

Sleep, Death, and Initiation

NĚSHĀMĀH, RŪAḤ, AND NEFESH each has its own function in waking, in sleep and dreams, and after death. In sleep and dreams nĚshĀmĀh and rŪaḤ travel upwards or downwards according to the quality of the waking consciousness — our aspiration or lack of it. When we sleep, our nefesh leaves the body and “tries to soar from grade to grade,” encountering “bright but unclean essences.” If undefiled during the day, it rises above them; if not, “it becomes defiled among them and cleaves to them and does not rise any further.” These unclean essences show the nefesh things which will happen in the near future, and “sometimes they delude her and show her false things. Thus she goes about the whole night until the man wakes up, when she returns to her place” (*Zohar* 1:83a, Sperling 1:277). The soul of one undefiled during the day is not enticed by false powers, but continues to ascend further, and finally comes to the gate of the celestial palace, and seeks out “the holy essence in the place from which she (originally) issued” (*ibid.*).

Thus the journey of the soul in sleep depends on each person’s deeds and attachments. The Supreme Point or Kether “absorbs in itself the souls of the righteous.” The holy angels then communicate to it true information which

the soul on its return communicates to the person through dreams or visions. When the soul descends again, the evil powers are eager to obtain from it this divine information, offering to impart many other things in exchange. But their information is much inferior. Thus people have the dreams that answer to their grade of consciousness and action:

dreams are under the charge of a hierarchy of custodians, so that some dreams are altogether true and others are a mixture of true and false. But to the truly righteous no false messages are ever communicated, but all they are told is true. . . . The unjust man is thus shown a happy dream, but an untruthful one, so as to make him go further astray from the path of truth. For since he turned aside from the right path they defile him the more, as whoever sets out to purify himself is purified from above, and whoever sets out to defile himself is similarly defiled from above.

— *Zohar* 2:199b, 200a, Sperling 2:258, 259-60

Just as the Greeks held that sleep and death are brothers, so likewise the Hebrews:

Similar adventures await the souls when they altogether leave the body to depart from this world. In their attempt to soar upwards they have to pass through many gates at which bands of demons are stationed. . . . On the other hand, the worthy souls soar upwards, as already explained, and are assigned the places corresponding to their merits.

— *Zohar* 2:130a-b, Sperling 2:19

Thirty days before death, Dūmāh, Angel of Death, intimates to the nēshāmāh its future, and something leaves the person: tsūlmā' (Hebrew tselem), "shadow, image, shade."

R. Jose said: "When a man's appointed time draws near, proclamation is made concerning him for thirty days, and even the birds of the heaven announce his doom; and if he is virtuous, his coming is announced for thirty days among the righteous in the Garden of Eden. We have learnt that during those thirty days his soul departs from him every night and ascends to the other world and sees its place there, and during those thirty days the man has not the same consciousness or control of his soul as previously." R. Judah said: "From the first arrival of those thirty days a man's shadow becomes faint and his form is not outlined clearly on the ground."

— *Zohar* 2:217b, Sperling 2:306

When death is near, "a new spirit enters into him from above, in virtue of which he sees things which he could not see before, and then he departs from the world" (*Zohar* 2:218b, Sperling 2:309). At death "all the days that he has lived in this world pass in review before Him" (*Zohar* 2:221b, Sperling 2:313). Three messengers or angels stand over the dying, taking down an account of all that he has done with his body and spirit while alive. He "admits all with his mouth and signs the account with his hand, . . . so that he should be judged in the next world for all his actions" (*Zohar* 1:79a, Sperling 1:266). Nothing is lost or forgotten:

In the centre of the heaven there is an illumined path, which is the celestial dragon, and in it are fixed multitudes of little stars which are charged to keep watch over the secret deeds of human beings. In the same way myriads of emissaries go forth from the primeval celestial serpent, by whom Adam was seduced, to spy out the secret deeds of mankind. Whoever, therefore, strives to live a life of purity is assisted from on high, and is encircled by the protecting hand of his Mas-

ter, and is called saintly. On the other hand, when a man seeks to pollute himself, hosts of demons, who lie in wait for him, hover over him and surround and pollute him, so that he is called unclean. — *Zohar* 2:125a-b, Sperling 2:10

Every day in which our good prompter is sovereign is a good day gained after death, and every day that the evil prompter dominates is a bad day, a day lost after death. After death our days are counted, and there must be at least a majority of good days in order to ascend into the upper spheres. The vesture in which the soul appears before the Almighty is formed of these days and is glorious or the reverse according to the quality of each day of the life on earth. Those days spoiled by sins are missing and make the vesture defective. If there are many missing, the soul has no clothes in the other world. Further, it is punished in Gehenna many days for each missing day.

