

# The Night Moses de Leon Died

There's a divinity that shapes our ends  
Rough-hew them how we will...  
*Hamlet Act IV, Scene II*

## **1. Anonymous Scribe**

The year is 1305. The country is Spain. The city is Arevalo. The man who is about to die is Moses de Leon (1250-1305 CE/AD) who was born in Leon in northwestern Spain to a Sephardic family of modest means, and lived in Guadalajara and Avila. Moses de Leon devoted many years to remaining anonymous in the act of transcribing the lost wisdom of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Galilean sage, Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai. With anonymity, Moses de Leon invoked Yahweh's fertility, transferred the seeds to words, and wrote about a time without boundaries.

### Commentary

Of interest to the affluent Sephardic elite of central and northern Spain was the writings of Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, inheritor of the pre-kabbalistic prayer-writings of the sage Yohanan ben Zakkai (40-90 CE/AD) who composed sermons (1.) on the prophet Ezekiel's vision of the Chariot (Merkabah). The Chariot (2.) appeared to Ezekiel in 592 BCE/BC as grotesque humanoid animal-faced creatures bursting through the sky in black flames to announce the fall of Solomon's Temple. This affluent group of the Spanish-Jewish elite paid for portions of a commentary (Midrash) on the Torah (*Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*) that had supposedly been lost in the Diaspora since the Nicene creed (325 CE/AD) of Roman Emperor Constantine. (3.) This manuscript along with Rabbi Akiba's (40-135 CE/AD) sermons (4.) on the process of creation from the biblical book *Genesis* known as Ma'aseh Bereshit would seem to provide a hungry Sephardic audience with ways to access divinity through understandable exegesis, anecdote and meditative practice. Moses de Leon's book captivated the imagination. It was antiquarian and represented a missing link to a methodology of applied commandments (Mitzvot), and the mysteries of God.

## **2. Isaac of Acre Locates Moses de Leon in Valladolid on Friday at 1 PM, 1305**

In 1304 Isaac of Acre journeyed to Italy, then Spain, arriving in Toledo in 1305 searching for a man who was distributing the writings of Shimon bar Yohai. Isaac met Moses de Leon in Valladolid. Moses de Leon looked at Isaac of Acre and did not avert his gaze. It is here that Moses de Leon reassured Isaac of Acre that the original manuscript composed by the ancient sage was in his possession, but that he would

have to travel to Avila where Moses de Leon now lived. The two men parted company. Isaac of Acre left by caravan. He was to meet an Andalusian rabbi, to discuss a legal matter, and would meet up with Moses de Leon in Avila. It was Friday night, the Sabbath. A full Andalusian moon lit the olive trees. Moses de Leon walked, his heart and lungs weakened from age.

#### Commentary

Isaac ben Samuel of Acre (1250-1340), who would become a leading figure of pre-renaissance Kabbalah (5.) and part conduit for a Christian adaptation of its numerology into astronomy and celestial mechanics (Paracelsus, Pico Della Mirandola, Johannes Reuchlin, and Sir Isaac Newton) (6.) had just survived the Mamluks conquest of Acre in Israel, where most of the Jewish and Christian inhabitants had been massacred. Isaac of Acre was an ambitious man. He was convinced that he had survived the massacre in Acre by divine intervention, and that he would lead the Diaspora back to Israel with God's blessing. He had plans to present the lost writings of Shimon bar Yohai, which he would purchase from Moses de Leon, to the Chief Rabbinate in Barcelona and Babylon. He would claim to be a descendant of Shimon bar Yohai and the true inheritor of the wisdom of Yahweh. Isaac of Acre circumvented Talmudic prohibition against assisted transport on the Sabbath. Moses de Leon did not. Moses de Leon had to walk. All men of learning were reared in Rabbinical Law and Maimonides (1135-1204), who rejuvenated Talmudic custom (7.) in a massive legal tome known as *The Mishneh Torah*. Maimonides systematized both The Palestinian and Babylonian Talmud's to re-deploy the Yahwic Covenant to a new generation, at the end of a golden age of Andalusian Spain (950-1250), which included poets, philosophers, theologians, painters and architects. (8.)

