

The Zohar on Talmud Tractate Hagigah 14b, "The Orchard"
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A newly discovered and edited chapter of the Zohar (the Book of Splendor or Radiance), the Jewish mystical work attributed to the second-century Palestinian rabbi Shimon bar Yohai but more likely composed in Spain during the late thirteenth century, early fourteenth century, and probably later as well.

Terms and Players

Talmud—Teachings, stories, conversations, and laws of the ancient rabbis compiled in about 500 C.E.

Torah—Strictly speaking, the five books of Moses, but often used to refer to all of the books of the Hebrew Bible.

Oral Torah—The Talmud. See first note.

Sefira Daat—Sefirot—The *sefirot* as used by Jewish mystics (kabbalists) refer to attributes of God such as lovingkindness, power, and endurance. Since humans are created in the image of God, we have these attributes in ourselves too.

Shekhinah—The presence (or feminine presence) of God.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, the Holy Lamp—Second-century Palestinian rabbi to whom the *Zohar* is traditionally attributed.

Rabbi Eleazar—Son of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and one of his rabbinic companions in the *Zohar*.

Rabbi Akiva—One of the most important of rabbis, who died about 132 C.E., and one of the teachers of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai.

Rabbi Pinchas—Rabbi Shimon's father-in-law and one of his rabbinic companions in the *Zohar*.

Rabbis Yose, Isaac, Abba, Hiyya, Yehudah, Hizkiyah, Yose ben Rabbi Shimon ben Lekuniah, Abbahu, and Yesa—other companions of Rabbi Shimon, who wander about discussing words of Torah (in the broadest sense).

Rav Hamnuna Sava—Ancient rabbinic time traveler who appears (usually as a simple mule or donkey driver, though not in this episode) suddenly and mysteriously and disappears just as suddenly and mysteriously.

The Talmud says: "Four entered the orchard—PRDS—paradise."

Rabbi Shimon, the Holy Lamp, opened: "The orchard is the upper Garden of Eden, where our souls go on Shabbat and when we die. It also is the place where the Holy One, blessed be He—the ultimate reality—resides, and where the mystery of existence is revealed."

His son, Rabbi Eleazar, added: "The PRDS—or *Pardes*—also are the four levels of textual interpretation—*peshat* [literal], *remez* [symbolic], *derash* [metaphorical/allegorical], and *sod* [secret/hidden]. These correspond as well to the four rivers branching out from the river in the Garden of Eden. And the holy Shekhinah (in one reading, the feminine aspect of God) is 'the *Pardes* of the Torah,' since she includes all four levels." [1]

The Talmud says that one of the four (sages) who entered—Rabbi Akiva—warned his three companions: "When you arrive in the orchard and reach the pure marble stones, do not to say 'Water, Water.'"

Rabbi Yose asked: "Why did he say that? Why did Rabbi Akiva say 'Water, Water' and not just 'Water'? Was it just for emphasis?"

"Rabbi Abbahu said: "Maybe there wasn't any water, so saying the words was meaningless."

Rabbi Isaac said: "Don't say 'Water, Water'; say 'pure marble stones.'"

Rabbi Abbahu said: "Don't say 'Water, Water.' Just say 'Water' one time. Keep it simple."

Rabbi Abba said: "For emphasis. Water was everywhere, from the four rivers flowing through the Garden. Water, Water, everywhere, polishing the underlying stone firmament smooth as pure marble stones. In addition, the two layers of water represent the upper Garden of Eden and the lower Garden of Eden, with the Earth between."

Rabbi Yose said: "Like a Hillel sandwich on Passover. Or the parting of the Red Sea—dry seabed in the middle, sea waters on either side. Stay focused on the miracle."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "The stones are heaven, which the Holy One separated from the waters during Creation. Rabbi Akiva was telling his companions to stay focused on the majesty of the all-powerful Holy One and not be distracted by anything they saw on their journey."

Rabbi Yose said: "The stones—the firmament—are the cornerstone of Creation, not the waters."

Rabbi Yehudah said: "There are different kinds of stones, some forming the stone tablets of the Commandments. Their wise words are like deep waters." [2]

Rabbi Pinchas said: "Rabbi Akiva warned not to mistake the pure marble stones for water. Do not mistake reality for appearance."

