

## ***KOTNOT OR (GENESIS 3:21): SKIN, LEATHER, LIGHT, OR BLIND?***

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*And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them* (JPS, 1917).

*Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skins, and clothed them* (King James Version - KJV).

*God made leather garments for Adam and his wife and He clothed them* (Aryeh Kaplan).<sup>1</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

In chapter three of Genesis, we are witness to Adam and Eve's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge and their subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden. Realizing that they are naked, *they sewed fig-leaves together* (Gen. 3:7). God announces punishments for the three guilty offenders (the serpent, the woman/Eve and Adam), and banishes them from the Garden of Eden: *Therefore, the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden* (Gen. 3:23). Before they were expelled from the Garden, God fashioned for them garments of skins (JPS, 1917), or leather garments (Kaplan), or coats of skins (KJV). Were these garments to be worn on top of the fig-leaves (Gen. 3:7), or in place of them? What were these garments made from: were they actually leather skins, as the simple meaning of the text indicates, or were they perhaps made of some other material? These questions will need to be addressed in our understanding of the meaning of *kotnot or*. In addition, we will look at the various possible meanings of the word *or* (spelled *ayin-vav-resh*); there is even a version that spells the word with an *aleph* (*aleph-vav-resh*) instead of an *ayin* as it appears in the Masoretic Text. Finally, we would like to propose another way of understanding *or* (*ayin-vav-resh*); not as 'skin' but as 'blind' (*iver*).

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The classical commentators interpret the phrase *kotnot or* by utilizing rabbinic extrapolations. The Aramaic translation (targum) of Onkelos explains: "garments of glory on their skin."<sup>2</sup> Rashi, based on midrashic sources,<sup>3</sup> remarks that these clothes were smooth like a fingernail or scale, and shone like a jewel. That explains *kotnot*. *Or* is explained by Rashi as something that derives from skin, like the fur of rabbits, which is warm and soft. The skin for these garments is variously understood as coming from the skin shed by the sly serpent who seduced Eve (Aramaic Targum of Yonatan Ben Uziel), or from the Leviathan<sup>4</sup> that God slaughtered, salted, and left for the righteous in the World to Come (Hizkuni).<sup>5</sup>

Ibn Ezra has an interesting formulation that blends several ideas. He writes that some explain that in the beginning man was made of bone and flesh, and now God made for them a covering of skin. Ibn Ezra continues, "Some explain 'clothes for their skin.' Others explain that there is an animal that has the physiognomy of man and God commanded to flay its skin. We can't question this. We just need to believe that God fashioned for Adam and his wife *kotnot or*." Ibn Ezra implies that it was an act of God that we cannot question or understand.

Semitic cognates follow similar lines. The Syriac translation of the Bible, the Peshitta,<sup>6</sup> translates *kotnot or* as *kutinita de-meshkha* (coats of skin/leather). Gesenius, in his Lexicon, defines *or* as *cutis hominis* (human skin) or *pellis animalium* (animal skin).<sup>7</sup>

There are hints to another possible understanding of the word *or*. In another entry for *ayin-vav-resch*, but vocalized *avar*, Gesenius translates *obcaecavit* (blind).<sup>8</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs,<sup>9</sup> following upon Gesenius, note the following possible vocalizations of *ayin-vav-resch*: *or* = skin, blindness (cataract),<sup>10</sup> *ur* = exposed, bare,<sup>11</sup> and *avar* = blind.

It is clear that something cataclysmic occurred to Adam and Eve after the sin. It is our thinking that the text conveys this in the word *or*.

#### BEFORE AND AFTER THE SIN AND BANISHMENT

After eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam and his wife, now realizing they were naked, made some type of clothing to cover themselves: *And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves girdles* (Gen. 3:7). If

they were now clothed, why did God make for them *garments of skins* (Gen. 3:21) before they were cast out of the Garden of Eden?<sup>12</sup>

There is another complication. There is a midrashic source which claims that Adam was not created naked. "What was the clothing of Adam: scaly skin and the Cloud of Glory<sup>13</sup> covering him. When he [Adam] ate from the fruits of the Tree [of Knowledge], the scaly skin came off and he saw himself naked, and the Cloud of Glory disappeared."<sup>14</sup> So the verse: *And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked* (Gen. 3:7),<sup>15</sup> means that they were denuded of the clothing that was already upon them.

