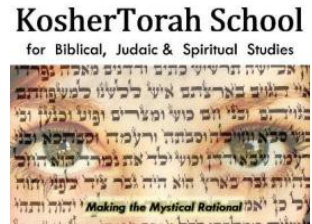


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The Legend that is the Zohar

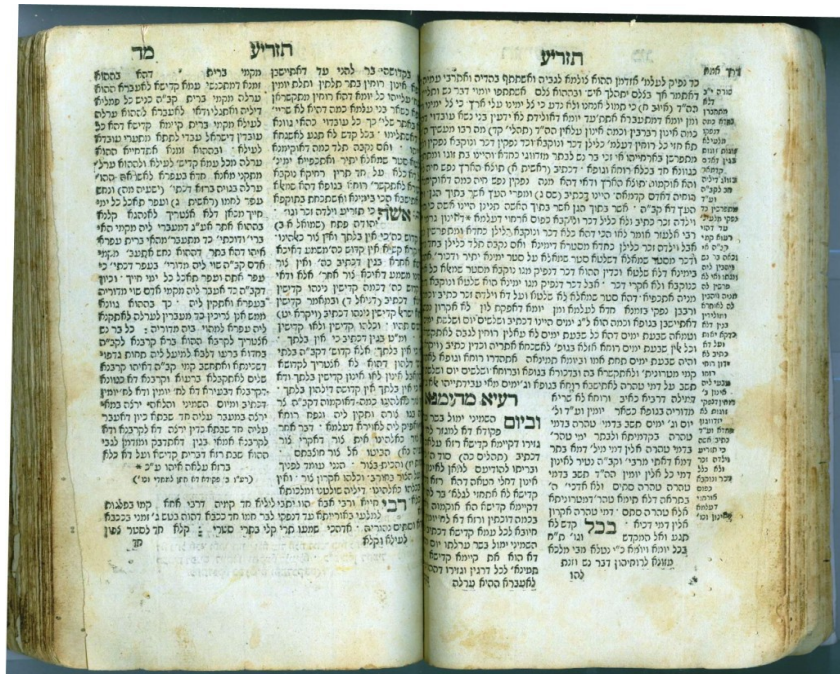
by Ariel B Tzadok
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The books that comprise the Zohar are a fascinating, blend of inspirational materials.

The stories throughout the Zohar take the reader off into a far away land and time, and instill in him/her a sense of awe, and wonder.

This riveting storytelling, alongside the Zohar's metaphysical depths, enables one to understand why these medieval midrashim, attributed to R. Shimon Bar Yohai, were so warmly received by the masses once the Zohar was finally printed.

The Zohar, however, is full of positive and negative influences. On the positive side, the Zohar fills its readers with a needed heart-based faith. On the negative side, it also fills its readers with a spirit of superstition, and fear, so different from the intellectual, rational path of the Abulafian Prophetic Kabbalah, and the Maimonidean thought upon which it was based.



Zoharic teachings have so completely swept over previous schools of Jewish mysticism that in almost all circles today Zoharic-based studies have become the exclusive definition of the study of Kabbalah. In others words, today, the Zohar is the Kabbalah, and the Kabbalah is the Zohar. But, historically, and realistically speaking, this is not the case. There have always been the few, mostly unseen in the public eye, who maintain the older, and authentic, original teachings of Jewish mysticism, untouched, and untainted by Zoharic influence.

These original, pre-Zoharic Jewish mystical teachings focus on meditative practices that lead to authentic spiritual experiences. Authentic (Biblical) Prophetic Meditation is not a watered-down, emotionally based experience. Rather, Prophetic Meditation is practiced for the sake of expanding consciousness, to the point of becoming aware of the collective consciousness permeating universal life. In Biblical times, this experience was visualized as the archetypal numinous seen in the Merkava vision, when the practitioner would gaze upon the “image of Man sitting upon the throne.”

Consciousness is of the mind. Therefore, the pre-Zoharic Prophetic meditative practices placed emphasis on developing, and expanding the powers of the mind. These included a sharpening of the intellect, and an in-depth exploration, and understanding of the powers of imagination. Along this path, emotions had to be balanced, and placed under total mental control. Accomplishing this level of emotional control, and balance, in and of itself, is no easy task, and explains why so few are able to succeed in walking this path. One cannot ascend to explore the realms of the inner-mind before one has properly balanced the heart, making it a stable place from which to descend into deeper layers of consciousness. Violation of this proper course can lead to dangerous results in meditation, the likes of which are recorded in the Talmudic story of the four who entered the Pardes.

The Zohar did away with all this practical, experiential pursuit of expanding consciousness. Instead of directing aspiring souls to attain direct, and personal spiritual experiences, the Zohar instead replaced meditative experience with an imaginary description of the spiritual realms. This was done because it is always easier to tell one what to believe instead of teaching one how to discover truths for oneself. The only problem with what the Zohar describes about the spiritual worlds is that these descriptions do not match the experiences of those who actually travel in the spiritual dimensions.

The Zohar creates an entirely apocryphal world, heavy on imagination, but light on factual, spiritual reality. Those who regularly meditate in accordance to the ancient and original Prophetic ways, see, and experience reality in ways that contradict

Zoharic descriptions. Prophetic meditators delve much deeper into hidden layers of consciousness than does any Zoharic metaphor. This is how they can recognize the apocryphal nature of many Zoharic teachings.

In spite of its many shortcomings, Zoharic literature serves a very positive general purpose. It inspires, and awes the masses who are not yet capable of acquiring intellectual refinement, and integrating individualized, experiential spirituality. One can read the Zohar, and see in it many wonderful, and wondrous things. Students of the Zohar are so often impressed and awed by what they read, that they never bother to subject what is written to inquisitive, critical analysis.