Rabbi Isaac said: "Do not mistake appearance for reality."

Rabbi Yose said: "But do not ignore appearance, for without appearance, there would be no reality."

Rabbi Isaac said: "When we look at clear water we can see what is beneath but also might think there is no water, only what is underneath, in this case the pure marble stones."

The other rabbis were silent, looking a little confused.

Rabbi Abbahu said: "Maybe there's nothing more than meets the eye."

Rabbi Yehudah said: "Everything is appearance. Nothing is what we think it is. Things are not what they seem. Let us look beneath the surface to try to ascertain the ultimate reality, to separate

the ephemeral from the tangible, to discover who and what we and the world really are, beneath appearances."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "There's more to life than meets the eye, yes, something deeper, like the experience listening to a brook or being compassionate. It's an illusion to think that what is in front of us is all there is—"

Rabbi Abbahu countered: "But it also may be an illusion to think there's more."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "Let us be careful not to think either the waters or the marble stone is the ultimate reality. Maybe the stone only seems more real than the water when viewed through the water."

Rabbi Yehudah then said: "There has to be an ultimate reality, and that is the Holy One, blessed be He. Everything else is illusion, generated by our minds."

Rabbi Hiyya opened his mouth as if to speak, but Rabbi Hizkiyah said: "The first water percolates through the stones and goes underground, forming a second, subterranean pool of water. If we allow *mayim hayim*, the waters of life, to penetrate our closedness, our hardheartedness, it will pool in our deepest places, providing a reservoir of God's outpouring of abundance and lovingkindness to sustain us."

Rabbi Yehudah said: "Two wells satisfy our heart, so do not get caught up in the material world."

"Amen," the other rabbis said.

Rabbi Abba said: "The two waters are the waters of life. Do not mistake the inanimate for the animate."

Rabbi Shimon said: "At one time the Shekhinah dwelt in the rock, the Torah. Moses struck the rock twice, corresponding to the two waters. Then the Shekhinah left the rock and went into exile."

The companions sighed.

Rabbi Shimon continued: "The waters are all around the firmament, surrounding it, and are one water, not two. The firmament before the Holy One divided the waters is like the fetus in utero, surrounded by amniotic fluid bathing it with nutrients."

His son, Rabbi Eleazar, said: "And since Torah is water, the source of life, the world was bathed in Torah before it was born."

Rabbi Shimon then said, "Come and see: The two waters represent dualism. Rabbi Akiva warned not to describe reality in dualistic terms. God and humans, life and death, light and heavy, light

and dark, good and bad, right and wrong, oral Torah [the Talmud] and written Torah—these are dualities, represented by the two waters. Do not mistake such pairs [the waters] for reality [the pure marble stones], which is oneness."

He paused before going on: "The waters are life and death; the pure marble stones, immortality. In life we are sandwiched between life and death, but if we can transcend reading our lives this way, we can transcend both."

Everyone paused a moment to take in these words.

Rabbi Isaac said: "Drink the waters of life and we are immortal."

"Amen," the other rabbis said.

Rabbi Eleazar changed the subject and said: "There are four levels of interpretation, the *Pardes*. *Peshat* is the surface meaning. That is the first 'water.' This is the level of appearance—what you see is what there is. Next is *remez*, or symbol. That is the second 'water.' At this level we perceive the symbolic nature of things. For example, *water* stands for 'Torah.' The two waters represent the Talmud—the oral Torah—and the Torah—the written Torah. The pure marble stones represent a deeper level of meaning—beneath appearance is solid reality; this is *derash*, the metaphorical or allegorical meaning. Finally, we have *sod*, or secret, related to *yesod*, foundation, which supports the other layers and the other interpretations. Here too the dualisms the Holy Lamp spoke of disappear and all is one. Ironically, in addition, although this is the secret level, the mystery is that everything is just as it appears, without mystery!"

Rabbi Yose said: "One water is the oral Torah; the other, the written Torah. There are no distinctions between them: Saying that one, the Talmud, appears to be a commentary on the other, the Five Books of Moses, is to miss the fact that they are one and the same Torah. There is only one water, one Torah."

