

Jewish Studies Quarterly

JSQ

Volume 22 (2015) No. 2

Marjorie Lehman

Rabbinic Masculinities:
Reading the *Ba'al Keri* in Tractate Yoma

Oded Yisraeli

The Mezuzah as an Amulet:
Directions and Trends in the Zohar

Alexander Green

Maimonides on Courage

Gerold Necker

Hans Blumenberg's Metaphorology and the
Historical Perspective of Mystical Terminology



Mohr Siebeck

The Mezuzah as an Amulet: Directions and Trends in the Zohar

ODED YISRAELI

The Zohar appeared in the last decades of the 13th century and the early 14th century, and according to all indications it was composed by a kabbalist or group of kabbalists who were working at the time in Castile, Spain.¹ Although written in Aramaic, in a talmudic style, and tying itself to the second-century personage of R. Shimon Bar Yohai, the Zohar's content easily discloses its medieval context.² Several recently published articles have shed light on the involvement of the Zohar in questions that are familiar to us from medieval rabbinical discourses, whether in the context of biblical exegesis, mythical exegesis or Jewish law. Sometimes we find the Zohar siding with well-known viewpoints, sometimes arguing with them, and sometimes it takes its own singular position, which compromises between the two former opinions or mediates between them.³ This article is devoted to a study of how the Zohar takes part in a lively rabbinic discourse connected to a rabbinic and literary discipline relatively new in its time – namely, the study of the reasons for the commandments. Through the prism of the commandment of the mezuzah (doorpost) and the Zoharic struggle

¹ For an overview of research and different opinions on this topic, see D. Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts and Textual Theory* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2010) 264–293.

² For a broad overview of this topic, see F. Lachower and I. Tishby, *Wisdom of the Zohar* (3 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) 1.55–87.

³ For a discussion on the Zohar's interpretive dialogue with the attitudes current at its time and place, see O. Yisraeli, *Temple Portals: Studies in Aggadah and Midrashic Dialogue in the Zohar* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 2013). For discussion of the Zohar's halakhic dialogue with medieval literature on Jewish law, see O. Yisraeli, "Studies in the Conflict between Halakhah and Kabbalah in the Zohar" (Hebrew), *And this is for Yehuda: Studies Presented to our Friend, Professor Yehuda Liebes, on the Occasion of his Fifty-Sixth Birthday*, ed. M. Niehoff et al. (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2012) 202–221; O. Yisraeli, "Klum Atah Rotzeh Laavor al Divrei Haverekha: A Chapter in the History of the Interpretation of Aggadah in the Zohar" (forthcoming in a volume of studies presented to Moshe Halamish); O. Yisraeli, "Midrashic Disputations in the Zohar," *HUCA* (forthcoming).

with its wherefores, I attempt to determine aspects of the Zohar's religious orientation and its position within the creative realm and rabbinic thought of medieval Spain.

In the Middle Ages the study of the reasons for the commandments (*ta'amei hamitzvot*) was a developing theoretical field.⁴ Engagement in the reasons for some of the commandments is found among the kabbalists already with the rise of the Kabbalah, in *Sefer Habahir* (the Bahir) and in the traditions attributed to R. Isaac Sagi Nahor and his students and to the circle of Nachmanides. At the end of the 13th century and the beginning of the 14th, the genre of reasons for the commandments appears amongst the kabbalists close to the circle of the Zohar. Among the more famous manuscripts of this type are *Sefer Harimon* by R. Moses de Léon, *Sefer Ta'amei Hamitzvot* by R. Yoseph Mishushan Habirah and *Sefer Ta'amei Hamitzvot* by R. Menachem Recanati.⁵ This literary trove indicates that the topic held a central position in the world of the kabbalists of this period, and, in the words of Moshe Idel, "Indeed, the bulk of 13th-century kabbalistic literature was dedicated to *ta'amei ha-mitzvot*."⁶

Although the teachings of the reasons for the commandments in the Kabbalah of the Middle Ages have been studied quite extensively,⁷ the teachings of the reasons for the commandments in the main sections of the Zohar have not yet been discussed in a comprehensive way.⁸ This is not the venue to study the matter exhaustively, but it may be stated, in general, that the Zohar greatly emphasizes the magical-theurgical trend

⁴ For a comprehensive review of the topic of the reasons for the commandments in Jewish literature, see I. Heinemann, *The Reasons for Commandments in Jewish Literature* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Jewish Agency Press, 1954).

⁵ For a detailed review of the literature on the reasons for the commandments in early Kabbalah and later, see M. Idel, *Kabbalah: New Perspectives* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) xii–xvi.

⁶ Idel, *Kabbalah*, xii.

⁷ Idel, *Kabbalah*, ix–xx, 173–199; M. Idel, *Enchanted Chains: Techniques and Rituals in Jewish Mysticism* (Los Angeles: Cherub, 2005); E. R. Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization of the Commandments in Sefer Harimon," *HUCA* 59 (1988) 217–251; E. R. Wolfson, "Mystical-Theurgical Dimensions of Prayer in *Sefer Harimon*," *Approaches to Judaism in Medieval Times*, ed. D. R. Blumenthal (3 vols.; Chico: Scholars, 1988) 3.41–79; D. C. Matt, "The Mystic and the Mitzvot," *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible through the Middle Ages*, ed. A. Green (New York: Crossroad, 1987) 367–404; M. M. Faierstein, "God's Need for the Commandments in Medieval Kabbalah," *Conservative Judaism* 36 (1982) 45–59.

⁸ General outlines for reasons for the commandments in the Zohar were drawn by Isaiah Tishby; see *Wisdom of the Zohar*, 3.1155–1171. For discussion of the reasons for the commandments in the *Raya Mehemna* section, see I. C. Malka, *On the Paths of the Kabbalah: Mystical Dimension of Jewish Law in the Ra'aya Meheimna* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 2004).

in its explanations of the commandments,⁹ and that its teachings on this topic are therefore very far from those taught in the philosophical schools of the Middle Ages.

Since the points of tangency between the Zohar's teachings on this topic and its parallels outside the kabbalistic school are few, it is difficult, for the most part, to identify "correspondence" with other streams and different approaches to this subject in the Zohar. However, the commandment of the mezuzah offers an exceptional case, for several reasons. First, unlike other commandments, such as those concerning *tzitzit*, *tefillin* or the four species, there was apparently no kabbalistic tradition prior to the Zohar, either in the Bahir or amongst the kabbalists of Gerona or Castile. The absence of this "secret" is conspicuous in the systematic writings of biblical exegesis, such as Nachmanides' commentary on the Torah. The approach reflected in the Zohar regarding the commandment of the mezuzah does not rely, then, on a previous kabbalistic tradition, but is rather a processing of more ancient elements. The hermeneutics of the Zohar on this commandment rests mainly on an ancient talmudic-Midrashic base – a natural platform for meeting, dialogue and conflict between extreme and opposing differences of opinion. Second, the question of the reason for the commandment of the mezuzah diverged from the theoretical context and had practical implications regarding how to perform the commandment. These customs became a focus of debate when Maimonides denounced them vehemently. All of this makes the mezuzah commandment a rewarding source of exploration regarding the Zohar's perspective on the question of the reasons for the commandments.

What ignited the dispute in the Middle Ages concerning the commandment of the mezuzah was the custom of adding onto the parchment, in the margins, names of angels or verses or other symbols with a distinctly magical character, for extra protection from "malefactors."¹⁰ This custom prevailed mainly in Ashkenaz (Germany).¹¹ Traces can be found in the 12th-century manuscripts of the sages of France and

⁹ See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 156–172.

¹⁰ On the protective and defensive role of angels in rabbinic literature and the protection they provide from malefactors in particular, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem; Magnes, 1987) 163–165.

¹¹ An inventory of these customs was analyzed by Avigdor Aptowitz, "Les Noms de Dieu et des Anges dans la Mezouza," *Revue des Etudes Juives* 60 (1910) 39–52 and 65 (1913) 54–60; and the topic was later studied by Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, c.1939, repr. 1961) 147–152, and David Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 2007) 8.96–123.

