
AIR AND BREATHING IN MEDIEVAL JEWISH MYSTICISM

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Just as the body is constructed in this world from the interweaving of four elements, taking form in this world, so is the spirit formed from the interweaving of four spirits existing in the Garden of Eden. [...] And were it not for these four spirits, which are the airs of the Garden, the spirit would not be formed at all (*Zohar* 2:13b; v. 4, p. 66).

Air in the *Zohar*, the masterpiece of “medieval Jewish mysticism, myth, and esoteric teaching,”¹ is polysemic. It involves breath or the highest level of the soul (*nešamah*); wind or spirit (*ruah*; also occasionally translated as breath); airborne earth in the form of dust, water as vapor, and chemical substances as aroma (*reyah*); the fleeting, short-lived breath (*havel*); the aura, of which light is a faint trace... Along with fire and water, it is considered to be that through which the world was created. As Rabbi El’azar says: “Come and see: By breath [*b’ruha*] the blessed Holy One made the world, and by breath it is sustained [*uve-ruha mitqayyama*] – the breath of those studying Torah, especially the breath of schoolchildren” (*Zohar* 1:47a; v. 1, p. 265).² Then, “the mystery of this breath of children becomes voice, spreading through the world, and they are the guardians of the world [*neturey ‘alma*], guardians of the city” (*Zohar* 2:39a; v. 4, p. 185). On a par with the dark spark and the primordial drop, breath is at the origin of the world. Despite its apparent volatility or motility and its ephemeral character, it also

¹ Arthur Green, “Introduction,” in *The Zohar*, Pritzker Edition, vol. 1, trans. Daniel C. Matt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018), xxxi.

² All the citations from the *Zohar* refer to *The Zohar*, Pritzker Edition, 12 vol., trans. Daniel C. Matt (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018).

serves to sustain, to guard and to protect everything created through it. Spanning creation and the continued existence of the world, the pneumatics of breath and/as spirit also straddles the divide between God and schoolchildren, in keeping with the singular, living, and exceptionally fragile foundations of being, which the *Zohar* locates in the figure of the *zadiq*, the righteous one.³

The nucleus of the idea that God created the world through breath may be found in Psalms 33:6 – “By the word of YHVH the heavens were made, by the breath of his mouth all their host” – and in *Sefer Yeẓirah* 1:9 that tracks the “ten *sefirot* [divine emanations, MM] of nothingness” back up to “the one breath of the living God [*eḥad ruah Elohim ḥayyim*]”⁴ – not with *creatio ex nihilo*, but with *deus ex nihilo*. There, the composition of “the holy breath,” *ruah ha-qodeš*, is revealed as “voice, and breath, and speech [*gol’ ve-ruah ve-dibur*].” To be a holy, animating breath, *ruah* must resound with voice and speech, or, to put it in Greek, the essential dimensions of *logos*. In the Zoharic “Midraš Ha-Ne’lam,” Rabbi El’azar (who pays close attention to the pneumatic underpinnings of the world) explains that “by a single letter was the world created – without speech” and adds: “Now this implies that by ה (hē) the world was created, with one letter – literally” (ZH 2d; v. 10, p. 4)⁵. The letter bespeaking the potency of *binah* and, to a lesser extent of *šekinah*, is the only one that recurs in the tetragrammaton, reminding us of the irreducible doubling in and at the origin, the doubling that denies the origin its simplicity and self-identity and that, from the get-go, exiles the origin from itself. This may explain the beginning of the enigmatic verse 1:10 in *Sefer Yeẓirah*: “Two: breath from breath [*štayim ruah me-ruah*].” But the question is: how and why does *hē* connote breath?

³ This is an inversion of the assertion made in the Babylonian Talmud, “The world endures only for the sake of the breath of schoolchildren” (BT *Sabbat* 119b). Citations from the Babylonian Talmud refer to *The Babylonian Talmud*, The William Davidson Edition, available at <https://www.sefaria.org/texts/Talmud>.

⁴ *Sefer Yeẓirah: The Book of Creation*, trans. Aryah Kaplan (San Francisco, CA, and Newburyport, MA: Weiser Books, 1997), 68; translation modified.

⁵ Volume ten of the *Zohar* includes supplementary materials that are conventionally quoted as ZH.

In a subtle polemic with the earliest known kabbalistic text,⁶ Rabbi El'azar subtracts speech and voice from the world-creating letter, since *hē* has no proper sound, except that of breath itself, an exhalation. The holy breath is reduced to nothing but breath. As such, it wafts close to the “ten *sefirot* of nothingness.” But, in being itself, it is already more than itself, given that breath consists of air and water: *hevel' it'avid beruḥa u-maya* (*Zohar* 2:39a; v. 4, p. 185). And it is a nothing that makes all the difference when, for instance, thanks to the addition of *hē*, *elim* (gods) are converted into *Elohim*,⁷ a word that, though written in the plural, is one of the names of the God of monotheism, or when Abram is renamed Abraham. The exhalation of *hē* expands and makes room where there hasn't been any: between other letters, between elements, between worlds. Air is the element of expansiveness. It gives room without occupying any; it lets be. Whatever else it means, *hē* also signifies *this*.

The expansiveness of air is palpable in the description of the pillars of breath, supporting the world: “On seven *havalim*, breaths, the world subsists – namely on seven pillars [*amudin*], supports of the world, corresponding to the seven heavens [...]. Just as there are seven heavens, there are others adjoining them, expanding, issuing from them. Similarly, there are other breaths, expanding, issuing from these” (*Zohar* 2:10b; v. 4, pp. 44-45).⁸ The seven breaths are, obviously, the seven *sefirot* from *binah* through to *šekīnah*, from the upper *hē* to the lower, from the first *hē* of the Tetragrammaton to the second. They are the metamorphoses

⁶ This polemic has a broader scope than may appear at first glance, since the *Zohar* refuses to confer the originary status on any one element, while, as Scholem observes, in *Sefer Yeẓirah*, this status belongs to air: “From the first *Sefirah* comes forth, by way of condensation, ‘one Spirit from another’; that is first the primal element of air, and from it, issuing one after the other as the third and fourth *Sefirot*, water and fire.” Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: Dorset Press, 1987), 24.

