

PHILOSOPHY — AND — KABBALAH

ELIJAH BENAMOZEGH AND THE RECONCILIATION
OF WESTERN THOUGHT AND JEWISH ESOTERICISM



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The Notes on the *Zohar*

In 1851—at the age of twenty-eight—Benamozegh played a part in a publishing operation of considerable importance. In collaboration with Shelomo Leoni and Yitzhaq Millul, he produced an edition of the *Zohar*, based on the earlier Constantinople edition, but involving an enormous amount of revision and correction.¹

This “Livorno” *Zohar* was divided into five volumes, following the five volumes of the Torah; it was printed very clearly and crisply (“on paper as white as snow,” according to the frontispiece), and was typographically elegant. Reprinted a number of times, its success was probably partly due to the critical apparatus, much of which was contributed by Benamozegh.

In fact, the young rabbi worked on the biblical references quoted in the *Zohar*—printed alongside the text—and, moreover, on cataloging all the places in the Talmud and *Midrash* where Shim'on Bar Yohai, the presumed author of the *Zohar*, appeared. He then linked these passages thematically with reminiscent passages in the *Zohar* and these quotations too were placed alongside the text.

This major work was based on the book *Ben Yohai* by the Hungarian rabbi Moshe Kunitzer,² but Benamozegh organized and incorporated it “drawing on the treasury of his knowledge of rabbinic sources.”³

It is therefore not surprising that among Benamozegh's various projected but unrealized works, a book on the correspondence between rabbinic texts and the *Zohar* recurred with increasing frequency on the wish list. He had, after all, had a considerable volume of data at his disposal since his youth, and it had already taken up a fair amount of his energy.⁴ The work that had already been done was in any case a substantial scholarly contribution, not to be surpassed or superseded for a century, until Reuven Margalioth produced his *Nitzotzei ha-Zohar* (*Sparks of the Zohar*).

The appendix to the Livorno *Zohar* contained two interesting new elements: a list of abbreviations found in the text and a compilation of *maftehot* (keys)—a sort of thematic index. The reader was thus able to orientate himself among the large number of technical terms and be sure

of finding the location of a given subject, such as “creation,” “the tables of the Law,” and so forth. Each subject was accompanied by a brief description of the Zoharic statements concerning it.

The appendices show that the book was intended for a readership that might, on the one hand, need help in studying it, and on the other, expect to see a logical restructuring of the contents. Reading the *Zohar* was no longer necessarily only for specialists, where a teacher’s guidance was indispensable; all that was required was a good linguistic grasp and enough familiarity with rabbinic texts, after which an individual could undertake private study of the monument of Jewish esotericism.

The thematic index met a similar need. The Israeli literary critic Gershon Shaked has commented⁵ that works such as Hayyim N. Bialik’s *Midrash* anthology, Hayyim Schirmann’s anthology of Italian Jewish poetry, and Yeshayahu Tishby’s *Zohar* translation and anthology (all works that appeared between the nineteen-thirties and fifties)⁶ restructured traditional material for consumption by a largely secular readership. By collecting *midrashim* or passages from the *Zohar* thematically—for instance, the relationship between God and man; exile and the land of Israel; the family; daily life; etc.—the authors of these major works extrapolated the passages from their context and from the continuity required by traditional study. As we have seen, this fitted in with the new style of biblical commentary, which detached itself—even typographically—from the text, and was structured around “introductions” and thematically grouped essays.

In 1852 it was of course still inconceivable for an edition of the *Zohar* to be aimed at a readership that was not immersed in traditional culture; yet this is where Benamozegh’s initiative was leading.

This provides a new explanation for the Livorno rabbi’s intriguing statement that Progress consisted of gradually disseminating Kabbalistic knowledge and abandoning the esoteric aspect that made it the strict preserve of the initiated. The universalist theological motivation revealed in *Israel and Humanity* accorded with this position, which is even more meaningful when applied to this area: indeed, a spirit of research was imposing itself, not without difficulty, and for the time being within a theoretically traditional milieu, in one of the innermost recesses of Judaism.