

The Forlorn Young Woman
A Recently Discovered Fragment of the Zohar
Translated and Edited by Henry Rasof

Rabbi Shimon¹ walked over to a fig tree² and sat down.³ Rabbi Eleazar, Rabbi Isaac, Rabbi Abba, and Rabbi Yose followed him and also sat down.⁴ A mule driver⁵ sat down to the left of the rabbis, a little ways off, tending the animals.⁶

At that moment a young woman⁷ walked gracefully⁸ by on the nearby road, then seemed to disappear from sight.⁹

"Who's the young woman¹⁰ with the big white head¹¹ and long face¹² who looks forlorn, as if her old man¹³ just threw her out of house and home?"¹⁴ Rabbi Abba asked.

Rabbi Shimon's son, Rabbi Eleazar, replied: "Rachel."¹⁵

"Not the wife¹⁶ of Jacob?"¹⁷ Rabbi Isaac asked.

"Yes," Rabbi Eleazar replied. All the rabbis said a prayer.¹⁸

Note: Terms, names, and some notes in the main text and footnotes are at the end of the fragment.

1 *Binah*, understanding.

2 The *sefirotic* tree, representing the ten *kabbalistic* attributes of God; the fig tree, the third tree mentioned in the Torah, represents the three upper *sefirot*—*keter*, *chokhmah*, and *binah*: intellect, wisdom, and understanding.

3 Grounding himself in *sefira yesod*, foundation. *Sefira* is the singular form of *sefirot*.

4 This describes the emanation of the *sefirot*.

5 The *sefira chokhmah*, wisdom.

6 The *sefirot*.

7 The *Shekhinah*, or presence of God; also, the lowest *sefira*, *malkhut*, the queen.

8 Grace is one of the characteristics of the *sefira chesed*, usually interpreted as lovingkindness.

9 Into *ayin*, nothingness.

10 The *Shekhinah*, or divine presence, often termed "feminine." Also the *sefira malkhut*. The lady will turn out to be "Rachel," who in this piece of *Zohar* represents the *sefira chesed*, lovingkindness, although this association occurs nowhere else in the *Zohar* or other *kabbalistic* literature. However, since *malkhut* is intensely "feminine" in nature, and hence, traditionally, nurturing, assigning *chesed* to her is only inconsistent within the *Zoharic* symbol system, not within a broader social and psychological system.

11 The *sefira keter*, mercy/divine will.

12 The *arikh anpin*, the "long countenance," signifying "the world of absolute mercy" (see *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, p. 245).

13 The *Atika Kadisha*, the Holy Ancient One, the primordial divine image. Also, *keter*, divine will, the highest of the *sefirot*. In our text, "old man" does not mean the woman's husband.

14 Into *galut*, exile

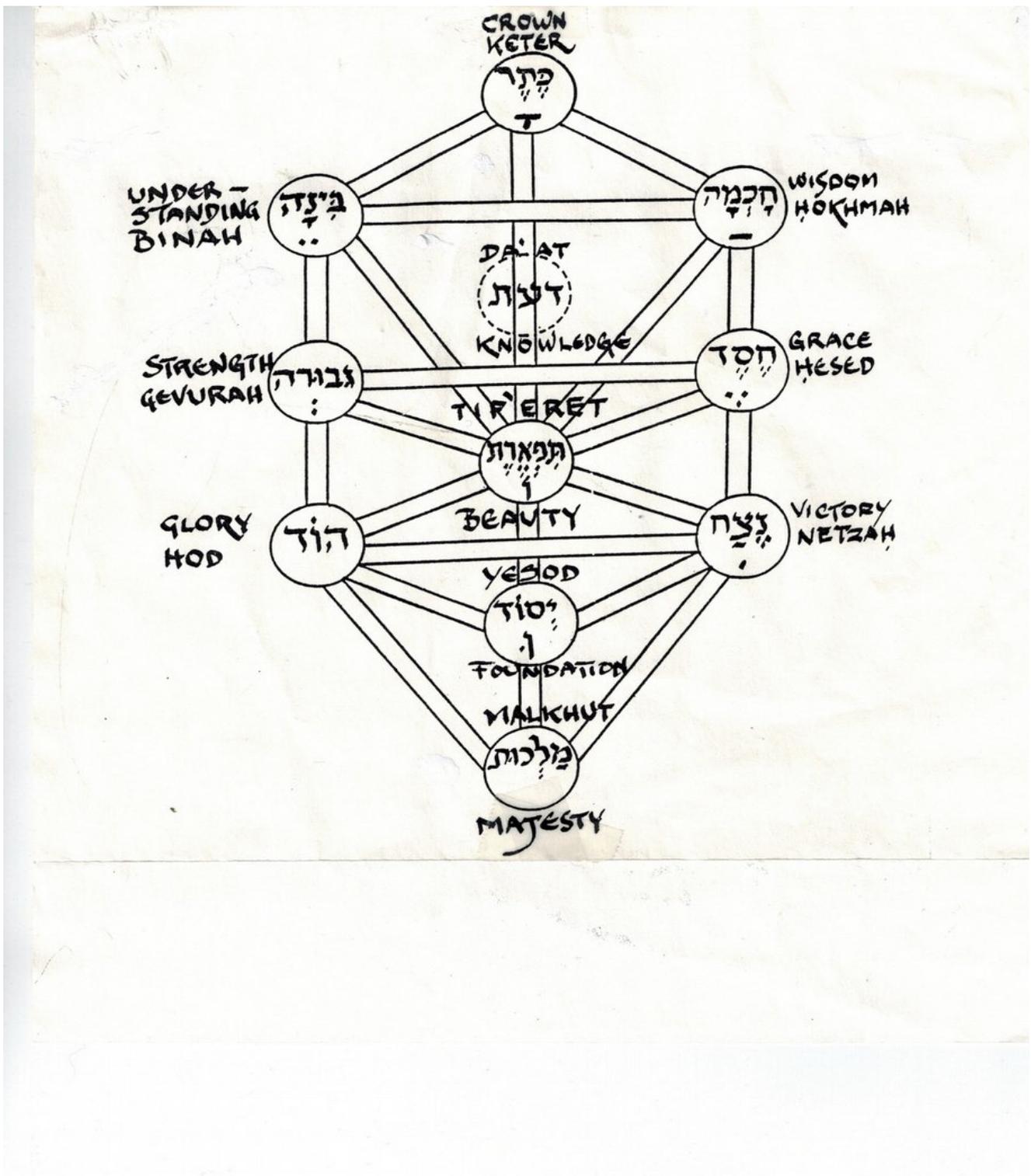
15 *Chesed*, lovingkindness. It also could meant the Torah (see *The Early Kabbalah*, edited and introduced by Joseph Dan, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 57).

16 The *Shekhinah*, the divine presence. Also, as used in this *Zohar* text, *chesed*, lovingkindness, instead of *malkhut*, kingdom.

17 *Tiferet*, God/harmony/balance/mercy.

18 For the unification of *chesed*, lovingkindness; *tiferet*, God/harmony/mercy; and *gevurah*, strength/power.

One rendition of the mystical sefirotic tree (please excuse the poor quality of the image).



Rabbi Yose now turned to survey the mule driver,¹⁹ who sported a goatee,²⁰ was smoking a water pipe,²¹ and looked tired and ragged. "How do we always end up with such half-dead beats?" Rabbi Yose asked. "He looks like a gravedigger²² who just stepped out of his own grave."²³

A cloud²⁴ passed overhead at that moment, threatening rain²⁵ on an already-sultry day.²⁶

Suddenly there was a cloudburst, it began raining²⁷ cats and dogs,²⁸ and everyone got soaked, including the woman.²⁹ Then, just as suddenly, the rain stopped.

"Rachel"³⁰ then adjusted her platinum-blond *sheitel*³¹ and removed her heavy, wet,³² waist-length jacket,³³ though of course remaining modestly covered.³⁴

"Call the woman,"³⁵ Rabbi Abba called out to the other rabbis. "Maybe she has some food³⁶ or can start a fire,³⁷ warm us up,³⁸ and dry us off."³⁹

When she heard Rabbi Abba, she slung her soaking jacket⁴⁰ over her left shoulder⁴¹ and walked to the river,⁴² where it was cooler.⁴³ She gazed over the river⁴⁴ at some children⁴⁵ playing on the opposite bank.

