

ZOHAR QUESTIONS – DANIEL MATT

1) How did you first become drawn to the mystical side of Judaism?

My father, Hershel Matt, was a rabbi—a genuinely spiritual rabbi. He rarely used the word “mystical,” but I imbibed spirituality from him, from praying, singing, and studying with him. Largely because of him, I felt drawn to exploring the mystical dimension of Judaism.

At Brandeis University I took courses in Jewish mysticism with Professor Alexander Altmann. Arthur Green, who was then a graduate student, taught an informal course in Hasidic texts. These courses inspired me to begin studying the *Zohar*, which I first undertook in Jerusalem at the Hebrew University during my junior year abroad in 1970.

2) How has the *Zohar* informed your life and what meaning can it have in our contemporary world—for Jews and other spiritual seekers?

I see the *Zohar* as a celebration of the imagination. It shows how to discover radically new meaning in an ancient text. The *Zohar*, after all, is a commentary on the Torah, not an independent book. It challenges you to delve deeply into Scripture. Though it builds on all the previous layers of Jewish tradition, it also demonstrates a holy dissatisfaction with traditional formulations. Typically we read: “This verse has already been discussed, but...” It is that pregnant “but” that provides an opening for new discovery, for new possibilities of meaning.

The *Zohar* has taught me to never stop questioning, to build on the past and to soar higher. Through its imaginative power, it has helped me cultivate a sense of wonder.

3) If the *Zohar* has been widely viewed by Jewish theologians to be as sacred as the Talmud and the Torah, why are so many Jews today unfamiliar with it?

The *Zohar* was first circulated in small circles. Gradually it became more widely known, but because of its dense symbolism and specialized Aramaic vocabulary, it has remained a fairly hidden treasure. One of the strengths of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* is the extensive commentary, which unpacks the kabbalistic terminology and symbolism for the reader, making the text accessible.

4) How do the various branches of Judaism—Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform—view Kabbalah and the *Zohar*? What about different Jewish communities around the globe? Are there countries where the *Zohar* is more or less accepted or

popular? How have attitudes toward the mystical side of Judaism changed over the centuries? What is the connection between contemporary Hasidism and the *Zohar*?

It is difficult to generalize about how the various branches of Judaism view Kabbalah and the *Zohar*. Within each denomination there are rabbis and laypeople who are more inclined or less inclined toward mysticism. Generally, one could say that many ultra-Orthodox Jews adhere to mystical Judaism. Over the past 10-15 years, many Reform Jews have felt attracted to certain aspects of Kabbalah, seeking to deepen their spirituality.

Kabbalah crystallized in Spain, and the *Zohar* first appeared there; so both Kabbalah and the *Zohar* have been revered throughout the Sephardic world. In contemporary Israel, Kabbalah and the *Zohar* are especially popular among Sephardic and Mizrahi (Eastern) Jews, but also among many young, secular Israelis who hunger for spirituality.

Mystical Judaism gained in popularity after the revival in Safed late in the 16th century. After the debacle of the Sabbatean messianic movement, there was a reaction against mysticism, or at least against its public consumption. Hasidism can be seen as a popularization of Kabbalah, spreading mystical teachings once again to the masses, while neutralizing certain messianic aspects.

5) How did you become involved in this *Zohar* translation project?

In September 1995 my friend Arthur Green called me and told me about a woman from Chicago named Margot Pritzker. She had been studying the *Zohar* with an Orthodox rabbi, Yehiel Poupko, but the dated English translation they were reading had proved inadequate. Margot had decided to commission a new translation, said Art, and she was inviting me to undertake the task.

I was astounded, and told Art that I needed a few days to consider this. The days turned into weeks, which turned into months, as I kept wrestling with the thrilling, terrifying offer. I decided to translate a short section of the *Zohar* to see how it felt, but I poured myself into the experiment so intensely, day after day, that I was left drained, exhausted, discouraged. How could I keep this up for years and years? I reluctantly resolved to decline the offer, but Art convinced me to at least meet this woman and her rabbi, so the following May the four of us gathered at the O'Hare Hyatt. I expressed my hesitation to them, and told Margot that the project could take twelve-to-fifteen years—to which she responded, “You’re not scaring me!” I was won over by her genuine desire to penetrate the *Zohar* and make it accessible to English readers.

6) At what point in the project did you decide that you would have to first construct a critical Aramaic text? In deciding which variant to choose, did you always opt for the older one? What other considerations came into play?

