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[A] sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end ... [I]n his expressions and looks, the unforgettable emerges and imparts...that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. ...Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. In other words, it is natural history to which his stories refer back.

- Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller' (1936)

I. Power, Nature, Myth

Writing of the modern privatization, even occultation, of death, Michel Foucault declares that, until the 18th century,

[d]eath was the moment when we made the transition from one power – the sovereign of this world – to another – that of the sovereign of the next world....Now that power is decreasingly the power to take life and increasingly the right to intervene to make live,...death becomes...the end of power. Power no longer recognizes death. Power lets death die.1

Foucault thus links the social consciousness of death – even its social existence – with its placement in the eye of power. Once out of the gaze of power, death becomes “the most shameful thing of all...the object of a taboo.”

Foucault’s description could not be further from a vision of death as an inevitability of nature – particularly from a vision of death as the intrusion of a meaningless natural fate into a human existence whose hallmark is semiosis, the making of meaning. Hamlet’s depression in his first throes of mourning (“how weary, flat, stale, and unprofitable / Seem to me all the uses of the world”) is the paradigmatic experience of death as the nullification of meaning.

At the opposite extreme from Foucault, consider a vision of death as purely natural, even the quintessentially natural event. Aristotle defines the “nature” of something as “a principle or cause of being moved and of being at rest in that to which it belongs primarily, in virtue of itself, and not accidentally” (Physics 195b22-23). One may conclude that death is the very “nature” of organisms in

1 Michel Foucault, ‘Society Must be Defended’ (1976). The last sentence contains a nearly untranslatable pun: “Le pouvoir laisse tomber la mort.”
Aristotle’s sense of the term. It befalls every organism inevitably, by virtue of conditions immanent to that organism.

This definition of nature plays a crucial role in Jewish philosophy. The use of the word teva [תֶוָּא] in the sense of “nature” comes into Jewish discourse through Samuel ibn Tibbon (ca. 1150-1230), from his translation of Maimonides’ Guide to the Perplexed. In his appended “Meaning of Foreign Words,” Ibn Tibbon gives Aristotle’s definition of nature, almost to the word, as the first meaning of teva.² It seems likely that it was Ibn Tibbon who invented the word teva in the sense of the philosophical physis or natura (and their Arabic equivalents). We may, with only a bit of hyperbole, credit his translation of Maimonides with the invention of “nature” itself, and not only its semantic designation, in the Jewish tradition.

Maimonides appears to endorse the notion that death is the quintessential natural event. Death is part of that “evil that happens to a person from the side of the nature [teva] of existence and loss: that is, because a person is a material being.”³ To deny death, Maimonides declares, is to desire a logical contradiction: that one be “flesh and bones” and yet not be subject to that which befalls all material beings.⁴ Defying nature and reason, one who denies the inevitability of death dwells in a “lie.”⁵

From this contrast between Foucault and Maimonides, between power and nature, I turn to a Talmudic portrayal of the moment of death:

They said about the Angel of Death that he is entirely full of eyes. At the hour of a sick person’s death, he [the Angel of Death] stands above his head, with his sword drawn in his hand, and a drop of poison hanging from it. Once the sick person sees him, he trembles and opens his mouth – and he [the Angel of Death] throws [the drop of poison] into his mouth. From this [drop] he dies, from it he putrefies, from it his face becomes green.⁶

This macabre scene stands at the very threshold between nature and power, as well as between life and death. It depicts a person in extremis from illness, a gossess [גוסס] in rabbinic terms. If the process would take its “natural course,” the person would die momentarily. The narrative, however, disrupts this quintessentially (Aristotelian/Maimonidean) natural scene – or rather, the formidable Angel of Death, “full of eyes,” sword drawn, disrupts it.

The dying person does not “go gentle into that good night.” On the contrary: he confronts this fearsome figure, opens his mouth from trembling, and receives the fatal poison. The passive process of dying becomes transformed into a scene of

² Samuel ibn Tibbon, Perush Ha-Milim Ha-Zarot.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ bAvodah Zarah 20b (Steinsaltz translation, modified).
action by both the Angel of Death and the dying person. The paradigmatic death from “natural causes” – in bed with a terminal illness – becomes a violent act of power, an execution, with the victim an unwilling player in a scene of violence. Only afterward do the natural effects take place: death, putrefaction, decay.