19 *Chokhmah*, wisdom.

20 Reminding of Esau, the brother of Jacob, who had matted red hair, representing *yesod*, the primordial foundation.

21 Torah = water, so studying Torah.

22 An interpreter of Torah: In Hebrew, *derash*, "to dig," also means "to interpret."

23 The second lowest *sefira*, *yesod*—foundation—is also associated with earth.

24 The *Shekhinah*, the divine presence.

25 *Shefa*, an overflow, outpouring, of Torah.

26 Already saturated with Torah.

27 *Ein-sof*, the remote, infinite God emanating the sefirot, which water the earth like Torah.

28 *Chokhmah* and *binah*, wisdom and understanding, respectively; the first two *sefirot* emanated.

29 *Chesed*, lovingkindness.

30 *Chesed*, lovingkindness.

31 Wig, covering *keter*, the Godhead, intellect, will, crown, the highest *sefira*.

32 With Torah = water.

33 The outermost garment of Torah.

34 With fewer of the outer garments of Torah—for example, the stories and chronologies.

35 Pray for *chesed*, lovingkindness.

36 Talmudic knowledge.

37 Kindle or release the primordial wisdom, *chokhmah*.

38 Transfer some of that light to us.

39 Evaporate any confusion resulting from immersion in so much Torah.

40 The outer garment of Torah is soaked with the upper *sefirot*.

41 Left = *Gevurah*, boundary.

42 Of Torah flowing from the Garden of Eden.

43 And where more Torah was available.

44 Flowing from the garden of Eden.

45 These are daughter letters of the Hebrew mother letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*, representing the three main constituents of matter: air (*aleph* is the first letter of *avir*, the Hebrew word for "air"), water (*mem* is the first letter of *mayim*, the Hebrew word for "water"), and fire (*shin* is the primary sound of *aish*, the Hebrew word for "fire"). They also represent the infinite God, *Ein-sof*. Although the concept of daughter letters appears nowhere else in the *Zohar* and is obscure, we can surmise that since during the Creation when *Ein-sof* emanated the universe through the vehicle of the Hebrew letters, the three mother letters constituting the *Ein-sof* gave birth to three daughter letters from which the rest of Creation could proceed. It is possible, too, that the children refer to the gnostic symbol of a daughter in the mystical *Book Bahir* (see *The Early Kabbalah*, edited and introduced by Joseph Dan, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 57).



Rabbi Eleazar, his back turned to the woman⁴⁶ and thus oblivious of her movement away from the group of rabbis,⁴⁷ said, "Amen. But how did Rachel get here,⁴⁸ and what does it mean that she adjusted her *sheitel*⁴⁹ and removed her coat?⁵⁰ Isn't this immodest?⁵¹ Why was she wearing a heavy jacket in the first place?⁵² And, you'd think Rachel,⁵³ beloved wife of our patriarch Jacob,⁵⁴ would have a *sheitel*⁵⁵ that fit perfectly.⁵⁶ There's a lot here to chew on, *chevra*.⁵⁷ What are the *remez*,⁵⁸ *derash*,⁵⁹ and *sod*⁶⁰

46 *Chesed*, lovingkindness.

47 *Chesed*, lovingkindness, separating from the other *sefirot*.

48 What is the origin of *chesed*, lovingkindness?

49 Covering *keter*, the Godhead/intellect/will/crown, the highest *sefira*.

50 The garment soaked with Torah.

51 Isn't it better to occlude our purest lovingkindness, lest it become contaminated by the lower *sefirot*?

52 Why did she need to cover her true nature?

53 *Chesed*, lovingkindness.

54 *Tiferet*, God/beauty/harmony/mercy.

55 *Keter*, crown/intellect/will/Godhead.

56 A reference to *keter* of *chesed*, balancing head with heart.

57 "Companions"/"friends."

58 Symbolic.

59 Metaphorical.

60 Secret.

levels of meaning? Surely she brings us an opportunity to board the sweet chariot⁶¹ swinging low and ride to the seventh heavenly hall."⁶²

During the last three words⁶³ the mule driver⁶⁴ interrupted with a long sigh⁶⁵ followed by a short sigh,⁶⁶ the way a mule might interrupt the neighing of a group of horses.⁶⁷ Then he said, "Huh?" and rolled his eyes. The mule driver, watching Rachel removing some of her garments, stated: "You are stripping the text of its *peshat*,⁶⁸ leaving naked the higher meanings you asked about."⁶⁹

He then admonished the rabbis⁷⁰: "Dudes⁷¹: You're in your heads⁷² too much. Dig the young lady⁷³ and come down to earth.⁷⁴ Call a spade a spade and dig deeper⁷⁵ in a straightforward way. Build a foundation⁷⁶ and only then build your house.⁷⁷ Pray from your heart,⁷⁸ lift your eyes to heaven instead of chasing heavenly halls,⁷⁹ and throw caution⁸⁰ to the wind.⁸¹

Then, seeming to have forgotten what he just said, he asked the astonished assembly of illustrious rabbis⁸²: "Why does the beginning of the Torah say '*Elohim*'—gods?"⁸³

61 The *merkavah* (chariot), assigned various *sefirot*, e.g., *binah*, understanding, or a group of four *sefirot*, namely, *chesed*/lovingkindness, *gevurah*/strength/power, *tiferet*/beauty/God, *malkhut*/kingdom.

62 The highest of the halls (or palaces)—*hekhalot*—mentioned in the vision described in Ezekiel 1:1–28 and also described in the *hekhalot* literature (e.g., the Book of Enoch) and also elsewhere in the *Zohar*. The seventh hall is the Holy of Holies, *binah*, understanding; the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence; and Shabbat, the seventh day. See *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 3, p. 593.

63 The Hebrew mother letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*, representing three main constituents of things: air (*aleph* is the first letter of *avir*, Hebrew for "air"), water (*mem* is the first letter of *mayim*, Hebrew for "water"), and fire (*shin* is the primary sound of *aish*, Hebrew for "fire"). They also represent the infinite God, *Ein-sof*. And, they refer to the three blasts of the shofar, the ram's horn blown on the Jewish High Holidays.

64 *Chokhmah*, wisdom.

65 Like the long blast of the *shofar* (the ram's horn) during High Holidays, or a reference to the *sefirotic* emanation described in *Tikkunei Zohar*, one of the components of the Holy *Zohar*.

66 A reference to the short blast of the shofar during High Holidays, or to the *sefirotic* emanations described in *Tikkunei Zohar*, one of the components of the Holy *Zohar*.

67 The way one *sefira* might interrupt the others.

68 Its plain meaning, through it's not always so plain. Along with *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*, these make up the four levels of interpretation, whose acronym is *prds*.

69 You can't divide the *sefirot* in half; they come in an indivisible package. To the mule driver, Rachel's "upper body" appeared naked—the *sefirot* were revealed—even though she was still modestly clothed.

70 A spirited interpretation.

71 *Chokhmah*, wisdom, emanating the lower *sefirot*.

72 The upper *sefirot*.

73 Engage with *chesed*, lovingkindness.

74 To a lower *sefira* like *yesod*, foundation.

75 Using the interpretive tool of *derash*—"to dig"—the metaphoric level of meaning.

76 *Yesod*, foundation.

77 The rest of the *sefirot*.

78 *Tiferet*, balance/beauty/harmony/centeredness; also, God.

79 A reference to the first line of Psalm 121—"I lift my eyes up to the mountains, from where my help comes." Also, he admonishes to look to *keter*, the highest *sefira*. See note 61 for more on the heavenly halls.

80 *Gevurah*, strength/power.

81 The *ruach hakodesh*, the Holy Spirit, though not the one in the Christian trinity.

82 He asked for answers from the totality of the *sefirotic* tree.

83 Why does the Torah begin with all of the *sefirot* and not just the highest one, *keter*—God, intellect—from which all the other *sefirot* flow?

Rabbi Yose said, "I do not see how this connects with anything.⁸⁴ And besides, the Talmud⁸⁵ and many *midrashim*⁸⁶ comment extensively on this."⁸⁷

The mule driver kicked in: "The question is common, as Rabbi Yose says, and has been addressed by famous commentators over the years. Sometimes, though, the familiar is the most profound."

