

COLOURS AND THEIR SYMBOLISM  
IN JEWISH TRADITION  
AND MYSTICISM

4.\*

With this area of the second triad contrasts above all the last sefirah, in which all these colours, as well as the various nuances of white-red, red-white, and a mixture of both, flash all together<sup>75</sup> or one after the other, as they did already in Azriel and often in the Zohar. Since she represents the divine power closest to the created world—in part even immanent in it, she is the richest in symbolism, and in colour symbolism as well.<sup>76</sup> Here the Kabbalah returns, in mystical correlations and transformations, to older motifs, some of which we have already discussed above.

Translated by Johanna Pick Margulies.

\* The first part of this article appeared in *Diogenes* No 108.

<sup>75</sup> See e.g. *Azriel* § 9; also in *Sod ha-Sefiroth*, p. 133b, and Cordovero, § 3-end; he assigns to the 9th sefirah, *Jesod*, some of the sapphire colour which he calls transparent.

<sup>76</sup> As to details of the symbolism of the 10th sefirah, see my *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit* (1962), pp. 152-188, also in the Eranos Yearbook 21, 1953, pp. 67-104; however, I didn't enter into the colour symbolism.

I shall speak here first of a motif—as yet unmentioned—which has been interpreted in a particularly original way by Isaac the Blind, one of the very first Kabbalists. An old third-century saying, supposedly of a Palestinian teacher Simon ben Lakish, tells that before the creation of the world the Torah was written on God's arm in black fire on white fire.<sup>77</sup> The white fire clearly means the parchment on which is written the Torah destined for ritual use in the synagogue. According to Isaac's new interpretation of this thought, the white fire means the primeval form of the written Torah and the black one the primeval form of the oral one; this last, given on Mount Sinai, continues to develop throughout generations and represents the application of the Torah to them all. According to this interpretation, these fundamental Torah formulations were buried in "God's right side"; i.e. in the Hessed sefirah in which they form an as yet undeveloped "Torah of Grace." Within it are enclosed the following two prototypes: "The form of the written Torah is the colour of white fire, and the form of the oral one is coloured as though in black fire." In the white fire the letters do not yet stand out clearly and, when they do, that is in the symbolic black fire, we are already in the area of the oral Torah, of the mystically interpreted tradition. The black fire signifies the judgment power and its colour schemes "rise and expand over the formations of the white one like the light over coal. For the power of the colour schemes of the flames conquers the glimmer of the coal until it disappears altogether in one overwhelming mass of flame." Only this union represents the complete revelation, which cannot be understood at all without this differentiating tradition, symbolized by the black light, since it remains hidden in the undifferentiated white light.<sup>78</sup> In the same direction points an affirmation of the most recent stratum of the Zohar, in which the verse: "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever" (Daniel 12:3) is interpreted as referring to the letters which teach the understanding of the Torah. The letters are the outer

<sup>77</sup> See Talmud *Shabkhalim* VI, end of *Halakha* I and parallels.

<sup>78</sup> See my *Ursprung und Anfänge*, pp. 253-4, as well as *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*.

robes of the still completely hidden Torah “which expresses itself in them, and they are” woven out of “all the colours of light—white, red, green and black—and they divide into many colour interplays. Indeed, these colours were all woven into the paradise man’s skin as well as into the sky stretched over Paradise.”<sup>79</sup> We may assume that these colour interplays on or about the Paradise man’s body signify the light of the aura which used to be clearly visible to all, whereas now only the chosen can see it. The Torah, as the revelation of the Creator, which actively penetrates all cosmos, participates in the colour schemes in the creation itself. No wonder then that the four above-mentioned colours are identical with those which, according to the old midrash (see p. 111), were shown to Moses on Mount Sinai as heavenly lights and prototypes of the Tabernacle, since the Tabernacle represents a likeness of the cosmos itself. This link is confirmed by Moses de León, who based on this very midrash his discussion of the four colours, which appear also in several paragraphs of the Zohar. He sees in them symbols of the interaction of two sefiroth: *Tiferet* and *Malkhuth*; according to all Spanish Kabbalists, these sefiroth are represented by the ancient signs of the, respectively, luminous and dark mirrors, in which the prophets, according to their rank, perceive God. Those mirrors reflected all colours. Moses saw them in their union, like in a shining mirror, as four kinds of unearthly splendour, all the other prophets only in the “dark mirror” of the last sefirah.<sup>80</sup>

