

# Everything Is Music: The *Zohar* on Body, Soul, and Immortality

## A Newly Discovered Text

Translated and Edited by Henry Rasof

Rabbi Shimon and the companions assembled and exited the walled portion of the city of Ávila through the *Puerta de la Malaventura*, the Gate of Bad Luck, in the old Jewish quarter. Yes, somehow these sages from the Talmudic period over a thousand years ago had landed in medieval Spain. They proceeded in a group down the dirt path and caught their breath on the banks of the river. Not too far away, a mule driver stood tending the mules, in case Rabbi Shimon or any of the companions were too tired to climb back up the hill to the city proper.

It was a clear, crisp autumn morning in the year 5061 by the Hebrew calendar, 1300 by the Western calendar. Dew sparkled on the tips of the blades of grass. Most of the leaves from the trees had fallen and were scattered randomly on the ground below. A slight breeze was blowing. The sun was just beginning to rise.

Suddenly, as if emerging from the stillness, came a faint, soft wisp of song. The rabbis turned toward the sound, which seemed to be coming from the direction of the mule driver. No, it was not one of the mules. Nor was it a bird or wild animal, or a sound made by humans—for example, the sound of someone bathing or washing clothes in the river. No, it was more of an unworldly sound, like that of a celestial harp.

Rabbi Abba asked: "Does the song remind others of King David, the ancient psalmist?"

The other rabbis nodded their assent. Though improbable, perhaps his music had left traces that they now were hearing.

Rabbi Abba then asked: "When we die, do we leave the earth, body and soul, the way we just left the city—"

Rabbi Yose interrupted: "I only hope it's not through a gate of bad luck. That would mean we were going to *gehinnom* [purgatory]."

Rabbi Abba continued: "—or, does our body die and our soul remain behind? Perhaps our soul leaves and our body stays behind."

The mule driver, who was close enough for the rabbis to hear him, called out: "The Hindus believe that our soul enters and exits our body through what they call the aperture of Brahma, a little gate at the top of the skull."

Rabbi Isaac said, "The *sefira keter* [the highest of the kabbalistic energy centers], I would venture to say," without pausing to wonder how the mule driver could know of such matters, especially those in faraway India.

The mule driver opined: "The gate opens in both directions. Just as today we have exited the city, later we can return, in the same form as when we left."

Rabbi Yose said: "Unless of course something happens to us, like breaking a leg, or a tree branch falling on us, or catching a cold."

Rabbi Abba, ignoring Rabbi Yose, now said to the mule driver: "Are you saying that death is a two-way street? We can pass in and out as easily as we are passing in and out of the gate?"

The mule driver tethered the mules to a tree and moved even closer to the assembly of illustrious rabbis. He was singing. Now the source of the song heard previously was clear: the mule driver.

It was an unusual song that he was singing, in an unfamiliar, unusual way. First he hummed the melody; then he sang some words. Then he sang the melody and intoned the words at the same time. Then he whispered the words. Then he stopped singing entirely, allowing the silence to envelop him along with the esteemed rabbis. He actually did all of this several times and in a different order each time. The melody seemed familiar but actually was nothing they ever had heard before. It was strange, haunting, unworldly.

Rabbi Abba again asked: "Is anyone else but me thinking of the ancient psalmist?"

All the other rabbis nodded in agreement. It was as if the song stirred exactly the same image and associations in the heads of all of the rabbis.

Also responding to the music but in a different way, Rabbi Shimon, the Holy Lamp, now opened in his typical way: "Come and see. A complete song has both lyrics and tune, but we can recognize the song by either its words or its melody. They are different elements of the song, of course, and ideally perhaps they are joined in completeness. Nevertheless, they work separately as well."

His son, Rabbi Eleazar, said: "Like a father and son, or mother and daughter. They can function independently but are only complete when together."

Rabbi Isaac asked: "What about the silence?"

Rabbi Eleazar said: "In silence there are neither words nor music."

Rabbi Yehudah, silent until now, said: "I must disagree. In silence are both music and words. They can be heard if we listen closely and carefully, and with a different type of sensory organ."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "With all due respect to the Holy Lamp, the problem is that this song is *not* recognizable, neither the words nor the melody. . . ."

The mule driver interrupted: "The Sufis believe that everything is music, so that must mean silence is music as well."

Rabbi Shimon then asked: "In a song, which is its soul, which its body?"

Rabbi Yehudah replied: "The music is the body; the words are the soul. Or maybe the music is the soul, the words the body."

Rabbi Isaac said: "Does this apply to human beings as well? If so, then after we die, the music disappears but the words remain."

The mule driver said: "I don't think so."

Rabbi Abba asked: "So, are both soul and body immortal in our tradition?"

The mule driver said: "Many words have been written and spoken about this matter, in our faith and in other traditions. The first question always asked is: 'What happens to us after we die, after our bodies die?' This is the question asked of the king of the underworld in the Katha Upanishad."