Rabbi Shimon said: "*Elohim* refers to the *sefirot*,⁸⁸ of which there are ten, a plural number—three upper *sefirot* and seven lower ones." He then addressed the mule driver: "What can you add to this?"

The mule driver said: "Rabbi Shimon, the Holy Lamp,⁸⁹ has provided an astute explanation."⁹⁰

Rabbi Yose snorted.⁹¹

The mule driver opined: "However, in this case we must take '*Elohim*' literally. Something that will be said in the future in a different context by a Jewish doctor may be relevant here: 'Sometimes a plural is just a plural.'⁹² And sometimes the *peshat*⁹³ is all there is. It was too great an effort for just the one God of Israel, blessed be His name, whatever is said about Him and His powers. It was a joint effort—"

"—by the one God and some angels,"⁹⁴ Rabbi Yose said assuredly.

The mule driver said: "No. The world—or this world—was created by many gods. In fact, each of the seven days of Creation was overseen by a different, lesser god—."⁹⁵

Rabbi Shimon cut him off, asking: "Are you saying there were seven gods in the beginning?"

The mule driver replied: "Ten, actually!"⁹⁶

Rabbi Yose butted in: "Oh, now it's ten gods. What did the other three do?"⁹⁷

84 His thinking is dualistic.

85 The ancient compendium of rabbinic wisdom.

86 Rabbinic commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, related to *derash*, "to dig."

87 He wants to know the relationship between the upper and lower worlds.

88 Attributes of God in Jewish mysticism.

89 One of the epithets for Rabbi Shimon.

90 Again, the nature of reality has been explained many times through use of the construct of the *sefirot*, indicating that nothing is special or mysterious about reality—it is what it is.

91 Emanated a breath of Holy Spirit.

92 An obvious reference to Sigmund Freud, who once famously said, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar," meaning that not everything that looks phallic is phallic.

93 The plain reading of a text.

94 In Gen. 1:26 God says, "Let us make man in our image." Two readings of "us" are: It can mean a plural God, *Elohim*. Or, as Rabbi Yose says, it can mean that God was consulting with angels.

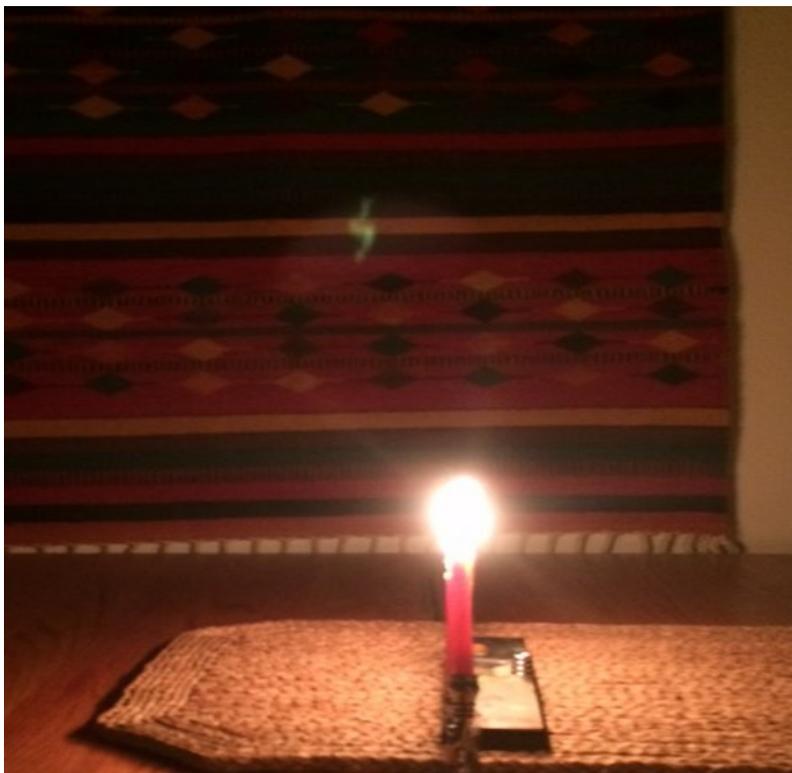
95 Normally, there would be notes here reading "gods" as *sefirot*, but in this case the mule driver is reading "gods" literally. Rabbi Shimon is the one reading "gods" as *sefirot*.

96 As if subtly testing Rabbi Shimon by switching interpretations, the mule driver alludes to the ten *sefirot* on the *sefirotic* tree.

97 He doesn't reply because the answer would be too complicated. For example, three could be the upper *sefirot*, or the three patriarchs, or "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:3) (see *The Early Kabbalah*, edited and introduced by Joseph Dan, New York: Paulist Press, 1986, p. 57). It most likely does not refer to the Trinity.

The mule driver, ignoring the question, said: "It's actually a matter of perspective. Think of a *menorah*⁹⁸. How many lights are there?"

"Eight," Rabbi Abba said, "plus the *shamash*, to light the eight lights."



The nine lights on a menorah viewed from one end appear as one light.

"If a lit *menorah* is viewed just right, you will see just one light (see photo above), even though the *shamash* is higher than the other lights. Now imagine a *menorah* with *ten* lights," said the mule driver.

"So what?" Rabbi Yose challenged.

"If you viewed the lights from either end, what would you see?" the mule driver asked.

"One light," said Rabbi Shimon. "You're saying it's a matter of perspective. From one angle there are ten lights; from another, one. From one perspective there are many gods; from another, just one God."

"Yes," said the mule driver.

Rabbi Isaac wanted to ask about the other three lights but held his tongue.

The mule driver went on: "All light comes from the *shamash*, since it is used to light the other lights,

⁹⁸ The candelabra used for Chanukah.

right?⁹⁹ In truth, then, the other lights are just illusion and only appear to be lit.¹⁰⁰ It's not a trick: When viewed as we have described, there is only one light.¹⁰¹ To see the oneness of this light requires changing one's perspective."¹⁰²

"In that case," asked Rabbi Shimon, "why did you say that many gods created the heavens and the earth?"

Rabbi Yose said: "Because he was trying to trick us and show us up, and demonstrate that he is smarter than we are."

There was silence.

Rabbi Eleazar then said, as the group stood up and began walking a few feet to a small clump of cork trees next to the river: "I think he is trying to tell us something."

"Which is?" asked Rabbi Yose.

Rabbi Shimon observed: "We have a plethora of interpretations here, complicating the picture. From '*Elohim*' the mule driver gets 'gods' and I get *sefirot*. Then from 'gods' he gets one God. I don't think he is trying to trick us, so I agree with my son, Rabbi Eleazar, that he is trying to tell us something."

The mule driver spoke: "As the Holy Lamp says, '*Elohim*' can be read either as 'gods' or as '*sefirot*.' Both are useful lenses with which to view the Creation, but at a deeper level both are just constructs and meaningless terms."

Rabbi Abba then asked, "If, like 'gods,' the *sefirot* are simply a construct and have no intrinsic meaning, what is their purpose? Why would anyone think up such a notion if it weren't based on some kind of reality, on something real? And, if God is One and indivisible, how else but through the *sefirot* can we explain the diversity and multiplicity of Creation? Without them metaphysical problems exist.¹⁰³ I hold that the Holy One emanated the *sefirot*, from which the heavens and the earth were created."¹⁰⁴

The mule driver responded: "God appears multiple when His Torah is interpreted either way. This apparent multiplicity has its uses, though. The *sefirot* are the lubricant of self-knowledge that leads to understanding our purpose in, and the purpose of, the universe. Rabbi Shimon sees the *sefirotic* tree, a multiplicity, in his mind's eye, which is a unity. To the ignorant, this separateness is real, when in fact it

99 All light comes from lovingkindness. Also, the *menorah* is a symbol of the rabbinic companions in the *Zohar*, whose *shamash* is Rabbi Shimon and whose other lights are the other rabbis.

100 The mule driver seems to deny the reality of the other lights. But, he is speaking metaphorically: lovingkindness is the only true light. It is like the moon and the sun—the moon does not emit its own light.

