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Who Is a Beautiful Maiden without Eyes? The Metamorphosis of a Zohar Midrashic Image from a Christian Allegory to a Kabbalistic Metaphor*

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The cultural origins of the medieval Jewish belief in the Shekhinah as an independent feminine divine presence has been the subject of an important scholarly debate in the field of Jewish mysticism during the last decade. At the crux of this debate stands the question concerning the possible influence of the revival of the praxis of devotions to Mary, during the High Middle Ages, on the emergence of the medieval Jewish belief in the Shekhinah as a feminine divine presence. The conclusion that this revival was indeed what influenced the evolution of the Jewish belief in the Shekhinah¹ is supported by the combination of two facts: the lack of any detailed discussions concerning the belief in a feminine divine presence in Jewish sources prior to the twelfth century CE compounded by the fact that at that very same time and in that very same cultural context, Marian worship flourished. Nevertheless, scholars who advanced this

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¹ On the possible influence of Marian devotions on the early kabbalah perceptions of the Shekhinah, see Raphael Patai, *The Hebrew Goddess* (New York, 1967), 191–92; Arthur Green, “Shekhinah, the Virgin Mary, and the Song of Songs: Reflection on a Kabbalistic Symbol in Its Historical Context,” *AJS Review* 26 (2002): 1–52; Peter Schäfer, *Mirror of His Beauty: Feminine Images of God from the Bible to Early Kabbalah* (Princeton, NJ, 2002). For a critical approach to this view, see Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros* (New Haven, CT, 2005), 45–49; Yehuda Liebes, “Indeed the Shekhinah a Virgin?: On the Book of Arthur Green” [in Hebrew], *Pe’amim* no. 101–2 (2005): 303–13; Daniel Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory: Methodologies of Textual Scholarship and Editorial Practice in the Study of Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem and Los Angeles, 2010), 154–56, and *The Female Body of God in Kabbalistic Literature* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2004), 41–43.

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claim were not able to point out any direct imprint of the Christian devotions on Jewish theologians and Kabbalists who had, from this period onward, applied themselves to the subject of the Shekhinah. Moreover, according to other scholars, the existence of ancient Near Eastern conceptions of a feminine divinity and late antiquity Gnostic myths concerning feminine deities in the upper world suggests an alternate possibility: that is, that in the Jewish world those beliefs existed and were preserved through oral chains having been committed to writing only in the twelfth century CE. The main purpose of the following article is not to solve this historical and theological dilemma but rather to illuminate the complexity of this subject based on a philological examination of the manner in which a unique Zoharic phrase was formed in the junction between the Christian world in northwest Europe and the Jewish kabbalistic world of the northern Iberian peninsula.

I

One of the most fascinating, well-known, and exhaustively studied images in Zoharic literature is that of the “beautiful maiden,”² which appears in two separate locations in the Zohar pericope named *Sabba de-Mishpatim* (Old man of Mishpatim; hereafter *SdM*). The first occurrence is as part of a rid-

² On *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, the riddle and the parable, see Oded Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation: Midrashic and Hermeneutic Strategies in Sabba de-Mishpatim of the Zohar* (Los Angeles, 2005); Gershom Scholem, *On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York, 1969), 55–56; Elliot R. Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden without Eyes: ‘Peshat’ and ‘Sod’ in Zoharic Hermeneutics,” in *The Midrashic Imagination; Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History*, ed. Michael Fishbane (Albany, NY, 1993), 155–203, *Through a Speculum That Shines: Vision and Imagination in Medieval Jewish Mysticism* (Princeton, NJ, 1994), 384–87, *Circle in the Square: Studies in the Use of Gender in Kabbalistic Symbolism* (Albany, NY, 1995), 44, 152, and “The Hermeneutic of Visionary Experience: Revelation and Interpretation in the Zohar,” *Religion* 18 (1988): 321–24; Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives* (New Haven, CT, 1988), 227–30, and *Absorbing Perfection: Kabbalah and Interpretation* (New Haven, CT, 2002), 304–5; Yehuda Liebes, “Zohar and Eros” [in Hebrew], *Alpayim* 9 (1994): 87–94, and “Helen’s Porphyry and *Kiddush Ha-Shem*” [in Hebrew], *Da’at* 57–59 (2006): 99–101; Monique Biber, “Raza de-Eina: A Study in the Secrets of the Eye in the Zohar” [in Hebrew] (MA thesis, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan), 19–25; Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, trans. Nathan Wolski (Stanford, CA, 2009), 215–28; Isaiah Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar: An Anthology of Texts*, trans. David Goldstein, vol. 3. (London, 1989), 1084–85; Daniel C. Matt, “The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” in *Gershom Scholem’s Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism 50 Years After*, ed. Joseph Dan and Peter Schäfer (Tübingen, 1993), 192–94, and *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, trans. and commentary by Daniel C. Matt, 7 vols. (Stanford, CA, 2004–12), 2:2 and 33–34; Daniel Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden without Eyes: Reading the Sexual Reconstruction of the Jewish Mystic in a Zoharic Parable,” *Da’at* 50–52 (2003): lix–lxxxiii; Pinchas Giller, *Reading the Zohar: The Sacred Text of the Kabbalah* (Oxford, 2001), 35–68; Fischel Lachower, *On the Borderline between the Old and the New* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 1951), 40–51; Michal Oron, “‘Set Me as a Seal upon Thine Heart’: Studies of the Poetic of the Author of *Sabba de-Mishpatim*,” in *Massu’ot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. Michal Oron and Amos Goldreich (Jerusalem, 1994), 1–24; Frank Talmage, “The Term ‘Haggadah’ in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985): 271–73; Rachel Elior, “Present but

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dle in the beginning of *SdM*, and the second is as part of a parable which appears later on in *SdM*.³

Let us begin with the first occurrence. Upon their meeting, the *Sabba* poses a threefold riddle to Rabbi Yose which is articulated as follows:

מאן הוא נחשא דפרה באיירא, ואזיל בפירודא, ובין כך ובין כך אית נייחא לחד נמלה דשכיב בין שנוי, שרי בחבורא
וסיים בפירודא.