Rabbi Yose cut in: "Shouldn't we investigate the nature of the soul instead of delving into the kind of nonsense the mule driver is spinning off?"

Rabbi Pinchas, the father-in-law of Rabbi Shimon, took the lead here: "Let us assume we have something called a soul. What is it? Is it immortal? Is it tangible—a thing—or a concept? Does it come into our body at birth, or before, or is it part of our flesh, inseparable? Does it grow along with our body before we are born? Is it something separate from our physical body when we grow older? What happens to it when we die?"

Rabbi Hiyya added: "Assuming we do have a soul, what is its purpose? Why do we have one?"

He paused. The only sound was that of the stream flowing over the rocks and a light breeze waving the remaining leaves on the cork trees. No one answered the questions, at least out loud.

In fact, all of the rabbis now were absolutely silent, except for the sound of their breathing. Above them the Gate of Bad Luck had swung shut. The city was still asleep. The rabbis also might have been, or in a trance, they were so still.

The mule driver then spoke:

"In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, which also contains the flood story, the king has lost his best friend. He is bereft and wants to find him. He goes to the ends of the Earth in search of him and of answers. He even asks Death itself, as was asked in the Indian book. But the only answer is that death is final. For him there is no answer, at least no satisfactory one. Keep in mind that Gilgamesh was an evil king. His friend, Enkidu, was a kind of wild man, primitive, perhaps like Esau. Read metaphorically, Gilgamesh has mistreated his untamed, naive, wild side, so much that this part of him has died. He cannot have it back. It is gone forever. He has, so to speak, tasted of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and because he has chosen evil over good, for him there is no next life, no immortality. This is it."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "Choose the dark path and there is no future after death."

Rabbi Isaac said: "And if we choose the path of light and goodness? Is there then a future after our body dies?"

Rabbi Shimon said: "Two men did not die: Enoch and Elijah. They were transformed into other beings while still alive. And one woman, Serah bat Asher, also did not die."

Rabbi Eleazar said: "They were the only exceptions we know of."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "What about the thirty-six righteous ones who keep the world in check?"

Rabbi Eleazar said: "We know nothing about them other than that."

The mule driver now interjected: "Just as in a musical tune there are various frequencies and overtones, so too in a human being there are various frequencies and overtones. Each of us has a unique spectrum by which we can be identified. We carry this spectrum with us while we are alive and after we die. Some of us have stronger signals in one range and weaker ones in another. Some of us have only weak signals. The *tzaddik*—the righteous person—has strong signals in all ranges. It is possible, through hard personal, inner work; following the *mitzvot*—the commandments—along with an exemplary life filled with good deeds, to strengthen the weak ranges, so that our soul vibrates intensely on all frequencies."

He paused for a moment to gauge the effect of his words, then went on: "If the soul is not immortal in the first place—and no one is certain that it is—according to our own tradition and to some other traditions, we can make it immortal or create within ourselves something immortal that can survive the death and decomposition of the body."

Rabbi Yose spoke up: "And what are those other traditions?" he asked with his familiar sneer.

Without hesitating, the mule driver replied: "One, from Central Asia, says that our soul can survive the death of our body only if we create something in ourselves, or in the world, that can withstand death, something important."

Quoting from Ecclesiastes, Rabbi Eleazar now said, in barely a whisper: "Nothing is new under the sun."

Rabbi Abbahu, also quoting Ecclesiastes, added: "All is vanity, companions. Does anyone really think they can create something that will make them immortal?"

The rabbis, including Rabbi Shimon, remained sitting, eyes half open, taking in all that the strange mule driver was saying.

"A Chinese book says," the mule driver added, "that if a person's soul or spirit can be detached from its physical body, it can survive death and be immortal. I have seen a diagram showing, near the heart, a spirit body created by one of their sages. . . ."

Rabbi Yose said: "You mean they grow a little green man in their chest? And how do they do this?"

Ignoring Rabbi Yose, who often was cynical, the mule driver continued: "They practice a kind of meditation in which the soul detaches from the body. In addition, they practice not being attached to outcomes of situations, to people, to ideas, to negative thoughts, and even to their own souls. In essence their lives are spent letting go of their bodies and of their existence on Earth."

Addressing just the other rabbis, Rabbi Yose then said: "I have never before heard such a teaching. Did he make it up out of thin air?"

Rabbi Yehudah said: "Surely this is no ordinary mule driver. Where did he learn these sorts of things?"

Rabbi Yose said: "Surely not in *cheder*, Hebrew school!"

Rabbi Isaac said: "Perhaps from a special rabbi in a special synagogue."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "More likely from a *maggid*, a wandering spirit who traveled widely and remembered what he saw, heard, felt, and learned. . . ."

Rabbi Yose cut him off: "Or maybe from that little green man coming to him in a dream after he had too much to drink the night before and . . ." He stopped midsentence, perhaps to reconsider his words.

