

Kissing Kabbalists: Hierarchy, Reciprocity, and Equality

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In an afterword to *The Kiss in History*, English historian Keith Thomas comments that the kiss can express “deference, obedience, respect, agreement, reverence, adoration, friendliness, affection, tenderness, love, superiority, inferiority, even insult. There is no such thing as a straightforward kiss.”¹ In religious literature, writers have also been drawn to the image of the kiss for its polyvalence, but have developed its intimacy and erotic suggestiveness particularly as a model for the relationship with the divinity. Thus from the opening of the Song of Songs, “O, let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth” (Song 1:2), allegorically understood by the rabbis to depict the love between Israel and God, to the kiss of peace in the early Christian rite,² to the Talmud’s assertion that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam died by a gentle kiss, to Bernard of Clairvaux’s use of the kiss to describe the mystic rapture that Paul experiences upon his ascent into the heavenly realm, religious imaginations have deployed the motif of the kiss as a model of mystical union.³

In the literature of the *Zohar*, medieval Jewish mysticism’s crown jewel, the gesture of kissing bears a wide variety of motives and meanings. The questions that I address in this paper center on the issue of hierarchy in the relationships between persons involved in the kissing exchange. If the exemplary kiss occurs between God and the mystic, will all kisses bear the imprint of that clear hierarchical interaction, a “kisser” and a “kissee,” as it were? Or can we find a different model of interaction, one between equals, specifically, between a man and his fellow? Or, and this would be more significant because of the culture’s patriarchal structure, between a man and his wife? What will emerge from my inquiry is more than a mere taxonomy of the various uses of the kiss: I believe that this metaphor of exchange and communion will help us think more deeply about central concerns of the zoharic kabbalah, specifically mystical union, embodiment, and gender, within the larger rubric of power. Can we imagine mystical union and gender freed from conventional medieval hierarchies and binaries, or must even the most surprising of kabbalistic texts ultimately be enfolded back into a vertical axis? While most of the *Zohar*’s kisses obtain between master

and disciple, signifying approval of a well-wrought homily, or between man and woman, two reliably hierarchical relationships, I will argue that sometimes the zoharic kabbalists subvert the linearity of gender and power relations. Though their medieval mindset immerses them in patriarchal hierarchies—masculine subordinating feminine, master subordinating disciple—nonetheless, they find avenues of reciprocity and equality in the meeting of one human and another across the bridge of lips.

How shall we understand the meaning of the *Zohar's* many formulaic kisses? Are they merely part of the gestural vocabulary shared by the kabbalists, or do they have more formalized ritual significance? To what extent do kisses serve to demarcate group boundaries (as they do, for example, in the early church)? What kind of kissing occurred between family members, upon greeting friends, etc.? Unfortunately, we know little about the historical lives of the Castilian kabbalists whose lives lie veiled beneath the surface of the text and are left primarily with the tools of literary analysis to decipher the meanings of their kisses. Moreover, because it is becoming increasingly clear that the *Zohar* was worked and reworked over generations, reading literary treatments of kisses in light of each other can be misleading, given that they may well have been developed independently of each other and undergone multiple redactions subsequently.⁴ At our historical moment, then, motif studies in zoharic literature may be suggestive regarding the historical context of late thirteenth century Spain, in which the work first started being disseminated, but ultimately they may have to content themselves with more humble, that is merely literary, conclusions. Nonetheless, working within the context of the received text, this paper adopts literary and phenomenological approaches to the material in the hopes that it might also shed light on the layering of the *Zohar's* authorship and that research into that layering will help clarify the development of this motif.⁵ In order to consider the meaning of human kisses, this paper first examines the ways in which the image of the kiss is used to describe mystical relationships between human beings and God. Subsequently, I turn to the various kinds of human kisses depicted in the *Zohar* with special attention to the question of hierarchies as revealed through the symbol of the kiss.

KISSING AS *DEVEQUT*

AFTER DEATH

The ultimate kiss is the kiss of *devequt* [mystical union], usually achieved

only at the point of death, as one's soul breaks free of its earthly lodging in an eternal embrace with its creator. The classic location for a kiss serving as a medium of *devequt* is in the Babylonian Talmud where we read that Moses, Aaron, and Miriam all died by a kiss "as it is written about them [that they died] by the mouth of the Lord (*al pi YHVH*) (Num 33:38, Deut 34:5)."⁶ With a biblical proof text to support the claim for only Moses and Aaron, the Talmud asserts that Miriam too enjoyed this departing kiss, but the Torah refrained from specifying so out of a sense of propriety. The rabbinic teaching concerning these biblical nobles is part of a larger pericope treating the various figures, including the patriarchs, who escaped the clutches of the Angel of Death.

In a well-known passage from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides uses the image of the kiss in a purely figurative way to indicate the union of the human intellect with the Active Intellect:

When a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure. Because of this the Sages have indicated with reference to the deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that the three of them died by a kiss....Their purpose was to indicate that the three of them died in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love. In this dictum the Sages, may their memory be blessed, followed the generally accepted poetical way of expression that calls the apprehension that is achieved in a state of intense and passionate love for Him, may He be exalted, and a kiss, in accordance with its dictum: "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," and so on. [The Sages,] may their memory be blessed, mention the occurrence of this kind of death, which in true reality is salvation from death, only with regard to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. The other prophets and excellent men are beneath this degree; but it holds good for all of them that the apprehension of their intellects becomes stronger at the separation.⁷

The *Zohar* adapts this approach without signaling that the kiss is merely metaphorical. Thus, we read about the sixth palace, a sub-divine realm populated by kisses: "When the time arrives for a righteous person to

depart from the world, and permission is given to the Other Side [to bring about his demise], these four [supernal angels who are appointed in this palace] stand there at the ready in order to draw out his soul with a kiss so that he should not suffer under the rule of the Other Side.”⁸

Moshe Idel has contrasted this death by a kiss as a natural process with the pursuit of death by a kiss in the writings of Abraham Abulafia and his followers. Thus, in Abulafia’s *Sefer Hayye ha-Olam ha-Ba* we read, “Indeed, one whose soul separated from him at the time of uttering [the Divine Names] dies by the [Divine] kiss. They said of this, R. Akiba’s soul departed with [the uttering of the word] ‘One.’”⁹ Idel argues that, for Abulafia, death by a kiss “is the result of a deliberate process, whereby the mystic enters a state of ecstasy; if death occurs while reciting God’s name, this is a sign that he has attained a very high level.” Moreover, it is for this reason that Akiba is substituted for Moses, Aaron, and Miriam because they enjoyed the kiss passively, as it were, whereas Akiba actively pursued it.¹⁰ Further, whereas Maimonides intends this attainment as something that occurs only at death, Abulafia describes it as mystical ecstasy, to be pursued in this lifetime. “Death here is a mystical process: man leaves this world so long as he succeeds in adhering to the Active Intellect, and thereby inherits the World to Come.”¹¹ The *Zohar* expands upon the teaching, contending that this ecstatic union, symbolized by the kiss, serves as redemption from the Angel of Death not only for Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and the patriarchs, but also for those who live lives immersed in study and righteousness.¹² For such people, their souls cleave to their root; thus, at rare moments this *devequt*, suggested by the kiss, can be enjoyed even during one’s lifetime.

R. Menahem Recanati, the fourteenth century Italian kabbalist who was strongly influenced by zoharic kabbalah, writes the following about the *devequt* that can transpire during prayer or in the study of kabbalistic teachings:

Thus a person should regard himself after completing the statutory prayers as if he had departed the world for he had separated from the Tree of Life and brought his feet towards the Tree of Death for he has returned his surety (i.e. his body), as it is said, “[Yaakov] gathered up his feet into the bed, and expired,” (Gen 49:33). Contemplate this great mystery that I will reveal to you that is contained in the teaching of our teachers, may their memory be for a blessing: “The patriarchs died by a kiss since they were exceedingly pious, masters of contemplation (*anshei ma’aseh mitbodedim*) who

were occupied with the supernal mysteries. They would delineate with the imaginative faculty as if these matters were engraved before them. When they would tie their souls (*nafsham*) with the supernal soul [spiritual] matters would increase and become blessed and revealed automatically from the [act of] vacating the mind. This is like a person who opens up a spigot and [the water] flows and flows. For the *mahashavah ha-deveikah* is the source and the pool (*bereikhab*) and the spring that never ceases. Therefore, one who causes his mind to cleave (*ha-madbik ha-mahashavah*) to an evil thought is worse than the sin as the rabbis said, “Thoughts of sin are worse than the sin itself.” Our rabbis, of blessed memory, taught in chapter *ein dorshin* “Ben ’Azzai was sitting etc....I am only sitting and teaching and the words are descending and rejoicing before me.” The reason is that when he would cause his soul to cleave to the supernal soul, the awesome words would be engraved upon his heart and he would imagine them (*mehayeram*) as if a person were putting the words into his mouth. As a result of this cleaving of thought with this emanation that emanated and that he had drawn down upon himself, the words were supplemented and increased, and they were revealed to him out of joy. This is why [the rabbis have taught] that the *Shekhinah* does not rest [upon a person] who is lazy (and so forth) but rather from joy. Sometimes this joy will overcome him until a great and wondrous crying befalls him, and his *neshamah* and his *nefesh* will seek to separate from his body and this is death by a kiss. This teaches about the joining of the one who kisses to that which is beloved to him, for then his soul (*nefesh*) will cleave to the *Shekhinah*. This is why sometimes in the *Zohar* you will find in the revelation of mysteries, “Rabbi Ploni rose and cried.” Perhaps his crying would overcome him until his soul (*nishmato*) was gathered up as it says, “and he gathered up his feet into the bed.” If he sets his heart upon it his spirit (*ruah*) and his (*neshamah*) will be gathered up to Him.¹³

The *petite mort* that is described in this passage explicates the technique and experience of “the kiss of death.” Rather than being a permanent departure from this world, it signifies a temporary split of the soul from the body so that it can adhere to the *Shekhinah* above.¹⁴ The metaphor of choice is the kiss because of the deep desire that the mystic has for Divinity, his beloved.