ומאי איהו נשרא דקא מקננא באילן דלא הוה, בנוי דאתגזלו ולא מן בריין דאתבריאו באתר דלא אתבריאו.
כד סלקין נחתין, כד נחתין סלקין. תרין דאינון חד, וחד דאינון תלתא.
מהו עולימתא שפירתא ולית לה עיינין, וגופא טמירתא ואתגליא, איהי נפקת בצפרא ואתכסיאת ביממא,
אתקשטת בקשוטין דלא הוה.⁴

[Who is a serpent that flies in the air, moving in separation, while an ant lies comfortably between its teeth? Beginning in union, it ends in separation.

Who is an eagle that nests in a tree that never was—its young plundered, though not by created creatures? Ascending, they descend; descending, they ascend. Two who are one, and one who is three.

Who is a beautiful maiden without eyes, her body concealed and revealed, she emerges in the morning and is concealed by day, adorning herself with adornments that are not?⁵]

It is quite conspicuous that these three riddles are of a surrealistic and enigmatic character and that they are imbued with fantastic depictions. The riddles are appealing and intriguing mainly for two reasons: first, because of their surrealistic contents, and second, as a result of the fact that riddles are generally scarce in Zoharic literature. To the best of my knowledge, in the entire Zoharic literature, it is only in *SdM* that this kind of explicit and straightforward riddle can be found, despite the widespread popularity of various genres of riddles in other medieval Jewish sources.⁶

I will attempt to demonstrate that among the three riddles, the one concerning the beautiful maiden without eyes is exceptional both textually and historically. This is evident, first of all, from the words of the Zohar itself as enunciated by R. Yose:

Absent, Still Life and a Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes: On the Presence and Absence of Women in the Hebrew Language, in Jewish Culture, and in Israeli Life,” in *Streams into the Sea: Studies in Jewish Culture and its Context, Dedicated to Felix Posen*, ed. Rachel Livneh-Freudenthal and Elchanan Reiner (Tel Aviv, 2001), 210.

³ The separation between the two units is to be found in all the Zohar’s recensions known to me. See, e.g., Zohar (Mantua ed.), 95a, 99a; Zohar (Cremona ed.), 43a, 45a; Vatican Library, Hebrew Collection: Ms. Heb. Vat. 606, 206r, 212r; New York Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS): Ms. New York JTS 2076, 86r, 91v–92r, and cf. also the earliest manuscript of Cordovero’s *Or Yakar* interpretation to *Sabba de-Mishpatim* in Ms. New York JTS 1922 1r–1v, 40v–41r.

⁴ Zohar 2:95a.

⁵ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:2.

⁶ On the medieval Hebrew riddle, see Israel Abrahams, *The Jewish Life in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia 1993), 384–87; Tova Rosen-Moked, “‘Testing with Riddles’: The Hebrew Riddle of the Middle Ages” [in Hebrew], *Ha-Sifrut* 30–31 (1980): 168–83; Dan Pagis, *Concealed Secret: The History of the Hebrew Riddle in Italy and Holland* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 1986), 16–20. On the similarities between these Zoharic riddles and medieval Hebrew riddles, see Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 93–97.

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אמר רבי יוסי, בכל מלין דשמענא דקאמרת לא תוהנא אלא מחד [. . .] אמר ההוא סבא ומאן איהי, אמר עולימתא שפירתא. . .⁷

[Rabbi Yose said, “Of all the words I heard you say, I was astonished by only one” . . . the old man said, “And which one is that?” He replied, “A beautiful maiden . . .”⁸]

R. Yose’s words seem to reflect a special inclination of the writer or the editor of *SdM* toward the peculiar content of this riddle. It is interesting that this twofold tendency, namely to detach the third riddle from the first two while endeavoring to decode its meanings, seems also to characterize both the traditional commentators of *SdM*⁹ and modern scholars who dealt with this text.¹⁰ Although the inner connection between the three riddles certainly calls for further discussion, this article will, likewise, focus on the riddle of the beautiful maiden.

Only a few pages after the three riddles, we encounter the second occurrence of the image of a “beautiful maiden”¹¹—this time, in the form of a parable about a beloved woman who is concealed in a palace. The description of the relationship of the beloved with her lover is accompanied by an exposition of its meaning relating it to the intimate relations between the Torah and the sages who know her secrets. Since the lesson is fully decoded at the conclusion of the parable, we meet with no difficulty in apprehending the image of the Torah, hiding in her palace and revealing herself through a slit solely to her beloved:

. . . אורייתא מלה נפקא מנרתקה ואתחזייתא זעיר ומיד אתמרת, הכי הוא ודאי, ובזמנא דאתגלייתא מגו נרתקה ואתמרת מיד, לא עבדת דא אלא לאינן דידעין בה ואשתמודען בה.