Rabbi Pinchas returned to the previous thread dealing with what is or isn't real: "There is no separation between the waters and the stones. Neither is more real, and the apparent differences are illusory. Not only are the differences illusory," he continued, "but the waters and pure marble stones are as well—"

Rabbi Isaac interjected: "The rabbis thought they were going to enter the orchard—paradise—but unless they focused only on the bedrock foundation of the orchard, what they encountered would not be the orchard, but rather an illusion, a mirage. Things would not be what they seemed, distorted by the waters of illusion."

Rabbi Yose broke in: "Appearance clouds reality, so perhaps the explanation too is illusory. And, if we look at the world as if everything is illusion, then the world itself becomes illusory."

Rabbi Pinchas said: "It's not that everything is illusion, rather that the concepts of separation and duality are illusory. Everything is illusion except illusion."

"Even ourselves?!", the rabbis responded in spontaneous unison, disturbed by the thought that they might not exist, or might not exist in a form they thought they existed in.

At that very moment of collective existential self-doubt, seemingly materializing from thin air, a musician in a seated position joined the rabbis, who suddenly grew silent. The musician then stood up, cleared his throat, and began humming a wordless melody while the rabbis were silent, absorbing all that had been said. The rabbis and musician then said another "Amen!" in unison, reinforcing the concept of unity in diversity and diversity in unity.

Rabbi Abba now turned his thoughts to the four rabbis who entered the PRDS: "Elisha ben Abouya saw only the first layer. He thought his faith could not explain everything, so after leaving the PRDS he sought another path. In retaliation, the other Talmudic sages stripped his name from the Talmud and just referred to him as *Aher*—'Other'—although they kept his stories and exegeses."

Rabbi Abbahu said: "He didn't believe in God. He only believed in what he could see."

Rabbi Abba said: "Ben Azzai thought the waters were illusory and saw only the marble stones, the abode of the Holy Ancient One. Glimpsing God without the protection of illusion and appearance, he burned up: Human beings need something to shield them from the flames of the ultimate reality."

Rabbi Abbahu said: "He saw God as Moses saw the burning bush."

Rabbi Abba said: "Ben Zoma also glimpsed God, in the second layer of water, the layer of symbol. He thought nothing—God, reality, illusion and appearance, symbol and symbolized, metaphor and allegory, dualism and nondualism—was real. He became caught in a hall of mirrors, unable to tell reflection from original image. Marble stones and waters, their differences and nondifferences, what they were or stood for, and so on—they all were the same or not the same. The substrates of reality shifted constantly like desert sands during a sirocco, leaving him no solid ground. Though this sort of thinking protected him from burning up, he lost touch with reality and lost his mind."

Rabbi Abbahu said: "He tried digging too deeply, thinking he would find the secret of existence."

Rabbi Shimon echoed the words of Rabbi Abbahu: "Do not to dig too deeply into certain mysteries. Look too hard and risk losing all sense of self and *everything* loses its reality, as happened to Ben Zoma."

The other rabbis and the musician shouted "Amen!" again.

Rabbi Shimon now said: "The orchard is the hermitage of the merciful, compassionate, loving Holy One, who in fact embodies the Beloved, Love. Aher lost his faith because he saw himself as separate from the Beloved and so couldn't really become One with the Beloved. Ben Azzai dropped his guard too much, got too close, and burned up. Ben Zoma also got too close, lost himself in union with the Beloved—becoming 'madly in love'—and went crazy."

Rabbi Abba picked up where he had left off with the rabbis but went in a new direction: "The four rabbis are the four worlds. Aher is *asiyah*, the world of action. Ben Azzai is *yetzirah*, the world of formation. Ben Zoma is *briyah*, the world of creation. And Rabbi Shimon is *atzilut*, the world of emanation. These worlds comprise many aspects and are the building blocks of matter—the pure marble stones, of which there were four! But, do not say 'Water, Water,' because there is only one water and all four worlds are needed for a complete world."

Another "Amen!"