The Jewish mystical tradition provides a reason for the necessity of new garments after the sin. A dramatic shift occurred in the relationship between God and Adam after the eating from the Tree of Knowledge. According to this understanding, the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge and man's subsequent banishment from the Garden of Eden changed the original "game-plan" of God. Eternal life without illness and death would now be replaced by a different type of life for Adam and his progeny. The Zohar,<sup>16</sup> commenting on the verse: *And the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3:7), states the following: "Opened to perceive the evil of the world, unknown to them until now . . . they had lost the supernal radiance enveloping them, which disappeared, leaving them *naked*... *they sewed fig-leaves together* (Gen. 3:7) . . . The blessed Holy One clothed them in garments soothing to the skin, as it is written: *kotnot or* (garments of skin) [*ayin-vav-resh*]. At first they wore *kotnot or* (garments of light) [*aleph-vav-resh*] . . . Now that they had sinned, *kotnot or* (garments of skin) [*ayin-vav-resh*], soothing only the skin, not the soul."<sup>17</sup>

Sinning by eating from the Tree of Knowledge caused Adam and Eve to lose their original aura. Before the sin, they were clothed in light from God's supernal radiance. After the sin, they were clothed in simple, physical skins. The great kabbalist, R. Isaac Luria, remarked: "Before Adam sinned, he had a supernal light, which was a spiritual set of clothes, which was light . . . After the sin, the supernal light left him...and he was naked from these clothes of light . . . After Adam sinned, his clothes changed from light [*aleph-vav-resh*] to leather [*ayin-vav-resh*]."<sup>18</sup> This change in clothing is reflective of a change that took place throughout the world. Because of this sin the entire world was cursed,

shifting from a more spiritual state, symbolized by light, to a more physical one, symbolized by skin.<sup>19</sup>

Another passage from the Zohar states that they had garments of skin [*ayin-vav-resh*] before they sinned, and were privy to God's radiance [*aleph-vav-resh*]. "Until now they only had leather garments, and they were very valuable clothes . . . They were no longer worthy even of *kotnot or* (garments of skins), since they sinned with the Tree of Knowledge . . . *And the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3:7), as they now perceived this world...which they couldn't discern before, when they were looking at the lower world from above."<sup>20</sup>

The rabbinic scholar Louis Ginzberg attempted to put together a composite picture based on midrashic sources. "Before, their bodies had been overlaid with a horny skin, and enveloped with the cloud of glory. No sooner had they violated the command given them than the cloud of glory and the horny skin dropped from them, and they stood there in their nakedness, and ashamed" (pp. 74-75). "They had enjoyed the splendors of Paradise but for a brief span of time – a few hours. It was in the first hour of the sixth day of creation that God conceived the idea of creating man . . . in the fourth [hour] He formed Adam; in the fifth [hour] He clothed him with skin . . . and in the twelfth hour of the day, he was cast out of Paradise" (p. 82).<sup>21</sup> There is another version of the fifth hour of the sixth day of creation: "in the fifth [hour], his orifices were opened."<sup>22</sup> One can thus imagine that Adam was created at first even without vision, his orifices, which can include eyes, were shut. These were opened in the fifth hour of the sixth day of creation. Possibly this is an allusion to *And the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3:7).

#### SWITCHING OF LETTERS: AYIN AND ALEPH

We have seen how, according to the mystical tradition, *kotnot or* could be garments of skin (*ayin-vav-resh*) or garments of light (*aleph-vav-resh*). We know from the Kabbalah that it is possible to "exchange" letters (*temurah*) in order to arrive at a more esoteric understanding and to create a new meaning for a biblical word or phrase.<sup>23</sup> Let us look at the letters *aleph* and *ayin*, in order to understand the hidden meaning behind each of them.