The Zohar is like an epic novel, whose readers fall in love with the story, and the characters. Only the professional literary critic, however, has the education, and the means to analyze the story, and to properly discern whether or not it is actually good literature. The professional may equally love the story and the characters, but at the same time consider the writing style itself to have its faults. Zoharic literature, indeed, serves a great purpose to inspire the masses. This is what its original authors must have intended. This explains why they wrote the Zohar as a pseudepigrapha about R. Shimon Bar Yohai. The authors never meant to deceive anyone, they only meant to inspire, and in this, they succeeded immensely.

The fact that the Zohar has no actual connection to the historical rabbi, Shimon Bar Yohai, does not detract from the value of its lessons. The fact that the book(s) are pseudepigraphal does not in any way invalidate their beauty, or their inspiration. One thing, however, must be made clear, the Zohar is not an ancient work from Talmudic or Tana'ic times. The Zohar is a product of medieval Spain. As such its claim to authority in matters of Halakha (Jewish Law) is extremely curtailed. The Halakhic views of the Zohar have no more, and no less, authority to them anymore than do the other opinions of Halakha expressed at that time.

This relationship of the Zohar to Halakha is significant in any discussion of Torah Law. R. Yosef Karo, the famous author of the Shulkhan Arukh, and a master Kabbalist in his own right elevated the status of the Zohar considerably. His opinion was that the opinions of the Zohar are legally binding just as long as they do not contradict any earlier Halakha found in the Talmud. As such, it was R. Karo who elevated the Zohar to become the "third book" of Judaism, following the Bible, and the Talmud.

R. Karo's opinion, however, was strongly contested by other rabbis. To this day, the relationship of Halakha to the Zohar, and the later Lurianic Kabbalah based on it is a hotly contested subject. The Ashkenazi communities of European origins, for the most part, never warmed up to Kabbalistic Halakha. Even many of the Hasidic

communities wavered back and forth between Kabbalistic practices, and earlier ones established by non-Kabbalistic authorities.

In the Sephardic communities of the Middle East many followed rabbinic opinions that were based almost entirely on the Kabbalah. Two of these Kabbalistic rabbis who embraced Kabbalah as law were R. Yosef Hayim, the Ben Ish Hai of Baghdad, and R. Ya'akov Sofer, the Kaf HaHayim of Jerusalem. Among many Middle East Sephardic communities, the Halakhic opinions of these two Kabbalistic scholars are still considered authoritative.

However, not all Sephardim followed the Kabbalistic approach. The controversial R. Ovadiah Yosef went to great efforts to neutralize the unwarranted Kabbalistic influence on Halakha. While R. Yosef was not a Kabbalist, he was not an opponent to the Kabbalah. He simply believed that Sephardic Halakha had to remain faithful to established precedent, and not waver under non-Halakhic influences, which included the Kabbalah.

The role of the Zohar, and later Kabbalah, in Halakha is a realm of discussion best left for rabbinic discussion. What relates to everyone are the moralistic, supernatural, and apocalyptic teachings of the Zohar. Today, Zoharic philosophy has permeated throughout many Jewish communities, including Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Hasidic, and even among many of the non-Orthodox.

Zoharic philosophy is magical, imaginative, and awe-inspiring, at least to those who embrace it. Zoharic stories read like the best of mythologies. These stories sound so real that those who read them believe them to be real, and that they are describing actual realities about the spiritual world. This is why many find Zoharic mythology so irresistible. They believe it to be real. How unfortunate it is that the mythology of the Zohar is as legendary, and not real, as are all other myths, and legends. But why let reality get in the way of a good story?

Regardless of its mythological element, the Zohar has served as an overall positive influence on Judaism. Although it is not historically the work of R. Shimon Bar Yohai, or his circle of students, the legendary attribution of authorship has helped many, and confused others. The stories described in the Zohar, for the most part, never happened, but again, why let reality get in the way of enjoying a really good story? Many of the Zohar's ominous warnings about the afterlife have scared individuals into living moral lives. This is not all that bad. Simple minds believe simple things. The Zohar, therefore, related simple moralistic lessons, draped with layers of mystical legend to reinforce its point.

Zoharic eschatology is, for most scholars, completely baffling. Although the Zohar says much about the pre-messianic times, still the language used to describe such things is so strange and bizarre that it defies any, and all accurate interpretations. Anyone who has made any kind of end-times predictions based on Zoharic teachings has been proven consistently wrong, over and over again. One has to wonder if Zoharic eschatology has any legitimacy to it at all.

As long as readers of the Zohar embrace its teachings as mere points of view, and opinions, then the views of the Zohar can be viewed alongside the views of all the other writers who have contributed to Torah literature. When, however, fantasy takes hold, and one elevates the Zohar to heights of importance and relevance where it does not belong, then the Zohar becomes a source of problems, instead of a source of proper spiritual inspiration.

Superstitious individuals are unfortunately powerfully attracted to the Zohar and due to the Zohar's mystical format they fall under a kind of mystical spell. This is when the Zohar can become a problem. Yet, the problem is not the Zohar itself, rather the problem is the many who read it, misunderstand it, and then act upon their misunderstandings, believing strange, and bizarre things. Not for naught have rabbis over the centuries warned that the Zohar should not be studied by those not properly prepared to understand it. Their warnings over the centuries have proven to be true.

All in all, the Zohar has greatly influenced Judaism, and for that matter, it has equally influenced many other religions, and philosophies. It is an integral part of Judaism, with both positive and negative repercussions. In order for us to dispel the negative repercussions of the Zohar, we have to take Zohar study to a proper level of academic, and rational analysis. When we dispel the clouds of superstition surrounding the Zohar we can then extract its original, metaphorical beauty, and allow the Zohar to take its proper place alongside the rest of the world's remarkable literary fictions.