

## The Theoretical Kabbalah

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The most lasting product of the Provençal and Spanish schools of Kabbalah was compilation and publication of the classical Kabbalistic texts: the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, and the *Sefer ha-Zohar*. The Spanish Rabbi Moses de León (c.1250–1305) published the *Zohar* at roughly the same time when Abraham Abulafia was writing about the ecstatic Kabbalah. Controversy over the *Zohar*'s origins may never be resolved, but the work emerged as a major Jewish sacred text. Without doubt it became the most significant text in the development of the theoretical Kabbalah.

The *Zohar* provided all of the concepts on which the theoretical Kabbalah is based. But its full potential was not exploited for another 300 years. That task fell to an elite group of scholars who assembled at Safed, Galilee, in the 16th century. Moses Cordovero, Isaac Luria, and others codified the zoharic teachings and built the elaborate system of theoretical Kabbalah we recognize today.

In this segment we shall learn more about the Ain Sof and the sefiroth. We shall study the Kabbalistic story of creation, fall and redemption; we shall meet the Shekinah, the feminine aspect of God; and we shall explore the human soul and reflect on the role humanity can play in cosmic redemption. Specifically, this segment includes the following sections:

- Cultural Context: From Southern Europe to Safed
- The Divine Emanations
- Creation, fall and redemption
- The Shekinah
- Humanity: Constitution and Behavior
- Reflections, Resources, and Assignment.

### Cultural Context

#### Exodus from Provence and Spain

The Golden Age of southern European Kabbalism, discussed in Segment 2, came to an end as political changes undermined the environment in which generations of Jews had lived, worked, worshipped and studied. In 1209 the Albigensian Crusade was launched against the Cathar Christians of Provence, and in the 1230s the Medieval Inquisition was established in France. The Inquisition did not specifically target Jews, but as religious intolerance increased they soon found that they were no longer welcome. Meanwhile, Al-Andalus was crumbling as Christian forces conquered the Iberian Peninsula. By 1250, only Granada remained in Islamic hands. Then in 1492—the very year Christopher Columbus discovered America—the armies of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile captured Grenada and claimed the whole of Spain for Christendom.

Jews and Muslims had already been persecuted for 100 years. But their woes increased substantially when the Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478. Final conquest of the Moors was followed by a nationwide decree giving non-Christians, even those whose families had lived there for five centuries, an ultimatum of conversion or exile. Roughly one-third of Spanish Jews accepted baptism, but others—estimated to be more than 100,000—chose to leave the country. Some Jews took refuge in neighboring Portugal, which had secured independence as a Christian

nation in 1249. Unfortunately, that tactic only bought another five years' freedom. In 1497 the Portuguese Inquisition gave Jews a similar ultimatum, and a further mass exodus ensued.

The forced migration of Sephardic Jews created a new, large-scale Diaspora. Some moved to the Netherlands, while others settled in Venice or in Fez and Alexandria in north Africa. In due course, many Jews traveled on to Sicily, Greece, and the Middle East. The rapidly expanding Ottoman Empire offered a particularly attractive destination. The Ottoman Turks had conquered Constantinople in 1453 and made it their capital. In 1516 they wrested control of Palestine from the Egyptian Mamluks. Jews were welcomed into the Ottoman Empire with generous promises of religious toleration and opportunities to play significant roles in society. Skills in crafts, business, and the professions—notably medicine—made them sought-after immigrants. Everywhere the Jewish migrants went, rabbis followed to serve their religious needs. In due course *yeshivahs*, or schools of Torah, were established.

The Diaspora gave rise both to apocalyptic sentiments and to a sense of new beginnings. Influential people claimed that they were receiving messages from prophets of the biblical period. Others claimed to be guided by *maggidim*. *Maggid* (MGYD) is sometimes translated as “mentor-angel,” and some *maggidim* seemed to be personal angels in the sense of the Holy Guardian Angel of Ashkenazic tradition. A widespread belief also developed that the sufferings of the Jewish people prefaced the appearance of a messiah. That belief gained strength when substantial numbers of Jews arrived in Palestine in the late 15th and early 16th centuries. For the first time in nearly 1,500 years, Jews felt welcome in their ancestral homeland—welcomed, no less, by Muslim authorities.

Within 40 years of the expulsions from Spain and Portugal, displaced Sephardic Jews began to arrive at Safed, in the mountains of Galilee in northern Palestine. Also known as Tzfat, Safed commanded impressive views east to the Golan Heights, north to Lebanon, west to Mount Meron, and south to the Sea of Galilee. Safed already had a small Jewish population in the 1490s, mostly *Musta'arabim*, or Arabic-speaking Jews, whose ancestors had survived oppression by Roman occupation forces in the first and second centuries, and uneasy relationships with the Byzantine Christian rulers and pre-Ottoman Muslims of later times. The city was poor; its spiritual leader, Rabbi Peretz Colobo, had to support himself by operating a grocery store. But, Safed was replete with legends. One legend asserted that Shem and Ever, son and grandson of Noah, established *yeshivah* in Safed and that Jacob had studied there. More pervasive was the legend that the first-century Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was buried at Safed—along with his manuscript of the *Zohar*.

With the influx of 8,000-10,000 displaced Jews, Safed grew rapidly, and within 100 years the population reached 30,000. The city increased in prosperity, becoming an important center of the textile trade. It also became a major center of Jewish spirituality; the first book in Hebrew to be published in the Middle East was printed there. Most importantly for our theme, 16th-century Safed became a center of Kabbalistic study whose influence soon spread throughout the Middle East and Europe. Safed continues to be revered in the modern State of Israel for its heritage of Jewish history and culture. Esotericists look back on Safed as the place where the Judaic theoretical Kabbalah reached maturity.

## The Safed Kabbalists

Among the Jews who left Spain in 1492 were the Rabbi Joseph Saragossi, a native of Saragossa, and a four-year-old boy from Toledo named Joseph Caro. Saragossi traveled to Palestine and in 1496 was appointed chief rabbi of Sidon. Later he established a *yeshivah* in Safed where he taught the Talmud and Kabbalah. Caro (1488–1575) was a child prodigy and by age 20 was already recognized as an authority on rabbinic law. In 1535, while living in Salonica, Macedonia, he was visited by a *maggid* who urged him to move to Safed. Arriving there two years later, he found a community that had already grown to more than 1,000 Jewish families. Along with his

teacher, the Rabbi Jacob Taitatzak, he reestablished the ancient rite of rabbinic ordination—believed to be a necessary step before the messiah could come.

Moses ben Jacob Cordovero (1522–1570) was either born in Safed or arrived there in infancy. His family originally came from Córdoba, Spain, though it appears that they may have spent time in Portugal. The teenage Cordovero studied in Caro's yeshivah. Then, at the age of twenty, his maggid urged him to study the Kabbalah with his brother-in-law, the Rabbi Solomon ha-Levi Alkabetz. Cordovero soon mastered the *Zohar* and completed his first book, the monumental *Pardes Rimoni* ("Orchard of Pomegranates"), in 1548. He explained the title thus: "It is the orchard that I planted and where I shall delight. Its treatises are its shoots, its chapters its pomegranates. There, new interpretations are arranged orderly, like the seeds of the pomegranate." We should also note that *Pardes* is closely related etymologically to our word "paradise."

Influenced by the work of Moses Maimonides, Cordovero's treatment of the Kabbalah was orderly and logical, contrasting with the often-impenetrable, midrashic style of the *Zohar*. *Pardes Rimoni* put all that was known of the Kabbalah up to that time onto a systematic basis, establishing its author as a leading Kabbalist. Another famous work was his *Tomer Devorah* ("Palm Tree of Deborah"), a treatise on morality based on the attributes of the sefirot. As their reputations grew, Caro and Cordovero attracted other scholars to Safed, and each assembled a group of disciples. Had Cordovero not been overshadowed—somewhat unfairly, perhaps—by Isaac Luria, he would be remembered as the greatest of the Safed Kabbalists.

Isaac ben Solomon Luria (1534–1572) was born in Jerusalem to German parents. That ancestry set him aside from most others in Safed because he came from the Ashkenazic rather than the Sephardic tradition. Except for his very substantial contribution, the theoretical Kabbalah was primarily the product of Sephardic Judaism.

Luria spent some time in Egypt, living as a hermit on the banks of the Nile. In 1569, allegedly in response to instructions from Elijah, he moved to Safed to study with Cordovero just months before the latter's death. An outstanding scholar, poet and mystic, Luria became known as the *Ari*, or "the Lion." "Ari" is interpreted variously as Ashkenazi Rabbi Isaac or as *Adonenu* ("Our Master") Rabbi Isaac. Luria claimed that Elijah and earlier teachers continued to speak to him up to the time of his death. Whereas Cordovero had taken a rational approach to the Kabbalah, Luria took a more mystical approach. The modern Jewish scholar Eliahu Klein shares this insight:

The Ari doesn't ask why. He describes and reveals complex levels of intermingling, interfacing, creating, dissolving, and recreating of energy on a myriad of intra-Divine dimensions. It seems he is in the midst of constant visions.