### **3. The Sabbath, Friday Night, 6:30 PM, 1305**

Between steps of an aging body that swayed, Moses de Leon chanted "Shema Yisrael Adonai Alohenu Adonai Echad." (Hear O Israel the Lord your God is One.) The bride of the Sabbath, the Shekhinah, walked with him in organs of speech. Moses de Leon walked past minarets and heard the muezzin, saw his silhouette in the mosque windows. He listened to children chasing each other, heard the sounds of carts and donkeys.

#### Commentary

Burgeoning alongside and yet antithetical to Moses Maimonides *Mishneh Torah* with its rejuvenated protocol of Jewish Law, was a submission to prayer through the invocation and recitation of the 22-Letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the study of the subversive genealogies of goddesses that evolved into the Hebrew trope of Shekhinah (also referred to as Malkhut in the Kabbalah: the entrance and most human of the Sefirotic feminine archetypes.) From Inana in ancient Sumeria, to Ishtar in Babylonia, Anat in Canaan, Isis in Egypt, to Aphrodite in Greece, (9.) the Hebrew

Shekhinah (10.) was to be respected in a climate of prayer and inactivity for fear of the wrath that would be unleashed on mere mortals. The Shekhinah was for Moses de Leon a divine as well as erotic presence in humans located at the bottom of the kabbalistic tree which humans would carry with them as tribal palladia. The human being would become a moveable and organic temple in the flesh during the Sabbath from sundown Friday to sunset Saturday. One could not be transported. One had to walk one's temple unassisted. Compliance to this Commandment would invoke the Shekhinah. The Shekhinah is a central protagonist of *The Zohar*. The *Zohar* (The Book of Radiance, also known as The Book of Enlightenment) which is an exegetical commentary on the *Torah*, was rumored to have been written by Shimon ben Yohai and his son Eliazar who talked to their disciples about God, nature and human life while wandering around Palestine.

#### **4. Moses de Leon Walks Alone Toward Avila, 7:30 PM, 1305**

Moses de Leon prays for his wife, his daughter, and Isaac of Acre. He hears the generations having replaced listening with the deaf codes of behavior. He listens to the dirt and gravel beneath his worn boots. He breathes the air. It is dusty and warm and raw in his lungs, which are too old to sustain his pace.

#### Commentary

Why didn't the two men travel together, after their encounter at Valladolid? If the rare manuscript was in Avila, why didn't Isaac of Acre join Moses de Leon on his trek home? Didn't Isaac of Acre survive the genocide of Acre, travel through Italy and Spain to miraculously locate and consult with the Guadalajararian Rabbi? What, if anything, occurred between these two men? Was Isaac of Acre suspicious of the authenticity of the *Zohar*?

#### **5. Moses de Leon At The Edge**

In looking over his fifty-five years, constricted in the trachea, coughing and leaning on a roadside fig stand, Moses de Leon thinks that it is not what he has written but what he would have liked to write that constitutes his real homilies. It is not what he is but what he aspired to be that constitutes his real writing: the uncollected words in the fragments that never made it to the *Zohar*.