מתל למה הדבר דומה, לרחימתא דאיהי שפירתא בחיזו ושפירתא בריוא, ואיהי טמירתא בטמירו גו היכלא דילה, ואית לה רחימא יחידאה דלא ידעין ביה בני נשא, אלא איהו בטמירו, ההוא רחימא מגו רחימו דרחימ לה, עבר לתרע ביתה תדיר, זקיף עינוי לכל סטר, איהי ידעת דהא רחימא אסחר תרע ביתה תדיר, מה עבדת, פתחת פתחא זעירא בההוא היכלא טמירא דאיהי תמן, וגלייתא אנפחא לגבי רחימאה, ומיד אתהדרת ואתכסיאת, כל אינן דהו לגבי רחימא לא חמו ולא אסתכלו, בר רחימא בלחודוי, ומעוי ולביה ונפשיה אזלו אבתרה, וידע דמגו רחימו דרחימת ליה אתגלייתא לגביה רגעא חדא, לאתערא (ס”א לגביה רחימו) ליה.

הכי הוא מלה דאורייתא, לא אתגלייתא אלא לגבי רחימאה, ידעת אורייתא דההוא חכימא דלכא אסחר לתרע ביתה כל יומא, מה עבדת, גלייתא אנפחא לגביה מגו היכלא, וארמיזת ליה רמיזא, ומיד אהדרת לאתרה ואתמרת, כל אינן דתמן לא ידעי ולא מסתכלי, אלא איהו בלחודוי, ומעוי ולביה ונפשיה אזיל אבתרה, ועל דא אורייתא אתגלייתא ואתכסיאת, ואזלת ברחימו לגבי רחימאה לאתערא בהדיה רחימו.¹²

⁷ Zohar 2:95a.

⁸ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:4, with minor changes from the Pritzker’s translation.

⁹ See, e.g., *Mikdash Melekh* (Jerusalem ed.), 111, 115; *Zohar Ha-Raki’a: Bi’or ‘al Ha-Zohar Me-Haari z”l* (Sh’ar Ha-Shamaim ed.), 1:69a.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 141 n. 2; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:178 n. 270; Yehuda Liebes, “Sections of the Zohar Lexicon” (PhD thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1976), 190, sec. 78; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 185–87; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” lx; Lachower, *On the Borderline*, 41; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 221.

¹¹ Zohar 2:99a–b. On the other manuscripts see Ms. Heb. Vat. 606, 206r, 212r; Ms. New York JTS 2076, 86r, 91v–92r; and cf. also the earliest manuscript of Cordovero’s *Or Yakar* interpretation to *Sabba de-Mishpatim* in Ms. New York JTS 1922 1r–1v, 40v–41r.

¹² Zohar 2:99a.

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[. . . [The] Torah emerges from her sheath, is seen for a moment, then quickly hides away—certainly so, but when she reveals herself from her sheath and quickly hides, she does so only for those who know her and recognize her.

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

So it is with a word of Torah: She reveals herself only to her lover. Torah knows that one who is wise of heart will circle her gate every day. What does she do? She reveals her face to him from the palace and beckons him with a hint, then swiftly withdraws to her place, hiding away. None of those there knows or notices—he alone does, and his inner being and heart and soul follow her. Thus Torah reveals and conceals herself, approaching her lover lovingly to arouse love within him.^{13]}

Most modern scholars have posited a connection between the riddle and the parable without further elucidation or justification of the ensuing disregard of the substantial differences between them.¹⁴ I propose that such a scholarly approach is misguided and, specifically, that this assumed connection is not self-evident or, more accurately, that the parable cannot be automatically considered as a decoding of the riddle. The majority of the traditional Zohar commentators from the sixteenth century on did not tend to make an association between the beautiful maiden of the riddle and that of the parable.¹⁵ They identified the image of “the beautiful maiden without eyes” from the riddle as a symbol of the Shekhinah, while they considered the parable of “the beloved in the palace” to be in line with the explicit explanation in the Zohar itself, as referring to the Torah and the manner in which her secrets are studied.¹⁶ To the best of my knowledge, Oded Israeli is the only scholar who raised and dealt explicitly and extensively with the actual question of the relation between the riddle and the parable. He pro-

¹³ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:33–34, with minor changes from Pritzker’s translation.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 141 n. 2; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:178 n. 270; Liebes, “Sections of the Zohar Lexicon,” 190, sec. 78; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 185–87; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” lx; Lachower, *On the Borderline*, 41; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 221.

¹⁵ As far as I know, Cordovero was the only interpreter of the Zohar who refers to an interpretation according to which the two units should be linked insofar as both refer to the soul. However, this is not his own interpretation but one he had heard and that he designates as marginal and unacceptable (Ms. New York JTS 1922 41r). On this matter, cf. also Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 199.

¹⁶ See, e.g., *Mikdash Melekh* (Jerusalem ed.), 111, 115; *Zohar Ha-Raki’a: Bi’or ‘al Ha-Zohar Me-Haari z’l* (Sh’ar Ha-Shamaim ed.), 1:69a.

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posed a connection between these two texts on the basis of two motifs: the beauty of the maiden and her concealment-revelment.¹⁷

The first part of the present study will be devoted to a reexamination of the relations between the riddle of the beautiful maiden without eyes and the parable of the beloved in the palace and will demonstrate the intricate links by which an important representation of the Ecclesia, which was identified with Mary in the High Middle Ages, found its way into the core of the kabbalistic literature. This part of the study will focus on the entangled relations between the riddle and the parable. It will be demonstrated that along with a certain similarity between them, important differences can be detected. These differences are manifest in images, literary-formal aspects and terminology as well as in the manner in which they are integrated into *SdM*. My assertion will be that the scholarly presumption according to which the parable of the beloved in the palace is the solution to the riddle of the maiden without eyes does not conform to the way in which those literary units were formed by the writers or the editors of *SdM*. As we shall see, it appears that the parable preceded the riddle and that some of the expressions included in the riddle were shaped in light of the parable. In its second part, the article will focus on a certain aspect of the Judeo-Christian discourse in northwest Europe that can shed light on the way in which the central image of the riddle, that of a beautiful maiden without eyes, had been formed. It will be demonstrated that this powerful image, which had no parallels in the kabbalistic literature of the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries, probably stems from the famous image of the Jewish Synagoga antithetical to the image of the Mary-Ecclesia and possessing allegorical meanings that were well known to Jews in northwest Europe. The article will conclude with the assertion that the Spanish Kabbalists who wrote or edited *SdM* were unaware of the context from which this image arose and were not familiar with these allegorical meanings of the image of the Synagoga. Therefore, they interpreted the image of the maiden without eyes according to their own comprehension, transforming it from an allegorical image to a riddle of metaphoric character. In this respect, this article, which argues that the image of the blind Shekhinah issued from Ashkenazic Jewish cultural context and was later adopted by the authors or editors of the Zohar in Spain, contributes to the scholarly debate regarding the peregrination of motifs from the Jewish world of French Ashkenazi into the kabbalistic literature in general and specifically into the literature of the Zohar.¹⁸