ORIGIN OF SOULS

In addition to the rapture at death or this-worldly *devequt*, kissing is also used in kabbalistic material to indicate the primordial connection between different gradations of the Godhead and between God and the soul. In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, R. Ezra of Gerona writes: “Oh, let him kiss me’: These are the Glory’s words, full of longing, desiring to make its ascent, to adhere to the light of the supernal luminescence which is like nothing else. It ascends in thought and idea and thus speaks in the third person. The kiss symbolizes the joy attained by the soul in its adhesion to the source of life and the additional infusion of the holy spirit. Thus the verse specifies ‘kisses.’”¹⁵ In the kiss between God and the soul there is a dual exchange: the desire and joy of the soul as it cleaves upwards and the soul’s reception of holy spirit progressing downwards.¹⁶ This use of the symbol helps lay the ontological groundwork that will be developed in the zoharic literature in the decades to come. It is the unificatory moment that enables the flow of spirit and divine energy between upper and lower realms.¹⁷

Nicola Perella has studied the confederation of kissing and the transmission of life, tracing the strong link between the kiss and the infusion or exchange of breath between the two parties.¹⁸ In the *Zohar*, too, the kiss serves as the initiating moment of the soul’s existence in this world. One teaching from the *Zohar* highlights the notion that human spirits have their ontological origin and continued maintenance deriving from kisses from above: “All the holy spirits that are sustained through the sustenance of supernal kisses emerge from this [the fifth] palace. For from these kisses emerges a vapor of the spirit that sustains the soul (*nafsha*) of all of those supernal souls (*nishmatin*) that are bestowed upon humanity.” This secret is attested in Scripture: “for man will live from everything that emerges from the mouth of the Lord” because in this palace stand all the souls and all the spirits that will be summoned to descend among humanity from the day that the world was created.¹⁹ Kisses from God enable souls to proceed into this world, one of the ways in which the *Zohar* interprets “man does not live by bread alone but by everything that emerges from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3).²⁰ The text deploys kisses from the divinity as the metaphor par excellence to describe the emergence of the divine efflux that sustains every human soul. In a typically hyperliteral translation, life’s origins proceed from between the divine lips. Kisses in such a case are unilateral, flowing from above, bequeathing life upon lifeless lumps as

God's speech is conflated with the kiss.

Other kisses, too, serve instrumental purposes even as they express deep love. One passage describes the order of prayer in terms of its theurgic effects; that is, its effects upon the divinity. The morning prayer service up until the statutory prayer [*shemone esrei*] prepares the *Shekhinah* for Her union with the upper *sefirot*:

When we stand before the supernal king we must stand in our place in fear and trembling. Then He extends His right hand towards Her and then He places His left hand beneath Her head. Then they embrace each other as one with kisses. These [gestures] are the first three [blessings of the statutory prayer] and a person must align his heart and his will and have intention (*kavvanah*) in all of these rectifications (*tiqqunim*) and the procedure of the prayers. His mouth, his heart and his will shall be unified. Then the Supernal King and Matron (*matronita*) are in the blissful union of kisses. One who wishes to submit petitions should petition for this is a time of goodwill.²¹

The daily prayers call for the person praying to perform unifications and in turn engineer the unifications of the masculine and feminine potencies within the Godhead. In the recital of these three blessings, the person praying stands not only in his own place, but also in that of the *Matronita* and that of the Supernal King as well. While standing in place on earth, he effects the movements of the divine feminine towards the divine masculine, initiating the divine embrace, an embrace of the King and *Shekhinah* and of King and human petitioner. That intimate joining, the moment of longing and desire, is not only the time of kisses, but also an auspicious time for propitiatory invocation. To put things quite baldly, good kissing brings results. These kisses/opening blessings lead to the goal of full unification through intercourse/completion of the statutory prayer.

A FAVORABLE MOMENT [*'ET RATZON*]

The immediacy witnessed above is what makes the metaphor attractive for representing a variety of religious goals; successful prayer is uppermost among these. In the following passage, we see the ways in which heaven's responsiveness to prayer, the transmission of esoteric lore, and the reunification of pure souls with their source are all enfolded in the symbolic domain of the kiss:

The sixth palace is called the palace of Will (*ratzon*), the Will (*ra'ava*) that is called “[everything] that emerges from the mouth of the Lord” (Deut 8:3). [This is] the joy of union (*hedva de-iddabquta*) of everything and it is the will of will in the mystery of Scripture’s “Your lips are like a thread of scarlet” (Song 4:3), the will of the souls that emerge from [the verse] “[everything] that emerges from the mouth of the Lord.” This palace is the palace of Will in which all of the requests and all of the petitions of the world are fulfilled; it is the Will of Wills, where the kisses reside, as in the mystery of “And Yaakov kissed Rachel” (Gen 29:11). Then, once one has kissed the other, it is called *'et rason* [favorable moment] because there is perfection and all faces are beaming. When prayers ascend, that is a favorable moment. Of this it is written, “As for me, may my prayer come to You, O Lord, at a favorable moment” (Ps 69:14) which is the joining (*hibbura*) of one with the other.²²

Kisses here are both ethereal and alluring, their connection to human experience not so attenuated as to render them entirely disembodied. In this passage, the sixth palace, which corresponds to the *sefirah Tif'eret*, is both the point of origin of love and kisses, and the site of the fulfillment of prayers. The petitioners’ lips are met by lips in the “favorable moment,” resulting in the luminous faces of the petitioners. The mystical unions that are achieved in this palace occur between the prayers of the supplicants and the unreferenced presence of God. This “oral” union is a lower manifestation of the kisses that occur between the *sefirot Tif'eret* and *Malkhut*, as suggested by the biblical proof text, “And Yaakov kissed Rachel” (Gen 29:11). The passage continues, conflating the pure desires of the souls of martyrs with the desires of sincere prayers: “Given over to the hands of this spirit [who supervises the palace] are all of the mysteries, the supernal souls who arouse desire for love above and below as one. These are the souls of Rabbi Akiva and his companions for they were not brought to bathe in the Dinur river like all other souls who pass through to bathe there.”²³ Deserving prayers and deserving souls merit the immediacy of the palace of kisses. In both prayer and martyrdom, fervor trumps the usual blockages that impede progress towards divinity, and this smooth journey is phenomenologically identified with the eros and propinquity of a kiss.

In some of the *Zohar*’s treatments of Song of Songs 1:2, the kisses

that are ostensibly exchanged between lovers are transformed into benefits conferred from above: “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth” could be rendered as “Let Him kiss me from among the kisses of His mouth.” The *Zohar* explains, “One should certainly not ask for a lot but rather a small amount. . . . One can ask for a small amount from the blessed Holy One and He bestows a great deal.”²⁴ In all of these instances, there is no question as to who is the master of the romance inasmuch as kisses are bestowed rather than exchanged.

HUMAN KISSES

INTENT

Turning to reflect upon the kisses that are given or exchanged between people, let us first consider a passage that uses many of the same tropes that characterize the inter-human kisses, but applies them to kisses given by God:

Rabbi Isaac opened, “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth” (Song 1:2).²⁵ The Community of Israel said, “Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.” Why does it say, “Let Him kiss me (*yishaqeni*)”? It should say, “Let Him love me!” But we have learned, “What are kisses? The cleaving of spirit to spirit (*itdabquta ruah be-ruah*).”²⁶ This is why the kiss must be on the mouth because the mouth is the point of egress and the source of the spirit.²⁷ A kiss on the mouth is a kiss of love and the cleaving of spirit to spirit in which one never separates from the other. Therefore, one whose soul departs with a kiss cleaves to another spirit, with a spirit that will never abandon it. That is what is called a kiss. The Community of Israel said of this, “Let Him kiss me (*yishaqeni*) with the kisses of His mouth,” so that spirit cleaves to spirit and will never separate from each other.²⁸

Phrases such as “the cleaving of spirit to spirit (*itdabquta ruah be-ruah*)” and “A kiss on the mouth is a kiss of love and the cleaving of spirit to spirit in which one never separates from the other” become refrains in the *Zohar*’s treatment of the kiss. They signify the absence of mediation and the possibility of eternal union. Moments of mystical encounter, and their representation as kisses with this spirit-to-spirit, mouth-to-mouth formula, ground human kisses in analogous mystical turf.

In this passage, the poetic redundancy of *yishaqeni* [Let Him kiss me] in

conjunction *mi-neshiqot fihu* [with the kisses of His mouth] troubles Rabbi Isaac; “Let Him love me” would have sufficed, he suggests. He contends that the doubled reference to kissing indicates that the Community of Israel asks for a kiss on the mouth because it is only through a kiss that the Community of Israel can attain the full union that She desires. It is the embodied quality and experience of the kiss that enables the kiss between human beings to teach directly and explicitly about kisses from God. When the text says that “the mouth is the point of egress and the source of the spirit,” it is referring to both the human mouth, the site at which human spirits meet, and the divine mouth from which human spirits emerge. In this way, the text mobilizes erotic energies in the service of divine worship and human love.

The focus on love and indivisible connection leads to the establishment of criteria by which to evaluate kisses, particularly along the lines of intent and sincerity, central features of the *Zohar*’s pietistic orientation. Responding to R. Isaac, R. Judah maintains that the verse’s concern is not with form or behavior but rather with intent:

R. Judah said, “And Jacob kissed Rachel and raised his voice and wept” (Gen 29:11). Why did he weep? Because of his spirit’s cleaving to her his heart could not withstand it, and he wept. And if you were to say, behold, it is written, [with regard to Esau] “and he kissed him, and they wept,” (Gen 33:4), we have learned in a mishnah, “Why are there dots above the word ‘*va-yishaqehu*’?²⁹ Because he [Esau] did not cause his spirit to cleave to him at all.” Similarly, it is written, “The kisses of the enemy are profuse” (Prov 27:6). What is the meaning of “The kisses of the enemy are profuse”? One who kisses out of love causes his spirit to cleave to the spirit of the other in the cleaving of love. And with one who does not kiss with love there is no cleaving, only profuseness. What is the meaning of “profuseness”? Coarseness. Because he does not cause cleaving of his spirit with that kiss. And there is no cleaving to him at all. Therefore it is written, “O let him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth,” because *that* is the cleaving of spirit to spirit. It has been taught that whenever the Holy One, blessed be He, travels with Israel, as it were, He causes a cleaving of spirit with spirit. Concerning this it is written, “But you who cleave unto the Lord” (Deut 4:4), in all the modes of cleaving, and they did not separate one from the other.

The debate between R. Isaac and R. Judah is one of form versus content. For R. Isaac, one might have thought that a plea of “Let him love me” would suffice, but he contends that it is the embodied nature of the kiss that clinches the metaphysical union between partners. Specifying a kiss implies an exchange of spirit and thus union. For R. Judah, specifying the kiss per se is so much texture without content. He contests the behaviorism, hence “superficiality,” of R. Isaac’s approach. Juxtaposing two kisses involving Jacob, the first in which he kisses Rachel and the second in which he is kissed by Esau, R. Judah poses two categories: loving kisses and insincere kisses. The exegetical hook for R. Judah is the presence of masoretic dots above the word *va-yishagehu* [and he (Esau) kissed him], interpreted rabbinically as referring to the various manners of assault that Esau attempted in his embrace of Jacob, alternately a thieving attempt to see if Jacob was concealing jewels or hiding an effort to bite his younger brother.³⁰ The profuseness, hence insincerity, of the kisses of an enemy contrasts with Jacob’s kiss to Rachel which is said to be sincere. Without explication the text indicates that additional words, “*mi-neshiqot fibu*,” modify the kissing to indicate sincerity: “This is why it is written, ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.’”