Rabbi Isaac now asked: "What about Rabbi Akiva, the teacher of Rabbi Shimon? How did he manage to ascend, perhaps reach the heavenly throne, and exit the garden intact? Some say it was because he was married and thus had his feet planted more solidly on the ground."

Rabbi Abbahu said: Rabbi Akiva stayed centered, and although he allowed himself to approach the Beloved, he also retained his sense of self so that he neither lost faith, nor burned up, nor went crazy.

The Holy Lamp then reminded everyone of the story of Rabbi Akiva's upbringing: "He was illiterate and frustrated at his lack of knowledge and understanding. Then at age forty he had an experience at a well that changed his entire life and set him on the path to becoming such a great scholar and man. In response to watching water from the well wearing away stones, he said: 'If what is soft wears down the hard, all the more shall the words of Torah, which are hard as iron, hollow out my heart, which is flesh and blood!'" [3]

Rabbi Yose, who had started the whole discussion of Rabbi Akiva's imperative to not say "Water, Water" when the four rabbis came to the pure marble stones, sighed and said. "Ah. *Ribbono Shel Olam*—Master of the Universe—Rabbi Akiva was referring to the higher Torah that would be learned in the PRDS. The four rabbis all wanted to learn that higher Torah, but only Rabbi Akiva succeeded. The others, even if they didn't say 'Water, Water,' thought the words when they entered the PRDS, and failed."

The other rabbis sighed along with Rabbi Yose.

At that moment Rabbi Yose, who had been the first rabbi to ask why Rabbi Akiva said what he said before the four rabbis entered the orchard, stood up, practically shooting into the air, and shouted a very loud Aha! "It is clear to me now why he warned not to say "water water" when the rabbis saw the pure marble stones."

"Why?" the other rabbis replied almost in unison.

"Because," Rabbi Yose said, "his experience that transformed him into such a great Torah scholar came from the realization that water, though soft, can wear away stone."

All the rabbis except Rabbi Shimon looked puzzled by his answer.

Rabbi Shimon then said: "In the story in the Talmud, three of the rabbis saw only one part of the picture. My master Rabbi Akiva was the only rabbi who saw the whole picture. He understood that you can't separate the waters and marble stones from one another. They form a complete picture and cannot stand alone. Any interpretation or reading of reality must take into account all the levels of meaning, and when it does, it reflects the fourfold nature of being and existence, that it comprises appearance, symbol, metaphor, and mystery, which cannot be separated from one another without disastrous consequences to our psyches and also to the fabric of reality itself. Just as a text cannot be stripped of its *peshat*—its plain meaning—all four levels are needed for the world to hold together. Without any one of these elements the structure of the universe would collapse. This is why Rabbi Akiva was the only one of the four who emerged unscathed after leaving the orchard."

Rabbi Yose jumped in: "Rabbi Akiva remembered his experience and emphasized the importance of the water by repeating the word."

Rabbi Abba then said: "That is what I said before, namely, that the repetition was for emphasis only."

There was a murmur among the companions.

Rabbi Yose, son of Rabbi Shimon ben Lekunya, said: "However, later on he was flayed alive by the Romans. 'Whoever speaks falsehood will not be established before My eyes' (Ps. 101.7). Perhaps he was wrong or less wise than is thought, his understanding no better than that of the others."

There was a general silence as the rabbis and the musician took in these words.

Rabbi Shimon disagreed: "Like all righteous people, Rabbi Akiva atoned with his suffering for the sins of his generation." [5]

Rabbi Abba returned to the four worlds: "Aher's world is doubt, which characterizes the lowest world. Ben Azzai's world is death, which characterizes the next world. Ben Zoma's world is madness, which characterizes the next world. And, Rabbi Akiva's world is divinity and harmony, which characterize the highest world. Doubt leads to spiritual death, which in turn leads to madness, but with proper preparation and training, madness can lead to the kind of harmony needed to enter paradise and approach God in all His glory."

The other rabbis and the musician remained quiet.

The musician then adjusted his brightly colored hat, brushed some hairs from his tunic, strummed the odd-shaped musical instrument he was holding, and began playing a tune with a seven-note scale. He then stopped strumming for a moment and said: "Four worlds, or four levels of interpretation, and three rabbis: the number of the lower *sefirot* in the kabbalistic tree of life."