¹⁷ Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 198–202.

¹⁸ On this subject see, e.g., Moshe Idel, “Between Ashkenaz and Castile: Incantations, Lists and ‘Gates of Sermons’ in the Circle of Rabbi Nehemia ben Shlomo the Prophet and Their Influences” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 77 (2008): 507–16; Yehuda Liebes, “How the Zohar Was

In order to explain the complexity of connections between the riddle of the beautiful maiden without eyes and the parable of the beloved in the palace, I will begin with a survey of the most prominent differences between them.

As Yehuda Liebes has noted,¹⁹ the parable of the beloved in the palace is a poetic acme of Zoharic literature, and it can be said that it iterates in a succinct manner some of the founding principles of the spirit of this literature. It is perhaps due to this that this parable has won more attention in discussions, analyses, and mention in scholarship than any other kabbalistic text of the same period.²⁰ The parable and its meaning impressively reflect the complex intricacies of the spiritual, erotic, and hermeneutic relationship between the Kabbalist and the Torah, and it can be asserted that this parable of the beloved in the palace is not only an organic part of the Zoharic literature but is one of its pinnacles.

As opposed to the parable of the beloved in the palace, it seems that the riddle of the beautiful maiden without eyes is foreign to the kabbalistic world in general and specifically to the Castilian kabbalah. Blindness in the Castilian kabbalah does not have any positive connotation. Unlike some well-known literary works in which blindness may be a positive image or receive a positive role—as, for example, the blindness of Tiresias, the prophet of Apollo, which signifies his ability to reveal the secrets of the Gods—blindness in the Castilian kabbalistic literature follows the common Judeo-Christian trope bearing the negative meaning according to which a blind person cannot see the theological truth.²¹ An example of this can be found

Written,” in *Studies in the Zohar* (New York, 1993), 85–138; Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Nigle She-Banistar: The Halachic Residue in the Zohar* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv, 2001), 25–50, and “Additional Inquiries into the Problem of Ashkenazi Sources to the Zohar” [in Hebrew], *Kabbalah* 5 (2000): 253–58; R. Meroz, “Zoharic Narratives and Their Adaptations,” *Hispania Judaica Bulletin* 3 (2001): 25–26 n. 85; Ephraim Kanarfogel, *Peering through the Lattices: Mystical, Magical, and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit, 2000); Judith Weiss, “The Two Zoharic Versions of the Legend of the Tanna and the Deadman” [in Hebrew], *Tarbiz* 78 (2009): 524–54.

¹⁹ Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 94–98; Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 193.

²⁰ On *Sabba de-Mishpatim*, the riddle, and the parable, see Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 55–56; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 155–203, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 384–87, *Circle in the Square*, 44, 152, and “The Hermeneutic of Visionary Experience,” 321–24; Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives*, 227–30, and *Absorbing Perfection*, 304–5; Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 87–94, and “Helen’s Porphyry and *Kiddush Ha-Shem*,” 99–101; Biber, *Raza de-Eina*, 19–25; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 215–28; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1084–85; Matt, “The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” 192–94, and Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 2:33–34; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” lix–lxxxiii; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 35–68; Lachower, *On the Borderline*, 40–51; Oron, “Set Me as a Seal upon Thine Heart,” 1–24; Talmage, “The Term ‘Haggadah’ in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar,” 271–73; Elior, “Present but Absent, Still Life and a Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes,” 210.

²¹ For a recent work on this matter, see Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2010), 63–89.

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in the next passage from pericope *VaYese* of the Mantua Zohar. In this passage, the Torah calls everyone to read her concealed meanings. However, the majority of the people, who are described as “closed-hearted and shut-eyed,” remain blind to her appeal:

כמה אית לן לאסתכלא במלי דאורייתא ווי לון לאינן אטימי לבא וסתמינן עיינן הא אורייתא קארי קמייהו (משלי ט') לכו לחמו בלחמי ושתו ביין מסכתי, מי פתי יסור הנה חסר לב אמרה לו ולית מאן דישגח²².

[How intensely we should contemplate words of Torah! Woe to the close-minded, close-hearted, and shut-eyed! Look, Torah proclaims before them: “Come, eat of my bread! Drink of the wine I have mingled! Whoever is simple, turn in here!” She says to those devoid of sense (Proverbs 9: 4–5). But no one pays attention!²³]

Unlike the laypeople who are “closed-hearted and shut-eyed” (אטימי לבא) and the sages, who can see the concealed meanings of the Torah, are described as “The wise who are full of eyes” (הכמיין דאינן מליין עיינין'). In this respect, we find in *SdM* that the sages' ability to understand the secrets that God concealed within the Torah is a result of having their eyes open to that which is beyond the cloaked literary meanings of the verses:

קודשא בריך הוא כל מלין סתימין דאיהו עביד עאל לון באורייתא קדישא, וכלא אשתכח באורייתא, והיה מלה סתימא גלי לה אורייתא, ומיד אתלבשא בלבושא אחרא, ואתמר תמן ולא אתגלי, והכימין דאינן מליין עיינין, אף על גב דהיה מלה אסתים בלבושה (תמן), חמאן לה מגו לבושה, ובשעתא דאתגלי היה מלה עד לא תיעול בלבושה, רמאן בה פקיהו דעינא, ואף על גב דמיד אסתים, לא אתאביד מעיניהו²⁴.