#### Commentary

In a section of the *Zohar* entitled "Openings," which is a Midrash (interpretive commentary on Biblical passages) on *Genesis* 18:1-10, a certain Rabbi Judah refers to the manner by which "the Blessed Holy One" is to be engaged: "He is known and grasped to the degree that one opens the gates of imagination." (11.) Scholars ranging from Gershom Scholem to Isaiah Tisby, Elliot Wolfson, Arthur Green, Daniel Matt, Harold Bloom and Moshe Idel (12.), have paid scant attention to opening the "gates of the imagination" regarding Moses de Leon's final days, though their scholarship is

exemplary and the foundation of future Kabbalah research. Let us enter the gates of the imagination in order to avoid gross effigy, romanticism and nostalgia, to view life of a man who entered the abyss with a teacher who was not in a physical body. Let us probe our memories by invoking the goddess Mnemosyne, who as the French philosopher, Jacques Derrida, tells us in *Memories* (1986):

"is the mother of all muses, as Socrates recalls in the *Theaetetus*. The gift of Mnemosyne, Socrates insists, is like the wax in which all that we wish to guard in our memory is engraved in relief so that it may leave a mark, like that of rings, bands or seals." (13.)

Intended prayer (Kavanot) cleaving (Devekut) to the goddess Mnemosyne to facilitate our memory could begin with a line from the *Book of Daniel*, cited in the *Zohar*: "The enlightened will shine like the Zohar of the sky..." (14.) To "shine like the Zohar of the sky," we must first locate Moses de Leon's life and the *Zohar* in its context.

## **6. Moses de Leon Remembers His Journey From *The Bible* to *The Bahir***

Moses de Leon stumbles on an exposed bit of tree root, and falls to his knees. He decides to stay where he has tripped. He rubs his coccyx, his lower back, remembers years bent over books, remembers the joy, the pain, the words of a covenant that compelled him to utter Yahweh's imagination. He remembers the Hebrew letters, black fire on white fire engraving the page--remembers the promise of more life in a book that must be written again and again.

### Commentary

In Arthur Green's essay "The *Zohar*: Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Spain," in *Essential Papers on Kabbalah* (15.) as well as in the classic *Kabbalah* by Gershom Scholem (16.), Moses de Leon is presented as a Spanish mystic responsible for authoring the *Zohar*. Prior to the period between 1280 and 1286, Moses de Leon was under the influence of Maimonides. *The Guide for the Perplexed* (17.), with its reliance on Aristotle's *Ethica Nicomachea* (18.) and the remote external soul (Entelechy), proved appropriate to link the non-anthropomorphic "uncaused cause" with rabbinical orthodoxy. Moses de Leon was then attracted to the esoteric tradition of the Kabbalah, which had flourished since the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century in Provence, Catalonia and Castile. Kabbalists were skilled in philosophy, Talmud, and perhaps other, non-Jewish teachings. They established academies of learning, where the first centers of Kabbalah were formed.

Kabbalah, as a body of esoteric interpretation, emerged from the works of Isaac the Blind (1160-1205), Eleazar of Worms (1160-1238) (19.) and Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164) who employed the first Kabbalistic work *Sefer Yetzirah* (5<sup>th</sup> Century CE, anonymous author) to allegedly build a Golem. (20.) A Golem is an artificial anthropoid built by combining the 22 letters of the Hebrew Alphabet in certain patterns to insure bipedality and protection from enemies. The Golem mimics

Yahweh's creation of Adam. Life or soul-breath (Neshamah) occurred to Adam when Yahweh blew the breath of life into the nostrils of his androgynous clump of clay. The anonymous author of the *Sefer Yetzirah* imagined that this breath of life blown into the nostrils of Adam was dense with letters: black fire on white fire, engraving the flesh and later engraved on the page. There are two central works of pre-zoharic Kabbalah: *Sefer Yetzirah* (21.) (The Book of Creation, 5<sup>th</sup> century CE), and *The Bahir* (22.) (The Book of Clarity, 12<sup>th</sup> century CE). The *Sefer Yetzirah*, as mentioned above, is an act of cryptic numerology, astrology and lexicography where God is shown to have created the world by means of a language as if he were writing a book. *The Bahir* bares a literary component absent from *Yetzirah*. The *Bahir* begins to describe the Sefirot, which refer directly to The Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. The Tree of Life is the tree whose fruit were not eaten by Adam & Eve. They ate from The Tree of Knowledge. They became aware of their nakedness instead of the immortality of the soul as well as of the body. The winged cherub guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden after the expulsion, with flaming swords, is protecting the Tree of Life. The Bahir Kabbalists were the first to attempt a return to a future not accounted for, where the Tree of Life is waiting to be eaten, or where the breath of life is a culinary alphabet of fruit waiting to be prepared for a soulful appetite. The Bahir Kabbalists sought to return and merge the first man (Adam) to the earth (Adamah) built as a tree with branches and roots, reaching in both directions to remnants of divinity. This invoked an old mimesis, to play off the J-Author, the first author of the Hebrew Bible (922 BCE), who wrote just after the death of King Solomon, that "Yahweh shaped an earthling from clay of the earth," and "the tree of life was there in the garden." (23.)

