



Seeing the Unseeable: Images of the Divine in Kabbalistic Texts

Dr Eitan Fishbane

Eitan P. Fishbane is professor of Jewish Thought at JTS, where he teaches courses in the literature and history of Jewish mysticism, from medieval Kabbalah to modern Hasidism. The author or editor of eight books, the latest of which was published in 2021 by Oxford University Press, Dr. Fishbane has devoted his research and writing primarily to the development of Kabbalah in medieval Spain. At present his scholarship is devoted to three main topics: The Zohar as mystical poetry; The Sabbath and sacred time in hasidic mysticism; and ideas of the self and identity in the Kabbalah.
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Rabbi Mordecai Schwartz, PhD

Marcus Mordecai Schwartz serves as the Henry R. And Miriam Ripps Schnitzer Librarian for Special Collections of the JTS Library, where he oversees the largest collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the world. Rabbi Schwartz is also a member of the Talmud faculty at JTS where he has taught the last 15 years.

His book, *Rewriting the Talmud*, on the effect of tradition from the Land of Israel on the composition of the Babylonian Talmud, was released in the summer of 2019.

Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment (1983)

Translation by Daniel Chanan Matt

One day Rabbi Shim'on was sitting.
Rabbi El'azar, his son, and Rabbi Abba were with him.
Rabbi El'azar said
"The verse written here:
I have appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob
...
Why appeared?"

The word should be spoken."
He answered
"El'azar, my son, it is a high mystery! Come and see:
Certain colors can be seen; certain colors cannot. These and those are the high mystery of faith. But human beings do not know; they do not reflect.

The colors that can be seen-
no one was pure enough to see them
until the Patriarchs came and mastered them.
Therefore the word appeared,
for they saw the colors which are revealed.
Which are revealed?
Colors of El Shaddai, colors in a cosmic prism.
These can be seen.

But the colors above, hidden and invisible-
no human has mastered them except for Moses.
Therefore the verse concludes:
'But by My name YHVH, I was not known to them.'
I was not revealed to them in high colors.
Do you think that the Patriarchs were not aware of
those colors at all?
They were aware, through those that are revealed.

It is written:
'The enlightened will shine like the zohar of the sky, and those who make the masses righteous will shine like the stars forever and ever' (Daniel 12:3).

**'The enlightened will shine' Who is enlightened?
The wise one who contemplates by himself, from himself, words that human beings cannot mouth.**

**'Will shine like the zohar of the sky' Which sky?
The sky of Moses
which stands in the center;
this zohar of his is concealed and not revealed. It stands above the sky that does not shine, in which colors can be seen. There those colors can be seen,
but they do not glow with the brilliance of the hidden colors.**

Come and see:
There are four lights.
Three are concealed and one is revealed. A shining light.
A glowing light;
it shines like the clear brilliance of heaven.
A purple light that absorbs all lights.
A light that does not shine
but gazes toward the others and draws them in.
Those lights are seen in her as in a crystal facing the sun.
The first three are concealed, overseeing this one, which is revealed.

The secret is: the eye. Come and see:
Three colors appear in the eye, but none of them glow,
for they are overshadowed by a light that does not shine.
These are images of the colors that are hidden, which oversee them.

These were shown to the Patriarchs,
so they would know those hidden ones that glow through these that do not glow.
The ones that glow and the ones that are hidden were revealed to Moses in that sky of his.
These oversee those colors that are seen in the eye.

The secret is: close your eye and roll your eyeball. Those colors that shine and glow will be revealed. Permission to see is granted only with eyes concealed, for they are high and concealed, overseeing those colors that can be seen but do not glow.

And so we read:

'Moses attained the mirror that shines,' which oversees the one that does not shine.

The rest of humanity, that mirror that does not shine. The Patriarchs saw, through these colors that are revealed,

those hidden ones, which oversee the ones that do not shine. Therefore it is written:

'I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob through El Shaddai '

through the colors that can be seen.

'But by My name YHVH, I was not known to them.'

These are high colors, hidden and glowing.

Moses was so pure that he gazed into them!

The secret is: the eye, closed and open. Closed, it sees the mirror that shines.

Opened, it sees the mirror that does not shine.

So, 'I appeared' in the mirror that does not shine, which is open and revealed.

This is described as seeing.

But the mirror that shines, which is concealed- this is described as knowing,

as it is written:

'I was not known.'"

Rabbi El'azar and Rabbi Abba came and kissed his hands.

Rabbi Abba cried, and said

"Woe when you disappear from the world!