Because karma or exact balance must forever be established, each person goes after death whither he is attracted, “since the grades assigned to souls in the next world correspond to their state on departing from this world” (*Zohar* 2:193a, Sperling 2:235-6). This may be the Upper Eden, the Inferior Eden, or Gehenna, according to his deserts. There is no Savior for us except our good deeds, which are our only defense after death: “The righteous is judged by the good impulse, the sinner by the evil impulse, and the intermediate, he who is between these two extremes, is judged by both” (*Zohar* 3:41b, Sperling 3:127). Every word we speak causes a vibration in the higher spheres, and becomes an entity to plague or bless us.

First the departed must go to the sphere below the lowest ‘ōlām: the land of Shě’ōl. This realm corresponds to the Greek Hades or Orcus, a place where the shades or astral remnants of human beings remain after death to dissipate. There are ten degrees of ever more material density until the lowest hells are reached where only the utterly depraved find lodgment. In the Old Testament, Shě’ōl is generally translated “hell” or “the pit.” It is the abode both of the righteous and the unrighteous, where life is continued as a shadowy, wavering reflection of earth life. Souls there have no part in earth life nor is there any knowledge or productive work there (*Eccl* 9). While Shě’ōl is a region of inactivity and stillness, Gehenna is both the region and the state of active dissolution of the compounded nefesh, the astral remains or kāma-rūpas bereft of their higher principles.

The purgatorial state of Gehenna has “seven circuits and seven gates, each with several gate-keepers under their own chief” (*Zohar* 2:237b, Sperling 2:357). There are seven habitations for the seven types of sinners, and thousands of angels under the Angel of Death punish the souls there.

When the man comes near his time to go away from this world, . . . when the herald calls out (the decree), at once, a flame comes forth from the North side and goes in and ignites the river *Dinur* [*nēhar dī-nūr*], (*i.e.*, the river of fire, comp. Dan. vii, 10) and spreads itself out to four sides of the world and burns the souls of the guilty, and that flame goes forth and comes down on the world . . .

— *Zohar* 1:218b, Myer, p.405

The *Zohar* states further that “The fire of the Gehenna

which is below comes from the Gehenna which is above, and is kindled by the heat of the sinners in whom the evil inclination burns, . . .” In Gehenna the souls polluted by the “filth of this world” are “purified by fire and made white, and then they ascend towards the heavenly regions” (*Zohar* 4:150b, Sperling 4:28). Their impurities remain below, ruled over by the fire of Gehenna.

Those who sin repeatedly without repenting, who never turned to their Lord and have caused others to sin, remain in the earthly Gehenna or Shē’ōl forever (*Zohar* 4:151a; Sperling 4:29). The souls of those who intended to repent “flutter upward” after a time of purgation:

The most wicked sinner, if he have intended repentance, but dies without carrying out his resolve, is, it is true, punished for having gone out of this world without having repented, but his good intention is not lost, but it ascends to the Supernal King and there remains until the Holy One, seeing it, prepares for that soul a place of refuge in “Sheol,” where it twitters repentance. — *Zohar* 4:150a; Sperling 4:26-7

The good intention, issuing from God, breaks through all the gates of Gehenna to smite the soul and re-awaken the intention to repent. The soul then struggles to ascend from Shē’ōl. Those who repent and feel remorse are forgiven, but those who “cling to their sins and refuse to repent of them will in the end descend to Gehinnom and never come up again” (*Zohar* 1:66a, Sperling 1:218).

After being purified in Shē’ōl and Gehenna, the soul may clothe itself in the garments of its good thoughts and deeds which are garments of the higher light. It enters the

lower Garden of Eden, which exactly reflects its prototype, the upper Paradise. Here the soul

rests and moves, and contemplates continually the supernal mysteries which, when he was in the earthly body, he could neither grasp nor understand. When the soul clothes herself with the garments of that world, what delights, what joys, she experiences! And who caused the body to be inhabited by the spirit? Why, he who took off the garment of flesh, the Angel of Death! — *Zohar* 4:150a, Sperling 4:26

Stories of a Paradise or Eden are universal, both as the state of innocence and bliss from which humanity departs and to which it eventually will return, either individually after death or as a whole after the course of earthly evolution is completed. The Eden of *Genesis* is a compression of many aspects, just as the several Adams are presented as one individual in the Bible. Eden (delight) is thought to be an ancient name for Mesopotamia and adjacent regions, a sacred land from which human races emerged, and a goal of bliss in the future. These Edens or Paradises contain trees which signify the tree of life or lives and the tree of wisdom or knowledge. Eden may also signify initiation into spiritual knowledge.

