



**Melila Hellner-Eshed.** *Seekers of the Face: Secrets of the Idra Rabba (The Great Assembly) of the Zohar.* Translated by Raphael Dascalu. Stanford Studies in Jewish Mysticism Series. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2021. 480 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-5036-2842-7.

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Melila Hellner-Eshed's *Seekers of the Face* is an enchanting work, in terms of both content and style. It constitutes the first monograph in English devoted to one of the most important parts of the *Zohar*, the crown jewel of medieval Jewish literature. A translation of Hellner-Eshed's Hebrew book *Mevakshei ha-Panim* (2017), *Seekers of the Face* is also a wonderful sequel to her earlier work, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar* (2009), which is a translation of her Hebrew monograph *Ve-Nahar Yotse me'-Eden* (2005). Both are part of Stanford University Press's ambitious series, Stanford Studies in Jewish Mysticism, which has published a number of important studies of the *Zohar*.

The *Zohar* is a voluminous and at times ponderous work, comprising some two dozen distinct and identifiable treatises. The longest of them is a running commentary on most of the Torah. In *A River Flows from Eden*, Hellner-Eshed analyzes important themes in zoharic narratives, arguing that its discourses by Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai and his disciples function as a guide, leading committed readers along the path of mystical experience. In *Seekers of the Face*, Hellner-Eshed has turned her attention to what is arguably the most challen-

ging and obscure stratum of the entire zoharic corpus, the *Idra Rabba* commonly rendered in English as "The Great Assembly." This composition constitutes the middle and longest composition of a trio of interdependent works: "The Book of Concealment," "The Great Assembly," and "The Small Assembly." Unlike most zoharic compositions, which are based on the pivotal kabbalistic theological framework of the ten *Sefirot*, intra-divine states of being, these three works primarily concentrate on three distinct divine configurations: *Attika Qaddisha* (The Holy Ancient One), *Ze'eir Anpin* (The Small Faced One), and *Nuqba* (The Female). While each has its counterpart in the sefirotic realm, Hellner-Eshed insists that they should not simply be treated as stand-ins but rather as distinct representations.

Hellner-Eshed divides her presentation into two parts. Part 1 offers a fascinating overview of the major themes and constructs in the *Idra Rabba*. Although the three main characters, the Holy Ancient One, the Small Faced One, and the Female, are introduced in their own right, Hellner-Eshed stresses that the principal mode of expression in the *Idra Rabba* consists of the intimate relationships that unfold between them. Of special

significance is the depiction of the faces of these divine hypostases and their intimate gaze upon their respective partner. To amplify her analysis, Hellner-Eshed explores the theories of Carl Jung and especially his student, Erich Neumann. In so doing she professes a special interest in the role of the Female. “According to Neumann, the Great Mother, experienced as a life-giving and nourishing presence, represents an early phase in the development of human consciousness” (p. 65). This is amplified further on when she makes an impassioned appeal. “Judaism must find a language, gestures, rituals, myths, and thought that will invoke the presence of divine femininity in its religious life.... A tangible and unsuppressed reality of God as the *Shekhinah* is necessary, as the Beloved and as the Great Mother, so that fundamental aspects of religious experience will not remain mute or invisible, bereft of language” (p. 127).

There is, however, more than a little irony in that when the *Idra Rabba* finally depicts the Female, “the lack of a detailed description of the Female’s face is striking indeed” (p. 318). Her explanation for this phenomenon is unnuanced. “The minimal and undeveloped treatment of the Female’s face bears painful testimony to the lesser status of women, who were understood across patriarchal cultures to be ‘derived’ from men and to be their property for thousands of years” (p. 318). What is particularly surprising about this polemical assertion is that the accompanying end-note diverges significantly. Therein she references various kabbalistic texts that offer extensive descriptions of the *Shekhinah*. Especially noteworthy is its beginning: “The author of *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* provided an admirable remedy for this in a beautiful description of the *Shekhinah’s* head” (p. 420n21). Given that *Tiqqunei ha-Zohar* constitutes a latter stratum of the zoharic corpus, Hellner-Eshed’s thesis concerning patriarchal denigration of women seems unwarranted. This is confirmed in the *Idra Rabba* wherein both the Holy One and the *Shekhinah*/the Female Divine In-Dwelling are depicted as being manifest in heaven and on

earth. Soon after, based on *Song of Songs* 1:10, there is a description of the neck of the Female that is simultaneously associated with the Temple above and the Temple below. Quite plausibly the *Idra Rabba’s* undeveloped description of the Female’s face is simply following the standard kabbalistic trope that the Female, corresponding to the *sefirah Malkhut/Sovereignty*, is associated with the moon, which lacks intrinsic radiance and is dependent on the sun, which corresponds to *Tiferet/Beauty* and the biblical character Jacob (who comes into play later on), as well as the Small Faced One.[1]