101 This is not a trick.

102 When we change our perspective, we see the unity of the lights.

103 The question has challenged philosophers, metaphysicians, mystics, and theologians for at least two thousand years. Simply put, the main metaphysical problem is, as Rabbi Abba points out, how a God that is a unity could create a universe that is a plurality. The *sefirot* are one solution—they serve as a kind of intermediary—though not a perfect one. Other thinkers, Jewish and non-Jewish, have come up with similar types of solutions, though those too are not perfect.

104 From one come many.

is illusion. This understanding comes only through opening to the influence of lovingkindness¹⁰⁵ in its total, purest form."¹⁰⁶

Rabbi Shimon asked, "But, *Elohim* is the judgmental aspect of God, not the lovingkindly, compassionate, merciful aspect."

To which the mule driver responded: "As I already said, there is only one God. It is just a certain perspective that yields the notion of a God with two aspects, or two Gods, or seven, or whatever. Again, when viewed from a different perspective, there is just one God, and viewed from the special perspective I talked about before, the only God is the God of lovingkindness. And, it's not really the

God of lovingkindness; God *is* lovingkindness; they are one and the same. To see things any differently is to see things from the world of illusion."¹⁰⁷

The rabbis, as one—including Rabbi Shimon—dropped their jaws and were speechless.¹⁰⁸ Rabbi Abba wept.¹⁰⁹ Then, as one body, the rabbis leaned toward the mule driver and kissed him on the forehead.¹¹⁰ Rabbi Eleazar then said: "In order to interpret Torah we need to humble ourselves like the mule driver,¹¹¹ dig into the text with crude tools,¹¹² and only then work through the higher levels of meaning with more subtle tools.¹¹³ In the beginning, meanings will appear multiple and perhaps contradict what we have been taught.¹¹⁴ But after a while it will become clear that these different meanings are illusory and that the text at hand has just one true, deep meaning. And this highest meaning will manifest from the one God, the God Whose identity *is* lovingkindness,¹¹⁵ as does everything in Creation."

"Amen!" everyone responded in unison, including the mule driver.¹¹⁶ Even the mules collectively made a sound, as if joining in the response.¹¹⁷

105 Working backwards, *chesed*, lovingkindness, if thinking *sefirotically*.

106 Which would be the *Shekhinah*, the Divine presence, embodied here as "Rachel."

107 This skirts the traditional reading of *Elohim* and deftly deals with any mistaken idea that there might be two Gods, a gnostic concept meant to explain the existence of evil.

108 This is like the lights on the *menorah* merging into one light—the *sefirot* merge into one. Speechlessness is a high state, opening the way for Torah to come into them and for the ultimate oneness of God and His creation. Or rather, for the lack of distinctions between them. An indirect reference also to the times in the Hebrew Bible when God is said to speak, even though the philosopher Maimonides said such usage is not meant literally: God does not speak as we know speaking. The editors of *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, vol. 1, in discussing the *Ein-sof* (literally, "without end"), the transcendent God, quote a *Zohar* text: "The seventh palace, 'O Lord, open my lips,' is the most sublime secret, in a whisper, without a sound being heard."

109 He felt the flow of Torah in him.

110 The lower *sefirot* acknowledge the superiority of higher *sefirot*. Here Rav Hanmuna is *chokhmah*, wisdom, and the rabbis, seeing *keter*, intellect, manifesting in him, kiss his forehead in acknowledgment and out of respect.

111 *Chokhmah*, wisdom.

112 Using *peshat*, the literal meaning; also, the lower *sefirot*.

113 The *derash*, the metaphorical meaning; *remez*, the hinted, symbolic meaning; and *sod*, the deepest, secret, most hidden meaning.

114 Many gods appear to be at work in the universe, even though the Jewish tradition teaches there is but one.

115 *YHVH*, *chesed*, lovingkindness.

116 The *sefirot* unite, as do lower and upper souls.

117 The mules, the animal soul, were united with the higher soul—the *neshamah*.

Rabbi Isaac said: "The mule driver is onto something. But, who is he, anyway, and why is such a man tending mules?"¹¹⁸

Rabbi Shimon and the companions then glanced to their right,¹¹⁹ in the direction of "Rachel,"¹²⁰ who by now had moved even farther from the rabbis.¹²¹

"Where is the 'wise' mule driver to tend to the mules?"¹²² Rabbi Yose asked. He had calmed down and seemed somewhat forlorn now that he didn't see the mule driver. The mule driver seemed to have vanished into thin air.¹²³

As if on cue, the mules began to bray and kick,¹²⁴ alarming the rabbis,¹²⁵ who didn't know how to control them.¹²⁶ Fortunately the mule driver,¹²⁷ though hidden from the rabbis,¹²⁸ had stayed near the animals.¹²⁹ He led them to an oat field scattered with husks,¹³⁰ then from "Rachel"¹³¹ to the river bank.¹³²

Listening to the mules,¹³³ Rabbi Shimon,¹³⁴ the Holy Lamp, then said: "I am convinced the mule driver is Rav Hamnuna Sava,¹³⁵ visiting from the next world to share some words of Torah. As my son, Rabbi Eleazar, has said more eloquently than I, Rav Hamnuna rightly says many things we think are diverse and multiple are indeed unitary and that we need to be careful not to mistake concepts, constructs, symbols and metaphors for what they stand for. Let us savor his teachings as we continue on our way."

The companions shouted "Amen." The woman—"Rachel"—also said "Amen" from the water, where she stood.¹³⁶ Then the river¹³⁷ softly splashed on her feet,¹³⁸ and from that point in its course¹³⁹ seemed, to all who noticed,¹⁴⁰ to move with a profoundly new sense of mystery.¹⁴¹

118 Why does *chokhmah*, wisdom, tend the lower *sefirot*; and the higher soul, the *neshamah*, the lower soul, the *nefesh*?

119 The rabbis opened up to the influence of *chesed*, lovingkindness.

120 *Chesed*, lovingkindness.

121 Although the *sefirot* united, the unity was only temporary. *Chesed* is really in a class of its own and draws its identity from God, Who is pure lovingkindness. She needs to draw closer to her own source, the way lovingly kind people want to be with other lovingly kind people and draw from one another.

122 *Chokhmah* controlling the lower *sefirot*.

123 Merging with the *Ein-sof*, the hidden, transcendent God.

124 The lower *sefirot* begin to emit light.

125 The upper *sefirot* now emit light.

126 To harness the energies of the *sefirot*.

127 *Keter*, the hidden God, the *Ein-sof*.

128 The upper *sefirot*.

129 The lower *sefirot*.

130 The *klippot/husks/shells* of negative energy.

131 *Chesed*, lovingkindness.

132 One of the rivers flowing from the garden of Eden; also, the stream of Torah.

133 The lower *sefirot*.

134 *Binah*, understanding.

135 *Chokhmah*, wisdom.

136 "Rachel," *chesed*, lovingkindness, is immersed in Torah, for which she was thirsty ("All who are thirst go to the water"—Isaiah. 55:1, cited in Joseph Dan, *The Early Kabbalah*, Paulist Press, p. 67).

137 The river of Torah.

138 "Rachel" = *chesed*, lovingkindness. The feet are *malkhut*, kingdom.

139 The course of the emanation of the *sefirot* from the Godhead.

140 This is the *sefira daat*, knowledge, which is not part of the standard ten *sefirot* on the *sefirotic* tree but which appears in some mystical writings, mostly later ones. It is a signal of what the future holds in store.

141 *Sod* is the deepest mystery.

Terms and Names

Some of these are in the main text, others in the footnotes. Most of the italicized words are Hebrew.

Atika Kadisha—The Holy Ancient One, the primordial divine image.

binah—Understanding.

candelabra—A holder for candles or oil wicks.

Chanukah—Jewish holiday of lights, celebrated during winter in the northern hemisphere and celebrating the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in ancient times and the miracle in which a small amount of oil lasted for eight days.

chesed—"Lovingkindness." One of the *kabbalistic sefirot*.

chokmah—Wisdom.

daat—Knowledge or awareness. Here is meant one of the *sefirot* but not one of the main ten.

derash—The metaphoric level of explication.

dualistic—Thinking that makes God and human beings separate.

Ein-sof—The transcendent, infinite God.

Elohim—One of the names of God, which happens to be in the plural.

galut—Exile.

garments of Torah—The different levels of meaning in the **Torah**.

gevurah—"Strength" or "power" or "limits." One of the *kabbalistic sefirot*.

heavenly halls—Subdivisions of Heaven in Jewish mythology. *Hekhalot* in Hebrew.