Germany – for example, *Sefer Hapardes*¹² and *Mahzor Vitry*¹³ (both from the school of Rashi), as well as *Sefer Haeshkol*,¹⁴ *Sefer Yere'im*¹⁵ and *Sefer Ra'aviah*.¹⁶ Not only did the rabbis see no violation in adding names of angels to the mezuzah, but they provided detailed instructions about how to arrange these names in the best and most effective way.¹⁷ Testimony to this custom in non-kabbalistic sources is also found in the Karaite *Sefer Eshkol Hakofer*, which says that for the rabbis “there are seven angels written on the mezuzah,”¹⁸ and perhaps also in responsa attributed to the Geonim.¹⁹ These customs, which until recently were known only from the literature of Jewish law and the Ashkenazic

¹² *Sefer Hapardes*, ed. H. L. Ehrenreich (Budapest: Katzbourg, 1924) 26.

¹³ *Mahzor Vitry*, ed. H. Brody (Berlin: Itzkowsky, 1893–1897) 648–649.

¹⁴ *Sefer Haeshkol*, ed. S. Albeck (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1935–1938) 189–190.

¹⁵ R. Eliezer of Metz, *Sefer Yere'im Hashalem*, ed. I. Goldblum (Vilna: Rom, 1892–1902) 218a.

¹⁶ R. Eliezer ben Yoel Halevi, *Sefer Ra'aviah*, ed. D. Devlitzky (Bnei Brak: Devlitzky, 2005) 239.

¹⁷ Different nuances may be noticed in these halakhic sources, which express changing tensions regarding commitment to this custom. In some cases the custom is portrayed as to be taken for granted; for example, in *Mahzor Vitry*. In other cases it is presented as a suggestion; for example, in *Sefer Hapardes*, “And it needs seven angels,” and in *Sefer Haeshkol* (at least in some manuscripts), “And there are those who make names of angels and seals at the end of the line according to known methods, and it is a commandment to do so” (see also editor’s note, 190 n. 2). On the other hand, in *Sefer Yere'im* there are reservations expressed regarding the custom: “Besides the laws in tractate *Menahot* regarding the mezuzah, people have become accustomed, for additional protection of their homes, to write seals and names of angels at the end of the lines, and this does not invalidate [the mezuzah] and it is not even a commandment, but only for additional protection.” On this comment by R. Eliezer of Metz, see E. E. Urbach, *The Tosaphists: Their History, Writings and Methods* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1980) 138; G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971) 266; E. Kanarfogel, “Peering through the Lattices”: *Mystical, Magical and Pietistic Dimensions in the Tosafist Period* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000) 196 and n.16. For a broad overview of these sources, see Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, 8.100–104.

¹⁸ Y. Hadassi, *Sefer Eshkol Hakofer* (Goslaw: Tirishken, 1836) 92b–93a. Adding angels to the mezuzah is already seen in the template of a mezuzah found in several manuscripts of *Sefer Halakhot Gedolot*; see *Halakhot Gedolot*, ed. A. Hildesheimer (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1992) 500–501 (although, as noted by the editor, the template is suspected to be a later addition, see nn. 5 and 6). For an outstanding expression of the protective nature of the mezuzah in the teachings of the Maharam of Rothenburg (without relation to the custom of adding angel names), see Kanarfogel, “Peering,” 236–237, n. 47. On the custom of engraving formulas including sacred names on the lintel, see Kanarfogel, “Peering,” 232, and n. 35. See also the *Tosafot* on BT *Baba Metz'a* 101b, s. v. *lo yiitena veyetze*; BT *Shabbat* 22a, s. v. *rav amar ein matirin mibeged lebeged*. See also M. L. Gordon, “Mezuzah: Protective Amulet or Religious Symbol,” *Tradition* 16 (1977) 2–20.

¹⁹ For a similar passage attributed to the Geonic responsa, see A. Aptowitz,

tradition, have now also been found in a number of *mezuzot* from the Cairo Genizah, on which there are inscriptions of the Tetragrammaton, names of angels and various magical symbols that match, to a great extent, the Ashkenazic ones.²⁰ This indicates the existence of this custom in Egypt, too, in the time of Maimonides or thereabout.

Maimonides referred to this practice in his magnum opus of Jewish law, *Mishneh Torah*, in the section devoted to the laws of the mezuzah and denounced it unequivocally:

It is universal custom to write the word *Shaddai* on the other side of the mezuzah, opposite the blank space between the two sections. As this word is written on the outside, the practice is unobjectionable.²¹ They, however, who write names of angels, holy names, a biblical text or inscriptions usual on seals, within the mezuzah, are among those who have no portion in the world to come. For these fools not only fail to fulfill the commandment, but they treat an important precept that expresses the Unity of God, the love of him and his worship, as if it were an amulet to promote their own personal interests, for according to their foolish mind, the mezuzah is something that will secure for them advantage in the vanities of the world.²²

To his legal criticism (“not only have they violated the commandment”), Maimonides added an objection based on principle – that they are using the mezuzah for advantage and material gain by making it into an amulet. But elsewhere Maimonides granted the angels metaphoric significance:

Our ancient teachers said: He who has phylacteries on his head and arm, fringes on his garment and a mezuzah on his door may be presumed not to sin, for he has many monitors – angels that save him from sinning, as it said,

“Misifrut Hageonim,” *Sefer Hayovel Le professor Shmuel Kraus* (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1937) 96–102.

²⁰ G. Bohak, “Mezuzoth with Magical Additions from the Cairo Genizah,” *Dine Yisrael* 26–27 (2009–2010) 387–403.

²¹ Regarding the custom of writing the name *Shaddai* on the outside, with which Maimonides compromises here, and on its vague source (probably from the Geonic period), see Aptowitz “Noms de Dieu,” 41, n. 5; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*, 148, 158. On the broader context of the name *Shaddai* and its protective power, see E. R. Wolfson, “Circumcision and the Divine Name: A Study in the Transmission of Esoteric Doctrine,” *JQR* 78 (1987) 80–81. On Maimonides’ compromise on this point, see I. Felix, “Theurgy, Magic and Mysticism in the Kabbalah of R. Joseph of Shushan” (Hebrew; PhD diss. Hebrew University, 2005) 279.

²² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Book of Adoration, Laws of Phylacteries, Mezuzah and the Scroll of Law*, trans. M. Hyamson (Jerusalem: Boys Town Jerusalem, 1962) 5.4.

*An angel of Lord encamps round about them that fear Him and delivers them (Ps 34:8).*²³

In this article I examine the place of the Zohar in the history of this historic polemic, and the ways it took part in the principled discussion regarding the use of the mezuzah as an amulet. One can identify within the Zohar a fluctuation between different trends, which are known and opposed to one another, alongside creativity and originality in the formation of a unique and moderate stance. The range of opinions and views may also inform us, beyond the Zohar's diverse character and manifold facets, as to an internal discourse within the Zoharic world regarding a contemporary religious dilemma.²⁴

The Mezuzah in the Zohar

Concerning Ashkenazic law and customs in the Zohar, in general, Jacob Katz²⁵ and Yisrael Ta-Shema²⁶ have written at length. In scores of examples, they revealed that the norms reflected in the Zohar represent Ashkenazic custom and confirmed the imprint of Ashkenazic religious law on the corpus of Zoharic literature.²⁷ Despite this, it is impossible to find in the Zoharic literature even one allusion to the custom of inscribing the names of angels on the mezuzah parchment.²⁸

²³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 6.13. On Maimonides' position in the broader context of his relation to folk religion, see I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980) 479–482. Maimonides' view regarding amulets and the use of sacred names is also expressed in his other writings; see Maimonides, *Perush Hamishnayot, Sotah*, 7.4, ed. J. Kafiah (Jerusalem: Mossad Ha-Rav Kook, 1969) 267; Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, ed. M. Schwartz (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2008) 1.61, 158; and A. Ravitzky, *Maimonidean Essays: Society, Philosophy and Nature in Maimonides and His Disciples* (Hebrew; Jerusalem, Schocken, 2006) 181–204.

²⁴ In speaking about the “Zoharic discourse” here, I do not wish to make a case for an historic event, a Zoharic concilium around this question, but rather to refer to the tension between different trends in the edited work.