As if nothing unusual had happened or been said, Rabbi Shimon now expounded: "In our tradition, too, we aim to not be identified with our body, to avoid creating harmful attachments, for the same reason: So that after we die our soul can quickly and easily ascend to heaven to join the Holy One of blessed countenance."

Rabbi Yehudah built on the idea of nonattachment: "If our soul is light because it is not attached to the body; or is attached only very loosely; and has not sinned or has done *teshuvah*—if these conditions are met, it will not be reborn."

Rabbi Abba asked: "How do we avoid attachments and reactions? They are normal and automatic, no?"

Rabbi Shimon replied: "We train ourselves to recognize that all of our reactions and responses come from us and have nothing to do with anything outside of us. There is an outside world, inhabited by other human beings, but it is separate from us."

Rabbi Abba asked: "Even if it were this simple, how would we do this?"

Rabbi Shimon said: "One way is to not respond to praise *or* criticism. Do not react to people or events."

Rabbi Abba replied: "This is not so easy."

The Holy Lamp said: "It indeed is not and takes constant work."

Rabbi Yehudah said: "When someone criticizes or verbally attacks me, my head feels strange. It is hard to explain, but I feel as if I go into a shimmering cloud that obscures reality. I then think that things are not real, that my thoughts are unreal, my body, my entire self. Everything is a mirage, a hallucination. I am caught up in an experience caused by my own faulty thinking, that what was said has something to do with me when in fact it doesn't. However, standing back from this mirage is not so easy."

The air was still. Not a leaf moved. The rabbis and even the mule driver were listening intently. Even the river was quiet and seemed to be listening. Perhaps it even was trying to help Rabbi Yehudah express himself.

The mule driver was the first to break the silence. He now said, humming the strange tune while talking: "Rabbi Yehudah has become aware of a deeper level of consciousness, an awareness of the indescribable. How can he and others of us deal with the kind of language that makes us feel that everything is unreal? Paying attention to your breathing is one way, according to some of those Eastern mystics. Let things bounce off you, like drops of rain bouncing off a duck's back. An extreme measure would be to make yourself fall asleep, to break the connection. Walk at a steady pace while counting breaths. There are many such techniques."

Rabbi Isaac wondered where the mule driver got these ideas—he seemed full of ideas and suggestions that either didn't seem or definitely were not Jewish—but only asked the mule driver: "Have you tried these?"

Rabbi Yose said: "He has. That's why he is so enlightened."

Rabbi Shimon said: "We have Jewish practices too, like concentrating on images of the Divine or of the *sefirot*, or chanting different combinations and permutations of the Divine Name and moving our heads up and down or side to side. But, yes, there is no easy way to disentangle from our reactions and extreme bodily sensations."

Rabbi Eleazer said: "As Rabbi Tarfon said: 'The day is short, the task is great, the workers are lazy. . . .'"

Rabbi Hiyya completed the famous statement: "' . . . It is not our job to complete the task, only to start it.'"

Rabbi Shimon nodded and looked up at the rising sun, which was partially hidden behind a gray cloud, and, seeming to change the subject: "Most other teachings focus on the conventional idea of sin, on how sinners cannot go to heaven, at least not without a lot of work in this life, a lot of punishment after they die, or very hard work in a rebirth. However, I like to define *sin* first as the inability to detach from our reactivity to words and actions we think are directed against us in order to anger or hurt us or that anger or hurt us in spite of ourselves. Then, second, by becoming entangled with other people's craziness or our own mental confusion arising from trying to figure out other people, we forget and lose our selves."

He paused, then continued: "This is what is meant by sin: forgetting our highest self by getting tangled up with all kinds of craziness."

The rabbis again were silent, except for their breathing.

Rabbi Yehudah, unsure whether he fully understood what had been said, nevertheless was able to summarize what had been said, almost as if an alien voice were speaking through him: "If, in relationships with other human beings, including our wives, children, parents, other family members, close associates, ordinary shopkeepers, and strangers, Jewish or not, we do not let ourselves become entangled with their *otherness*, do not react to anything they might say or do that bothers or angers us, or pleases us either, we will be very light when we die, go directly to heaven, and not have anything to work out in a subsequent life. Then our souls will not reincarnate or transmigrate or perhaps even resurrect at the end of days. . . ."

Rabbi Abba, known as "the questioner," interrupted: "What if a pure soul feels the need or is commanded to return to Earth to help another or other human beings free their own souls?"

Rabbi Yehudah added: "For the highest of individuals, who can maintain their separateness from other people and also from nature, acts of God, and so on, there is a responsibility, an obligation to do so, in order to help raise the sparks of their fellow men and women, so that they too may either stay in the upper Garden of Eden or return to Earth to help their fellow humans."

Rabbi Abba then asked: "Isn't it possible that this pure soul will get lost? I have heard of an angel sent to Earth to guide an Earth being through a very difficult time, who became attached to her. . . . The story is recounted in a little-known story called 'Angels in Love'" [see the Web page for a link].