Luria would lead his students—who came to be known as the "Lion Cubs"—on walks through the graveyards in and around Safed. He suggested that they lie down on the graves of *zaddikim* ("the righteous") and absorb the saints' wisdom. Luria favored an oral style of teaching, arguing that books could not contain true wisdom. His writings are limited to a few poems and prayers and a commentary on a single section of the *Zohar*. Isaac Luria died in an outbreak of the plague at the age of 38. He had spent only three years in Safed, but in that short time he accomplished much and won wide acclaim.

Most of what we know of Isaac Luria's Kabbalistic teachings comes from his disciples, especially from the Rabbi Chaim ben Joseph Vital (1543–1620). Vital was born in Safed and was educated in the Torah by leading rabbis. As a young man he had a vision that convinced him to study the Kabbalah. He studied first with Cordovero and then with Luria. Observing that his latter master committed few teachings to writing, Vital began to take copious notes of everything he learned.

However, Vital shared Luria's reluctance to see the teachings published. When Luria died, Vital—still in his 20s—demanded that other students give him their notes for safekeeping. Reportedly, not all of Vital's colleagues complied. They also took advantage of a period when Vital was sick to make surreptitious copies of his manuscripts. In due course the writings were published as the *Etz Chayyim* ("Tree of Life"), and from that book we have the most complete account of Luria's teachings. Among much else, the teachings asserted that study of the Kabbalah was pleasing to God, because that would facilitate the coming of the messiah. Vital spent most of his later life away from Safed, and he died in Damascus. For several years his outlook was dominated by Luria's teachings, but eventually he developed greater independence and shared his own insights. Before his death, Vital ordered that all his writings be buried with him. However, several years later, after performing a ritual known as *Sheilat Shalom* ("Requesting Peace"), students retrieved the manuscripts and published them.

The secrecy favored by Isaac Luria and Chaim Vital represented a return to attitudes in late antiquity and the gaonic period. Perhaps the two individuals felt that the insights they gained were too intimate to be revealed to others. But the larger Kabbalistic community was eager to study their work, and the teachings quickly spread to Italy, Poland and elsewhere. From then on any attempts to restrict dissemination were fruitless. A major stimulus was invention of the printing press. The first printed version of the *Zohar* appeared in Mantua, Italy, in 1558, and other important texts were printed soon thereafter.

Sadly, the Safed scholars were accused of sewing the seeds of the Sabbatean messianic movement. Certainly there was discussion of the coming of a messiah during the heyday of Safed Kabbalism, but the real problem arose several decades later. In the 1660s, the charismatic but psychologically unstable Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) proclaimed himself messiah and attracted popular support throughout the Jewish world. Zevi himself had no particular leanings toward the Kabbalah, but a leading supporter, Nathan of Gaza, used Kabbalistic teachings to bolster Zevi's claims. When Zevi converted to Islam to escape execution by the Turkish sultan, the movement turned into a fiasco. From the lofty heights which the theoretical Kabbalah had occupied for the five centuries after the *Zohar* was published, Kabbalistic study became tainted, and remained so for three centuries.

A few brave Kabbalists continued their studies, among them the Italian Rabbi Moses Chaim Luzzatto (1707–1746). Reportedly he mastered all the teachings of Isaac Luria by the time he was 14 and wrote his first book on the Kabbalah one year later. He went on to write numerous other works, some of them under the guidance of a *maggid* whom, he claimed, revealed previously unpublished teachings of Luria's. Accused of his own messianic ambitions, Luzzatto was persecuted and forced to leave Italy; moving first to Germany and then to the Netherlands. Luzzatto finally settled in Tiberias, Palestine, where he died from the plague at the age of 39. His *Klalout Hailan* ("Essentials of the Tree of Life") provides a concise summary of Luria's teachings. Whereas Vital captured Luria's stream-of-consciousness style of teaching, Luzzatto presented the teachings more logically.

## The Divine Emanations

Moses Cordovero, Isaac Luria, and other scholars drew upon concepts from the *Zohar* and developed them into an elaborate system of theology—or "theosophy," as Judaic scholars prefer to call it. That term will be avoided here because of possible confusion with the work of the Theosophical Society.

In the spirit of Maimonides' scholasticism, the Godhead was conceived of as "Absolute Being." Moreover it was deemed to be self-sufficient and *necessary*: its very definition demanded existence. Here we are reminded of the ontological argument for the existence of God proposed

by the 11th-century Christian scholastic Anselm of Canterbury. The Godhead, the Kabbalists argued, is the “Concealed of the Concealed,” entirely unknowable, beyond any power of human understanding. It is concealed behind three “veils”: the *Ain* (AYN), the *Ain Sof* (AYN SYP), and the *Ain Sof Aur* (AYN SVP AVR, “Limitless Light”). Strictly speaking, since we can speak of the veils, they cannot be the true Godhead; but for convenience we often use “Ain Sof” to refer to it.

**The Sefiroth**

The Godhead manifests, or reveals itself, through the sefiroth. Whereas the Ain Sof is without limitation, the sefiroth are limited by their respective attributes and by being differentiated from one another. The attributes allow the sefiroth to be apprehended by the human mind. Table 1 lists the sefiroth as they were known to the Safed Kabbalists.

**Table 1.  
Sefiroth in the Safed Kabbalah**

Sefirah		English Translation*
1	Kether KThR	Crown
2	Chokmah ChKMH	Wisdom
3	Binah BYNH	Understanding, intuition
--	Daath DETh	Knowledge, gnosis
4	Chesed or Gedulah ChSD GDVLH	Grace, lovingkindness Magnanimity, greatness
5	Geburah, Din or Pachad GBVRH DYN PKD	Severity Judgment Fear
6	Tifareth or Rachamim ThPARTh RKMYM	Beauty, harmony, heaven Compassion, mercy
7	Netzach NTzCh	Endurance, victory
8	Hod HVD	Splendor
9	Yesod YSVD	Foundation
10	Malkuth MLKVTh	Kingdom, sovereignty, stewardship

\* The Safed Kabbalists associated “Mercy” with Tifareth/Rachamim. In the modern Kabbalah, it is more commonly associated with Chesed.

The divine light first manifests in Kether. The light then cascades like water from one sefiroth to the next. At each stage the light encounters denser levels of reality, until in Malkuth it reaches the physical level. In Kether, the Divine is only partially manifest. Full manifestation—or “existence,” which literally means “to stand aside from”—demands duality, which first occurs in the polarity of Chokmah and Binah and continues through two other pairs of opposites: Chesed and Geburah, and Netzach and Hod. The first several sefiroth are so far above our level of

consciousness that we can only glimpse their meaning; but the lower sefiroth are more comprehensible to the human mind.

The theological significance of the sefiroth was discussed by Moses Nachmanides, Eleazor of Worms, and others as well as by the author of the *Bahir*. An important question was whether the sefiroth expressed the divine essence or were simply instruments of its manifestation. More specifically: should the sefiroth be viewed as divine emanations or as the vessels into which those emanations flowed? For example, Nachmanides argued that they were divine emanations. Cordovero concluded that the two views were both valid and mutually complementary. Each sefirah can be considered as a form and also as the light that dwells within it.

Explaining why the Ain Sof must manifest in precisely ten sefiroth, Cordovero turned to the Tetragrammaton, the unutterable name of God. He observed that the four Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton, YHWH expand to ten when the letters are spelled out: *yod, he, vav, he*. Furthermore, as Pythagoras had pointed out, ten is the sum of the digits one through four. “Ten” also had special significance in the Torah, where we find the Ten Commandments, ten plagues leading up to the Exodus, and the ten “sayings” of *Genesis* 1: “God *said*, Let there be light... God *said*, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters...,” and so forth. Despite the insistence that there could only be ten sefiroth, Cordovero and others often spoke of an 11th quasi-sefirah, Daath. In the *Pardes Rimonim* Cordovero refers Daath as “the Harmonizer” among the ten sefiroth.

From an early date, scholars and mystics had explored the rich symbolism of the sefiroth, citing planets, signs of the zodiac, angels, directions in space, colors, and other meaningful correlates. Kabbalists of the *Zohar* and Safed periods also correlated the sefiroth with biblical figures; for example, Chesed was associated with Abraham, Geburah with Isaac, Tifareth with Jacob and Moses, and Yesod with Joseph. Verses of scripture offered a further basis for correlation. Cordovero associated the sefiroth with the ten “praise” verses in *Psalms* 150 (Table 2). For example, “Praise God in His sanctuary,” which forms part of verse 1, was assigned to Kether, and “Praise him with the psaltery and harp,” part of verse 3, to Tifareth.