I began translating from the standard printed edition of the *Zohar*, figuring that I would check variant readings in the manuscripts when I came across difficult readings or multiple readings in the printed text. Gradually I discovered that in numerous other instances the manuscript variants offered superior readings; so I decided to work with the manuscripts more systematically.

Deciding which variant to use is a constant challenge. Sometimes I see that a number of the older, more reliable manuscripts offer what seems to be a “better” reading: more in line with the *Zohar*’s unique theology, style, syntax, or vocabulary. For example, later copyists, editors or printers have often “corrected” apparent mistakes in the manuscripts—“mistakes” that are actually typical Zoharic formulations. These I restore. Often, as well, later hands have added explanatory words or phrases. Based on manuscript evidence, I often delete these, thereby restoring some of the original mystery to the text. In my commentary I offer clarification.

7) How do the different interpretations of the *Zohar* that have arisen in different times reflect the societies from which they emanated?

The *Zohar* is such a powerful work of imagination that whoever studies it can’t help but imagining its message in new ways. Every commentary on the *Zohar* reflects the mentality of the commentator.

The most significant development in Zoharic commentary was the Lurianic revolution. In the 16th century, Issac Luria immersed himself in the *Zohar*. His understanding of the text generated a new formulation of Kabbalah, which became dominant. All Kabbalists today are, in effect, Lurianic Kabbalists, and they read the *Zohar* through the lens of Lurianic Kabbalah.

In my commentary I have attempted to go back before Luria, to scrape away several hundred years of Lurianic readings and recover something closer to “what the *Zohar* meant” when it first emerged. This, of course, is impossible; you cannot recapture the mentality of a 13th-century kabbalist or totally escape a 21st-century mindset. But still, I have tried to approach what one of my teachers used to call *peshat ha-Zohar*, its “simple sense.”

8) The Pritzker edition is the first annotated English translation by a recognized academic authority, but have there been scholarly translations with commentary into other languages? How did any of these editions—in Hebrew, French, German, or other languages—influence your English translation?

I have consulted the excellent French translation by Charles Mopsik, which so far consists of seven volumes. He achieves a fine balance between accuracy and fluidity.

I have consulted a number of fine Hebrew translations, including those of Yehudah Ashlag (the *Sullam*), Yechiel Bar-Lev (*Yedid Nefesh*), Yehudah Edri, Daniel Frisch

(*Matoq mi-Devash*), and Isaish Tisbhy's masterful anthology, *Mishnat ha-Zohar* (also available in an English translation by David Goldstein: *The Wisdom of the Zohar*). Hebrew renderings of the *Zohar* are extremely helpful because the author(s) of the *Zohar* was often thinking in Hebrew while composing in Aramaic.

Although the old English translation by Sperling, Simon, and Levertoff is inadequate, it was nevertheless helpful. When its paraphrases didn't capture the original Aramaic, they provided their own kind of commentary.

A translator needs all the help he can muster, and I am grateful for the efforts of all my predecessors.

9) What are the special challenges of translating a work whose meaning is often cryptic and elusive?

If much of the *Zohar*'s power and fascination lies in its language—its “unusual, striking wording” and “unruly, untamed vibrancy”—how does the translator convey this in a language whose structure and flavor are very different from the original?

Is the *Zohar* purposefully cryptic or has its meaning become more and more obscure the further removed we are from the time when Aramaic was a living language? What indications are there in the text that let us know that the *Zohar* was “not intended to be easily understood, but rather to be deciphered”?

What did you mean when you wrote that “in exploring the *Zohar* linguistic search and spiritual search go hand in hand”?

The *Zohar* is notoriously obscure—perhaps the most difficult Jewish classic to translate. It was composed in 13th-century Spain mostly in Aramaic, a language no longer spoken there. The author(s) concocted a unique blend of Aramaic out of traditional sources. This unparalleled neo-Aramaic is peppered with enigmatic expressions, puns, outlandish constructions, puzzling neologisms, grammatical mistakes, and traces of medieval Hebrew and Castilian.

The *Zohar*'s prose is poetic, overflowing with multiple connotations, composed in such a way that you often cannot pin down the precise meaning of a phrase. The language matches the subject matter, which itself is mysterious, elusive, and ineffable; words can merely suggest and hint. An unfathomable process may be stated, then immediately denied: “It split and did not split its aura.” Sometimes we encounter oxymorons, such as “new-ancient words,” alluding to the dual nature of the *Zohar*'s secrets: recently composed yet ascribed to ancient sources. The first impulse of divine emanation is described as *botsina de-qardinuta*, “a spark of impenetrable darkness,” so intensely bright that it cannot be seen.

