

Parashat Be-Reshit

"IN THE BEGINNING" (GENESIS 1:1–6:8)

בראשית (Be-reshit), *In the beginning* (Genesis 1:1).

At the head of potency of the King,¹ He engraved engravings² in luster on high.³
 A spark of impenetrable darkness⁴ flashed within the concealed of the con-

1. **potency of the King** הורמנותא דמלכא (*Hurmanuta de-malka*), "Authority [or: decree] of the king." The phrase הורמנא דמלכא (*harmana de-malka*), "authority [or: decree] of the king," appears in BT *Berakhot* 58a, *Gittin* 57b, *Bava Metsi'a* 83b–84a, *Hullin* 57b.

See *Zohar* 1:76b, 97a, 108a, 109b (all *ST*), 147a (*Tos*); 2:123a; *ZH* 67c (*ShS*), 121d. Here the King is *Ein Sof*, arousing Itself to manifest through the process of emanation.

2. **engraved engravings** These engravings eventually manifest as the *sefirot*. See *Zohar* 1:3b, 38a; 2:126b; 3:128a (*IR*).

3. **luster on high** The brilliance of the first *sefirah*, *Keter*, represented in the *Zohar* as coeternal with *Ein Sof*.

4. **spark of impenetrable darkness** בוצינא דקדינותא (*Botsina de-qardinuta*), "A lamp of impenetrability." Though בוצינא (*botsina*) usually means "lamp," here "spark" is likely. See the wealth of material collected and analyzed by Liebes, *Peraqim*, 145–51, 161–64. *OY* and *OL* record the variant בוצינא (*botsitsa*), "spark." Cf. *Zohar* 3:139a (*IR*), 295a (*IZ*); and the phrase בוצינא דקדינותא (*botsitsa de-qardinuta*), which appears several times in *ZH* 56d–58d (*QhM*). קדינותא (*Qardinuta*) recalls a phrase in BT *Pesaḥim* 7a: חיטי קרדנאיתא (*hittei qurdanaita*), "wheat from Kurdistan," which, according to Rashi,

is very hard. *OY*, *OL*, and *DE* record the variants קדינותא (*qadrinuta*) or קרדונינא (*qadrunita*), "darkness." See *ZH* 2a, where קרדונותא דסיהרא (*qardenuta de-sihara*) means "eclipse of the moon," corresponding to the Hebrew קדרות הירח (*qadrut ha-yareah*), "darkening of the moon." Shim'on Lavi (*KP*) retains the reading בוצינא דקדינותא (*botsina de-qardinuta*) but renders it שביב הקדרות (*sheviv ha-qadrut*), "the spark of darkness." Cf. Tishby, *Mishnat ha-Zohar*, 1:163; שביב של קדרות (*shaviv shel qadrut*), "a spark of darkness"; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, tr. Goldstein, 1:309; "a spark of blackness." See *Tanḥuma*, *Shemot* 15.

The spark is so potentially brilliant that it overwhelms comprehension. Many mystics convey similar paradoxical images: "a ray of divine darkness" (Dionysius, *Mystical Theology* 1:1); "the luminous darkness" (Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 2:163); "the black light" (Iranian Sufism; see Corbin, *The Man of Light in Iranian Sufism*, 99–120). Prior to the *Zohar*, Azriel of Gerona and the author of *Ma'yan ha-Ḥokhmah* mention "the light darkened from shining." See Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, 59–60, 158–59; Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 336. Cf. Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:59: "We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden

cealed,⁵ from the head of Infinity⁶—a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness, thrust in a ring,⁷ not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all.⁸ As a cord surveyed,⁹ it yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below, concealed within the concealed of the mystery of *Ein Sof*.¹⁰ It split and did not split its aura,¹¹ was not known at all, until under the

from us because of the intensity with which He becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes too weak to apprehend it.”

Here the blinding spark is the first impulse of emanation flashing from *Ein Sof* through *Keter* and proceeding to delineate the various *sefirot*. (On the connection between *qardinuta* and measurement, see Liebes, *Peraqim*, 146–49, 162–63.) The goal of meditation is to attain this spark and participate in the primal flow of being. See ZH 57d–58a (*QhM*); cf. *Zohar* 1:18b, 86b, 172a; 2:133b, 177a, 233a, 254b, 260a; 3:48b–49a, 135b, 139a (*IR*), 292b, 295a–b (*IZ*).