⁷ Rabbi El'azar again: “It is written: ‘Who is like you among *elim* (gods), o YHVH (Exodus 15:11) – that is able to create the world? Indicating that *elim*, gods, could not create the world, until the blessed Holy One took one letter from his name – the letter *hē* – and with it the world was created; this letter expanded into *Elohim* and his name *Elohim* was inscribed. Concerning this we have learned: With *hē* he created them” (ZH 4a; v. 10, p. 14).

⁸ The signature expression of Qohelet (or Ecclesiastes), *hevel' havalim*, futility of futilities, is reinterpreted by the authors of the *Zohar* as “breath of breaths.” As in many other cases, the most ephemeral, denigrated, and negative becomes the most essential, enduring, and positive.

of the seven branches of the cosmic tree, the tributaries of the river of emanations, or the seven letters of light. The uniqueness of this rendition of the *sefirot* is that they are, simultaneously, supportive pillars and expanding realms. The pillars are not static and they only perform their task of sustaining the world well to the extent that they do not remain the same, do not stay still (to be sure, the same may be said about the growing branches of a tree, the tributaries of a fast-flowing river, or the burning letters). Swelling with divine exhalation, they make room and accommodate all within it. Literally aerodynamic, these *'amudin* support the world by proliferating, by birthing further breaths, reiterating *ad infinitum* the basic operation cryptically described in *Sefer Yeẓirah* as “two: breath from breath.” The breath of life persists in its circulation, sharing, and increasing; instead of dwindling away, or dissipating in an entropic process, it grows. Such is the axiom of mystical sustainability.

The support provided by breath is unstable in the substantive sense of stability. Moreover, the pillars of air are a part of the elemental whole, which they internally interconnect and interrelate. “Fire, water, air, dust – interconnected, interlinked, indivisible [*ve-itqašran da be-da*]. [...] Though all four supernal sides that we have mentioned are interlinked, all of them sustaining above and below, what sustains the world the most is *ruah*, for thereby all exists [*qiyuma de-’alma yatir ruah, be-gin de- kōla qayyma*]” (*Zohar* 2:24b; v. 4, pp. 87-88). The pillars of air, as imagined by the authors of the *Zohar*, are flexible and pliable; they are the spiritual-elemental ties of the elemental whole, the ties that hold the world together and, by holding it together, uphold it. Neither above nor below (and both above and below), *ruah* sustains the world from within by articulating the elements amongst themselves and by lending them configurations that are propitious to the continuation of finite existence. It embodies the relational and ecological conception of elementality.⁹

⁹ In *The Star of Redemption*, Rosenzweig writes that “in Creation, the definite was created on the background of its indefiniteness, through the paired action of the two articles.” Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. Barbara E. Galli (Madison and London: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 253. As we can see here, the indefinite is not only the background of creation but its ongoing “support structure.”

Pillars of air will resurface several times in the *Zohar*. According to the interpretation of “*Lek leka*,” “when the blessed Holy One created the world, he made the heavens of fire and water commingled as one, but they did not congeal. Afterward, they congealed and endured through supernal spirit [*ruḥa*]. Thence he sowed the world to stand upon pillars, those pillars standing only through that spirit. When the spirit disappears, they all quiver and tremble, the world quakes [*uve-ša’ata de-hahu ruḥa istalaq kulhu merafefin ve-za’in ve-’alma irtat*]” (*Zohar* 1:77a; v. 2, p. 2). These lines, too, contain an allusion to *Sefer Yeẓirah*, where the creator converts nonexistence into existence by carving “great pillars from air that cannot be grasped [*‘amudim gdolim me-avir še-eino nitfas*]” (2:6).¹⁰ The elusiveness of these aerial pillars (and of the atmospheric grounds for life) within the scope of an appropriative grasp – including a *conceptual* grasp – goes hand in hand with the spiritual consistency they lend to the primordial commingling of fire and water. Just as the earth quakes when its seemingly firm foundations give way under our feet, so the world shakes when spirit is on the verge of breathlessness. Such worldquakes are more devastating than earthquakes, because they both result from and aggravate the discombobulation of spirit, of the largely invisible yet also material bonds tying together diverse elements, beings, and the world (or worlds).

The mediations that air generates between water and fire, or between *hesed* and *gevurah*,¹¹ yield *ruaḥ šelim*, a perfect or a complete spirit (*tif’eret*).¹² Between the primordial spark and the drop “issued

¹⁰ *Sefer Yeẓirah*, 131.

¹¹ “Come and see: Air and east. East – hot and wet. Air – hot and wet, therefore embracing two sides. For fire is hot and dry, water is cold and wet; air is hot and wet: the aspect that is hot grasps fire, the aspect that is wet grasps water. So it harmonizes between them, mediating the conflict of water and fire” (*Zohar* 2:24a; v. 4, p. 84). Pneumatic mediation of fire and water also complicates the straightforward attribution to air and fire “the power of the heavens.” David Mevorach Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology: God’s Image in the More-Than-Human World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 217.