The Zohar notes that when God wished to create the world, each letter came forth endeavoring to prove why it should be the first letter that God would use to do so. "The letter aleph stood and did not enter. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to her, 'Aleph, aleph, why do you not enter My presence like all the other letters?' She replied . . . 'Because I saw all the letters leaving Your presence fruitlessly. What could I do there?' . . . The Holy One, blessed be He, then said, 'Aleph, aleph. Although I will create the world with the letter *bet*, you will be the first of all the letters. Only through you do I become One."<sup>24</sup> Thus the *aleph* "denotes God's Oneness, Sovereignty, and Infinity."<sup>25</sup>

Regarding the letter *ayin*, the Zohar states: "*Ayin* stands for *avon*, iniquity. Although she [the letter *ayin*] said, 'I imply *anavah*, humility,' the Holy One replied that He would not create the world by her."<sup>26</sup> Another passage confirms the negativity of the letter *ayin*: "When Adam and Eve became aware of their sin, *the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3:7) . . . Their eyes . . . become agents of evil impulses . . . The [letter] *ayin*, like man, has two eyes on its top, figuratively."<sup>27</sup>

#### BLIND

We have also observed that the word *or* (*ayin-vav-resh*) has many possible interpretations. The one that is most unusual is "blind." We would like to pursue this direction to show that this is indeed a possible interpretation. If Adam was born with scaly skin that fell away after he sinned by eating from the Tree of Knowledge, then *kotnot or* might possibly be read as *kotnot avariver*. In this understanding, Adam's scaly skin also included a covering over his eyes, something akin to the nictitating membrane, which only opened after eating of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge: *And the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3:7). The nictitating membrane is a transparent or translucent additional eyelid that is present in some animals. It is used for protection and self-lubrication. In humans, a vestigial remnant of the nictitating membrane is the *plica semilunaris* on the inside corner of the eye. The verse is thus referring to an opening of the eyes in a physical sense.

Maimonides disputes this approach. He explains that since the Torah wrote, *And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked*

(Gen. 3:7), the emphasis is on the words "and they knew." The Torah did not

write "'and they saw', because what they saw in the beginning was what they saw at the end. And there was no cloudy vision – it was clear."<sup>28</sup> The Zohar similarly states that the narrative does not refer to actual vision, but rather to understanding, eyes "opened to perceive the evil of the world, unknown to them till now."<sup>29</sup>

However, Avraham Sebba (15<sup>th</sup> century), a kabbalist and Bible commentator, makes a dramatic point that seems to accept both physical and metaphorical blindness: "Immediately upon their sinning, they died. When they opened their eyes [*And the eyes of them both were opened* (Gen. 3:7)], they<sup>30</sup> were like a dead person who may have his eyes opened, but cannot see. Until the sin, their eyes were closed . . . After the sin their eyes were opened."<sup>31</sup> Were their eyes closed physically, unable to see, or were they able to see, but unaware of what they saw?<sup>32</sup> According to this, both ideas are probably correct. Their eyes were covered with scaly skin and they were awed by the aura of God's supernal light. After the sin, their chance for immortality ended and they "died." Their eyes were opened to the reality of a different world from the one unto which they were created. They were now able to perceive what God enabled them to "see" – the imperfect world, with sickness and death. *Kotnot or* is the term applied to their new status, blinded to the supernal light and munificence that God had earlier bestowed upon them, before the sin.<sup>33</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In this paper we have shown the different cognate permutations that are possible with the phrase *kotnot or*. We feel that there is a strong case to be made for viewing *or* in many different ways, including the unusual way of seeing *ayin-vav-resh* as a variation of the verb for "blind." The biblical text, supported by rabbinic sources, has once again shown its specificity as well as elasticity – within the limits of traditional biblical exegesis.