Other renderings of the phrase include: מנורה חשוכה (*menorah hashukhah*), “a dark lamp” (Galante); נִצְּצוֹת חֲזָק (*nitsots hazaq*), “powerful spark” (*DE*); נֵר שֶׁל חֹשֶׁךְ (*ner shel hoshekh*), “a lamp of darkness” (Elijah of Vilna, *Yahel Or*); “a dark flame” (Scholem, *Zohar*, 27); “a very powerful light” (Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 228); “a lamp of scintillation [or: darkness, measurement]” (Sperling and Simon, *The Zohar*); “a blinding spark” (Matt, *Zohar*, 49); *une flamme obscure* (Mopsik, *Le Zohar*); “the hardened spark” (Wolfson, “Woman—The Feminine as Other in Theosophic Kabbalah,” 178–82). On the phallic connotations of the phrase, see Wolfson’s discussion there and in his *Circle in the Square*, 60–62, and index, s.v. “hardened spark”; Liebes, “*Zohar ve-Eros*,” 73–80.

5. concealed of the concealed The luster on high, the first and most hidden *sefirah*, *Keter*.

6. Infinity Hebrew, אֵין סוֹף (*Ein Sof*), “there is no end,” the ultimate divine reality. On the evolution of this term, see Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 88–89.

7. cluster of vapor forming in formlessness... קוּטְרָא בְּגוּלְמָא (*Qutra be-gulma*). *Qutra* means both “knot” and “smoke” in

the *Zohar*. See 1:172a, and 30a, 33b, 94b, 106a, 161b; 2:80a, 124a; 3:45b, 51a–b, 107a, 289b, 295b (*IZ*).

Some commentators (Galante, *OY*, Sullam) suggest translating *qutra* as “form.” Cf. קְטוּרִין (*qeturin*) in *Vayigra Rabbah* 23:12; *Arukh*, s.v. *qtr*. The phrase would then mean: “a form in formlessness,” which resonates with “a spark of darkness.” The ring is *Keter*, the “Crown.”

8. not white, not black... These four colors are associated with four *sefirot*: *Hesed*, *Shekhinah*, *Gevurah*, and *Tif'eret*, none of which appears until a later stage of emanation. See ZH 57a (*QhM*); Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth*, 84.

9. As a cord surveyed The spark that is a vapor is also a cord (מִשְׁחִיָּה [meshihā]), referred to elsewhere in the *Zohar* as קַי הַמִּדָּה (*qav ha-middah*), “the line of measure,” based on Jeremiah 31:38.

See Azriel of Gerona, *Peirush ha-Aggadot*, 89–90; Jacob ben Sheshet, *Meshiv Devarim Nekho'im*, 113; *Zohar* 1:18b; 2:233a–b, 258a; ZH 56d–58d (*QhM*); TZ 18, 37b.

The cord, or measuring line, maps out the paths and stages of emanation, the spectrum of divine colors, each with its own wavelength.

10. concealed within the concealed... The flow of emanation has just begun; everything is still hidden within the mystery of *Ein Sof*.

11. It split and did not split... בִּקְעָ וְלֹא בִקְעָ (*Beqa ve-la beqa*). The flow somehow broke through, but the nature of the breakthrough is impossible to describe, so the act is stated and immediately denied. See Scholem’s remarks on expressions of this kind in *Major Trends*, 166–67.

The aura (אֵירוֹרָא [*avira*], “air, space, ether, aura”) is *Keter*. See *Zohar* 1:16b; 3:135b (*IR*); Altmann, *Studies*, 174; Scholem, “*Iqvotav shel*

impact of splitting, a single, concealed, supernal point shone. Beyond that point, nothing is known, so it is called ראשית (Reshit), *Beginning*,¹² first command of all.¹³

*The enlightened*¹⁴ will shine like the זוהר (zohar), radiance,¹⁵ of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever (Daniel 12:3).

this point.¹⁶ Then this *beginning* expanded, building itself a palace worthy of

זוהר (Zohar), Radiance! Concealed of concealed struck its aura, which touched and did not touch

Gevrol be-Qabbalah, 167–68; idem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 331–47 (especially 342); Pines, in *Tarbiz* 50 (1981): 339–47; Liebes, in *Mehqerei Yerushalym be-Mahashevet Yisra'el* 6:3–4 (1987): 80–86; Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, 153–56.

See *Sefer Yetsirah* 2:6: “Out of chaos He formed substance, making what is not into what is. He hewed enormous pillars out of ether that cannot be grasped.”

See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Keter Malkhut* 9:101: “He called to אֵין (ayin), nothingness, וְנִבְקָע (ve-nivqa), and it was split, to יֵשׁ (yesh), something, and it was thrust.” On the parallel between the *Zohar*’s description and the Orphic myth of the hatching of the cosmic egg, see Liebes, *Studies in Jewish Myth*, 79–84.

