

The Zohar

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

The Festival of Chanukah (however you spell it in English) in addition to its historical origins, is also a celebration of the long mystical tradition in Judaism. Nothing symbolizes mysticism in Judaism today more than the book called the Zohar (Bright Light). It has become the most significant text, in terms of its influence on Jewish life, since the Talmud. Yet its origins are obscure. Some of its ideas are often absurd. And its authorship is still in dispute.

How did such a book come to be so important? Why do some people actually claim it has magical powers. If you pass your hand over its pages, even if you do not understand a single word, it can produce miracles for you. That is not even said of the Torah!

The Zohar was neither discovered nor heard of until the fourteenth century in northern Spain. It purports to be the work of the great Talmudic figure Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai of the late first and second century. A scholar and mystic, he was a pupil of Rabbi Akiva and shared many of his views. He was persecuted by the Romans for criticizing them and refused to stop teaching the Torah when it was banned. He and his son spent thirteen years hiding in a cave to escape them.

The Zohar was brought to light during a period of a mystical explosion. Jews, Christians, and Muslims were all exploring alternatives to the formal, intellectual rationalism of theology, still rooted in Greek philosophy. It is a compilation of different volumes, commentaries, and dissertations.

It was Moses Shem Tov de Leon of Guadalajara (1240-1305) the author of a mystical book Sefer HaRimon, who claimed to have discovered and who disseminated the Zohar. There is no trace nor record of it before then, despite the claim that it dates back to the second century. The sophisticated Aramaic of the text places it much later than the second century. Did Moses De Leon write it, discover it, or simply compile a series of different documents into one?

After the death of de Leon, apparently, someone offered the widow, who had been left without means, a large sum of money for the original and she then confessed that her husband himself was the author of the work. It spread

among the Jews with remarkable celerity. Scarcely fifty years had passed since its appearance before it was quoted by many Kabbalists. Such a book could surely not have been written by any mortal unless he had been inspired from above. This being the case, it came to be placed on almost the same level as the Bible

Mystics were attracted by its glorification of man, its doctrine of immortality and transmigration of souls. According to the Zohar, the moral perfection of man influenced the ideal world through the *Sefirot*. The idea originated in the earlier *Sefer Yetzirah*, written in Hebrew, which itself was attributed (despite evidence to the contrary) to Abraham. God as Ein Sof (the Endless) was above and beyond the material world. But through the channels of *Sefirot* (often described as emanations, connections), human beings could communicate with God and God with humans. This was the way one could bring God down into the physical world.

The accepted authorship of the Zohar was challenged by such authorities as Elijah Delmedigo (1458-1492/3), Leon de Modena (1571-1648), and Yaakov Emden (1697-1776). Otherwise, it would have been mentioned by the Talmud. The Zohar contains names of rabbis who lived at a later period than that of Shimon Bar Yochai. R. Yaakov Emden pointed out that the Zohar misquotes Scripture, misunderstands the Talmud, and contains some ritual observances which came from later rabbinical authorities. It mentions the crusades against the Muslims (who did not exist in the second century) and uses the expression "esnoga", which is a Portuguese and Ladino corruption of "synagogue" and gives a mystical explanation of the Hebrew vowel-points, which were not introduced until long after the Talmudic period.

The Zohar influenced the liturgy of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and the religious poets not only used many of its ideas in their compositions but also adopted its style. It uses erotic terminology to illustrate the relations between man and God. Sensuous pleasures, and especially intoxication, typify the highest degree of divine love and alcohol can create a state in which the human qualities merge or are exalted into those of God. It was adopted by many Christian scholars, such as Pico de Mirandola and Reuchlin. They believed that the book contained proofs of the truth of Christianity by referring to God as having three heads and thus being a Trinity.

On the other hand, the Zohar was censured by many rabbis because it propagated medieval superstitious beliefs, and produced a host of mystical dreamers, whose over-heated imaginations peopled the world with spirits, demons, and all kinds of good and bad influences. And particularly in reaction to the False Messiah Shabtai Zvi (1626-1676) whose heretical movement drew heavily on the Zohar, many European rabbis forbade studying the

Zohar and mysticism in general.

In Yemen, Rav Yihya Qafih (1850-1931) founded a movement called the Dordaim which was strongly opposed to the Zohar. He too argued it was not what it was claimed to be and had a negative influence on Jewish life.

I believe the Zohar's influence today is largely circumstantial.

Safed in the Sixteenth Century was the very center of the Jewish world and attracted Jews from all over the Jewish world. Under the influence of rabbis Cordovero, Luria, and Vital it turned Kabbalah and the Zohar from the esoteric margins of mysticism into the very center of popular Jewish life. Kabbalistic innovations in the liturgy, such as *Kabbalat Shabbat* became mainstream.

More crucially, Hassidism, which emerged at the end of the seventeenth century as a massively popular movement in Eastern Europe, adopted the Lurianic concepts and customs. Although opponents of Hassidism like the Vilna Gaon also studied the Zohar and mysticism, it was for them esoteric. Hassidism popularized it. In the Sephardi world too, it became influential as the preserve of the rabbis who used it therapeutically, inspirational, and as a tool of control.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust, no rational argument could explain its horrors. Only a mystical world of contradictions provided comfort and hope. This what people found and find attractive in non-rationality.

Whereas previously studying the Kabbalah was considered dangerous and forbidden to ordinary humans, in Hassidism it became part of the curriculum and liturgy from childhood onwards. And in both Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, it even now caters to the needs of those who turn to miracle-working rabbis for reassurance, in the way that many others turn to astrology or Feng Shui.

I regard the Zohar as one of the most impressive pieces of Jewish literature and thought. But it clearly reflects the times it was born of. Today it has been used in ways that defy logic, as red wrist bands, charms containing special letters, even holy water. Placebos have their uses but when they are associated with a religion they trivialize it.

The Zohar represents what is finest in the Kabbalah if it is studied seriously. Similarly, the exercises of practical Kabbalah are as useful and inspirational as Yoga and Meditation. The downside is that I am certain that both Rebbi Shimon Bar Yochai and Moshe De Leon would be unhappy about how the Zohar has come to be misused.