As if shifting gears the text continues, saying, “It has been taught, whenever the blessed, Holy One travels with Israel, spirit cleaves with spirit, as it were. Therefore it is written, ‘But you who did cleave to the Lord your God [are all alive this day]’ (Deut 4:4), in all manners of cleaving and they do not separate from one another.” The text’s jump from kisses to an explicit reference regarding the joining of God with Israel appears to rely on the unusual word *pihu*. As pointed out elsewhere in the *Zohar adash*, the word *pihu* contains the first three letters of the tetragrammaton, and the *Zohar* implicitly uses that idiosyncratic detail to make the link of God traveling with Israel to the kisses.³¹ For R. Judah, it is not the site of the kiss that matters, but rather what lies in the inner recesses of the heart that determines the value of the kiss. The presence of the divinity, as indicated by God’s name in the exchange, determines the sincerity and value of the kiss. The test of a true kiss, and testing is seminal in the *Zohar*, is whether it is enacted with proper consciousness, an awareness that it partakes of the primordial kisses: “There is no love of *devequt*, of spirit to spirit, without a kiss. And it is the kiss of the mouth which is the spring of the spirit and the way it exits. When one kisses the other, the spirits of these cleave with those and they are one. And then it is one love.”³²

APPROBATION & ADMISSION INTO THE KABBALISTIC COTERIE

The second type of kissing that I consider is the kiss that proceeds from a senior figure to a junior figure as a sign of approval, love, and acceptance. R. Abba teaches that kissing means to support or to sate. He draws his support from Genesis 41:40, in which Pharaoh says to Yosef, “*ve-al pikha yishak ami*,” which translates more literally as “by your word shall all my people be ruled.”³³ For R. Abba the love of the kiss is the love a superior communicates to those below him, by caring for them and sustaining them. His kiss is the kiss of the benevolent king or father, not that of a partner or peer.

The most common of kisses in the zoharic corpus are those bestowed from master to disciple. The literary source for this kiss is *Tosefta Hagigah* 2:1 (and its Talmudic parallels), in which R. Eleazar ben Arakh delivers a mystical homily before his teacher, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai. The passage concludes as follows, “When Rabbi Eleazar ben Arakh finished with the account of the chariot, R. Yohanan ben Zakkai rose and kissed him on his head. He said, ‘Blessed is the Lord, God of Israel who gave to our forefather Abraham a wise son who knows how to teach about the glory of our Father in heaven.’”³⁴ In our modern-day contexts, this behavior would accord tidily with a parental kiss approving a child’s performance. In the environments of the Talmud and of the kabbalists—less anxious than in our own day—teachers kiss their students without reserve.³⁵ A similar example, probably modelled on this last one, can be found in the late midrashic collection, *Pirqe R. Eliezer*. After the protagonist becomes illuminated, we read, “While Rabbi Eliezer was sitting and expounding his face was luminous like the light of the sun and his rays emanated like the rays of Moshe. Nobody could tell if it was day or night. Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai came from behind him and kissed him on his head. He said to him, ‘Happy are you, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that this one has come from your loins.’”³⁶

In dozens of instances in the *Zohar*, a master kisses his disciple after the latter successfully delivers a mystical homily, following these rabbinic patterns.³⁷ Sometimes the narrative is explicit, indicating that the kiss is planted on the head, the eyes, mouth, or hands, but most often that specificity of detail is omitted. Since there are no truly common folk in the *Zohar*—even the most vulgar are eventually revealed as great kabbalists—it is hard to ascertain whether these kisses serve a ritual function, indicating that a person is now inducted into the mystical fraternity. The kisses’

meaning then could be equivalent to an American pat on the back or, given the mystical background discussed above, a minor form of mystical union. This is the question to which I now attend.

When the *Zohar's* fictional kabbalists kiss the wondrous child kabbalist [*yanoqa*] whose brilliance surpasses that of his guests, the mystical protagonists, they “kiss him with their mouths on his head and on his eyes.”³⁸ Many of the *Zohar's* formulaic kisses are bestowed upon the head: from master to disciple, adult kabbalist to child kabbalist, or from a member of the mystical fraternity to one of the mysterious donkey-driving kabbalists.³⁹ The kiss on the head invariably signals a distinction in social status between the one imparting the kiss and the one receiving it.⁴⁰ Each of these kisses bears semiotic meaning, depending on the cultural import of the limb involved: an appreciation of or desire to draw from the place of vision in the case of eyes, or the place from which blessing sometimes proceeds, from the hands. As the following passage suggests, there is an element of intimate joining even in the most apparently innocent of kisses. At the end of one of the child's homilies, the narrative says, “R. Yeisa came and kissed him. He said, ‘So much goodness hidden in your hand and I was unaware.’ He (the child) said, ‘I will turn from the path and join together with you.’ They went. R. Hizkiyah said, ‘Let us travel on this path of the *Shekhinah* because it is paved before us.’ He joined hands with the child and they proceeded. They said to him, ‘Tell us about one verse from [the teachings of] your father!’ The child opened, saying, ‘Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.’”⁴¹

In the course of two lines of text, there is social adhesion through kisses, walking, handholding, and teaching, concluding with a verse of mystical union from the Song of Songs. The narrative's kiss is enfolded in the larger narrative structure of communing and unites the narrative with the homily. While this social compact of kabbalists and child may fall short of mystical union, it does represent a layer of social complementarity to the mystical reading of Song of Songs 1:2.⁴² The kiss here is one element of a broad array of gestural, narrative, and homiletically mergers; while certainly not the focus of the narrative, it is characteristic of its themes.

As we have seen, these formulaic kisses signify the status of belonging to the circle of kabbalists. In the latter strata of the *Zohar*, the denial of a kiss reinforces social and metaphysical boundaries. In one passage from the *Tiqqunei Zohar*, the text portrays the *yanoqa* as literally otherworldly. Following the child's delivery of a mystical midrash, the rabbis approach

the child to kiss him, but he disappears.⁴³ Clearly, the child's kabbalistic Torah transcends the reach of normal humans and is reserved, presumably, for those who have passed on to the next world. The implicit assumption is that the *yanoqa* is the doomed child of tractate *Hagigah*, taken before his time because he was occupied with esoteric matters.⁴⁴

This motif of the kiss denied occurs in another instance in the *Tiqqunim* of *Zohar Hadash*, but this time with the Saba [another mysterious kabbalist and denizen of the world-to-come] as the protagonist. This time there is an explanation for the Saba's vanishing: "The holy lamp (R. Shim'on) rose along with all of his attendants in order to kiss him [the Saba]. He disappeared. R. Shim'on said, 'Certainly this old man did not want to receive our reward of kissing him and so he fled. How fortunate is our lot that we have merited to hear about the reward in the world-to-come for the commandment of prayer [the subject of the old man's homily].'"⁴⁵ The explanation, such as it is, for the old man's fleeing the kiss is rather oblique. How is a kiss a reward? It is a pietistic choice that R. Hemnuna Saba makes, not wanting to receive recognition for the Torah that he had taught. When R. Shim'on's son Eleazar asks about the man's identity, R. Shim'on explains that the Saba and other holy souls clothe themselves in the mystical discourses of the kabbalists below, indicating that, as with the child mentioned above, the Saba, too, is a phantom that cannot be reached.

The failed kiss marks the hinge in each of these stories' conclusions, whereas in the *Zohar's* narratives the kisses that follow homilies serves as ritualized gestures and signs of approbation, completing the story. In rabbinic literature, a kiss from God signals the recipient's fitness to make the transit from this world to the next without distress; in the texts that we have examined from the *Zohar* proper, the kiss signifies social, intellectual, and spiritual rapport; in these last texts, in contrast, the kiss is a reminder of the constraints on the pursuit of the transcendent. Like God refusing Moses' request to see his face, the *yanoqa* and the Saba refuse the kabbalists' request for intimacy as well. The denial of kisses is deployed as the mechanism that signifies refusal of entry to a realm reserved for the deceased righteous.

To contextualize these kisses that are exchanged among members of the mystical coterie, we consider the kisses that words of prayer and words of Torah receive, as well as the kisses that converts receive as they are brought under the wings of the *Shekhinah*. In a long homily about

prayer, we read about the supernal events that occur when Jews enter the synagogue for prayer:

They begin with hymns and praises that a person must [offer] after he has prepared himself through the service that is performed with the adornment of commandments and holiness. [This is] in order to unify his heart in the fitting inner service of his Master, and to align his heart and his will in this service of words, for the word ascends.⁴⁶ Those angels who are appointed in the ether are appointed to the four winds of the world. For the east side there is one angel who stands in the ether on that side and his name is GZRDYA. With him are other appointed supernal princes who wait for that word of prayer. It ascends in the ether on that side and this angel takes it. If the word is fitting, he and all the other princes⁴⁷ kiss that word and ascend with it until that ether of the firmament above where there are other appointed princes. When he kisses that word he opens, saying, “Happy are you, O Israel for you know how to crown your master with holy crowns. Happy is the mouth from which this crowning word has emerged.”⁴⁸

The passage continues with a series of similar scenes for each one of the angels appointed over the different directions. At each new stage, there is a kiss and a declaration of the word’s praiseworthiness. Kisses are a sign of love and approval, but they also serve ritually to signal the fitness of words of prayer, permitting entry to a higher level.⁴⁹ These tender, paternalistic scenes depict the love that transpires at the words’ graduation from one degree to another. The angels’ kissing words of prayer parallel the masters’ kissing their disciples upon the latters’ successful delivery of a mystical homily. Indeed, seeing the kiss in this non-human context underscores the way in which these kisses are ritualized.