As noted in Segment 2, another practice dating from early times was the assignment of divine names to the sefiroth. Table 2 shows a consensus list of names from the Safed period. The assignment of divine names to the sefiroth has always varied somewhat from one teacher to another. For example, in his discussion of the names, Cordovero simplified the name for Geburah to *Elohim*, rather than *Elohim Gebor*; the name for Tifareth to *YHVH*; and the names for both Netzach and Hod to *Tzabaoth*. Some other writers have assigned *YHVH Elohim* to Daath. While the divine names have served the primary purposes of mystical contemplation and invocatory prayer or magic, their symbolism sheds further light on our understanding of the sefiroth.

Many people have assigned colors to the sefiroth, either to bring out their meaning or to provide a basis for meditative visualization. One of the first to do so was the 13th–14th-century Spanish Rabbi David ben Yehudah the Hasid, but the theme was taken up again by the Safed Kabbalists. Table 3 shows the correlations proposed by Cordovero in *Pardes Rimonim*. In the same work he noted that the high priest would wear white vestments on Yom Kippur to attract the merciful power of Chesed. On the other hand, Cordovero betrayed Hermetic influence—otherwise more common in the Christian than in the Judaic Kabbalah—when he discussed the use of colors on amulets:

It is thus known that when Names are drawn on amulets, those which involve Judgment are drawn in red, those involving Love, in white, and those pertaining to Mercy, in green. This is all known through Maggidim, who taught the methods of writing amulets.

**Table 2.**  
**Correlations with Praises and Divine Names**  
**(after Moses Cordovero and others)**

Sefirah	Verse in <i>Psalm</i> 150	Divine Name	
1 Kether	“Praise God in His sanctuary.” [v. 1]	<i>Eheieh</i> (AHYH)	“I am that I am”
2 Chokmah	“Praise him in the firmament of His power.” [v. 1]	<i>Yah</i> (YH)	Yah
3 Binah	“Praise him for His mighty acts.” [v. 2]	<i>YHVH Adonai</i> (YHVH ADNY)	YHVH Lord
4 Chesed	“Praise him according to His excellent greatness.” [v. 2]	<i>El</i> (AL)	El
5 Geburah	“Praise him with sound of the trumpet.” [v. 3]	<i>Elohim Gebor</i> (ALHYM GBR)	Elohim of Strength
6 Tifareth	“Praise him with the psaltery and harp.” [v. 3]	<i>YHVH Eloah va-Daath</i> (YHVH ALWH BDETh)	Lord YHVH of Knowledge
7 Netzach	“Praise him with the timbrel and dance.” [v. 4]	<i>Adonai Tzabaoth</i> (ADNY TzBAVTh)	Lord of Hosts
8 Hod	“Praise him with stringed instruments and organs.” [v. 4]	<i>Elohim Tzabaoth</i> (ALHYM TzBAVTh)	Elohim of Hosts
9 Yesod	“Praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.” [v. 5]	<i>Shaddai El-Chai</i> (ShDY AL ChY)	Almighty Living God
10 Malkuth	“Praise him upon the loud cymbals.” [v. 5]	<i>Adonai</i> (ADNY)	Lord

Some rabbis would probably have been offended by the suggestion that maggidim would stoop to providing instructions on amulet design! Notwithstanding, modern Kabbalists have often assigned different colors to the sefiroth; for example, Geburah is usually assumed to be red, Tifareth gold, and Netzach green; Kether is almost always taken to be a brilliant white.

### Tree of Life

The *Zohar* hinted that the sefiroth formed a symbolic spatial structure. Its model was God’s physical body, which was assumed to resemble the human body, but on an enormously larger scale. Thus Kether represented the head, Chokmah and Binah the shoulders, Yesod the phallus, and so forth. The Safed scholars depicted that structure in more abstract terms and created the glyph, or schematic diagram, known as the *Tree of Life* (*Etz Chayyim*). Moses Cordovero and Isaac Luria each offered versions of the Tree, and many later scholars have suggested their own.

**Table 3. Sefiroth and Colors  
(after Moses Cordovero)**

Sefirah	Color
1 Kether	Brilliant, blinding white
2 Chokmah	“A color that includes all colors”
3 Binah	Yellow, green
4 Chesed	White, silver
5 Geburah	Red, gold
6 Tifareth	Yellow, purple
7 Netzach	Light pink
8 Hod	Dark pink
9 Yesod	Orange
10 Malkuth	Blue

The sefiroth on the Tree of Life can be connected in various ways to form geometric figures of interest. The “Lightning Flash,” representing the primary line of descent of the divine light from the Ain Sof to Malkuth, was shown Figure 1 of Segment 1. Alternatively, attention can be drawn to the three vertical pillars or columns. Chokmah, Chesed and Netzach lie on the *Pillar of Mercy*—named after Chesed. Binah, Geburah and Hod lie on the *Pillar of Severity*—named after Geburah. Kether, Daath, Tifareth, Yesod and Malkuth lie on the middle *Pillar of Equilibrium*. Safed teachings placed Mercy on the right and Severity on the left, and we recall that God’s right hand has traditionally been regarded as the hand of mercy. The sefiroth on the two outer pillars can be interpreted as contrasting divine attributes or as contrasting human impulses or experiences. In either case the polarities are of great significance.

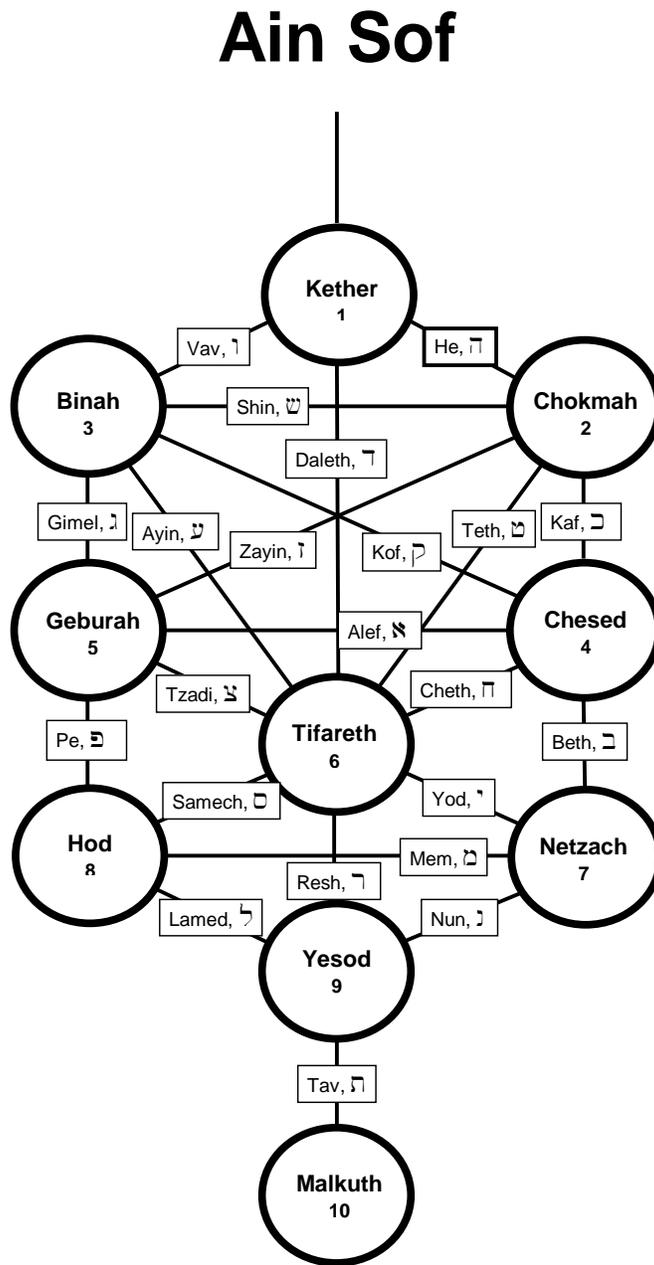
In most representations of the Tree of Life, the original ten sefiroth are connected by paths, or *netivoth* (singular: *nativ*, NThYB). The paths represent juxtapositions or associations among the sefiroth. Their primary relevance is not to the cosmos or even to humanity at large but to individual spiritual challenge. Significantly, in classical Hebrew, “nativ” denoted a spiritual path rather than a physical one.