### **7. Moses de Leon's Love For The Tree of Life**

Moses de Leon lies on his back and looks up at the thin, bony branches of the tree that caused his fall sway in the dark, summer night. The branches look like the arms of an old man signaling to be approached. Moses imagines that the first biblical writer had no original shame, no original guilt. People are not fallen. They are distracted, split from the axis of unity. Moses aspired to light the darkened branches of The Tree of Life and enable access to everyone.

#### Commentary

In the Psalms of King David, retranslated and reinterpreted by David Rosenberg, in *The Book of David* (1997), there is a thesis that the natives of Canaan (aboriginals) living in Canaan (24.) before the Egyptian Diaspora with its consort of Habiru (a term denoting wanderer, then later "Hebrew"), were the original Jews. These natives were neither idol-worshippers, city-builders, colonists nor Hittites or Philistines. King David's war was not with the original Canaanites.

Rosenberg imagines that part of the Hebrew tribes were native Canaanites who practiced horticulture, pioneering the cultivation of trees. Their society revolved around fruit trees, fig trees, olive trees, dates, nuts and grapes. Trees litter the *Hebrew*

*Bible*, are most overt in the Garden of Eden, and in the story of Abraham who is visited by Yahweh and several angelic hosts while resting beneath a terebinth tree in Mamre. To link a native metaphor of the tree to a theological poetry would be the next kabbalistic step, though the memory of The Tree of Life had long been transferred to the behavioral codes of a life of obedience.

### **8. Moses de Leon Thinks About His Life**

Moses de Leon thinks that he has been uncompromising creating homilies to signal to the dread cherubs with their flaming swords guarding the entrance to the Garden of Eden. He feels that he has been Yahweh's cartographer. He thinks his work has been a risk, that people might not find their way--that he could have provided better for his family. He thinks his imagination is a concubine, birthing illegitimate words, which deprived him of sleep, of sustaining a living and living in obeisance to the social norms of his day.

#### Commentary

The *Zohar* (1280-1286) is a sort of magical poem that is reminiscent of *Job*, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and at times by its self-reflection and over-hearing, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Hamlet imagines that he has entered "the undiscovered country from whose bourn/No traveller returns..." Had Moses de Leon entered such a country? Written in an artificial, highly literary Aramaic, the *Zohar*, 700 hundred years after its publication remains one of the most important books of the Western esoteric tradition. Daniel Matt says that as a kabbalist,

"Moses de Leon was communicating this ancient wisdom. His style could be biblical or mythological, rabbinical or medieval; the essence was eternal. As one link in the chain of Kabbalah, he was transmitting something beyond himself and felt free to cite the sages who inhabited his imagination." (25.)

