

The Zohar

by [Petr Chylek](#) (December 2023)



Profile with Red Child– Marc Chagall, 1960

Toward the end of the 13th century in Spain, a manuscript appeared called the Zohar. In Hebrew, Zohar means radiance. An unemployed Rabbi named Moses DeLeon (1240-1305) was selling the Zohar in several installments, and he claimed he was copying it from an ancient manuscript that somehow found its way from the land of Israel to his possession in Spain.

The Zohar appeared to be a mystical commentary on the five books of Moses (the first five books of the Old Testament). The Zohar implied that its author was a famous second-century Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Soon Zohar became elevated to the status of the Holy Zohar (Zohar Ha Kodesh in Hebrew). However, later academic research pointed to a 13th-century Spanish author, perhaps Moses De Leon himself.

So, who is the author of the Zohar? An orthodox community today would tell you that it is Shimon bar Yochai. More open-minded would point towards Moses De Leon as the author. To me, it does not matter. I care more for what Zohar says than who wrote it. At the same time, it seems that one person could not produce the writing. Zohar is not a well-organized book. The topics of discussion go off on tangents at any time and in all possible directions. Many opinions presented together contradict each other.

My impression is that the Zohar records the discussions of friends at their meetings. They discuss different Torah-oriented topics and they talk over each other. One rabbi presents his opinion on one topic and the next speaker talks about a completely different topic. Occasionally, a more coherent story is inserted in between the records of discussion. Individual pieces are connected into one whole by an overall framework of several rabbis traveling in the countryside of Galilee, telling the story to each other,

discussing the Torah verses, and meeting strange characters (e.g. a little boy or a donkey driver) who turn out to be wise scholars teaching rabbis the spiritual meaning of Torah.

In any case, the Zohar became the third most important book in Jewish tradition, just after the Torah, written by Moses, and the Talmud, written by an assembly of rabbis in the early centuries CE (200-500 CE). While the Talmud was meant for all Jews, prescribing in detail the laws and daily duties of its followers, the Zohar presented cryptic writing directed at those familiar with Jewish mysticism, Kabbalah.

After its appearance around 1280, the Zohar remained in the sphere of high kabbalistic circles. It established its place in public awareness, its sanctity, and a place among the Jewish inspired scriptures only after the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492. When the real situation seemed hopeless, the people looked for more spiritual sources to support their beliefs. They wanted to hear that the situation would get better, and they found the Zohar.

This became most apparent in the 16th century in the flourishing kabbalistic center in Safed in Galilee in Israel. A high concentration of kabbalistic scholars culminated in the arrival of Rabbi Isaac Luria (1534-1572). The stories say that Isaac Luria spent his time in Egypt, before his arrival to Safed, fully immersed in the study of Zohar. After he became a leader of Safed's kabbalistic group, the Zohar became the main source of his teaching. Rabbi Luria presented many new interpretations of Torah verses based on his understanding of the Zohar.

Many people believe that their opinion is an absolute truth and that only their truth should be allowed in the world. Mystically inclined kabbalists tried to delete the Talmud. In contrast, the legalistically-minded Jews tried the opposite, to delete the Zohar and keep the Talmud as the main script. The disagreement got heated sometimes, and scholars accused

each other of worshipping idols and misleading the people. A suggested compromise still favored the Talmud, by saying that when Zohar rulings are different from the Talmud, the Talmud prevails. When Zohar rules in a situation where there is no Talmud ruling, the Zohar ruling may be accepted.

The founder of Chasidism, Rabbi Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), and his early disciples saw a connection between Zohar and Talmud as a connection between the soul and the body. They placed, however, greater emphasis on holiness, on the soul, and the Zohar. Later Chasidic leaders, however, abolished the mystical path and concentrated on the Talmud and the performance of commandments. In the words of Rabbi Arye Kaplan (1934 -1983), a famous 20th-century Orthodox rabbi:[\[1\]](#)

During the first three generations of Chasidism, there was hardly a published work on the subject that did not contain some mention of meditation and mystical experience. In later works, however, mysticism is notably lacking ... the Chasidic movement developed a strong anti-mystical trend.

One of the latest attacks against Zohar occurred during the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah). Many Jewish rabbis saw the Zohar as a source of invalid doctrines and a stain on the purity of the Jewish religion.