[All concealed things that the blessed Holy One does He placed within the holy Torah; all is found there. That concealed matter is revealed by Torah, and immediately clothed in another garment, hidden there and not revealed. The wise who are full of eyes—although that matter is concealed there in its garment—see it through the garment. And when that matter is revealed, before entering its garment, they cast an open eye upon it; although immediately concealed, it is not lost to their sight.²⁵]

The only depiction of a figure without eyes that I could find in the kabbalistic literature of the period is that of “blind dragon,” a demonic creature that acts as an intermediary in the coupling of Lilith and Samael as described by R. Yitzhak Ben Yaakov Hacohen:

... והתנין של מעלה הוא שר סומא, שהוא כדמיון שושבין אמצעי בין סמאל וליילית ושמו תנינעור. ובעלי קבלה אמרו, כי אותו התנין שבים בלי עינים, וכן התנין של מעלה כדמות צורות רוחניות²⁶ בלי גוונים שם העינים ונקרא

²² Zohar 1:165a; and cf. 1:28a, 1:62a, 1:68a, 3:74a 3:77a 3:222a.

²³ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 2:423.

²⁴ Zohar 2:98b. On this motif see also Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 225–28; Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*, 194, 200–201, 226–31; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 169–70, 185–86, and *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 385.

²⁵ Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 5:30.

²⁶ In R. Elazar of Worms's interpretation to the prayer book (*Siddur*), one finds the following tradition according to which “The ministering angels have no eyes but only wings” (*The Rokeach's Commentary on the Sidur*; Shofarot, 680). It seems that R. Yitzhak b. Ya'akov referred here to this tradition.

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אצל המקובלים בריה שאין לה עינים על כן שמו תנינעור כמו תנין עור והוא המחבר הלוי והזוג בין סמאל ובין לילית.²⁷

[and the Upper Dragon is a blind prince, who is like an intermediary between Samael and Lilith and his name is “Blindragon.” And the sages of the kabbalah said that [just as] the dragon in the sea has no eyes, similarly the Upper Dragon, in the image of spiritual forms, is without shades [which are] named eyes. And he is called by the Kabbalists “a creature that has no eyes.” Hence his name is “Blindragon,” that is: blind dragon. It is he who joins, as escort and matchmaker, Samael and Lilith.]

The description of the dragon as blind, *Suma* (סומא), is not surprising given its similarity to the name of his lord Samael (סמאל). The tension between the eyes and the lack of eyes is like the tension between knowledge and justice on the one hand and ignorance and evil on the other. It can, therefore, be stated that in the Zohar and in the literature of the kabbalah of the late middle ages, the symbolic meanings of the motif of the closed eyes and blindness is essentially negative—whether as a demonic image or as an expression of removal from the understanding of the secret world. It is, therefore, strange and alien to the Zohar that the description of “the beautiful maiden without eyes” would be appropriated as a representation of a positive image, whether of the Shekhinah, the Torah, or the soul.

This anomaly prompted Yehuda Liebes, in his *Dictionary of the Zohar*, to present two explanations that are consonant with its Zoharic context. According to the first, what is actually intended is a beautiful maiden who is not looked at, as is the case of the beloved in the parable of “the beloved in the palace.”²⁸ The second explanation ensues from the mythical description presented in the words of R. Yitzhak b. Ya’akov regarding the blind dragon cited above. Based on this paragraph, Liebes interprets the word “eyes” (עינין) as shades and therefore suggests that the maiden in the riddle is not blind but has no tints.²⁹ Both explanations proposed by Liebes solve difficulties in the understanding of the nature of this expression, its Zoharic context, and the relation between the riddle and the parable. Nonetheless, there remains an important question that is left unsolved, and that is, why do we not find any similar expressions or articulations connected to blindness or lack of eyes in regard to the Torah or the Shekhinah in the kabbalistic literature of that period? In addition, it seems that these important

²⁷ *Maamar ‘al Ha-Ašlūt Ha-Smalit* (Scholem ed.), 100–101/23 in Gershom Scholem, “The Kabbalah of R. Yitzhak and R. Ya’akov, Sons of R. Ya’akov Ha-Cohen,” *Jewish Studies* 2 (1927): 262–63. On a similar image, see *S’ar Ha-Razim* (Oron ed.), 65, 262–63. And see also Liebes, “Sections of the Zohar Lexicon,” 190, sec. 78; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 185.

²⁸ Elliot Wolfson explained the difficulties in this interpretation: “The difficulty with this explanation [i.e. that the beautiful maiden cannot be seen Tz. W.] is a philological one, for the actual expression is that the maiden has no eyes. This implies that she cannot see, not that she cannot be seen” (Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,”), 186.

²⁹ Liebes, “Sections of the Zohar Lexicon,” 190, sec. 78.