## NOTES

1. A. Kaplan, *The Living Torah* (New York: Moznaim Publishing Corporation, 1981), p. 9.

2. The *Zohar* 1:39b has "garments of glory emitting aromas from spices of Eden." Daniel Matt in his translation and commentary writes, "...the *coats of skin* were supernatural, as indicated by the Aramaic translation of this phrase in *Targum Onqelos*, 'garments of glory on their skin.'" (Daniel Matt, *Zohar: Pritzker Edition*, vol. 4 [Stanford, California: University of Stanford Press, 2007], p. 188, *fn.* 174). See also Saadia Gaon, *Commentary on the Torah*, translated and edited by Joseph Kapah (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963), p. 16 (Hebrew).
3. Rashi bases his interpretation on *Genesis Rabbah* 20:12. A commentary on Rashi, *Siftei Hakhmamim* (by Shabbetai Bass of Prague, 1641-1718), *ad loc.*, explains that these clothes were something scaly that was stuck onto the skin. Horny or scaly skin may be related to the nictitating membrane. Another source Rashi utilizes is TB *Sotah* 14a (found also in the *Zohar*, 1:36b), where we find that *or* is understood as something derived from skin or soothing to the skin.
4. The word Leviathan is mentioned in Rashi's commentary on Genesis 1:21: *And God created the great sea-monsters*: "According to legend, this refers to the Leviathan and its mate. God created a male and female Leviathan, then killed the female and salted it for the righteous, for if the Leviathans were to reproduce, the world could not withstand them." This story is related at length in TB *Bava Batra* 74b, where it is told that the Leviathan will be slain. its flesh served as a feast to the righteous in the World to Come, and its skin used to cover the tent where the banquet will take place.
5. Hezekiah ben Manoah (c. 1240), known as *Hizkuni*, was a French rabbi and exegete who wrote a commentary on the Torah.
6. C. Heller (ed.), *Peshitta* (Berlin, 1927, reprinted in Tel Aviv: Zion, 1970), p. 4. The *Peshitta* was translated from the Hebrew in the second century CE. See also J. P. Smith (ed.), *A Compendious Syriac Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 212, 307.
7. H. F. W. Gesenius, *Lexicon Manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum* (Leipzig: Sumtibus Typisque, 1833), p. 748.
8. Gesenius, *ibid.*, p. 747.
9. F. Brown, S.R. Driver and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 734-5. Compare how Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) noted the same etymological possibilities. See M. Clark, *Etymological Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew Based on the Commentaries of Samson Raphael Hirsch* (New York: Feldheim, 1999), p. 182.
10. A cataract is a clouding that develops in the crystalline lens of the eye or in its envelope, varying in degree from slight to complete opacity and obstructing the passage of light. Before the advent of modern medicine, the patient with this condition probably felt that his vision was becoming cloudy because some skin membrane was blocking his vision. Hence, the root *or*, also used for skin.
11. Cf. Habakkuk 2:15 and 3:9. The Radak calls this "open and revealed": D. Kimhi, *Sefer ha-Shorashim* (Berlin, 1847, reprinted in Jerusalem, 1967), p. 257 (Hebrew).
12. It would be interesting to explore the language used in the banishment from the Garden of Eden: *Therefore the Lord God sent him forth (va-yeshallehehu) from the Garden of Eden* (Gen. 3:23) . . . *So He drove out (va-yegaresh) the man* . . . (Gen. 3:24). However, that is not within the scope of this paper.
13. The phrase "cloud of glory" does not occur in the Torah. It is found in TB *Rosh Ha-Shanah* 3a and in *Sukkot* 11b. It is also mentioned in the *Shulhan Arukh* (Code of Jewish Law), 625:1.

The spatial juxtaposition of the words *cloud* and *glory* as two distinct clauses is found in two verses in the Torah: *and, behold, the glory of the LORD appeared in the cloud* (Ex. 16:10), and *the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle* (Ex. 40:35).

14. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, chapter 14. David Luria (1797-1855) in his commentary noted, "scaly skin, like that found on many animals, a scaly, shiny covering...It is possible that the word *tziporen* (scaly) is made up of two words: *tzipu'i oran* (covering of their light)."

15. This is the interpretation of the commentator Hayyim Ibn Attar (1696-1743) in his work *Or ha-Hayyim*, *ad loc.*

16. Zohar 1:36b

17. We utilize here the translation and commentary of Daniel Matt, *The Zohar: Pritzker Edition* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2004), vol.1, pp. 229-230.

18. Rabbi Isaac Luria (Ashkenazi) (1534-1572), known by his Hebrew acronym as the Ari (Lion), developed a comprehensive system of Kabbalah known today as Lurianic Kabbalah. This quotation comes from his collected works on Kabbalah, as promulgated by his student, Rabbi Hayyim Vital (1543-1620): *Sefer ha-Likkutim* (Jerusalem, 1988), vol. 15, p. 28.