¹² In turn, Marla Segol points out that “air and fire are tied together with the biblical proof-text: ‘he makes his angels winds, his servants fire’ (Ps. 104:4).” Marla Segol, *Word and Image in the Medieval Kabbalah* (London and New York: Palgrave, 2012), 51. In and of itself, however, the *sefirotic* drama of *hesed* and *gevurah* replays, at another level, the opposition of *ḥokmah* and *binah*, but the upper dyad is not unified below; the co-belonging of the upper *sefirot* is only obscurely indicated in *keter* above.

ruah šelim, so those two sides turned into one; it was placed between them [*mi-beynayhu*] – they were crowned with one another. Then *šelim*, peace, prevailed above, peace below, and the rung stabilized” (*Zohar* 1:87a; v. 2, p. 55). The place of spirit, of breath, of air is in-between, which means that the spiritual foundation of the world, the “pillars of air” that support it, are in also in the middle. Worldquakes are the outcomes of the erasure or the erosion of the middle, of the breathing space and time in-between. Without the middle, existence suffocates. And, conversely, the completion of spirit is not a teleological accomplishment, but the ongoing activity of shuttling and mediating, of spanning and bridging. In Hebrew and Aramaic, such completion is conceptually and etymologically related to peace (*šalom/šelim*), an association that the authors of the *Zohar* could not overlook. Thus, the possibilities of both strife and harmonization are present in kabbalistic cosmology, where the conflict between opposite sides is only occasionally quelled when they are revealed as two sides of the same “thing.”

Since Jacob personifies *tif’eret* and, therefore, the atmospheric reconciliation of water and fire, *hesed* and *gevurah*, his designation as “a consummate [*šelim*] man, for he dwells in two supernal dwellings, consummating this side and that” (*Zohar* 1:167b, v. 3, p. 12) is justified. While, horizontally, he completes the triad of the patriarchs, vertically, Jacob dwells with *binah* and *šekīnah*, or Leah and Rachel, respectively.¹³ The perfection, the consummate nature, and the peacefulness of Jacob, of *tif’eret*, or of the *ruah*-aspect of air are achieved at the price of their split identity, of dwelling “in two supernal dwellings” at once, of being exiled from “one side” by the act of dwelling in the other. Spirit itself, conceived as breath rhythmically moving from exhalation to inhalation and back, is this exile on the underside of spirit’s work of binding, linking up, and forging connections.

The non-self-coincidence of the intermediary spills over into a conflict that provides sufficient traction for world-creation. The spirit or the wind of God hovers over the dark abysses swept with “another wind,” *ruha ahera*, blowing from below, from the depths of the void. Subsequently, “the blessed Holy One struck wind against wind and created

¹³ *Zohar* 1:167a; v. 3, pp. 12–13, n.86.

the world [*bataš ruḥa be-ruḥa u-vara 'alma*]” (*Zohar* 2:34b; v. 4, p. 154). The intermediary itself, split in or against itself, cannot be mediated. One airmass clashes with another, allowing the world to appear in the midst of this spiritual-elemental standoff, which parallels the cosmogonic blowing of spark against spark, or, *mutatis mutandis*, the generative separation of the lower from the upper waters. Behind the peaceful façade of mediation, the frictions and tensions of the divided middle (divided, above all, against itself) are unabating. However, rather than the dead-heat of two identities confronting one another, divisions inhering in the non-self-identical foster the process of becoming.¹⁴

The mediatory function and the middle position of air *qua ruah* holds, as well, for the soul. In the psychic order, it is the second of three layers of the “fragrant garments [*levušā*]” of days: “One garment: worn by *ruah* in the terrestrial Garden of Eden. One – most precious of all: worn by *nešamah* within the bundle of life [...]. One, an external garment: existent and non-existent, visible and invisible. This is worn by *nefeš*, and she goes roaming through the world” (*Zohar* 1:224b; v. 3, p. 351).¹⁵ Between the highest and the lowest, the most ethereal and the animal kinds of soul bound with the body (“visible and invisible”), *ruah* occupies the structural position of *thumos* (spiritedness) in the psychophysiology that Plato lays out in *The Republic*. Nevertheless, the quasi-political hierarchy of the Platonic arrangement is disrupted in *Zohar*, where *ruah* is interposed, cloth-like, between the other two kinds of soul, bringing or stitching together the highest and the lowest in such a way that the latter depends on the former and the former on the latter. The layering of psychic garments is, in and of itself, indicative of the importance of their surfaces in the overall arrangement. But what, precisely, is gained (or lost) in this multilayered image of the soul?

¹⁴ In this sense, Hegel’s dialectics, and particularly the two *Logics*, are congruent with the dynamics of the *Zohar*.

¹⁵ This view seems to be the inverse of Christian mysticism, where it is the body that is the garment of the soul. Hence, Hildegard of Bingen writes: “The body is truly the garment of the soul, which has a living voice [*corpus vero indumentum est anime, que vivam vocem habet*], and so it is proper for the body, in harmony with the soul, to use its voice to sing praises to God.” Hildegard von Bingen, *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, first part, I–XC, ed. L. Van Acker, *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis* 91 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1991), 64.

There is no authentic psyche, the wearer that *is* the soul “itself.” Their layering of the garments replicates the dynamics of light that enwraps itself in itself, its previous shells transformed into new kernels, or into extensions of the same kernel. But, all in all, the soul is more intimately related to breath than to light, its “fragrant” garments also made of “days,” of time, of the duration of breath lingering on. In this vein, Rabbi Bo concludes his interpretation of Numbers 15:31 – “That soul shall be surely cut off” – by saying: “Well, it is like the breath that emerges out of a person’s mouth, unable to rise even up to his eyes but immediately disappears. So, the creaturely soul [*nefeš*] is like that breath which is immediately cut off from the mouth and disappears, never seen, as though it never was” (ZH 11a; v. 10, p. 75). Rav Huna confirms: “What is this labor of vanity [*hevel*: also breath, MM]? It is the creaturely soul, which will be annihilated and cut off, like the breath that comes out of the mouth – which is vanity” (ZH 11b; v. 10, p. 78).

