

Scanning of Gershom Scholem's

Milon HaZohar Card Index

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The Zohar is among the preeminent spiritual works of all time. Its history attests to its importance: within three hundred years of its creation (at the end of the 13th century) it had become the central text Kabbalistic text. The Kabbalists regarded it as an authoritative source, a model to be emulated, and an interpretive subject. One might venture to say that the most important Kabbalistic traditions, such as those of Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (the Ramak), Rabbi Isaac Luria (the Ari) and the Vilna Gaon, were nothing if not interpretations of the Zohar, from whence they derived their vitality.

Gershom Scholem (1897-1982), the father of Kabbala scholarship, followed suit and made the Zohar the focus of his endeavors, both because of its critical importance in the history of Kabbala, and in deference to its essential attributes. This much is evident from Scholem's seminal work, his treatise in English on the major trends in Jewish mysticism.¹ In this book Scholem describes seven major streams of Jewish mysticism, among them the Zohar. However, while the other six streams of mysticism each have a chapter devoted to them, the Zohar has two. The first of these deals with the Zohar and its authorship, the second with its theosophy. The titles of these chapters also indicate Scholem's primary interests as a researcher. On the one hand there is the book's theosophy, which he saw as the most important feature of the Zohar and of Kabbalistic doctrine in general.² On the other is the riddle of the Zohar's authorship, given that it emerged in the form of a

marvelous Midrash at the end of the Middle Ages, having ostensibly been composed during the Tannaite period.³ Indeed, the question of the Zohar's authorship intrigued Scholem, as indicated by the closing lines of his autobiography:

"I sat and wrote an opening lecture⁴ on a fascinating subject: 'Did Rabbi Moses de Leon write the Zohar?' In it I summarized or expanded upon all the arguments against this assumption, which demand 'systematic reexamination of the origin of the book and the development of Kabbala without prior assumptions.' I then devoted the next ten or fifteen years to an investigation of this nature, negating the arguments featured in the opening lecture one by one. This, despite the fact that I had set out to prove their veracity. In these about-faces I too am evidence of the verse ' Truth springs from the earth'⁵

The results of this investigation, to which Scholem devoted even more than the noted fifteen years, are summarized in the aforementioned chapter of *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* and in encyclopedia entries.⁶ However, Scholem did not leave us with a comprehensive work on the Zohar problem.⁷ The summaries that appear in *Major Trends* do not include an exhaustive analysis or a broad scientific apparatus capable of satisfactorily addressing the problems that Scholem himself raised in the aforementioned opening lecture and in other early articles.

Though these summaries do include, particularly when considered together with the few articles that Scholem wrote on Zohar criticism, several examples that lead in the direction of the solution he is proposing. These however, remain examples, as if indicating to the

reader: there's more to come; this author has much more to say in this regard.

Indeed, Scholem had a great deal of material in the pipeline, and though he did not manage to lay it all out for the reader and publish it formally, it does exist. Those who so desire can come to it by other paths.

Scholem's words about various passages, verses and words from the Zohar can be found in the many notations he made in his copy of the Zohar, on notes that he tucked between its pages, which were published in facsimile in 1991/2⁸ as well as in his Milon HaZohar card index, which is now available on the National Library's website.

The catalogue is not a book per se, but personal notes that Scholem took in anticipation of the future writing of a Zohar lexicon. The notes are in the form of white cards, which Scholem stored in impeccable order in a long narrow wooden drawer that fit them perfectly, in his impressive writing desk (which today serves as the Scholem collections librarian's desk at the National Library).

Each card deals with a word from the Zohar and includes citations that include this word in its various senses, with references to the Zohar, clarifications of formulation and important notes on the lexicon of the Zohar.

In addition to these are cards prepared by his student Professor Rivka Shatz, at his request, featuring words unique to the language of the Zohar, known as the Midrash Neelam.

The notes written on the cards include, first and foremost, the meaning of the word and its various connotations, both in linguistic and Kabbalistic terms, and sometimes also symbolic ones. In addition, the

cards contain other usages and explanations that elucidate the origin of the word and its etymological development from the ancient texts (Bible, Talmud and Midrashim) or Medieval texts – philosophy and Kabbala, in particular allusions to the works of Moses de Leon who Scholem, for most of his life, regarded as the author of the Zohar.

The notes also contain etymological considerations and parallel words in other languages, as well as reference to usage in later Kabbalistic texts and discussion of these words in works by both early and modern Zohar commentators.