The *Zohar* is written through the voices of sages/protagonists speaking to each other with questions, poetic reciprocation's, anecdotes, adages, narratives and fragments. The novel depicts a 2<sup>nd</sup>-century Talmudist, Shimon ben Yohai, wandering around the cities and deserts of Palestine with his son El'azar, discussing the metaphysics of creation and the Patriarchs, through interpretations of key passages from the *Torah*. Structure, systematic progress, plot development and narrative consistency seem to be absent from the *Zohar*. Moses de Leon joins his Sufic counterpart Ibn al-Arabi in believing that God, as the Roman Catholic nun Karen Armstrong says in her classic study *The History of God* "gives each mystic a unique and personal revelation, so there is no limit to the way the Torah can be interpreted." (26.) With the *Zohar* the reader stands before the cherubs with their flaming swords who guard the entrance to the Garden of Eden after the expulsion, and re-enters. But this is no mere return like a faint nostalgia of birthplace. This is the primal body, the Adam Kadmon. It is also the flame-burst of pale black-light calling Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees, and what wrestles the Patriarch Jacob at the Jabokk river for the covenant, or what sits inverse

over a maze of sparkling sapphires before the 70 haunted Israelite elders and Moses at Sinai.

The *Zohar* is about The Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, the one the aboriginal Canaanites worshipped as a giver of eternal life. The Tree of Life went unnoticed by our primal couple: no daemonic serpentine arousal through fruit, no warning. Yahweh exclaims: "Look the earthling sees like one of us, knowing good and bad. And now he may blindly reach out his hand, grasp the tree of life as well, eat and live forever." (27.)

### **9. Moses de Leon Prays And Eats**

Moses de Leon lifts his weary body adjusts his Yarmulke (skullcap used for prayer, or worn daily by the devout) and tightens his worn Phylacteries (leather strap worn around the arms and head by the devout). He takes a fig and a piece of bread from his leather pouch. He eats with his hand-sharpened dagger worn from years of use.

#### Commentary

What if the primal couple (Adam & Eve) had eaten the fruit of The Tree of Life first? They would possess Yahwic inventiveness and the hermeneutic tools to become immortal. The Tree of Life is a composite of ten archetypal Sefirot, whereby the impersonal Ein-Sof becomes a personality. In the three highest Sefirot--Keter, Hokhmah and Binah--when, as it were, Ein-Sof begins to express himself, the divine reality is called "he." As he descends through the middle Sefirot--Hesed, Gevurah, Tiferet, Nezah, Hod and Yesod--"he" becomes "you." Finally when God becomes present in the world in the Shekhinah, "he" calls himself "I." At this point God is closest to an individual. His self-expression is complete. The mystic can begin his journey.

The Tree of Life dons a plush foliage of Sefirot. What is a Sefirah? Gershom Scholem, the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar of Jewish mysticism, calls the Sefirot "Sayings, names, lights, powers, crowns, qualities, stages, garments, mirrors, shoots, sources, primal days, aspects, inner faces and the limbs of God." (28.) The word Sefirot has more in common with the Hebrew word "Sappir" (sapphire) than the Greek notion of "sphere." We might surmise that Scholem imagined a stronger lexical relation to sapphire due to the bed of sapphires Yahweh sat on while staring at the Israelite elders at Sinai. These sapphires were metonymically transferred from The Tree of Life to show the Israelite elders what they had lost, and where they might look for retrieval. It is retrieval that stirred Moses de Leon, if not downright invention.

Necessity, as the mother of invention, lingers with more weight than a typical platitude when it comes to restoring vitality to a concept of God that had grown stale through excessive rationalism. Ein-Sof means simply infinite: that which does not divide the God of infinite space outside of time that can not be known. Ein-Sof is without end which is reminiscent of the Gnosticism of Valentinus and Basilides and

the Neoplatonism of Plotinus (29.), to which Kabbalah is indebted. Daniel Matt cites an anonymous kabbalist who tells us that the Ein-Sof is not even "hinted" at in the *Hebrew Bible*. It is a trope envisioned by the masters of service.

"Ein-Sof is not hinted at in the *Torah*, the *Prophets*, the *Writings*, or in the words of the rabbis, may their memory be a blessing; but the masters of service (the kabbalists) have received a little hint of it." (30.)

