Introduction

[1] The late orthodox Israeli poet Zelda Schneersohn-Mishkovsky (1914-1984), better known as Zelda, was a descendent of a lineage of illustrious rabbis. Her father, Shalom Shalom Schneersohn, belonged to the prominent Schneersohn dynasty of Habad hasidic masters and was the uncle of the late New York rebbi of Lubavitz, R. Menahem Mendel Schneersohn (fl. 1902-1994), who was (and remains) the subject of considerable messianic speculation. Her mother, Rachel Hen, descended from the famous Sephardic dynasty of Hen-Gracian, which traces its roots to eleventh-century Barcelona, Spain. Her maternal grandfather's grandfather, R. Elhanan ben Meir ben R. Elhanan, was a student of R. Shneur Zalman of Lyadi (fl. 1745-1812), the founder of Habad Hasidism and Zelda’s paternal grandfather’s grandfather. R. Elhanan’s grandson and Zelda’s maternal grandfather, R. Hayyim David Zvi Hirsch (1850-1926), was rabbi in the ancient Ukrainian city Chernigov and an influential hasidic leader.

[2] Following the emigration of the family to Mandatory Palestine, where they settled in Jerusalem in 1925, both the poet's father and grandfather died. Zelda, who was twelve at the time and her father’s only child, received special permission to recite the Kaddish, the Jewish mourner's prayer, which she did daily for a year. She and her mother were isolated in the Jewish community of Jerusalem. Only when she began to study in a Teachers' College of the religious Mizrahi movement, whose teachers encouraged her artistic and literary bent, did she feel at home. Following her graduation in 1932, she moved with her mother to Tel Aviv and then to Haifa, where she taught in a school for orthodox girls. In 1935, she returned with her now twice-widowed mother to Jerusalem, where she would remain for the rest of her life. She worked intermittently as a teacher, but did not find teaching her vocation. In 1950, she married Hayyim Mishkovsky, an accountant, stopped teaching, and devoted herself to writing.

[3] Although Zelda began writing short pieces of prose and poems already in the 1930's, when she was in her twenties, and began to publish sporadically since the 1940's, Penai (Free Time), her first book, was not published until 1967, two years after her mother’s death, when the poet was fifty-three years old. Ha-Carmel ha-Ee Nireh (The Invisible Carmel), her second book, was published after her husband’s death in 1971. Following these two books, which were republished together in 1971, Zelda produced four more: Al Tirhaq (Be Not Far) in 1975; Halo Har Halo Esh (It is Surely a Mountain, It is Surely a Fire) in 1977; Al ha-Shoni ha-Marhiv (On the Spectacular Difference) in 1981; she-Nivdelu mi-Kol Merhaq (Who became Separated from Every Distance) in 1984. Additional poems, never included in these books, appeared in various Israeli newspapers and magazines. After the publication of her first book, she quickly won wide acclaim and several prestigious awards: the Israeli Brenner Prize (1971), the Bialik Prize (1977) and the Wertheim Prize (1982). She became popular among secular and religious readers alike, who fell under the spell of her rich emotive and contemplative imagery, drawn from the world of Jewish mysticism, Hasidism, and Russian fairy tales.
[4] One can read Zelda’s poems without knowing much about Judaism, although Hasidism and Kabbalah informed much of her poetry. After all, the wish to find metaphysical meaning in the trivial and ephemeral, the enchantment, and disillusionment with the concrete and the sensual can be and have been experienced by religious and secular people alike. However, Zelda’s poetry, with its heavy use of religious concepts and archaic grammar, challenges even Hebrew readers. Here is the recent testimony of the novelist Amos Oz, who, as a child, was Zelda’s pupil:

Teacher Zelda also revealed a Hebrew language to me that I had never encountered before. . . a strange, anarchic Hebrew, the Hebrew of stories of saints, Hasidic tales, folk sayings, Hebrew leavened with Yiddish, breaking all the rules, confusing masculine and feminine, past and present, pronouns and adjectives, a sloppy, even disjointed Hebrew. But what vitality those tales had! . . . As though the writer had dipped his pen in wine: the words reeled and staggered in your mouth.

