Chapter 9

DEMONIZATION AND TRANSFORMATION:
LEGAL AND KABBALISTIC MYTHS OF SELF AND OTHER

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I. Two Grand Myths

All fundamental transformations—political, religious, economic, metaphysical—demand a regeneration of identity. Alongside its material dimensions, structural change cannot take place without the transformation of those who inhabit those structures. Revolutionary political ideologies invariably prophesy the advent of a "new man," a "new woman," even a "new humanity." This dimension is most salient in ideologies focused on specific groups: class, gender, nation, religion, and so on. Though some decry "identity politics" as a distraction from "real issues," profound transformation without the reconstruction of identity is unimaginable.

The rhetoric of "real issues," however, does point us, a contrario, to myth as a source of insight about identity-transformation—provided we understand "myth" not as delusion, but as imaginative narrative, above all tales of Self and Other, their conflicts, metamorphoses, even reciprocal transmutations. I examine here two grand myths of the dialectics of Self and Other. Both proclaim the emergence of a renewed Self from alienation, its liberation from the
feature remarkable homologies. One might attribute these homologies to the participation of both in the oldest conundrum of Western, Mediterranean, even world culture. There is also, however, a more proximate historical link between these two myths, or, more precisely, contemporary interest in them: the aesthetic/political/religious ferment of the early twentieth century known as “cultural-modernism.”

Cultural-modernists were fascinated with so-called primitive sources of cultural energy—energy flowing from racial, geographical, or ethnic Others, or that intimate Other, the unconscious. Cultural-modernists, in a variety of fields, often created their masterpieces animated by a desire for a paradoxical “alliance” between such forces and advanced techniques of high culture. Picasso’s Les Demoiselles d’Avignon (1907) is an iconic example of this “alliance.”

Cultural-modernists viewed their “primitive” forces with ambivalence. On the one hand, they desired them as indispensable sources of vitality for cultural renewal, for unblocking an ossified Western culture. On the other hand, they feared them as excessive and destabilizing. In 1926, the influential Protestant theologian Paul Tillich (1886–1965) highlighted this ambivalence by identifying the “primitives” of the artistic imagination with the “demonic” of the religious imagination. Tillich shared his lifelong fascination with the demonic with his fellow Berliner, Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), who, like Tillich, emerged from the crucible of cultural-modernism.

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1. I use this term for the texts printed in the sixteenth century as “Sefer ha-Zohar.” Recent critics have challenged the notion that the Zohar is a unitary book with a single author or even a unified group of authors. Elliot Wolfson summarizes these critiques while nonetheless arguing persuasively for reading the Zoharic literature together, in “Zoharic Literature and Midrashic Temporality,” in Midrash Unbound, ed. Michael Fishbane and Joanna Weinberg (Portland, OR: Littman Library, 2013), 323–324. I have, throughout, emended the Zoharic texts in accordance with the critical edition established by Daniel Matt, Nathan Wolski, and Joel Hecker, available at www.sup.org/Zohar?id=Aramaic%20Texts&ft-index. Although I have made my own translations for the Zoharic passages discussed here, I have at times referred to the Matt, Wolski, and Hecker translation. See Daniel C. Matt, Nathan Wolski, & Joel Hecker, trans., The Zohar: Prifer Edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004–17).


II. Law: From "Monstrous" States to Peoples' Self-Determination

In international law, the myth of self-transformation I discuss here concerns non-State, ethno-national groups. In the early twentieth century, such groups included European separatist nationalists aspiring to dismantle the Ottoman, Hapsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov empires, and, ever-increasingly, anti-colonial nationalists resisting the yoke of Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal. These were all groups perceived as peripheral, as Other, by the Western, State-centered international order bequeathed by the nineteenth century. These groups challenged the legitimacy of existing States, international law's foundational units, on the ground that they suppressed the ethno-national identities of those under their rule. From a Jewish perspective, these developments bore decisive historical consequences. Zionism emerged in the context of growing European ethno-nationalism; and, on a radically different note, the metastasis of that ethno-nationalism led to the greatest catastrophe in Jewish history.

In the nineteenth century, most international lawyers rejected such claims. In 1871, the Italian Guido Padelletti declared that, in contrast to "the concrete idea of the State," the idea of the "nation and the liberty of peoples" was "filled with contradictions." This "other notion" was "vague and disintegrating," inevitably provoking the "dissolution of all political ties" and "chaos in public law." Despite its ability to "overthrow the whole of Europe," its internal contradictions rendered it "impotent" to resolve territorial disputes.

