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The Zohar: Pritzker Edition, Volume Five

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Sefer ha-Zohar (The Book of Radiance) has amazed and overwhelmed readers ever since it emerged mysteriously in medieval Spain toward the end of the thirteenth century. Written in a unique, lyrical Aramaic, this masterpiece of Kabbalah exceeds the dimensions of a normal book; it is virtually a body of literature, comprising over twenty discrete sections. The bulk of the *Zohar* consists of a running commentary on the Torah, from Genesis through Deuteronomy.

This fifth volume of *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* opens in the middle of Exodus immediately following the revelation at Mount Sinai. The first chapter features a famous narrative about two rabbis and an old donkey-driver they encounter on the road. This old man seems like a complete ignoramus and pesters them with nonsensical riddles, but he turns out to be a sage and explains to them one of the most tightly guarded secrets of Kabbalah: the reincarnation of the soul. In the course of his exposition, the old man enthralls his two listeners with a romantic account of Torah as a maiden who reveals herself only to one who pursues her lovingly.

The rest of this volume consists mainly of the *Zohar*'s commentary on the biblical description of the *mishkan*, the Dwelling (or Tabernacle) in the desert. The *mishkan* symbolizes *Shekhinah*, the feminine presence of God who "dwells" on earth. Since the Dwelling was the center of worship, the *Zohar* explores here the theme of prayer.

The volume concludes with one of the shortest yet most important sections of the Zohar—*Sifra di-Tsni'uta* (The Book of Concealment). This enigmatic and poetic composition contains a veiled description of God's body, focusing on the beard. Its few pages convey the central teachings of Kabbalah, including the balance between male and female energies, and how divine breath animates all that exists.

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