### **10. Moses de Leon's Service In Avila**

Moses de Leon served an ancient holy Jewish poesis which lay between metaphor, metonymy and metalepsis as a midrashic latecomer scribe, for which he was occasionally paid. Yet he peddled something extra. He didn't do it mechanically. He was serving an inner voice. Imagination was a way to it. Imagination served to incarnate a connection to Shimon bar Yohai. If Shimon bar Yohai did not exist, and was the only name he could give, he knew that it might not be a person, but a mythology for which he was the bridge and to which he would one day be linked.

#### Commentary

Moses de Leon did indeed receive a little hint that the Ein-Sof had no attributes. Ein-Sof is "nothing," yet there is never merely nothing as the scholar Henry Corbin suggests when interpreting Ibn Arabi's relation to being "alone with The Alone." (31.) The "nothing" the Ein-Sof invokes is called "Ayin," referring to *Exodus 3:14* where God says "Eheyeh asher Eheyeh" (I am that I am.) Ayin is nothing and Eheyeh is being, which suggests that God created the world out of nothing and himself which are located in the same place. In other words, God created the world out of himself, out of nothing, which takes the name Ayin to begin its descent. Ayin is a poetic substitution rather than an attribute, a metaphor rather than an allegory. This maneuver happens at the atomic level within God. This maneuver is also alphabetical. The name of God, which informed Moses de Leon, comes from the *Sefer Yetzirah* where the tetragrammaton "Yod," "Heh," "Vav" and later a repeated "Heh," come into existence through the merging of Yod and the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet Aleph, which is not spoken. Roughly speaking, Yod correlates to fire, spirit, emanation and intuition. The first Heh correlates to air, mind, creation and knowing. The letter Vav correlates to water, heart, formation and feeling. The second Heh correlates to earth, body, function and doing. (32.) The four letters YHWH hover above the Tree of Life, invoke the Sefirot and descend down to the human being.

The Sefirot absorb the Ayin and through figuration and trope, substitute for God, without being God per say. The line, or intricate mesh between the Ein-Sof and the Sefirot, constitutes the central difficulty and daring of the *Zohar*. It is the line between magic and the potency of language, between the ineffable and the poetic longing that roughs the periphery of the ineffable.

## **11. A Book, The Book**

Moses de Leon hoped that he would sell portions of his *Zohar* to Isaac of Acre, and that Isaac would bring him other clients. Moses de Leon did not want his family to dip into the economic and emotional penury of the winter of 1304. Mrs. de Leon worried that her otherwise stable husband had slipped into the ecstatic brilliance of the Zoharic Sitra Arah (The Dark Side) and would never return to their carefully crafted lives. She feared that he would vanish mysteriously and leave her to quell all queries regarding R. Yohai's ancient codex.

### Commentary

According to Gershom Scholem (33.) few kabbalists, even Joseph Gikatilla (Moses de Leon's closest friend and practitioner of an ecstatic kabbalistic method disseminated from Abraham Abulafia's techniques) had seen the original *Zohar* manuscript. Limited biographical information tells us that Isaac of Acre had not heard of the *Zohar* while he was living in Israel, and perhaps questioned the legitimacy of its authorship in Galilee. Moses de Leon was connected to a small kabbalistic community and to Castilian Jewry, so Isaac of Acre was able to inquire about Moses de Leon after his death. It seems that a wealthy Sephardic businessman and tax-collector was willing to marry his son to the daughter of Moses de Leon's widow in exchange for the original ancient manuscript. Both daughter and mother maintained that such a book did not exist, but was rather authored in private by Moses de Leon during a stage of profound reclusivity between 1280 and 1286. Isaac of Acres' story preserved in Abraham Zacuto's *Sefer ha-Yuhasin*, ends at this point. (34.)