Paradoxically, despite its destructiveness, ethno-nationalism possessed the power to construct an alternative international or-
der, a veritable demonic double of the existing State system. While multi-ethnic States like Belgium and Switzerland would no longer have "the right to exist," the "logical consequence" of nationalist claims would be the "formation of three or four monstrous States." On the one hand, "disintegrating," and "filled with contradictions"; on the other hand, driven by an iron "logic" yielding fearsome "monsters": such was the paradox of ethno-nationalism. Those familiar with kabbalistic notions of the Other Side readily recognize this kind of paradoxical adversarial force.

This paradox was rooted in ethno-nationalism's twofold relation to alterity. On the one hand, the ethno-national Other sought to destabilize existing States—the Hapsburg Empire by the Czechs, the French Empire by the Algerians, and so on. On the other hand, this Other was internally fractured, due to the divergent elements within all collective identities, as well as the multiplicity of identities that cohabit all territories. Only in Italy, Padelletti declared, was there a convergence of "language, literature, geographical configuration, economic interests, race," and "the consciousness of belonging" to the same "nation and glorious historical traditions"—unwittingly exemplifying the familiar "othering" of all nationalisms except one's own.

After World War I, jurists sought to embrace emerging ethno-nationalist Selves as indispensable to a new international order. Nonetheless, a new set of paradoxes arose. For the Alsatian Robert Redlso (1882–1962), nationalism was one of the "generating forces" of World War I; but it had also "inspired the Peace Treaties." It was to that paradox, the destructive and constructive dimensions of nationalism, that he devoted his 1930 study, The Principle of Nationalities.

5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 478.
7. Ibid., 478–479.
For Redslab, nationalism was “the pathos of an elemental force,”12 an “ardent torrent of popular passion.”13 Redslab acknowledged that “the conservation of the existing State” was sometimes wiser than dismantling it in response to separatist nationalism, whose “unleashing of elemental passions” could be “difficult to master.”14 At the same time, in an almost exact reversal of Padelleti’s associations, Redslab painted a gothic-horror image of merely “existing States.” Such States, “devoid of ethnic personality,” had no intrinsic vitality. As “incomplete, inorganic formations,” they each sought “to destroy the other and assimilate its vital energies.”15 Again, those familiar with kabbalistic myth will readily recognize this imagery: essentially lifeless entities that have nonetheless gained destructive power through parasitically appropriating the vitality of others—a textbook definition of Lurianic k’li po’t.

For Redslab, the international order founded on those false monsters must be overhauled by nationalist vitality. International law, stripped of its “artificial exterior,” should “reflect the real movement of nationalities,” indeed “model itself” on the “elemental force.” Law would then not devote itself to preserving existing States, but to aligning itself with the “creative, emotional, passionate movement of people” striving for “a new constellation of their collective life.”16 The nationalist “torrent” unlocks the floodgates of human creativity, sweeps away the “inorganic” States, and regenerates collective identity and human history itself.

Nevertheless, due to nationalism’s two-edged, vital/dangerous quality, progress cannot consist of a foundationalist substitution of Nation for State, Life for Law. Rather, the “clan of emancipation, the tumultuous flood,” must “encounter” law—the latter revitalized by its own encounter with nationalism—and “make it its

ally.”17 The “pact” between nationalism and law will domesticate the former, even while rejuvenating the latter. Once law has been revitalized by nationalist passion, the latter “will discipline itself” by reshaping itself in accordance with law.18 Once the ossified State system has been overturned by nationalist energy, new legal forms can emerge to embrace, while “disciplining,” that energy.

For jurists like Redslab, this double stance toward nationalism—embracing and disciplining—expressed itself in the new legal doctrines and institutions that emerged from the Versailles Treaty. The new legal order affirmed ethno-national energy while weaving it into that order, restraining its dangerous impulses.

Affirmation of nationalist claims seems to be most directly expressed in the right of self-determination: in its fullest form, entailing independence and thus the dismantling of an existing State. Self-determination addresses alterity through the separation of different “Selves.” Nevertheless, while self-determination purports to directly translate nationalist identity into legal form, it always involves contestable acts of inclusion and exclusion. The secessionist claim of the American colonies shows this all too clearly, with its dubious assertion of a difference of “peoplehood” from the English and its immoral exclusions of indigenous peoples and enslaved Africans. But irresolvable conundrum about who is included in the “Self” and who is excluded as “Other” attend the emergence of every collective or individual Self. All attempts definitively to resolve such questions inevitably involve domination and violence.