In Catherine Bell’s discussion of ritualization, a practice becomes ritualized when it is accompanied by an interpretative declaration or some other correlated practice that distinguishes it from ordinary gestures.⁵⁰ Throughout the *Zohar*’s narrations of kisses of approbation, the kiss is quite frequently followed by a rabbi proclaiming the uniqueness of that particular teaching. Thus we read, “Rabbi Pinhas came and kissed him. He declared, ‘Blessed is the Compassionate One, that we happened to meet here’”; “They came up and kissed him. Rabbi Yose proclaimed for him, ‘All your children will be taught by YHVH...(Isa 54:13)’”; “Rabbi

Yeisa came and kissed him, saying, ‘all this goodness in your hand, and I was unaware!’”; “Rabbi Yitzhak came and kissed him, saying, ‘If I walked this way just to hear this, I am satisfied!’”; “R. Hiyya approached and kissed him on the head. He said to him, ‘You are a child but supernal wisdom rests in your heart!’”; “R. Shimon approached and kissed him. He said to him, ‘Your name is light (R. *Nehorai*) and you are light (*nehorai*), and light (*nehorai*) rests with you.’”⁵¹ Adapting the master-student kisses from the Talmud in this way, the formulaic kisses from teacher to student are not mere literary borrowings from the Talmud, but represent an idealized ritual intended to re-animate those patterns of behavior.⁵²

CONVERTS AND ISRAELITES

When a convert’s soul prepares to enter the world, it proceeds under the wings of the *Shekhinah*, who then kisses it.⁵³ Similarly, in writings by the author of *Tiqqunei Zohar* and *Raya Mehemna*, we read a midrash that originates in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* in which the angels descend upon the Israelites at the time of the giving of the Torah, a moment that Maimonides analogizes to conversion.⁵⁴ The angels describe “some stringencies and some leniencies” from among the commandments (the classical formulation about the curriculum for potential converts); when the Israelites accept God’s sovereignty and the yoke of commandments, an angel kisses each person on the mouth.⁵⁵ A more elaborate version is offered in the *Zohar* describing the scene at Mt. Sinai with a voice emerging from each of the commandments, each one in turn producing seventy voices.⁵⁶ A voice descends upon each Israelite asking him for acceptance of “the good parts and the hard parts.” When the Israelite affirms his unwavering commitment, the voice kisses him on the mouth, again joining the spirits of divine voice and human voice.⁵⁷ Each one of these kisses, a metaphor originating in a human context, is recast as a hierarchical joining of two disparate entities. The result: these moments of mystical encounter and their representation as a kiss, with this spirit-to-spirit, mouth-to-mouth formula, ground human kisses in kindred mystical turf. Moreover, it is the vertical axis that is most prominent—God is on top, angels or their vocal proxies in the middle, and human beings below.

That these ritualized kisses reflect the kisses exchanged following homilies can be seen by turning back to the selection examined above from the *Heikhalot* section of the *Zohar*. This passage that describes the sixth palace continues, elaborating other religious moments that occur there:⁵⁸

There are six doorways in this palace: four doorways for the four ends of the world, one above, and one below. There is one spirit appointed over these doorways who is the master of all those who are appointed over these doorways and his name is Raziel. He is appointed and charged with all of the supernal mysteries that are spoken mouth-to-mouth and that are in the kisses from one to the other in the love of loving (*be-rehimu de-rehimuta*).⁵⁹ These mysteries may not be revealed but when the gates open then everyone knows these palaces, all of the spirits and all of its guards, because the gates of Favor have been opened. Only the desires of prayer, desires of praise, desires of holy supernal souls may enter them....Into this palace enter all of those prayers, all of those desires, and praises lovingly composed. When they enter into this palace they all cleave to the blessed Holy One. Everyday, whenever kisses join together, that is the time that the blessed Holy One delights in the souls of the righteous. What is the delight? That the kisses are aroused and they precede that delight. Of this, it is written in Scripture, "Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord" (Isa 58:14).⁶⁰

All of these exchanges are marked by bilateral love. In each one, the human party expresses love or dependence, and the blessed Holy One responds with words, kisses, granting of requests, or the opening of hitherto closed gateways. The kiss is the metaphor par excellence to symbolize the immediacy of relationship obtained in prayer, martyrdom, the transmission of esoteric knowledge, and God's delight in the righteous. Kisses are homologized to the transmission of esoteric knowledge that occurs mouth-to-mouth; when a master kisses a disciple following the latter's performance, he is performing ritually, through kissing, what has already been done verbally. The kiss is an embodied gesture that completes the exchange and marks the union of the two figures in an intimate, social, and esoteric compact.

KISSING PEOPLE AND KISSING GOD

Until now, we have been considering kisses that are clearly hierarchical: from God to biblical figures, the righteous, and kabbalists, or from senior to junior rabbinical figures. Lyrical hints and sometimes explicit references indicate that kissing another person can also entail an encounter with Divinity. This type of kiss is significant because it indicates a mystical style

of social relationship in which interpersonal rendezvous entail mystical experience. It is well known that heterosexual lovemaking can incur this symbolic and ontological convergence with Divinity, exemplified in the Jewish tradition in the anonymously written *Iggeret ha-Qodesh*, but pervasive throughout theosophic kabbalah. In the last generation, scholars have turned their attention to the theurgic significance of the love that was demanded of the members of the *Zohar's* kabbalistic fraternity.⁶¹ In this section of the paper, I turn my attention to the kiss—both between men and women and between men—to discern the symbolic role that this gesture and embodied praxis play in engagement with God.

Sometimes, the mystical import of the kiss is overt. R. Shim'on delivers a homily regarding three miraculous mouths that are accented in *Mishnah Avot*: the opening up of the earth swallowing Korah and his band [*pi ha-aretz*], the mouth of Balaam's donkey [*pi ha-aton*], and the opening of Miriam's well [*pi ha-be'er*]. Approaching his conclusion, R. Shim'on says, "When the [Sabbath] day is sanctified the mouth that is appointed over all other mouths ascends. Which day is it that ascends and is sanctified above all? It is that one which is called 'the mouth of the Lord' (*pi YHVH*) that created these other mouths at twilight on the eve of the Sabbath." Meanwhile, the text continues, "they saw that R. Pinhas was coming. They drew close to him. R. Pinhas came forward and kissed R. Shim'on. He said, 'Let us kiss the mouth of the Lord which is aromatized with the fragrances of its garden.'"⁶² The *Zohar* links Rabbi Shim'on's mouth, which speaks Torah, to God's mouth, which created these other mouths, which are in turn manifestations of God's might, blessing, and life-giving nature. By symbolic extension, kissing R. Shim'on's mouth is kissing the mouth of God Himself. Similarly, when R. Shimon and his band arrive at the home of R. Pinhas ben Ya'ir, he steps out and kisses R. Shim'on, exulting, "I have merited to kiss the *Shekhinah*! How exalted is my portion!"⁶³

Another mouth-to-mouth connection elicits supernatural powers, providing a complement to the examples of the kiss. A zoharic story recounts how a motherless child, whose father had now also died, cried out to heaven in protest of the injustice. Interspersed with his wailing, he kept his mouth firmly pressed against that of his recently deceased father until his father is revived.⁶⁴ After this profound event, everyone present kisses the child, apparently in order to have contact with the locus that bestowed the life-restoring kiss. It is the heart-rending depth

of the child's cries that elicits divine mercy, but the kiss is the medium of resurrection, the transmission of breath and spirit infusing life. The kiss is an act of creation, the transmission of breath, vapor, and spirit that infuses life below.⁶⁵ In these different instances, kisses serve to join individuals together, resurrecting the dead, giving life-support, and providing direct experience, even momentarily, of God in His manifestations on earth.⁶⁶

The last type of kisses that I consider is the kiss that is exchanged between two people who love each other. These kisses are decidedly mystical, partaking of divine love as they enact loving in this world. One typical example is the *Zohar's* comment that when Yitzhak and Rivkah are erotically entangled, they do so in order to take delight from the gleam of the *Shekhinah* [*leihanot mi-ziv ha-Shekhinah*], citing Song of Songs 1:2, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth," as a proof text.⁶⁷ The verse is a cipher for desire; since the underlying assumption of the proof text is that God is the lover, human desire is homologized to the kabbalistic desire to experience direct intimacy with God. How human kisses are associated with God's kisses becomes clear in more elaborate passages treating the mystery of the kiss. The test of a true kiss, the *Zohar* avers, is whether it is executed with a proper consciousness, an awareness that it partakes of the primordial kisses. Immediately following the homily about the kissing of Israelites who had accepted the commandments, the text says:

Another teaching: "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth."
 What did King Solomon see [that led him] to insert words of love between the upper world and the lower world? The love that gains entree between the upper world and the lower world and the beginning of the praise of love that gains access between them is [encapsulated in] "Let Him kiss me [with the kisses of His mouth]." There is no love of *devequt*, of spirit to spirit, without a kiss. This is the kiss of the mouth, which is the spring of the spirit and its point of departure. When one kisses the other, the spirits of these cleave with those and they are one. And then it is one love.⁶⁸

KISSING AND THE INTERMINGLING OF SOULS

This last example points to the mythical substrate underlying the human kiss, which is developed in a series of beautiful homilies in the *Zohar Hadash* on the Song of Songs:

“He shall kiss me”—this is the cleaving of love, of spirit with spirit. For there are four spirits that join together and become one: one gives his spirit to his fellow and takes the spirit of his fellow who is cleaving to him. Thus his spirit and the spirit of his friend make two; and the same is true for his friend. Thus there are four spirits that are united as one with these kisses. “With the kisses of His mouth”: from those supernal kisses that He had kissed before. For there is no love and enjoyment unless they come from the kisses of the Supernal Spirit [to those] below.⁶⁹

As noted above, many cultures understand kissing as an exchange of breath; that is, the mingling of two people’s breath/spirit. In the *Zohar’s* representation of kissing, breath is exchanged by the partners such that A gives of his spirit to B, and reciprocally B gives of his spirit to A. Zoharic mathematics yields four souls: A & B₁ in one person, B & A₁ in the second. The full mystical potency of the human kiss rests upon the notion that human kisses have their origin in the primordial kisses that God first bestowed upon humanity, in which God breathed life into the inanimate lump of clay of Genesis 2. Kissing between a man and his fellow not only marks the mutual fructification of souls, but the kissers thus participate in the paradigmatic kiss that stands at the very inception of life. There is neither true pleasure nor true love in human kissing unless it is grounded in consciousness of its source. Moreover, through kissing, the two have become one, overcoming the divisions into self and other that are the stuff of commonplace experience.⁷⁰

MALE-MALE AND MALE-FEMALE KISSING

Similar to the passage above, but with a striking difference, is a textual comparison of male-male kissing to male-female kissing: “How [can we discern] a kiss of love? Only [a kiss] on the mouth, so that spirit joins with spirit. Each one of them is comprised of two spirits, his spirit and that of his fellow. Thus between the two of them there are four spirits. How much more so in the case of a man and a woman when they are joined—there are four spirits together. The son that comes from them—that is the spirit that comes from four spirits as you have cited, ‘Come, O spirit, from four spirits’—that is a complete spirit.”⁷¹ As in the previous example, only a kiss that is mouth-to-mouth, spirit to spirit, is a kiss of love. Not all kisses are created equal, however, as we see in the privileging of the heterosexual kiss. The prototype is the union of spirits that occurs when two people kiss

on the mouth, creating four spirits, united as one. And yet, the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* continues, the kiss between man and woman trumps the male-male kiss because of the ensuing progeny. In the former instance, kissing is mere foreplay leading to the higher-ranking goal of reproduction.