Hebrew Bible—The Tanakh: Torah, Prophets, and Writings; the biblical books other than those in the New Testament.

Holy Lamp—Name for **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai**.

Jacob—One of the biblical patriarchs.

kabbalah—The most important strain of Jewish mysticism. The Hebrew root means "to receive."

kabbalist—A practitioner of *kabbalah*.

kabbalistic—Having to do with *kabbalah*.

karma (Sanskrit)—Actions in this and previous lifetimes that affect us in this and future lifetimes.

karmic—Having to do with *karma*.

keter—"Crown," the uppermost of the *kabbalistic sefirot*.

klippot—In some schools of *kabbalah*, husks or shells of negativity.

malkhut—"Sovereignty," the lowermost of the *kabbalistic sefirot*, associated with the *Shekhinah*.

menorah—Candelabra in the ancient Jerusalem temple, now a term used for the candelabra used on

Chanukah, today sometimes called a *chanukiah*. It has eight candleholders (or oil holders) and a ninth, for the *shamash*, which is used to light the other candles or oil wicks.

merkavah—The chariot in which the prophet Ezekiel (see the Book of Ezekiel) saw God in his vision.

midrashim—Rabbinic interpretations of the **Hebrew Bible**.

Mishnah—The oral **Torah**, which is part of the **Talmud**.

mitzvah—Good deed.

mitzvot—Biblical commandments. Also, more loosely, "good deeds."

mohel—Ritual circumciser.

mule driver—Turns out to be **Rav Hamnuna Sava**.

nefesh—The animal soul in *kabbalah*.

neshamah—One of the souls in *kabbalah*, and also just "soul."

pardes—"Orchard," or "paradise." Also (and sometimes written *prds*) the four levels of biblical interpretation: *peshat*, literal; *remez*, symbolic; *derash*, metaphorical; *sod*, secret.

peshat—The surface reading of a text in the four-level method of interpretation, although it has been argued that sometimes the *peshat* level is the highest one.

prds—See *pardes*.

qasida—Poetic form originating in north Africa and popular in medieval Spain and other countries. It contains the following features, although there are variations: The poet is in a deserted campground and daydreams about his beloved. Then he praises his camel and his patron.

rabbi—A Jewish religious teacher. Rabbinic means having to do with a **rabbi** or **rabbis**.

Rabbi Abba—One of the companions of **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** in the *Zohar*.

Rabbi Eleazar (2nd century C.E., b. Israel)—Son of **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** and one of his rabbinic companions in the *Zohar*.

Rabbi Isaac—One of the companions of **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** in the *Zohar*.

Rabbi Moses de León (1240–1305, b. Spain)—Medieval Spanish mystic and likely author of the major part of the *Zohar*.

Rabbi Shimon—See next entry.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (or Simeon ben Yochai) (d. 160 C.E.)—Second-century Palestinian rabbi to whom the *Zohar* traditionally is attributed. Sometimes called the Holy Lamp.

Rabbi Yose—One of the companions of **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai** in the *Zohar*.

rabbi(s)—Jewish religious teacher(s).

Rachel—Wife of Jacob in the **Torah**.

Rav Hamnuna Sava (Hamnuna the Elder) (3rd/4th century C.E.)—Ancient rabbinic time traveler who appears (usually as a simple mule driver, though not in this episode) suddenly and mysteriously and disappears just as suddenly and mysteriously.

remez—The symbolic level of explication.

ruach hakodesh—Holy Spirit (Jewish).

sefira—Singular of *sefirot*.

sefira chesed—The *sefira* of compassion and lovingkindness.

sefira daat—See *sefirot* and *daat*.

sefira keter—The *sefira* of the highest level of intellect.

sefira yesod—The *sefira* of foundation.

sefirot—The *sefirot* (singular, *sefira*) as used by Jewish mystics (especially *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.

sefirotic tree—A diagram representing the ten *kabbalistic* attributes of God.

Shabbat—The Jewish sabbath.

shamash—The highest candle or wick on the *menorah*, used to light the other candles or wicks.

shefa—Abundance, outpouring, flow.

sheitl—Wig worn by married Orthodox Jewish women.

Shekhinah—The presence or feminine presence of God.

shofar—The ram's horn blown on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939, b. Austrian empire)—(Jewish) founder of psychoanalysis.

sod—"secret." The highest level of biblical interpretation.

Souls in the Garden: Poems About Jewish Spain—A book of poems by Henry Rasof published in 2019.

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

tiferet—Beauty, balance.

Torah—Strictly speaking, the five books of Moses, but often used to refer to all of the books of the Hebrew Bible (the Tanakh: Torah, Prophets, and Writings; the books other than those in the New Testament) or even to Jewish beliefs and practices in general.

Tikkunei Zohar (or *Tikkunei ha-Zohar*)—One of the components of the **Zohar**.

tzaddik—A righteous person.

yesod—Foundation.

YHVH—Acronym for the four-Hebrew-letter name of God, the *tetragrammaton*: *Yod Hey Vav Hey*.

Zohar—The *Book of Splendor* (or *Radiance*), the main book of Jewish mysticism, traditionally attributed to the second-century **Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai**, since he is its main player.

However, modern scholarship assigns authorship primarily to the **Rabbi Moses de León**.

Zoharic—Having to do with the **Zohar**.

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*Street in León, Spain, named after Moses de León,
author of most of the Zohar, the Book of Splendor, or Radiance.*

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The Forlorn Young Woman

A Recently Discovered Fragment of the *Zohar*

Analysis and Interpretation by Rabbi Yitzchak Meir Heschel, the Zinkover Rebbe (1770–1855)

Commentary by Henry Rasof

When Rabbi Shimon walked over to the fig tree, followed by the companion rabbis, he saw the *kabbalistic* tree in his mind's eye. Instead of seeing the other rabbis and the mule driver, he saw the tree of life emanating the divine attributes—the *sefirot*—among them *chokmah*—wisdom—on the right side of the tree (from our perspective). He sought the highest *sefirot* but was able to connect only with the lower ones, represented by the mules. All human beings, or most, want to connect with a higher power or with the more developed parts of themselves, but, even for a Rabbi Shimon, this is challenging, so we often do not succeed.

The woman who walked by at that moment was the *Shekhinah*—the presence or feminine presence of God, and *malkhut*, the lowest *sefira*—manifesting momentarily in the guise of the matriarch Rachel, then disappearing. Rabbi Isaac, suddenly overwhelmed by the lovingly kind aura of the *Shekhinah* and by his own lovingkindness toward her, caught a glimpse of the ancient, primordial, eternal nature of God and asked his colleagues what he was experiencing. When we ourselves try to connect with that higher place, something wonderful happens: Even if just for a moment, we experience a strong manifestation of lovingkindness in the form of divine feminine energy. And, when we connect with that source, we also connect with the eternal, transcendent, merciful God.

Here also we have the holy triad of *chesed*, *tiferet*, and *gevurah*—lovingkindness, beauty, and strength. "Rachel" is the *sefira chesed* (normally in *sefirotic* language, lovingkindness would not be her *sefira*, but it is here), Rabbi Isaac is *gevurah* (strength), and God is *tiferet*. The rabbis prayed for the unification of these three qualities so that the world might be redeemed. Directed prayer is able to affect the universe in such a way as to unite different aspects of Creation and of God. On the personal level, praying for the unification of these qualities in ourselves brings a supernal sense of harmony and balance—God is our center, emanating our lovingkindness, tempered by restraint.

Such unification requires wisdom and understanding. However, these qualities are mysterious and fleeting, often disguised, even invisible, and as such were not perceived even by Rabbi Shimon and his companions. These two qualities now appeared but were unrecognized, disguised as qualities of the lowly mule driver, who actually was the mysterious Rav Hamnuna Sava, famous for his brilliant Torah interpretations and who frequently visited from the other world to teach Torah on Earth. As in many of his manifestations, and like those of the Holy One, he was recognized only after appearing and disappearing, and at this point, he was yet to be recognized by the rabbis. Our highest qualities, wisdom and understanding, may appear unexpectedly, be transient, and be disguised, so that we miss their appearance. These qualities also may show up in places we normally wouldn't associate with higher qualities.