[5] Zelda’s poems presuppose a Jewish literary education. She uses various kabbalistic and hasidic terms to convey the fluid boundaries between death and life, imprisoning grief and liberating maturation. The Hebrew editions do not refer the reader to the biblical or post biblical allusions and quotations, since, as has often been remarked, the Israeli public is generally familiar with the Bible and Jewish literature. Hebrew readers also have at their disposal biblical and rabbinic concordances, anthologies of mystical literature, and Hamutal-Bar-Yosef’s excellent study of Zelda. Many of the mystical associations of Zelda’s language, however, are easily lost in English translation, and her English readers are further handicapped by the dearth of annotated translations and critical studies of her poetry.

[6] Zelda's poetry can be seen as a poetic expression of the tenets of Habad, a hasidic movement which was led by masters belonging to her father’s family. Habad proposed to attain knowledge of the divine through *hitbonenut*, contemplation, constant reflection on God, in order to bridge the gap between the transcendental experience of a world without divinity and the immanent longings for a world united within divinity. The poet is a contemplative, lyrical self who observes a variety of daily phenomena and seeks their hidden meaning. Her stance is cautious and surprised, which we see in questioning, qualifying phrases: "almost," "perhaps," "it would seem," "why, surely," "how," and "why." Her religiosity is a humble one, far from certain that deeper meanings have been grasped or that the understanding will last. Hasidism associates the state of awe before a divine reality that surrounds us with a state of humility that stems from the awareness of one's "own nothingness against the only true existence and reality." These two states are evoked by the poet’s voice. Zelda assumed the stance of a mystic, a stance in Judaism traditionally formulated in texts written by and prescribed for men. Her poetry expresses her perception that the divide between the emotional and the reflective, the mundane and the holy, is fluid. Her writing is religiously daring insofar as she transcended the traditional expectation that women limit themselves to the emotional and the mundane.
[7] We should not be surprised that she also draws on kabbalistic sources. Scholars of both movements have acknowledged and debated the ways in which Hasidism adapted and appropriated kabbalistic ideas.10 Zelda evokes kabbalistic terms such as ayin, the Infinite or Nothingness. The term, explicated in the writings of R. Schneur Zalman of Lyadi as well as in kabbalistic literature, refers to absence or nonbeing as well as to the uppermost sphere of the Divine, named keter (Crown).11 She also evokes the image of the palace, prevalent in Jewish mystical literature, where it is used to depict the stations in the supernal worlds through which the mystic approaches God.12 Linked to the palace image is the image of the closed gates which challenge the mystic in search of a key to the concealed. Gates, shearim, a kabbalistic symbol for the sefirot and especially for the shekhinah, perceived as a gate to the Godhead, are a leitmotif in many of her poems where opening and closing figure prominently.13 Shying away from the explicit, Zelda rarely uses the primary names of the ten sefirot. Yet she repeatedly evokes their appellations and symbols, notably worlds (almin), firmaments (reqi’in), lights (nehorin), colors (gevanim), gates (tarin) streams (neharim), garments (levushin), and crowns (ketarim).14 Firmly embedded in the Bible, she also makes use of numerous biblical phrases and especially from the Psalms, and incorporates midrashic and mystical readings of familiar biblical passages.

[8] Zelda, to the best of my knowledge, is the first female orthodox Jewish poet to consistently draw on the rich corpus of Jewish mystical literature, thought by both traditional and modern scholars to be written by men (unlike Christianity, Judaism has not had its female mystics).15 Its symbols and imagery are pivotal to her poetry.16 Instead of using erotic imagery, as many mystics famously did, she evokes a contemplative feminine self that is anchored in a domestic, physically narrow life around the home, the balcony and courtyard, the shopkeepers, and the downtrodden of the neighborhood.17 Yet this very humble self appropriates the language of Jewish mysticism in her search for meaning, for the mark of God in the world.