A river known only to the initiated flows from the Lower Eden. Souls coming from earth thirst for the light of the Garden and rest by this river in their ethereal garments, without which they could not endure the celestial light:

but protected by this covering they are in comfort and drink their fill of that radiance without being overwhelmed by it. It is the river which renders the souls fit and able to

feast on and to enjoy that radiance. The celestial river brings forth the souls who fly off into the Garden; the lower river in the terrestrial Garden, on the other hand, builds up the souls and makes them fit and able to enjoy those radiances, and so to mount up to the celestial Paradise through the central opening of the firmament and by the pillar that stands in the centre of the Lower Paradise. That pillar is enveloped in cloud and smoke and bright flashes, the cloud and smoke encircling it from the outside in order to screen those mounting up into the Upper Paradise that they should not be seen by those remaining below.

— *Zohar* 4:210b-211a, Sperling 4:216

After its judgment, the weighing in the balance of good against evil, the *něshāmāh* is purified in the River of Fire (*něhar dī-nūr*). The *něshāmāh* originated in fire and, hence, must be cleansed by fire alone, to purify it and separate away the earthly dross. It is plunged into the River of Fire which cleanses without consuming. Speaking of the ascent of the *něshāmāh* to the superior Paradise or Garden of Eden, the *Zohar* says:

A second ordeal has to be undergone by the soul on its passage from Lower Paradise to Upper Paradise; for whilst in Lower Paradise it is not yet entirely purged of the materialities of this world, so as to be fit to ascend on high. They thus pass it through that “river of fire” from which it emerges completely purified and so comes before the presence of the Sovereign of the universe beatified in every aspect. Also the rays of the celestial light afford it healing. This is its final stage. At that stage the souls stand garbed in their raiment and adorned in their crowns before their Master.

— 4:211b, Sperling 4:219-20

These abodes of the soul after death are among the ten firmaments spoken of in the *Zohar*. The seven manifested firmaments are associated with the various “earths,” which are analogous to the globes of the earth planetary chain in theosophy.

Between each earth and the next is a firmament which divides them from one another. Hence they all have separate names, among them being the Garden of Eden and Gehinnom. The creatures in them also are different, corresponding to those above, some with two faces, some with four, and some with one; and their aspects also differ. . . . This mystery [that there are seven earths enveloping one another] has been entrusted to the masters of wisdom, but is not known to those who mark out boundaries.

— *Zohar* 4:10a, Sperling 4:346-7

Above the lower seven firmaments is a firmament of no color, beyond human comprehension, which diffuses light to all and

speeds them each on its fitting orbit. Beyond that firmament knowledge cannot penetrate, and man must close his mouth and not seek to reflect upon it. He who does so reflect is turned backwards, for it passes our knowledge. . . . their mystery can be comprehended only by the wise of heart.

— *Zohar* 4:164b, Sperling 4:68

It is said that the garments of the inferior Eden are made of our good actions, while the garments of the superior Eden are formed of the devotion and earnestness of our spirit. In the *Zohar* this is called devotion to the Tōrāh, which represents truth and the divine mysteries. The *Zohar* also says that the Tōrāh and compassion are in essence

identical. Thus the importance of loving the Tōrāh, of having supreme devotion and dedication to the Law or truth. The written word is incidental and unimportant by itself. One's devotion is to the oral or esoteric Tōrāh, the spirit of truth and the fraternity of teachers who expound that oral or secret Sōd, the Mysteries.

All the Companions in the time of R. Simeon loved one another with heart and soul, and therefore in his generation the secrets were revealed; for he was wont to say that students of the Holy Torah who do not love one another cause a departure from the right path, and what is even more serious, cause a blemish in the very Torah itself, for the Torah is the essence of love, brotherhood, and truth.

— *Zohar* 4:190b, Sperling 4:142

The Tōrāh opens up communication between the soul and the superior worlds, sustaining all things, for with it the Holy One nourished the world: “whenever the Torah is studied by night, a little thread of this hidden light steals down and plays upon them that are absorbed in their study . . .” (*Zohar* 4:149a, Sperling 4:21). Those “who are importunate for any word of esoteric wisdom, who study it minutely and patiently to discover its true significance and so to gain knowledge of their Lord” are the ones who will enter the company of the angels “and pass through all the celestial gates without let or hindrance” (*Zohar* 2:130b, Sperling 2:20).