This scene takes us far from the Aristotelian/Maimonidean vision of death as the quintessence of nature. But it also departs from the Foucauldian vision of death as a seamless power-succession from the sovereign of this world to that of the next. Rather, it is a liminal scene: it stages the disruption of nature by power, at the moment of the interruption of life by death. And this disruption is wrought by the intrusion of myth, in the person of that archetypally mythical persona, the Angel of Death.

The narration of every death as an act of judgment, a death-sentence, would go on to deeply inform Jewish accounts of death throughout the medieval period, most famously in the Tractate on the Beating of the Grave. Here, I wish to emphasize the appearance of mythical beings at the threshold between life and death. The scene of death stages the very birth of myth.

The Talmudic scene, as well as its later medieval variants, proliferates in the Zoharic literature. One passage succinctly and explicitly recounts the birth of myth, as well as the mythopoetic faculty, at the moment of death:

> Come and see: on the day of the completion of a person’s days to leave the world, that day when the body is broken, and the soul seeks to separate from him – then a person is given permission to see that which he did not have permission to see when the body ruled and stood in its clarity.

These opening lines stage the birth of the mythopoetic faculty. At the moment of the “breaking of the body,” the moment when natural death is about to interrupt life, a person gains the ability to see beyond the natural. And, on cue, the mythical personae make their appearance:

> And then three messengers stand before him. And they consider his days, and his sins, and all that he did in this world. And he acknowledges everything with his mouth, and afterwards he signs it with his hand. ... And of all these deeds, which he did in this world with his body and spirit, he gives an account with his body and spirit just before he leaves the world.

We see here features similar to the Talmudic scene: natural death transformed into an execution, a death sentence carried out with the participation of its

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7 Cf. Sefer Ma’avar Yabok 24b, which declares that every person should intend their death to be a martyrdom, “al kiddush Hashem,” even when dying in bed, drawing on a prophecy received by Yosef Karo.

8 Zohar I:79a.
victim. But the Zoharic account self-reflexively comments on the event: the natural transition from life to death is interrupted by mythical beings who become visible – or perhaps even constructed – because the dying person becomes a mythopoetic being.

The Zoharic literature contains many variants on this theme. One passage begins with a proto-Heideggerian account of a person oblivious to his mortality:

Come and see: a person moves through this world and thinks that it belongs to him perpetually, that he will remain in it for generations.9

But this existentially inauthentic natural life is interrupted by a lethal crisis: “while he is still moving in the world, he is put in a neck-iron.” The person in a “neck-iron” is, at one level, a metaphor of a person beset by a grievous illness. But the passage leaves mere metaphor behind as it makes the turn from a natural life interrupted by a mortal illness to a mythical scene of power. The person in the “neck-iron” is a person who has been arrested and forcibly placed in the judicial dock: “once he is sitting, he is judged in a field-forum with others who are accused.”10 When the person loses his trial, he becomes possessed of heightened mythopoetic powers – and thereby participates in his own execution:

At that moment, as he is lying in the King’s neck-iron, raising his eyes he sees two beings coming toward him, writing down in his presence all that he has done in the world and all that he has uttered with his mouth, and he gives an account of it all and they write it down in his presence...11

After the court passes the death sentence, the person’s mythopoetic vision becomes even more extravagant, as does his participation in the drama. The following drama is a fantastical elaboration of the Talmudic scene:

...[T]he king’s guard descends and stands before him at his feet, with a sharp sword in his hand. The person raises his eyes and sees the walls of the house burning from [the guard’s] flashing fire. Just then, he sees him right in front of him, completely full of eyes, clothed in fire, blazing in the person’s presence. Certainly so, for many people have seen an angel in the street ...without anyone else seeing him.12

Finally, explicitly evoking its precursors’ portrayal of poison on the Angel of Death’s sword (one drop in the Talmud, three in the Tractate of the Beating of the Grave), the passage recounts the person’s participation in his own death. It is significant that, despite the “drops” imagery, the passage replaces the Talmudic “opens his mouth” with an “opening of the eyes” – another self-reflexive allusion to the mythopoetic faculty:

9 Zohar III:126a (Matt translation).
10 “Field forum” is Matt’s translation for קינפון. Perhaps “drumhead court” might also be apt.
11 Zohar III:126b (Matt)
12 Ibid.
‘Three drops on his sword’...The person is afraid and wants to hide but he cannot. When he sees that he is unable, he opens his eyes, and has to look at [the Angel of Death] – gazing at him wide-eyed, he then surrenders himself and his soul.