At that moment, as if on cue, the strange, alien sound could be heard, but not coming from the mule driver, and certainly not from any of the mules. First the companions heard words, then melody, then both together, then silence, as if a supernal musician were performing for them a composition embedded into which was a message just for each of them, a message that each could hear according to his own capacity, like the giving of the manna in the Torah. The complete song was like a coil, with words, melody, and silence winding around one another. It was like a whisper from the past, or a soul that didn't completely depart after its body died.

The rabbis, including Rabbi Shimon, were speechless, transported elsewhere from where they were, out of Ávila, into a dreamscape, perhaps into the *pardes*, the orchard—paradise—or one of the heavenly halls. The sound, the song, had had a strange effect on them.

Such is the nature of the deepest experiences: Reality seems to become dream; then dream seems to become reality, or vice versa.

Rabbi Yesa broke the silence: "It is said that when some people are washed for burial, they feel very light, almost weightless."

Rabbi Shimon said: "Their souls have ascended already."

Rabbi Abba asked: "Does this apply to people with impure souls?"

Rabbi Abbahu, quiet until now, replied: "A soul that cannot stay unattached and nonreactive in this life suffers in this life and, after its body dies, continues to suffer in *gehinnom* until it redeems herself or is redeemed by the Holy One if there are no extenuating circumstances, for instance, if the soul's owner had a tortured life through no fault of his or her own."

Rabbi Shimon said: "Only God can judge whose soul is pure or impure. Sometimes a *tzaddik*, who you might think has a very light soul, has a very slight contamination, which weighs him down, while someone you think would have a very heavy soul weighted down with evil and misdeeds, has fought her past-life baggage mightily in this life and so actually has a lighter soul.

Said Rabbi Yesa: "The righteous ascend wearing a garment of light and a garment of good deeds. They enable their wearer to be lighter than air and to quickly join the Holy One in the Upper Garden of Eden."

Rabbi Isaac asked again: "How do we know that good deeds and inner work will get us anywhere after we die?"

Rabbi Shimon weighed in: "The proof is that the world is permeated with *chesed*, lovingkindness. In spite of what seems an abundance of evil and evil people, the Holy Blessed One remains a lovingly kind and loving God, seemingly untouched, though of course touched in that He remains at the reins of all that is. Also, we know that some souls in this world are new ones, here for the first time, while others have been here before. The souls here for the first time are totally pure, since they have no previous memories or existence. The older souls—" He interrupted himself to catch his breath."

While he did so, Rabbi Hizkiyah said: "The older souls could comprise many earlier souls, going back to Adam. His sparks and the sparks of our other ancestors compose our souls. This would explain why we feel as if we have different inclinations, conflicting thoughts, complicated ideas, a plethora of emotions and feelings, contradictory impulses."

"Well spoken," Rabbi Shimon said. He then asked, rhetorically: "Isn't it the same when we are alive? Each person, each event, each thing we encounter in this life leaves a trace of its soul in us that then becomes part of our own soul?"

The other rabbis were silent, taking this in.

The mule driver then said: "Last night I dreamed about a man in another country who formulated a principle that says when explanations become too complicated, the simplest one is usually the correct one."

"A strange dream," Rabbi Isaac said.

Rabbi Yose asked: "Was the man Jewish?"

Rabbi Shimon addressed the mule driver: "Are you implying, then, that explanations about the multiplicity of the soul are wrong, that we have just one soul, indivisible, like the Holy One, blessed be He. *Chevra*—what do you think about this?"

The mule driver spoke again: "It is indeed difficult, *chevra*, to simply say we are who we appear to be and do not need to explain our various traits by invoking past lives over the years, centuries, and millennia. But, remember that at its essence our soul *is* indivisible, in spite of appearances, just like the *sefirot*. Reality appears multifaceted and multidimensional but really is not."

Rabbi Abba asked: "How does our mule driver know about the *sefirot*, and does his dream also apply to them?"

No one responded.

Rabbi Isaac then asked, addressing the mule driver: "Does your theory of simplicity also apply to the three souls?"

The mule driver said: "Yes. We think we have different soul levels, some higher, some lower, and that

each of us is stronger in one or more of these levels, like the musical overtones I was talking about earlier. In fact, there is just one indivisible soul, which if anything is—or contains a spark of—the divine. It is illusion to think there are more souls within us, whether three, five, or thousands. This just cannot be."

Rabbi Shimon asked: "Mule driver, can you prove this?"

The latter replied, without hesitation: "It is something intuitive. Either you know it or you don't. Sometimes the world appears complex and variegated, as if viewed through a piece of crystal. Other times it appears simple. Both are correct, but the latter is more correct. Beneath the complexity is simplicity. Some cultures see many gods; some see two; ours sees just one. Our God sometimes seems multifaceted, but when viewed correctly is not."

"What about the *sefirot*?" Rabbi Shimon queried. "Is the system to which they belong too complex as well?"