There are apparently two distinct aims in kissing: the union of souls in love and physical reproduction. This pairing—love and procreation—exists in a certain tension. The privileging of fecundity here can be contrasted with the privileging of the kiss over and above sexual intercourse elsewhere. This can be seen in yet another example from the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam*, in which it is noted that each of the first two verses of the Song of Songs opens with alliterative repetition.⁷² The first verse begins with *shir ha-shirim* [Song of Songs] and the second with *yisshaqeni mi-neshiqot* [He shall kiss me with kisses]. Playing on this wordplay, the text says that the first word coupling, *shir ha-shirim*, refers to the union of bodies, while the second, *yisshaqeni mi-neshiqot*, refers to the union of spirit. As manna, an ethereal food, is a higher form of nourishment than unleavened bread, so too, asserts the text, are kisses a higher form of union than its coarser alternative.⁷³ One attraction of the metaphor of the kiss, for the *Zohar*, is that it lacks the material messiness of sexual intercourse; put differently, the kiss is less physical, more spiritual, and thus more highly valued in the vertically-arrayed metaphysics of medieval kabbalah. Moreover, kissing involves the head, focusing on the mouth—parts of the body that are most connected to the intellect, breath, and the word, idealized zones of the body for ascetically inclined mystics.⁷⁴

Most striking, though, is the comparison of the two different couples: “How much more so in the case of a man and a woman when they are joined—there are four spirits together. The son that comes from them—that is the spirit that comes from four spirits.” The tension between kissing and reproduction becomes most clear here.⁷⁵ For the kabbalists, as for the Talmudic rabbis before them, time spent in learned exchange with other men is the most prized activity; moreover, it is a context in which heterosexual eros is reinforced and sublimated through mystical engagement with the *Shekhinah* in the male, club-like environment of the kabbalistic fraternity. Rather than homosexuality or homoeroticism, these relationships are best understood under the rubric of “male homosocial desire” or, in more colloquial terms, male bonding.⁷⁶ Even when the focus of their conversation is about the eros of mystical connection with the feminine *Shekhinah*, the erotic discourse is one that is shared among men

exclusively, and that same male cohort thus plays a seminal role in the very fabric of the erotic experience. It is time with each other that they cherish, not with their wives. In other words, the heterosexual discourse helps bind these men together; indeed, they experience their interactions together as part of sexual union with the *Shekhinah*.⁷⁷ Moreover, the kiss is a focal point that links the two different forms of social groupings advocated in the *Zohar*, the family and the mystical fraternity.⁷⁸

These texts point to an ambivalence in the kabbalistic ethos, however: which is more highly esteemed, the kiss that leads to the continued propagation of Israel and its holy seed or the kissing borne of the union of fellows and their revelations of esoteric gems? The former, rooted in normative practice and contributing to the conventional development of the Jewish community, served also to multiply God's image on earth.⁷⁹ On the other hand, rooted in material reality, driven by physical desire, and localized in the body, procreation seems somehow less than ideal. Sharing words of Torah—opening up wellsprings of primordial illumination and then lovingly sealing these verbal geysers with a kiss that joins the hearer to the homilist, and the two of them to the source of all love—certainly seems to be a more elevated achievement than the mere production of a human being. Conversely, merely spouting words into the ether does not fulfill God's most basic, and first, command, concretizing that illumination in materiality.

The answer to the dilemma is provided at the beginning of the passage:

Rabbi Rehumai opened, "The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord" (Isa 11:2). These four spirits: no one merits them other than the messiah alone. Ah, but it is written, "From the four spirits (*ruhot*), come, O spirit (*ha-ruah*)" (Ezek 37:9)⁸⁰—Scripture does not say "four spirits" but rather "From the four spirits"—this is a complete spirit. He said to him, "How does this come about?" He said to him, "It comes through the love of kissing." What is the love of kissing? It can only be the kiss on the mouth when spirit joins with spirit and each one of them is comprised of two spirits, his spirit and that of his fellow, such that the two of them comprise four spirits. And all themore so when the male and female join together that there are four spirits together. Understand this.

The one that comes from them is the spirit that comes from four spirits, as you have said, “From four spirits, come, O spirit”—and this is a whole spirit.⁸¹

The long literary history of the verse from Isaiah as being messianic confers a messianic hue upon the entire passage, further reinforcing the significance of the heterosexual kiss.⁸² As a result, the messianic offspring that issues from the heterosexual kiss trumps whatever benefit might obtain from the male-male kiss. Thus, in this framework, the male-male kiss becomes a digression from the trajectory towards the final redemption.

In this example, the use of the number four—four spirits and, of course, four lips—supports a symmetry of partners that bears on the larger question of hierarchies and zoharic poetics. In much of the *Zohar*, progeny are borne of the union of *Tiferet* and *Malkhut*; here, however, the distance between the world above and the one below is collapsed, as the love that produces that spirit can be found in both places. Indeed, the passage suggests that the love of a kiss is always generative of a messianic dimension of reality, if not an actual historical messiah. I note the ambivalence of these two forms of kissing insofar as each of them is productive of the love of kissing and the four souls. It is the symmetry of the male-male kiss, in which partners are arrayed horizontally rather than vertically (as might be expected to be the case in the male-female kiss), that highlights the significance of the kiss as a mark of equality between partners.

Which kiss, then, marks the eschaton? The male-male kiss or the male-female kiss? I submit that in both instances there is a parity between lovers that distinguishes the kiss from coitus. To be sure, one does not altogether elude hierarchical resonances: parents producing progeny is inescapably hierarchical, and the medieval understanding of human physiology is inescapably androcentric. These background details do not undermine what I would argue is the poetic thrust of the passage, in which the romance is configured as a parallel construct. In other words, rather than falling into the neat patriarchal superiority of male over female, master over disciple, the kiss offers a graphic image emphasizing the horizontal axis rather than the vertical.

In a discussion of the difference between the kiss and sexual congress, Moshe Cordovero writes the following: “The kiss is more hidden and delightful than love because love is [symbolized by] the act of the embrace as we have said before. Kissing comes after love and [the *Zohar*] says of it that it is the union of spirit with spirit (*itdabquta ruah be-ruah*).”

He continues, explaining the zoharic passage regarding alliteration cited above:

[Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai] taught that the matter of *Shir ha-Shirim* explained in relation to the *sefirot* as the union of the body—that is the *sefirot* in their external aspect. The kiss, however, is union of spirit with spirit in the internal and soul aspect of the *sefirot*. Thus the two internal spirits are united together like a man who kisses the one he desires on the mouth. For it is by way of the mouth that he unites mouth with mouth, breath with breath, that is, soul with soul, spirit with spirit. The principle that emerges regarding the mouth and kissing from several sources in the *Zohar* is that the mouth symbolizes *Malkhut* in its hidden aspect within *Tif'eret* and it is by way of the mouth that the internal hidden spirit within *Tif'eret* and the internal hidden spirit in *Malkhut* meet and kissing occurs through them. Moreover, kissing arouses from the internal aspect of the *sefirot* that illuminate from *Ein Sof*. Thus, just as they unite from the external aspects of the *sefirot*, so do they unite in the internal aspects of the *sefirot*.⁸³

By analogizing the metaphorical relationship between kissing and intercourse to internal and external aspects of the *sefirot*, Cordovero emphasizes and clarifies the ontological priority of kissing over sexual union, inverting the values suggested by chronology, in which kissing is preparatory for sexual union.⁸⁴

We see a confirmation of this preference in Moshe Cordovero's commentary on the *Zohar*, *Or Yaqar*, in which he compares kissing to the embrace. He says that hugging is an inferior form of cleaving, as it is a union from which there can be separation, because there is no exchange of *ruah*; in a kiss, however, the personal link is grounded in more essential aspects of personhood.⁸⁵ In this way, Cordovero echoes the *Zohar's* distinction between the on-again off-again relationship between *Tif'eret* and *Malkhut* in comparison with the eternally united pair of *Hokhmah* and *Binah*. The latter relationship is depicted as transcending the fickleness of commitment and faith, a place in which polarity is perpetually overcome. One more example of the superiority of kissing comes in one of the *Zohar's* discussions of *heikhalot*:

One *heikhal* is the sixth and one *heikhal* is the seventh. There is desire above in those kisses that Yaakov took, desire below in

the intercourse taken by Yosef. From these two sides the ark of the covenant takes the spirit of life: from the side of Yaakov it takes the supernal spirit of life that cleaves to it [to *Tif'eret*] with those supernal kisses. The supernal spirit of life enters into it [*Shekhinah*] so that She will be nourished by it. From the side of Yosef which is below, at the conclusion of the body in this *heikhal*, it [*Shekhinah*] takes spirits and souls to cast them downward to disseminate in this world.⁸⁶

Here the case is stated quite plainly: kisses are associated with *Tif'eret*, sexual intercourse with the *sefirah Yesod*. While both are necessary, location is everything in determining superiority. With all of zoharic kabbalah's emphasis on heterosexual union, there remains a Neoplatonically-based privileging of kissing over and above sexual intercourse. In both human and divine terms, kissing is the foreplay leading to the more intimate and generative act of intercourse, suggesting that the latter should be the privileged act as it leads directly to the ultimate *telos* of the kiss.⁸⁷ And yet, as the kiss marks unification at the level of spirit, kissing provides a union freed of the coarser bodily dimension.⁸⁸

EQUALITY AND THE BLURRING OF HIERARCHY

The earliest examples cited above that I have suggested indicate equity between kissing partners come from the *Midrash ha-Ne'elam* on the Song of Songs. As we have seen, the poetics of parallelism overcome ontological assumptions associated with gradations of *sefirot* and of gender. The formulae of "mouth with mouth, spirit with spirit" recur in various contexts in the later development of the text, sometimes reinforcing the equilibrium and sometimes transforming it. One example of the latter emerges in a description of Moshe's dialogues with God, described with kisses of reciprocity in a relationship in which hierarchy cannot be ultimately overcome:

This is the palace of Moshe: Moshe entered into this palace with love and he kissed kisses. In this palace, "Moses would speak and God would answer him with voice" (Exod 19:19), when the kisses of one would join together with the kisses of the other (*kad itdabqu neshiqin be-neshiqin da im da*). Of this it is written in Scripture, "Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth" (Song 1:2). There are no kisses of joy and love unless there is joining

of one with the other, mouth-to-mouth, and spirit-to-spirit. For then there is the appearance of one taking total delight in the other and joy from the supernal light.⁸⁹

The love described here cannot ultimately elude hierarchy, but the parallelism of “joining of one with the other, mouth to mouth, spirit to spirit” suggests the blurring of rank that constitutes the bliss of mystical union.