The source of the *mule driver's* wisdom was his strong grounding in the upper and lower worlds and his ability to dig in the high realms of the lower world in order to explore the depths of the upper world. He looked tired and ragged to the rabbis because, as Rav Hamnuna Sava, he was exhausted from raising so many sparks—elevating lower souls and reclaiming lost Torah knowledge. What was he there to teach

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this time? That one who is so grounded receives an outpouring of wisdom and understanding. Wisdom comes not just from a high place but from a low place as well; true wisdom comes from both places, from a place of balance.

From the description of "Rachel's" response to the heavy rain, we can construct an interpretation built around the *sefirot*, the divine energies, of which there are ten total: When the upper and lower *sefirot* are fused, the divine nature of God—*tiferet*—will emerge. Furthermore, the energies of the *sefirot* can influence ("interrupt") one another. For example, *chesed* (lovingkindness) can influence *chokhmah* (wisdom) when the other upper *sefirot* are allowed to modestly reveal themselves: The Torah has levels of meaning, arrayed in layers like garments—the garments of Torah. When they are allowed to flutter modestly "in the wind," the holy spirit—the blessed Holy One—descends to earth in the form of *chesed*—pure lovingkindness, which is the essential essence of God. All wisdom, all experience, all people, all of life's mysteries, everything under the sun—everything has layers of meaning and significance; when allowed to reveal their "spirit," they open the way for the revelation of God's purest nature, namely, *chesed*, or lovingkindness.

When Rabbi Abba said to "call the woman," he was not being flip or disrespectful or demeaning. He was saying, in code, "Let us pray for *chesed*—lovingkindness—so that we can have a direct experience of God." For him to attain this state, however, more Torah study ("food") was necessary, and of the fiery kind. Additionally, balance was required, lest he become supersaturated with lovingkindness and lose his self boundaries. Thus the desire for warmth, but the necessity for limits, symbolized by the woman's throwing her wet jacket over her left shoulder (*gevurah*, limits = left side).

As the woman does this, she gazes at "some children." What or who are these children? The daughter letters of the Hebrew mother letters *aleph*, *mem*, and *shin*, representing the three main constituents of matter: air (*aleph*, the first letter of *avir*, Hebrew for "air"), water (*mem*, the first letter of *mayim*, Hebrew for "water"), and fire (*shin*, the primary sound of *aish*, Hebrew for "fire"). They also represent the transcendent, infinite God, *Ein-sof*, which has no qualities we are able to detect or describe. Although the concept of daughter letters appears nowhere else in the *Zohar* and is obscure, we can surmise that since during the Creation when *Ein-sof* emanated the universe through the vehicle of the Hebrew letters, the three mother letters constituting the *Ein-sof* gave birth to three daughter letters from which the rest of Creation could proceed. What does this teach us? That that which appears simple on the surface sometimes is actually very complicated.

After "Rachel" left, Rabbi Eleazar attempted to penetrate the surface of *chesed*, thinking he could attain communion with God through the *prds*, the four levels of biblical interpretation (*peshat*, plain/literal; *derash*, metaphorical; *remez*, hinted or symbolic; *sod*, secret). In sighing, long and short, the mule driver was referring to the *sefirotic* emanations described in *Tikkunei Zohar*, one of the components of the holy *Zohar*, which are *chesed* (lovingkindness; long) and *din* (judgment; short) at the extremes and *rachamim* (mercy) in the middle. The mule driver signaled only the two extremes, meant to send a wakeup call to the faithful, just as the long and short blasts of the shofar are meant to wake the faithful during the Days of Awe. He was attempting to awaken the rabbis to a more solid, holistic reality so that they could experience the unobscured, harmonious light of *rachamim* (mercy).

The sighs also represented creation and formation, the two lowest of the *kabbalistic* "four worlds"—and the lowest parts of the soul. The sighs, based on exhaled air rather than on words, also suggest a connection with the *ruach hakodesh* (the Holy Spirit)—in Hebrew, *ruach* means both wind

and spirit, and it is also one of the levels of the soul, or if you wish, the third of our souls. The mule driver is suggesting that through listening to their breath the rabbis could come to a profound understanding of their souls.

With these sighs, the mule driver nonverbally transmitted two profound teachings, without any fancy hermeneutic tools, the way all good teachers transmit teachings to their students—for example, Zen Buddhist teachers, who transmit their teachings and anoint successors nonverbally. We too can wake up and receive profound teachings by just following our breath, like a practitioner of *vipassana* meditation/mindfulness practice. Nothing here is secret or complicated: We just need to attend to the signs that direct us to balance our extreme qualities in order to be merciful toward ourselves and others, and also to experience the most basic levels of our soul. Once we do this we can soar in our highest soul to connect with God.

When the mule driver admonished the rabbis for being in their heads too much, he was continuing his theme of taking a grounded approach to Torah study. He first told the illustrious rabbis not to ignore "surface" meaning, because sometimes the surface meaning *is* the higher meaning, and sometimes that is all there is. Then he said to build a Torah interpretation from the ground up—actually, starting below-ground: As an interpretation grows increasingly complex, it will be sturdy and survive counter-interpretations and challenges. Additionally, all interpretations must center in the heart, considered the seat of the mind, since the heart represents balance, and a beautiful, sound interpretation must balance many considerations.

We often look for something in the wrong place, thinking it hidden, when actually it is in the open, under our noses. Seeing the obvious does not always come naturally, however; we may have to turn our world upsidedown, but when we do, we still need to stay close to the Source. In *sefirotic* terms this might mean inverting the tree so that the *shefa* (the divine flow) moves from the lowest *sefira*, *yesod* (foundation), to *malkhut* (the *Shekhinah*), to the middle *sefira*, *tiferet* (harmony), to two of the upper *sefirot*, *chokmah* (wisdom) and *binah* (understanding), and finally to the highest *sefira*, *keter* (divine will), which some commentators do not believe is a *sefira*. All but three *sefirot* are engaged in this process.

The end of Rabbi Eleazar's remarkably rich delivery on everything from "Rachel's" wig to the apex of Jewish mystical experience drew further comments from the mule driver, who was responding in particular to Rabbi Eleazar's florid, somewhat grandiose statement about riding the chariot (a central feature of *merkavah* mysticism—*merkavah* is Hebrew for "chariot"—inspired by Ezek. 1) to the seventh heavenly hall. The seventh heavenly hall that he referred to is the "Holy of Holies—the highest of the *hekhalot* (heavenly halls or palaces described in early Jewish mystical literature and also elsewhere in the *Zohar*), the one inhabited by *Ein-sof*, the transcendent God, the God without qualities. The mule driver advised him and the other rabbis to come down to Earth.

When we, seeking to connect with the transcendent God, become too removed from ourselves, from our deepest self, from Mother Nature, from our bodies, from the ground under our feet, we risk losing touch with reality and losing our minds. This is why traditionally Jews were not allowed to study kabbalah and the *Zohar* until they were forty years old, after they had a family, gainful employment, a through knowledge of the Torah, the Talmud, and Jewish ethics and law, as well as some life experience, for these would keep them grounded while exploring kabbalah, which could take the person into outer space: If you are an astronaut working outside the Space

Station, you always are tethered to the Space Station so that you don't drift off and become a casualty of deep space.

When after chastising the rabbis for "chasing heavenly halls," out of the blue the mule driver threw a curveball question about the opening of the Torah—which contains one of the deepest puzzles of the Torah—why the text says *Elohim*, "gods"—he meant to challenge both tradition and conventional thinking. Achieving the deepest understanding of the Torah requires no less a challenge. We may have studied something before, perhaps what we have studied has come from our enlightened predecessors, but to arrive at our own complete and true wisdom we have to question everything we have learned so far, or else our knowledge is not really our own.

Furthermore, we need to ask questions from a holistic place, not a dualistic one: By standing back from the appearance of differences, we can come to realize, using our innate wisdom (*chokhmah*), that our intelligent, probing, seemingly off-beat questions come as well from a place of unity and harmony, regardless of what other people may think of them. In other words, though a cliché, we need to trust in our selves—not necessarily throwing out the baby with the bathwater, just not accepting everything we are told, without asking questions and testing whether what we are told is indeed true. The result is the connection that Rabbi Yose asked about.