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suggestions that Liebes proposes regarding the interpretation of the expression ignore its distinctly visual character. It is worthy of note that Zohar commentators from the sixteenth century on accepted the visual description as is and indeed discussed the Shekhinah simply as having no eyes, or as blind on the basis of the interpretation of the image of the maiden as signifying the Shekhinah.³⁰ In this connection, one finds from the sixteenth century on rituals and kabbalistic intentions that are based on the visual description of the maiden without eyes.³¹

The riddle and the parable differ in their terminology specifically in regard to the key word that is supposed to connect them: while the heroine of the riddle is termed “maiden” (עוֹלִימָתָא), in the center of the parable stands the word “beloved” (רַחֵמָה). These are, of course, close expressions, but they point to a conceptual rather than a textual proximity. From a philological point of view, it is very difficult to assume that the parable was created as a solution to the riddle, or was in point of fact under its influence, because the word *‘ulimta* (maiden), which is supposed to link the riddle and the parable, is not mentioned in the parable even once.

From the literary-structural point of view, the endeavor to establish a direct connection between the riddle and the parable, regarding the parable as a solution to the riddle, is nonviable. The parable is a closed unit that stands by itself and has a clear structure: introduction, parable, moral, and then a detailed hermeneutic discussion as a summary. Moreover, the parable unit offers a moral that is overt and directly related to the parable within it. Therefore, it does not seem plausible to suppose that the parable depends on or evolves from any source external to it or that it alludes to or addresses the riddle in any way.

Finally, an examination of the general value structure of *SdM* does not suggest any affinity between the parable and the riddle. In those manuscripts known to me,³² the riddle and the parable are separated by long and detailed sections. It appears that not one of the writers, editors, or scribes of the Zohar saw any reason to indicate any connection between them.

³⁰ In this respect, the words: “A beautiful maiden without eyes” were interpreted in Zohar Ha-Raki’a: “and the Sabba referred to the secret that was implied by that to Raḥel who is ‘a beautiful maiden etc.’ in the secret of ‘Raḥel was beautiful and well favoured’ (Gen. 29, 17), and she does not have eyes, since the eyes were not mentioned, but only the eyes of Leah were mentioned in the secret of ‘Leah was tender eyed’” (ibid.) (*Zohar Ha-Raki’a: A Commentary on the Zohar from the Ari z”l*, 1:69a).

³¹ In this manner one finds in *Sha’ar Ha-Kavanot*: “Before saying *Shm’ Israel* close your eyes with your right hand and concentrate on that which was written in Sabba de-Mishpatim: ‘a beautiful maiden without eyes’” (*Sha’ar Ha-Kavanot, keri’at shm’*, 135). For more about rituals and concentrations referring to those words, see Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 141.

³² See above Zohar (Mantua ed.), 95a, 99a; Zohar (Cremona ed.), 43a, 45a; Ms. Heb. Vat. 606, 206r, 212r; Ms. New York JTS 2076, 86r, 91v–92r and cf. also the earliest manuscript of Cordovero’s *Or Yakar* interpretation to *Sabba de-Mishpatim* in Ms. New York JTS 1922 1r–1v, 40v–41r.

Along with the clear differences between the parable and the riddle, there also exist points of similarity that are of importance. As we have already noted, there is a thematic similarity that cannot be attributable to the terminological differences: in the riddle there is “a beautiful maiden” (עולימתא שפירתא) and in the parable there is a “beloved, beautiful in form and appearance” (רחימתא דאיהי שפירתא בחיזו ושפירתא בריוא). Nevertheless, such a connection can be gleaned in my opinion from another motif that appears in both riddle and parable, namely, the description of those beautiful women in both units as concealed and revealed. In this case the similarity is manifest on the descriptive as well as on the terminological level: in the riddle one finds that the maiden’s body is “concealed and revealed” (טמירתא ואתגליא), and in the parable the beloved is “concealed secretly in her palace” (איהי טמירתא בטמירו גו) (היכלא דליה). Later on, when she is revealed to her beloved she is described in these words: “She opens a little window in that secret palace where she is, reveals her face to her lover” (פתחתא פתחא זעירא בההוא היכלא טמירא דאיהי תמן, וגליאתא) (אנפחא לגבי רחימאה). In this case, it is, in fact, the terminological criterion that leads us to make a connection between the riddle and the parable. In light of the complex relations between the riddle and the parable, which include essential differences along with hints of connection between them, I propose in what follows an account that may clarify the way in which both were crystallized and integrated in the framework of *SdM*.

As stated above, the expression “a beautiful maiden without eyes” has no parallel in the kabbalistic literature of the period. I suggest that a better understanding of its meaning can be achieved in the context of the medieval Christian world of imagery and more specifically in reference to the imagery of the Synagoga as it was designed in the Christian art of that period. It is known that from the ninth century on, in Christian art it was common to represent the Ecclesia and the Synagoga as mirror images.³³ Nevertheless, beginning in the twelfth century CE, some changes occurred in the manner in which these artistic images were represented. First, from this period on we find that the Synagoga is blindfolded, a sign of her blindness and her

³³ These motifs are well known in the scholarly literature and I will refer here only to the most important ones: Paul Weber, *Geistliches Schauspiel und Kirchliche Kunst in ihrem Verhältnis erläutert an einer Ikonographie der Kirche und Synagoge* (Stuttgart, 1894); Wolfgang S. Seiferth, *Synagogue and Church in the Middle Ages: Two Symbols in Art and Literature*, trans. Lee Chadeayne and Paul Gottwald (New York, 1971); Bernhard Blumenkranz, *Le Juif médiéval au miroir de l’art chrétien* (Paris, 1966); Heinz Schreckenberg, *The Jews in Christian Art: An Illustrated History* (New York, 1996), 16–18 and 31–65.

