as has been said.<sup>39</sup>

And then, after developing this parabolic correlation in greater detail, the wise old man concludes: “Human beings should become aware, pursuing Torah to become her lovers.” This text stands as an extraordinary paradigmatic instance of the manner in which the authors of the *Zohar* integrate elements of medieval romance literature into their poetic and narrative creativity. One of the core love stories of the *Zohar*, the core of its romance, is the passionate yearning, eros, and love that the kabbalist as interpreter has for the Torah, indeed for *Shekhinah*, the Divine Feminine, incarnated as the Torah and its deepest mysteries. Not only does the kabbalist pine deeply for *Shekhinah*-as-Torah, but *Shekhinah* herself longs in love for the male kabbalist. Troubadour and Arthurian romance, French romance as found in works like *Roman de la Rose* and Castilian pondering and representations of love as in the *Libro de Buen Amor*, are in the *Zohar* most fundamentally rendered as a love story, a passion quest of the mystic for the depths of Torah’s wisdom, which is, in the end, nothing less than a central dimension of God Herself (*Shekhinah*). This love story is reflected in many other zoharic passages in which the Torah is once again personified as female lover to the male mystic

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39 *Zohar*, 2:99aa; Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, 5:33–35.

who pines in eros for her intimacy and who evokes her in highly romantic and sexualized terms.

This zoharic pericope would seem to flow from the notion of chivalry as an exalted ideal in medieval romance, one that involves trust in God, a certain element of the fantastic, and the pledged word. The knightly quest for the Holy Grail, and the elements of spiritual formation that accompany this journey, are central to the *Parzival* narrative; in the passage from the *Zohar* cited above, the quest for the Grail is directly paralleled by the quest for the holy secrets of the Torah, and ultimately the quest for and revelatory encounter with the Divine.