Of special significance is the interconnectedness of all aspects of the divine that ultimately flow into the earthly realm. This is represented by the dew that trickles down from the Holy Ancient One to the Small Faced One and then to the Female, afterward to the realm of the angels and ultimately as the manna that the Israelites consumed in the wilderness. For this process to be replicated Rabbi Shimon convened his companions to aid him in this mission. As Hellner notes: “The Companions who gather in the *Idra Rabba* do so in order to begin a cosmic task of *tiqqun*, an alignment that moves from above to below ... from the conceptual to that which has a face, from the Divine to the human.... But the ultimate conjunction between the divine and human worlds takes place in the moments of Rabbi Shimon’s death, at the conclusion of the *Idra Zuta*” (p. 134).

Toward the end of part 1, Hellner-Eshed lays out what she considers to be the ultimate agenda of the *Idra Rabba*. “At the very foundation of the *Idra Rabba* lies a critical theological claim: in the process of developing the dualistic, legal, institutional, and ethical dimensions of the Jewish religion, other important aspects of religious life were deemphasized, and their presence waned.... According to the *Idra*, the remedy for this state of affairs is the expansion of Jewish religious discourse and its conceptions of God” (pp. 123-24). Her assertion that the authors of the *Idra Rabba* viewed

their enterprise as of utmost importance is supported by its start: “Rabbi Shimon opened, saying, ‘Time to act for YHVH—they have violated your Torah’ (Psalms 119:126)” (p. 161).

Part 2 of *Seekers of the Face* offers a detailed exploration of the *Idra Rabba* by systematically analyzing key passages from each successive section of the text. Throughout the proceedings in the *Idra Rabba*, Rabbi Shimon acts like a maestro, assigning which of his companions is tasked with formulating a discourse targeted to rectify a specific aspect of the divine. One of the many interesting insights Hellner-Eshed offers is that prior to each distinct stage of this ameliorative process, there is a brief tangent on the biblical text: “These are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any king reigned over the Israelites” (Genesis 36:31). Given that the vast majority of the *Idra Rabba* is devoted to a highly detailed and technical discussion of its three main characters, a novice reader would easily overlook these brief interludes. Hellner-Eshed explains that the death of the Edomite kings is due to their fundamental disproportion of the characteristic of judgment. Her most expansive discussion of this theme occurs in her introduction to the third and final appearance of this topic. “Before each successive stage in the process of emanation, the *Idra* returns to the myth of the kings of Edom in order to highlight the particular imbalance or unripeness that is in need of rectification in the coming stage of the manifestation of the Divine faces.... The formulation *before a king reign* is interpreted as a reference to the time preceding the configuration of the Divine as the Male and the Female, while the Land of Edom represents the Female’s red vagina. The Hebrew for ‘red’ is *adom*, and here the ‘Land of Edom’ is being read as ‘Land of Redness’” (p. 323). It would also have been appropriate for Hellner-Eshed to have mentioned that the Edomite kings are the direct descendants of Esau, who was consistently associated with redness. He “emerged red” at birth (Genesis 25:25) and when returning from the hunt he demanded that his younger twin brother, Jacob,

feed him “some of that red red stuff to gulp down” (Genesis 25:30), which Esau thereupon purchased from Jacob with his birthright. This is an important foreshadowing of the Edomite kings being succeeded and displaced by the Israelite kings.

Additionally, as Hellner-Eshed comments in one of her final endnotes, the *Idra Rabba* does not directly connect the lineage of the Edomite kings to the seminal kabbalistic doctrine of the *Sitra Ahra*/the Other Side, namely, the negative counterpart to the *Sefirot* (p. 426n38). This is a central concept in the other strata of the *Zohar*, and one would have expected Hellner-Eshed to draw the reader’s attention to this in the body of her book. Perhaps she could have addressed this in conjunction with her important discussion of the serpent’s seduction and insemination of Eve.