Two primary methods have been used to determine national “Selves”: so-called objective and subjective self-determination. The Versailles settlement implemented “objective” self-determination by ratifying the establishment of new States in central and eastern Europe, purportedly founded on formerly repressed ethno-national Selves. It reserved “subjective” self-determination for disputed

12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 36.
15. Ibid., 86–87.
16. Ibid., 13 (emphasis added).
17. Ibid., 36.
18. Ibid.
borderlands, such as Upper Silesia, where plebiscites were held to determine more murky “Selves.”

The controversies involved in determining any ethno-national Self can be sketched through a series of questions. If we purport to determine that Self “objectively”—for example, through race, religion, or language—what is to be done with the alterities that undermine such criteria: racially mixed ancestry, religious heterodoxy or syncretism, and linguistic dialects or hybrids? What is to be done when “objective” factors cut in different directions—when racial and linguistic identity do not coincide, or when either clashes with religious identity? Should such cases be determined through plebiscites, the “subjective” method? But this method provokes its own conundra. For example, how does one determine the population to be consulted—all those living within the borders carved out by the incumbent State, or only those conforming to some “objective” definition of the nation, whose difficulties I have just outlined? Should émigrés and refugees be entitled to vote? The “subjective” method returns us to its “objective” counterpart, just as the latter did to the former. The challenge of alterity, which gives rise to the movement to form new national Selves, also renders them forever precarious.

A second set of legal/political regimes seeks to affirm the identity of the ethno-national Other while integrating it into the State’s citizenship. After World War I, treaties protecting minority rights were imposed on the new States of eastern and central Europe—States themselves purportedly embodying the Selves of their ethno-national majorities. Often, particularly in relation to ethnic Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia, the minorities granted protection were those who had formerly constituted the dominant ethnic group in the defunct empires. The minority Other to the new majority national Self was formerly part of the majority Self in relation to the erstwhile minority Other.

The minority protection system sought to safeguard cultural autonomy for ethno-national groups without infringing upon the new States’ internal identity or international status: on the one hand, forbidding forcible integration into the majority culture; on the other, disallowing direct representation of minority groups in international fora such as the World Court and the Council of the League of Nations. The system diminished absolute sovereignty but did not transfer the prerogatives of States to ethno-national groups. While self-determination disciplined nationalism through legal procedures for determining selfhood, minority protection disciplined it by subjecting it to State sovereignty, albeit one subject to international scrutiny.

Controversy arose concerning the purpose of minority protection. Did it primarily seek to engender minorities’ loyalty to the new States, or to protect their distinct cultural identity? If the former, the system could be temporary; if the latter, it would have to be permanent. The League hotly debated such issues for years, until the system’s demise under fascist and Nazi assault. As the system collapsed, its ambivalences made it possible for some to accuse it of insufficiently protecting minorities and others to accuse it of encouraging minority disloyalty to the States of their citizenship.

Finally, a third option loomed throughout the inter-war period: the effacement or extermination of ethno-national Others. The temptation to expel minorities, deprive them of citizenship, or forcibly assimilate them beckoned to States eager to safeguard their precarious new national Selves. Such temptations eventually gave rise to the horrors of which we are all aware.

In every ethno-national struggle, decisions about inclusion or exclusion deeply affect the construction of the national Self. These decisions often prove to be provisional, as nationalist movements, like individuals, often oscillate, sometimes wildly, among a variety of stances toward the Other. Bounded selfhood on the national level, no less than the individual level, is always precarious because of the irreducible alterity in every Self. The energy of a nationalist Other may succeed in destroying an existing State, but the Self it seeks to embody in a new State will, in turn, be beset by its own Others.
III. Kabbalah: From Demonic to Divine Selfhood

The kabbalistic myths I discuss here also begin by diagnosing a monstrous condition: a Self that is distorted by its relation to an Other, a vitality blocked, an illegitimate political hierarchy. Dismantling this configuration unleashes creativity, liberates the true Self, and restores legitimacy. But this transformation demands that the Self engage with the Other that blocks it—an Other that often proves to be the Self in alienated form, vital energy lamentedly reified, creative desire gone astray. These tales, precisely because of their overtly mythical quality, illuminate the ostensibly pragmatic legal discourse; the latter, in turn, highlights the stakes in kabbalistic myths. Political and legal tropes in kabbalistic discourse, as well as demonizing and spiritualizing tropes in legal discourse, heighten this reciprocal illumination.