[9] Zelda’s major autobiographical poem, be-Tor ha-Yaldut—Peri Hadash (At the Turn of Childhood—a New Fruit) explores the parallel between the mystical journey and the journey to adulthood. The following is an annotated translation. In addition to providing a literal translation, I hope to illustrate the advantages of the format of annotation, customarily not offered in literary journals, such as those where early translations of Zelda’s poems have previously appeared.18

[10] A few words about the poem. Written in the 1940's, be-Tor ha-Yaldut—Peri Hadash was first published in the Israeli newspaper Ha-Aretz on December 9, 1969. It was then included in her second book, Ha-Carmel Ha-Ee Nireh (The Invisible Carmel, 1971).19 The poem recalls the tragic events of the early death of the poet’s father and grandfather, two dominant figures in her life. It evokes the listless grief of her mother, the ensuing poverty and hopelessness of both mother and daughter, and Zelda’s intermittent moments of hope. The events take place in hilly Jerusalem, whose air, heavy with millennia of longing, hangs over traditional neighborhoods built into the rocky mountains.
[11] The Israeli scholar Hamutal Bar-Yosef has defined the work as a short modern lyrical poem, and she provided a psychological interpretation that emphasizes the separation of adolescent daughter from bereaved mother. She views the transitions from reality to fantasy; the poem’s mingling of authentic biography and symbolic fantasy, as the main psychic event standing at the center of the poem.20 The daughter uses fantasy to separate from her despondent mother and find hope. Such a reading brings to mind J. R. R. Tolkein’s view of fantasy tales as a source of consolation from suffering. Fantasy, Tolkien argued, fulfills hidden human desires, including the desire to travel to far off places and surmount the boundaries of time and space, even the boundaries between species. At the end of Zelda’s poem the dead are still beyond reach and there is no known path to them. Yet, the adolescent girl has opened up to internal and external sources of solace and learned to reconfigure a reality of pain as a path to liberation. This suggests Tolkein’s consolation or eucatastrophe. By this, Tolkien, a deeply devout Catholic, meant a sudden and miraculous grace: never to be counted on or to recur. . . giving a fleeting moment of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.21 Zelda reaches for a similar convergence of religious and imaginative experiences of reality by evoking biblical, kabbalistic, and hasidic sources, as the notes below attempt to show.

The Poem

[12] At the Turn of Childhood -- A New Fruit22

The carriage rolls down—
but they have no power to save me23 from a first night
in the Jerusalem hills,
an infinite night that took from the soul
the lust for possession—
as the spectacular darkness swallowed mountains
and courtyards, bushes and trees,
and the horses paced on the face of the heavens
together with the constellations.

I longed for shelter
but my father and mother wept in the darkened palace.
I pressed against them—
but they sang without a sound24
"What is man, that You have been mindful of him."25

And where was Grandfather?
When the sunrise glittered as we drank ancient wine

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(by the open windows)
brought us by air generous as the sea
and devoid of substance—
my grandfather forsook us for his soul pined
for his son in Paradise.  
And while my mother still sat on the mourners' stool
before we washed our faces of the tears
my father fell ill and did not rise from his illness.

By the dilapidated stone hedge the angels in charge of the dew
spoke in whispers with the weary man
as I rent my thin dress
to mark my childhood with a sign of mourning
as my hesitant mother was left in the remote room
whose walls were whitewashed,

as her weeping was lost among the mountains.

An unexpected gray bird
that came to break bread,
spread the radiance of the heavens
and the tears of our eyes became mingled
with the light of the sunset,
mixed with the golden glory.
A sudden light bird
prepared my soul for the melody of the grasses
for the scent of the olive trees' wonderment
for the joy of the clouds
and the flickering of the glass shards.

And my mother's hair is turning white
beneath the shawl,
for my reflecting, excited, set-apart father—
is asleep in the heart of the mountain,
for my faltering father whose life was hints of gold,
mere hints—who hoped so much,
is asleep in the heart of the rocky mountain.

She is looking with terror toward the burning horizon
from our latticed window—
her dreams torment her, her longing torments her.
Outside a butterfly flutters calmly
all around
outside the onyx shines. 27
I am drunk with the dance of the bitter scents
of the mountain stems
and with the acquaintance with the delicate taste,
a bit chilly, of grapes transparent as water
and pure as amethyst,
for at the turn of childhood eating a new fruit
opens before the soul the gates of Paradise,
that has no tree of knowledge and no serpent,
that cherubim do not guard at its opening
in the flaming heat of the ever-turning sword, 28
for at the turn of childhood my imagination dipped
in the dark honey of the palm-fruit,
upon whose shell the copper mountains emanated their brightness—
and before me opened the round golden wall
of the pomegranate 29

and I entered a palace 30 of transparent windows
and fountains of wine.