The soul entwined with a living body is the breath with the shortest duration possible: it drifts off and away, disappearing as soon as it emerges, now and again erasing this very emergence (“as though it never was”) in its disappearance. The thread of time, with which this layer of fragrant psychic garments is sewn, is marked by radical discontinuity, the fleetingness of an instant incapable of projection into the future, because it is disconnected from the ancient stream of the coming world. On the contrary, *nešamah* is the “divine soul [that] is in his [a person’s, MM] nostrils” (ZH 22a; v. 10, p. 246). Rather than escaping from one’s mouth, as *nefeš* does, it is enduring breath, the divine breath, dwelling in the nostrils and allowing a finite living being to participate in infinite vitality. Despite the rhythms of respiration with alternating inhalation and exhalation, this soul does not leave the body it animates, lodged as it is “in” a person’s nostrils.

Between these two durations and sources of vitality, *ruah* mediates. Comparing the body to the earth, Rabbi Abbahu sees in the act of creation “the radiance of spirit [*zohar ha-ruah*] hovering over the body to revive it, illuminating its darkness” (ZH 16a; v. 10, p. 149). Neither inhabiting a living body in the manner of *nešamah* nor getting cut off from it after the fashion of *nefeš*, *ruah* hovers over the body (including the body of the earth). From close proximity, it dispenses light and

breath, the radiance of fire and the expansiveness of air. The vagaries of the soul, the drifting of breath and its ephemeral nature, are constrained and held in check thanks to the “hovering” of the animating *ruah* over the body it cares for and persistently reanimates.

Regardless of the mediating activity of the middle psychic layer, the three garments of the soul belong to distinct spatial and temporal constellations. Breath is not gathered in itself; it is not identical to itself, tending closer to or further away from the body and its various organs (the mouth, the nose...), the earth, and the elemental manifold. In its vertical ascents or descents, moreover, it is not driven solely by the larger scheme of onto-theological reality, but, in a bottom-up determination, by human conduct.

On the one hand, “when actions prove worthy below, and a person contemplates the service of the Holy King, the act of righteousness [*ma’aseh ha-zedaqah*] that he performs turns into a breath [*hevel*] above. And there is no breath without voice – rising, crowned above, becoming an advocate before the blessed Holy One” (*Zohar* 2:59a; v. 4, p. 314). Breath travels, traversing long distances (not only of the physical variety) and metamorphosing from an act into a higher breath and then into a “crowned voice.” And since Qohelet bemoans the vanity/breath (*hevel*) that flutters “under the sun,” this reading situates the crowned breath “above the sun” – “the act of righteousness is different, for it is above the sun” (*Zohar* 2:59a; v. 4, p. 314), which is, incidentally, the *sefirah tif’eret* – in a tacit reference to Plato’s “good beyond being,” itself analogous to the sun. Becoming “a holy breath,” it is “a seed sown by a person in that [other] world” (*Zohar* 2:59a; v. 4, p. 315).

On the other hand, the errancy of breath is the upshot of futile endeavors, marrying the two senses of *hevel*: breath and futility. This breath “goes drifting through the world [*ve-azla ve-šatat be-’alma*]. And when the person’s soul departs, that breath whirls it through the world [*hevel’ megalgla leyh*] like a stone in the sling” (*Zohar* 2:59a; v. 4, p. 315). An exilic breath drifts and whirls through the world without acquiring a body, a voice, a place of its own, or the promise of a future seminal potency or potentiality. It frustrates the mediations of spirit, spirit *as* mediation, the middling breath that acts as a buffer zone between creaturely and divine vitalities. Such a breath, which is nothing other than

breath and that does not translate itself into an act, into a voice, and ultimately into the good, “is the breaking of spirit [*re’ut ruah*], for it breaks the spirit, rising and falling in the world” (*Zohar* 2:59a; v. 4, p. 315). It leaves no chance for the mediatory, remedial, mending work of spirit, nor does it care about its disunion from the body, roaming the earth as a specter.

The *Zohar* thus presents its readers with two versions of the exile of air, if not of the exile that is air. First is the non-identity and fecund divergence of air or breath from itself, its splitting into three fragrant garments, and its transformations into something *other* – voice, seed, an angelic advocate... Second is the perpetually itinerant air or breath, roving aimlessly, reduced to the purity of its identity and cut off from the mouth that exhaled it. In traditional theodicy, the successive historic exiles of the Jewish people were seen as the second kind of exile, which, more than a divine punishment, rendered visible a dearth of righteous acts, the dearth of which was a logical expression or consequence. Could it be that the overall negative experience of exile surreptitiously and incrementally nourished the first, fecund, interpretation? And what happens when this new interpretation touches upon the elements, air above all? Is our exile from the atmosphere and even from the breath that fills our lungs with suffocating smog a case of alienation from the ubiquitous element that envelops and indwells us? Does it not boast a more affirmative dimension?

“Airing” our exegesis of the kabbalistic approach to air a little, let’s contemplate for a moment the simple exile of air from itself in the case of the earth’s atmosphere. Vegetal and animal respirations are the inverse of one another: plants exhale O₂, while animals exhale CO₂. Due to these divergent effects of the living, joining the mix of other gases such as ozone, methane, or nitrous oxide, the atmosphere is *constituted* by the exile of air. To the extent that pneumatic exile is propitious to the fragile conditions of possibility for life, it is not utter errancy; rather, it transpires within certain limits. The aggravation of animal respiration by the techno-body of industrial humanity annuls these limits. Emanating from the masses of long-dead plants and animals that have been incinerated for the sake of momentary energy release, a lethal breath shorn of a body, a voice, or a place of its own whirls through the world.

This second exile of air testifies to the breaking of spirit, the untying of delicate bonds conducive to life. Deep strata of the earth thrown into the atmosphere erase the mediations that are at the core of spirit and confound what is above and what is below, leading to an immediate collapse of the elemental whole.