12. a single, concealed, supernal point... *Beginning* The flow of emanation manifests as a point of light. This is the second *sefirah*: *Hokhmah* (“Wisdom”), which is called *Beginning* because it is the first ray of divine light to appear outside of *Keter*, the first aspect of God that can be known.

The identification of ראשית (reshit), *beginning*, with Wisdom appears widely. See *Targum Yerushalmi* (frag.), Genesis 1:1; Wolfson, *Philo*, 1:242–45, 266–69; *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1; Azriel of Gerona, *Peirush ha-Aggadot*, 81; Nahmanides on Genesis 1:1; *Zohar* 1:2a, 3b, 16b, 20a, 145a; Moses de León, *Sheqel ha-Qodesh*, 21–22 (25–26); Scholem, *Major Trends*, 391, n. 80.

13. first command of all According to *M Avot* 5:1, “The world was created through ten commands.” Only nine explicit com-

mands appear in Genesis 1, but the decade is completed by counting the phrase *In the beginning*.

See BT *Rosh ha-Shanah* 32a, *Megillah* 21b; Ezra of Gerona, *Peirush Shir ha-Shirim*, 506; *Zohar* 1:16b, 30a; TZ 32, 76a. In Kabbalah the ten commands symbolize the ten *sefirot*, the first of which establishes the basis for the other nine.

14. *The enlightened* הַמְשִׁכִּילִים (H-maskilim). Both philosophers and kabbalists described themselves by this term, which originally may have designated the community of those who shared Daniel’s vision. See Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, 224. On the following pages of the *Zohar* (15b–16a), the term is applied to the letters and vowels, as well as to the *sefirot*. The *Zohar* on Exodus opens with the same verse and applies it to the kabbalists: “*The enlightened* are those who contemplate the secret of wisdom” (2:2a).

See *Bahir* 95 (139); *Zohar* 2:23a; ZH 58c (QhM), 93d–94b (TiQ); Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines*, 383–84; Liebes, “*Zohar ve-Eros*,” 73–75.

15. זוהר (zohar), radiance The word designates the hidden power of emanation and provides the title of the book. See below, and *Zohar* 1:100a (ST); 3:124b, 153b (RM); Liebes, “*Zohar ve-Eros*,” 73–86.

16. זוהר (Zohar), Radiance!...this point The spark of emanation flashes again, and *Keter*, the aura, subtly transmits the impulse to *Hokhmah*, the point of Wisdom. See *Zohar* 1:16b, 65a; 2:268b.

glorious praise. There it sowed seed to give birth, availing worlds.¹⁷ The secret is: *Her stock is seed of holiness* (Isaiah 6:13).¹⁸

זוהר (Zohar), *Radiance!* Sowing seed for its glory, like the seed of fine purple silk wrapping itself within, weaving itself a palace,¹⁹ constituting its praise, availing all.

With this *beginning*, the unknown concealed one²⁰ created the palace. This palace is called אלהים (Elohim), *God*.²¹ The secret is: בראשית ברא אלהים (Bereshit bara Elohim), *With beginning, — created God* (Genesis 1:1).²²

17. palace worthy of glorious praise... sowed seed... The purpose of emanation is to display the glory of the hidden God, which is achieved through a rhythm of revelation and concealment: only by concealing itself can the overwhelming light be revealed. The point expands into a circle, a palace—the third *sefirah*: Binah (“Understanding”). She is the divine womb, where the seed of *Hokhmah*, the divine father, is sown. Binah gives birth to the seven lower *sefirot*, which engender the rest of creation. See Zohar 2:68b (Tos). The idea that the sperm originates in the brain is based on the theory of the second-century Greek physician Galen, common in medieval literature.

18. *Her stock is seed of holiness* The prophet Isaiah refers to one-tenth of the people of Israel, who will be saved. The Zohar cites the verse as an allusion either to Binah or Shekhinah, the mystical Assembly of Israel, the tenth *sefirah*, whose origin is the seed of *Hokhmah* (known as “Holiness”) sown in Binah. See Azriel of Gerona, *Peirush ha-Aggadot*, 20; Zohar 2:121a.

19. fine purple silk wrapping itself within... As the silkworm spins a cocoon out of its own substance, so *Hokhmah*, the point of *beginning*, expands into the palace of Binah. (The silk industry was extensive in Andalusia, south of Castile, where the Zohar emerged.)

See *Bereshit Rabbah* 21:5: “like the locust whose garment is of itself.” Cf. Shneur Zalman of Lyady, *Sha’ar ha-Yihud ve-ha-Emunah*, chap. 7; and the spider simile in the Upanishads (Hume, ed., *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, 95, 367).