The four colours appear also to every prophet, according to the various progressive degrees of his vision, as the different modalities of the totally secret, extra-sensory light. Even when he moves his eyeballs, with his eyes closed, there appear those four primeval lights, out of which the four colours are then reflected in the “dark mirror.”<sup>81</sup> The Zohar definitely limits such

<sup>79</sup> *Tikkune Zohar* (introduction), leaf 14b. These four colours are mentioned already in the description of Paradise in the main part of the Zohar II, 209b, as the colours of the sky over Paradise. The Zohar ascribes the same colours to the pillars which join the Paradise of the Blessed to the superterrestrial one. See also *Zohar Khadash*, leaf 3a (*Mathnithin*).

<sup>80</sup> The interpretation comes from the Tract. *Jebamoth* 49b; the two mirrors are degrees of prophetic vision.

<sup>81</sup> Moses de León, *Shekel ha-Kodesh*, London 1911, p. 123, and Zohar I, 97a, 147.

sight to the prophetic vision, whereas Moses de León in his Hebrew works expresses himself less clearly.

The Zohar says (even without any reference to prophetic or mystical vision) that the human eye in its colours<sup>82</sup> reflects and represents the entire world. This is of course only a paraphrase of the much older comparison in the Talmudic literature: “The world is like a human eyeball: the white in it is the ocean which surrounds the whole world; the iris is the inhabited world; the pupil is Jerualem and the sight in it the Temple as the centre of the world.”<sup>83</sup>

Seen from the point of view of the colour symbolism the last sefirah has three aspects. It is the union of all other colours—and above all, of course, of those three (red, white and green) which we have found in the second triad. It is the blackness (the black *par excellence*), the lack of light that gains colour only from the irruption of other lights; but it is also often the blue which we have found already in the biblical cult symbolism. The blue thread in the ritual fringes (*tsitsith*) is always interpreted as the proof of the divine presence, the *Shekhinah*, in the tenth sefirah. However, it is also considered as the dark light from which derives the splendour of all others and which seemingly forms a throne above which they hover.<sup>84</sup> For the author of the Zohar and for other Kabbalists, the purplish blue of the *tekheleth* (the blue thread in the ritual fringes) has the same meaning as the purple proper, *Argaman*. But when the latter is mentioned, the definition of colours which shine in it is more precise.

Already in the book *Bahir* the *tekheleth* in the *tsitsith* is described in a parable as a sign which should distinguish the guardian of the King’s garden, in which there are thirty-two paths. However, this garden is just the last sefirah, or the mystic princess, in which are gathered “the thirty-two paths of wisdom,” the basic powers or laws of all creation. The guardian who keeps watch over them is the “Guardian of Israel” who, according to the psalmist’s word (Ps. 121:4), never sleeps. However, he

<sup>82</sup> Zohar I, 226a.

<sup>83</sup> *Massekheh Derekh Erets*, ed. M. Higger, Brooklyn 1935, pp. 150-51. The Kabbalist Azriel included this midrash in his collection of cosmologically significant *Aggadotb: Perush Aggadotb*, ed. Is. Tishdy, Jerus. 1943, p. 60.