The diagnosis of our world as ontologically and normatively inverted sets the stage for myths presented as etiologies of that condition. Divine power is the source of all existence, yet everywhere appears subordinated to adversarial forces; the divine is absolute unity, yet the world is violently divided; the divine is absolute goodness, yet evil reigns. Unlike much philosophical theodicy, thirteenth-century kabbalistic myths do not explain away these phenomena as subjective illusions, artifacts of limited human understanding. Rather, they portray them as ontological realities, however scandalous theologically and tragic existentially. Elements of theodicy appear in this discourse, but it is not these elements that give them their distinctiveness.

I draw my first kabbalistic myth from a number of thirteenth-century sources, including Zoharic and related texts. In thus assembling this myth, I follow Claude Lévi-Strauss’s dictum that “a myth consists of all its variants.”

The first source, from the Zoharic literature, begins with its leading sage, Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai, lamenting the distorted state of the world, prompting him to a tale that provides its secret explanation:

One day, the Companions were walking with Rabbi Shim’on. Rabbi Shim’on said: “I see these nations are all elevated and Israel is the lowest of all. Why? Because the King has cast the Matronita [Queen] away and made the bondwoman enter in her place...” Rabbi Shim’on wept, and continued: “A king without a Matronita is not called a king. A king who cleaves to her bondwoman, where is his honor?”

This tale is self-consciously etiological: the world’s unacceptable political condition, which anyone can “see,” provokes the mythical narrative of the divine king who has replaced his true consort with the bondwoman. The text identifies this bondwoman with the demonic: the “alien crown” and the “Other Side.” She is the counterpart, elsewhere called Lilith, of the divine Queen, the Matronita, a name for the Shekhinah, a divine female persona. The liaison is scandalous, even abject: the king “rides... in a place not his own, in an alien place, and sucks her...” The tale thus attributes the distorted world to deviant divine desire, causing royal disgrace (“where is his honor?”), indeed the loss of royal identity (“the king... is not called a king”). The myth provides the backstory of a world ruled by illegitimate sovereigns: a disqualified king, a demonic queen.

Our text refrains from justifying the king’s improper desire. This silence implies, however shockingly, that the king’s dalliance is due to overpowering lust for this Other woman. This motive is explicitly dramatized in a closely related tale by another thirteenth-century Spanish kabbalist, Joseph of Hamadan, who describes a

divine king with two consorts, his public queen and the alluring “concubine” he visits at night. Yet another thirteenth-century writer, Moshe of Burgos, describes the seduction of the divine phallus by Lilith, with the result that a “turban” encases it, blocking its proper creativity, causing the birth of demons. These three tales are not identical, but constitute variants of an identifiable mythic pattern, the vicissitudes of divine desire.

Divine desire, the most powerful force in the cosmos, the creator of beautiful form, proves to be in continual danger of going astray, its power alienated by the Other, giving rise to a world of demons. In Joseph of Hamadan, the king’s improper liaison co-exists with his rule alongside his proper consort; in Moshe of Burgos, it produces a demonic world; in our Zoharic text, illegitimate sovereigns rule a world marked by illegitimate hierarchies. The sovereigns’ monstrous transmogrification is all the more horrifying because it is invisible except to those with esoteric knowledge.

In whatever variant, one may wonder: can divine desire, so powerful it overrides all norms, be devoid of redemptive potential? Joseph of Hamadan portrays the liaison with the Other woman as an ineluctable, if clandestine, feature of the divine king’s intimate life. He even attributes to this liaison the kingship of the House of David, and thus eventually of the Messiah—for the origin of the royal line in the Other woman, the Moabitite Ruth, is the price that the divine king’s alien mistress exacted for their sexual relationship. This shocking assertion is a mythical recasting of the various dubious liaisons that punctuate the Davidic genealogy.

25. Ibid.

Demonization and Transformation

The liaison between the divine male and the demonic female, which explains distorted political hierarchies, is thus also the source of proper political rule, indeed of cosmic redemption.