Rabbi Shimon thought the mule driver meant *sefirot* when he said "gods" because he thought that he and Rav Hamnuna Sava were playing the same game, that is, thinking in terms of *sefirot*. Although the *Zohar* uses *sefirotic* language only sparingly, this section contains one of the important instances of its usage. Although an obvious observation, we need to be careful not to assume anything without looking deeper and to choose our language carefully, else we misunderstand or be misunderstood.

When Rabbi Shimon asked the mule driver, almost as an aside, "What can you add to this?" he wanted to know whether the latter knew the deepest meaning of the Creation story that opens the Torah, and the secret of Creation itself, namely, the details of how God created the universe from the Torah blueprint and on a lower level how God utilized water to create life on earth. This is *maaseh bereshit*, the Work of Creation described in early Jewish texts and in the twelfth century by Moses Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed*. Going with Maimonides' take on these concepts: Whereas *maaseh merkavah*, the Work of the Chariot (the same chariot Rabbi Eleazar referred to), describes the philosophical and mystical fabric of the universe, *maaseh bereshit* describes the physical, scientific fabric. Where do we come from, where are we going, who are we, what is the meaning of life? These are the big questions, whether we are Rabbi Shimon, scientists, philosophers, mystics, theologians, writers, children, or "ordinary" people. Even if we think we know the answer to a profound question, we need to probe more, because these questions have no final, conclusive answers. As the saying goes: Those who say they know, do not know, and those who know, do not say.

However, the mule driver was more interested in *Elohim* than in the details of Creation, which he did not provide. He said, no, *Elohim* had nothing to do with the *sefirot*; rather, *Elohim* meant "gods," literally. He said that throughout the Torah many usages have no secondary or deeper meaning—for example, instances of plurals used in place of singulars, and so the take on Freud's famous statement about cigars—"Sometimes a plural is just a plural." Hence *Elohim* ("gods") may have no special meaning. Additionally, this question, like all seemingly deep questions, may

not be so special after all. Again, we need to be careful not to take anything at face value or assume everything has a deeper significance. People who do this risk forgetting to smell the flowers and listen to the birds and simply be present with these sensory experiences. We need to ask questions and probe deeply for answers, but again, we need to stay alert for the unexpected, not privilege any experience or concept, and remember to take some things with a grain of salt.

Curiously, this is the opposite of what the mule driver said earlier, that beneath simplicity often lies complexity. However, these two concepts do not really contradict each other; they simply illustrate that we cannot really take anything at face value and make assumptions about its true nature. Some phenomena appear simple but are actually quite complex, and some complex phenomena are actually quite simple. Just as we need to be careful not to make mountains out of molehills, so too we need to be careful not to minimize or downplay the significance of something just because it appears simple.

When Rabbi Yose and the mule driver went back on forth on the nature of *Elohim*, Rabbi Yose brought in angels, since one of the traditional explanations of God's plurality in the name *Elohim* is that when the Torah says, "Let us make man in our own image" (Gen. 1:26), God is consulting with angels. However, not only did the mule driver insist that *Elohim* means "gods," plural, but he said there are seven gods and then, correcting himself, ten. Curiously, this sounds as if he is talking about *sefirot*, first as a group of seven, then as a totality of ten, including the godhead itself (possibly *keter*).

He then used the analogy of the *menorah* to argue that whether *Elohim* signifies God or gods is a matter of perspective, as with lights in a *menorah*: From one angle *Elohim* appears to be many gods, but from another *Elohim* is just one God. "Gods," plural, is an illusion. The apparent argument about the number of gods "In the Beginning" is thus irrelevant, since perspective is what matters, regardless of whether the number of lights is three, or seven, or eight, or ten, since from another perspective there may appear to be just one light.

When asked about the *shamash*, the light on the *menorah* that is supposed to be higher than the other lights, he said the *shamash* indeed has a special purpose, but when a *menorah* is viewed from a certain angle, all the lights, now including the *shamash*, appear to be one. We can draw a parallel with human society: Some members (like Rabbi Shimon) are indeed "higher" in spiritual or intellectual or physical status—they have special abilities and other people cannot do. However, they are still part of humankind at large; from that perspective, all the lights are one, or manifestations of one light. The reasoning in our *Zohar* passage somewhat resembles a section of the *Idra Zuta*, a *Zohar* text: "[A]ll the lights draw their light from the supernal light. . . . And all the lights and all the luminaries draw their light from the *Atika Kadisha*, . . . the supernal light."

Likewise, ourselves as individuals: We have many lights within ourselves, but one is higher, or should be: our chief feature as an individual human being, which makes us individually special. This might be our reasoning skills, or our kindness and generosity, or our spirituality, or our physical strength, or our ability to make peace or lead an army, or raise children, or play music or create art. Or, it might just be that we are human, made in the image of God, since we are special even if we don't shine in any of these ways, which are really just talents or abilities. Yet, within our selves, despite the appearance of many parts, we are really just one soul, undivided, indivisible.

Of course, when viewed against all the other lights around us—the rest of humanity—our seemingly unique soul is one with the whole. And, from the final perspective, this soul is one with the universe, and with God: Everything is part of God, there is no difference between us and God, even using this language of differentiation is false, God lights all the lamps, He is the holiest of lamps, and yet God too is not higher than any one of us, since viewed from that special perspective there is but one lamp. And this is why Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was called the Holy Lamp: He realized all of this.

In spite of the mule driver's explanations, Rabbi Shimon, although understanding *what* the mule driver said, was still unclear *why* the mule driver said what he said, specifically, "many gods created the heavens and the earth." Although Rabbi Yose suspected trickery, Rabbi Eleazar gave him the benefit of the doubt: "I think he is trying to tell us something." Likewise, when confronted by someone who says something that appears confusing or is too complicated for us to grasp, rather than reacting as if a trick is involved, we need to ask, "What is the message?" Obviously, not everything has a message, as the mule driver has pointed out, and of course sometimes confusion and complication are unnecessary or even harmful—deliberate obfuscation is crazy-making if we do not hold on to our center, to our own highest guiding light, and to our connection with the highest light—God.

In this case, of course, Rabbi Shimon sensed the wisdom in the mule driver's words, and so he intuitively knew there was something deep in what he was saying, a special message or teaching he was bringing, and thus agreed with his son, Rabbi Eleazar, that the mule driver was trying to tell the rabbis something.

To make sure he understood the mule driver, Rabbi Shimon then summarized the essence of the mule driver's teaching on perspective, to which the mule driver responded by asserting that both terms—"gods" and "*sefirot*"—were meaningless. Although he never directly said, "I used the word *gods* because . . .," the reason he asked the question was to get the rabbis, including Rabbi Shimon, to see beyond appearances and linguistic constructs like *Elohim* and *sefirot* and words in general and to experience the unity of all existence.

In the metaphysical realm we need to remember that things and their descriptions are not the same; words go just so far. If we are caught up in the fine points of constructs, we will forget that constructs are just that: constructs. Objects have a more basic reality than the way they are described, for instance. In Hinduism this quality might be called *sat-chit-ananda*—"truth, consciousness, bliss," an epithet and description for the subjective experience of Brahman, the ultimate, unchanging reality. The later Western philosophers also were aware of these different levels of perception. All descriptions of reality are equivalent—none is better than another, more accurate. Mistaking these descriptions for the subject of the descriptions is illusion.

Rabbi Abba then astutely asked: What, then, is the purpose of the *sefirot*? If they have no reality of their own, how did they come to be? Are they just a figment of someone's imagination? And, even more astutely, If God is just One and indivisible, how explain the diversity and multiplicity of creation? This last question has challenged philosophers, metaphysicians, and mystics, Jewish and non-Jewish, for at least two thousand years.

Rabbi Abba answered his own question, saying the *sefirot* are needed to explain the diversity and multiplicity of Creation and that God emanated the *sefirot*, which in turn propagated the diversity and multiplicity we see in the world.

For the mule driver, however, there was no problem, since distinctions between God and His creation are illusory, and the *sefirot* are not needed to explain life's deepest mysteries: They are a construct useful to understanding the blessed Holy One and the universe but do not reflect their actual natures. We will always be puzzled if we do not see the unity of all creation and understand that words are simply imperfect descriptions of what is.