The mule driver didn't reply but instead sang his song, whereby each of the companions heard one component, according to his capacity. He then made them hear the totality of the song. When he added words, some of the rabbis heard just the words; others, the music; still others, the words and music as one. He then sang so that all of the rabbis heard the words and music as inseparable.

A hush fell over the assembly of distinguished sages. They were speechless. Their jaws had dropped. For one moment all of the companions heard exactly the same thing. Then, as suddenly as they heard what the mule driver sang to them, the moment evaporated, and the rabbis seemed to spring to life, as if they had been resurrected, and again began to talk among themselves, as if nothing had happened.

Rabbi Shimon now said: "I think our mule driver is onto something with what he is saying. There is a basic unity to life. Differences, distinctions, complications, contradictions—these are illusions."

Rabbi Hiyya said: "We already decided that even illusion is illusory, didn't we, in our discussion of Talmud Tractate Hagigah 14b, which describes the four rabbis entering the *pardes*—the orchard—paradise?"

"What did we decide?" asked Rabbi Pinchas.

"That often what we think is real, is not, and also the other way around," said Rabbi Hiyya. "Like what Rabbi Yehudah said about the way he reacts to people criticizing him."

"Indeed," said Rabbi Shimon. "We also heard a voice of unknown origin telling us that none of this mattered as much as the memory of two long-gone friends, that the memory was more real than debating whether reality is illusion or illusion is reality, more real than any of our discussions. This is sobering, *chevra*, don't you think?"

The rabbis collectively sighed, along with the mule driver. Even the mules seemed to sigh, and the clouds overhead as well.

"Maybe some matters and things are not illusory but just simpler than they appear," said Rabbi Isaac.

"What do you mean?" asked Rabbi Abba.

"Take resurrection," Rabbi Isaac responded.

"Take it," Rabbi Yose responded tartly.

"How can it be, for example," Rabbi Isaac asked, "that at the end of days the dead will arise? There were just six-hundred-thirteen-thousand souls at Sinai. There are many more Jews now, plus a lot of other people in other countries. Where did the resurrected bodies of the dead go? And where will future resurrected bodies go? Will the new bodies be without souls?"

Rabbi Hizkiyah said: "That is why I said before that the later generations have pieces of earlier souls."

The mule driver restated what he had said before: "The soul is indivisible, so how can the original souls be subdivided?"

The rabbis seemed at a stalemate, but just then Rabbi Shimon reentered the discussion: "New souls are continuously being born, from the treasury of souls. Older souls continue to circulate, depending upon the kind of life they led while alive, and new souls join them."

Rabbi Abba asked: "How do we know which kind of soul we have when we are born into this world?"

The mule driver replied: "We don't, for if we did, we might not live this life in full and do good deeds. We have to act as if we have no past; otherwise things would seem too complicated, more complicated than they really are."

Rabbi Yesa said, echoing what he had said before about the celestial garments: "The patriarch Joseph's coat of many colors was his garment of good deeds, his garment of light, the garment he would wear after he went to heaven."

"Amen!" the rabbis shouted as one.

The companions now began to discuss the Luz bone, said to be the bone in the body from which we will be resurrected at the end of days.

Rabbi Eleazar said: "Some say this bone is at the top of the spine, while others say it is at the bottom."

Rabbi Isaac said: "The Talmud says it is indestructible—it cannot be crushed, dissolved, or burned."

Rabbi Yehudah said: "Other commentators say this is just not true. Nothing is indestructible, even diamond, supposedly the world's hardest substance."

Rabbi Eleazar said: "Even if it could be burned, a vapor would still remain, mixing with the atmosphere."

Seemingly taking off in a new direction, Rabbi Yehudah now asked: "What do *teshuvah* and resurrection have to do with each other, if anything?"

Again the mule driver was the first to respond: "*Teshuvah*—returning to closeness to God—is a kind of rebirth, and resurrection a kind of returning. When it is said in Daniel that 'many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence,' *teshuvah* is what is being referred to, not *literal* resurrection."

"Amen!" the rabbis again shouted.

The mule driver now told of another tradition: "It is said that in Central Asia certain magicians are able, by withholding their semen while pleasuring their wives, to transform it into a crystalline substance that cannot be destroyed and that will house the magician's soul after the magician dies. The soul will therefore be immortal."

Quoting again from Ecclesiastes, Rabbi Eleazer said, more loudly than before: "Nothing is new under the sun."

The rabbis sat quietly, listening. Even the mules seemed to be listening: They had perked up their ears.

Rabbi Shimon now said: "Come and see. I had a dream in which a voice said the Luz bone refers to the Torah and the Talmud. They cannot be destroyed, and from them, even if no more Jews remain on earth, the Jewish people will be resurrected at the end of days."

Rabbi Hizkiyah said: "A *maggid* came to me recently at night and told me that the *Zohar* [the *Book of Splendor*], the book that will contain all of our discussions, is what is meant by the Luz bone."