²⁵ J. Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah: Studies in the History of Jewish Religion, Its Various Faces and Social Relevance* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986) 9–57. In this chapter Katz discusses the status of halakha in early Kabbalah the Middle Ages in a general way; on the Zohar in particular, see pp. 34–57.

²⁶ I. M. Ta-Shema, *Ha-Nigle She-Banistar: The Halachic Residue in the Zohar* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2001).

²⁷ For discussion of how the Ashkenazic material reached the authors of the Zohar and the nature of their use of it, see Katz, *Halakhah and Kabbalah*; Ta-Shema, *Ha-Nigle*; Yisraeli, “Studies.”

²⁸ The Zohar also does not mention the custom of inscribing *kuzu bemuhsuz kuzu* on the back of the mezuzah, although the phrase itself is mentioned in many

The Zohar's complete disregard for this custom is surprising mainly because the practice would have been in accordance with its magical trend in explaining the commandments. The absence of any such reference might be attributed to the strong influence of Maimonides, which had already prevailed.²⁹ However, it is probable that this attitude was inherent to the religious world of the Zohar itself, for unlike medieval Ashkenazic thought (which was greatly influenced by the Heikhalot and Merkavah literature, where angels held a central position in the divine realm), according to the kabbalists the focus of theosophical occurrence lay not in the angelological realm but deep inside the realm of divinity – or, to be more precise, in the realm of the *sefirot*. This stance was formulated clearly in the medieval kabbalistic *Sefer Shoshan Sodot*, which cautioned, “Be assured that writing the names of the angels in a mezuzah is not proper, because it serves them, and not they it.”³⁰ It is likely, then, that the Zohar's disregard for this custom reflects an ever diminishing interest in angels and their theosophical status.

However, disregard for the Ashkenazic norm does not necessarily also mean disregard for the fundamental question regarding the function and the power of the mezuzah and the significance of this commandment. Attentive and sensitive perusal of the words of the Zohar where it addresses the commandment of the mezuzah provides illuminating insights regarding its attitude – its various attitudes – regarding the matter of principle raised in Maimonides' polemic against the magical approach underlying the custom of adding angels to the parchment. The spectrum of approaches is broad and diverse, and expresses different trends and perhaps even a tense deliberation within the Zoharic atmosphere in this context.

In what follows I discuss some of the expressions of the fluctuation in the Zohar between the Ashkenazic position³¹ and its magical character,

places in the Zohar. See Ta-Shema, *Ha-Nigle*, 32 and 121 n. 58, and references there; I. M. Ta-Shema, “More on the Ashkenazi Origins to the Zohar” (Hebrew), *Kabbalah* 3 (1998) 263. For the Ashkenazi sources for this custom, see Kanarfogel, “Peering,” 86, n. 156 and references there.

²⁹ Testimony to the influence of Maimonides in the late 13th century can be found in the words of R. Asher Ben Yehiel (the Rosh), who lived and worked in this period and traveled from Germany to Spain: “They also had a custom in Germany and France of writing the name of God on the outside, parallel to the words ‘the Lord our God, the Lord,’ but inside one may not add anything at all, and no seals, for this will look like one is intending to make an amulet for protection” (Asher Ben Yehiel, *Halakhot Ketanot, Mezuzah*, 18, in the Vilna edition of BT Menahot).

³⁰ *Sefer Shoshan Sodot* (Korets: Kriger, 1784) 28a.

³¹ For the sake of the current discussion, this position will hereinafter be called “Ashkenazic” even though it was also prevalent in the East.

on the one hand, and the anti-magical stance of Maimonides, on the other. I focus on three typical examples, each of which presents a different tendency of the Zoharic literature – the first is close in character to the magical trend, the second to the didactic tone of Maimonides, and the third represents a unique orientation and composite viewpoint that originated in the Zoharic school.³²

The Magical Trend

The magical-guardian function of the mezuzah is evident in the Zohar, and it appears in most of the discourses that deal with the commandment of the mezuzah.³³ However, the nature of this magic and its underlying mythos often express a complex worldview that presents a unique position in the medieval debate on angels in the mezuzah. In order to situate this discourse, it is necessary to preface and clearly delineate the main attributes of the magical approach to the mezuzah in its literary appearances in ancient times and in the Middle Ages.

The idea of assigning protective and shielding power to the mezuzah had roots in the Talmud, where recognition of the power of the mezuzah is expressed in a most explicit way, especially in tractate Menahot.³⁴ We find it, for example, in the discussion about the laws of the placement of the mezuzah within the doorway. According to Rava, in a house with thick walls the mezuzah should be affixed “within a hand-breadth near the public domain.”³⁵ Two explanations were offered: “The rabbis said,

³² Suggesting different approaches within the Zohar is in accord with the dominant trend nowadays in Zohar research, according to which the Zohar is the creative product of many kabbalists and not of an individual. This approach was first extensively presented by Yehuda Liebes, “How the Zohar Was Written,” in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference on the History of Jewish Mysticism: The Age of the Zohar*, ed. Joseph Dan (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1989) 1–71. On the history of scholarship regarding this issue at length, see Abrams, *Kabbalistic Manuscripts*.

³³ See, for example Zohar 2.36a; and 3.238a, 264a, 265b, 266a, 267a, etc. On other protective commandments in the Zohar, see D. Cohen-Aloro, “Magic and Sorcery in the Zohar” (Hebrew; PhD diss., Hebrew University, 1989) 179–214. On the protective function of the mezuzah in the teachings of R. Yoseph Mishushan Habirah, a kabbalist close to the Zoharic circle, see Felix, “Theurgy,” 269–306.

³⁴ In the ancient Judeo-Hellenistic literature there is no mention of the magical perception of the mezuzah; see Gordon, “Mezuzah,” 28, n. 14. For the notion of *tefillin* as a “length-of-days” amulet in ancient Judaism, see Y. Cohn, “Were Tefillin Phylacteries?” *JJS* 59 (2008) 39–6. Cohn argues briefly the possible connection between that notion and the notion of the mezuzah as amulet.

³⁵ BT Menahot 33b.

So that one encounters the mezuzah immediately, and R. Hanina from Surā says, So that it will protect him.” The reason given by R. Hanina – to expand the range of protection of the mezuzah to include the doorway space – is presented here without any tone of apology or any need to explain at length.³⁶ Likewise, a law presented in the name of Shmuel holds that if the mezuzah is placed incorrectly (for example, hung on a stick or put behind the door), it is “dangerous, and it does not (fulfill) the commandment.”³⁷ The danger was apparently the exposure of the residents of that house to perils from which the mezuzah would protect them if affixed properly.³⁸ Traces of the protective perception of the mezuzah are thus already found in early rabbinic literature.³⁹

An even earlier testimony of the belief in the protective nature of the mezuzah is found in the *Mekhilta de R. Yishmael*. This source, which is evidently the earliest one reflecting the magical perception of the mezuzah, also contains an important key for understanding the mythic

³⁶ Indeed, another reason for the halakha discussed here is presented in the name of “the *rabanan*,” according to which the need to affix the mezuzah within a handbreadth of the doorway is so that when one arrives, “one will encounter the mezuzah immediately.” However, it is not necessary to see this as a reservation regarding the basic approach inherent in the words of R. Hanina about the protective value of the mezuzah, especially since in the editing of this topic, the opinion of the *rabanan* is presented first and not in response to R. Hanina. See, however, Gordon, “Mezuzah,” 14.

³⁷ BT Menahot 32b.

³⁸ BT Menahot 32b, Rashi, s. v. *sakana*. For another interpretation (a very strained one) of the “danger” mentioned here, see *Tosafot*, Menahot 32b, s. v. *sakana*, *ve’ain ba mitzvah*. Additional evidence for the protective perception of the mezuzah can perhaps be found in the Mishnah, Kelim 17, 19, which mentions “a stick that has a compartment for a mezuzah”; see Gordon, “Mezuzah,” 18.