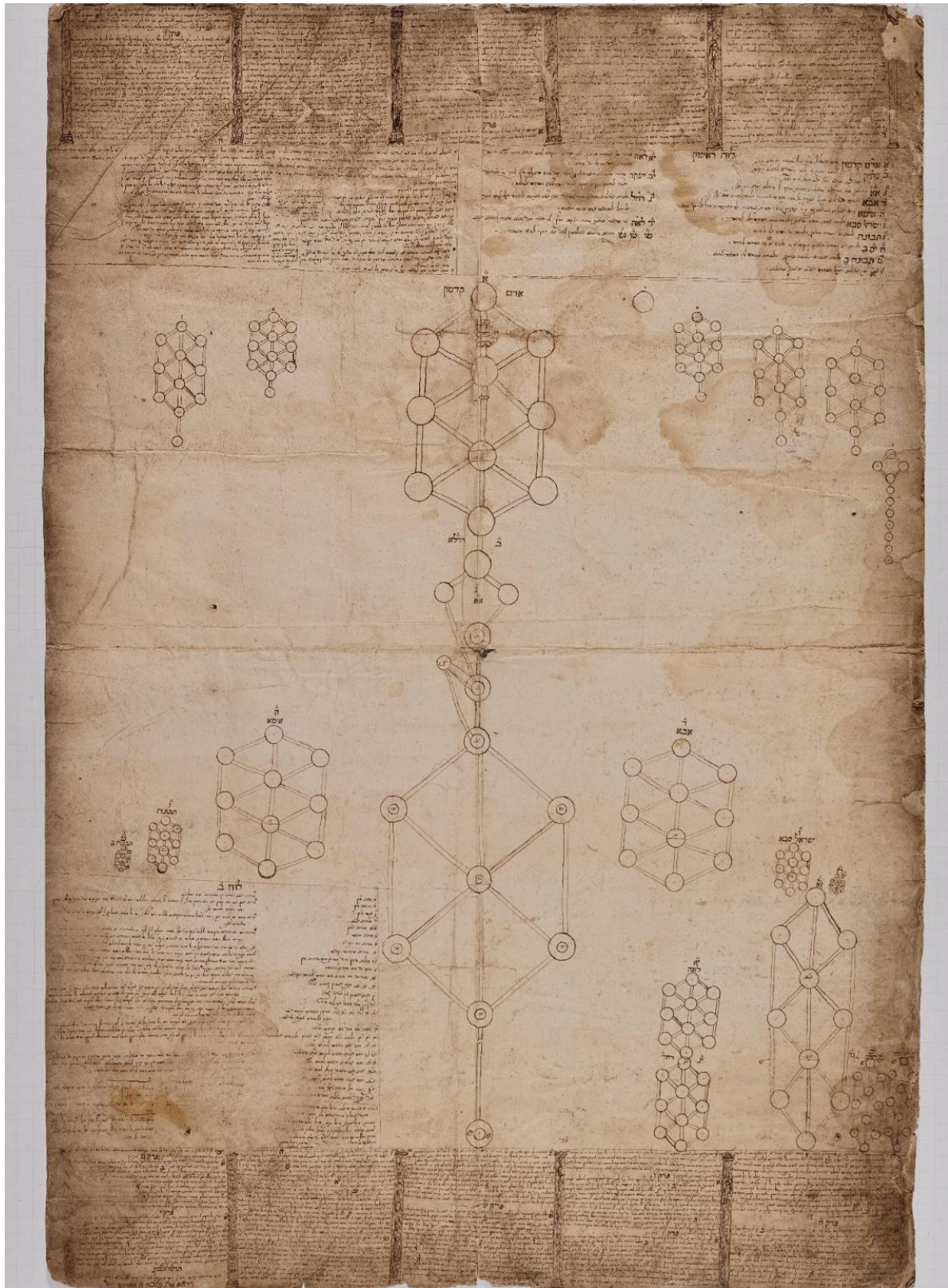
The world will be an orphan without you!

Who will be able to illumine the words of Torah?"

Kabbala Denudata, Christian Knorr von Rosenroth Sulzbach: Abraham Lichtenthaler, 1677
(RB425:1 fols. 233)



Ilan ha-partzufim, Ten Sefirot, Moses Hayyim, Luzzatto, Italy, 1729 (B K103)