20. the unknown concealed one The hidden source of emanation, *Ein Sof* or *Keter*.

21. אלהים (Elohim), *God* Here the name signifies *Binah*, the Divine Mother who gives birth to the seven lower *sefirot*. See Zohar 1:3b, 15b.

22. The secret is... The Zohar offers its mystical reading of the opening words of Genesis. It translates the first word, בראשית (Be-reshit), as *With beginning* rather than *In the beginning*, relying on an alternative meaning of the preposition ב (be). See *Targum Yerushalmi* (frag.) and Nahmanides, ad loc.; *Bereshit Rabbah* 1:1; Azriel of Gerona, *Peirush ha-Aggadot*, 81.

The subject of the verse, אלהים (Elohim), *God*, follows the verb ברא (bara), *created*. In its typical hyperliteral fashion, the author(s) of the Zohar insists on reading the words in the exact order in which they appear, thereby transforming *God* into the object! This means that the subject is now unnamed, but that is perfectly appropriate because the true subject of emanation is unnamable. The opening words of the Bible no longer mean: *In the beginning God created*, but rather: *With beginning* [by means of the point of *Hokhmah*], the ineffable source *created Elohim* [the palace of Binah].

The rabbis of the Talmud were aware of the danger of misinterpreting *Elohim* as the object of the sentence, which could promote Gnostic dualism (see BT *Megillah* 9a; Rashi and Tosafot, ad loc.). Various early kabbalists also adopt such a reading. See *Kiryat Sefer* 6 (1929–30): 415; Verman, *The Books of Contemplation*, 139–41; Isaac ibn Latif, *Sha’ar ha-Shamayim* 2:10; *Ma’arekhet ha-Elohut*, 82b–

זוהר (Zohar), *Radiance*! From here all commands were created through the mysterious expansion of this point of concealed radiance. If *created* is written here, no wonder it is written: *God created the human being in His image* (Genesis 1:27).²³

זוהר (Zohar), *Radiance*! Mystery! בראשית (Be-reshit), *In the beginning*, first of all. אהיה (Ehyeh), *I will be* (Exodus 3:14), a sacred name engraved in its sides;²⁴ אלהים (Elohim), *God*, engraved in the crown.²⁵ אשר (Asher), *Who* (ibid.)—a hidden, treasured palace, beginning of the mystery of ראשית (reshit).²⁶ אשר (Asher)—ראש (rosh), head, emerging from ראשית (reshit).²⁷ When [15b] afterward point and palace were arrayed as one, then בראשית (Be-reshit) comprised supernal ראשית (reshit) in wisdom.²⁸ Afterward the color of the palace transformed and it was called בית (bayit), house, while the supernal point was called ראש (rosh), merging in one another in the mystery of בראשית (Be-reshit), when all was as one in one entirety, before the house was inhabited.²⁹

83a; Scholem, *Major Trends*, 402, n. 55; Liebes, *Studies in the Zohar*, 152–54. For Gnostic parallels, see Robinson, ed., *The Nag Hammadi Library*, index, s.v. Autogenes, Self-begotten One.

23. If *created*... no wonder... The verb ברא (bara), *created*, thought to be reserved for creation *ex nihilo*, refers in the opening verse of Genesis to an act of emanation, the emanation of Binah (Elohim) from the primordial point of Hokhmah (Reshit). See below, page 113: “Bara—concealed mystery, from which all expands.” If so, no wonder the same verb is employed to describe the creation of Adam and Eve, a further stage of divine unfolding.

For alternative interpretations, see Scholem; KP; OY; Galante; MM; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:310. Liebes (“Zohar ve-Eros,” 75) suggests: If, by means of זוהר (zohar), *radiance*, God created heaven and earth, no wonder that it is written: *God created the human being in His image*, a verse that perplexed those medieval interpreters who denied anthropomorphism. The verse is not comparing the human and divine forms, but rather the creative power called zohar, common to both God and humans. In creating the human being, God emanated and imparted this creative potential.

24. אהיה (Ehyeh), *I will be*... A name of Keter. At the burning bush, God reveals His name to Moses: אהיה אשר אהיה (Ehyeh asher ehyeh), *I will be who I will be* [or: *I am who I am*]. Here the first two of the three Hebrew words are applied to Keter and Binah respectively. See Zohar 3:11a, 65a–b.

25. אלהים (Elohim), *God*... As noted above, this name applies to Binah, but it also alludes to Shekhinah, known as עטרה (atarah), “crown.”