Especially puzzling, though charming, are the neologisms strewn throughout the *Zohar*, intended to bewilder and astound the reader. Some derive from rare Talmudic terms, which the author refashions by intentionally misspelling or by inverting letters; some derive from Greek, Latin, or Castilian; some appear to be pure inventions.

One newly-coined noun, *tiqla*, is particularly versatile. In various contexts it can mean “scale, hollow of the hand, fist, potter’s wheel, and water clock.” This last sense refers to a device described in ancient and medieval scientific literature, which in the *Zohar* functions as an alarm clock, calibrated to wake kabbalists precisely at midnight for the ritual study of Torah. A similar device was employed in Christian monasteries to rouse monks for their vigils. How appropriate to invent a word for an invention!

Often, by pondering the context, comparing Zoharic and rabbinic parallels, and scouring sundry dictionaries and lexicons, one can decipher or at least conjecture the meaning of these weird terms, but some remain as perplexing as originally intended.

Despite its difficulties, the potency of the *Zohar*’s language has mesmerized countless readers, even those who could not plumb its secrets. While kabbalists delved deeply, the uninitiated chanted the lyrical Aramaic, often unaware of its literal meaning. In the words of an eighteenth-century mystic, “Even if one does not understand, the language is suited to the soul.”

I am aware of the risks of translating the *Zohar*, but it would be worse to leave these gems of wisdom buried in their ancient Aramaic vault. So I have plunged in, seeking to transmit some of the *Zohar*’s magic. Though I wish to make the *Zohar* accessible, I also want to convey its strangeness, potency, and rich ambiguity. Here the commentary is essential. When the translation cannot adequately express a multifaceted phrase, I unfold the range of meaning in the commentary. When the translation is as cryptic as the original Aramaic, the commentary rescues the stranded reader.

My style of translation is literal yet poetic. I am convinced that a literal rendering of the *Zohar* is not only the most accurate but also the most colorful and zestful—the best way to transmit the lyrical energy of the Aramaic. Still, at times, the multivalent language invites a certain freedom of expression. Let me cite one example (*Zohar* 1:83a), where Rabbi Shim’on describes the nighttime journey of the soul, soaring skyward from her sleeping body: “Flying, she encounters those *qumrin tehirin* of defilement.”

What does this bizarre term mean? The Sperling-Simon translation renders it as “certain bright but unclean essences.” The English translation of Tishby’s *Wisdom of the Zohar* reads: “the deceiving lights of uncleanness,” while Tishby’s original Hebrew translation reads a bit differently: *qimmurei negohot*—roughly: “vaulted splendors”—though in his note he acknowledges that the meaning is “doubtful.” I render the sentence as follows: “Flying, she encounters those hooded, hunchbacked, dazzling demons of defilement.” The accompanying commentary explains that these are malevolent forces who block the ascent of an unworthy soul. *Qumrin* derives via rabbinic usage from the Greek *qamara*,

“arched cover,” while *tehirin* is a cognate of the Aramaic *tihara*, meaning “brightness, noon.” One class of demons is named *tiharei*, “noonday demons.”

Although the *Zohar*’s basic vocabulary is limited, its roots generate a rich variety of meanings, which demand a wide range of English renderings. For example, the root *tqn* spans the following: “establish, institute, mend, restore, correct, perfect, prepare, arrange, array, adorn.” The root *slq* can mean: “rise, raise, culminate, attain, surpass, depart, disappear, die, remove, postpone, reserve, emit (fragrance).”

I find that I have to navigate between conflicting meanings and determine the appropriate one—or sometimes to discover how differing meanings pertain simultaneously. The frequent dilemmas of interpretation suggest that in exploring the *Zohar*, linguistic search and spiritual search go hand in hand. By this I mean that you can’t just read the text; you have to contemplate possible meanings. You have to enter openings created by the rich language, travel down the winding paths, try out various potential implications, see how they resonate within yourself. In this quest, the intellect is vital, but so is the spirit; the two must work hand-in-hand, aiding and correcting one another. The *Zohar* cannot be fully appreciated on a purely academic level; it demands engaging the text and self-reflection.