³⁹ The magical and mythical characterization of the commandments is not obvious when studying rabbinic thought. Ephraim Elimelech Urbach and Isaac Heinemann expressed a view that characterized an entire school of scholars for the last hundred years, according to which the rabbis perceived the commandments in general, and the specific commandments in particular, as having primarily didactic and pedagogic value. On the other hand, a new approach, which recognizes the presence of mythos, magic and even theurgy in the rabbinic universe, is presented by Moshe Idel and Yehuda Liebes. See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 156–199; Y. Liebes, “*De Natura Dei: On Jewish Myth and Its Development*” (Hebrew), in *Massuot: Studies in Kabbalistic Literature and Jewish Philosophy in Memory of Prof. Ephraim Gottlieb*, ed. M. Oron and A. Goldreich (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994) 243–297. For the history of this polemic, also see Felix, “Theurgy,” 283–286. With regard to the magical perception of the mezuzah, even Gershom Scholem thought that its source was only in the early Middle Ages; see Scholem, *Messianic Idea*, 266–267. On attempts to purify the ancient Jewish sources, at least partially, from their magical character with regard to the mezuzah, see Gordon, “Mezuzah,” 7–40; E. M. Jansson, “The Magic of the Mezuzah in Rabbinic Literature,” in *Jewish Studies in a New Europe*, ed. U. Haxen et al. (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzel, 1988) 415–425.

foundations of this belief – foundations destined to manifest in different forms and to take root in the Zohar as well. In the discourse on the Exodus from Egypt and the plague of the firstborn, the *Mekhilta* draws a line from the commandment of the mezuzah to the historic commandment given to the people of Israel on the eve of the plague of the firstborn, to sprinkle the blood of the paschal sacrifice on the lintel and the doorposts. The discourse is anchored in the verse, “God will pass through to plague Egypt, and He shall see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, and God shall pass over the doorway and not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to plague you” (Exod 12:23). From there it goes on to mention the commandment of the mezuzah for future generations:

God shall pass over the doorway and not allow – This must be case, since the blood of the paschal sacrifice in Egypt, which was only for that time and not for generations, was said to bar the destroyer. How much more so will the mezuzah, then, which has ten unique names and is applicable day and night for all generations – how much more so will it bar the destroyer ...⁴⁰

This comparison clearly reveals the story of the plague of the firstborn as the source of inspiration for the protective nature of the mezuzah.⁴¹ Moreover, it is possible that the commandment of affixing a mezuzah on the doorway of a house should be seen, in accordance with what was said here, as a copy and an imitation of the historical situation in which God saved the inhabitants of the house on account of the blood on the doorposts.

The comparison of the mezuzah commandment and the plague of the firstborn may also clarify the magical “mechanism” of the mezuzah. The *Mekhilta* explains the verb *pasah* as follows: “And there is no *pesiha* except mercy (*haise*), as it says, *Like flying birds, so shall the Lord of Hosts protect Jerusalem, He will defend and deliver it* (*pasoah vehimlit*) (Isa 31:5).” The word *pasoah* is also explained as being derived from

⁴⁰ *Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishmael*, ed. H. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1931) 39.

⁴¹ In this passage in the *Mekhilta* (in the sections preceding the commentary discussed here) Jonah Frankel identified an anti-magical trend that sought to transfer the cause for rescue in Egypt from a technical-magical procedure to Israel’s merit in performing God’s commandments; see Y. Frankel, *Darkei Ha’agadah Vehamidrash* (Givatayim: Yad Latalmud, 1991) 214, and *Midrash and Agadah* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Open University, 1996) 722–731. In my opinion, this claim is not convincing. In any case, Frankel himself admits that one cannot deny the magical tone of the commentary discussed here.

the word for compassion.⁴² Consequently, the Lord in His mercy spread His wings over the doorways of the homes of the people of Israel and protected them from “the destroyer” who visited house after house that night and decimated the inhabitants. The name this night obtained in scripture, “night of vigil” (*leil shimurim*, Exod 12:42) also suits this explanation, since the essence of the night is the protection (*pesiha*) of the Lord over His people. Indeed, the mythos of God protecting the doorways of Israelite houses is related in a number of places to the mezuzah and its magical power. Thus, for example:

Said Rabbi Hanina, See how the manner of mortals is not like the manner of the Holy One, blessed be He. A king sits indoors, and the people outdoors protect him, as it says, *God protects you, God, who is your shield on your right hand* (Ps 121:5).⁴³

We may derive that, according to these texts, which are among the oldest regarding the protective and defensive power of the mezuzah, its magical power is not manifest in troops of angels and spirits that stand like a fortified wall against assorted destroyers, but in the power of the mezuzah to make the King present at the entrance to the house. The promise of the verse, “God protects you,” was understood by the *Mekhilta* in a literal sense, as meaning that the Lord Himself – not an angel, not a seraph – stands at the entrance to the house, to show mercy to its inhabitants and defend them, just as He defended the homes of the

⁴² Indeed, the accepted meaning for *pesiha* is “to pass over,” as explained by Rashi and in his wake many biblical commentators. On the other hand, Onkelos and the Aramaic translation attributed to Yonatan translated the word like the author of the *Mekhilta*, as meaning “compassion and protection,” as did the grammarian R. Yonah Ibn Janah. It seems that both meanings have bases in biblical language; see M. Z. Kadari, *Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew* (Hebrew; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2006) 867. Nevertheless, the interpretation of *pesiha* as compassion and rescue makes better sense in the biblical context, for only on this basis can one understand “God will have compassion on the doorway” as a reason and direct cause for the remainder of the verse: “and will not permit the destroyer to enter your houses and plague you.”

⁴³ BT Menahot 33b. This text is also included in the legend about Onkeles, son of Klonimus the convert (BT Avodah Zarah 11a). According to this story, when the Roman soldiers came to take him back from the Jewish academy to his home, he placed his hand on the mezuzah at the entrance of the house, and when he was asked, “What is that?” he replied, “It is the way of the world that a mortal king sits inside, and his servants guard him from outside, whereas the Holy One, blessed be He, his servants are inside, and He guards them from outside.” The passage of R. Hanina on its own does not prove unequivocally that it is about the mezuzah, but because of the way it is included in the talmudic legend about Onkelos, as well as the context in which it is brought in the discussion in Menahot, it was evidently understood thus, at least by the editors of this section.

people of Israel in Egypt. Making the Lord present at the entrance to the house may be connected to the “ten unique names” in the mezuzah (if this is what the *Mekhilta* is suggesting), but it is likely that it derives from the scriptural passages in the mezuzah, which from this point of view represent God Himself.⁴⁴

This mythos of the deity that defends the entrance to the house underwent a change in the Middle Ages, but it did not change fundamentally. The Ashkenazic custom sought to reinforce the protective power of the mezuzah mainly by adding names of angels,⁴⁵ for the most part, seven angels.⁴⁶ This has now been confirmed by the testimony of the *mezuzot* found in the Cairo Genizah.⁴⁷ Who are these seven angels? Sperber has suggested identifying them with the archangels mentioned in *Sefer Hanoach*.⁴⁸ This is a most logical conjecture, even though, as a closer and more direct source of inspiration, one might prefer the eighth-century *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, which describes the Lord seated on an exalted throne, and on His right “seven angels created in the beginning serve Him behind the curtain.”⁴⁹ These angels are, in the biblical terminology of the Book of Esther, “the seven who see the face of the king, who are seated first in kingship” (Esth 1:14). This is, therefore, not a random

⁴⁴ This awareness of God in the mezuzah, who abides at the entrance and wards off the destroyer and malefactors, is also reflected in BT Menahot 33a, which, in a discussion of whether to affix the mezuzah horizontally or vertically, mentions a custom of affixing it “like (*ke-*) *istavira*.” This is apparently a term derived from Middle Persian, which means “ankle.” According to this custom, the mezuzah was installed in the doorway in a manner that imitates the form of a shoe or a boot – in effect, a graphic illustration of the bottom of the foot. As demonstrated by Elliot Wolfson, the foot as a representation of God is a permanent motif in Jewish mysticism, from the revelation at Sinai, where the people of Israel “saw the God of Israel and under His feet something like a sapphire slab” (Exod 24: 10), to the ubiquitous Zoharic likening of the foot and the shoe to the male and female in the divine realm. On this subject, see E. R. Wolfson, “Images of God’s Feet: Some Observations on the Divine Body in Judaism,” in *People of the Body: Jews and Judaism from an Embodied Perspective*, ed. H. Eilberg-Schwartz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992) 143–181. It follows that the protective power of the mezuzah was already present in talmudic literature, which identified in the mezuzah the footprint of God, who stands and protects the home and its inhabitants.