Perhaps, because of the emphasis on the individual, no universally recognized set of netivoth has emerged. Isaac Luria proposed the pattern shown in Figure 1. Building upon suggestions in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, he related the netivoth to Hebrew letters. He assigned the three “mother” letters: *alef*, *mem* and *shin* to the horizontal paths; the seven “double” letters: *beth*, *gimel*, *daleth*, *kaf*, *pe*, *resh*, and *tav*, to the vertical paths; and the 12 “single” letters: *he*, *vav*, *zayin*, *cheth*, *teth*, *yod*, *lamed*, *nun*, *samech*, *ayin*, *tzaddi*, and *kof*, to the diagonal paths. Daath was mentioned in the *Zohar*, and it featured more prominently in the work of the Safed scholars, but it was ignored when the paths were drawn.

The numbers 3, 7 and 12 have profound numerological significance. It is not known when the Hebrew alphabet was divided thus. But the appearance of the numbers in the alphabet and in the Kabbalah suggests Pythagorean, or perhaps Egyptian, influence. The *Sefer Yetzirah* related the

seven double letters to the planets and the 12 single letters to the months of the year. Twelve can also be related to the tribes of Israel and to the signs of the zodiac. Later the three mother letters would be related to three of the four elements: fire, air and water.

**Figure 1. The Sefiroth and Paths  
According to Isaac Luria**



It is worth noting that Luria’s assignments of Hebrew letters to the *netiv* are not the same as the assignments suggested by the 19th- and 20th-century writers. Notwithstanding, virtually all modern versions of the Tree of Life restrict the number of paths to 22—the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet—even though certain pairs of *sefirot* have to be left unconnected. For example, in the Lurianic version shown in Figure 1, Malkuth is not connected to either Hod or Netzach. In an alternative version proposed by the 18th-century Kabbalist Eliahu Gaon of Vilna, those two connections are made, but Tifareth is not linked to Chokmah and Binah.

Although the *sefirot* are differentiated, the Safed Kabbalists stressed their unity in the divine essence from which they emanated. By inference, each *sefirah* contains the seeds of all the others. Thus it is meaningful to speak of “the Kether in Tifareth,” or “the Netzach in Chokmah.” Modern esotericists notice a similar situation in connection with the subrays of the seven major rays. Some representations of the Tree of Life, proposed in the 16th–18th centuries, showed a miniature Tree embedded in each *sefirah* or drawn beside it. The resulting diagrams became quite complicated. An example, the work of the Christian Kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1631–1689) who was influenced by Isaac Luria, will be shown in the next segment of the course.

### The Four Worlds

In addition to the *sefirot*, the *Zohar* identified four levels of reality, which they termed “worlds,” or *olamin* (singular: *olam*). The four worlds are: *Atziluth* (ATzKVTh), *Briah* (BRYAH), *Yetzirah* (YTzYRH), and *Assiah* (AShYH) (Table 4). Just as the divine light descends through the *sefirot* from Kether to Malkuth, it descends through the worlds—from Atziluth, the archetypal World of Emanation, to Assiah, the World of Action, or Realization. Cordovero explained: Emanation (Atziluth) comes from the Emanator, creation (Briah) from emanation, formation (Yetzirah) from creation, and action (Assiah) from formation.” Interestingly, the descriptors of the three lower worlds—“creation,” “formation” and “realization”—are all related conceptually; however the shades of meaning are intended to capture notions of increasing degrees of concretization as we move down from Briah to Assiah.

**Table 4. The Four Worlds**

	World		Denizens	Hebrew Letter
<i>Atziluth</i>	ATzKVTh	Emanation	Divine emanations, names of God, archetypes	Yod
<i>Briah</i>	BRYAH	Creation	Archangels	He
<i>Yetzirah</i>	YTzYRH	Formation	Angels	Vav
<i>Assiah</i>	AShYH	Action or “Realization”	Humanity	He

The *sefirot* and also the divine names are considered to reside on Atziluth. The intermediate worlds of Briah and Yetzirah are, respectively, the domains of the archangels and lesser angels. Briah was considered feminine, complementing the masculine Atziluth. The Safed Kabbalists considered Assiah to be the everyday world of human affairs—though Christian Kabbalists often treated it as the domain of the planets. Isaac Luria correlated the four worlds with the letters of the Tetragrammaton (Table 4).

The concept of the four worlds allows the Tree of Life to provide a psychological as well as a theological model. Its symbolism can be applied to humankind as well as to God, without minimizing the gulf between God and humanity—and perhaps avoiding any suggestion of blasphemy. Atziluth is the natural domain of the Divine, and Assiah the natural domain of humanity. But the worlds are not isolated from one another, and movement from one to another is possible. Just as the divine light descends through the sefiroth and through the worlds, the human soul has the opportunity to explore the paths above Malkuth and the worlds above Assiah.

## Creation, Fall and Redemption

One of the most interesting aspects of Kabbalistic thought, as it emerged from the *Zohar* and the Safed school, was a creation story. The story helped explain how the universe came into being in a rather imperfect state. In particular, it offered an explanation for the origin of evil. The story also provided further insights into the Ain Sof, the sefiroth, humanity, and their mutual relationships.

In the beginning, the story recounts, there was nothing but the Ain Sof—eternal, infinite, and self-sufficient. Then, for reasons which we cannot hope to penetrate, the Divine decided to manifest or reveal itself. The manifest universe was produced by a process of emanation, or outpouring, of the divine light. The *Zohar* explained:

A spark of impenetrable darkness flashed within the concealed of the concealed from the head of Infinity—a cluster of vapor forming in formlessness... not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all... It yielded radiant colors. Deep within the spark gushed a flow, splaying colors below.

The explosion of light was expressed through the Hebrew alphabet and the Torah which was constructed from it:

And there was light—light that already was. This light is concealed mystery, and expansion expanding, bursting from the mysterious secret of the hidden supernal aura. First it burst, generating from its mystery a single concealed point... It expanded, and seven letters of the alphabet shone within it [and in turn the remainder of the 22 letters.] The *expanse* congealed, folding into shape, forming forms. Torah was engraved there, to shine forth.

Like many philosophers before and since their time, the Safed scholars wondered how the infinite and unknowable could become finite and known. In particular, since the Ain Sof occupied the whole of “space,” where could the universe be created? The proposed solution was that the Ain Sof underwent a “contraction,” or *tzimtzum* (TzMTzVM), which left a circular or spherical region of emptiness. Into that dark void a single ray, or “thread,” of divine light penetrated. To quote Luzzatto:

He willed to create, and contracted His light to create all beings, by giving them a space... The space being circular, the Ain Sof encircles it from all sides. A ray emerged from Him, entered on one side...

The void became a region of enormous potency. The prototypical *Adam Kadmon* (“primordial man”) was formed in it by God’s command: “Let us make man in our image” [*Genesis* 1:26]. The sefiroth also were created by divine utterance, taking up positions aligned with the various parts of Adam Kadmon’s body. The theme that God created the universe by the power of speech runs through the whole of Jewish mysticism, and we have already noted the ten “sayings” in the first chapter of *Genesis*. We also note that “sefirah” can be interpreted both as word and number, and the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet: *alef* through *yod*, represent the numbers one through 10. The creative ray of light that penetrated the void has sometimes been described as a *yod*, which has a numerical value of 10.

## Shattering and Repair of the Vessels

The divine light flowed into the sefirothic vessels in the highest world of Atziluth. However they were not robust enough to withstand the impact. While the upper three sefiroth managed to survive in a damaged state, the lower seven did not: “All seven vessels shattered and collapsed, for they were not able to contain the light.” The “breaking of the vessels:” the *shevirat ha-kelim*, was a catastrophe of cosmic proportions.

Much of the divine light was withdrawn into the Ain Sof, while the shards from the broken forms fell into the lower realms to form the *klifoth* (singular: *klifah*, QLYPH, “husk” or “shell”). In the *Zohar* we read: “For this light... lowered itself and diminished its own radiance while the klifoth were established in their places. This gave place to the emerging of the klifoth.” In another reference, the klifoth were described as the “bark” on the Tree of Life.

Separated from the Creator, the *klifoth* constituted the seeds of evil. Through the catastrophe duality came into the world. But without that duality perhaps we could not have enjoyed freewill—or even physical existence. Where precisely did the klifoth go? They were scattered through the three lower worlds: Briah, Yetzirah and Assiah—or even down to a fifth world below them. The “World of Klifoth,” might be identified with Assiah or with an underworld, the domain of evil. Wherever, they went, each klifah retained a tiny spark of light and qualities associated with its sefirah of origin, so it is meaningful to speak of the “klifah of Geburah,” the “klifah of Hod,” and so forth.

The cosmic catastrophe was followed by the “repairing of the world,” the *tikkun olam*, in which God reconstructed the sefiroth. Chaim Vital explained: “It arose in His will to recreate all these worlds so they could bear the light... As a result, the lights returned more concealed; thus these worlds were sustained and enabled to contain the light.” According to the Safed scholars, the sefirothic vessels were not repaired directly. Instead, the *tikkun* involved an intermediate stage: the creation of five divine “personifications,” or *partzufim* (singular *partzuf*, PRTzVP, “face”). The *partzufim* can be understood in much the same way as the persons of the Christian trinity. They are listed in Table 5, and Figure 2 shows the simplified Tree of Life they form. Three of the *partzufim* were built around the damaged, but surviving, sefiroth: Kether, Chokmah and Binah. And two new *partzufim* were created.