19. Zohar 1:36b and *Midrash Rabbah* Genesis 5:9, based on the verse: *cursed is the ground for thy sake* (Gen. 3:17).

20. Zohar 3:261b.

21. L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1968), pp. 74-5, 82. Before the horny skin and cloud of glory fell away, they were blinded by the supernal light and the horny skin.

22. *Avot de-Rabbi Natan* 1:8

23. *Temurah* is one of the three kabbalistic methods used to rearrange words and sentences in the Bible, in the belief that by this method one can derive their esoteric and deeper spiritual meaning. Other methods are *Gematria* (a system of assigning numerical value to a word or phrase, in the belief that words or phrases with the same numerical value bear some relation to each other) and *Notarikon* (a method of deriving a word, akin to the creation of an acronym, by using each of its initial or final letters to stand for another word, forming a sentence or idea out of the words). See A. Abulafia, *Otzar Eden Ganuz* (Jerusalem: Barazani, 1999), ed. A. Gross, p. 66 (Hebrew). This was originally compiled in 1286. See also J. Gikatilla, *Ginnat Egoz* (Jerusalem: Yeshivat ha-Hayyim ve-ha-Shalom, 1999), p. 411 (Hebrew); originally compiled in 1274; and M. Cordovero, *Pardes Rimmonim* (Jerusalem: Yerid ha-Sefarim, 2000), sha'ar 30, chapter 5, pp. 460-461 (Hebrew); originally published in 1548. See, in addition, J. H. Berke & S. Schneider, *Centers of Power: The Convergence of Psychoanalysis and Kabbalah* (Lanham, Maryland: Aronson, 2008), esp. pp.165-6.

24. Zohar 1:3b.

25. M. L. Munk, *The Wisdom in the Hebrew Alphabet* (New York: Mesorah Publications, 1998), p. 44.

26. Zohar 1:3a.

27. Munk, *op cit.*, pp. 172-3, 177. The printed letter *ayin* has two points on top.

28. Maimonides, *Moreh Nevukhim* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977), translated and elucidated by Yosef Kapah, 1:2 (Hebrew).
29. Zohar 1:36b (Matt, 2004, p. 229).
30. TB *Berakhot* 19a: "the dead do not know...but we infer that they do know."
31. A. Sebba, *Tzeror ha-Mor* (Benei Berak: Heikhal ha-Sefer, 1990), pp. 30, 34 (Hebrew). Sebba (1440-1508) was expelled with other Jews from Portugal.
32. This is very similar to a clinical case that the neurologist Oliver Sacks recounts. A fifty-year-old man who had begun to lose his sight as a child, and who became almost totally blind by age 10, had a series of operations to restore his vision. He was then physically able to see, but unable to comprehend what he saw. He was missing "experience." See O. Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Knopf, 1995), pp. 108-152.
33. Joseph Halévy, a French orientalist and Bible scholar of the late nineteenth century, wrote a fascinating linguistic paper on the term *sanverim* (blindness): J. Halévy, "Recherches Bibliques." *Revue des Études Juives* 11 (1885), pp. 60-77. Based on the verse, *And they smote the men that were at the door of the house with blindness* (Gen. 19:11), Halévy contends that the letter *nun* is interchangeable with the letter *ayin*, "la permutation de ayin en nun" (p. 66). Thus *sanverim* (root: *nun-vav-resh*) becomes *saverim* (root: *ayin-vav-resh*). He brings another example from the Talmud (TB *Shabbat* 62a), where the metal helmet worn by soldiers was called *sanvarta*. Rashi, *ad loc.*, wrote that it was a leather cap under a metal hat. Once again the *nun* and *ayin* switch so that "leather" (*or*) now forms part of the word.



## WE WELCOME ARTICLES ON THE FOLLOWING BOOKS OF TANAKH:

**KINGS**  
**ISAIAH**  
**JEREMIAH**  
**MICAH**  
**AMOS**  
**JOEL**  
**HAGGAI**  
**HABAKKUK**  
**PSALMS**

***PROVERBS  
CHRONICLES***