<sup>84</sup> Zohar II, 139a and 149b.

represents simultaneously the real Israel, whose watch over the garden paths is the very observance of Torah's commandments, on which, for the Kabbalist, depends the harmony of the creation, of the thirty-two roads. That blue signifies that "this garden belongs to the King and to his daughter the Shekhinah, and that He made its paths." The guardian, i.e. he who keeps the Torah, can show the King's seal, the blue thread, at any time. But the "King's garden" is also, in another symbolism, the deep blue "Sea of Sophia into which flow all thirty-two roads of the higher powers."<sup>85</sup>

The Spanish Kabbalists have another, persistent, symbol of the tenth sefirah: the apple, which unites in its freshness the three basic colours, white, red and green or, to be precise, shines in them. Thus this sefirah shows the powers of the second triad of the sefirot, which act through it, and whose representation by these three colours we have already discussed. The layman might easily suppose that the Kabbalists derived this symbolism from the Paradise apple with whose delightful perfume, colours and taste Eve tempted Adam, but he would be wrong. Indeed, the old Jewish tradition has never heard of the apple tree as the tree of knowledge which brought to humanity such pain and such greatness. The old scholars who worried about the botanical definition of this tree and its fruit ended up with only three possibilities: the vine, the fig tree and the citrus, but were put to shame by the prevalent and morally impressive explanation that the Torah did not give the tree a name so as not to humiliate it.<sup>86</sup> The Kabbalists' apple symbol was probably taken from the Song of Songs, in which (2:3) the lover is praised "as the apple among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among the sons." According to the Kabbalists and their mystic interpretation, this beloved, whose relationship with God is praised in the Song, is the *Shekhinah* as the last sefirah.

Already Ezra ben Salomon from Gerona, as the first such commentator, writes: "He compares the glory [i.e. the *Shekhinah* or the last sefirah] with the apple which has many colours," and his colleague Azriel mentions definitely white, red and green

<sup>85</sup> *Bahir*, § 62 and 65.

<sup>86</sup> *Beresith Rabbah* 15, § 7; see also the forbidden fruit and its nature in L. Ginzberg *The Legend of the Jews* V (1925), pp. 97-98.

and declares them to be the “basic colours”.<sup>87</sup> The various kinds of apple trees which can bear also separately red, white or green apples, form all together the “apple field,” which mainly the book of Zohar and the poetry of the Kabbalists made into a widely known and particularly popular symbol of the *Shekbinah*; since in this image the receptivity of the field as a female symbol is united with the activity which, dialectically speaking, is contained even in the receptivity and produces the various powers of the “apple”.<sup>88</sup>

The symbolism of the rainbow, nature’s most evident colour sign, is much more complicated and has been often and extensively meditated on by the Kabbalists. Since the interplay of the basic colours in this phenomenon had been established already in the Bible as a symbol of the covenant between God and His Creation, it was of course automatically placed in the various connections in which the Kabbalists were interpreting the covenant symbol. “Covenant” meant to them above all two things: the Hebrew word for covenant, *brith*, is feminine—and so they saw in the covenant the gathering of all sefiroth powers in the tenth one, which represents the female element in the manifestations of the Godhead. On the other hand, the “sign of the covenant”—*oth berith*—is masculine not only grammatically, but even more so according to its finest appearance in Jewish life. The covenant sign as such is here the mark of circumcision, which Judaism interprets as the covenant with God through the taming of the sexual creative powers. The male organ marked by the sign of the covenant is therefore the very essence of all active power in creation. The Hebrew word for bow, *Kesbeth*, signifies in Hebrew literature not only the rainbow but, in the rabbinical writings, also the penis. Thus the Kabbalists were given two possible symbolic concepts of the rainbow, which become particularly evident in the Zohar. The rainbow colour

<sup>87</sup> See G. Vajda *Le commentaire d'Ezra de Jérôme sur le Cantique des Cantiques*, Paris 1969, p. 67; *Azriel* ed. Tishby, p. 36; Zohar I, 85a; II, 122a and III 286b.