If the Zoharic king is a God lost in the Other, what of his improper consort, the bondwoman? When the king emerges from the “alien place,” he will “have salvation” and will again be called “righteous.” But what of his consort? Might she be the alienated form of the divine *Matronita*? A number of Zoharic passages, indeed, portray the Shekhinah transmogrified into a terrifying figure, with distinctly Lilith-like characteristics—often as a result of liaisons with the demonic male, attributed variously to seduction, capture, and rape. Indeed, the king-and-the-bondwoman passage is so striking because portrayals of sexual liaisons between the divine male and the demonic female are so much rarer than the converse. In one stark example, a liaison between the demonic male and the divine female leads to her physical transformation into a Lilith-like monster, with long hair and nails, wreaking violence upon the world.

Is the bondwoman in our passage, too, a transmogrified Shekhinah? Would the end of cosmic alienation, in which the king regains his honor and his name, bring about a similar transfiguration of the bondwoman? Will this Other woman regain her identity as a divine Self? Might the tale be one of the recovery of true selfhood by both illegitimate sovereigns? Is this a myth of the integration of the Other into a liberated State over which unalienated Selves preside?

Our king-and-the-bondwoman passage does not, however, give any indication in this direction. On the contrary, it twice identifies the “bondwoman” with she whose “first born the blessed Holy One killed in Egypt,” seemingly relegating her to irremediable alterity. Despite divine desire for her, or perhaps as an overcompensation

29. See, e.g., Zohar I, 23a–b; III, 79a.
for it, this tale seemingly seeks the effacement or even extermination of the national and metaphysical Other.

A second myth, elaborated in a famous Zoharic passage from the *Idra Rabba* ("Greater Assembly") section, more explicitly portrays the relationship between divine and demonic kingdoms, both national and metaphysical. It elaborates a seemingly superfluous passage in the Bible concerning the "kings who reigned in the land of Edom, before there reigned any king over the Israelites" (Genesis 36, 31). This biblical text enumerates seven kings who "reigned" and "died," apparently a succession of usurpers, and an eighth who reigned but whose death is not recited. Rabbi Shim'on proclaims that these balan verses contain the deepest cosmic secrets. Indeed, when Rabbi Shim'on began this discourse, the earth "shuddered" and his disciples "swooned.""32

What is this unbearable secret that destabilizes the foundations of the cosmos and human subjectivity? It is the story of the instability of the divine Self and its ineluctable relationship to its demonic Other. The narrative begins by recounting the flawed initial creation of the cosmos by the Holy Ancient One, *Atikah Kadisha*, the highest divine persona in the Zoharic literature. This ultimate deity prepared carefully for his doomed creative act: he "unfolded before Him a curtain and on it He engraved and measured kings." All for naught: "his tikunim33 did not endure"— and the "kings" died.34 "Kings," like "crowns," is a term that Zoharic writers use instead of the more common "Sefirot," the ten fundamental structures of all being, divine and demonic, cosmic and human. The creation of

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31. The passage starts at *Zohar* III, 128a, and continues, with some digressions, for several folios.


33. *Tikun* (Aramaic plural: *tikkunim*) is a key term in the Zoharic and kabbalistic traditions. Its semantic range in Zoharic Aramaic includes: repair, rectification, preparation, arrayal, and adornment. Most often, the Zoharic texts seem to intend that the word evoke that full range of meanings. I leave it untranslated in this essay for the sake of brevity.

34. *Zohar* III, 128a.


36. Ibid.
create," the Torah, figured here as something like a female consort of Atika Kadisha, "immediately said to Him: Whoever wishes to do tikun and create, let him first do tikun on his own tikunin." 37 Attributing the defective creation to a flawed divine Self, the passage proclaims a political moral:

From here we learn that unless a ruler of a nation receives his tikun first, his nation cannot receive its tikun.... How do we know this? From the Ancient of Days: until he received his tikun in his tikunin, all those who need tikun did not endure—and all the worlds were destroyed. 38

As Yehuda Liebes explains, it would take just one step further to identify "Edom" with this flawed, "pre-tikkun" state of Atika Kadisha. Although only an eighteenth-century Sabbatean work seems to have explicitly taken this shocking step, 39 it is implicit in the Zoharic narrative. The demonic Edom is the initial state of the ultimate God. And "the land of Edom" is his defective cosmos, figured as a system of "kings," a "monstrous" international order, an empire of the Other Side.

"Edom" is the great Other in Jewish tradition: first identified with Esau, Jacob's adversarial twin, then Rome, the destroyer of the Temple, and, finally, Christianity, the great political/theological enemy. The identification of Edom with the initial state of Atika Kadisha, and the "land of Edom" with his first creation, is breathtakingly bold. The great metaphysical, political, and religious Other is God-as-Other, an alterity that pre-exists his Selfhood.

