

Decoding Jewish Mysticism

RRC's resident Zohar scholar translates
holy texts that sing like jazz.

By Wendy Univer

When Joel Hecker, Ph.D., first encountered *Sefer ha-Zohar*, or the *Book of Splendor*, as a graduate student in Israel, he felt seduced by the text — its language, theology and erotic style.

As he explains it, the intensely poetic and esoteric prose of the Zohar attempts to communicate “things that rest in the heights of the universe; it is a highly sensual and luminous kind of language. It includes a great deal of tactile imagery. It's not a book of abstractions. It interprets the material world, the natural world, and—most important—the Jewish textual world as a coded manifestation of God's own being.”

Hecker frankly admits that the notion of a God with multiple identities, including strong masculine and feminine potencies, was “very striking and exciting” to him as a young man in his late 20s. However, what influenced him most is the Zohar's picture of a direct and mutually influential connection between people and the Divine. This launched him on a career dedicated largely to Jewish mysticism and *kabbalah*—the medieval mystics' reinterpretation of Jewish tradition. That path now culminates in a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Hecker, who chairs the Department of Modern Jewish Civilization at RRC, is one of only two academics in the world invited to join distinguished Zohar scholar Daniel Matt, Ph.D., in the monumental task of writing the first unabridged translation of and commentary on the Zohar in English. The original texts in Aramaic and Hebrew have been virtually impenetrable to untrained readers. Existing English translations fall far short. The new *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, commissioned by philanthropist Margot Pritzker, will create an unprecedented level of insight and access for academics, rabbis and rabbinical students, and educated lay readers. Pritzker was motivated by her own text studies as well as a desire for a translation that includes more recent scholarship and matches the wondrous nature of the original.

ZOHAR

The *kabbalists* depicted God as a complex web of multiple potencies and identities—male and female, loving and angry, accessible and ineffable. “The Zohar is a masterpiece of world religious literature, one of the most stunning pieces of writing I’ve come across,” says Joel Hecker, Ph.D.



Matt, professor of Jewish mysticism at the Center for Jewish Studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, has worked on the Zohar Education Project full time since 1997 and has published five volumes so far, to great critical acclaim; he anticipates producing four more. However, to meet the project’s targeted completion date of 2015, a team of advisers began looking for additional translators. They offered RRC’s professor an assignment based on his previous publications and the sensitivity he demonstrated in bringing *zoharic* text to life in English.

Hecker and Nathan Wolski, Ph.D., of Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, will focus on *Zohar Chadash*, which is material that came to light after the initial printing of the Zohar in 1558 in Italy. Working independently, the two expect to produce volumes 10 through 12 in the

series. Hecker notes that he and Wolski must be “faithful to the Zohar, in harmony with Danny’s style, and yet true to our own vision of what the Zohar is trying to communicate.” They will draw on extensive Aramaic-to-English glossaries developed for the early volumes.

Matt expresses great excitement about the partnership: “Joel combines superb scholarship with literary sensitivity. I am confident that he will produce an accurate, vibrant, and uplifting translation, enabling English readers to explore the enchanted world of the Zohar.”

History of a mystery

The unusual origins of what became known as *Sefer ha-Zohar* help explain many of the complexities involved in translation. Pieces of the text first appeared in Spain in the late 13th

century, circulated by a *kabbalist* named Rabbi Moses de Leon. He claimed that they originated with a second-century rabbi, Shimon bar Yochai. Contemporary experts believe that de Leon probably authored the bulk of this material himself, possibly in collaboration with a group of his contemporaries. They wrote in Aramaic, a sister language of Hebrew and the voice of the Talmud.

However, the Zohar’s Aramaic is highly idiosyncratic, due to a combination of linguistic error, poetic embellishment and a deliberate desire for mystery. The work values alliteration, ambiguity and aural play, such as the frequent use of open vowel sounds like “ta” at the ends of words even when this is grammatically inappropriate.

Later scribes “Aramaized” some of the related texts that appeared in Hebrew to match de Leon’s, adding

another layer of complication. The end result is nearly 2,000 pages of commentary on Torah and Talmud—as well as wide-ranging material that covers theology, cosmogony (the origin and evolution of the universe), psychology, parables, narratives and poetry, all designed to draw readers into participation in a mystical drama. Scholarly readers have compared *zoharic* text to jazz, with a variety of voices improvising around a theme. Hecker agrees, saying that one can definitely recognize when a “Miles Davis” shows up and starts to play.

The *kabbalists* depicted God as a complex web of multiple potencies and identities—male and female, loving and angry, accessible and ineffable. “It is a masterpiece of world religious literature, one of the most stunning pieces of writing I’ve come across,” observes Hecker, who received his undergraduate degree in literature before pursuing a rabbinical degree and a Ph.D. in Judaic studies.