10) Is it possible for the curious reader with little previous knowledge of Kabbalah or the *Zohar* to simply pick up this translation and read it with comprehension? What background knowledge is needed to guide the reader through the esoteric language and symbolism and ambiguity of the *Zohar*?

I have composed this translation for the intelligent lay reader. In other words, someone who has little previous knowledge of Kabbalah should be able to approach the book. The Translator’s Introduction discusses my method and suggests “How to Read the *Zohar*.” A separate, extensive introduction by Arthur Green discusses the development of the Kabbalah and the symbol system of the *Zohar*. These two introductions should prepare you.

However, the *Zohar* was never intended to be easy reading. It is meant to be pondered, not immediately grasped. My commentary (printed at the bottom of the page) clarifies the symbolism and the unique terminology, though I here have tried not to be heavy-handed—not to ruin the subtlety and ambiguity of the original. I want to allow and compel you to wrestle with the text.

11) What is the significance of the *Zohar*’s erotic imagery? What is the union of male and female used to depict? How is the concept of “exile” used in the *Zohar*?

One of the secrets of the *Zohar*’s success was surely its bold eroticism, which appears in both the divine and human realms. Here God is equally male and female, and the human task is to promote the “sacred union” of the divine couple: the Holy One, blessed be He,

and His divine bride, *Shekhinah*. Human sexuality is also central; in fact, through the unification of a human couple below, the divine partners are also united.

Exile affects not only the people of Israel but God as well. According to the *Zohar*, God shares in the people's exile, wandering along with them, comforting them. Eventually, God will actually be redeemed along with Israel, a process that depends vitally on human righteousness and ethical behavior.

12) What has it been like for you to commit to a project as immense as this *Zohar* translation—one that will take many years to complete? How have the demands of this project changed your life—professionally and personally? What was it like working in Jerusalem during the first part of this project? Did your family accompany you?

When the project was first proposed, I realized that it would change my life. I have never worked so hard—or been so fulfilled. I have basically restructured my life around the project. I work as much as I can each day, without exhausting or draining myself. I eat very carefully and exercise daily. I feared at the beginning that I might grow tired of the work, but now, after six years, I love it even more than when I began.

I avoid any other professional commitments and limit my socializing. The time I spend with my family is precious to me.

I spent the years 1998-2002 in Jerusalem with my wife and two children. For the first two years, I worked at the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University. The next two years I spent at the Shalom Hartman Institute. Both of these provided superb environments for my research and writing. Despite the tension in Jerusalem, our entire family treasures the time we spent there.

13) How has your work on this project enriched your own understanding of the *Zohar*? What are some of your favorite passages of the first two volumes of the *Zohar*?

I began studying the *Zohar* in 1970. I later composed an anthology of *Zohar* translations that was published in 1983 (*Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*). But now, after working intensively on this project for the past six years, I feel a much deeper intimacy with the book, like I'm inside of the text. The stimulation is endless: it's as if I'm navigating rapids, surrounded by stunning scenery, flirting with danger, constantly encountering challenges and surprises, learning from each failure and success. There is nothing I'd rather be doing.

My favorite passages include the following:

1) The concluding verse in the biblical story of the Garden of Eden reads: *He drove out Adam* (Genesis 3:24; literally, *He drove out the human*). In the *Zohar*, Rabbi El'azar remarks: "We do not know who divorced whom: if the blessed Holy One divorced Adam, or not."

As the rabbi demonstrates, the mystical meaning is the shocking alternative lurking within that bland phrase, "or not": Adam *drove out*, divorced *Shekhinah* (the divine feminine), splitting Her from Her divine partner and from himself. Once, as Adam, humanity was wedded to God. The original sin lies in losing intimacy with the divine, thereby constricting our unbounded awareness. This loss is inevitable—a consequence of tasting the fruit of knowledge, the price we pay for maturity and culture. But the spiritual challenge is to search for that lost treasure—without renouncing the self or the world.

2) The *Zohar's* interpretations often seem far removed from the literal sense. But sometimes a verse is read "hyperliterally," ignoring idiomatic usage in favor of a radically spiritual sense. For example, in Genesis 12, God commands Abraham, *Lekh lekha*, two Hebrew words that are often translated: "Go forth" (to the land that I will show you). Rabbi El'azar insists on reading the words more literally than they were intended: *Lekh lekha*: "Go to yourself!" Search deep within to discover your true self.