The *Arikh Anpin* (ARYK ANPYN), the rebuilt Kether, was identified with the Ancient of Days of *Daniel* 7. Or, to emphasize his early manifestation even more strongly, it was presented as the “Ancient of Ancients.” The *Arikh Anpin* stood aloof from duality as the pre-sexual manifestation of God—or perhaps as the principle in which all polarities will eventually be resolved. Elsewhere, gender polarities were portrayed vividly.

Chokmah and Binah were rebuilt as *Abba* (AB, “Father”) and *Imma* (AM, “Mother”). The identification of Chokmah with *Abba* was problematic, insofar as “Chokmah” is a feminine noun in Hebrew and was referred to as “she” throughout the Old Testament. Its direct Greek equivalent is Sophia. Nonetheless, the misogynistic Philo of Alexandria had already offered the terse solution: “We do not concern ourselves with names, but simply declare God’s daughter, Wisdom, to be masculine.” Whatever the justification, Chokmah was allowed to become the Kabbalistic symbol of masculine potency, and it serves well in relationship to the feminine receptivity and form-building capability of Binah.

*Abba* and *Imma* serve as the cosmic parents, giving new meaning to the commandment: “Honour thy father and thy mother.” In turn, *Abba* and *Imma* gave birth to two children: a son and daughter. The son, the *Zeir Anpin* (ZEYR ANPYN, “son” or “heaven”), customarily referred to as “The Holy One,” was compared—or even identified—with the biblical Jacob/Israel, father of the 12 tribes. The daughter *Nukvah* (NVQBH, “daughter” or “earth”) was compared jointly with two

of Jacob's four wives: the rival but complementary sisters, Leah and Rachel. Invoking yet other systems of symbolism, the Zeir Anpin and Nkvah were identified, respectively, with the sun and moon, and with the heavens and the earth.

**Table 5. The Partzufim  
or Divine Personifications**

	<b>Partzuf</b>		<b>Significance</b>	<b>Related Sefiroth</b>
<i>Arikh Anpin</i>	ARYK ANPYN	“Long Face,” or “Immortal Face.” The “long suffering one.”	The Ancient of Days, or the Ancient of All Ancients.	<i>Kether</i>
<i>Abba</i>	AB	“Father”	Primeval masculine principle.	<i>Chokmah</i>
<i>Imma</i> (or <i>Ama</i> )	AM	“Mother”	Primeval feminine principle.	<i>Binah</i>
<i>Zeir Anpin</i>	ZEYR ANPYN	“Short Face,” or “Young Face.” The “impatient one.” The divine son- bridegroom.	Mediator, the Logos, the Messiah. The Holy One. “The heavens.”	<i>Daath, Chesed, Geburah, Tifareth, Netzach, Hod &amp; Yesod</i>
<i>Nukvah</i>	NVQBH	“Daughter.” The divine daughter-bride.	Humanity, the earth. The Shekinah.	<i>Malkuth</i>

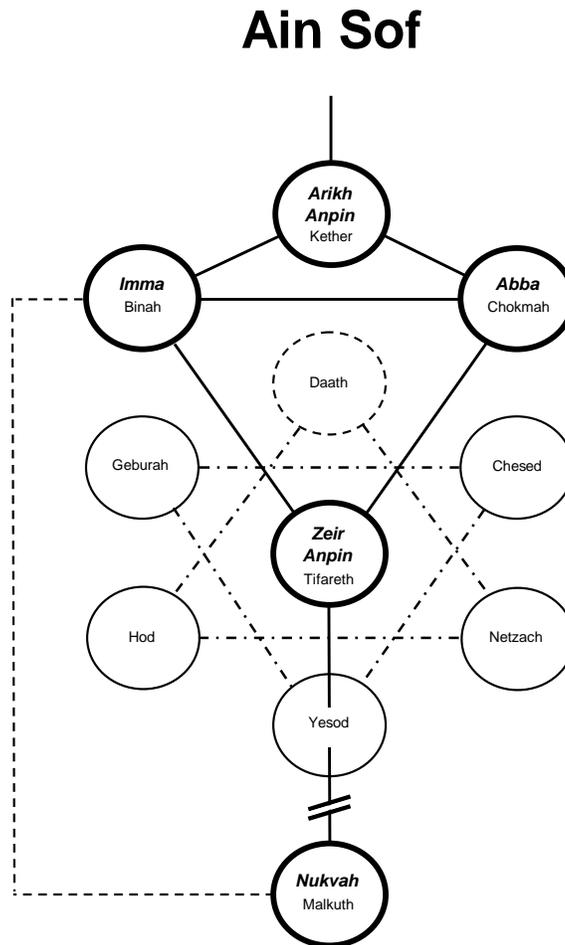
Descriptions of the creation of the Zeir Anpin and Nukvah in the Lurianic literature read like a manual of dating behavior, obstetrics, and child-rearing. Also, allegory took precedence over narrative consistency in the birth-story of the Holy One and Nukvah. Isaac Luria spoke at length about the children's birth as back-to-back Siamese twins who were separated later and turned “to face each other.” Elsewhere he spoke of different gestation periods: the normal nine months for the Zeir Anpin, but 12 months for Nukvah.

In addition to being siblings, the Holy One and Nukvah were betrothed to be married. Luria's students, no less than other Kabbalists, were dismayed by the suggestion of an incestuous marriage. However, such taboos were held to apply only to humanity and not to the Divine.

The final phase of creation/redemption was the reconstruction of the lower sefiroth from the Zeir Anpin and Nukvah. Nukvah became the new Malkuth. Her dual nature as both Leah and Rachel is reflected in the duality of Malkuth, where two realities coexist: “One is the world of concealment, namely Leah, and one is the world of revelation, namely Rachel.” The Zeir Anpin, centered on Tifareth, expanded to create five additional sefiroth: Chesed, Geburah, Netzach, Hod and Yesod—six if Daath is included. The six sefiroth surrounding the Zeir Anpin/Tifareth form a hexagram, or Star of David (Figure 2). Christian Kabbalists would associate Tifareth with Christ. The hexagram retains significance because “six” is regarded in numerology as the number of the Christ. The plural nature of the Zeir Anpin is reflected in the opening verse of *Genesis*: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” *Anpin* itself is a plural Aramaic word.

According to the *Zohar*, Tifareth is identified with the six directions in space and also with the first three letters of the Tetragrammaton: *yod, he, vav*; the final *he* is associated with Malkuth.

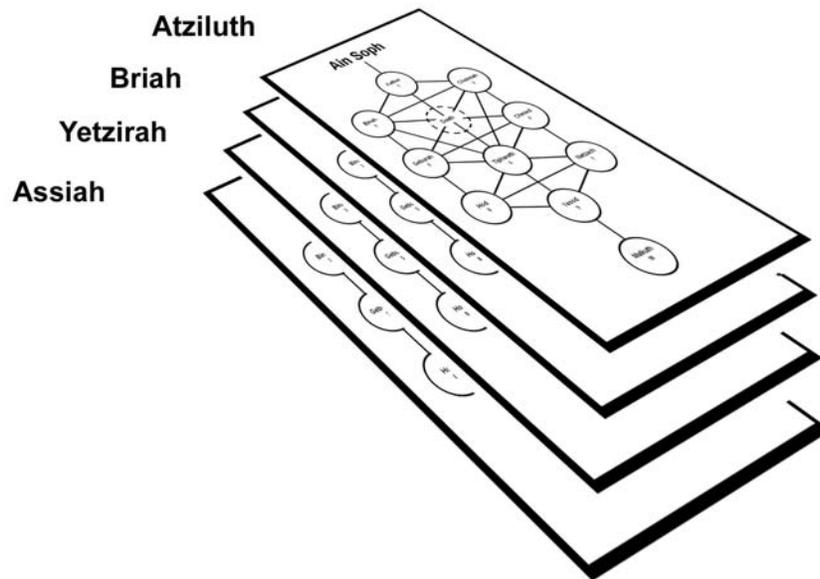
**Figure 2. The Partzufim in Relation to the Reconstructed Sefiroth**



The Safed scholars explained that, when the seven lower sefiroth were originally created, they were aligned on a single column. The Tree of Life only attained its now-familiar form when the lower sefiroth were reconstructed after the shattering of the vessels. The three pillars emerged, and with them the Chesed-Geburah and Netzach-Hod dualities.