According to Hecker, Matt wants to “recover the Zohar’s primal texture and cryptic flavor” and convey the text’s “strangeness, potency and rich ambiguity.” All three scholars are striving for the “most colorful and zestful” translation possible.

Matt’s work to date shows ample evidence that he has succeeded. In Volume 2, he offers this description of the Milky Way:

In the middle of the sky, a lustrous path is woven—Celestial Serpent—all gossamer stars clustered within, mounds upon mound encharged with requiting the deeds of inhabitants of the world. Similarly, numerous bands of dazzling demons issue from this supernal, primordial serpent—by whom Adam was seduced—and they are all encharged with requiting deeds of the world. (Zohar 1125b; Matt 2004–2009, vol. 2, p. 215)

He diverges dramatically from earlier English translations and provides meticulous documentation of his word choices. For example, in a passage in which Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (the purported author of the Zohar) invites his son to interpret the Torah, a literal translation looks like this:

Recount something good, my son, because a word from your mouth is like the voice of the lamp.

Whereas the *Pritzker Edition* offers this:

Speak, my son! May dazzling topaz from your mouth resound like a spark! (Zohar 1:92b; Matt 2004–2009, vol. 2, p. 84)

To deepen the reader’s understanding, extensive notations in the *Pritzker Edition* cover a broad range of topics: explaining how Latin, Greek, Castilian and Arabic influenced the language of the Zohar; offering historical context for the narrative’s references to physics, botany and medicine; and much more.

Sefirotic system of meaning

At the heart of the Zohar and *kabbalistic* thinking lies a depiction of a God made up of 10 *sefirot*, or gradations of divinity, each representing a different attribute, such as the stern judge or the compassionate healer. Hecker explains that for the *kabbalists*, these identities are indivisible and always unified, yet have sharply different characteristics that offer flexibility to the faithful in interpreting God’s actions.

“Having 10 *sefirot* or 10 ‘balls in the air’ to describe how divinity interacts with the world, humanity and the Jewish people—manifesting itself through nature, Torah and *mitzvot*—helps to fashion a web of meaning that is always referring back to itself,” he says. This kaleidoscopic framework grows logically from the medieval mindset as well as from competing religious forces of that era, full of magic, myth, angels and demons, and other sacred fantasies.

Academic Dean Tamar Kamionkowski, Ph.D., notes that current biblical scholarship also offers “a rediscovery of God as a fluid spiritual force who manifests in different ways at different times.” In fact, *kabbalistic* thinking draws upon a very ancient way of approaching divinity that may even be “the most dominant in Judaism.” She is excited by the prospect of faculty work that opens such pivotal Jewish source material to a broader audience.

Spirituality, not pop psychology

The recent popularity of *kabbalah*—attracting celebrities from Madonna to British soccer star David Beckham—does not surprise Hecker.

However, he considers this a commercialization that distorts its meaning, sometimes to the point of denying its Jewish nature entirely. As a result, rabbis today have an even greater need for textual and historical grounding in Jewish mysticism, so that they can guide people who feel drawn to its appeal. But this subject matter isn’t new at RRC.

The College began offering coursework in *kabbalah* as early as 1976, when the pure rationalism of the early Reconstructionist movement was giving way to a wider range of ideas and practices. By 1985 it had become a requirement—part of RRC’s long-standing leadership in training rabbis who can meet their communities’ needs for spiritual exploration.

Today, all students take a minimum of one course in *kabbalah* and one in Hasidism, the mystical beliefs and practices that evolved in the 18th century. Hecker observes: “It seems to me perfectly in keeping with the Reconstructionist mission to integrate the best of *kabbalistic* lore, thought, practice and theology, in order to help reconstruct Judaism in the most vibrant form that it can adopt today. Ultimately, what the writers of the Zohar

are trying to do is make sense of the Bible and rabbinic tradition and of God’s message to Jewish people.”

Hecker appears to relish the challenge of sifting through layers of meaning that have accumulated over centuries. He looks forward to translating the Zohar’s commentaries on Song of Songs, Lamentations and the Book of Ruth as well as other material. “After the five books of Moses, the Song of Songs is the single most important text for the *kabbalists*,” he explains. This stems from the belief handed down from Rabbi Akiba that it represents the love song between God and the Jewish people.

Ultimately, Hecker describes his work on the *Zohar: Pritzker Edition* as more than a prestigious scholarly assignment. “I relate to the Zohar as a sacred book of Jewish tradition, and I approach the task of translating it with a fair amount of trepidation and a sense that what this text wants to do is help us to seek God. I’m aware that in translating it, I’m trying to open up the English language to be able to deliver that same kind of experience. It is not only an academic endeavor; I believe that this is holy work.”