<sup>88</sup> The image goes back to tract. *Ta'anith* 29b where the field in Gen. 27:27 is interpreted as apple field. *Azriel loc cit.*, p. 35, Zohar II, 60b; III 84a; *Midrash ne'elam* for Ruth in *Zohar Khadash*, leaf 85 c. In Isaak Luria's famous hymn the mystic enters on Sabbath Eve the area of the “holy apple field.”

harmony is sometimes referred to as the concentration and synopsis of the active and creative forces in the *Jessod* sefirah, represented in the mystic symbolism of the human figure by the penis. Of all the biblical patriarchs, Joseph is the most outstanding example of this sefirah; he is the “guardian of the covenant” *par excellence*, who had withstood the temptation of unbound sexuality and who maintained unsullied the covenant mark of circumcision on his body. It is thus that they explain the praise of Joseph in Jacob’s blessing (Gen. 49:24): “His bow abode in its original strength.”<sup>89</sup> The Kabbalists ascribed also the colour symbolism of the rainbow to this sefirah, called also in the Zohar, as the generating power, “the life of the worlds.”<sup>90</sup> Therefore, for this book, the harmony of the three colours belongs also to both the generating and the conceiving spheres of the last sefirah. Concerning Ezekiel’s comparison (Ex. 1:28): “As the appearance of the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain, so was the appearance of the brightness around” the Zohar says: “The bow is the ‘life of the worlds’, the cloud is the [10th sefirah] *Malkhuth* [which is the feminine principle or the *Shekhinah*] and that is the meaning of “I have set my bow in the cloud [Gen. 9:13]”—I do set: ever since the world was created [it exists thanks to the relationship of those two spheres]. “...in the day of rain,” in which the powers of judgment are active, the bow becomes visible; since, when the Left (hand) rises to gain strength, [the *Shekhinah* called] Rachel appears in the three principal colours of the rainbow... white, red and green, which become visible in that “form of glory.” For, “like the sight of light shining all around”—means like the light which is hidden in the eyeball [divided into the same three colours], so is the “appearance of glory.” This regards also the [appearance of the] colours, in which the union of the nether world takes place according to the union of the upper

<sup>89</sup> Zohar I, 71b; *Tikkune Zohar* Nr. 69, leaf 110a. We find the same interpretation of this verse as referring to the penis in various versions in Talmudic sources, but with another motivation.

<sup>90</sup> So writes unequivocally Isaak ben Jacob Kohen in his “*Perush ha-Merkabah*” *Tarbiz* II (1931) p. 200; and for further explanation of this expression using the colours of the rainbow, see his disciple Moses of Burgos, *Tarbiz* V (1934), p. 183.

one. And as the hidden invisible colours become one in the upper world, so do also the white, red and green in the [visible] rainbow below, as the symbol of the nether unity."<sup>91</sup> Neither do the later Kabbalists fail to link this rainbow symbolism with the harmonies of future redemption.<sup>92</sup>

Another line of colour symbolism was followed by Joseph Gikatilla (ca. 1300), probable author of an anonymous *Mysterium of the Colours according to their Kind*, which has survived in a Munich manuscript.<sup>93</sup> Its importance lies in the emphasis it puts, in a noteworthy context, on the symbolism of nature. He considers the highest sefirah, "Kether," (*Crocun*) to be the un-mixed and unchangeable White, the "absolute mercy" of Divinity,<sup>94</sup> which stands above all the syntheses and which therefore establishes the domination of white in the Atonement Day rites. On the other hand, the same white in the sefirah *Khokhmah* contains already an element of darkness; for all sefiroth except the highest one have now two aspects, an obverse and a reverse, the latter taken over by darkness. This darkness appears in the beginning only as red mixed with the white. This would agree with the theory that we must look for the primary origin of God's judging power in this very sefirah.<sup>95</sup> In the next sefirah this red becomes prevalent: the whole sefirah appears to be red, tending white. However, when the white and red of these two sefiroth "become interwoven" with a lot of blue, the result is green and this, according to the author, is the reason why in nature green is the main colour: because it represents the action of the sefirah of Grace, *Hessed*: the freely outpouring,

<sup>91</sup> Zohar I, 18a/b. See also my above-mentioned note (43) Inselbuch, pp. 75-76. Likewise in the Zohar III, 215a, 230b; *Tikkune Zohar* N. 6, leaf 24b, as well as Bakhiah ben Asher's commentary to Genesis 9:13 (ed. Venice 1544), leaf 20d. In the *Tikkunim* these three colours of the rainbow are also associated with the three colours in the eye, and with the three primeval sounds as well, which, according to the Kabbalistic idea, the shofar brings forth from the primeval language matter.