The rabbis heaved a collective sigh. To themselves they were wondering which of them would go directly to heaven, to the upper Garden of Eden; which would have to suffer at death or on the way there; which would have to return to Earth to do additional work until seen fit to ascend to the proximity of the Holy One; which would be required to transmigrate, perhaps to be reborn in the body of an insect or even as a mule. They also began to wonder about the strange, wise mule driver, about who he was and whether he was a reborn or resurrected soul. Silently their heads were spinning, and their hearts pounded with fear, fear of the unknown, for although they had tried to lead exemplary lives, they also knew they had faults, including faults they were not aware of and that only the Holy One knew of.

The mule driver then took the reins of the mules and began moving away from the rabbis, ostensibly to allow the mules to drink from the river. But before he was out of range, he said aloud: "When I take a dip in this river on Shabbat, I will look for the ascending and descending angels." As if in response, the river made a whooshing sound.

And then, almost with what seemed another whooshing sound, he was gone, like the flower in Psalm 103 that disappears after being stirred by the wind.

"Where'd he go?!" the rabbis exclaimed, almost in unison. The mules looked up, flicked their ears as if in response, then continued drinking from the river, which suddenly seemed more shallow than usual.

Of course, this was no ordinary mule driver. It was Rav Hamnuna Sava, the famous Torah interpreter from Talmudic times, paying a visit to a time period far away perhaps in years but not in sensibility. His

companion sages in Ávila instinctively knew this but did not want to break the spell by saying anything.

Rabbi Eleazar was the first to break the silence: "How odd, that mule driver and his mules. At first seemingly inseparable, then separable, then inseparable, and so on."

Rabbi Hizkiyah then asked: "How do you mean?"

Rabbi Eleazar said: "Like body and soul."

The other rabbis sighed, almost in unison.

Like a burned Luz bone, or a memorable exchange of words of Torah, or the songs the mule driver had sung, a strange, unworldly vapor lingered, and in spite of breezes and noises; in spite of a most saintly birth in the city; in spite of saintly visits to the region; in spite of the resurrection of Jewish history; in spite of the creation of a memory garden within the city wall. In spite of all manner of external doings and sayings, something lingered from the past, an old soul, a composite soul, perhaps immortal, meant to guide visitors on their own journeys through this world and, it would be hoped, to the next.

## Notes

I found, translated, and edited this manuscript in early 2018, shortly after my father, of blessed memory, died, at the end of 2017. It appears to be a heretofore unknown text from the *Zohar*, the *Book of Splendor* (or *Radiance*) traditionally attributed to the second-century Talmudic sage Rabbi Shimon bar (or ben) Yochai but more likely the work of one or more thirteenth- and possibly fourteenth-century Spanish kabbalists (Jewish mystics)—perhaps a school—including, most prominently, Rabbi Moses de León, since the books of the *Zohar* we know today began appearing at the end of the thirteenth century. Why the rabbi or rabbis involved in the project didn't lend their own name to these texts is not really known, but possibly it was to lend the work the authority of the earlier, Talmudic sage.

After my father's death and after reading this manuscript, I thought, for obvious reasons, long and hard about the matters under consideration, which are given different names and applications, namely, rebirth, reincarnation, transmigration, and resurrection. I also read biblical, Talmudic, other mystical, Hasidic, and philosophical commentaries on these subjects, in addition to some Indian, Greek, Mesopotamian, Chinese, Tibetan, and other texts. Some of the Jewish texts were provided by, and discussed with, Rabbi Tirzah Firestone, whom I also wish to thank for perhaps unknowingly having inspired the direction of this project.

I also thought again about my mother, of blessed memory, who died in 2012; about my father, of blessed memory, who died in 2017; and about David Stoller and R. C. Morse, two close literary friends of blessed memory who died much too young in the 1980s—they were in their thirties—as well as about other friends, acquaintances, and relatives who had died.

When someone I know dies, I feel as if a light has gone out, a star extinguished. For these stars there is no afterlife, no resurrection, no rebirth or reincarnation, no transmigration into another form. When the person who dies is someone I knew my whole life, or for a long time, there is no way to replace this person: Making new friends isn't easy, making lifelong friends at my age even harder, and making new

parents and grandparents impossible. As I age, I feel the universe to be progressively darkening.

Lately, however, I have changed my thinking somewhat, as a result of making new friends. They seem a combination of new souls and recycled ones, perhaps even a composite of preexisting souls.

How do I know?

Some of them are totally, and I mean totally, different from the dead people in my life. Oh, yes, of course there are similarities, but for the most part these new stars are surprises. Other people seem familiar, or have familiar qualities; perhaps I knew some of these people in a past life, or perhaps some pieces in my soul come from the same root soul as pieces in the other people's souls.

I still miss the dead people in my life, and always will, but am joyful that new people now are being born, perhaps reincarnated or reborn, or resurrected, maybe even transmigrated from other life forms. No one but the Holy Ancient One knows the full ancestry of these souls, their soul registry or lineage. And this is a good thing, since I have a lot to discover about them. Another good thing of course is recognition: I sometimes recognize in these new souls a kinship—sometimes it is like finding a sister or brother, or even several sisters and brothers. Sometimes I find a child or an uncle.