The musician said: "Rabbi Akiva is the *sefira daat*, the intelligence unaffected negatively by experience.

Rabbi Abba said: "There are ten *sefirot* in the tree of life, not seven or eight."

The musician said: "The seven I just mentioned, plus the two waters is nine, and the pure marble stones makes ten."

Rabbi Abba now said: "Including *daat* makes eleven *sefirot*."

The musician said: "Since the two waters are really one, as the Holy Lamp says, there are really just ten *sefirot*—"

Rabbi Eleazar interrupted: "The two waters represent two of the *sefirot*: *Chesed*, lovingkindness and openness; and *gevurah*, judgment and boundaries. The pure marble stones represent *tiferet*, which is God and harmony. The orchard is the totality of the *sefirot*. To avoid losing faith, death, and insanity, steer the middle course, harmony and balance."

Rabbi Abbahu said: "That is what Rabbi Akiva did."

At that moment the musician played a strange, unworldly song on his strange stringed instrument that enabled all of the assembled rabbis to have an almost visceral taste of what Rabbi Shimon was talking about. It was as if the musician were playing four melodies at the same time that sounded at various moments in no particular order like polyphony, monophony, harmony, dissonance, and silence. With each shift the rabbis experienced themselves and the world in a different way, as if listening to each of the four Talmudic sages singing his own story. In no special order the rabbis thought everything was just the way it seemed, a symbol for something else, an allegory, a mysterious secret, or various combinations of these.

The musician then sang: "In spite of what I just played and you just heard, to what loss seeing the world in just *one* of these ways? For example, to perceive life as pure symbol and nothing more, navigating day and night through a forbidding landscape of symbols of trees, wild animals, plants, people, not the actuals themselves? What loss from living in a world of insanity, with men and women forgetting who they really are, colliding in the shadows as if swimming in the dark waters of an underworld? Perhaps there is no actual music, only music notation. . . ."

In unison, the rabbis began to weep.

Rabbi Yesa, quiet until now, said: "Methinks our musician is none other than Rav Hamnuna Sava, visiting our modest assembly on Earth to share Torah wisdom through words and music and make sure we stay on the right path."

The musician again began humming his wordless tune and then, as mysteriously as he had appeared, seemed to disappear into thin air.

Collectively the rabbis exclaimed: "Where'd he go?!", and at that very moment . . . at that very moment, I felt as if I were waking from a dream . . . or perhaps falling asleep and beginning to dream . . . or caught in a web of illusion, unable to distinguish appearance from reality, trapped in the same hall of mirrors that had driven Ben Zoma insane. In that state . . .

. . . I walked out of my house onto my deck, sat on the old couch, and watched a rabbit, a squirrel, and a blue jay eating Italian prune plums, each in its own way. . . .

The rabbit sits on its hind legs, chewing. The squirrel scurries up and down the trunk and branches, retrieving the plums in its mouth. The jay lands on the fruit and pecks at it, eventually knocking it to the ground. An owl swoops down from its roost, disturbing the other animals. Other birds drink from a large pool of clear water covering pure marble stones resting in turn on another layer of water. What more can be learned from life than can be learned from watching these and other animals?

No one else is here. No Holy Lamp and his circle of lesser lights discussing the heady matters of reality and illusion. No strange musician singing otherworldly songs and playing a strange musical instrument. Oh, but wait. Someone—or something—*is* here: The ghosts of two long-dead friends hover nearby, waiting for something, but for what, I do not know. Suddenly the world is bathed in sadness.

Could there be anything more than this, anything deeper, more real, less illusory, than these friends standing close by, for all appearances ghosts from another—the other—world? R.C. Morse and David Stoller, poet and novelist, respectively, one dead of AIDS at thirty-five, the other brain-dead, then just plain dead, at thirty after heart surgery to repair a congenital hole in his heart. They harbor neither surface nor secret meanings, no layers or levels of significance. Whatever the strange musician said about seeing the world as just pure symbol, these long-dead friends are symbols or metaphors for nothing but themselves. As Jean Cocteau, the twentieth-century French surrealist poet, filmmaker, and artist, said about his French compatriots: If they "don't understand, it must be a symbol. . . ." They think: "Either what I'm seeing doesn't mean anything or else it means something different from what I am seeing, and that something different may be hiding a symbolic meaning." [4]

"Amen," I feel like shouting.