<sup>92</sup> See latest edition of Cordovero's *Commentary to the Tikkunim*, Jerusalem 1972, I, leaf 59a.

<sup>93</sup> Cod. Hebr. 305, leaf 59b-62b. The authorship can be deduced from a close relationship of style and of many details, particularly at the beginning and at the end, to Gikatilla's *Sha'are Orab* and his other works.

<sup>94</sup> "Absolute" here as contrast to the relative mercy, the synthesis of love and discipline, which is ascribed to the central sefirah of "*Tifereth*."

<sup>95</sup> Cordovero mentions this opinion, but he rejects it.

generously giving power of God in the visible creation. "Earth's robe" is not white, but green. When nature wilts in autumn, because the severity takes over and "the channels are interrupted" through which the created world communicates with its sources in the world of sefiroth, the leaves fall and the plants wilt; but the dew conveys to them still some of the white power, which comes down from the very top, though only in drops. Of course some channels never break down, and therefore we have evergreen trees and bushes. As in the *Khokhmah* appears for the first time the moment of creation and demise, of "to be and not to be" in the dialectics; just so all nature's various shades of green derive their strength from the influence of *Khokhmah* on this sefirah of creative and generous grace or love (*Hessed*). On the other hand, the next sefirah, the stern judgment, takes its power from the red of the sefirah *Binah* and therefore becomes an absolute red, as seen in the burning fire. Whereas the fire destroys, "all things"—says the author—"exist through the Green." From now on the progress assumes the well-known symbolism of *Tifereth* as purple, which contains white, black, blue, green, yellow and red. These colours are rendered active by the next two sefiroth and in the ninth one form the rainbow. The last sefirah is again pure blue and represents the community of Israel in its historical and metaphysical forms.<sup>96</sup>

We have now seen how the Kabbalist found even in the world of colours a reflection of the various powers and aspects of the Divine. Of course, similar representations of the worlds of God's throne and of the *Merkabah*—which stand below the sefiroth and are already creations—are repeated in all possible variations. This is particularly true in the Zohar's descriptions of the seven "palaces of light" which lie below the last sefirah.<sup>97</sup> Here there

<sup>96</sup> The author ends his observations: "Thus you can deduce from every passage in the Torah in which appears one of these colours, from which sefirah it originates. And where two colours are mixed together you will know which sefirah is here mixed with the last one, *Malkuth*, and manifests itself through it." (leaf 62b).

<sup>97</sup> See e.g. Zohar I, 41b-45a; also in the commentaries to Ezechiel's *Merkabah* vision; we possess the most important and original of them in the *Zohar Khadash*, in Moses de León's *Mishkan ha-Eduth*, as well as in some of the writings of Jacob ben Jacob ha-Koen, his brother Isaac Kohen, Moses of Burgos and Joseph Ghikatilla. The latter, in his essay *Sod ha-Khashmal*, in the collection *Artsei Levanon* (Venice 1601, leaf 41b), speaks of the symbolism of the seven

are many shades of the colour gamut which continue also in the imaginative descriptions of the heavenly and earthly paradises; and the author of the Zohar revels particularly in these descriptions. The very Names of God and their single letters shine in these spheres in all possible configurations and colour interplays, a motif which influences even the expressions of the so-called “practical Kabbalists” concerning meditation and magic practices, since the Names of God have either an imaginary or a real effect only when represented and considered in the right colours, as transmitted by oral tradition.<sup>98</sup>

I would like to conclude with a passage from the Zohar in which the colour symbolism in the image of the flame is used with particular emphasis to represent the Divine unity in all its dynamic power.