My final Zoharic example is a passage that unites the natural and cosmological perspectives on dying, as well as identifying what I have called the mythopoetic faculty with a change in the person’s spirit. This excerpt’s poetic evocation of the cosmic trauma of human death is formidable:

It has been taught: On that fierce and terrifying day for a person, when his time arrives to depart from the world, four dimensions of the world stand in harsh judgment, and judgments arouse from four dimensions, and four clusters quarrel, and wrangling prevails among them as they seek to separate, each to its own side. A herald emerges and proclaims in that world, and it is heard in 270 worlds.

This passage, like other Zoharic texts we shall visit, portrays death as dissociation of a multiplicity. A key feature of the poetic power of this passage is a certain obscurity of the referents of its three quadrupled nouns (“dimensions” [סִפְרֵי], in two occurrences, and “clusters” [אָמְצָרֵי]). Nonetheless, Moshe Cordovero’s decoding seems at least approximately apt. The “four dimensions of the world,” he explains, are the metaphysical roots of the four material elements (earth, fire, wind, air); the “four dimensions” from which “judgments arouse” are the four key lower Sefirot (Hesed, Gevurah Tiferet, Malkhut); the “four clusters” [אָמְצָרֵי] are the four elements (earth, fire, wind, air) within a person. The material elements “quarrel”; the metaphysical roots of those elements “stand in judgment”; and the divine Sefirot manifest their exclusively judgmental aspect.

Zoharic Judgment [Din or Gevurah] is, of course, the divine archetype of disunity – and, when hypertrophied, becomes a destructive, even demonic force. The individuality of the person dissolves into the material, cosmic, and divine archetypes from which it came. The passage thus portrays natural and metaphysical death as simultaneous and intertwined events, indeed as one event.

At this very moment, however, an extraordinary mythical scene and mythopoetic faculty emerge. This part of the passage begins with an exceptional (even for the Zohar) flight of mythological description – describing the cosmos-shaking significance of the death of a single person. Picking up from where my last excerpt left off, it declares:

13 Ibid.
14 Zohar I:218b (Matt translation, slightly modified)
15 Moshe Cordovero, Or Yakar, VI:181b (PDF 1424).
It has been taught: When the herald proclaims, a flame issues from the side of the north and blazes in the River of Fire, diverging in four directions of the world and burning the souls of the wicked. That flame shoots forth, up and down through the world, and reaches the wings of a black rooster, striking its wings, and it crows at the opening between the gates.16

Only the dying person, however, can perceive this astonishing cosmic drama:

[W]hen judgment arouses over a person, [the rooster] begins to crow, and no one knows it except that person who lies ill. For we have learned: When a person lies ill and judgment looms over him— to leave this world— the supernal spirit increases within [or, “is added to”] him, which he never had before. Once this dwells upon him and cleaves to him, he sees what he never attained all his days, because that spirit has increased within [or “been added to”] him. As it does and he sees, he departs from this world, as is written: ‘You increase their spirit; they perish and return to their dust’ (Psalms 104:29).17

This “supernal spirit” [רוחא עלאה] which appears within a person at the time of death is what I have been calling the mythopoetic faculty. It is not altogether clear whether this spirit already exists within the person and is heightened at the time of death (as in Matt’s rendering) or whether it is a distinct spirit that a person acquires only at the time of death (as in the alternative rendering I have placed in brackets). The latter would be something like the “additional soul” the tradition declares each Jew receives on the Sabbath. In either case, it stands forth from the other components of a person, which are in the process of separating. It may even, as we shall see, contain the secret of the unity of the person, of which the person is unaware during biological life, but which stands out distinctly as that life disintegrates.