To return to *Zohar*, when a secret (i.e., mystical) word of wisdom ascends, it finally presents itself before the Ancient of Days. “At that moment, the Ancient of Days inhales the aroma of that word and it pleases him more than anything” (*Zohar* 1:4b; v. 1, p. 26). It is worth noting that the Hebrew *reyah*, smell or aroma, is derived from the same root as spirit, *ruah*.¹⁶ It is the spirit of the word in its airy materiality that ascends and that emits a fragrance. The passage further intimates that the divine sensorium is replete with an olfactory sense, capable of discerning and taking pleasure in the fragrance of the word. Shortly, we will examine the details and structure of the nose of God as it is depicted in *Zohar* in order to appreciate the kabbalistic take on air and breath. But prior to that, it is necessary to note how the inhaling of aroma by the Ancient of Days is not the end of its atmospheric journey: afterwards, the mystical word of wisdom “flies, ascending and descending, and is transformed into a sky. So, each and every word of wisdom is transformed into new skies, the innovated skies [*šamayim ḥadašim*, *šamayim meḥudašim*],” and “all other [non-mystical] innovated words of Torah...stand before the blessed Holy One, then ascend and are transformed into ‘earths of the living [*arṣot ha-ḥayyim*]’ (Psalms 116:9)” (*Zohar* 1:4b-5a; v. 1, p. 26).¹⁷

There are, then, multiple skies and earths, airy expanses and substantial supports, countless worlds created by words after the initial creation of the world. Rather than merely traversing the atmosphere, or journeying from the physical to a metaphysical dimension of existence,

¹⁶ In addition to this etymology, the overpowering smell of aromatic herbs heated by the summer sun in the French Occitan and in Southern Spain, where the *Zohar* was compiled, must have had a strong impact on this olfactory conception of spirit.

¹⁷ Compare this to the *Zohar* 1:33b (v. 1, p. 207): “By the word of YHVH the heavens were made – the heavens below, fashioned by the word of the heavens above through a breath generating a voice reaching that river flowing forth, whose waters never cease. By the breath of his mouth all their host – all those below endure by the breath, namely, the word.”

the mystical word of wisdom *becomes* a new atmosphere for reading, acting, thinking, and being, as indispensable as the air one breathes. It contributes to the ramifying growth of *tif'eret*. Conventional interpretations of the Torah, situated lower on the *sefirotic* tree, form new substrata for existence, “earths of the living,” corresponding to the territories of *šekīnah*. Taken together, the air/skies and the earths formed by words of exegesis indicate that creation is not a one-time event and that it does not depend on the *incipit* of the demiurge alone. The creation of worlds in speech, through and by means of words, requires breath, which is then coupled with voice, but the breath itself births more air – indeed an entire new sky. This creation also entails a body, the density of the underlying with its organs of articulation, an earthy heaviness that nevertheless also rises as words that “ascend and are transformed into ‘earths of the living’.” The proliferation of worlds is, therefore, both elemental and logological; whether old or new, a world is the elemental mutation of a word.

Within the divine sensorium, the nose that picks up the aroma of mystical words of wisdom is described in *Zohar's* “Idra Zuta,” “The Small Assembly” that purports to record the teachings Rabbi Šim'on gave on his deathbed. The nose, situated above the revealed *sefirot*, belongs to the face of the concealed God triangulated through *keter*, *hokmah*, and *binah*. “The nose. In this nose, through the nostril of an armoire within [*be-nuqba de-fardašqa*], blows the breath of life [*ruḥa de-hayyey*] to *Zé'ir Anpin* [the revealed *sefirot*, MM]. And in this nose, in the nostril of an armoire, is suspended ן (*hē*), sustaining another *hē* below. This breath issues from the concealed brain and is called ‘breath of life.’ [...] This nose is life on all sides – complete joy, tranquility, health” (*Zohar* 3:289a; v. 9, p. 782).¹⁸

The divine nose exhales the breath of life, which is, in turn, inhaled by and kept in the nostrils of all finite creatures for the duration of their existence and flows incessantly through the *sefirotic* network. The inver-

¹⁸ The highest and lowest mirror each other, even when it comes to this suspension of everything in the medium of breath or air. While the *sefirotic* tree from *binah* to *šekīnah* is suspended in the nose of the concealed divine face, the stones of the primordial void (*bobu*) are “suspended in the air [*avira*] – sometimes suspended in the air, sometimes concealed on a cloudy day, generating water from the abyss to nourish *tohu*” (*Zohar* 1:16a; v. 1, p. 120).

sion of exhaling and inhaling between the nose of the concealed God, on the one hand, and the revealed divinity and creaturely life, on the other, is akin to the relation between vegetal and animal breath, the former animating the latter. In addition, the breath of life is not channeled from the lungs, but from the “concealed brain” – *keter* – and it passes through the divine nostril, compared to an armoire (*fardašqa* as a variation on the rabbinic term *pardisqin*, which is, for its part, a corruption of the Greek *purgiskos*, “cupboard” or “cabinet”¹⁹). The nostril is both a chamber and a passage, the place where the encounter between God’s olfaction and words of wisdom takes place. It marks a porous boundary between the inner and the outer, the concealed and the revealed, whence life is dispensed. It is a dwelling for the two dwellings, the two figures of divine ecology, *binah* and *šekīnah*, the *hē* above and the *hē* below suspended in the nostril. Since this sublime armoire contains the place-giving emanations of God, can we safely conclude that what eternally occurs here, in the holy of holies of esoteric wisdom presumably related by Rabbi Šim’on just before his death, is the ultimate totalization and unification of all that is?