The four worlds also assumed their familiar form, with five partzufim and ten (or 11) sefiroth on each world. The notion that the whole Tree of Life is reproduced on all four worlds (Figure 3) contrasts with claims by other Kabbalists that there is only one Tree, and the “worlds” are comprised of subsets of sefiroth within it. By definition, the sefiroth—the divine emanations—emerged first on Atziluth, the World of Emanations. Subsequently, the corresponding sefiroth were created on the lower worlds. In Luzzatto’s words: “There is a screen that separates one world from another. From this screen, the ten sefiroth of the lower world come out from the ten sefiroth of the higher world.” Drawing upon the concept that Adam Kadmon resided on the

**Figure 3. The Sefiroth and the Worlds**



world of Atziluth, some teachers postulated that three other “Adams” inhabited the lower worlds; the last, residing on Assiah, represented humanity.

Although the five partzufim and the sefiroth were now all in place, the link between the son, Zeir Anpin/Tifareth, and the daughter, Nukvah/Malkuth, remained tenuous. Moreover the latter lacked her full divine status. Like the moon that receives its light from the sun, Nukvah had no light of her own but depended on the light of the Zeir Anpin. The *Zohar* commented that the Zeir Anpin resides on the world of Atziluth, while Nukvah has fallen to Briah. The “marriage” of Nukvah and the Zeir Anpin—their reunification on Atziluth—would not be consummated until the messiah comes. Meanwhile, Nukvah’s sole source of sustenance comes from the indirect link with her divine mother, Imma (Figure 2).

## The Shekinah

The story of the divine daughter Nukvah, and the preparations for her wedding, ran parallel and overlapped with the older story of the Shekinah. In order to understand the latter story we need to trace the evolution of the Shekinah from her origins in biblical Judaism.

The word *Shekinah* (ShKYNH) was probably coined toward the end of the biblical period. It is thought to be derived from the root verb *shakan* (“to dwell or abide”). “Shakan” was often used in the Hebrew scriptures to denote the presence of God in sacred places like the Ark of the Covenant, Mount Sinai, or the Holy of Holies. For example: “The glory of the LORD abode [shakan] upon mount Sinai.” [*Exodus* 24:16] And: “For thus saith the high and lofty One that inhabiteth [shakan] eternity, whose name is Holy; I dwell [shakan] in the high and holy place.” [*Isaiah* 57:15] From the latter part of the first century CE onward, the Shekinah could no longer be found in the temple which had been destroyed by the Romans, but it could still be found in the world and in people’s hearts.

In the *Talmud* the Shekinah came to denote the immanence of God, contrasting with the transcendence of the Tetragrammaton. The Shekinah was the divine presence in the world, the divine glory—a sentiment captured by the scriptural passage: “The whole earth is full of his glory.” [Isaiah 6:3] The Shekinah was sometimes associated with the rainbow, an expression of glory but also the symbol of his covenant with Noah. Retrospectively, it was also associated with the cloud and pillar of fire that went before the Israelites during the Exodus.

The fact that “Shekinah” was a feminine noun gradually took on more than grammatical significance. The Shekinah began to be anthropomorphized, with a definite feminine persona. Anthropomorphism of the Shekinah is evident in the *Bahir*:

This is like a royal princess who came from a far place. People did not know her origin, but they saw that she was a woman of valor, beautiful and refined in all her ways. They said, “She certainly originates from the side of light, for she illuminates the world through her deeds.”

As personification of the Shekinah increased, she evolved into a female aspect of God, an expression of the Divine Feminine. The fact that the Shekinah is mentioned 1,065 times in the *Zohar* attests to the amount of attention that came to be focused on her. Among much else the Shekinah was heralded as the “Mother of Israel,” the protector of her people, sharing in their sufferings but also rejoicing in their triumphs.

A common theme was the Shekinah’s role during the Jews’ exiled to Babylon in the sixth century BCE. According to the *Zohar*: “The Shekinah is revealed below in this world. When the children of Israel were in exile, the Shekinah was not perfected below or above. This is because the Shekinah is in exile with them.” Elsewhere in the *Zohar* we find: “the angels escorted the Shekinah to Babylon, sat there and wept with Israel”—a reference to the scriptural passage: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.” [Psalm 137:1-2] It should be noted that weeping was not just an expression of sorrow; as noted in Segment 3, it was also a common mystical practice.

As Jews of Safed looked back over history, they began to weave the Shekinah into their own stories of exile and suffering. After the failed revolts against the Romans in the second century CE, large numbers of Jews were banished or sold into slavery. The Merovingian King Dagobert I expelled Jews from France in 629, and Edward I expelled them from England in 1290. In 1492 Jews were expelled from Spain, and in 1497 from Portugal. Those tragedies were projected onto the Shekinah. She had been exiled too and shared their suffering; but the Shekinah also expressed the Jewish people’s unbreakable link with God and served as the guarantor of the Covenant. As the story of creation and redemption gathered momentum, the Shekinah’s exile even began to be associated with the shattering of the vessels, and rescuing her became associated with the repairing of the sefiroth.

Like Nukvah, the Shekinah was betrothed to the Holy One. And the Shekinah’s wedding was delayed, in this case because of the bride had been defiled and was wandering in the wilderness. The Shekinah was lost and defiled, and the grieving bridegroom awaited her. She must be found, adorned in her finery, and brought to the wedding. Every Sabbath was considered an opportunity for the wedding. The *Zohar* urged “we should to make a beautiful canopy with beautiful decorations to invite the Supernal Bride, who is the Shekinah.” Solomon Alkabetz, Cordovero’s mentor, encouraged Jews to “go forth to welcome the Sabbath Queen.” Significantly, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, and the Shekinah/Malkuth is the seventh of the lower sephiroth.

Kabbalists customarily associated the Shekinah with the tenth and lowest sephirah in the Tree of Life: *Malkuth*, the “Kingdom.” Indeed “Shekinah” was often used as an alternative name for Malkuth. That association is appropriate since the Shekinah is the divine presence in the world. The fact that she is also viewed the divine glory should inspire us to see the corresponding glory in nature. The Shekinah’s wedding was to occur on the Sabbath, the seventh day of the week. Significantly, the Shekinah/Malkuth is the seventh of the lower sephiroth.

The feminine character of the lowest sephirah is not surprising when we recognize that it receives the divine force from all higher sephiroth; “receptiveness” is a primary feminine archetype. The immanent Shekinah of Malkuth is the “lower Shekinah,” contrasting with—yet inseparably connected with—the “supernal Shekinah” of *Binah*. The “combined” Shekinah is a feminine expression of Deity reaching from the very highest levels to the plane of earthly existence.

## Humanity: Constitution and Behavior

### The Soul and Its Destiny

Judaic concepts of the human soul evolved slowly during the biblical period. Three words in the Hebrew Bible correspond to “soul”: *nefesh* (NPSH), *ruach* (RVCh), and *neshamah* (NShMH). The *nefesh* was viewed as the animating principle in a living body; anything that was alive had a *nefesh*, whereas inanimate objects did not. The *nefesh* could be compared to the Egyptian *ka* and to the etheric body of Theosophical teachings. The *ruach* and *neshamah*, both of which can be translated as breath, wind or spirit, were treated as other aspects of the soul. These definitions of the three aspects stood the test of time. In one edition of the *Zohar*, *ruach* is translated as “spirit” and *neshamah* as “soul breath.”

During most of the biblical period, the precise relationships among the various aspects of the soul, and between the body and the soul, were never spelled out. Under Hellenic influence toward the end of the period, however, Judaism began to distinguish body and soul more clearly and to embrace Platonic notions of a threefold soul. The *nefesh*, *ruach*, and *neshamah* became a hierarchical structure, with the *neshamah* as the highest aspect. *Nefesh* came to mean the animal and vegetative nature, *ruach* the ethical principle, and *neshamah* the purely spiritual intelligence.

This notion of an ordered triplicity passed into Kabbalistic teachings. But according to those teachings, not everyone has the two higher aspects; they have to be earned. The *Zohar* explained: “When a man is born, he is given a *nefesh* of the animal element... If he gains further merit, he is given a *ruach* from the aspect of the holy living creatures, namely from the world of *Yetzirah*. If he merits further, he is given a *neshamah* from the part of the throne, namely from the world of *Briah*.” The throne, of course, had great significance in Merkabah mysticism.

The *Zohar* hints that there might be still higher aspects of the soul. The soul, it says, has “five names, *Neshamah*, *Ruach*, *Nefesh*, *Chayah*, *Yechidah*.” The *chayah* (ChYH, “source of life”) seems to be a higher correlate of the *nefesh*: the *nefesh* on a higher plane, while the *yechidah* (YChYDAH, “unity”) resembles the monad of Neoplatonic and Theosophical teachings. Unfoldment of the *yechidah* could be compared with attainment of a high initiation. Isaac Luria suggested that the *chayah* and *yechidah* reside on the world of *Atziluth*.