And so I turn to the mystery of the unity of the person in the Zoharic literature, with a little help from Jacques Lacan.

II. The Zoharic Person as Mythopoetic Subject: Rethinking the Tselem

[T]his form...situates the agency of the subject in the realm of fiction....


In Mishnat Ha-Zohar, Isaiah Tishby declares that the Zoharic authors portray the unity of the human self as “dubious and improbable,” for its parts are

16 Zohar I:218b (Matt).
17 Ibid. (Matt translation, slightly modified). In context, the Psalms verse would rather be translated, “you gather [i.e., take away] their spirit.”
“dispersed and fragmented.” In the words of Moshe de Leon, this unity is precarious: a “mystery” which underlies both life and death: “The mystery of the unity [of the parts of the human soul] in this world is also the cause of their separation and division after death.” The manifestation of this mystery when biological death approaches, the time of the dissociation of that unity, is one of my key themes in this paper. In this section, I explore this theme in a way that brings together the body, that aspect of a person most conventionally associated with “nature,” and myth and the mythopoetic faculty, aspects most conventionally associated with the “spirit,” the meta-natural.

The Zoharic person as a mysterious unity of divergent parts concerns divine persons, as well as human persons. As Tishby states: “in its conception of divinity, the Zohar can only establish complete unity through complex, paradoxical formulations” – just as it does in relation to the “dubious and improbable” unity of the human self. Moreover, divine unity is also precarious – and the restoration of that unity after rupture is the goal of all ritual practice, indeed all human action. The precarity of divine unity leads at least one Zoharic passage to speak of the “grave” of one element of the divine, explicitly drawing a parallel with human burial. However scandalous theologically, the association of death with the divine seems almost inevitable when we juxtapose Zoharic ruptures of divine persons with Zoharic death as the dissolution of the person.

Upon first consideration, such teachings would lead us to formulate Zoharic personhood as a dynamic unity of all its elements – rather than a simple essence in relation to which other facets would be mere contingencies. This vision would appear to reflect a more Platonic rather than Aristotelian conception. In Plato, too, “the unity of the self,” and therefore its very identity, “is not something given but something achieved, not a beginning but a goal.” Nevertheless, after exploring this dynamic unity in Zoharic texts, I will also propose a possible candidate for the key to the “mystery of unity”: the mythopoetic faculty, which I link to the Zoharic “tselem” and the Lacanian “fictional subject.”

Support for the self-as-dynamic unity may be found in the Zoharic literature’s lack of an overall name for its three principal soul-levels, nefesh-ruah-neshama. Some passages use nefesh, others neshama, as an overall stand-in for what we might call “soul” in English, even while using those same words to designate only one of the three levels. The lack of an overall name is not merely a terminological issue. If unity lies in a dynamic relationship among the

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18 Mishnat Ha-Zohar, p. 15.
19 Mishkan He-Edut, 117.
20 Mishnat Ha-Zohar, 15.
21 Zohar II:142a. This notion is also alluded to in Zohar III:81b
22 See, e.g., Aristotle, De Anima, I, 411b, trans. R.D. Hicks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1907), 45. Aristotle insists on the axiomatic unity of the soul, criticizing Plato for his lack of a principle which could hold the soul’s parts together.
23 Alexander Nehamas, Life as Literature (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 182
24 Mishnat Ha-Zohar, 4 n. 17.
components, there is no entity in relation which *nefesh*, *ruah*, and *neshama* would be parts or aspects. I generally, therefore, try to leave these terms transliterated, rather than translated. In referring to them as “soul-levels,” I make use of the Zoharic word “levels” (*dargin* in Aramaic), which often refers to the three. It is far from coincidental that the Zoharic literature also uses this same term, “levels,” to refer to the components of the divine.