As a matter of fact, as the mystical account unfolds further, it becomes evident that the divine nose and divine nostril are not identical. Of nostrils, there are two, as Rabbi Šim’on casually remarks. The remark itself is prefaced by a cryptic, *prima facie* unrelated reflection of *rešit*, the beginning: “*Alef* on its own is called *rišon*, first [...]. In *alef* is concealed and hidden what is not known. When this *alef* is joined to another place, it is called *rešit*, beginning. If you say that it is joined – no; rather, it is revealed in it, illuminating it” (*Zohar* 3:294a; v. 9, p. 823). The beginning is not the first, because it is preceded by the genuine but utterly unknowable first, *alef* illuminating the beginning without, itself, appearing. And Rabbi Šim’on leaves implicit another splitting of the beginning, namely the commencement of the text of *Berešit* not with *alef* but with *bet*, which corresponds to the number 2. The beginning is not just multiple and variously preceded, but also doubled or redoubled.

¹⁹ *Zohar* 3:289a; v. 9, p. 782, n46.

The same is true for the two nostrils and two noses of God: “The nose of *Ze’ir Anpin*,” Rabbi Šim’on observes in an argumentative leap from a lengthy reflection on the beginning, “ – enhancement of the countenance; the whole face is thereby recognized. This nose is unlike the nose of the Holy Ancient One, concealed of all concealed; for the nose of the Ancient One is life of life for all [*ḥayyim de-ḥayyim le-ḳola*] – from its two nostrils, breath of life for all [*ruḥin de-ḥayyin le-ḳola*] and life for all [*ḥayyin le-ḳola*]” (*Zohar* 3:294a; v. 9, p. 823). “The life of life for all,” *ḥayyim de-ḥayyim le-ḳola*, presents itself as a term of gathering and totalization, of a meta-vitality that animates everything and everyone said to be alive. Even in the expression itself, however, life is redoubled (not to mention the irreducibly plural form of the word for life, *ḥayyim* or *ḥayyin*, in Hebrew and Aramaic). The reference to the two divine nostrils distributes this life of life between the “breath of life for all” and “life for all,” between spirit taken in its airy, pneumatic or pneumatological sense and the actual, including past and future, vitality of the ensemble of the living. On the same level of divine countenance, the two nostrils accommodate the inspiring and the inspired, the source (which will have always been preceded, if only by itself in its unrevealed aspect) and the destination, the animating and the animated. This doubling retrospectively clarifies the assertion “[t]his nose is life on all sides – complete joy, tranquility, health”: “life on all sides” is not the absolute where all the sides amount to one no-side, but a many-sided physiological-spiritual process of respiration.

Besides the two nostrils of the same divine nose, there are two noses: one pertaining to the concealed God; the other, to the revealed. “The nose of the Holy Ancient One is *arik*, long and extended, so he is called *erek apayim*, long-nosed, long-suffering. This nose, however, is *ze’ir*, short; and when smoke begins, it comes out hurriedly and judgment is executed” (*Zohar* 3:294a; v. 9, p. 824). The short-tempered, fiery nose of the revealed God is quick to pass judgment, and it is appeased by the “soothing aroma,” *reyaḥ ha-niḥoaḥ*, of burnt offerings (*Zohar* 3:294a; v. 9, p. 823).²⁰ The medium of the revealed divine olfaction is fire; that

²⁰ See also *Zohar* 3:289a; v. 9, pp. 782–783: “[J]udgment depends upon the nose; and it is written *Smoke rose from his nostrils* [...] The root of wrath depends upon the nose.”

of the concealed God is air. Other interpreters (notably, Rav Hamnuna Sava) attribute this difference to the two nostrils of the same divine nose: “From one [nostril], smoke and fire; from the other, tranquility and beneficent breath – for it includes right and left” (*Zohar* 3:294a; v. 9, p. 825). Be this as it may, the two noses or nostrils – that is to say, the vertical or the horizontal doubling of olfactory organs – correspond, roughly, to the animal and vegetal breaths, whether with regard to the involvement or noninvolvement of combustion or with regard to the distinction between anger and tranquility.

The physical and the metaphysical realities are, then, brought together in the nexus of the aroma and spirit (*reyah* and *ruah*), and the aromas run the gamut from volatile biochemical substances to acts. Upon descending from the ark, Noah made a burnt offering of thanks to God. The pleasing or soothing aroma, *reyah ha-niḥoah*, discussed by Rabbi Šimʿon invokes this very smell of the first sacrifice after the Flood in Genesis 8:21 and, furthermore, includes Noah’s name in the description of the aroma as pleasing or soothing, *niḥoah*. Rabbi Yehudah notes in “Midraš Ha-Ne’lam”: “Three aromas ascended before him [before God, MM]: the aroma of the offering, the aroma of his prayer, and the aroma of his deeds. No aroma in the world was as pleasing to God as that aroma” (ZH 22d; v. 10, p. 255). The smells that present themselves before the divine sensorium are 1) sensations, 2) words (of prayer), and 3) deeds. Words are the hinges, mediating between the sensory and the active dimensions of the aromatic offering; the right actions articulate the material and the spiritual aspects of air: *reyah* and *ruah*. Reaching the left nostril or the nose of God’s lower countenance attuned to smoke and burning, the three aromas reaffirm the middling and mediatory activity of spirit. And, in spite of this, they preserve the non-identity of air, to the extent that their mediations take place under the aegis of the revealed God alone.

The non-identity of air is not only spatial but also temporal. As we have seen, at the creation of the world, light (אור, *or*) is what remains of auratic air (אוויר, *avir*).²¹ Light is deficient air, air that has undergone

²¹ The light gathered in “the primordial point” “is concealed mystery, an expansion expanding, bursting from the mysterious secret of the hidden supernal aura [or “air,” אוויר (*avir*)”

the subtraction of something essential, something that, signified with the letter ם (*yod*), refers to divine wisdom (*ḥokmah*) or, further still, to the dark spark of *buzina d'qardinuta*. So, light is the remains of air, but air, too, is the remains of air, for, just as primordial light was reserved and hidden from the world, so was primordial air: “That father is spirit treasured away in the Ancient of Days. In him was concealed this air, absorbing the spark that issued from the lamp of adamantine darkness” (*Zohar* 3:292b; v. 9, p. 810). Like everything else, air is subdivided into the concealed and the revealed; the Ancient of Days, *keter* or *ein-sof*, becomes a capsule of sorts for air that is “treasured away,” even as the air that remains animates existence and interconnects the world. That the pneumatic foundations – the pillars of the world – are not purely original follows, therefore, both from their intermediary nature as relational ties and from their being remnants of the concealed spirit. In this way, air makes its contribution to the kabbalistic ecology of remnants.