⁴⁵ The books that describe these customs also speak about the inscription of “seals” and God’s “names,” but the names of the angels have a central status.

⁴⁶ Aptowitz, “Noms de Dieu”; Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic*; and *Sefer Eshkol Hakofer*.

⁴⁷ Bohak, “Mezuzoth,” 392.

⁴⁸ Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, 8.101, n. 18. For a different approach to the deciphering of the septadic typology here, see Bohak, “Mezuzoth.”

⁴⁹ *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (Venice: 1544) 6a. The footprints of this idea also lead to the Heikhalot literature; see, for example, P. Schäfer, *A Synopsis of Heikhalot Literature* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1981) 372.

“recruitment” and listing of names of angels for reinforcing protection, but is a richer and harmonious mythos of the divine realm itself – in fact, about effecting the presence of the entire pleromic “supreme council” around the King of Kings, represented by the mezuzah itself. Consequently, the Ashkenazic mythos is not different than the earlier mythos, but only more developed: instead of the Lord standing at the entrance to the house to defend it (as reflected in the *Mekhilta*), it offers a picture of the King and his entourage.

This mythos of God and His angels stationed on the mezuzah can also be identified in the kabbalistic literature of 13th-century Spain, even though this literature does not refer to the practice of inscribing the names of angels on the parchment. In a document apparently written in the environs of the Zohar, one can discern an interim phase from the Ashkenazic approach to a similar approach in the Zohar. This document, entitled *Sod Hamezuzah* (Secret of the Mezuzah),⁵⁰ is attributed to R. Joseph Gikatilla,⁵¹ a kabbalist who was close to the Zoharic circle, if not one of its creators.⁵² Gikatilla explains, in kabbalistic language, the “mechanism” of the protection of the mezuzah at the entrance to the house:⁵³

Know that all sanctity and purity and protection are in the palaces of God exalted – that is, in these ten *sefirot*. And know that outside the palaces of the *sefirot* there are other external things, and they are called the forces of impurity. And if, heaven forefend, they should encounter a man, they will harm him. The Holy One, blessed be He, because of His great love for Israel, gave them these two passages, which are Shema and Vehaya Im Shamo, and they are the secret of the two passages called Gedulah (grace) and Gevurah (severity). Encompassing Gedulah and Gevurah are all the external forces, and in order to protect Israel from the external forces that surround Gedulah and Gevurah, which are called the *mezuzot* of the supreme palace, He commanded Israel to place a mezuzah on the gates of their homes, so that there should be no permission for the external forces to enter the homes of Israel, so that they cannot harm them.

⁵⁰ Extant manuscripts of this text include MS Munich 305; JTS 1609; Cambridge, University Library 1511; Moscow-Ginzburg 14/1; Vatican 213; Vatican 214. See also R. Yehiel Ashkenazi, *Heikhal Hashem* (Venice: Zenity, 1607) 39a. In all these sources the “secret of the mezuzah” appears within a sequence of “secrets” (which are kabbalistic explanations for different commandments). See A. Altmann, “*Ta’ame Hamitzvot*, Attributed to Isaac Ibn Farhi, and Its Author” (Hebrew), *Qiryat Sefer* 40 (1965) 269–276.

⁵¹ See, for example, MS JTS 1609 and Cambridge 1511.

⁵² On the position of R. Joseph Gikatilla in the Zoharic circle, see Liebes, “How the Zohar,” 20–25.

⁵³ This version is according to MS Munich 305, with necessary corrections and in comparison to other textual evidence.

And the secret: *God shall pass over to plague Egypt, and He shall see the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts*, and so on (Exod 12:23). Now then, the mezuzah always stands in the place of those things that were done on the night they left Egypt, and the mezuzah guards at the entrance against all the external forces of impurity, so that they may not enter the house. Likewise, when a man goes out the door of his house, those camps of sanctity and purity that are attached to these two passages – namely, Shema and Vehaya Im Shamo'a – they all go with the man who has a mezuzah in his doorway, and when he goes out the door of his house, they protect him from the harmful spirits and from all the external forces of impurity until he returns home. The mezuzah therefore protects a person when he enters his home, when he goes out ... and those angels that are appointed for those two passages in the mezuzah protect a man when he goes out the door of his house. And it is about this that it says, *For He shall command His angels, for you, to protect you on all your paths, to carry you in His hands* (Ps 91:11).

In his opening words, Gikatilla stresses that the protection is in the “palaces of God,” which are the ten *sefirot*. He sees in the two scriptural passages in the mezuzah a representation of the *sefirot* Gedulah and Gevurah. In his book *Sha'arei Orah*, Gikatilla expresses reservations about the “lower” magic of names.⁵⁴ He believes that power is to be attributed only to the divine entities themselves, the *sefirot*. This approach, which derives from motives of principle, is in accord with the ancient tradition that sees the mezuzah as effecting the presence of God Himself at the entrance to the house and refers to the blood on the lintel and doorposts at the Exodus. Here, however, Gikatilla makes an unexpected exegetic shift by introducing “camps” of angels into the guardian mechanism of the mezuzah. A picture is painted in which the divine presence at the entrance to the house, represented by the two scriptural passages in the mezuzah, is surrounded by an angelological presence of an ancillary character (“camps of sanctity and purity ... attached to these two passages.” This complex model is undoubtedly a slightly faded reflection of the familiar Ashkenazic mythos of the mezuzah where angels surround the Lord, but, whereas the Ashkenazic mythos became embodied in the custom of adding names of angels to the parchment, here the motif of the angels remained as an unrelated vestige with no hold on the practical aspect of the commandment.

The protective perception of the mezuzah is also expressed in one of the discourses of the Zohar, 3:266a, where one can sense the Zohar's ambivalence: on the one hand, it takes an additional step in muting the

⁵⁴ See J. Gikatilla, *Sha'arei Orah*, ed. J. Ben-Shlomo (2 vols.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1970) 1.46–47.

idea of the appearance of angels in the mezuzah, but, on the other hand, it configures it in a different magical pattern.⁵⁵ One may discern a complex standpoint that would like to repress the perception of angels in the mezuzah but not completely relinquish it.⁵⁶

R. Abba opened by saying: Come and see, when those evil entities approach the entrance of [the home of] a person, [they] raise their heads and look at the holy impression seen outside, which is the Shaddai crowned with its crowns, a name more complete than all of them, which [they] fear and flee, and they do not come near the entrance of [the home of] the person.

Said R. Yitzhak to him: If so, then a person should inscribe [only] this name at the entrance of the house and no more, [so] why the entire text?

He replied: It is right, since this name is not adorned but with all those letters which are written by the scribe of the King, and when the entire passage is written, then this name is crowned with its crowns, and the King emerges with all His hosts, and then they fear Him and flee from Him.

According to the magical version recounted here, the mezuzah was meant to drive away “evil entities” who wish to encroach upon the entrance of the house and harm its inhabitants. This perception of the magical power of the mezuzah is most surprising, as it is clearly dissociated from the halakhic concept of the commandment of the mezuzah. Here the main protective power of the mezuzah is inherent in the name Shaddai, which is inscribed on the outside, even though this inscription has no halakhic import and is but a late custom, whereas the scriptural passages, which are the legal requisite of the mezuzah, are only there to “adorn” the name Shaddai and fortify His hosts against the evil and destructive forces.

The expounder is aware of this absurdity, since he places the question in the mouth of R. Yitzhak. Why does the commentator need to confront the rooted and traditional halakhic state of mind? It seems that this magical model of the mezuzah expresses a great speculative effort to preserve the age-old paradigm without necessitating any addition of angels’ names in the mezuzah. Zohar 3:266a emphasizes that when the name is crowned with its crowns, then “the King emerges with all His hosts.” Thus, the name Shaddai, which is crowned by the letters of the mezuzah, represents the mythos of the divine King who emerges with His angels. The magical inscription of the name Shaddai, “crowned” by

⁵⁵ In presenting the Zoharic discourse discussed here as a culmination of the process presented by Gikatilla, I have no intention of deciding on the question of the chronological precedence, but only claim that this Zoharic discourse reflects the maturation of a trend whose earlier expressions might be represented by Gikatilla.