Two Zoharic passages vividly stage the themes I have been developing here: death as dissociation and the relationship between the natural and the metaphysical. Both passages evoke the image of a flame. The first of these passages is well-known to those who seek guidance for meditation exercises in kabbalistic texts. It instructs the meditator to see the unity of the various components of the divine, as well as divine/human unity, in a humble flame:

Come and see: one who seeks to know the wisdom of the holy unity – let them contemplate the flame that ascends from within a coal or from within a lamp that is lit. For the flame only ascends when it grasps some coarse matter. Come and see: in the flame that ascends there are two lights: one a white light that illuminates, one the light, black or blue, that grasps it. This white light is above and ascends in a straight path. Underneath is this blue or black light which is a throne for that [white] light. And this [white] light dwells over it – and they grasp each other to become one.²⁵

A full explication of this passage would be quite lengthy. For my purposes here, it suffices to know that the white and blue/black lights evoke the two central divine *personae* in the Zoharic drama: the male Blessed Holy One and the female Shekhinah. Divine unification, the “holy unity,” depends on their embrace, “their grasping each other to become one.” A later part of the passage also evokes a third, higher, light which the text associates with the highest divine *persona*, the Holy Ancient One.

But what of the “coarse matter,” the coal or the lamp’s wick? This “coarse matter,” indispensable for the unification, perhaps even the existence, of the divine *personae*, is none other than the human being (or perhaps the people of Israel). In linking the aethereal dance of the divine flames to the human substrate it designates as “coarse matter,” the passage also stages the paradox of the relationship between nature and spirit. I note that the “coarse matter” here appears to designate the human being as a whole, without differentiating body and soul. (I also note that, for reasons of space, I am simplifying this rich passage, but the omitted complexities would not affect my basic analysis here.)

And yet, this indispensable “coarse matter” also suffers the fate of all wicks and pieces of coal: consumption by the fire they make possible. Thus, while this “coarse matter” makes divine unity possible, it is also continually being destroyed.

²⁵ *Zohar* I:50b–51a.
by the very divine fire that it facilitates. In describing this destruction, the blue/black light also becomes red, especially when it manifests its destructive power:

And this [blue/black/red light] perpetually consumes and destroys the matter that is placed [below] it. For in relation to everything that cleaves to it [from] below, the [blue/black/red] light that dwells above it destroys it – for its way is to destroy and to consume. For on this [blue/black/red light] depends the destruction of all, the death of all.26

I read this passage as staging a paradox intrinsic to all theistic religions: the paradox that the finite, fallible human being, destined to die, can come into relationship with the divine. The text heightens this paradox to the breaking point: for it insists that the “coarse matter,” the mortal human being, is indispensable to the unification, even the existence, of the divine – and yet, that very divine is also forever in the process of burning up the mortal being, of killing that being upon whom the divine depends. To use De Leon’s formulation: the “mystery of unity” is also the “cause of death.”

A second, less well-known, passage situates this entire dynamic at the human level, using nearly identical imagery. The three lights reappear here as three human soul-levels, with the human body playing the role of the “coarse matter” of the first passage. We may associate the three soul-levels here with the nefesh-ruah-neshama schema, although the passage only names the nefesh.

Come and see: Nefesh is the lower arousal that cleaves to the body. In the same manner [ke-gavna] as the light of a lamp: for the lower light, which is black, cleaves to the wick and does not separate from it, and is only readied27 through it. And when it is readied through the wick, it becomes a throne for the upper white light that dwells on that black light. Afterwards, when they are both readied, this white light becomes a throne for the concealed light that is not seen. And that which dwells upon that white light is not known. And then the light is complete. And thus is a person [bar nash] who is completed in all, and then he is called, “holy.” ...And in this manner [ke-gavna] is the sublime mystery.28

The passage associates the wick with the human body, just as the first passage associated the “coarse matter” with the human being as a whole. It associates the part of the flame closest to the wick, the “black light,” with the lowest soul-level, the nefesh, the level closest to the body. It portrays this light as a “throne” to the

26 Zohar I:50b.
27 The Aramaic verb here derives from the word “tikkun,” whose semantic range includes to ready, to adorn, and to rectify.
28 Zohar I:83b.
white light, as did the “divine unity” passage. Although it does not name this white light, closely related Zoharic passages associate this white light with the ruah – and the third, highest light with the neshama.

This passage thus portrays the dynamic unification of the human being in images almost identical to those used by the first passage in its portrayal of the dynamic unification of the divine. Indeed, the concluding words of this excerpt explicitly declare that the human unification is characterized by “the same manner [ke-gavna]” as “the sublime mystery” – i.e. the mystery of the divine.

