



E-Shiur: Zohar on the Holidays of Tishrei

By Dr. Shaiya Rothberg, Teacher in Bible and Jewish Thought

This edition of the Conservative Yeshiva's E-Shiur is made possible by a generous grant from Temple Zion Israelite Center, Miami, Florida.

This e-shiur is a much expanded version of a piece appearing in the Fall edition of Shma (<http://www.shma.com>) in the "Nishma" section.

Jewish life constitutes a mosaic of ritual, law and narrative. Our most sacred text, the Five Books of Moses, weaves these elements into the holy story around which we build our lives as Jews and from which we derive the precepts of Jewish law and religion. The holidays of Tishrei are all rooted in that story of creation, covenant, slavery and redemption. This rootedness involves not only the legal codes that God reveals to Moses at different stages of the narrative, but also the sacred plot itself: Our sages discovered connections between Rosh Hashanah and the creation of the world. Sukkot is explicitly associated in the Torah with the Exodus. And the sages calculate Yom Kippur as the very day on which God fully forgave His People Israel for the sin of the Golden Calf.

In the text of the Zohar accompanying this e-shiur, the sages (of the Zohar) read the holidays from Rosh Hashanah through Sukkot as not only *rooted* in the Jewish storyline, but also as *telling* a story themselves. The story they hear the holidays telling is the great cosmic drama at the heart of Jewish life as they understood it. This drama is the struggle of good against evil, of health against sickness and of love against alienation and oppression. In the eyes of the sages, the holy Jewish story, from the Five Books to the details of Jewish law today, is all about this great cosmic drama. We keep the commandments and live Jewish lives in order to help God ensure that goodness, health and love overcome their opposites.

While the Zohar expresses this cosmic drama in many forms, the paramount symbol or metaphor is that of two lovers. In the spirit of Jewish mysticism, both of these lovers are understood as aspects of God: the Holy One and the Matronita (Lady) or Shechinah. Goodness, health and love are symbolized by the holy union of the lovers. Evil, sickness and alienation are symbolized by the lovers being torn apart (think of the Song of Songs). The lovers are brought together or torn apart by our actions here in this world. Since the Shechinah is the immanent aspect of God, She is tied to our world.

When we sin and fill the world with evil, we tear Her away, as it were, from the Holy One, Her lover. But when we keep the commandments and do good, we bring them together. In this sense, we ourselves are central players in the Zohar's cosmic drama. God gave us the Torah so that we would know how to play our part.

The different times and qualities of the holidays of Tishrei are interpreted by the Zohar to be the choreography of the last scene, the climax, of the great divine drama. The fear and judgment of Rosh Hashanah are the moment when the forces of evil enslaving the Shechinah (and the world) are struck down, and union between the lovers is made possible again. The ten days of repentance are the slow walk of the Holy One and the Matronita, one towards the other. On Yom Kippur they just barely meet for a moment of reflection and self-purification. And then on Sukkot and the Eighth Day (Shmini Atseret/Simchat Torah), with their commandments to be joyous, comes the embrace of the two lovers. They embrace in two stages. The first stage is the first day of Sukkot: the lovers have finished the soul-searching of Yom Kippur and now grasp each other with loving arms. The second stage is Shmini Atseret (and Simchat Torah), symbolizing the final all-encompassing act of love. And thus on the Eighth Day, at the very end of the holiday cycle of Tishrei, we taste the complete redemption: a world of goodness, health and love – the world that God set out to create from the very beginning.

Notice that the Zohar introduces its exposition of the story told by the holidays with a story about the sages, sitting in a shade of "soulful happiness" cast by a stone in the desert. If academic scholars are right, the Zohar was written more than a thousand years after Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Chiya were already dead. Why would the Zohar embed its interpretation of the holidays-as-a-story inside another story? Perhaps it's signaling to us to pay close attention to the pregnant space between ritual and story, law and narrative, where Jewish life flourishes. And perhaps the Zohar is focusing our attention on the method and art of that religious life: story within story, each layer revealing new meanings in the next.

So on Sukkot, as you rejoice in the love of friends and family, think of the Matronita and the Holy One in their loving embrace. And when you learn some Torah in the Sukkah, or just enjoy sitting in it, look up at the *schach* (the sukkah's "roof") casting its delicate shadow from above. And think of Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Chiya, expounding on the story told by the holidays of Tishrei, as they sit in the shadow of that great stone in the desert.