In addition to the “five names,” another aspect of the soul, which dated from earliest times, was the *tzelem* (TzLM, “image” or “shadow”). In the first chapter of *Genesis* God said “Let us make man in our image [tzelem].” The *tzelem* would play a role in later Kabbalistic literature. In ancient Egypt, a person’s shadow, or *khaibit*, was also regarded as an aspect of the soul. Yet another concept of the soul, shared by both Egyptian and Judaic culture, was a person’s name. One’s name—particularly if one stood out from the crowd—conveyed notions of personal identity, contrasting with the tribal collectiveness so prevalent in early cultures. A change of

name signaled a change in soul-purpose; for instance the angel gave Jacob the new name Israel, and he became father of the Jewish nation.

The concept that God descended into manifestation through the sefiroth is, of course, central to Kabbalistic teaching. Platonic philosophy taught that the human soul also descended from higher levels of reality into physical manifestation and must find its way back to spirit. In turn, a similar principle found its way into Hellenic Judaism. Philo of Alexandria, who made important contributions to Jewish thought, affirmed that the soul is divine in origin and is eternal. Philo embraced Platonic dualism, attributing sin to the descent of spirit into matter. Although the Kabbalists did not concern themselves much with the soul's original descent into dense physical matter—that is, to Malkuth in Assiah—they emphasized the need for it to work its way up through the sefiroth and the four worlds.

The soul's ascent is reminiscent of the Merkabah mystics' journeys through the seven *hekhaloth*, or “palaces.” Indeed the *Bahir* mentions the “Throne of the Blessed One” and the “Throne of Glory,” adding the customary references to *Exodus* 24:10 and *Ezekiel* 1:26. We also recall that a throne was the symbol of the Egyptian goddess Isis—and, we might argue, perhaps a symbol of the Shekinah. As already noted, the world of Briah has feminine associations. Elsewhere in the *Zohar*, we learn that the four legs of the throne are Chesed, Geburah, Tifareth and Malkuth. Acquisition of a ruach is the key to immortality:

After a person's death, [the ruach] leaves this world and is separated from the nefesh, which remains hovering over the grave, and it enters the Garden of Eden of this world. There, it clothes itself with the air of the Garden of Eden, just as the supernal angels do when they come down to this world.

Several passages in the *Zohar* relate the sefiroth to the hekhaloth. Consistency is not always maintained, but the general consensus is that the first palace can be identified with Yesod—the sefirah immediately above the everyday realm of Malkuth—the fourth with Tifareth, and the seventh with Binah—often described as “the throne.” In the assignment of archangels to the sefiroth, Metatron is usually associated with Kether. That assignment is reasonable since “Metatron” means “above the throne,” and Kether is above Binah. But Chokmah lies between them, and its archangel, Ratzel (“Herald”) would have to be fitted into the emerging picture. Contrasting with—or perhaps complementing—the depiction of Binah as “the throne,” a passage from the *Zohar* quoted earlier referred to the World of Briah as the “throne-world.” Clearly the qualities of the sefiroth and worlds were not always distinguished in the Kabbalists' minds.

In our ascent through the Tree of Life we are destined to explore both the sefiroth and the paths connecting them. The *Sefer Yetzirah* spoke of 32 “paths to wisdom,” consisting of the 10 sefiroth and the 22 netivoh. The rarified higher sefiroth will provide experiences very different from the “earthiness” of Malkuth. The sefiroth on the two outer pillars will also offer contrasting experiences. For example, the grace of Chesed will be juxtaposed against the fierce justice of Geburah; the exuberant creativity of Netzach against the cold rationalism of Hod. The Kabbalah offered a rich portrayal of dualities; but it was a healthier one than the stark spirit-matter, good-evil dichotomies of Zoroastrianism, classical Gnosticism—and, to a lesser extent, Christianity.

Everybody faces the struggle between the polar opposites of good and evil. The *Sefer Yetzirah* asserted that good and evil give meaning to each other: “Good defines evil, and evil defines good.” However morality was not simply a matter of establishing balance, like harmonizing Chesed and Geburah, or Netzach and Hod. Pious Jews must obey the law and do penance when they failed. Kabbalists, like thoughtful people everywhere, wrestled with the philosophical problem of reconciling evil with belief in a beneficent God—and divine justice. Why, the *Bahir* had asked, do the just suffer in this world, while the wicked may prosper? The answer was that

the righteous person was being punished for previous wickedness, to which Rabbi Shimon added: “I am not speaking of his present lifetime.”

Belief in any kind of personal afterlife was slow to develop in Judaism. Throughout most of the biblical era, a few prominent figures like Elijah were believed to reside in heaven and might come again to earth. But for the mass of the people, hopes of survival were focused on future generations of the Jewish race. Notions of reincarnation were foreign to mainstream Judaism in biblical times and later.

However, under Hellenic influence, belief in individual immortality began to take hold in late biblical times. And notions of reincarnation gained a foothold, at least in esoteric Judaism. Belief in reincarnation is evident in the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*, and it continued among Kabbalists in the Safed period. Reincarnation was referred to as *gilgul* (GLGVL). *Gilgul*, derived from the Hebrew word for “wheel,” captured the notion of “revolving” or “turning over,” calling to mind Hindu and Buddhist notions of the Wheel of Rebirth.

Isaac Luria hypothesized that all souls are fragments of Adam’s and that the fragments inhabit a succession of bodies. Luria appealed to an analogy dating back to the *Bahir*, likening rebirth to donning new clothes. Over time people could reach the perfection that was lost in the Fall, where “perfection” meant illumination by the *Shekinah*.

In one of his major works, *Shaar Ha-Gilgulim*, Chaim Vital provided examples of reincarnation among biblical figures. According to his account, Abel and Seth reincarnated as Moses. Jacob’s father-in-law, Lavan, reincarnated as Bilaam, during the time of Moses, and Naval, during the time of David. Jacob himself reincarnated as Rabbi Akiba. Joseph’s ten brothers who sold him into slavery were punished by having to reincarnate as the ten Tannaic martyrs executed by the Romans in the second century CE. However rebirth as a martyr was not the worst possible fate. Vital claimed that the soul of someone who had committed a particularly grievous sin could incarnate as an animal, a plant, or even some form of inert matter. Only after a long and arduous journey could the soul return to a human form. Other Kabbalists believed that the worst outcome was exile from the divine presence and the community of Jewish people. There, the collective suffering of the people—and the empathetic suffering of *Shekinah*—would all be focused on that hapless individual. Another terrifying prospect for the rabbis was to reincarnate as a woman!

Assuming progress over time, an individual’s spiritual attainment could be expected to reflect the number of times he or she had incarnated. Luzzatto observed: “Not all souls are equal, the new are not like the old, and the reincarnated once is not like the reincarnated twice.” Elsewhere he observed: “The *tzadikim* [saints] reincarnate up to a thousand generations, the sinners up to four.” An additional factor determining spiritual development involved one’s parents. According to the *Zohar*:

When a man is aroused... to mate with his wife, all parts of the body agree on this and are prepared to receive enjoyment from it. Then the nefesh and the desire of the person indulge willingly in that act. The nefesh is drawn down and enters the sperm that comes forth.

Cordovero added that much depends on the father’s preparation for the procreative sex act: “If his father sanctifies himself properly, and his intention is right, [the son] merits a holy higher soul...” Patriarchal bias in these teachings is unmistakable: the nefesh is implanted via the sperm rather than the ovum and is influenced only on the father’s disposition. Moreover, no mention is made of the kind of soul that might be implanted in a daughter.

## **Cosmic Implications of Human Behavior**

The prophets of the biblical period had viewed the Jews’ exile to Babylon as punishment for disobedience of the law, much as Adam and Eve were banished from Eden because of their

disobedience. Similarly the rabbis of Safed viewed the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula as a consequence of their own actions. By extension, blame for the delay in Nukvah's wedding and the Shekinah's continued exile—perhaps even for delays in repairing the sefirotic vessels—could be laid at humanity's feet. Isaac Luria related an elaborate legend in which Adam's soul embraced all the souls of mankind. However, as a result of the fall, "his soul fragmented into thousands of thousands of sparks... which subsequently became clothed/incarnated in every single human being that was ever born and is alive now."

Even though God had repaired the sefirot, the shards from the breaking of the vessels were still scattered throughout the world, and each shard contained a spark of the primeval divine light. Devout Jews were responsible collecting the shards and releasing the light hidden within them. In Chaim Vital's words:

When saints leave this world and pass through the realm of Action [Assiah], they raise up with them sacred sparks from the Shells [klifoth] to the realm of Formation [Yetzirah]; in the same way, when they ascend to the world of Formation to the world of Creation [Briah], and from the world of Creation to the world of Emanation [Atziluth], they transform and raise these sparks and return this great light to the sublime and noble place.