But in the late hours of the night
when my mother extinguishes the kerosene lamp
we are thrown in the darkness
with formless objects
forgotten and as if devoid of corporeality—
our existence hanging on the neighbors’ voices
beyond the wall.
When they keep silent
the dust tunnels sigh,
when they keep silent
the crevices open their mouths wide,
when they keep silent
I hear the steps of the sad-spirited 31
who comes up the mountain in the dark
who goes down the mountain in the dark
For outside the darkness is different, different
for outside one can stroll in gardens and orchards
dark as pits
according to the stars.
In the gloom of the silent room terrible eyes
strain,
the heart is terrified and its blood doesn't stir—
from beyond the wall a word comes
groping in the dark,
we sat in it as inside a boat
we were saved.

When did the kingdoms in the heights change
and the pure light enter the mourning chamber
to rouse colors and shapes—
when did the shining eyes of men
awaken?
And I repel from myself the cooking smells that pace
from all sides,
for they cast stains on the delicate embroidery
of my thoughts,
and I look on the neighbor's little daughters,
who are polishing the courtyard cobbles—
there the canvas curtain hangs like a curse
on the ways of sunrises,
looking on my life with its hostile eyes.

Slowly slowly I befriended the heavens
and began to distinguish darkness from darkness
night from night
and I said in my heart:
the name of the green nights transparent as the sea—
"You enticed me, O Lord, and I was enticed" or Jeremiah's crown,
and the name of the blue nights, starlight nights—
"In God I trust; I am not afraid; what can mortals do to me,"
and Jacob's dream is a night of silver,
a night of moon.
Slowly slowly I began to distinguish
face from face, voice from voice
and the little daughters became white roses
and roses whose petals are gold. 37
The roses flee from the big net
that the primeval darkness spreads-
in empty streets and alleys
the roses whisper:
Would that a man in whose eyes is the knowledge of the sun
stand at the gate.

A man whose face is white as paper
looks with overflowing wonder
at the little maidens.
He sings before us in his dying voice
about the king of great stature
about the fingers of the blind musicians
about the hospital=s copper gates.
The pale man makes jewelry
out of ancient verses
and lays them at night on the mountaintops.

In the morn the immortelle tells me:
The stammering man who sang to you
is close to me in the root of the soul. 38
In the morn the immortelle taught me
to distinguish a day of white fire
from a day of yellow fire
streets of the sun
from streets of gold waste.

The electricity of my thoughts, hissing
like a hot wind of the east,
frightens my gentle mother
concealed at home 39
and she closes her eyes
to be able to weep
on the necks of her father and mother 40
to whom there is no path in the revealed.

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Notes:

1. The major study of Zelda's life and work is Hamutal Bar-Yosef, 'Al Shirat Zelda (On Zelda's Poetry) (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1988).
3. Hamutal Bar-Yosef, On Zelda’s Poetry, p. 15. Judith Baskin pointed out to me how unusual this was.
7. Hamutal Bar-Yosef, On Zelda's Poetry, pp. 103-106, with references to later poems as well.
9. According to Dan Miron, it was the contemplative nature of Zelda’s poetry, not her religiosity, which hindered her acceptance by editors and critics, who, prior to the 1970's, expected female poets to limit themselves to the intimate and the emotional, to the Afeminine cycle of love, passion, pregnancy, and motherhood. The distinction between contemplation and religiosity, however, does not take into account the joining of the two in Habad. Dan Miron, Founding Mothers and Stepsisters: The Emergence of the First Hebrew Poetesses & Other Essays [Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1991), pp. 160-177
10. For a succinct survey of the issue from the perspective of a scholar of Hasidism, see Rachel Elior, Kabbalah and Hasidism Continuation or Change (Hebrew), in Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Division C: Jewish Thought and Literature (Jerusalem: World congress of Jewish Studies, 1986), pp. 107-114 and her The Paradoxiacal Ascent to God: The


12. In addition to the poem translated here (see note 22), the image is prominent in numerous poems in her first book, Penai.