One of the *Zohar*'s primary structuring devices is the use of anagogy, in which two domains, usually upper and lower worlds, are said to symbolically mirror each other. The most common symbol manifesting this is the human body as microcosm of the divine anthropos. The *Zohar* often expresses this symbolic mirroring in a literary form that suggests parallelism between the two entities, and it is that symbolic conflation that constitutes its authors' mystical apprehension of the universe. The literary effect of this linguistic trope is to signal reciprocity, even equality, in instances that ontologically resist that leveling. The alliteration and repetition in phrases such as “the kisses of one would join together with the kisses of the other” [*kad itdabqu neshiqin be-neshiqin da im da*] and “joining of one with the other, mouth to mouth, spirit to spirit” [*mitdabqan da be-da, puma be-puma, ruah be-ruah*] create the effect of mirroring on a horizontal rather than a vertical plane. It might be argued that hierarchies inevitably underlie the kabbalists' medieval style of thinking and that, however symmetrical things might appear, that symmetry is arrayed on a vertical axis that reaches from the heavens to the earth. I would contend, on the contrary, that these phrasings draw upon the equity in the imagery of the human kisses and carry their resonances forward.

These literary forms are informed by the earlier usage and thus are linguistic remnants in the later material. The equality that is established in the horizontal plane of kissing is imported into the more clearly hierarchical, albeit mystical, kisses between God and Moses. The potency of the kiss, I believe, is that it disrupts this easy division by evoking a relationship that is both equal and hierarchical, loving and dependent, horizontal and vertical. Indeed, I would suggest that the visual appearance and sensual experience of the kiss confound these easy dichotomies, most particularly in the context of mystical experience in which boundaries are blurred and discrete identities obscured.⁹⁰

If this last example shows how kisses can be co-opted by a conventional hierarchical structure, I now conclude with a story that disrupts these

hierarchies. R. El'azar utters a casual remark regarding kissing when he and his fellow kabbalists return to visit the child mystic. The narrative reads: "R. El'azar came and kissed him [the child] on his head. He kissed him, again, on the mouth. R. El'azar said, 'The first kiss is on account of the fish who leave the water and cavort on the land. The second kiss is on account of the fish eggs that produce good offspring in the world.'"¹ The obscure references signify Rav Hemnuna Sava (the fish) and his son, the child kabbalist (fish eggs). R. El'azar's kiss on the head refers to his relationship to the deceased father, the kiss on the mouth toward the extraordinary child himself.

The significance of this passage lies in its clarification of the distinction between the kiss on the head and the kiss on the mouth. As long as the relationship to the child is mediated through the father, the hierarchy is maintained, the kiss is paternal in style. In adjusting the vertical positioning of the kiss, collapsing the vertical axis as R. El'azar stands, or perhaps kneels down, face-to-face to kiss the child on the mouth, he establishes a move toward equality. Both R. El'azar and the *yanoqa* are scions of legendary kabbalists: R. El'azar is the son and study partner of Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai, the hero of the *Zohar*; the child is the son—perhaps the reincarnated soul—of Rav Hamnuna Saba, legendary among the *Zohar's* kabbalists. R. El'azar holds a senior position in the mystical fraternity, but recognizes his equal and kisses him on the lips. Seeing the holiness within the child, he wants to unite with that child. He is neither sustaining the child, nor is he seeking validation or blessing. Here we see one logical outcome of the mystical encounter: even as the kabbalists are deeply entrenched in, and committed to, traditional conservative structures, subversion lurks in the kiss that is not just a kiss.

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NOTES

¹ Keith Thomas, "Afterword," in *The Kiss in History* (ed. Karen Harvey; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 188.

² See L. Edward Phillips, *The Ritual Kiss in Early Christian Worship*, Joint

Liturgical Studies (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 1996); Michael Penn, *Kissing Christians: Ritual, Community, and the Late Ancient Church* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

³ Moshe Idel has drawn attention to the kiss as a symbol of mystical union, and Michael Fishbane has explored the ways in which the mystical ecstasy of the kiss is a multivalent nexus at which spiritual desire and death meet. Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 43-45; Michael Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 14-50. See also Admiel Kosman, "Breath, Kiss, and Speech as the Source of the Animation of Life: Ancient Foundations of Rabbinic Homilies on the Giving of the Torah as the Kiss of God," in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience*, (eds. A. I. Baumgarten, J. Assmann, et al.; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 96-124. Kosman analyzes the kiss in rabbinic literature, considering the ways in which kissing is conceived as an act that bestows life, rooted in the moment in Genesis 2 in which God breathes life into Adam.

⁴ Regarding the historical problematics of the *Zohar's* compilation, see Ronit Meroz, "Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations," *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 3 (2000): 3-63; Boaz Huss, "The Appearance of 'Sefer Ha-Zohar'," *Tarbitz* 70, no. 3-4 (2001): 507-42; Daniel Abrams, "The *Zohar* as a Book: On the Assumptions and Expectations of the Kabbalists and Modern Scholarship," *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 12 (2004): 201-32.

⁵ See Ronit Meroz, "Der Aufbau Des Buches Sohar," *PaRDeS: Zeitschrift der Vereinigung Für Jüdischen Studien e.V.* II (2005): 16-36. My thanks to the author, who kindly shared a Hebrew version of the article with me.

⁶ *B. B. Bat.* 17a. Cf. *Qat.* 28a; *Devarim Rabbah* 11:9 (end); *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2. In general, rabbinic literature treats kisses with reserve and even circumspection. Thus we read in *Midrash Tanhuma*, "All kisses are frivolous other than three [types of] kisses: the kiss of parting (*perishut*), the kiss of honoring (*gedulah*), and the kiss of greeting (*perakim*). From where do we know the kiss of separation? It is written, 'And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law,' (Ruth 1:14). From where do we know the kiss of honoring? It is written, 'Then Samuel took the vial of oil, and poured it upon his head, and kissed him,' (1 Sam 10:1). From where do we know the kiss of greeting? It is written, 'And he went, and met him in the mountain of God, and kissed him,' (Exod 4:27)." Solomon Buber, ed., *Midrash Tanhuma* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1982), *Shemot* 28, 233. In the *Bereshit Rabbah* version of this teaching, R. Tanhuma adds the kiss of kinship. Judah Theodor and Chanoch Albeck, eds., *Bereshit Rabba*

(Jerusalem: Wahrmann Books, 1965), 70:12, 811. There is also a somewhat abstemious preference for non-labial kisses, as evidenced in *Bereshit Rabbah* 74:2 and *b. Ber.* 8b, in which a rabbi (Rabbi Shim'on ben Gamliel in the former, R. Akiva in the latter) says he admires the practice of the Medes (or people of the east) who kiss only on the hand. Theodor and Albeck, *Bereshit Rabba*, 74:2, 858-59.

⁷ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (trans. Shlomo Pines; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 627-28.

⁸ *Sefer Ha-Zohar*, ed. Reuven Margalio (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1970), 2:256a. All selections from the *Zohar* are taken from the Margalio editions. *Zohar Hadash* (ed. Reuven Margalio; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1970); *Tiqunei Zohar* (ed. Reuven Margalio; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1994). All translations are mine except for selections taken from volume 1 of the *Zohar*, for which I generally followed Daniel Matt's translation. Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004). See also the end of the *Idra Rabba* section, in which three of the members of the mystical fraternity die by a kiss. *Zohar* 3:144b. See also Menahem Recanati, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Mitzvot* (London: L. Honig & Sons Ltd., 1962), 80a. The fullest discussions of the motif of the death by a kiss are in Fishbane, *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism*, 14-50; Moshe Idel, *R. Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist* (Jerusalem: Schocken Books, 1998), 142-51.

⁹ Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Hayyei ha-Olam ha-Ba* (Jerusalem: Aharon Barzani & Sons, 1999), 71.

¹⁰ Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia* (ed. Jonathan Chipman; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 181.

¹¹ Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, 182. See Idel's discussion, 180-84, and 209 n.23, Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives*, 44-45; Yehuda Liebes, "The Messiah of the *Zohar* (in Hebrew)," in *The Messianic Idea in Jewish Thought: A Study Conference in Honour of the Eightieth Birthday of Gershom Scholem* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1982), 174 n.301, 177 n.308.

¹² *Zohar* 1:168a. See also *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2, in which Rabbi Azariah teaches that the righteous also die by a kiss because "if you were occupied with words of Torah such that your lips were kissed [in the course of speaking the words of Torah that came from God's mouth], in the end everyone will kiss you on the mouth [to honor you, including God]." In contrast to the zoharic text, Moshe de Leon writes in *Sefer ha-Rimmon* that redemption from the angel of death is a closed avenue, one achieved only by those biblical predecessors,

implying that the contemporary pious will not be so fortunate. Moshe de Leon, *The book of the pomegranate: Moses de Leon's Sefer ha-Rimmon* (ed. Elliot R. Wolfson; Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1988), 396.

¹³ Menahem Recanati, *Recanati on the Torah* (Jerusalem: Mordekhai Attia, 1961), 37b-38b.

¹⁴ In his study of Recanati, Idel argues that this kabbalist inclines boldly towards bodily death as a desired outcome of *devequt*, identified as death by a kiss. Idel, *R. Menahem Recanati the Kabbalist*, 144.

¹⁵ Ezra of Gerona, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe Ben Nahman*, (ed. Charles Chavel; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1988), 485. I have used the late Seth Brody's translation. Ezra ben Solomon of Gerona, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," in *Commentary on the Song of Songs and Other Kabbalistic Commentaries* (ed. and trans. Seth Brody; Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 39-40. See also *Zohar* 2:256b; cf. Joseph Gikatilla, *Sefer Sha'arei Tzedek* (Brooklyn: Moriah Offset Co., 1985), 3a; Eleazar ben Yehudah of Worms, *Shirat Ha-Roke'ah: The Poems of Rabbi Eleazar Ben Yehudah of Worms* (Jerusalem, 1993), 27.

¹⁶ A member of the zoharic coterie, R. David ben Judah he-Hasid, talks of kissing primarily in terms of the latter dynamic, referring to kissing as "overflow." David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, *The book of mirrors: Sefer Mar'ot ha-Tzove'ot* (ed. Daniel Chanan Matt; Chico: Scholars Press, 1982), 68.