Not just formally but actively as well, the movements of air occupy themselves (indeed, are stubbornly preoccupied) with refuse. Concerning Genesis 1:2b – “And a wind of God [*ve-ruah Elohim*] hovering over the face of the waters” – it is said that “once this wind blew, one fine film clarified from that refuse, like filthy froth flying off, clarified, refined again and again, till that filth is left [*ad de-ištaer*] lacking any filth at all” (*Zohar* 1:16a; v. 1, p. 119). The wind hovering over the face of the waters precipitates a series of elemental discernments within the waters themselves, clarifying, refining, and separating refuse from non-refuse. Whatever remains of each of these operations still includes refuse, all the way down to the final refinement “till that filth is left lacking any filth at all.” The goal of the successive purifications eventually

MM]. [...] After the primordial point, ם (*yod*), emerged from it into being it manifested upon it, touching yet not touching. Expanding, it emerged; this is אור (*or*), light, remaining [*d'ištaer*] from אור (*avir*, air, or aura), the light that already was. This endured, emerged, ascended, was treasured away...” (*Zohar* 1:16b; v. 1, pp. 123-4). In the Lurianic doctrine, the world-creating contraction of the infinite (*tsimtsum*) results “in the creation of ‘vessels’ (*kelim*) in which the divine essence that remained in primordial space is precipitated out: at first this takes place still hylically, in the vessel called ‘primordial air’ (*avir kadmon*), but subsequently it assumes a clearer form in the vessel called ‘primordial man’ (*Adam Kadmon*).” Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 130. It is thus reasonable to assume that the *avira* of the *Zohar* corresponds to the Lurianic *avir qadmon*.

yielding the matter and form appropriate to creation is not the ideal of purity but “filth without filth,” the minimal version of the remains. Nor is it the case that *ruah* plays a wholly active role in the purification of water; their elemental engagement is mutual. As the water was purified, the “wind clarified [*ivrir ruah*], and embraced in its mystery was the sound of sheer silence” (*Zohar* 1:16a; v. 1, p. 119). Hand in hand with the water’s transformation into filth without filth, the air is transmuted into voice without voice; *ruah* is rid of the voice but not of sound, retaining “the sound of sheer silence” – or that of breath.²²

The tensions between identity and non-identity (of air, among other things) are concentrated in the variously sealed or burst open enigma of *keter* / *ein-sof*. The infinity that lends this *sefirah* one of its names (*ein-sof*) is where, having ascended to it, “all becomes one” (*Zohar* 1:16b; v. 1, p. 124). Moving in the other direction, with the creation of light as a leftover of the aura or air, “*ein-sof* burst out of its aura [*baqa’ me-avira*], revealing this point ‘(*yod*)’” (*Zohar* 1:16b; v. 1, p. 124). The dehiscence of *ein-sof* prompts the watery, fiery, or airy flux of emanations to spill over and travel to the rest of the *sefirot*. This is the moment of a cosmic breath that commences its respiratory rhythms, exhaling for the first time at the edge of the knowable, the representable, the conceivable. *Nota bene*: the *Zohar* does not insist on the initial unity of *ein-sof*; rather, it is only by ascending to it that “all becomes one.” The opposite vector of descent begins with two: the tearing, cleaving, breaking open or breaking through (*baqa*) of the aura, the parting of air, its dehiscence. The unity of the point ‘(*yod*) that concretizes in the transition from *ein-sof* to *hokmah* is disclosed within this cleft, against the backdrop of the two (or more) into which the first *sefirah* has burst. The identity of breath is reconstructed, ever so partially, in the upward journey of the elements. In their downward rush, non-identity reigns supreme.

Since the aura (*avira*) always presents itself as already cleaved, light and air are the remnants of a non-existent unity, of nothing in fact,

²² This point (namely, that within the nascent ecology of the remnants or leftovers *ruah* is voice without voice) is confirmed by what follows the already cited passage: “*Ruah*, wind, is a voice hovering over *bohu*, empowering and conducting it with whatever is needed” (*Zohar* 1:16a; v. 1, p. 120). Plus, as Rabbi El’azar notes: “A silent voice is the sublime voice, from which all voices issue” (*Zohar* 1:210a; v. 3, p. 289).

seeing that the ten *sefirot* are of nothing: *ein*, the prefix of *ein-sof*, of the in-finite. Everything and everyone that and who remains in post-auratic reality commemorates the nothing in the wake of which they have emerged and endured – for a while. Identity and non-identity form only one facet of the inherently contradictory nature of air, at once volatile and enduring, suspended and grounding, divisible and indivisible, interlacing and initiating.

The very place of air is indeterminate when examined from the kabbalistic perspective. Whereas, according to its innermost dynamics, breath tends upward, this tendency is tempered by the pronouncement that “whether on this side or that, the breath that we have mentioned is actualized and empowered on earth [*hevel’ na’asah ve-ittaqaf ‘al ha-arez*]” (*Zohar* 2:10b; v. 4, p. 46). Breath, as the instantiation of spirit traceable all the way up to *ein-sof*, becomes truly effective solely here-below, in the realm of *šekīnah* and everything extending down from it. This is the breath that animates and ensouls – that, having delivered itself from the infinite to the finite, is entwined with the body. Only in this finitude does it gain power and actuality. The cleft, from which it was exhaled, is reiterated, realized each time anew but with indelible differences, in every event of ensoulment, in a living and livable world. The upward striving of unencumbered breath is moderated by its realization here-below.