In all of this it is not as before when I might have thought these ideas nonsensical when weighed against my day-to-day existence, or "buzheh" as my dear sainted mother might have said. All of the highest cultures have asked the same question: "Where do we go after we die?" This follows, of course, "Where do we come from, what was here before us and where were we before, and of course why are we here in the first place, what are we doing here, what is our purpose?"

Rav Hamnuna Sava would have disagreed with much of this, of course, since he favored simplicity. I do, too, but sometimes simple explanations do not explain enough and leave unsolved mysteries. In addition, they are less interesting than complicated, intricate explanations—at least for some of us.

The focus of earlier Jewish texts dealing with subjects and terms like resurrection, reincarnation, rebirth, and transmigration overlaps somewhat with the focus of the text at hand but in general is more on traditional concepts of sin, with the stages of death and bodily decomposition, with types of hells, and with the details of the afterlife. The current text seems more practical and limited in scope, almost a working blueprint for how to achieve immortality.

Still, these ideas can be complicated, especially the Jewish ones, and often contradictory, even illogical. If we just detach consciousness from desire, we will not be reborn. We also will not suffer in this lifetime. But, as our rabbis said, achieving this isn't easy! Easier perhaps would be going to Varanasi in India and having ourselves cremated, which reputedly will prevent reincarnation. Easier perhaps except that although at one time Jews did cremate, today for various reasons cremation, though still done, mostly by nonreligious Jews, is frowned up. One reason—whether or not you believe in the power of the Luz bone—is that if there is no body at the End of Days, there can be no resurrection. And so we Jews are back where we started, having to earn our afterlife or resurrection the hard way, through good deeds, moderation of desire, acts of lovingkindness, study, and of course prayer. I do not believe we are commanded to believe in any of this, only to act *as if* we believe.

For me, belief, as it was for my mother and perhaps also for my father and grandparents, is in the

beauty of nature, of human beings, of the whole process of Creation and of life, even of technology, and of course of music.

As the Sufi teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan, like me a former musician, said, when you can hear the inner sound of the universe, then everything in your life, in the world, past and present—including the body, the soul, immortality, reincarnation, and resurrection—everything is music.

## Postscript

In October 2018 I conducted a little ceremony for the unveiling of my father's headstone. The next day I returned alone to the cemetery to say two of the prayers in Hebrew. I then began talking to my father, urging him to let go of resentments, grudges, anger, disappointments, and so on, in order to lighten his soul and enable it to float freely to the world-to-come and possibly to avoid rebirth, with its unfinished and messy karmic business. I also said if he could do this, he would ascend wearing only his garment of good deeds, as the *Zohar* puts it. Then, if his soul were to return, its only task would be doing good—giving more charity, helping more students, doing other *mitzvot*, interacting with friends and family and colleagues in only the most positive of ways. I believe that my dad was listening closely, and should you encounter a new tzaddik in your own sphere, perhaps he or she will house the soul of my dear, sainted, beloved father of blessed memory: Bernard Rasof, Beryl Pinchas ben Shoshana v'Yechiel.

## Glossary

**a most saintly birth**—A reference to St Teresa of Ávila (1515–1582), the important Catholic mystic, who, by the way, had Jewish ancestry.

**"Angels in Love"**—Story of an angel sent to Earth to guide a widow through her grieving process.

**aperture of Brahma**—Hindus believe it's the place in the skull through which the soul leaves the body after death.

**Ávila**—City northwest of Madrid, the Spanish capital, that had a thriving Jewish community. **Rabbi Moses de León** lived here; St Teresa of Ávila, an important Catholic mystic, was born here.

**Central Asia**—Oblique reference to teachings described about six hundred years later by the Armenian–Greek spiritual teacher G.I. Gurdjieff (late 19th c.–1949).

**cheder**—Jewish religious school for children (Hebrew).

**chesed**—"Lovingkindness" (Hebrew).

**chevra**—"Friend" or "companion" (Hebrew).

**Chinese book**—*T'ai I Chin Hua Tsung Chih* (*The Secret of the Golden Flower: A Chinese Book of Life*), a Taoist text.

**companions**—The rabbinic companions of **Rabbi Shimon**.

**Epic of Gilgamesh**—Work of literature from Mesopotamia, dated to the third millennium B.C.E.

**Everything Is Music**—Line/title based on words by the Sufi teacher **Hazrat Inayat Khan**: ". . . I arrived at a stage where I touched the music of the spheres. Then every sound became for me a musical note, and all life became music," in Prologue to Hazrat Inayat Khan, *The Mysticism of Sound and Music* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1996), rev. ed., p. xi. However, I recently learned that the Persian poet Rumi (1207–1273) said something similar, so I imagine that either he influenced Inayat Khan or they had similar awakenings (see "Where Everything Is Music," in Coleman Barks, trans., with John Moyne, *The Essential Rumi* (New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1998), pp. 34–35, and also in *Rumi: Selected Poems*, trans. Coleman Barks, with John Moyne, A. J. Arberry, and Reynold Nicholson (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 34–35.