On the way to Tiberias, rabbi Simon bar Yokhai and rabbi Jinkhas ben Yair discuss the unity of the Upper and the Lower, i.e. the *hieros gamos* in the world of the Divine powers, which is also symbolically represented in the unity of heaven and earth. At the end of the conversation rabbi Simon says: “There is still one word to say between us.” The passage goes on as follows:

“Rabbi Simon began and said: ‘Two sentences [seemingly contrary to each other] we find in the Scriptures, even in the same Torah chapter. First (Deut. 4:24): ... for the Lord thy God is a consuming fire; but then, the second says (Deut. 4:4): ... but ye that cleave unto the Lord your God are alive every one of you this day. These sentences have been already explained elsewhere

colours of the radiant “light” (*Nogah*) of the *Merkabah*, and their mixtures. He mentions the existence in the *Merkabah* of seventy-two nuances of white colour alone. I shall only refer to another passage in the Zohar II, 92a, about colour symbolism. In a dissertation about the Sabbath it speaks of two pearls, set in a buckle, which shine on this day, one colourless and one in seven colours from red to white. It means probably the light of the *Binah* and of the seven lower sefirot gathered in the last one. Both these sefirot play always a particularly important role in the Sabbath symbolism.

<sup>98</sup> See the strange passage in Abraham Halevy’s *Massoreth ha-Khokhmah*, written ca. 1490, quoted in the collection *Zekher Nathan*, ed. Coronel, Vienna 1872, leaf 1b. Perhaps I should mention that so far I haven’t found anything like it in any of Abraham Abulafia’s writings about the theory and practice of meditation, where we could rightly expect citations about the symbolism of light in such a connection.

and our fellow rabbis have discussed them.<sup>99</sup> It was known already among our colleagues that there is a fire that consumes and destroys fire, since there exists fire stronger than fire itself.<sup>100</sup> But come and look: whoever wants to gather knowledge about the holy Oneness, let him observe the flame that rises from coal or from a burning [oil] lamp. For this flame can rise only if it can hold on to a grosser [more material] stuff. Come and see: in the rising flame there are two kinds of light. One is a white shining light and the other a light in which are mixed also black and blue. The white light is above and rises straight up, and under it is the blue or black light, which forms a throne for the white one. And the white light hovers above it; and as they hold on to each other, they become one; and the black or blue light which is underneath becomes a throne of glory for the white one. And that leads us to the mystery of the *tekheleth* [the blue ritual colour in the Torah]. This blue-black throne is rooted in the other matter under it that ignites it and spurs it on to the union with the white light. The blue-black turns sometimes into red, but the white light above it never changes; it stays steadily white. But the blue light changes its colour, sometimes blue or black, sometimes red. And this light is connected in two directions: It connects upward with the white light; and downwards with the matter which is below it and which makes it burn. However, this blue light feeds on the matter that is given to it and consumes it. The stronger this light holds on to the matter below it and presses on it, the quicker this matter is devoured and consumed, for it is this light's nature to consume and devour; because this light rules the destruction and death of all creation.<sup>101</sup> Therefore it consumes everything which cleaves to it from below. But the white light which rests upon the blue never consumes, nor does it destroy, and it remains unchangeable. And about this says Moses: "...For the Lord thy

<sup>99</sup> I mean the passage in tract. *Kethuboth* III b. in which the contradiction between these two verses is discussed for the first time and the question asked: It is at all possible for man to "cleave" unto the *Shekinah*, i.e. communicate with God? Our master's answer to a question leading to the very border of mysticism is quite an anticlimax of sobriety: "one should marry one's daughter to a Talmudic scholar."

<sup>100</sup> This comes from tract. *Joma* 21b.

<sup>101</sup> In the continuation of this story (*Zohar* I, 51b), the interpretation of the blue colour as representing the death principle, is based on the afore-mentioned Talmud passage (see Footnote 21), according to which in our dreams blue represents an unlucky or death-presaging omen.