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inability to see the truth.³⁴ Second, in the first quarter of the thirteenth century, with the establishment of churches in the Gothic style, one notes the prominent location of sculptures of the Ecclesia and the Synagoga at the entrance to churches (fig. 1). In other words, as opposed to the prevalent ninth-century artistic convention, from the twelfth century on, figures of the Ecclesia and the Synagoga were displayed independently as distinct and large figures and were no longer relegated to be solely elements of the artistic expositions, reliefs, or drawings, primarily describing the crucifixion. The composition of the sculptures endowed the depicted female figures with a dynamic presence, clearly expressed in the outline of their bodies, their clothing, and their ornaments. Moreover, the location of the impressive sculptures of the Ecclesia and the Synagoga at the entrances of churches had the effect of displaying them in this public domain to be seen by all, Christians and non-Christians alike.³⁵ Third, this change was expressed not only in the artistic medium and its accessibility to the wider public but also in the way in which these figures were represented. At this time, the Synagoga had begun to be depicted according to Gothic artistic conventions as a tall, noble, and beautiful woman having body contours and facial outlines and features almost identical to the Ecclesia. Hence, the two are differentiated and opposed by characteristics other than their beauty. In contrast to the Ecclesia, who is erect, dressed with indications of royalty such as a crown and cape, and whose eyes are wide open, the Synagoga lowers her gaze, the ten commandments are shown to be slipping out of her hands, and she is depicted as having been divested of those signs of royalty that had characterized her in the past because her crown is fallen, her cape is worn, and her sword or banner is broken. Finally, the Synagoga is prevented from seeing the truth as her eyes are bound.³⁶

In conclusion, I suggest that from the thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries it is possible to see in northwest Europe many and new representations of the figures of the Synagoga and the Ecclesia that were made con-

³⁴ See, e.g., Seifert, *Synagogue and Church*, 90. It seems that this allegorical meaning was based on the second Corinthians (3:13–16) in which we find: “We are not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face to prevent the Israelites from seeing the end of what was passing away / But their minds were made dull, for to this day the same veil remains when the old covenant is read. It has not been removed, because only in Christ is it taken away / Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts / But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away.”

³⁵ On this see, for example, Nina Rowe, “Idealization and Subjection at the South Façade of Strasbourg Cathedral,” in *Beyond the Yellow Badge: Anti-Judaism and Antisemitism in Medieval and Early Modern Visual Culture*, ed. Mitchell B. Merback (Leiden, 2007), 179–202; Sara Offenberg, “Expressions of Meeting the Challenges of the Christian Milieu in the Medieval Jewish Art and Literature” [in Hebrew] (PhD thesis, Ben Gurion University, Beer Sheva, 2008), 22–26, 47.

³⁶ Based on the verses from Lamentations 5:15–17: “The joy of our heart is ceased; our dance is turned into mourning / The crown is fallen from our head: woe unto us, that we have sinned / For this our heart is faint; for these things our eyes are dim.”



FIG. 1.—The Ecclesia and the Synagoga from the Strasbourg Cathedral. The photographs were taken by Dr. Sara Offenberg. I would like to thank her for her kind permission to publish them.

spicuous in the public domain and in which both were depicted as beautiful women.³⁷ The Synagoga was differentiated from the Ecclesia mainly by her blindness, her lowered gaze, and the usurpation of vestiges of royalty. A paraphrase of the words of the riddle in the Zohar could be formulated as follows: there is a beautiful maiden, dressed in royalty and seeing the truth,

³⁷ On this matter see, for example, Rowe, "Idealization and Subjection," 181; Seifert, *Synagogue and Church*, 111–17.

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and as opposed to her there is a beautiful maiden whose vestiges of royalty have been usurped and she is unable to see as her eyes are bound (fig. 2).

The similarity between these characteristics of the sculptures of the Synagoga in the thirteenth–fourteenth centuries and the description of the maiden in the riddle is very significant. In addition, the adoption of Christian visual imagery by Jews is not surprising and is obvious in many Jewish works of art that were created in the Ashkenazi-French region between the second quarter of the thirteenth century and the mid-fourteenth century.³⁸ A unique example, which is also quite relevant to our subject, is to be found in *Mahzor Levy*, which was written in the first third of the fourteenth century. In this manuscript, there appears a drawing of a bride and a groom: the groom represents the God of Israel wearing a hat that was singularly Jewish—*Judenhut*. The bride, representing Keneset Israel, is described as seated on a chair draped in a cape with a crown on her head similar to depictions of Mary or Ecclesia in Christian illustrations of the Song of Songs of that period. On the other hand, one can note that the female figure is blindfolded, a motif that was obviously borrowed from the representation of the Synagoga in Christian art. There is nothing in these words that is meant to suggest or imply that either the motif of the maiden with no eyes that was adapted to the Zoharic riddle or the illustration from *Mahzor Levy* were inspired by each other or a common third source. Rather, it is suggested that both express the same spirit, which adopts a negative Christian motif of Keneset Israel while at the same time does not abstain from ascribing to Keneset Israel positive motifs that in the Christian world were attributed to Mary-Ecclesia.³⁹

v

At this point, I would like to return to *SdM* and its cryptic-metaphoric depiction of the beautiful maiden. As I have argued above, there exists a firm foundation to assume that the expression “a beautiful maiden without eyes . . . adorning herself with adornments that are not” is of Christian origin. Contrary to the Iberian Peninsula, where these images of the Synagoga and the Ecclesia were not exhibited in the public realm and therefore were

³⁸ On the meanings and the ways in which these motifs were adopted in Jewish art, see, for example, Shalom Sabar, “The Fathers Slaughter their Sons: Depictions of the Binding of Isaac in the Medieval Ashkenaz,” *Image 3* (2009): 9–27; Sarit Shalev-Eyni, “Iconography of Love: Illustrations of Bride and Bridegroom in Ashkenazi Prayerbooks of the Thirteenth and the Fourteenth Centuries,” *Studies in Iconography 26* (2005): 27–57; Ruth Mellinkoff, *Antisemitic Hate Signs in Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts from Medieval Germany* (Jerusalem, 1999); Offenber, *Expressions of Meeting*, 56–74.