⁵⁶ Quotes from the Zohar are from the first printed edition, Mantua, 1558. Translations are mine.

the letters of the mezuzah, substitutes for the more ancient configuration, according to which the Lord Himself is represented by the scriptural passages, while the angels are represented by the added names in the margins. Transferring the focus to the name Shaddai inscribed on the outside of the mezuzah allows the Zoharic commentator to view the letters in the mezuzah itself as representing the angels and forgo other dubious additions to the basic halakhic text of the mezuzah.

Thus, the paradigmatic structure of the Lord and His angels who are represented in the mezuzah and guard the home in the Ashkenazic tradition is precisely the same structure that is reflected here in Zohar 3.266a in the image of the sacred name crowned by the letters of the mezuzah. The Ashkenazic approach is present, but in a different garb of names and letters. In this manner the Zohar not only succeeds in excluding the angels from the mythic portrayal, but also – more importantly – frees itself from problematic normative implications, such as adding names onto the parchment of the mezuzah.

In this discourse the Zohar's approach is similar to the Ashkenazic one. By hiding the "Ashkenazic" angels behind the letters of the mezuzah, the commentator successfully expresses his principled worldview, which both builds on the Ashkenazic mythos and avoids the need to effect changes and additions in the mezuzah itself. Behind the garb of the names and the letters of the mezuzah, a shadow of the Ashkenazic approach is reflected here. There is no doubt, then, that this discourse presents a pronounced Ashkenazic tendency in the Zohar.

The Didactic Trend

Although the magical approach to the mezuzah is the dominant one in Zoharic literature, one may also identify, in the pluralistic Zoharic world of many voices, other approaches that are not in accord with the magical perception of the mezuzah. These evidently represent other spiritual orientations in the Zoharic "academy." In contrast to the magical trend discussed above, which preserves the Ashkenazic custom in kabbalistic garb, one can also find in and around the Zohar an expression of the didactic approach that originates in the school of Maimonides – an approach that, like Maimonides', views the mezuzah as a means to remind a person of God and His commandments and thereby ensure faithfulness to them. Behind the literal and symbolic use of kabbalistic nomenclature, a didactic approach is reflected, which is at the very least not magical, if not anti-magical.

The following text, Zohar 3.263b, provides two explanations for the commandment of the mezuzah.⁵⁷

It is a commandment that a person should affix a mezuzah to his gate, in order that every person be protected by the Holy One, blessed be He, upon departing and upon arriving, and the secret is *God shall guard your departures and arrivals forever and ever* (Ps 121:8). The secret of the mezuzah is that it is always located at the opening, and this is the opening above, and this is the level called guardian. So that it should be that the protection of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not for the person, for He is always watching and standing at the entrance, while the person is inside. And also, that a person should never forget the remembrance of the Holy One, blessed be He, and this is like with *tzitzit*, as it says, *You will see it and remember*, and so on (Num 15:39). Since the person sees this reminder, [he] himself remembers to do the commandments of his Lord. The secret of the belief: that the mezuzah incorporates male and female as one.

Two explanations for the commandment of the mezuzah are grouped into a single construct by means of “and also.” The first explanation may be categorized as magical. The Zohar utilizes a typical exegetic technique that strings a sequence of symbols in an associative way (mezuzah → opening → opening above → guardian) and ultimately leads to the identification of the mezuzah with the level of “guardian” – that is, the *sefirah* of Malkhut (kingship).⁵⁸ Thus this text establishes, in kabbalistic language, the secret of the guardian power of the mezuzah (“which is always watching and standing at the entrance”).⁵⁹

The second explanation, which is our main interest here, is completely different. According to it, the mezuzah was meant to remind a

⁵⁷ Though marked in printings as part of the Raya Mehemna section, this actually belongs to the main Zoharic stratum, as shown by E. Gottlieb, *Studies in the Kabbalah Literature* (Hebrew; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976) 215–230; the passage discussed here appears in the list of Pikudin, p. 228, para. 38.

⁵⁸ The direct identification of the mezuzah with the *sefirah* of Malkhut appears in the Zohar in only a few more places. See, for example, Zohar 3.257a (Raya Mehemna). However, the “entrance” that would also be associatively connected to the mezuzah is used in the Zohar as a typical symbol of the *sefirah* of Malkhut. See, for example, Zohar 1.36b, 54b; 2.36a; 3.14a, 71b, etc.

⁵⁹ Notwithstanding the magical character of this explanation, it has a moderate character, perhaps even polemical regarding more radical magical trends. The requirement that “every person should be protected by the Holy One,” rejects the possibility of attaining the same goal not through the Holy One. Also, the emphasis further on, that “the protection of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not for the person, for He is always watching and standing at the entrance, while the person is inside,” shows that that man cannot fulfill the role of the Holy One, but the Holy One is the protector and man is the protected. Nevertheless, according to the categorization suggested here, it is clear that this explanation in and of itself belongs to the magical trend, since it sees the mezuzah as a means of defense and protection.

person to remember the Lord and His commandments in order not to stray from them. This explanation, which attributes didactic and pedagogic value to the mezuzah is, without a doubt, a paraphrase of the words of Maimonides:

Whenever one enters or leaves a home with the mezuzah on the doorpost, he will be confronted with the Declaration of God's Unity, blessed be his holy name, and will remember the love due to God, and will be aroused from his slumbers and his foolish absorption in temporal vanities. He will realize that nothing endures to all eternity save knowledge of the Ruler of the Universe. This thought will immediately restore him to his right senses, and he will walk in the paths of righteousness.⁶⁰

Even the comparison to *tzitzit* in this Zohar passage parallels the words of Maimonides, who refers in the sentence just before the quoted passage to the *tzitzit* as one of the "reminders" that help keep a person from sinning.

An echo of the didactic approach regarding the commandment of the mezuzah can be found in other places in and around the Zohar.⁶¹ An especially pronounced expression of this trend is in *Sefer Harimon* by R. Moses de Léon. This kabbalist, who was deeply involved in the compilation of the Zohar, was given to Maimonides' influence in his early career, and this influence did not cease even after he turned to theosophical Kabbalah. *Sefer Harimon* deals with the reasons for the commandments according to the Kabbalah, and for the reason for the commandment of the mezuzah, it offers an explanation that displays a significant likeness to Zohar 3.263b:

Write a mezuzah to have on the doorway when one departs and arrives, as it says: *You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates* (Deut 6:9). Know and teach that He, may He be blessed, created the world as He wished and arranged it to be a model, and the worlds would proceed in a chain, so that He should be unified according to the secret of His unity above and below, and there would be no break in His unity and rule. And He made man rule in this world to prepare him and assist him with the power of the secret of His divinity, which is upon him from above. And He ordained man to be upright before Him, as it says, *For the Lord*

⁶⁰ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, 6.13.

⁶¹ Such an echo may be discerned mainly from commentaries that perceive the mezuzah as part of the list of "remembrance commandments" that encompass a person and remind him of his creator, such as *tzitzit*, *tefillin*, etc. See, for example, Zohar 3.265a, 266a; *Zohar Hadash* (Ruth), 84d. An extensive and typical expression of the didactic trend can be found also in the anonymous *Secret of the Mezuzah*, which was appended (among other "secrets") in editions of R. Moses de Léon, *Hanefesh Hahakhamah*; see, for example, Basel, 1608.

made people upright (Eccl 29:7) and commanded them to use this world as a model of the sublime, and placed His Torah in their hearts to behave according to the secret of divinity, to stand before Him and serve Him. And it is all as we have said. And the worlds shall proceed in a single chain, as we have said.

Open the gates of justice for me (Ps 118:19). Know that the gate for entering into the secret of His unity is the gate called Tzedek (justice), and from there one may enter the secret of the unified unity. And this gate will not close. And you must awaken, for man has to be in the secret of the belief, upon departing and upon arriving, to teach that this is the gate to God, which may be entered by the just, and to know and to realize that one has a part in God, and one should lift up his eyes and see, and remember his creator, and not forget Him upon departing or upon arriving. Know that He, may He be blessed, protects people who strive for Him, as they said: *Follow the Lord your God* (Deut 13:5). And the secret of the mezuzah is that it teaches one to have proper belief [in] the protector of Israel, therefore does this secret protect ...