There are two crucial features of the first, “divine unity,” passage not explicitly named in the second, “human unity,” passage. The “human unity,” passage does not explicitly portray the destructive effect of the spiritual elements (the divine levels in the first passage, the soul-levels in the second passage) on the natural element (the “coarse matter,” the coal, wick, and human body). Nonetheless, one can readily infer the presence of this feature in the “human unity” passage. It is, after all, also focused on a burning lamp – and the effect of flames on the “coarse matter,” here explicitly named as the human body, is obvious (whatever our speculations about the authorship of the two strikingly similar passages).

We may also infer something akin to the other missing feature: the explicit address in the “divine unity” passage to “one who seeks to know the wisdom of unity.” In the “human unity” passage, we may discern the implicit reference to this feature partly in the common Zoharic preface, “Come and see” – but, more significantly, in the word that directs us to the image of the flame: “ke-gavna,” “in the same manner as.” Zoharic authors pervasively use this seemingly insignificant word to express a key trait of the Zoharic cosmos: the parallelism, even twinning, between its various polar dimensions – divine and demonic, male and female, divine and human, and, here, between human and non-human, the person and the lamp.

One who is able to understand the “ke-gavna” teaching, that “x” is “in the same manner” as “y,” is one who, in the words of the first passage, “seeks to know the mystery of the holy unity.” This person is already something of a kabbalistic initiate, or at least in the novitiate. The contemplation of the unities portrayed in the two passages, both of which stage the relationship between the spiritual and the natural, as well as between life and death, requires the insight of one who can perceive the parallelism between the seemingly antithetical poles. Such a person has, or aspires to, the mythopoetic faculty.
This faculty emerges in the liminal place between the poles of the “ke-gavna” vision – and it stands out as such precisely when the seamlessness of the unities is loosened. Zoharic texts describe such loosening most often when death is imminent – a moment which makes available for insight that which is usually invisible or taken for granted. Or in the portrayal I cited of the “additional spirit” acquired at the moment of death: “Once this dwells upon him and cleaves to him, he sees what he never attained all his days, because that spirit has increased within [or “been added to”] him.”

One particular portrayal of the moment of death provides a clue to the “mystery of unity” and its relationship to the mythopoetic faculty:

> It has been taught: all those thirty days [before death], his neshama departs from him every night. And she goes and sees her place in that world [i.e., the world-to-come]. And this person [bar nash] does not know and does not notice and does not control his neshama all those thirty days as he did before. As it is written, “There is no man that hath power over the spirit [ruah] to retain the spirit...” [Ecclesiastes 8:8]. Rabbi Yehudah said: once those thirty days begin, the image [tsulma] of a person darkens, and his likeness [diyukna] that appears on earth becomes blocked.  

Even this somewhat simplified version of Zoharic anthropology poses the mystery of human identity. The “bar-nash” lies asleep, while the soul (here called the neshama) ascends to another world. While I tentatively translated bar nash as “person,” it seems difficult to consider the sleeper as the person: how could identity reside with the sleeper when his soul wanders away on journeys about which he knows nothing and over which he has no control? Or perhaps the bar-nash is the body? And yet the ending suggests otherwise, with its declaration that the “likeness [diyukna, Hebrew demut] which appears on the earth is blocked.” This “likeness” seems well-suited for the role of the body, for surely it is in our bodies that we appear on the earth. But then it seems highly improbable to attribute “personhood” to the inert, soul-less, diyukna-darkened body lying in bed. Might the “likeness that appears on the earth” be something like the active, social body, the participant in the affairs of the world? But, then, what of the “image” [tsulma, Hebrew tselem]? I caution that this passage may (or may not) be distinguishing diyukna and tsulma; in any case, I will use that distinction heuristically here, though other passages clearly use the terms interchangeably.  