¹⁷ As such, it is distinct from the divine syzygy in which the column of the divine phallus links the two lower regions of the Godhead. Cf., however, Elliot R. Wolfson, "Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth," in *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 100-01, who has argued that the mouth serves as displaced phallus. Compare Luria's treatment of kissing. Hayyim Vital, *Sha'ar Ma'Amarei Rashbi*, Kol Kitvei Ha-Arizal (Jerusalem, 1988), 147-48.

¹⁸ N. Perella, *The Kiss, Sacred and Profane: An Interpretative History of Kiss Symbolism and Related Religio-Erotic Themes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 12-23.

¹⁹ *Zohar* 2:253a.

²⁰ *Zohar* 2:253b.

²¹ *Zohar* 2:200b. See the discussion in Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar* (trans. David Goldstein; reprint, 1949, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 966-67.

²² *Zohar* 2:253b.

²³ *Zohar* 2:254a. The Dinur river is the fiery river in purgatory in which souls are purified before being brought to their heavenly rest.

²⁴ *Zohar Hadash Shir ha-Shirim* 64b.

²⁵ In translating Song of Songs 1:2, I have opted for the bulky literalness of the King James version, replicated in JPS 1917, because its very awkwardness reflects the textual bumps in which the zoharic exegetes are interested.

²⁶ From this usage, it is clear that the term *ruah* [spirit] used with regard to kissing is not meant technically as the middle unit of the tripartite soul, but rather as a placeholder for soul. Apparently, the word *ruah* is used because of the association of kissing with breath and God's initial breathing of life into Adam. Cf., however, R. Moshe Cordovero, who explains that kissing doesn't achieve total *devequt* because this cannot be attained with the *ruah* alone. Moses Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, vol. 14 (Jerusalem: Safra Publishing, 1986), 240.

²⁷ Moshe Cordovero comments that the kisses of love are kisses of the mouth because such a kiss is "a revelation of love from inwardness, from the inner chambers of the heart, in contrast to revealed love which is not as significant a mode of love, because this [former] one is a strong tie that cannot be undone because it is from the inwardness of this attribute, as is well known." Moses Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, vol. 8 (Jerusalem: Ha-Tehiyah Publishing, 1976), 266.

²⁸ *Zohar* 2:124b.

²⁹ See *Sifre Be-ha'alotekha* 9:10.

³⁰ In the different versions of the story offered in *Bereshit Rabbah*, we find an assortment of interpretations of Esau's kiss: Esau's mercies were aroused and he kissed Yaakov with a full heart; Esau tried to bite Yaakov but his teeth turned to wax; Yaakov's neck turned to marble; and one version combines the marble with the wax. *Bereshit Rabbah* 78:9. In *Midrash Tanhuma*, we read that it an insincere kiss. In the *Sifre*, R. Shim'on bar Yohai says that it is a halakhah that Esau hates Yaakov, but that here his mercies overcame him; it is not surprising that this opinion by Shim'on bar Yohai is omitted in the *Zohar*, which is more committed to the xenophobic first half of this teaching. *Sifrei Devarim Be-ha'alotekha* 11. Cf. *Shemot Rabbah* 5:13. Abraham ibn Ezra contends that the kissing must be sincere because of the crying; further, he mutes the erotic charge of the kiss between Jacob and Rachel by saying that, "Any kiss that is [written] without a *lamed* is [a kiss] on the mouth; with a *lamed* it is on the hand or shoulder or cheek according to the practice of the locale, for instance....'And Jacob kissed Rachel' (Gen 27:27)." Abraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Song of Songs* 1:2. Cf. his commentary on Gen 27:27. Bahya ben Asher refers to Esau's kiss, saying that it is not full-hearted and rather is "only a kiss of anger (*neshiqat*

af),” citing Prov 27:6. Bahya ben Asher, *Commentary on the Torah* (ed. Charles Chavel; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1982), Gen 33:4, 286.

³¹ *Zohar Hadash Song of Songs* 63b.

³² *Zohar* 2:146a-b. A variation on this formula for determining a kiss’s authenticity renders the statement as follows: “There is no kissing of love other than when there is *devequt* of mouth-to-mouth and spirit to spirit” (*Zohar* 2:254a). See also *Zohar* 2: 256b; *Zohar Hadash Shir ha Shirim (Midrash ha-Ne’elam)* 60c, 63a.

³³ *Zohar* 1:137a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*).

³⁴ See also *y. Hag.* 2:1, 77a; *b. Hag.* 14b.

³⁵ Another literary source hovering in the background is the section of *Sefer Yetzirah* in which Abraham is kissed by God: “When Abraham our father came, and looked, and saw, and investigated, and understood, and carved, and combined, and hewed, and pondered, and succeeded, the Lord of all was revealed to him. And he made him sit in his lap, and kissed him upon his head. He called him his friend and named him his son, and made a covenant with him and his seed for ever.” A. Peter Hayman, *Sefer Yetzira* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004), §61, 182. The version I have used is from manuscript ‘A’ from the Long Recension. The location of this paragraph in the traditional text is 6:4, the last paragraph of the book. Cf. Peter Schäfer, ed., *Synopse Zur Hekhalot-Literatur* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1981), §164. Another text that may be lurking in the background, the absence of which in the *Zohar*’s discussion of kissing is surprising, is Prov 24:26: “He kisses the lips that give a right answer.”

³⁶ Samuel Luria, *Sefer Pirkei Rabbi Eliezer*, reprint, 1852 (Jerusalem, 1990), 4a.

³⁷ *Zohar* 1:6a, 12a, 51a, 61a, 64b, 70a, 72a, 89b, 92b, 148b, 239b; 2:12a, 13a-14a, 15a, 169a, 170a, 190a, 199b, 203a, 209a, 237b; 3:21a, 22b, 41a, 119a, 157b, 158a, 171a-b, 174b, 187b, 189a-b, 191a-b, 196a-b, 203a, 204b, 261a, 303a; *Zohar Hadash Ruth* 44a, 45a, 48a, 49a, 52d; *Zohar Hadash Shir ha-Shirim (Midrash ha-Ne’elam)* 1d.

³⁸ *Zohar* 3:206a.

³⁹ *Zohar* 2:152b-153a, 156b, 162b, 175a-b, 199b, 214b; 3:39b, 41a, 174a, 188a. Cf. *Zohar* 2:8b, in which God kisses the messiah on the head upon the latter’s advent: “When the blessed Holy One see the King Messiah dressed in the garment of vengeance and girded with weapons, he raises him up and kisses him on the head.”

⁴⁰ There is one passage that partially militates against this rule. R. Shimon points out that the youthful kabbalist was actually the youth Metatron, a heavenly being. The kiss on the child’s head (read: Metatron’s head) reinforces the irony

of the ostensibly superior rabbi standing over the ostensibly subordinate child, but it does not undo the meaning conveyed by the behavioral code (*Zohar* 2:169b-170a). Cf. *Zohar* 3:41. On *Zohar* 2:146b-147a, the rabbis kiss a homileticist on the head after he delivers a long homily about kissing; in the homily, however, the kisses are on the mouth. See also *Zohar* 155a, 156b, 175a; cf. 3:188a. Interestingly, the child talks at length about kissing, kisses of love, indicating the way in which the erogenous exoteric meaning of the erotic image is purified in his mind. See, e.g., *Zohar* 3:187b.

⁴¹ *Zohar* 1:70a. Cf. *Zohar* 2:223b where the *yanoqa's* listeners "united with his hands (or with him) and kissed his hands."

⁴² See, similarly, *Zohar* 3:47a. Another frequent form of kissing in the zoharic narratives is the kiss on the hands. R. Eliezer, Rashbi's son, as well as others in the fraternity, kiss the master's hand after he has delivered a homily; in these situations, the kiss is a sign of respectful gratitude, kissing the hand that feeds them, as it were. See *Zohar* 1:83b, 213b, 250b; 2:21b, 23b, 29a, 38a, 62a, 68a, 79a, 86a-87a, 121a, 123b, 181a, 193b; 3:31a, 57b, 65b, 73b, 119b, 121a, 191a, 290b, 296a. See W. Bacher, "Le Baisement des Mains dans le Zohar (I)," *Revue des Études Juives* 22 (1890): 137-38; W. Bacher, "Le Baisement des Mains dans le Zohar (II)," *Revue des Études Juives* 23 (1890): 133-34. The most affecting of these hand-kissing episodes (3:290b) is the scene of R. Eleazar kissing the hands of his father, R. Shimon bar Yohai, after the latter's demise. Regarding the kissing of the dead in Jewish history, see Admiel Kosman, "Kissing the Dead—the Evolution and Transformation of a Custom," *Tarbitz* 62:3 (April-June 1996): 483-508. There is a legend that would have had wide circulation in Jewish-Spanish circles in the thirteenth century that a young child kissed the hands of the deceased R. Yitzhaq Alfasi upon the latter's death-bed, with the child being a young Maimonides. If there is any truth to the legend, though, it is more likely that the departed sage was Yosef ibn Migash. See Elliot Horowitz, "On Mediterranean Kissing of the Dead," *Tarbitz* 64:1 (1998): 134.

⁴³ *Tiqqunei Zohar* §21 (43b).

⁴⁴ *B. Hag.* 13a.

⁴⁵ *Zohar Hadash Tiqqunim* 97b. See also *Tiqqunei Zohar*, §26, 72b.

⁴⁶ The adornment refers to the *talit* [prayer shawl] and *tefillin* [phylacteries] worn for the morning prayer service. See Hayyim Vital on *Zohar* 2:201b.

⁴⁷ Angelic figures.

⁴⁸ *Zohar* 2:201b.

⁴⁹ A passage from the "Introduction to the *Zohar*" depicts an even more exalted scene for words of Torah: "Rabbi Shim'on opened, 'I have put my words in your

mouth' (Isa 51:16). How vital it is for a human being to engage in Torah day and night! For the blessed Holy One listens to the voice of those who occupy themselves with Torah, and every word innovated in Torah by one engaged in Torah fashions one heaven. We have learned: The moment a new word of Torah originates from the mouth of a human being, that word ascends and presents herself before the blessed Holy One, who lifts that word, kisses her, and adorns her with seventy crowns—engraved and inscribed.” *Zohar* 1:4b. Translation from Matt, *The Zohar*, vol. 1:25.