The illuminating words of the mule driver created an aha! experience for the rabbis, which is why they were speechless. There is some indication that this experience led them directly to that seventh heavenly hall that the mule driver, somewhat ironically in retrospect, warned the rabbis about earlier on, since no sound is heard in this hall, wherein dwells the *Shekhinah*, the divine presence. Many of us, confronted with a profound revelation that we intuitively know is a reflection of one of life's truths, or even a recognition on a lower level of something we aren't aware of—like a secret that a good friend has been hiding for years—may respond similarly, becoming temporarily mute and perhaps even experiencing our jaw dropping, as we momentarily connect with the supernal Source of Life, seemingly distant and invisible, now immanent, close to us.

Rabbi Eleazar then eloquently summarized all the mule driver said: Because the nature of reality has been explained many times, just as the question posed by Rabbi Hamnuna Sava has been posed many times, it can be said that in the next world an even deeper meaning will be revealed, namely, that this world is actually just how it appears, with nothing special or mysterious about it. And this highest meaning will manifest from the one God, the lovingly kind God, as does everything in Creation. The primordial origin of the universe is in fact lovingkindness. This seems to be *maaseh bereshit*, the Work of Creation, its ultimate secret. Using the metaphor of the candelabra, lovingkindness is the *shamash* that lights the other *sefirot*. However, it is both the highest light and just another light—it's all a matter of perspective.

"Amen!" everyone responded, a recognition of faith in God's oneness—the *sefirot* are only a construct—"amen" is related to *emunah*, faith—and a response to those Jewish critics who attacked kabbalists as being worse than Christians for propagating the belief that God is not just three but many, defaming the *shema*, the central proclamation of the Jewish faith that God is One.

By saying "The mule driver is onto something," Rabbi Isaac was partially acknowledging that the mule driver had some wisdom that the rabbis didn't have, and admitting his own limitations. However, because he stereotypes people, even though he knows "the mule driver is onto something," he still is unable to fully acknowledge that the mule driver has some wisdom, asking, almost snidely, "But, who is he anyway?" It is likewise with us: To use a cliché, we often judge a book by its cover. How often do we do this with other people and also with ourselves: We have more wisdom than we want to admit, inner wisdom, intuitive understanding, and might discount this wisdom because it is not coming from a PhD or an MD or someone who is educated in a way that we are not: "How could so and so possibly know that? She never went to college." Or: "I couldn't possibly do that. I don't know enough. I'm terrible at numbers."

After Rabbi Eleazar spoke, the rabbis looked to the right, in the direction of "Rachel," *chesed*, lovingkindness. She had moved farther away because she thought the rabbis also had moved away: Even though they seemed to be "getting it"—that is, what the mule driver had said and their own native wisdom—she sensed resistance to the teachings. When we realize that *chesed* is the hub of the wheel of the universe, we also may become afraid that we will lose ourselves, so we may pull back from the realization and revert to our former, less enlightened selves.

After "Rachel" moved away, the mule driver disappeared. He had helped guide the rabbis, especially toward understanding the importance of perspective in seeing past illusory constructs and dualities.

Whether everyone needs such an external guide to help in his or her spiritual maturation is an individual decision. From this text, however, it would seem that a guide could help steer us toward a fuller understanding of ourselves, of the world, of the relationship between the two, and of the various methods or anti-methods of achieving this understanding. At some point, however, the guide may be unnecessary: When the lenses of perception are cleansed of dualities of the kind being discussed, our human qualities will take care of themselves, without a guide. And, since an immanent God is not needed, God becomes transcendent. We may feel lost at first, like Rabbi Yose, who no longer had his whipping boy in the form of the mule driver. Rabbi Yose now needs to let go his narrow-mindedness and insecurities, but eventually he will be better off. He will need to depend on his own smarts, which automatically will be in tune with God's. We too will be better off if we let go our prejudices and projections and no longer let them guide us.

However, even if we let go an outer guide or let it disappear, we still will need some way to control and direct our lives, else things get out of hand. This control needs to come from the highest place, not from any intermediary place. And this highest place is *Ein-sof*, the God that cannot be seen, felt, heard, touched, or described, but perhaps glimpsed in rare moments—the Holy Ancient One alluded to earlier in this *Zohar* text when Rabbi Abba asked the identity of the young woman. Control also comes from feeding our lower qualities the discards: They would not survive on higher qualities: If we are hungry, we need physical food, not spiritual food. If we need physical affection, all the wisdom in the world won't make a dent in that need. Also, these lower qualities will happily feed off the husks, leaving the higher qualities to feed on the oat kernels.

Inspired by the enigmatic, disappearing mule driver and his out-of-control mules, Rabbi Shimon finally identified the mule driver was: Rav Hamnuna Sava, described earlier. Likewise, when we figure out which part of us is the wisest and most brilliant, we are free to savor what we can learn from it, in this case not to mistake husks for oats.

There now was total agreement on Rav Hamnuna's teaching, meaning that Rav Hamnuna had been freed of any taint of duality, bonding him to his teaching, allowing him to return to the Other World. Likewise, when our own qualities light up at the same time, indicating harmony, we are free to merge with God, or to realize there was no difference in the first place. Any perceived difference is illusion, just like the concept that God is plural.

In the flow of the river, the ancient flow of Torah wisdom, too, echoed this realization, and although the mystery of Creation seemed solved—at least for the time being—the mystery of the chariot remained

unsolved, leaving a conundrum and new mystery: If *chesed*—lovingkindness—explains the *physical* creation of the universe—one would think this would be the *metaphysical* basis of Creation—then what does *maaseh merkavah*—the Work of the Chariot, the metaphysical reality—explain or do?

A clue perhaps resides with the river. Could this be one of the rivers in the Garden of Eden? Perhaps the mystery is there. Or maybe it suggests Hagigah 14b–15b, the famous passage in the Babylonian Talmud in which Rabbi Akiva says, "When you reach the shining marble stone, do not cry out 'Water, Water.'" Some commentators connect this with "theories of Creation which assume water to be the original element." However, our *Zohar* text does not explore this angle.

We may figure something out that we think is important and end up thinking if we can figure that out, we can figure out anything and everything, including *maaseh bereshit* and *maaseh merkavah*. This does not always happen: Sometimes the expected answer is the unexpected one, leaving us back where we started or forcing us to regroup. And sometimes no one knows the answer, or there is no answer, or the person we think has the answer either doesn't or doesn't want to tell us. If even Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, the wisest of the wise, illuminator of the deepest of mysteries, didn't know the secret of Creation or why the Torah was written the way it was, what about the rest of us? Even the wise mule driver, who turned out to be the greatest of the ancient Torah scholars, didn't have all the answers. And, no one even noticed the apparent problem created in saying the physical universe came from a metaphysical source, if indeed it was a contradiction.

And so, even though the Torah flows with lovingkindness and its revelations depend on the lovingkindness of the Holy One, Torah will always be refreshed, will always refresh those who embody lovingkindness, and surprise us with her eternal mysteries.

Coda

The reader may notice that in the analysis, interpretation, and commentary—especially the beginning—and most especially in the endnotes to the original text—names, terms, and phrases are interpreted using the *sefirot*, often on a one-to-one correspondence: Rabbi Shimon = *binah* (understanding), Rachel = *chesed* (lovingkindness), and so on.

The observant reader then will notice that *sefirotic* language is mostly dropped in favor of ordinary terms like "lovingkindness." As Rav Hamnuna Sava says repeatedly, don't mistake words for what they stand for. He also says the *sefirot* are a useful paradigm for understanding the world but are only a construct: Although the *sefirot* are not needed to understand the nature of Creation, this language is still helpful in understanding the text. It also makes the text familiar to those readers familiar with this type of interpretation. On this seemingly opaque and contradictory note, I leave *you* to uncover and navigate the truths embodied in this recently discovered piece of the holy *Zohar*, the *Book of Splendor*.

Reference

The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts. Three vols. Oxford and Portland, OR: Oxford University Press, 1989. Systematically arranged and rendered into Hebrew by Fischel Lachower (vols. 1 & 2) and Isaiah Tishby (vols. 1–3), with extensive introductions and explanations by Isaiah Tishby. English translation by David Goldstein.