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29 Zohar I:217b.  
30 I note that Death is not the only portrayal of a person’s disintegration in the Zoharic literature and related texts. When a person is overcome by anger or evil propensities, a very similar dissolution process occurs. One Zoharic passage proclaims that an angry person is one who has “torn and uprooted his soul,” even becoming possessed by a diabolical “Other god.” Zohar II:182b. Similarly, Moshe de Leon declares that when a person goes down the path of evil, his divine spirit flies away from him – and an evil spirit takes its place. Mishkan Ha-Edut 109.
The Zoharic tselem is the human form that exists prior to birth, presides over the moment of conception, accompanies a person throughout life, and enclothes the person after death. Gershom Scholem devoted a major study to the tselem (most of whose details I will not rehearse here). Scholem refers to the tselem as the “astral body,” though perhaps “ethereal body” might be more apt. Zoharic passages describe the tselem as possessing the same form that the human being has in this world – but of ethereal, rather than physical composition. The ethereal body is “ke-gavna,” “in the same manner as,” the twin of, the earthly body.

Some Zoharic passages, indeed, use the word “body” [נשמה] to refer to both. Tishby writes that the tselem is the “force that mediates between the nefesh and the body – and particularly, as a concealed ethereal body corresponding to the visible, carnal body.” Moshe Cordovero describes the tselem as a kind of mold which gives shape to the spiritual substance of a person, both in its ethereal and earthly modes. In our “dying sleeper” passage, I propose associating the diyukna with the form of the material body, the tsulma with the ethereal body.

Scholem also declares that the tselem is the “principium individuationis” of the human being. The notion that individuation precedes and/or survives biological life can serve to distinguish most strands of traditional Jewish anthropology (from the Talmudic period onward) from those strands most marked by Aristotelian philosophy. From a Maimonidean perspective, in particular, it would be difficult to say how a person’s individuality could survive death. Shlomo Pines convincingly argues that Maimonides would agree with Ibn Bājja: the “intellect being regarded as the only portion of man that survives bodily death, ... nothing individual remains after death.” Maimonides’ association of death with nature, and individuation with bodies, make probable his agreement with Ibn Bājja, whose view he describes in Guide I:74. Its counter-traditional import probably accounts for Maimonides’ drawing short of clearly affirming it.

It is precisely as an individuating principle that the tselem is important for my discussion. In one Zoharic passage, a sage explains to his friend how he knows that he is going to die soon:

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Anger, evil, and death: all crises of disintegration that pose the mystery of the unity of the person. These crises are the focus of the book project of which the present essay is a foreshadowing: Confronting Anger, Evil, and Death through the Zohar: the Agonies and the Ecstasies.

31 See, e.g., Zohar I:220a; III:104b.
33 E.g., Zohar II:150a.
34 Tishby, Mishnat Ha-Zohar, II:90.
35 Or Yakar.
36 Mystical Shape, 269.
“Look, my soul departs from me every night and does not enlighten me with a dream as before. Further, when I pray and reach ‘who hears prayer,’ I look for my tselem on the wall and do not see it, so I conclude that since the tselem has disappeared and can no longer be seen, the herald has already gone forth and issued the proclamation, as is written: ‘Only with a tselem does a person walk about’ (Psalms 39:7) — as long as a person’s tselem does not disappear, the person walks about, his spirit sustained within him. Once a person’s tselem passes away and cannot be seen, he passes away from this world.”  

The tselem is thus something like an ideal self. It is not only the form that presides over one’s birth and that one rejoins after death, but that towards which a person walks in life. Without that ideal form, one is no longer truly living and death is near. Natural, biological life depends on the polestar of this ethereal form which both doubles it and provides it with an ideal to “walk towards.”

This ideal form would go on to have a long history in kabbalah, as Scholem shows. However, it also pre-existed the Zoharic literature — and in a way that directly evokes the mythopoetic faculty. In one text, the tselem (though not named as such) is the source of prophecy, indeed, the very being that speaks to the prophet. The Zoharic passage just quoted perhaps alludes to this feature in its association of the vision of the tselem with the blessing, “who hears prayer.” Scholem quotes Yitshak Ha-Kohen of Soria, the source for crucial features of Zoharic cosmology (particularly its demonology). Note that Scholem identifies the “potency changed into the form of angel” [נהפך כוח בצורת מלאך] with the tselem.