What is today's situation? You can find it yourself. You can visit any of the synagogues in our cities. You would hardly find one without tens of volumes of Talmud in its library. At the same time, you would have a hard time finding a synagogue with at least some volumes of Zohar. It is clear where the balance currently lies.

My own experience with the Zohar began somewhat recently, during COVID. Like many others, I could not go to work and had

to work from home. It felt strange, since whole my life I never brought work home with me. The newfound flexibility made it possible to use my time in a new way: I divided my time roughly half to my professional interests in physics and environmental sciences, and a half to reading the Zohar, which I had never done before. Without COVID, I would likely never have done a systematic study of the Zohar, despite owning several editions of it—not short anthologies, but multi-volume English translations of the text.

I began with the Zohar translated by Daniel Matt.[\[2\]](#) I had purchased the first three volumes years earlier, which covered discussions of Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament. More qualified reviewers declared that Daniel Matt's translation is the best and the most accurate translation from the original Aramaic. I fully agree that this is a great academic work. However, I missed the inspirational part, which I was looking for.

Thus, I switched to my second Zohar collection, twenty-three volumes of Zohar in English with the Aramaic text, published by the Kabbalah Society.[\[3\]](#) The original Aramaic was translated into Hebrew by Rabbi Ashlag (1885-1954) and from Hebrew to English by Rabbi Berg. I did not purchase these books. One of our friends, now an older lady, had purchased these twenty-three books in times of youthful enthusiasm. However, her enthusiasm apparently did not last, and a few decades later she donated those books to me, assuming that I might get interested in reading them. When I got them, each volume was in an original plastic wrap, indicating that none of them was ever opened. I have to admit that in my possession, they remained in their original packing for a few years. Then came COVID, and I found myself with enough time to unpack them and start reading.

My third set of Zohar consists of a three-volume extensive anthology (over 1600 pages) of Isaiah Tishby,[\[4\]](#) originally translated from Aramaic to Hebrew by Isaiah Tishby

(1908-1992), and then from Hebrew to English by David Goldstein. A few years ago, I was attending a Hebrew class at an Orthodox synagogue, and one day the Rabbi told me that they were removing a few books from their library and suggested that I take some. Just before my eyes were three volumes of "The Wisdom of the Zohar" by Isaiah Tishby. Thus, it ended up as the third set in my Zohar collection.

The Wisdom of the Zohar is not a complete Zohar, but an extensive selected collection. It was the most useful of the books I had. I think this is the best choice for the first reading of Zohar. The reason is that Tishby's Zohar anthology is arranged by topics, instead of by sections of the Torah. The original Zohar is formally arranged by names of sections (Parshas) used in Jewish Torah reading. Each section consists of several chapters of the common Old Testament. The arrangement by sections sounds good, but within any section, rabbis will discuss at random any topic that may come to mind. Therefore, the arrangement by topics, with the addition of an explaining commentary by Isaiah Tishby is very helpful.

Torah is accepted as "The Book." According to Kabbalists, the Torah should be read on several different levels from literal understanding of the stories to their mystical interpretations, from the revealed level to the concealed one. The revealed level is directed toward physical actions and the concealed level toward mystical understanding. This is a difference between the Talmud and the Zohar. One is for the body, the other for the spirit. Both are needed. Each is useful for different groups of people. Religion needs to take care of both. Without this, religion is incomplete.

Man does not live by bread only, but by each word that comes from the mouth of God (Deuteronomy 8:3 and Mathew 4:4). And He (Jesus) opened his mouth, and taught them (Matthew 5:2). And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most-high God (Genesis14:18).

Bread and Wine, the Talmud and the Zohar, the exoteric and esoteric, the body and the Soul. Walk on the earth but keep your head above the clouds. Bread is not enough. Zohar is needed, even if the powerful men of religion almost succeeded in eliminating it.

[1] Arye Kaplan, Jewish Meditation, Schocken Books, New York 1985

[2] Daniel Matt, The Zohar, The Standford University Press, Stanford 2004

[3] The Zohar by Shimon bar Yochai with commentary by Yehuda Ashlag, Kabbalah Center International, New York and Los Angeles 2003

[4] Isaiah Tishby, The Wisdom of Zohar, The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London 1991

[Table of Contents](#)

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