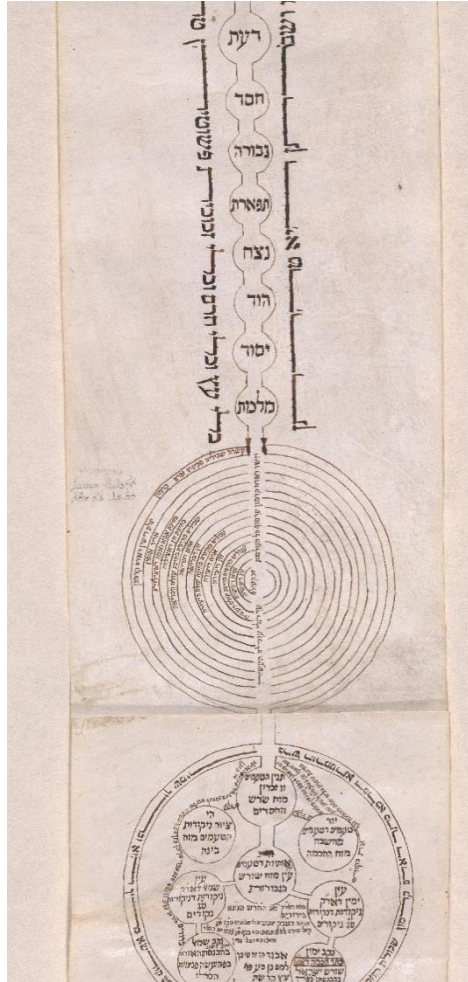
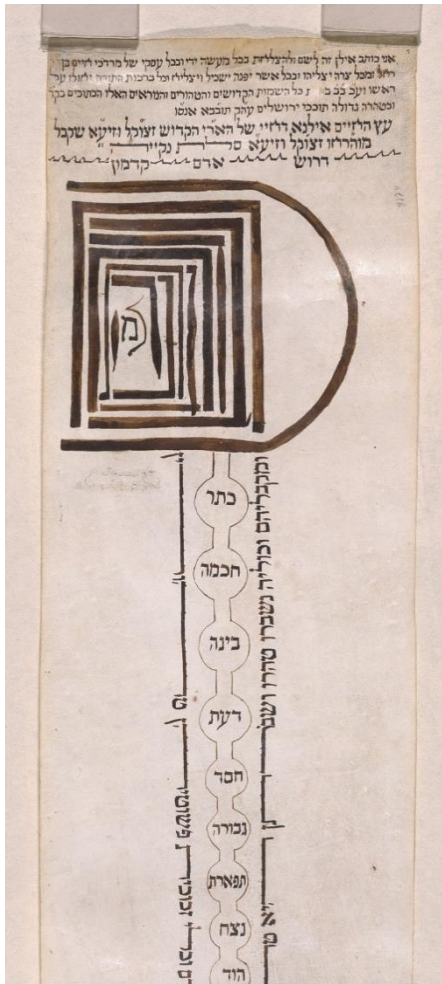


Shiviti, Vratsa, Bulgaria, 1917, Written by Nissim Ezekiel Ereza (B K89 MS 9407 DR 2-R26)





Ilan (S435)—[LINK TO FULL IMAGE](#)



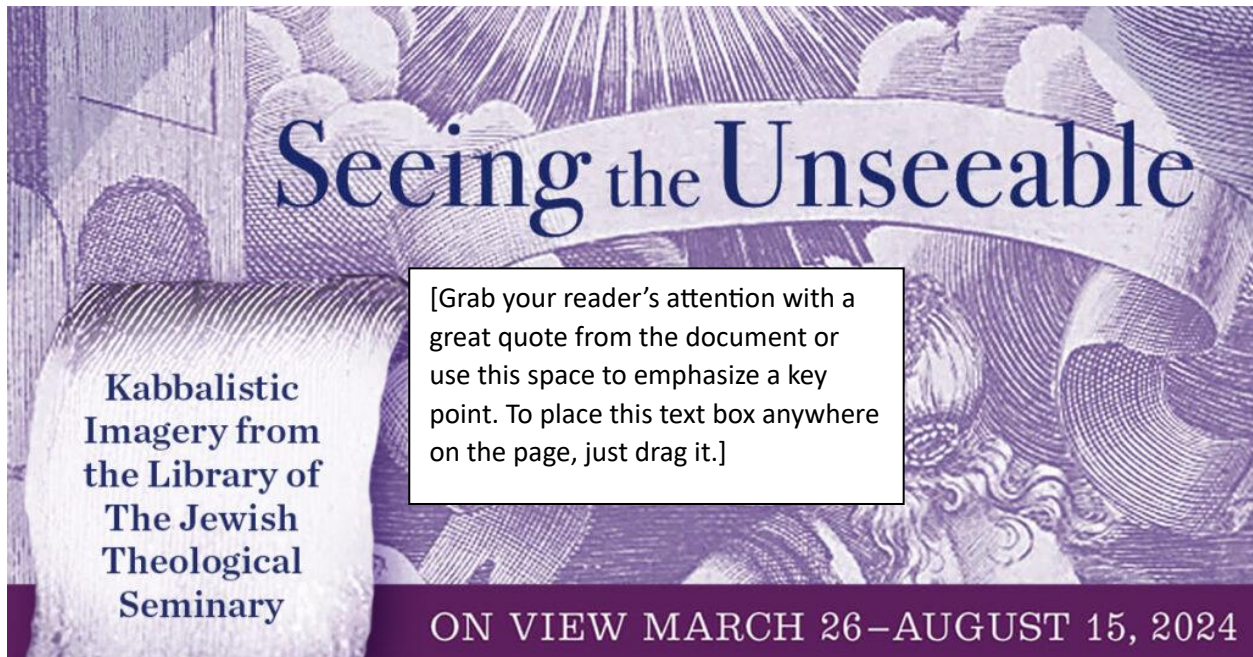


Exhibit opening event, March 26, 5:30 – 7:30 PM. [Register here.](#)

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New Podcast from JTS, Launches March 26.

- Biblical Mysticism (Mar 26)
- Rabbinic Mysticism (April 9)
- The Origins of Kabbalah in Medieval Europe (April 26)
- The Zohar (May 7)
- Meditative Kabbalah (May 21)
- The Kabbalah of Tzfat (June 4)
- Hasidism (June 18)