**gehinnom** (also *gehenna*)—In Jewish thought, purgatory (Hebrew).

**Hazrat Inayat Khan**—Indian **Sufi** teacher (1882–1927) who has influenced Westerners either directly or through his son and grandson.

**kabbalah**—The most important strain of Jewish mysticism.

**kabbalist**—A practitioner of **kabbalah**.

**Katha Upanishad**—One of the texts of the Upanishads, sacred texts of the Hindus, which pretty much begins with the question: "Where do we go after we die?"

**Jewish practices**—Various meditation and concentration practices, especially those developed by Rabbi Abraham Abulafia (1240–1291), a Spanish mystic.

**"Last night I dreamed about a man . . . who formulated a principle that says when explanations become too complicated, the simplest one is usually the correct one."**—A reference to Ockham's Razor, a principle set forth by the English philosopher–theologian William of Ockham (1285–1347).

**Luz bone**—Supposedly indestructible bone in the human body that many Jews believe will be the vehicle of resurrection at the End of Days.

**maggid**—Wandering preacher, but in this case a wandering spirit (Hebrew)

**memory garden**—Reference to the Jardin de Moshe de León, in **Ávila**, a garden dedicated to the mystic **Rabbi Moses de León**, the likely author or editor of a good part of the **Zohar**.

**mitzvot**—Biblical commandments (Hebrew). Also, more loosely, "good deeds."

**pardes**—"Orchard," or "paradise" (Hebrew). Also, four levels of biblical interpretation, usually transcribed *prds* (Hebrew).

**Psalms 103**—"As for man, his days are as grass;/ As a flower of the field, so he flourisheth./ For the wind passeth over it, and it is gone; . . ." *JPS Tanakh*, 1917.

**Puerta de la Malaventura, the Gate of Bad Luck**—Gate near the former Jewish quarter of **Ávila** leading in and out of the city.

**rabbi**—Jewish religious teacher.

**Rabbi Moses de León**. Likely author or editor of the major part of the **Zohar**.

**Rabbi Shimon**—Rabbi Shimon bar (or ben) Yochai, the Holy Lamp, the second-century Palestinian rabbi to whom the **Zohar** traditionally is attributed.

**Rabbi Tarfon**—Talmudic sage. See **Talmud**.

**Rabbis Abba, Yose, Isaac, Eleazar, Yehudah, Hiyya, Pinchas, Abbahu, Hizkiyah, and Yesa**—**companions** of **Rabbi Shimon** and the other **rabbis** in the text, 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) and suddenly and mysteriously disappears as suddenly and mysteriously.

**rebirth**—The process a soul goes through after its body dies, in which it comes back in another body.

**reincarnation**—See previous entry and also **transmigration**. The term in Hebrew is *gilgul*, which also means "cycle."

**resurrection**—The process by which a soul or body or both come to life after the body has died.

**saintly visits**—By, for example, the important Christian mystic and St John of the Cross (1542–1591).

**sefira**—Singular of *sefirot* (Hebrew).

**sefira keter**—The highest of the *sefirot*, at the top of the head (Hebrew).

**sefirot**—attributes of God and of ourselves, in some systems of Jewish mysticism (Hebrew).

**Sufi**—An Islamic mystic.

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

**Talmudic period**—Including the earliest period, from about the first century B.C.E. to about the sixth century C.E. See also previous entry.

**Talmud Tractate Hagigah 14b**—Book of the **Talmud** containing the famous story of the four sages who ascended to heaven while still alive.

**teshuvah**—Repentance (Hebrew).

**three souls**—*Nefesh* (body), *ruach* (spirit), and *neshamah* (higher soul) (Hebrew). Although not referred to in the text, there also are three higher souls.

**Torah**—Strictly speaking, the five books of Moses, but often used to refer to all the books of the Hebrew Bible and sometimes as well to all Jewish religious texts.

**transmigration**—The process of a human soul being implanted after death from one being to another, human or nonhuman. Similar meaning to **reincarnation** and **rebirth**.

**Upper Garden of Eden**—The heavenly garden of Eden, the world to come.

**"When I take a dip . . . in this river on Shabbat, I will look for the ascending and descending angels."**—The source is *Zohar* 2:136b [Parashat Terumah (Exodus 25:1–27:19)], in *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, translation and commentary by Daniel C. Matt (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 259. Shabbat is the Jewish sabbath, Friday evening until Saturday evening.

**Zohar**—The *Book of Splendor* (or *Radiance*), attributed to the second-century **Rabbi Shimon** but more likely composed or edited in Spain in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Spanish **Rabbi Moses de León** is the likely author of a large part of the *Zohar*.

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