As mentioned previously, this card index is not a book and does not obviate the need for a dictionary of the Zohar. The notes it contains, like those published in the aforementioned facsimile of Scholem's Zohar text, were made by Scholem for personal use. Most of them are in the German cursive script that was taught in German schools in the early 20th century, which is difficult to read (even for those proficient in German). However, even when we only manage to decipher part of the note, its intention can usually be inferred from the references included.

Moreover, the notes on the cards were not written at the same time, and they reflect more than one approach to the Zohar. Thus, the reader cannot draw conclusions, but merely glimpse the workings of the researcher's enterprise.

This is also true of the citations from the Zohar, featured on each card to demonstrate its usage in this text. These too, are a work in progress. Today however, in the digital age, the mapping of usage throughout the Zohar can easily be completed by means of databases (such as DBS) that include the text of the Zohar. Nevertheless, Scholem citations are

significant in that they were the product not of a computer program but of his remarkable mind. He was thus able to emphasize the most important and characteristic occurrences he found for each word.

I encountered the limitations of the Scholem card index personally when, in the early 1970s, Scholem asked me to prepare a dictionary on the basis of the cards as part of my doctoral dissertation. It soon became apparent that the card index was inadequate to this end. I undertook this task for several years (if this had taken place in the digital age, the results would have been far superior and taken less time) and I got no further than "Chapters in Milon HaZohar". This work, though vast, covers a mere twenty words. (Scholem, who was a kind and understanding man, mercifully agreed to approve this partial work as a doctoral dissertation). I learned then that the language of the Zohar, though relatively sparse in terms of lemmae, was nevertheless extremely rich in the collocations and their accompanying semantic connotations that are part of every dictionary.

Indeed, for one word 'גופא' in my dictionary there were no less than 472 sub-entries; for the word 'אדם' 353; for the word 'אילנא' 132; and for the word 'קיומא' 97, etc. As if this were not enough, since then I have collected further nuances of meaning for those self-same entries. I add these to my dissertation, which appears on the internet, on a regular basis.

To conclude, even though the Scholem card catalogue cannot be regarded as a fully realized dictionary of the Zohar, it is still of tremendous value as the only attempt thus far to prepare a comprehensive dictionary of this kind. Today, the card index is

accessible via the Internet and everyone is free to get a glimpse of the greatest Kabbalistic scholar at work, and learn much about his subject as well as his method.

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- 1 Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, Schocken Publishing House, Jerusalem 1941.
 - 2 For a critique of this view see my article in P'amim vol.50, pp.150-170. This article and all my other publications mentioned here are available on my personal website:
<http://pluto.huji.ac.il/~liebes/zohar>.
 - 3 In my opinion, if the "narrative framework" of the Zohar is ahistorical, as Scholem claims, there is deep implicit meaning to understanding this book. Cf. Yehuda Liebes "The Messiah of the Zohar: On the Messianic figure of Simon bar Yochai" (Hebrew). In: S. Re'em. ed. The Messianic Idea in Israel: Conference in Honor of Gershom Scholem's 80th Birthday, Jerusalem 1981/2, pp.87-236.
 - 4 On the occasion of his appointment as a lecturer in Kabbala at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in 1925.
 - 5 Gershom Scholem, From Berlin to Jerusalem (Hebrew), Am Oved, 1981/2, pp. 223-224. It is unclear how we are to understand the last verse of the citation (the end of the book). Perhaps this is a reference to the virtue of living in the land of Israel, which enabled him to reach the truth, or perhaps the "land" is a term for thorough unbiased investigation.
 - 6 I am referring to the entries 'Zohar' and 'Kabbala' in the Encyclopedia Judaica and Ivrit. Also relevant here is the anthology of Zohar passages translated into English, with an introduction by Scholem: *ZOHAR: The Book of Splendor*, New York 1963.
 - 7 Here Scholem left his student Yeshayahu Tishbi ample room to specialize. Tishbi's Mishnat HaZohar (Vol. I Jerusalem, 1956/7, Vol. II 1960/1) is the first comprehensive work of scholarship on the Zohar to be published. I can attest to this via a personal anecdote: When I became Bar Mitzvah Scholem, who was a close friend of my father's, wanted to give me a gift that would bring me closer to the world of the Zohar and he came me Vol. I of Tishbi's book.
 - 8 Gershom Scholem's Sefer HaZohar, Jerusalem, Magnes Press, 1991/2, with introduction by Yehuda Liebes.