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38. Ibid. The last clause relates the death of the Edomite Kings to the midrashic myth of the primordial worlds that were destroyed before our world was created. Midrash Kodesh Rabbah 3, 14.
If Edom and Atika Kadisha are at once antagonistic Self and Other, and yet different stages of the "same" subjectivity, so are each of the "kings" within the two realms. The passage expresses this paradox in relation to their putative "death." On the one hand, with the Bible, it affirms this death. On the other hand, it declares: "and if you say, it is written, 'and he died...and he died...it is not so! But rather, anyone who descends from his former status, 'death' is spoken of in relation to him."42 Once the overall tikkan has been established, the kings are rehabilitated—and, as in the "king-and-the-bondwoman" passage, they are then "called by different names."43

The "king-and-the-bondwoman" and "Edom" passages share key features. They each portray two political/metaphysical orders, one proper, one improper, with the shift between the two triggered by different states of the ruler's subjectivity and desire. The ruler is both the same in the two states and absolutely different. To be sure, the "Edom" passage concerns the initial divine emanations, while the "bondwoman" passage portrays an interruption of the proper state of the king. I would not, however, overestimate this difference, in view of the cyclical quality of Zoharic mythical time.

Both passages, moreover, express ambivalence about the Other's fate. The "Edom" passage declares not only that the "kings" died and that they were rehabilitated, but it also proclaims that "some became fragrant, some became fragrant and not fragrant, and some did not become fragrant at all."44 In the "king-and-the-bondwoman" passage, the king appears completely rehabilitated, but is this rehabilitation not forever shadowed by his powerful, wayward desire? And, although the bondwoman seems condemned to banishment or death, must we not also imagine her rehabilitation as the Shekhinah, as other Zoharic passages instruct?

Moreover, how should we envision the relationship between the land of Edom, with its doomed bachelor-kings, and the land of tikkan, with its gender dimorphism and organic desire? At first these appear to be two radically separate lands, cultures, peoples, cosmoi. The resurrection of the "kings," however, implies that it is the same land, with the "Edomite people" eventually assimilated into the land/people/cosmos of tikkan. Nonetheless, in view of the fact that some of the "kings" did "not become fragrant at all," the tension between the two kingdoms persists—either in mortal combat, or, perhaps, as an irreducible alterity necessary for the continual re-consolidation of the always precarious divine, national, and personal Selves.

A third Zoharic myth, contained in the "desert hermit" passage, addresses such territorial questions directly. I will only sketch a few elements of this complex tale. The Zoharic sages encounter an old man who declares that he dwells year-round in the desert, for which he gives two paradoxically interrelated explanations. Portraying the "fierce desert" into which the Israelites fled Egypt as demonic, the "place and dominion of the Serpent, the wicked king, for it is literally his,"45 he proclaims:

> We have separated ourselves from the settled area [yishuv] to the fierce desert, to study Torah there, in order to subdue That Side [i.e., the Other Side]. And also, because Torah only settles [misyuhud] there—for there is no light except that which issues forth from darkness...46

This brief excerpt, including lines famously analyzed by Elliot Wolfson,47 is rich with territorial paradox. The desert is the domain of the Devil, "the Serpent, the wicked King." The "settled area," by contrast, is the territory of the "side of holiness."48 Their relationship during most of the year is a political/metaphysical partition of

42. Zohar III, 13b.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Zohar II, 184a.
46. Zohar II, 184a.
47. Wolfson, "Light through Darkness."
48. Ibid.
the land between two rulers, two distinct cultures, one divine, the other demonic.

However, these dominions are also irreducibly intertwined. On the one hand, the hermit dwells in the land of the Devil in order to subdue him, a saboteur behind enemy lines. On the other hand, he declares that it is only in the desert that "Torah is settled" [miyashuv]. This verb plays on the term "settled area" [yishuv], the appellation of the region that is the opposite of the desert. It is, paradoxically, only in the "non-settled" area that the "settling" of Torah occurs. The separation of the two dominions thus cannot be permanent or impermeable because the demonic Other contains the key to the divine Self. "Settlement," the distinguishing characteristic of the divine side, can only occur in the domain of the Other. "Human perfection," in Wolfson's phrase, can only be achieved nor by integrating the two sides but by continually engaging in dialectical struggle between them. True Selfhood, indeed the Torah itself, can only be constructed by dwelling in alterity. Without partition, the indispensable cross-border engagement would be impossible.