And therefore the secret of the mezuzah is as we have said. And if you were to say, what is this name, its matter and its secret? The point, however, is the matter of the secret, in order that male and female be joined ... *me-zu-zah* is a secret that incorporates male and female together, and one cannot separate them with any separation in the world. Never shall a woman be alone with any man unless her husband is with her, and a woman is not invited except through her husband.⁶²

Many ties connect this passage to Zohar 3.263b,⁶³ not only in the symbol of the “opening above” (called a gate in *Sefer Harimon*), the emphasis on the gate of a person’s house likened to the supernal gate of Justice (that is, Malkhut), and the exegesis on the word *me-zu-zah*, which alludes to “male and female together” (in the Zohar, “incorporating male and female as one”), but especially in the didactic approach that views the mezuzah as a means for man to remember his creator and to inculcate him with awareness and “proper belief” (meaning, of course, kabbalistic belief).

The fundamental elements in the text of *Sefer Harimon* derive from both parts of Zohar 3.263b.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, R. Moses de Léon

⁶² *The Book of the Pomegranate: Moses De Leon's Sefer Ha-Rimon*, ed. E. R. Wolfson (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988) 231–233.

⁶³ The linkage between these passages in *Sefer Harimon* and the Zohar was already noted in Wolfson, *Book of the Pomegranate*, 231 n. 14.

⁶⁴ The fundamental assumption here is in accordance with the conclusion drawn by Gershom Scholem, according to whom *Sefer Harimon*, which was written in 1287, was written after the main part of the Zohar. See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Jerusalem: Schocken, 1941) 185. Tishby’s opinion regarding this matter (as well as the opinions of Jelinek and Graetz before him) was different; see Tishby, *Wisdom*, 94–96. See also Wolfson, *Book*, 5–9.

completely ignored the magical reason for the mezuzah presented by the Zohar. Moreover, the concept of the “opening above” was disconnected from its original context and used to serve the didactic trend. Thus the mezuzah was meant to remind a person of the opening above in order that he not forget his creator upon departing or arriving. The performer of the commandment actualizes the kabbalistic ideal of “making use of this world as a model of the sublime” and actually constructs a new awareness for himself, in which he regularly sees the shadow of the supernal gate at the gate of his home. In this way a man clings to God, and through this the Lord will protect him, for God “protects people who strive for Him.”

The trend in R. Moses de Léon to dissolve the magical meaning and to present the didactic significance as an arch-principle indicates an additional stage in processing the didactic explanation within and around Zoharic literature. Most pronounced is the linkage to Maimonides’ style in this context. R. Moses de Leon’s words, “And a person will see and remember his creator and not forget him upon arriving or departing,” resonate with Maimonides’ words, “Whenever one enters or leaves a home with the Mezuzah on the doorpost, he will be confronted with the Declaration of God’s Unity, blessed be his holy name, and will remember the love due to God, and will be aroused from his slumbers and his foolish absorption in temporal vanities.” In both cases the focus is transferred to the person’s awareness, and his devotion to supernal truth will save him from all things evil (though the nature of R. Moses de Léon’s kabbalistic belief is of course different from Maimonides’ belief). R. Moses de Léon exemplifies here a trend that emerges in the Zohar – but while it is usually presented in the Zohar as an additional option, in *Sefer Harimon* it has already become the one and only path, the high road.

Thus we learn that, just as the Ashkenazic spirit cloaked itself in kabbalistic garb upon entering the gates of the Zohar, so did Maimonides’ rational position.⁶⁵ Identification of Maimonides’ stamp once again

⁶⁵ On the influence of Maimonides in *Sefer Harimon*, see Wolfson, *Book*, 36–38; D. Cohen-Aloro, *Sefer Ha-Rimon: Mitzvot Lo-Ta’ase, by Rabbi Moshe de Leon* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1987) 18–20. Maimonides’ imprint on the teachings of de Léon may be attributed to the first period of his intellectual biography, when he was close to the philosophical schools; see Scholem, *Major Trends*, 190–191, and A. Altmann, “*Or Zarua* by Rabbi Moshe de Leon: Introduction, Critical Text with Notes,” *Kobetz Al Yad*, NS 9 [19] (1980) 219–244; A. Farber-Ginat, “On the Sources of Rabbi Moses de Leon’s Early Kabbalistic System” (Hebrew), in *Studies in Jewish Mysticism, Philosophy and Ethical Literature, Presented to Isaiah Tishby on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. J. Dan and I. Hacker (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986) 67–96.

illustrates the Zohar's pluralistic complexity and its power to contain disparate voices side by side. Maimonides' didactic approach with regard to the commandment of the mezuzah did find its way into the circle of the Zoharic kabbalists, demonstrating the depth of Maimonides' influence even in the very heart of the most important and productive kabbalistic school of the late 13th century.

The Ritual Trend

Two Zoharic models presented so far have allowed for the identification of familiar medieval approaches, behind the Zoharic formulations. The last model expresses a unique trend in which the Zohar forges a route of its own. This pathway also reveals a sort of escape found by the Zohar from the jaws of Maimonides' reproach. This explanation is presented in the Zohar 3.265b, and, as in *Sefer Harimon*, the explanation links the entrance of the earthly house and the entrance to the supernal house, although things go, from there, in a very different direction.

The mezuzah is the name of the place where the entrance of the house is found, as it is above. The place where the entrance to the supernal house is found is called a mezuzah, [because] it is the completion of the house and is the entrance to the house. From that mezuzah do the harsh enforcers flee; the masters of severe judgments cannot be present there; and, parallel to this below, when a person affixes a mezuzah at the doorway of his house, which has the sacred name written in its letters, this person is crowned with the crown of his Lord. Evil entities do not come near the entrance to his house, and they cannot be present there.

At the base of this explanation is an approach that views the doorway of the house and the mezuzah as a reflection of the supernal doorway and mezuzah – the same approach that was at the base of the Zohar discourse in 3.263b and the passage in *Sefer Harimon* discussed above. Here, however, the words bear a different character and serve a different purpose. This parallel is not presented in order to divert the focus from the magical occurrence to human awareness (where the physical doorway reminds a person of the supernal doorway), but in order to illuminate the magical mezuzah in a broader and more complex context.

With measured steps, the Zohar reverts here to the protective characterization of the mezuzah, and the protective purpose itself is now

On the different trends in the reasons for the commandments in *Sefer Harimon*, see Wolfson, "Mystical Rationalization," 217–251.

loaded with additional significance. Zohar 3.265b says that use of the mezuzah for defense and protection is but a way for a person to walk in the ways of the Lord and to emulate Him, to be “crowned with the crown of his Lord.” A person is supposed to install a mezuzah in his physical dwelling and protect himself from all that is malevolent, because in doing so he is imitating God, who drives away malefactors (or “harsh enforcers”) from the doorway of the “house” in the divine realm; just as the Lord protects His supernal palace by means of the power called mezuzah (identified with the *sefirah* of Malkhut) on the entrance, so should a person protect his own house by means of affixing a mezuzah in the doorway.

The ritual approach to the mezuzah commandment allows the Zoharic commentator to hold the rope at both ends. On the one hand, he attributes magical-protective power to the mezuzah, while making this power dependent on the linkage of the mezuzah to the higher realm, the *sefirah* of Malkhut, thus also granting it kabbalistic validity. On the other hand, he refrains from defining the manifestation of this magical power as the ultimate purpose of the commandment, and this, evidently, is in order not to make it “an amulet for personal gain,” as Maimonides’ objected.