13. According to the major thirteenth-century Kabbalistic work, the Zohar, one can enter the gates through prayer and observance of the commandments. The challenge is to find the path to the gates and then a key to open them. Metatron, a servant of the Shekhinah, holds the keys to the secret of the supernal mysteries. See Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishbi, The Wisdom of the Zohar: an Anthology of Texts, trans. David Goldstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), vol. 1, pp. 272-273 and vol. 2, pp. 626-631, 644-645.


16. The non-orthodox Israeli poet Daliah Rabikovitz (1936-2005) in her Ahavat Tapuah Ha-Zahav (Love of the Golden Apple) also used mystical sources. However, Zelda was the first orthodox poet to do so and to write mystical poetry. In a recent anthology of studies of Jewish women's writings, Judith Baskin wrote that "to become a Jewish woman writer was to become a cultural anomaly." See Judith R. Baskin, ed. Women of the Word (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 18. Significantly, Shmuel Niger's essay identifies the engendered divide between Yiddish and Hebrew, with the former's becoming the language of women's religious literature. In an interesting parallel to Zelda, he found that most early modern Yiddish female writers of ethical works and supplicatory prayers (tkhines) were of rabbinic descent. See Shmuel Niger, "Yiddish Literature and the Female Reader," trans. and abridged by Sheva Zucker, ibid, pp. 70-90.

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18. Early translations of poems by Zelda, by translators such as S.F. Chyet, Dorothea Crook-Gilad, Marcia Falk, Amnon Hadari, Chana Hoffman, Zvi Jagendorf, Harold Schimmel, and Edna G. Sharoni conformed to the format of literary journals which excludes notes. Since the completion of this article, Marcia Falk has published The Spectacular Difference: Selected Poems by Zelda (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2004), in which she does provide endnotes to the poems. Her translation of the poem (pp.85-99) is of a later version. The poem titled “New Fruit in Childhood,” translated by Edna Sharoni (Shademot 6 [1976], p. 66) is actually a translation of “The Sun Stands by Me” and not of “At the Turn of Childhood – a New Fruit.”

19. Hamutal Bar-Yosef, On Zelda’s Poetry, p. 64. The hiatus between her writing the poem and its publication is but one example of her complex publication career discussed at length in ibid, pp. 24-26.

20. Ibid, pp. 64-68, where the poem is also compared to Zelda’s short story “ha-Gerot,” (The Strangers).


22. The following translation of the poem is of the text published in Penai: ha-Carmel ha-Ee Nireh. I thank Hamutal Bar Yosef for her insightful criticism. In translating biblical phrases I followed the JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew text and the New JPS Translation (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1999). The Hebrew be-tor (at the turn) echoes Ester 2:12, 15, where it is used in the narration of the presentation of the women before the Persian king Ahasuerus, each at her turn, thus setting off the palace imagery developed later on in the poem. New fruit is an allusion to the Jewish blessing she-heheyyanu, recited upon the eating of a new fruit. Kabbalistic and hasidic writers endowed it with a symbolic meaning of drawing sustenance from God. See Hamutal Bar-Yosef, On Zelda’s Poetry, p. 64.

23. Cf. Isaiah 50:2 where God’s continuous covenant with the Israelites is stressed: Why, when I came, was no one there . . .  Have I not the power to save?