The words of the sages dissipate in the air, ascending like incense from the ancient Temple after a sacrifice. They have become ethereal abstractions, perhaps like the glassy water covering—and

being covered by—the marble stones in the Talmudic story of the four rabbis who entered the PRDS. But, the two friends—their shades, rather—remain infinitely more real.

I take a deep breath and ease beneath the shimmering top layer of water in the pool, running like a sheet of glass over the entire specter of reality that composes, that supposedly composes, the world we know, with which we are familiar. I see the top water, the pure marble stones, and the bottom layer of water, replicating in a way the upper and lower waters and the firmament described in Genesis, and cry out: "I cannot—no one can—possibly know which is more real, the most real, real, of any of this: water or stones, appearance or reality, illusion, which of the descriptions and interpretations, whether the rabbis are real, their story in the Talmud, the Talmud itself!" I then realize I again am descending the same slippery slope taken by Ben Azzai, who, becoming lost in the hall of mirrors, went mad, but quickly catch myself and quietly say aloud but to myself (or so I think):

"Come and see. The Talmud compares its scholars to nuts, quoting Song of Songs (6:11): 'I went down into a garden of nuts. . . .' Four of them rode a chariot to the highest heaven and then embarked on a further journey to the PRDS, the orchard. These very same sages and the later medieval mystics thought they understood what they saw but also became trapped in the same hall of mirrors, piling one interpretation another, until—well, enough!"

The animals seem to turn toward me, as if hearing me raise my voice.

All there is, is in front of us, manifesting most brightly in friendship, fellowship, relationship, and love. In moderation, the complex discussions are interesting and nourish us, but ultimately they are ephemeral—for example, whether the world exists or exists as we perceive it. We do not need to shed our belief, nor do we need to touch God nor penetrate all of life's mysteries. And yet . . . even moderation has its limits and can test us sorely.

Rabbi Akiva's faith was tested to the extreme, and unlike Aher, although he submitted to the extreme pain of worldly reality, he came through spiritually intact, if physically stripped to his sinews and arteries. This is the significance of his martyrdom and the lesson for the rest of us: There is no easy path to understanding reality, whichever path we find ourselves on. But, when we do find our path, suffering can open us up so that we are more fully human. We discover that our skin—our appearance—is only part of this reality. As long as we do not allow ourselves to feel separate from others, we can allow our own suffering to help redeem the rest of humanity, in turn helping us reach the deeper levels of our own existence and bringing us nearer to God.

That said, these two poor friends, doomed to wander in the garden of my consciousness, with me watching animals and possibly the animals in turn watching and possibly even listening to me—these two friends will accompany me, like angels, wherever I go, reminding me of the basic absurdity of anyone's thinking things are or are not what they seem, even when played on the instrument of the kabbalistic mind—or minds—shining forth from the *Zohar*, the holy *Book of Splendor*.

NOTES

[1] 'the *Pardes* of the Torah.' Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford, England, and Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989), vol. 3, p. 1090.

[2] "Their wise words are like deep waters." See Prov. 18:4.

[3] 'If what is soft wears down the hard, all the more shall the words of Torah, which are hard as iron, hollow out my heart, which is flesh and blood!' These words are from Judah Goldin, trans., *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* [Avot de-Rabbi Natan] (New York: Schocken Books, 1955), p. 41. See also Job 14:19: "Waters wear away rock."

[4] [If they] "don't understand, it must be a symbol. . . ." They think: "Either what I'm seeing doesn't mean anything or else it means something different from what I am seeing, and that something different may be hiding a symbolic meaning." The quotations are from Jean Cocteau, *Two Screenplays: The Blood of a Poet* and *The Testament to Orpheus* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1985).

[5] See *Zohar* 3:218a and footnote 86 in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, translation and commentary by Daniel C Matt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press), vol. 9, p. 529. Also see Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford, England, and Portland, OR: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 1989), vol. 3, pp. 1424-1426.