A similarly cautious stance is also reflected in the explanation of R. Menachem Recanati of the reason for the mezuzah commandment:

And yet, according to the way of truth, the mezuzah alludes to the supernal Congregation of Israel (*Knesset Yisrael*), and its installation is at the entrances of gates, as our rabbis of blessed memory said about that attribute, “I have placed her as a servant at the outside entrance of My palace, to mete out justice upon the entourage above and the entourage below,”⁶⁶ and since it is at the entrance, all those that are destructive and malevolent flee from it, and this is alluded to in the word *mezuzot*, whose letters spell *zaz mavet* (removes death) ... and it was affixed in the doorways, for the Congregation of Israel is the gateway for entering the name of God.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ The citation attributed to “our rabbis” represents a tradition whose roots are probably in the Heikhalot literature and relates to the angel Metatron; see Schäfer, *Synopsis*, 295, 405. Its later traces lead to some medieval compositions; see *Midrash Otiot de-Rabbi Akiva*, Version 1, ed. Wertheimer, *Batei Midrashot* 2 (Jerusalem: Rubin Mass, 1950) 351–352; *Bereshit Rabbati*, ed. H. Albeck (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1940) 27–28. However, the text exactly as quoted here can be found, as far as I know, only in *Sefer Ha’iyyun*; see M. W. Verman, *Sifrei Ha’iyyun* (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 1984) 106. It is possible that Recanati is alluding here to this text. In any event, Recanati changed the gender from masculine to feminine (*santiha* instead of *santiho*), when he wished to refer to “the Congregation of Israel” and not to Metatron.

⁶⁷ R. Menachem Recanati, *Perush Al Hatorah*, ed. A. Gross (Tel Aviv: Gross, 2003) 25.

The main construct in this passage focuses on the “supernal Congregation of Israel” (meaning the *sefirah* of Malkhut). This is the one whose place is at the entrance to the palace, “to mete justice upon the entourage above and the entourage below” (“the masters of harsh judgment” in the Zohar); it is the one that “all those that are destructive and malevolent flee from”; and it is what is “affixed in the doorways” because “it is the gateway for entering the name of God.” About the mezuzah “below,” nothing is mentioned here, except that it alludes to the supernal Congregation of Israel. Consequently, anyone who wishes to derive the power of the earthly mezuzah as an amulet from Recanati’s text will be doing so at his own risk.

Beyond this delicate manner of expressing the magical-protective power of the mezuzah, it seems that perceiving the performance of the commandment as an actualization of the ideal of imitating God (who also, as it appears, uses a mezuzah) is presented to give legitimacy to the magical use of the mezuzah by rooting it in ancient Jewish ritual and ethos.⁶⁸

The ideal of *imitatio dei* as a key for shedding light on human ritual was obviously not conceived here. Already in the Talmud there are traditions according to which the Holy One prays and puts on phylacteries,⁶⁹ and, as shown by Mircea Eliade, the link between ritual and mythos is a widespread and universal religious characteristic.⁷⁰ Here, however, it

⁶⁸ This trend is might also be expressed in the final sentence of the passage: “And malevolent entities do not come near the entrance of his house, and they cannot be present there.” The sentence may be read in two alternative ways. On the one hand, it may be perceived as summarizing the realization of the magical purpose of the ritual, as if to say that since man is likened to God, all malefactors flee from him. However, in accordance with the split structure of the passage, it is more plausible to view this sentence as part of the description of the ritual itself and a completion and summarization of the parallel between the earthly dwelling and the “house” on high – meaning that, just as the house above is protected from the “masters of harsh judgment” by the mezuzah above, so does the mezuzah below guard the house against the malevolent. It seems that the double meaning of the closing sentence comes to soften the magical character of the story and transfer the focus from the magical purpose to the ritual of emulating God.

⁶⁹ For talmudic references to this concept, see, for example, K. C. Patton, *Religion of Gods: Ritual, Paradox and Reflexivity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 249–280. On this phenomenon in early Kabbalah, see A. Afterman, *The Intention of Prayers in Early Ecstatic Kabbalah* (Hebrew; Los Angeles: Cherub, 2004) 124–125. On expressions of this principle regarding the commandment of *tefillin*, see A. Afterman, “The Phylactery Knot: History of a Jewish Icon” (Hebrew), in *Myth, Ritual and Mysticism: Studies in the Honor of Prof. Ithamar Gruenwald*, ed. G. Bohak et al. (Tel Aviv: Rosenberg School of Jewish Studies, 2014) 441–480.

⁷⁰ M. Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper, 1959) 21–27.

appears that the words possess a more radical character, for we learn not only that God performs the mezuzah commandment, but that it also protects His house. Zohar 3.265b raises the magical act to the level of a religious ritual intended to manifest the exalted ideal of emulating God in His war against “the masters of harsh judgment” on high. In these words too, the Zohar certainly dialogues with Maimonides’ criticism of “those who have made a great commandment, which is to unify His name, to love Him and to serve Him, into an amulet for personal benefit.” As noted, Maimonides’ opposition to the practice of inscribing angels’ names inside the mezuzah was internalized by the Zohar. On the other hand, the magical quality of the mezuzah was not relinquished. Use of the mezuzah for the sake of protection and defense is not reprehensible to the Zohar. On the contrary, it is an important expression of actualizing the exalted ideal of walking in the ways of God.

Nevertheless, the ideal of emulating God as a reason for the commandments of the Torah is not common in the Zohar. Its occurrence in Zohar 3.265b may indicate the extent of religious distress from which this explanation emerged, as well as the extensive degree of creativity reflected in this solution. The complex stance upheld by the Zohar in this case may be instructive about its insightful, sensitive and balanced approach to religious dilemmas related to changing times.

Conclusion

I have presented three directions in the Zohar’s responses to the medieval polemic about the reason for the commandment of the mezuzah and the attribution of magical-guardian power to the mezuzah. The broader picture of these different expressions reflects the richness of colors in the Zoharic spectrum and its many facets. Each of these literary directions represents a different religious tendency: the first expresses ideological identification with the magical Ashkenazic trend, and the second reflects a proclivity for Maimonides’ rational and purist approach, while the third represents a middle position that attempts to contain, in a complex and sophisticated way, the idea of attributing protective power to the mezuzah along with implied reservations as to this power being the explicit purpose of the commandment.

The involvement of the Zohar in the discussion about the magical reason for the mezuzah should not be perceived in concrete historical contexts. After all, when the Zoharic passages discussed here took shape, in the late 13th century or early 14th, the echoes of the dispute aroused

by Maimonides had almost faded out. Nevertheless, these different and opposing currents continued to ferment and inform ethical, mythical and ritual consciousness with regard to the mezuzah in the environs of the Zohar, and this should be seen as the background for its deliberation on the subject and for the consolidation of these approaches.

What can we learn from this issue regarding the spirit of the Zohar, its religious trends and its unique orientations, beyond understanding of the Zohar's position with regard to the commandment of the mezuzah and the Zohar's involvement in its deliberation?

First, it should be noted that what we are looking at is an expression of the complicated relationship of the Zohar to magic. The trend defined by Idel as theurgical-magical is the most prominent and dominant in the Zohar's teachings of the reasons for the commandments,⁷¹ and in this context there are usually specific, defined models and a kabbalistic system that functions according to set rules anchored in the supernal *sefirotic* system.⁷² Nonetheless, the magical, in its broader and more popular contexts, is regarded in the Zohar in a more complicated and much more reserved manner.⁷³ This is how we are made to feel with respect to the Ashkenazic customs that regarded the mezuzah as an amulet meant to defend and protect a person in his house.

Beyond this, from the comparison of these texts we learn that perusal which is attentive to the different voices in the Zohar as an echo and response to the broader medieval dialogue reveals – to our great surprise – remarkably conservative lines in the Zohar. Thus, in the normative context, the Zohar rejects both the Ashkenazic “innovation” of adding names of angels to the mezuzah and also Maimonides' rational speculations regarding angels as images of man's good deeds. It seeks, rather, to assign a central place to the ancient magical approach to the mezuzah, even though clothed in new garments and exhibiting a more refined magical tension. It seems to me that these conservative aspects in the world of the Zohar are a key to understanding how quickly the Zohar was accepted, both by conservatives and also by those much less conformist, within the Jewish world of the Middle Ages.

⁷¹ See Idel, *Kabbalah*, 156–172.

⁷² One may also get this impression from Gikatilla's comments, which on the one hand express serious reservations about “low” magic that makes use of the sacred names, while on the other hand use the magical principle as an explanation for the reason for the commandment when it relates to the *sefirot* themselves.

⁷³ On the Zohar's complex relationship to magic, see Yisraeli, *Temple Portals*, 258–262.