In the prophet and seer, all the varieties of his potencies falter and change from form to form, until he enclothes himself in the potency of the form that appears to him, and then his potency is changed into the form of an angel. And this form, which is changed within him, gives him the power to receive the prophetic potency. And a spiritual, imaginal engraving is engraved in his heart. And when the messenger has completed his mission, the prophet becomes stripped of the power of the form that has appeared to him and becomes enclothed in his original form; he strips himself of one form and enclothes himself in another form. Then all his limbs return to one another, and cleave to each other, and all his physical powers return as they were at the beginning, and then he speaks and prophesies in the form of human beings.

This state of prophecy resembles the near-death states we have already explored. It is marked by a “faltering” of the person’s powers, a loosening of his unifying bonds, a dissociation of his component parts; only after the prophetic episode has

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38 Zohar I:217b, Matt translation.
39 Mystical Shape, 259. I have somewhat modified Scholem’s translation, which he bases on the manuscript he published in 1927 as emended by the form it appears in Ibn Gabbai’s Avodat Ha-Kodesh. I have also added the emphases.
passed do “his limbs return to one another.” As in our passages on death, this loosening of the person’s unity is accompanied by the upsurge of the power of prophecy, closely related to the mythopoetic faculty. The emergence of that faculty enables the person to see the form that speaks to him, his own ideal form, or what is elsewhere called the tselem.

Is this tselem, then, the entity that is the true person, an Aristotelian substance that replaces my earlier hypothesis of a Platonic dynamic unity? I do not think that is quite right. I note that the Zoharic literature (as well as the passage just quoted) often portrays the tselem as a garment that is doffed and donned with some frequency in the afterlife, rather than a constant substance. Moreover, Zoharic descriptions of the locus of the person after death often describe the three soul-levels (nefesh-ruah-neshama) as divergently placed: the nefesh near the grave, the ruah in the “lower Garden of Eden,” the neshama in the “upper Garden of Eden.” Such passages do not declare that one of these is the true locus of the person, despite the hierarchy prevailing between them. These levels are intimately linked in a variety of ways, but only dynamically, not through some unifying substance. Nor do such passages even mention the tselem.

So what is this tselem, this spiritual body that is the twin of the natural body? It is, I would assert, the mythopoetic faculty itself which doubles the natural body. Its emergence at the time of death is the very agency of the turn from nature to power, from life to death – the agency of myth as disruption, with which I began this paper. It is not Tishby’s seamless link, but an agency of disruption which creates the turn, the upsurge of myth in the moment of transition.

I was inspired to make this claim in part by a famous early essay by Jacques Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function.” Lacan describes an infant who has not yet mastered the unity of his own limbs, entranced by his image in the mirror:

The jubilant assumption of his specular image by the [infant] – still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence...seems to me to manifest ... the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form....This form would have to be called the “Ideal-I”...[It] .situates ... the ego ... in the realm of fiction [dans une ligne de fiction].40

Although Lacan’s discussion here (as always) is a bit obscure, we may paraphrase him fairly confidently. The unification of the self is something imagined before it is not found in the natural body. The infant is still flailing about, unable to coordinate his limbs, but he sees before him his imagined unity, his “Ideal-I,” in the mirror. This unity is, we might say, a myth. It is situated “in the realm of fiction,” “dans une ligne de fiction.” A person’s first myth is the myth of the unity of the self.

And therefore, Lacan teaches, that fictional “Ideal-I” – the very form of the person – will remain ever-elusive. It will “only asymptotically approach the subject’s becoming,” no matter how the individual strives to “resolve...his discordance with his own reality.”\(^{41}\) The intervention of this mythopoetic faculty of the infant occurs during a time of dissociation (or more strictly: pre-association) of his component parts – just as it does in the Zoharic and Yitshak Ha-Kohen passages. This mirror image, this “ideal-I,” this “fiction” is not a substance: it is an artifact of mythopoesis. The unity of the self is a myth, a myth indispensable for the coherence of a body which has lost or not yet attained its coherence – and is also that body’s double, its mirror-image, “in the realm of fiction.”

Or, in the Zoharic (mis)reading of the verse from Psalms: אֶךָ בְּצלָם יִהְיֶה אִישָׁהוּ “only with the tselem can a person walk about” in this world...and the next.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.