What is the ultimate fate prescribed for the Other in this passage? On the one hand, it might be the maintenance of its alterity, a reservoir of "unsettlement" through which Selfhood can be continually re-achieved ("settled"). The notion that there is "no light except that which issues forth from darkness" seems to require alterity as a foil against which the Self can continually reconsolidate itself. On the other hand, the passage also envisions the subjugation of the Other Side, even its annihilation. And, on the third hand (as it were), in the world in which we live, the world whose etiology the myth comes to provide, alterity seems irreducible. The scapegoat must be sent to the Devil every year, and the hermit lives his secret life in the land of the Other.

The passage thus suggests a perennial oscillation among separation, integration, engagement, and subjugation. To put it in all-too-familiar terms, the desert and the "settled area" oscillate among: partition between two sealed-off States; two States with citizens of each living in the other; one State that emerges through subordination or anni-

hilation of the Other; a complex federation in which fraught cultural interchange is vital to the existence of each; and more still.

A final passage thematizes territorial and existential ambivalence toward the Other. This text concerns the k'lipot, "husks" or "shells," another key Zoharic term for the demonic. Two possible roles are attributed to the k'lipot in thirteenth-century kabbalah. Their proper role is to serve the divine realm, surrounding and protecting it, like the shell of a nut. When the cosmos is out of joint, they contaminate, dominate, or even destroy the divine. These two roles correspond to two opposite fates Zoharically envisioned for them. On the one hand, after protecting the divine while it gestates, they may be cast off or annihilated—a fate emphasized if they have improperly come to dominate the divine. On the other hand, they may, after serving their proper role, be integrated into the divine whole, their hardness melting into the flow of divine Grace.

Our Zoharic passage stages this ambivalence in the form of a debate between two sages, Rabbis Yishak and Hamnuna Saba, about an entity called nogah, "brightness," one of the heavenly phenomena attending Ezekiel's vision of the divine Chariot. This nogah has a long history within post-Zoharic kabbalah, a liminal terrain where good and evil fight their battles. In this passage, it serves as the crux of a debate about the proper stance toward the k'lipot in general:

Even though this side is nothing other than the side of contamination, there is "brightness [nogah] about it" [Ezekiel 1, 4]. Therefore a person should not cast it outside. Why? Because...it has a side of holiness, and one should not treat it with contempt. Therefore it should be given a portion in the holy side. Rav Hamnuna Saba: [the verse] meant as follows: "could there be a brightness about it?" And it should be treated with contempt.49

49. Reading the phrase as rhetorical sarcasm, rather than as a declarative statement.

Ambivalence toward the Other thematized as a debate, with metaphysical, political, and existential consequences: either cast outside and treated with contempt, or given a place within holiness and treated with non-contempt (respect). The territorial imagery of banishment/residence and affective imagery of contempt/non-contempt for the Other highlight the political and existential stakes. Should the Other be integrated into the national or individual Self or banished to a separate territorial or psychic space?

Following others, such as Wolfson, I have argued here that the demonic in kabbalistic myth is closely related to what we today again call “the Other”—that which teaches us about the unknown within, that without which we cannot consolidate our Selves, that which renders that consolidation ever precarious. Engagement with otherness promises the most vital creativity and renewal, as well as posing the gravest moral and existential dangers. These dangers include hatred, racism, violence, even exterminationism. Refusal to confront alterity, however, has its own dangers. It can bring (in descending order of gravity): flattening of human diversity; sealing of wellsprings of cultural, political, or existential creativity; coercive assimilation to a dominant culture; and legitimation of pragmatist, as opposed to essentialist, forms of violence (Vietnam rather than Auschwitz). These dangers have been highlighted by a wide range of critical thinkers, including the Frankfurt School, post-colonial theorists, cultural feminists, and so on. Much of this thought has had a psychoanalytical dimension, the teaching that the repression of the Other is rooted in the denial of alterity within the Self, the denial of the unconscious, the denial that we are “aliens to ourselves.”

I conclude with a well-known passage by Scholem:

51. Both kabbalists and academics have long highlighted the political implications of kabbalah. Gershom Scholem, Elliot Wolfson, Yehuda Liebes, Haviwa Pedaya, and Yonatan Garb are only some of the most prominent examples.


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