One of the most profound insights that Hellner-Eshed explores is the interdependence of humans and the divine. “If human beings do not hold on tight to the cord of divinity in our world, the kite of the Divine will lift off, disappearing into the sky of the Infinite” (p. 353). She bases her conclusion on the *Idra Rabba*’s exploration of the significance of the term *Adam* in various verses from the opening chapters of Genesis. Most surprising is the *Zohar*’s interpretation of Genesis 6:7: “YHVH said, ‘I will wipe out *ha-adam*, humankind, whom I created, from the face of the earth’—excluding *Adam* above. But if you say ‘*Adam* below, alone’—not to exclude at all, since one cannot exist without the other.” Thereupon Hellner-Eshed asserts: “one cannot distinguish between the divine and terrestrial Adams, and one cannot destroy only the latter, for the two figures are dependent upon one another” (p. 352). This specific analysis also underscores one of the *Zohar*’s central concerns, namely, that the biblical narratives are simultaneously referring to both the human and divine. She even goes so far as to assert: “as the *Idra* frames it, more than God is anthropomorphic (human form), human beings are theomorphic (divine in form)” (p. 133).

Another one of the many positive elements of Hellner-Eshed's presentation is that she consistently takes pains to ensure that all readers, whether familiar with kabbalistic literature or not, can follow her presentation. One glaring exception to the book's otherwise very accessible style is its inclusion of passing references to the incomparable, pre-medieval theosophical text *Shi'ur Komah* (*The Measure of the Divine Stature*), an esoteric text that is not widely read beyond the narrow circle of intrepid scholars and students of the Jewish mystical tradition. Accordingly, it would have been desirable for Hellner-Eshed to offer her readers a proper introduction to this obscure work.

As well, while the translation offers a remarkably detailed rendering of the original Hebrew work, some differences should be noted. Hellner-Eshed's original Hebrew monograph contained a 139-page appendix that offered a bilingual presentation of a scholarly edition of the Aramaic of the *Idra Rabba* compiled and edited by Hellner-Eshed and her study partner, Rabbi Avraham Leader, and an accompanying Hebrew translation that occupied Hellner-Eshed and Rabbi Leader for several years of painstaking, word-by-word labor. Accordingly, *Mavakshei ha-Panim* presented the reader with a standalone volume, in which one could read both the entire *Idra Rabba* in Aramaic and Hebrew, as well as Hellner-Eshed's analysis. This appendix is lacking in *Seekers of the Face* and one has to go elsewhere to read the complete text of the *Idra Rabba*. Further, the passages that Hellner-Eshed quotes from the *Idra Rabba* have been excerpted from Daniel Matt's English translation, which were occasionally emended, though Hellner-Eshed offers no indication what was revised or why.[2] Additionally, the index in the Hebrew is more complete and includes sections devoted to references to biblical and other Jewish writings, as well as passages from the *Zohar*, all of which are useful but lacking in the English version.

The personal way that Hellner-Eshed connects with her subject and draws her readers into this

astonishing realm makes *Seekers of the Face* particularly captivating. As she evocatively writes in the section of the introduction titled "My Path to the Idra and to Writing This Book": "Once I began to read the Zohar and to immerse myself in it, I found that its diverse ideas, figures, forms and textures captured me—echoing central aspects of my own life at different periods. It was as if I were constantly wandering in the same field, yet with each season certain flowers would stand out in their beauty, often very different from previous ones" (p. 3).

By means of her sensitive and methodical approach, Hellner-Eshed has made accessible one of the most difficult and abstruse medieval Jewish texts. Written for a general readership but replete with invaluable insights and wide-ranging references to the contemporary scholarship on her subject, *Seekers of the Face* is well worth reading by any and all.

#### Notes

[1]. For example, see the introduction to the *Zohar* vol. 1, f. 33b. This also fits the Female's self-description in Song of Songs 1:5-6: "I am dark ... Don't stare at me because I am swarthy, Because the sun has gazed upon me." For the creation of the Female's face when touched by a strand of hair from the Small Faced One, see pages 317-18. Not coincidentally, this particular strand of hair is specifically referred to as *Tif'eret*.

[2]. The *Idra Rabba* is found in Daniel Matt, trans. and commentator, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), 8:318-459.

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