Knowledge of the Tōrāh is said to make the way smooth after death, as it makes known the paths of those realms and in fact guards the departed, not unlike the Tibetan “Book of the Dead.” It leads the soul on its upward journey, standing

by it “when he is awakened at the resurrection of the dead, in order to defend him against any accusations.” Those who studied the Tōrāh will be more skillful after death than they were before, “so that points which formerly baffled them in spite of all their labour will now be fully comprehended by them, the Torah itself speaking within them” (*Zohar* 2:185a, Sperling 2:206).

Now the tree of life ramifies into various degrees, all differing from one another, although forming a unity, in the shape of branches, leaves, bark, stock, and roots. All the faithful ones of Israel lay hold upon the tree of life, some grasping the stock, some the branches, some the leaves, and others, again, the roots. But those who exert themselves in the study of the Torah grasp the very trunk of the tree, and so lay hold upon all; and so we affirm.

— *Zohar* 2:193a-b, Sperling 2:235-6

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* and other scriptures contain the same injunction: “he who is devoted to me, becomes at one with me (Krishna), is blessed, and receives the supreme spirit within him.” This is devotion to truth, zeal for its study, loyalty to its spiritualizing ideals, and dedication of the self to its demands in order to become that truth itself — for the sharing of its benedictions with the world. All this transmutes the base within us into gold, spiritualizes the nefesh, raising it from animal to human, and from human to divinity. The precepts of the Tōrāh “fashion a glorious garment” for the spirit, and for the soul after death, and a glorious garment on earth, “and man requires them all” (*Zohar* 2:226b, Sperling 2:326).

Spiritual growth and initiation are among the running

themes in Qabbālāh. The assemblies or secret mysteries of the Hebrews were called Sōd, reminiscent of the Greek word *mystērion* (mystery). The word occurs frequently in the Old Testament, translated as “secret” or “assembly,” where “Mysteries” would perhaps be more apt. In connection with Sōd was the Sodalian Oath of secrecy, the breaking of which meant “death” to the betrayer.

In explaining the hidden nature of the deeper wisdom, the *Zohar* says that the supernal primordial light which came forth when God said, “Let there be light,” shone for one day and then was hidden away, although it continues to sustain all the worlds “by secret paths which cannot be discovered” (*Zohar* 1:30b, Sperling 1:116).

There is a graduated series of the intimations by which deeper knowledge is conveyed to men, dreams forming one grade, vision another grade, and prophecy a third grade, in a rising series. — *Zohar* 2:183a, Sperling 2:199

Man was created with the faculty to perfect himself in the service of the Divine and to direct his life so that he would merit the hidden celestial light reserved for the righteous.

Initiation stories are found throughout the *Zohar*, which states that God sends tests to the righteous in order to glorify them. The Satan (adversary, opposer) of exoteric Judaism and Christianity is a product of theological imagination. Many biblical scholars point out that the Satan of the *Book of Job* was an angel sent by God to test the character of Job. The adverse forces of nature are the means by which each one of us tests our will and determination to grow in spirit, mind, and heart.

Moses ascended the mountain, spoke with God, and returned glorified, bringing the divine message to the Hebrew people. Probably all peoples have had a holy mountain, such as Meru, Parnassus, Olympus, or Aetna. All these represented “places of initiation and the abodes of the *chiefs* of the communities of ancient and even modern adepts” (*SD* 2:494).

A third example of initiation is the story of Jonah, swallowed by the great fish. Therein, protected, he saw “an open space like unto the halls of a palace, and the two eyes of the fish shining like the sun at noon. Inside was a precious stone which illumined all around, and made visible to him all the wonders of the deep” (*Zohar* 3:48a, Sperling 3:146). God, seeing his enjoyment, killed the fish, and other fishes ate “its carcase from all sides so that Jonah found himself in dire straits, and it was then that he prayed ‘from out of the belly of sheol,’ to wit, of the dead fish” — but also the underworld of the dead. “‘And Jonah prayed unto the Lord *his* God out of the fish’s belly’; i.e. to the grade of the Deity to which he was attached” (*Zohar* 3:48a, Sperling 3:146-7). God then brought the great fish back to life, and it rose up onto the land and vomited Jonah forth.

Sometimes the secret wisdom or knowledge is conceived of as a chariot (*merkābāh*) because esoteric wisdom is the vehicle for the communication to human consciousness of the mysteries of the universe and of man. God descends, using the form of the archetypal man as a vehicle or chariot for the expression of divinity below.