26. אשר (Asher), *Who*... Referring to Binah, the palace, the first sefirah to emanate from Hokhmah, known as ראשית (reshit), *beginning*. On Asher as a name of Binah, see Zohar 1:158a, 246a.

27. אשר (Asher)—ראש (rosh), head... אשר (Asher), signifying Binah, is an anagram of ראש (rosh), the initial letters of ראשית (reshit), signifying Hokhmah. Binah emerges from Hokhmah.

28. then בראשית (Be-reshit)... in wisdom The opening word of the Torah indicates both the primordial point of Hokhmah (reshit) and the palace of Binah (be).

29. the color... transformed... Binah develops further and is no longer called by the single letter ב (bet) (i.e., the preposition be, “in” or “with”), but by the word בית (bayit), “house,” though it is still joined with

Once it was sown, arraying habitation, it was called אלהים (*Elohim*)—hidden, concealed.³⁰

זוהר (*Zohar*), *Radiance*! Concealed and treasured, while offspring lay within, yet to be born, and the house expanded, arrayed by that seed of holiness.³¹ Until it conceived, expanding into habitation, it was not called אלהים (*Elohim*), rather all combined: בראשית (*Be-reshit*). Once arrayed in the name אלהים (*Elohim*), it generated offspring from that seed sown within.

What is that seed? Those engraved letters, mystery of Torah, emerging from that point.³² Within that palace the point sowed the seed of three points—חולם (*holem*), שורק (*shuruq*), חירק (*hireq*)³³—merging together, becoming a single mystery: a voice emerging in unison.³⁴ As it emerged, its consort emerged with it, comprising all letters, as is written: את השמים (*et ha-shamayim*), *the heavens*—voice and consort.³⁵ This voice, *heaven*, is the final אהיה (*ehyeh*), *I will be*.³⁶

the point of *Hokhmah*, called ראש (*rosh*), “head,” and together they comprise בראשית (*Be-reshit*). At this stage, the house of *Binah* is still uninhabited by the primordial seed or by any of the lower *sefirot*. See ZH 5a (*MhN*).

30. Once it was sown... אלהים (*Elohim*)... Once the seed of emanation from *Hokhmah* flows into Her, *Binah* attains the independent name *Elohim*. “Hidden, concealed” may refer to the lower *sefirot* gestating within *Binah* or to the fact that *Binah* is assigned the letters of the name יהוה (*YHVH*) with the vowels of the name אלהים (*Elohim*). See *Zohar* 3:65a; OY; Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 1:311.

31. while offspring... The lower *sefirot* exist potentially within the primordial seed of *Hokhmah*, which has not yet impregnated *Binah*, though the primordial point has already expanded into a circle, the house of *Binah*, and begun to enter Her.

32. Those engraved letters... The emanation is depicted as a stream of the letters of the alphabet flowing from *Hokhmah*, who is known as primordial Torah.

33. the seed of three points—חולם (*holem*), שורק (*shuruq*), חירק (*hireq*) These three vowels appear, respectively, as points placed above, within, and beneath the letter. Here they apparently represent the three lines of emanation: right, left, and center.

See Isaac ha-Kohen, *Ta'amei ha-Nequddot*, ed. Scholem, *Madda'ei ha-Yahadut* 2 (1927): 265–68; *Zohar* 1:17a; Judah Hayyat, *Ma'arekhet ha-Elohut*, 136a. According to Moses de León, *Sefer ha-Rimmon*, 328–30 (see Wolfson's note, 329:2), the three points symbolize *Hokhmah*, *Tiferet*, and *Shekhinah*.

34. a voice... The *sefirah* of *Tiferet*, known as Written Torah.

35. its consort emerged with it... The partner of *Tiferet* is *Shekhinah*, who is called אֵת (*Et*), comprising the entire alphabet of divine speech, the letters from א (*alef*) to ת (*tav*). See the Christian parallel in Revelation 1:8: “I am *alpha* and *omega*.”

Grammatically, the accusative particle *et* has no ascertainable independent sense, but Naḥum of Gimzo and his disciple Rabbi Akiva taught that when *et* appears in a biblical verse, it amplifies the original meaning. See BT *Pesaḥim* 22b; *Hagigah* 12a–b; *Zohar* 1:247a; 2:90a, 135b.

אֵת (*Et*), the range of the alphabet, is an appropriate name for *Shekhinah*, who is known as both the mystical realm of speech and Oral Torah. In the opening verse of Genesis, the phrase את השמים (*et ha-shamayim*) refers to *Shekhinah* and Her partner, *Tiferet*, the voice, also known as *shamayim*, *heaven*.

36. the final אהיה (*ehyeh*), *I will be* In the name revealed by God to Moses, אהיה