⁵⁰ Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 74. This definition serves as a central organizing principle for Michael Penn's analysis of ritual kissing in the ancient Christian world. Penn, *Kissing Christians*, 17, 35. The difficulty in applying Bell's method in so thoroughgoing a manner in kabbalistic material is, as noted above, the paucity of historical information that we have regarding gestures among the Spanish kabbalists.

⁵¹ *Zohar* 1:51a, 64b, 70a, 148b; 2:153a, 187a. See also 1:239b; 2:29a, 31b, 38a, 62a, 170a, 175a, 193b, 199b; 3:188a, 191a.

⁵² That the *Zohar* reflects and encourages the practices it describes has become a working assumption in *Zohar* scholarship. See Liebes, “The Messiah of the *Zohar* (in Hebrew)”; Yehuda Liebes, “The Messiah of the *Zohar*: On R. Simeon Bar Yohai as a Messianic Figure (in English),” in *Studies in the Zohar* (trans. Arnold Schwartz, Stephanie Nakache, and Penina Peli; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1-84, 163-94; Elliot R. Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Visionary Experience and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 326-92; Joel Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals: Eating and Embodiment in Medieval Kabbalah* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005); Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Issues Forth from Eden: On the Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2005).

⁵³ *Zohar* 3:168a.

⁵⁴ *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah* 1:2. Maimonides, *Hilkhot Issurei Bi'ah* 13:1.

⁵⁵ *The Hebrew Writings of the Author of “Tiqqunei Zohar” and “Ra'aya Mehemna”* (ed. Efraim Gottlieb; Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 2003), 131.

⁵⁶ *Zohar* 2:146a-b. This text indicates that there is not only kissing on the mouth, but eye-to-eye contact as well.

⁵⁷ The author of the *Ra'aya Mehemna* and the *Tiqqunei Zohar* embroiders upon this scene, explaining that when the Israelite would accept the Torah, an angel

would “immediately kiss him upon the mouth and teach him the entire Torah via the kiss, and this is [the meaning of] ‘Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth.’ This is what the rabbis said in *Shir ha-Shirim Rabbah*, may their memory be for a blessing.” *Hebrew Writings of the Author*, 131, and see notes there.

⁵⁸ There are two *Heikhalot* sections in the *Zohar*: 1:38a-45b and 2:244a-269a.

⁵⁹ Daniel Matt has translated the expression as “passionate love.” See also Michael Higer, ed., *Masekhtot Kalah* (New York: Hotsa’at de-be Rabanan, 1936), 351.

⁶⁰ *Zohar* 2:253b, 255a.

⁶¹ See Yehuda Liebes, “*Zohar* and Eros,” *Alpayim—A Multidisciplinary Publication for Contemporary Thought and Literature* 9 (1994): 67-119; Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 368-77; Wolfson, “Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth,” 107-10.

⁶² *Zohar* 3:201b.

⁶³ *Zohar* 3:59b. See Liebes, “*Zohar* and Eros,” 105-08. This connection between kissing and speech can be found in some of the Greco-Roman authors and in early Christian writers as well. See Penn, *Kissing Christians*, 15.

⁶⁴ *Zohar* 3:204b-205a.

⁶⁵ In a more muted form of sustenance, the *Zohar* offers an interesting turn on Genesis 41:40, “*ve-al pikha yishak ami*.” While the verse is translated literally as “by your word shall all my people be ruled” (JPS 1916), R. Abba explains that the verse means “by your mouth my people shall be kissed,” to teach that kissing symbolizes supporting or satiating (*Zohar* 1:137a). For R. Abba, the love of the kiss is the love a superior communicates to those below him, by caring for them and sustaining them. His kiss is the kiss of the benevolent king or father, not that of a partner or peer. What he provides is life itself.

⁶⁶ Reference to incarnation has become more common in *Zohar* scholarship of late. See Elliot R. Wolfson, “Judaism and Incarnation: The Imaginal Body of God,” in *Christianity in Jewish Terms* (ed. Tikva Frymer-Kensky, et. al.; Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 239-54; Joel Hecker, “‘New-Ancient Words’ and New-Ancient Worlds: A Review of Daniel Matt’s *Zohar* Translation and Arthur Green’s *A Guide to the Zohar*,” *Hebrew Studies* XLVII (2006).

⁶⁷ *Zohar* 1:137a (*Midrash ha-Ne’elam*).

⁶⁸ *Zohar* 2:146a-b. See also *Zohar* 2:254a.

⁶⁹ *Zohar Hadash Shir ha-Shirim (Midrash ha-Ne’elam)* 64b. The literature of courtly love may well hover in the background of some of the depictions of love in the *Zohar*. It is interesting to note that the kisses that are developed in

that literature have their own origin in the kiss exchanged between vassal and lord. The latter ceremony has been described as follows: “The ceremony of homage varied, but, in its most common form, the vassal, without sword, belt, or spurs, knelt bareheaded, placed his joined hands between those of his lord, and declared that he was the lord’s man in return for a specified fief. The lord then kissed the vassal on the mouth and said that he took him as his man.” J. Russell Major, “‘Bastard Feudalism’ and the Kiss: Changing Social Mores in Late Medieval and Early Modern France,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 17:3 (Winter 1987): 509-10. See also Perella, *The Kiss, Sacred and Profane*, 84-123; Major, “‘Bastard Feudalism’ and the Kiss,” 511-12.

⁷⁰ See also *Zohar* 2:254a-b, where the four columns/angels join together as one spirit.

⁷¹ *Zohar Hadash*, 60c.

⁷² *Zohar Hadash Shir ha-Shirim (Midrash ha-Ne’elam)* 63a.

⁷³ See, e.g., *Zohar* 3:208a. For a discussion of the ethereal quality of manna in zoharic kabbalah, see Hecker, *Mystical Bodies, Mystical Meals*, 82-115.

⁷⁴ We see a confirmation of this preference in Moshe Cordovero’s *Or Yaqar*, in which he compares kissing to the embrace. He says that hugging is an inferior form of cleaving—it is a union from which there can be separation because there is no exchange of spirit; in a kiss, however, the link is grounded in a more essential aspect of personhood. Cordovero, *Or Yaqar*, vol. 14:240. At the same time, however, Cordovero contends that kissing is not a full mystical union because it is a union of spirits [*ruhot*], not souls [*neshamot*]. The *Zohar*, of course, is not unfamiliar with these distinctions, but uses *ruah* generically to refer to soul because of its dual connotation as breath that can be exchanged through kissing.

⁷⁵ These are the same oppositions that Daniel Boyarin has highlighted in his discussion of the religious impulses in Talmudic literature to marry and study. Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 134-66.

⁷⁶ The term “male homosocial desire” was coined by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), 1-5. Regarding homosexuality, there is near complete absence of the prohibition of Lev 18:22 in the *Zohar*, a text replete with references to sexual sins; the lacuna itself is noteworthy. For discussions of the homosocial setting of the zoharic kabbalists, see “Liebes, “The Messiah of the *Zohar* (in Hebrew),” 157-65; Liebes, “The Messiah of the *Zohar* (in English),” 37-43; Liebes, “*Zohar* and Eros,” 104-12;

Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 368-77; Wolfson, "Crossing Gender Boundaries in Kabbalistic Ritual and Myth," 107-10.

⁷⁷ See Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 368-77.

⁷⁸ Penn, *Kissing Christians*, 30-37.

⁷⁹ See Charles Mopsik, "The Body of Engenderment in the Hebrew Bible, the Rabbinic Tradition, and the Kabbalah," in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, part 1 (eds. Ramona Naddaff and Nadia Tazi Michael; New York: Zone, 1989), 48-73.

⁸⁰ In the JPS Tanakh, the verse is translated as "Come, O breath, from the four winds," but I have altered the translation to illustrate the kabbalistic play on words.

⁸¹ *Zohar Hadash Shir ha-Shirim* 60c.

⁸² *B. Sanh.* 93b; Theodor and Albeck, *Bereshit Rabba*, 2:4, p.17; *Bamidbar Rabbah* 13:11; *Ruth Rabbah* 8:15; *Pesikta Rabbati* 33 s.v. *davar aber anokhi*; Buber, *Midrash Tanhuma, Va-yeshev* 13; Yehudah David Eisenstein, ed., *Ozar Midrashim: Bet Eged le-Matayim Midrashim* (New York: Resnick, Menshel and Partners Publishing, 1928), 162 s.v. *sheva hupot*.

⁸³ Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* (Jerusalem, 1962), Gate 8, Chapter 21.

⁸⁴ In the writings by the anonymous author of the *Ra'aya Mehemna* and *Tiqqunei Zohar*, kissing serves as euphemism for intercourse or as a displacement to the genital region, insofar as Moses and Aharon are identified with the *sefirot* of *Netzah* and *Hod*, which in turn are said to be joined as in the verse, "Righteousness and peace shall kiss" (Ps 85:11). Further, the *sefirah Yesod*, normally identified as the phallus, in this formation is aligned with the tongue. See *Zohar* 3:250a (*Ra'aya Mehemna*), 223b; *Tiqqunei Zohar* 19 (39a), 21 (45b), *Hebrew Writings of the Author*, 131. See also *Zohar Hadash* 34d, 94d (*Tiqqunim*), 111d (*Tiqqunim*). Cf. Todros ben Yosef Abulafia, *Sha'ar ha-Razim*, Michal Kushnir-Oron (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1989), 127.

⁸⁵ *Or Yaqar* on *Zohar* 3:250b.

⁸⁶ *Zohar* 2:259a.

⁸⁷ It is striking that there is no reference to kissing in the *Iggeret ha-Qodesh*, the medieval kabbalistic manual for lovemaking. "*Iggeret Ha-Qodesh*," in *Kitvei Ramban* (ed. Charles Chavel; Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1964), 314-37.

⁸⁸ Sometimes kisses stand metonymically for union in its entirety. See, e.g., *Zohar Hadash Shir ha-Shirim (Midrash ha-Ne'elam)* 63d, and a discussion of this passage in Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim*, 8:21.

⁸⁹ *Zohar* 2:254a.

⁹⁰ See, similarly, this example from the *Tiqqunei Zohar*: "What are 'the kisses of

His mouth' (Song 1:2)? His two lips and her two lips. These are the four wings of the creatures about which it is said, 'and everyone had four wings' (Ezek 1:6). And when His two faces and Her two faces are combined with the four limbs of them both it is said about them, 'And every one had four faces, and every one of them had four wings.' These four faces are YHVH, the four wings ADNY, in one joining YAHVDVNHY. When the letters are combined they are called *electrum (hashmal)*." *Tiqqunei Zohar* 10 (25b). On the one hand, the four creatures and their four wings have no apparent hierarchy among them; however, the letters of the tetragrammaton and their interleaving with the name ADNY certainly do.

⁹¹ *Zohar* 3:188a.