## **12. Avila Is Too Far Away, Friday Night, 10:00 PM, 1305**

For twenty years Moses de Leon lived with the secret of his imaginative acumen. For twenty years he scraped a modest salary through the sales of portions of his *Zohar*. For twenty years he wandered through Andalusia witnessing the majority of his community ensnared in protocol and religious hyperbole between the warring worlds of Islam and Christianity. What had been the Arabization and thus tolerance of Spain was quickly being over-turned by Papal intolerance. Papal decrees would soon lead to The Inquisition and to the eventual expulsion of Jews from Spain 200 years later in 1492.

## **13. Arevalo Is Closer, Friday Night, 10:30 PM, 1305**

Moses de Leon had met with the first "outsider" he would ever meet. He walked alone in the warm Andalusian night. His right foot stepped in Spain. His left foot stepped in the Garden of Eden. He wore a lightly colored medieval Yarmulke, a loose-fitting robe, fastened by a leather strap, which held a small leather pouch and small dagger. His beard, grown white from years of wandering and thought, nearly covered his face, and formed a perfect conduit of hair to waves of brownish-white hair tucked beneath his Yarmulke and reaching down his back like angel wings. With

each step, Moses shifted between worlds. In Spain he saw the future: the end of the Reconquista, the Inquisition, the Expulsion, as well as the use of his *Zohar* in Renaissance Italy. He gazed over Isaac Luria (1534-1572) performing the art of reading people's faces in Safed. He viewed the evangelizing rants of Shabbetai Tzevi (1626-1676), using his *Zohar* to declare the recent arrival of the messiah as himself. He walked with the Baal Shem Tov (ca. 1700-1760) and appeared in the stories of Nachman of Bratzlav (1772-1811). He saw his family cut to pieces and his village burned down by Cossack pogroms. He stared out of the window in Prague with Franz Kafka's eyes, and walked, chanting the Shema, into the crematoriums of Treblinka. He heard his name mentioned, after 700 hundred years, on the lips of a young exegete in Jerusalem (Gershom Scholem). He saw translations of his *Zohar* in French, English, Russian, Mandarin Chinese, in Hindu and Japanese, saw his poetry on t-shirts, and listened to talk show hosts discuss his book with movie stars on television. He sat in the back of a San Francisco taxicab in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and overheard the driver mention the mystery of his death to a fare.

#### **14. Moses de Leon In The Garden, Friday Night, 11:00 PM, 1305**

With his next step, Moses de Leon stared at The Tree of Life. He heard the horrifying cries of Adam and Eve passing through the Edenic gate into a firestorm of basalt, dust and debris. He watched the tears of God spill like acid-rain burning holes in the sky and the earth. He looked back and viewed the Tree of Knowledge shrivel into sawdust while Lilith and Samael danced in an ecstatic romp of orgasmic twitching. Then he stood before The Tree of Life, held the base in his hand, saw the Sefirot sparkle and spin like a child's toy. Then he was The Tree of Life, felt his skin, which was now a bark of sapphires, and looked down at the earth. The earth glowed blue like a small marble, spinning in a storm of cosmic wind. He prayed, and felt the stillness of the Shekhinah (womb), receiving the Tiferet (phallus) and creating more worlds.

#### **15. Moses de Leon At The Olive Tree, Friday Night, 11:30 PM, 1305**

Moses stopped before an olive tree, several miles from Arevalo, where he would die. Could he keep walking, stepping between worlds with a weak heart and raw useless lungs? Had his *Zohar* given him the ability to jump through time? As long as the *Zohar* remained within the limited geography of central and northern Spain, Moses de Leon was able to maintain a quiet and unexposed life. Expansion of his territory and transmission of his knowledge was the greatest risk he faced. Isaac of Acre would be that conduit. On this night, Moses de Leon's worlds collided. Had he written what Shakespeare's Hamlet (1605) imagined was "the undiscovered country, from whose bourn no traveller returns?" Moses de Leon did indeed return, but there would be no one there to greet him: no one from this side, no one from the other side. Moses de Leon had transmitted the "undiscovered country" between worlds, which is neither alive nor dead: it is immortal. The villagers who housed Moses de Leon in Arevalo did not know him. They gave him a room for the night, as it was customary to do for a weary traveller. Hamlet says that a form of divinity is present at our end. It is up to

us to shape, sculpt or compose it the way we like. We must be ready to write our own life and death and listen to what never changes in us as we gaze at The Tree of Life. Anymore than this is silence.