God is a consuming fire," which really consumes and destroys all that lies below Him, and therefore he [Moses] says: *thy* God and not *our* God. Moses belonged to the white upper light which neither destroys nor consumes. Come and see: the blue flame cannot be lighted nor gain a part in the white one by any other stimulus except Israel, which is attached to it from below [as matter for the light]. Although it is in the nature of the blue light to consume everything attached to it underneath, Israel cleaves unto it from below and still stays alive, and that is what is meant by the words of the Scriptures: "...But you who cleave unto the Lord your God are alive;" *your* God, not *our* God, namely that blue-black light which devours and destroys all which cleaves unto it from below. However you cleave unto it and still continue to exist, as is said: "...you are all alive today." But above the white light hovers yet another, hidden one, that encircles it; within that one [in this colourless light which signifies the highest sefirah] lies the supreme mystery. So you will find everything in the tall flame; the most sublime knowledge [of God's Oneness] is included in it'. Then rabbi Pinchas came and kissed him."<sup>102</sup>

This tale, notable for its unconventional interpretation of the symbols, has a continuation in which an important role is played by the explanation of the sacrificial flame which ignites from the material substratum and leads through the dark light into the white one. Later, Moses de León quoted this parable in part literally, in part more extensively, in one of his Hebrew works; the Zohar is written essentially in an artificial Aramaic—a fact that explains de León's motivation.<sup>103</sup> The black light, which shines also in red and blue iridescence, is the sensual in contrast

<sup>102</sup> Zohar I, 50b-51a. The translation of this tale in Ernst Müller's *Der Sobar, das heilige Buch der Kabbala*, Vienna 1932, pp. 321-323, is misrepresentative, because every time the Aramaic original says "have a part in" or "link up with," the translator simplifies both expressions into "unite."

<sup>103</sup> This passage is to be found in a voluminous, title-less manuscript about the ten sefiroth (written before 1290), preserved in the Munich Handschrift Hebr. 47, 375b—376b. In his *Shekel ha Kodesh*, p. 124, Moses de León mentions this passage in a short, concise sentence. I have published part of it in my essay on this Munich manuscript *Eine unbekannte, mystische Schrift des Mose de León*, *Monatschrift für Gesch. und Wiss. des Judentums* 71 (1927), pp. 120-21.

to the intellectual “white” light, which represents the passage from the world of matter to the purely spiritual one and therefore leads to and brings about the unity between the lowest and the highest. But it is also the dark power of the *Shekhinah*, symbolized by the blue of the *tekheleth*, in which the ambivalence of her nature is most drastically expressed.<sup>104</sup> She is not only the *Feminine* as genetrix of life but has also a destructive, deadly element. The Zohar defines her as the tree of knowledge of good and evil—not only in contrast to the tree of life, which contains the generating powers; but the tree of knowledge has, according to the biblical tale, a deadly aspect as well; it even becomes a “tree of death,” as for example in the continuation of the above-mentioned passage.<sup>105</sup> The blue light is intimately linked to its matter substratum even while destroying it. But it is exactly this double function which renders possible its constantly renewed transformation and sublimation into the white light, in which foregather all the other aspects of the Divinity. Israel, in its actions, its observance of the Torah, its sacrifice, in the literal as well as symbolic sense, represents that substratum from which the dark flames are rising and glowing from black to red and striving towards pure Divinity; according to the law of the flame, this Israel should perish. The Zohar maintains that Moses announced to Israel the miracle of its existence in the very moment of its entrance into history. Always threatened, yea and consumed, by destruction, by the “Tree of Death,” it stays alive as long as it does not lose the communication, *Devekuth*, with its God, who reveals Himself in the oneness of the white and blue light.

<sup>104</sup> About the ambivalence of the last sefirah, i.e. the *Shekhinah*, see Scholem *Von der mystischen Gestalt der Gottheit*, pp. 183-186.

<sup>105</sup> Zohar I, 51b, speaking of the blue colour in dreams. In I, 154b the “Tree of Death” is already interpreted as a symbol of the “other side” as well, i.e. of the domain of the daemonic.