25. Psalms 8:5. The psalmist’s humility is triggered by his contemplation of the heavens, moon, and stars (see verse 4).

26. Cf. Psalm 84:3 and 119:81. The line also echoes the midrash of R. Shneur Zalman of Liadi on the meaning of the word tikhlah, purpose, in Psalm 119:96: tikhlah is an idiom of kaloth hanefesh, the yearning of the soul in the Garden of Eden, for there it is in a mode of end, limit,
27. The Hebrew shoham was one of the precious stones inlaid in the sacral vestments of the High Priest (cf. Exodus 28:9 and 39:6). Its identity is uncertain. The JPS translation has it as lazuli whereas the King James Version and Reuben Alcalay, The Complete Hebrew-English Dictionary (Ramat Gan: Massada, 1988)-as onyx.  
28. The ever-turning flaming sword (Genesis 3:24) was placed east of the Garden of Eden to guard the way to the Tree of Life. In the Zoharic Account of the Chariot (Ma’aseh Merkavah) it is the changing light of the powers of judgement. Cf. Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishbi, The Wisdom of the Zohar, vol. 2, p. 608. The sword is also one of the symbols of the sefirah of Malkhut (Kingdom). See Daniel Frisch, Sefer Otzar ha-Zohar ha-Shalem, trans. Yedidyah Berensdorf (Jerusalem: Alpha, 1977), vol. 4: heleq ha-Kabbalah, s.v. Malkhut: Lahat ha-Herev.  
29. These lines contain several key kabbalistic terms: Acopper mountains . . . round golden wall. In Zoharic cosmology, gold and copper, two of the four basic metals of antiquity are associated respectively with the sefirot of Gedullah (Greatness) and Tiferet (Beauty), two of the aspects of the divine. See Gershom G. Scholem, Kabbalah, p. 111; Ashell,@ Hebrew: kelippah. In Lurianic Kabbalah, a term for the evil forces which conceal the divine radiance and for gross matter in general. See Gershom G. Scholem, Kabbalah, pp. 134-135; emanated. Hebrew: she-he’etzilu.  
31. The sad spirited, Hebrew: atzuv ha-ruah. As is well-known, the Hebrew ruah means both wind and spirit. The atzuv ha-ruah in the poem, which I translated as the sad-spirited seems to refer to a mysterious man, whom the young girl imagined as walking outside, but also suggests anthropomorphic depiction of the wind blowing outside.  
32. The term rigmah, embroidery, is used in Hebrew to coin anatomical terms such as rigmat ta’im (cell tissue), rigmat sheririm (muscular tissue) and rigmat shuman (fatty issue). It also echoes the mystical image of the soul as a garment (beged, malbush) which is shaped through worship of God and fulfillment of the commandments. See Gershom Scholem, “Levush ha-Neshamot ve-Halukkah de-Rabbanan,” Tarbiz 24(1955), pp. 290-306.  

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34. According to a rabbinic tradition, the Israelites received two crowns at Mount Sinai but lost one crown when they worshiped the Golden Calf and the other in Jeremiah’s times, when they refused to heed the prophet’s remonstrance. See Louis Ginzberg, The Legends of the Jews (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1967-1969), vol. 3, pp. 92-93 and vol. 6, pp. 36-37.
35. A quotation of Psalms 56:5.
36. Both the medieval German Hasidim and the Spanish Kabbalists viewed Jacob’s dream about the angels of God going up and down a ladder set on the earth and reaching the sky (Genesis 28:10-22) as a simile for the prayers of human beings to God since prayer was perceived as a mystical ascent. See Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishbi, The Wisdom of the Zohar, vol. 3, p. 957 and Gershom G. Scholem, Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, p. 100.
37. The Hebrew shoshanim, usually translated in biblical texts as lilies, commonly mean roses in modern Hebrew. Their portrayal as a metaphor for the soul’s search for vitality and freedom and as a reflection of the divine is also rooted in kabbalistic and hasidic mystical literature, which in its turn, drew on the Song of Songs. See See Fischel Lachower and Isaiah Tishbi, The Wisdom of the Zohar, vol. 1, pp. 391-2 and Hamutal Bar-Yosef, On Zelda’s Poetry, pp. 55, 77. White, red, and yellow are the colors most commonly found in the Zohar and they stand for the three sefirot of Hesed (Love, Mercy), Gevurah (Power, especially manifested in judgment and punishment), and Tiferet (Splendor), respectively. White and Red symbolize the contrast between love and judgment whereas yellow is meant to be a mixture of the two. Ibid, p. 291.
39. The Hebrew sefunah ba-bayit is a quotation of Haggai 1:4.
40. A biblical expression used in the context of extremely emotional meetings of long-lost kinsmen. Cf. Genesis: 33:4 (Esau’s meeting with Jacob), 45:14, and 46:29 (Joseph’s meeting with his brother and father).

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