The indeterminacy of place is further exacerbated by the shifting directionalities of wind, the environmental hypostasis of *ruah*, which is not exempt from the principles of the motility of atmospheric air-masses. Wind can blow from four different directions, themselves tacitly associated with distinct *sefirot*. “When the east wind rouses to flow into the world, whoever is walking on the way and attunes his spirit to this matter – at that hour, all the blessings with which he is blessed are fulfilled” (*ZH* 13b; v. 10, p. 106). Accompanied by the angel Michael, the wind rousing from the east derives from the upper *sefirot*, in light of the fact that the entire *sefirotic* tree extends from *ein-sof* in the east to *šekīnah* in the west. The airborne flow of blessings is another name for the flux of *mazzala*, although here it is endowed with an unrestrictedly positive meaning. This is the “proper,” or the properly metaphysical, vector of spirit, but it is counterbalanced by three other vectors that

question the unidirectional causality prevalent in metaphysical systems. It is also limited in time: a morning wind, it prevails at the beginning of the day, which variously refers to a millennium or to the entire limited duration of the world's existence. The spatial indeterminacy of air is riveted to time determinations, its *whence* indissociable from its *when*.

The wind blowing from the west emanates from *šekīnah*. "The west wind blows from the middle of the day until the night, and with it 465 breezes flow forth from the fountain treasury – causing plants, trees, and crops to thrive. It has been taught: an angel is empowered from the middle of the day until the night – named Raphael; he is appointed over the west" (ZH 13b; v. 10, p. 107). The west wind, emanating from *šekīnah*, which is also the earth, is fecund: it stimulates plant growth. Its fecundity sends a plethora of blessings back up in the shape of "plants, trees, and crops," and has a curative effect, hinted at by the name of the angel in charge of this wind, Raphael, or "God heals."²³ The spirit of healing is, therefore, vegetal; flying in the face of the *sefrotic* flow, it is exuded by the earth, precisely as *the spirit of the earth*.

In turn, "the south wind blows from the beginning of the night until midnight, and with it 275 breezes flow forth from that beloved treasury, invigorating the earth and warming the cold. An angel is empowered over it – named Uriel; he is appointed over the south, in that wind" (ZH 13b; v. 10, p. 108). In serifotic cartography, the south corresponds to *hesed*, with the warmth of compassionate love responsible for the unfreezing of the sea of *šekīnah* and moderating the excessive rigor of judgment (also occasionally concentrated in *šekīnah* and most relevant to *gevurah*). Here, the kabbalistic interpretation clashes with the Talmudic reading of the south wind as harsh: "And the south wind is harsher than all of them [*ve-ruah dromit qaša mi-kulan*], and were it not for the angel called Ben Netz, who stops it from blowing even harder, it would have destroyed the entire world" (BT *Gittin* 31b). Aware of this incongruity, the authors of the *Zohar* attempt to reconcile two significations of this wind (no doubt, affected by their own embeddedness in the climates of Southern France and Spain), when they relate

²³ The allusion is explicitly spelled out further down in the same passage, with the invocation of "the angel empowered over healing acts" (ZH 13b; v. 10, p. 107).

that, when it is blowing, “the wicked are judged in the fire of hell” (ZH 13b; v. 10, p. 108). But, while the addition accords with the Talmudic text, it refutes the derivation of the south wind from *hesed*. Speaking in the elemental terms of fire, the apparent contradiction is, nevertheless, resolved once it is stated that the warmth invigorating the earth may also scorch it – that having been just right, the heat may grow excessive. Far from the global spread of compassionate love, global warming is the “harshest” in the 21st century, and it is life-giving if it follows on the heels of an Ice Age.

The north wind, emitted by *gevurah*, “blows at midnight and the blessed Holy One enters, all the spices and all the trees in the Garden of Eden emit their fragrance – singing in his presence” (ZH 13b; v. 10, p. 109).²⁴ Returning to the nexus of *ruah* and *reyah*, of spirit and aroma, and succeeding all the other winds, the north wind carries a bouquet of their curative, growth-promoting, and warmth-giving properties. Such a gathering of the four winds (or at least of their effects) is temporary; it will dissolve at the break of the following day. The fragrance of “all the spice and all the trees” that it calls forth is the ascent of *ruah* as *reyah* in the form of a song – a voiceless, silent song, mediated by airborne biochemical plant substances. In addition to being tasked with passing severe judgment, *gevurah* is the *sefirah* of separation, distinction, and discernment, which is why it promotes the fine discernments of the melodic language of plants. Reminiscent of the voice without voice of *ruah* itself, this language similarly comprises “the sound[s] of sheer silence,” albeit a silence that sings, aromatically. On the precipice of undergoing future displacements, the place of spirit is provisionally determined from the north as a green song, sung mystically and silently in the dark, at midnight.

²⁴ A peaceful vision of the north wind stands in sharp contrast to Ezekiel’s vision, which is fundamental to the *merkavah* mysticism: “I looked and saw a windstorm coming out of the north – an immense cloud with flashing lightning and surrounded by brilliant light. The center of the fire looked like glowing metal” (*Ezekiel* 1:4; *Torah, Nevi’im, K’ruvim* (Jerusalem: Hotza’at Koren, 1994)). Likewise, it radically diverges from a prior statement in the *Zohar*: “When the north wind [*ruah zafon*: *ruah* also means “spirit,” MM] blows, waters congeal – no longer flowing out, no one watered – since judgment impends and the cold of the north freezes water. When the south wind [*ruah darom*] arouses, waters warm – their ice melting away – so they flow. Then all are watered [*itsaqyan kola*]” (*Zohar* 1:161b; v. 2, pp. 402-3).

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