### **16. Moses de Leon At The Inn In Arevalo, Saturday Morning, 12:30 AM, 1305**

Moses de Leon entered the small room. He gently placed his Yarmulke on the night table next to the bed. He untied the leather strap that held his robe against his body, and placed the robe along with the small dagger and leather pouch on the wooden chair next to the amber wall. He took off his boots and lay on the bed draped in his Tallis. He was out of breath. He blew out the candle, which had lit the small room and created a small flicker of shadows, and closed his eyes. He fell into a deep sleep. He dreamed that his ribcage opened and that his heart lifted out of his body. It floated above him with its veins detaching one by one until it was free of blood.

Moses de Leon died on the Sabbath in Arevalo in 1305. There is no record of his death, no gravestone, no memorial, other than his wife who claimed that her husband had written the *Zohar* until her death.

#### Notes

1. *Talmudic Images*, Adin Steinsaltz, Aronson Inc. 1997: Chapter 3 on Yohanan Ben Zakkai; R. Yohanan was a pupil of R. Hillel, part of the Hekhalot (Palaces of God, heavens, chambers) school, who were the first to discuss the esoteric names of God which descended from Ezekiel's Chariot (Ma'aseh Merkabah).
2. *Tanakh, The Holy Scripture*, Jewish Publication Society, 1985: Nevi'im (The Prophets) Ezekiel Pages 893-894 1:1-26. John Milton's Satan peering over the earth that he will soon inhabit is one of the literary progeny of Ezekiel's monstrous vision.
3. *The Medieval World 300-1300*, Norman Cantor, State University of New York, 1968: The Nicene Creed, Page 9. This is an excellent corpus of original documents from the medieval world without exegesis.
4. *Akiba: Scholar, Saint and Martyr*, Louis Finkelstein, Atheneum, 1970: This is a dramatic philosophical biography of a Jewish saint whose life parallels Jesus Christ. Moses De Leon employed the hermeneutics of the mystery of creation in a poetic and homiletic fashion.
5. *Zohar, The Book of Enlightenment*, Translated & Introduced by Daniel Matt, Paulist Press, 1983: Pages 3-5
6. *From Paracelsus to Newton*, Charles Webster, Barnes & Nobel, 1982.
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### Academic Commentary

- (1.) “The essay, *The Night Moses de Leon Died*, by Daniel Y. Harris, is very creative and suggestive.” –Daniel C. Matt, author of *The Essential Kabbalah, God and the Big Bang*, and translator of *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*.
- (2.) “I think Daniel has done a good job of putting his own stamp on the well-known story of Moses de Leon and Isaac of Acre. Also, the formal innovation of writing a story with a segment-by-segment commentary is a winning and unexpected adaptation of a traditional Jewish literary form to the purposes of imaginative writing.” –Raymond P. Scheindlin, author of *Wine, Women and Death, Medieval Hebrew Poems on the Good Life* and *The Gazelle, Medieval Hebrew Poems on God, Israel and the Soul*.
- (3.) “Your essay is FANTASTIC. I can't tell you how happy I am that I once offered the possibility of publishing it in the *In Posse Review* and now am actually able to do so-- I truly do love your prose style and your approach with it--it is not just the information that you share with us that is so interesting (it is, alas!) but the ways HOW you do it fascinates me. Wonderful! It will be coming up in the next issue of In Posse Review. Thank you.” –Ilya Kaminsky, Poetry Editor, *In Posse Review*