³⁹ On the adaptation of representations of Mary-Ecclesia in Jewish illustrations from the thirteenth and the fourteenth centuries see, for example, Shalev-Eyni, “Iconography of Love.” On the motif of the crown in these illustrations, see Naomi Feuchtwanger, “The Coronation of the Virgin and the Bride,” *Jewish Art 12–13* (1989): 213–24.



FIG. 2.—Illustration from Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg, Cod. Levy 37, 169r. I would like to thank the Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek in Hamburg for permission to publish this illustration.

probably unknown to Jews who lived there,⁴⁰ in the Ashkenazy Jewish world such an expression was certainly not unusual in reference to the larger cultural context in which they lived. When this expression reached the Kabb-

⁴⁰ A survey list of the sculptures as well as other representations of the Ecclesia and the *Synagoga* from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which are known today can be found in Rowe, "Idealization and Subjection," 183 n. 13.

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lists in the Iberian Peninsula, they were impressed by its strangeness and poetic strength,⁴¹ while not comprehending its allegorical significance since they were not acquainted with the Ecclesia and the Synagoga statues in the Christian art. They therefore interpreted this image in a metaphorical manner that does not refer to a specific representation of a denotative nature but rather represents a wide range of connections and is mainly connotative. As such, this expression suited the literary aims of the creators of *SdM*, and it was interwoven with other visual imagery as part of the surrealist riddles put in the mouth of the grandfather. To return to one of the questions with which we began, we can now say that the extrinsic origin of the expression “a beautiful maiden without eyes” accounts for the fact that we do not find any other parallels in the kabbalistic literature of the period. The reason for this is that this expression does not belong to the kabbalistic context whose center was in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. This image is not part of the semantic fields and symbolic meanings that are connected to the Shekhinah, the Torah, or the soul in kabbalistic literature. Nevertheless, this image did penetrate into *SdM* in the form of a riddle perhaps due to its poetic power. If this be the case, it may serve to clarify the curious attitude of R. Yose who, as we noted in the beginning of the article, was so deeply impressed by it and that he detached it from the two other riddles. Hence, the riddle of the beautiful maiden is distinguished by its very origin from the parable of “the beloved in the palace,” which had evolved quite naturally from the kabbalistic context that had developed in the north of the Iberian Peninsula. The articulation of the system of relations between the Kabbalist and the Torah on the erotic and hermeneutical levels⁴² as imparted in the parable is integral to the kabbalistic context of the book of Zohar.

In light of the findings presented above, I wish to reexamine the structure of the riddle of “the beautiful maiden with no eyes” and the way in which it was formed. Contrary to the common opinion in scholarship that sees the parable as an attempt to interpret or enlarge upon the riddle, it now appears that the riddle was formed under the influence of the parable and not other-

⁴¹ As the Zohar says explicitly: “Rabbi Yose said, ‘Of all the words I heard you say, I was astonished by only one. Either you said it out of foolishness, or they are empty words.’ The old man said, ‘And which one is that?’ He replied, “A beautiful maiden etc.” (Zohar, 2:95a translation: Zohar [Pritzker ed.], 5:4).

⁴² On this see Israeli, *The Interpretation of the Secret and the Secret of Interpretation*; Scholem, *On the Kabbalah*, 55–56; Wolfson, “Beautiful Maiden,” 155–203, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 384–87, *Circle in the Square*, 44, 152, and “The Hermeneutic of Visionary Experience,” 321–24; Idel, *Kabbalah New Perspectives*, 227–30, and *Absorbing Perfection*, 304–5; Liebes, “Zohar and Eros,” 87–94, and “Helen’s Porphyry and Kiddush Ha-Shem,” 99–101; Biber, *Raza de-Eina*, 19–25; Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows*, 215–28; Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3:1084–85; Matt, “The Aura of Secrecy in the Zohar,” 192–94, and Zohar (Pritzker ed.), 2:33–34; Abrams, “Knowing the Maiden,” lix–lxxxiii; Giller, *Reading the Zohar*, 35–68; Fischel Lachower, *On the Borderline* 40–51; Oron, “Set Me as a Seal upon Thine Heart,” 1–24; Talmage, “The Term ‘Haggadah’ in the Parable of the Beloved in the Palace in the Zohar,” 271–73; Elijior, “Present but Absent, Still Life and a Pretty Maiden Who Has No Eyes,” 210.

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wise. At the outset, this expression, which included four motifs—that is, the maiden, her blindness, her beauty, and her ornaments—seems to have been familiar to Jews in northwest Europe who encountered this image in Christian art that was presented in the public domain. In its second stage, this description found its way to the writer or the redactor of *SdM*, who was ignorant of its specific attire in Christian art as the Ecclesia and the Synagoga, and he consequently adopted this expression into his world by adding to it that cryptic-metaphoric level.

In conclusion, it can be stated that the dilemma concerning the possible influence of theological and sociological vicissitudes that occurred in Western Europe during the High Middle Ages on substantial themes in the Jewish mystical literature of that period will most probably continue to engage the scholarship of Jewish mysticism in the future. The purpose of this article was to demonstrate that the Zoharic riddle about “a beautiful maiden without eyes” originated in the Christian mirror images of Ecclesia-Synagoga. Nevertheless, this Zoharic reference seems to indicate no awareness of the cultural origins and the allegoric meaning of this image in the Christian art and theology. As such, this study does not pretend to solve the issue of Christian influence on the image of the Shekhinah in Jewish mystical literature but rather contributes to the realization of its complexity.