What advice does the *Zohar* give those who wish to progress spiritually? We have already discussed right thought

and conduct, sincere repentance, love of truth, and study of the Tōrāh or Law. Self-control is recommended; anger, for instance, is called a form of idolatry, “since it actually sets up an idol in the very heart of him who is angered . . . because he has uprooted the holiness of his soul from its place and the ‘other god’ has entrenched himself therein, . . .”

when a man uproots the holiness of his soul and is given admission to that “strange god” in its place — the “strange god” which is called “impure” — that man has become polluted and he pollutes everyone with whom he comes into contact, and holiness flees from him; . . .

— *Zohar* 4:182b, Sperling 4:118

To achieve the spirit of holiness requires “strenuous effort, purification of one’s self and one’s dwelling, devotion of heart and soul; and even so one will be lucky to win it to take up its abode with him” (*Zohar* 3:128a, Sperling 3:364). Of great importance is the practice of concentration or prayer, which is “spiritual worship. Deep mysteries are attached to it, for men wot not that a man’s prayer cleaves the ethereal spaces, cleaves the firmament, opens doors and ascends on high” (*Zohar* 4:201a, Sperling 4:181). This prayer is contemplation, not petitionary prayer. Such practice allows us to “see” with the closed eye.

The closed eye sees the mirror of light: the open eye sees the mirror which is not luminous. Therefore in regard to the lightless mirror, the term “see” is used, because it is discernible, but in regard to the luminous mirror the term “know” is used, because it is in concealment.

— *Zohar* 3:23b, Sperling 3:78

Sperling explains that “The idea seems to be that just as these [luminous colors] can only be seen when the eye is closed, so the higher emanations can only be grasped when the mind completely abstracts itself from the perceptions of sense” (*Zohar* 3:23b, Sperling 3:78n).

The seeker after the divine mysteries should concentrate the mind on the highest, while realizing that higher still is the unknowable, the concealed starting-point.

It is the desire of the upward-striving thought to pursue after this and to be illumined by it. In the process a certain fragment is detached, and from that fragment, through the pursuit of the upward-striving thought, which reaches and yet does not reach it, there is a certain illumination. The upward-striving thought is thus illumined by a light undisclosed and unknowable even to that thought. That unknowable light of Thought impinges on the light of the detached fragment which radiates from the unknowable and undisclosed, so that they are fused into one light, from which are formed nine Palaces. These Palaces are neither lights nor spirits nor souls, neither is there anyone who can grasp them. The longing of the nine illuminations which are all centred in the Thought — the latter being indeed counted as one of them — is to pursue these Palaces at the time when they are stationed in the thought, though they are not (even then) grasped or known, nor are they attained by the highest effort of the mind or the thought. All the mysteries of faith are contained in those Palaces, and all those lights which proceed from the mystic supreme Thought are called *EN-SOF* (Limitless). Up to this point the lights reach and yet do not reach: this is beyond the attainment of mind and thought. When Thought illumines, though from what

source is not known, it is clothed and enveloped in *Binah* (understanding), and then further lights appear and one is embraced with the other until all are intertwined.

— *Zohar* 1:65a, Sperling 1:212-13

The *Zohar* says, “for none is a more interior abode reserved than for those who penetrate into the divine mystical doctrines and enter each day into close union with their Divine Master” (2:130b, Sperling 2:19). The final goal is unity of all the inner aspects with the divine.

Happy is the portion of whoever can penetrate into the mysteries of his Master and become absorbed into Him, as it were. Especially does a man achieve this when he offers up his prayer to his Master in intense devotion, his will then becoming as the flame inseparable from the coal, and his mind concentrated on the unity of the lower firmaments, to unify them by means of a lower name, then on the unity of the higher firmaments, and finally on the absorption of them all into that most high firmament. Whilst a man’s mouth and lips are moving, his heart and will must soar to the height of heights, so as to acknowledge the unity of the whole in virtue of the mystery of mysteries in which all ideas, all wills and all thoughts find their goal, to wit, the mystery of the *En-Sof* (Infinite, Illimitable).

— *Zohar* 4:213b, Sperling 4:224-5

The mystical teachings of the Hebrews bear the insignia of the ancient wisdom-religion, paralleling the inner teachings of the other great world religions concerning the nature of the human being and the paths followed in sleep, death, and initiation. This unity of essence should not surprise us when we remember that all the great systems of thought

and inquiry spring from an identic source: the brotherhood of spiritually advanced human beings and the inner core of each individual, which is identic with the core of every other being.