Similarly, everybody shared in the guilt of the Shekinah's exile and defilement. And everyone—at least all pious Jews—shared the responsibility for restoring her to her rightful place. That shared guilt provided the context in which Joseph Karo and a number of others experienced visions of the Shekinah after profuse weeping. One of Cordovero's disciples, Elijah de Vidas, urged pious Jews to confess their sins in order that the soul could "stimulate the female waters within the Shekinah." Then, at midnight, they should rise to study the Torah and pray. By so doing they could "feel the distress of the Shekinah [and] weep and mourn over the destruction of the Sanctuary." Midnight is the time when "the Holy One... forgives those who return to Him."

Entering into and maintaining an honorable marriage had cosmic implications as well as ensuring good souls for one's children. To honor one's wife—Kabbalistic teachings of the period were always addressed to men—was to honor the Shekinah; while to be unfaithful was to dishonor her and prolong her exile. Jews were encouraged to have intercourse with their wives on the Sabbath. To quote the modern writer Lawrence Fine:

The traditional emphasis on having marital intercourse on the night of the Sabbath took on heightened significance. The earthly love between wife and husband was held to represent the supernal union between the Shekinah and Tifareth. Even more, it served to facilitate such unification within the sefirotic world. The Sabbath experience as a whole assumed the character of a sacred marriage celebration.

A recurring theme in Jewish mysticism was that intercourse with one's wife helped reunite the two souls which, "in the beginning," had formed a single whole.

In these various ways, pious Jews could help restore the primeval Divine Order. The Safed teachings presented a moral imperative for Jews to take an active role in the redemptive process. By contrast, Christianity, particularly following Martin Luther and John Calvin, insisted that Christ alone procured the redemption, and humanity's role was limited to a profession of faith. Importantly, through their piety, Jews could hasten the appearance of the messiah. Sadly, it was that aspect of the teachings that would connect the theoretical Kabbalah with the Sabbatean fiasco of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century and discredit Kabbalistic studies in the eyes of Jewish authorities.

## Reflections

The gathering of outstanding scholars—a favorable side-effect of the otherwise tragic expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula—created a critical mass of talent unequalled in the history of the

Kabbalah. Little has been added to their work since 1600, and much may have been lost. Because of prominent Kabbalists' reluctance to commit their teachings to writing, what we know of their work depended on the diligence—and was limited by the biases—of a handful of disciples. Moreover, for more than two centuries, Kabbalistic studies languished in a backlash from mainstream Judaism. Notwithstanding, the heritage of Safed continues to inspire seekers as much as it provides continuing opportunities for academic research.

The decline of Kabbalistic studies in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had multiple causes. The impact of Sabbatean movement, and its alleged links to Safed Kabbalism, has already been mentioned. Another was the emergence of the Christian Kabbalah and contamination by Hermeticism. Yet another was the growth of rationalism in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish intellectual circles.

We noted that the theoretical Kabbalah, at least as it was articulated by Cordovero, was influenced by Moses Maimonides whom modern historians regard as the greatest medieval Jewish philosopher. However Judaism never embraced religious philosophy to the extent that Christianity did. Similarly, the theoretical Kabbalah remained, in many ways, a mystical system rather than a rational one. Isaac Luria, whose teachings were almost purely mystical, conformed more closely to the traditional Judaic norm than did Cordovero. When rationalism began to pervade Judaism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Kabbalah came to be viewed as dated and superstitious.

Even before the Safed period, a “Christian Kabbalah” had emerged in Florence and spread to other parts of Europe. Strongly influenced by Hermeticism, it provided a basis for the work of the 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century occultists and for today's popular Kabbalah. Few people would doubt the impact the Hermetic/Christian Kabbalah has had on western esotericism. On the other hand, study of the Judaic Kabbalah, as we have done in Segment 3 and here, offers a wealth of insights free from Hermetic contamination. If we tread carefully through the archaic religious mindset, cultural context, and language of the classical Kabbalistic texts, other medieval writings, and the Safed teachings, we discover a system of great richness and potential.

Gershom Scholem led the revival of Judaic Kabbalistic studies in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and the Kabbalah since become an area of fertile study by academic scholars. Scholem comments that the contents of the *Zohar* lie “before us in some measure of inaccessible and silent, as befits a work of great wisdom.” Fortunately, for us, the inaccessibility has been eased by the availability of English translations of key texts. The *Zohar* may not have regained the standing as a sacred Jewish text it enjoyed in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but it remains one of the most important texts of western esotericism. The 22-volume Berg edition is available online, the five-volume Soncino edition is on CD-Rom, and the remainder of the 10-volume Pritzker edition—an endeavor of outstanding scholarship—will be published over the next several years. Extracts from the *Zohar* and modern commentaries on it are plentiful, and Gershom Scholem's own book of readings provides a good introduction for students at an earlier stage in their Kabbalistic studies. Similarly, English translations of the work of the Safed Kabbalists are starting to become available, although many texts remain in Hebrew.

## Resources

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|-----------------|--|
| Raphael Afilalo | <i>The Kabbalah of the Ari Z'al</i> . Kabbalah Editions, 2004.   |
| Moses Cordovero | <i>Pardes Rimonim</i> . (Transl: Elyakim Getz.) Providence University, 2007. (Only the first four treatises are included.) |
| Lawrence Fine   | <i>Safed Spirituality</i> . Paulist Press, 1984.   |

- Aryeh Kaplan      *Meditation and the Kabbalah*. Weiser, 1982.  
                          *Sefer Yetzirah*. Weiser Books, 1997.  
                          *The Bahir*. Weiser Books, 1998.
- Eliahu Klein.      *Kabbalah of Creation*. North Atlantic Books, 2000.
- Moses Luzzatto    *Klalout Hailan*. (Transl: R. Afilalo), Kabbalah Editions, 2004.
- Daniel C. Matt (ed.) *The Zohar*. Pritzker Edition. Stanford Univ. Press, 10 volumes, 2004–.  
 (The first four volumes are currently available.)
- Gershom Scholem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*. Schocken Books, 1946/1954.  
                          *The Zohar: Basic Readings from the Kabbalah*. Schocken Books, 1949.  
                          *Kabbalah*. Meridian Books, 1974.  
                          *On the Mystical Shape of the Godhead*. Schocken Books, 1991.

### Journal Articles:

- John F. Nash      “The Shekinah: the Indwelling Glory of God.” *The Esoteric Quarterly*,  
 Summer 2005, pp. 33-40.  
                          “From the *Zohar* to Safed: Development of the Theoretical Kabbalah.”  
 (Accepted for publication in the *Esoteric Quarterly*.)

### Other Online Resources:

- Ariel Bar Tzadok    “Bereshi, the Beginning.” <http://www.koshertorah.com/bereshit.pdf>
- Online *Zohar*      <http://www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php/p=zohar>

## Assignment

Instructions for preparing your report are provided below. Your report should be headed SES Kabbalah Course, Segment 4, and should include your name, email address, and the date of submittal. Send your report to [seselectives@gmail.com](mailto:seselectives@gmail.com).

- Following are a number of issues raised in this segment of the course. Write a paper discussing two or more of the issues in depth.
  - (a) Why were Kabbalistic teachings guarded so closely during the Middle Ages—and even in the Safed period? Why do you think the teachings were disseminated more widely in later periods? To what extent were religious, cultural, political, technological, and/or other factors involved?
  - (b) *Daath* was omitted from the original list of 10 sefiroth. However it was discussed by the Safed Kabbalists and, over time, earned a place in the Tree of Life. What significance could be attached to the ambivalence about this quasi-sefirah? Discuss the placement of *Daath* on the middle pillar between *Tifareth* and *Kether*.
  - (c) Choose two sefiroth that are linked by a *nativ*, or path, in the Lurianic scheme shown in Figure 1. Suppose your spiritual journey is taking you along that path. What experiences and/or challenges could be expected from the two sefiroth and the path from one to the other?

- (d) Compare and contrast the Kabbalistic story of the “breaking of the vessels” with a cosmic or planetary catastrophe discussed in another religious or esoteric system. What can be learned from the comparison?
  - (e) The *partzufim* express divine manifestation in distinctly anthropomorphic terms: “father,” “mother,” “son/bridegroom,” “daughter/bride.” Do you find such anthropomorphism meaningful or distracting? Compare and contrast the partzufim with personifications of God considered in the teachings of Christianity or Hinduism.
  - (f) Judaism is usually considered to be a patriarchal religion. But the Kabbalists and others created the rich tradition of the Shekinah. Explore this tradition and relate the Shekinah to other expressions of the Divine Feminine.
  - (g) The Kabbalists speculated that we acquire higher aspects of the soul according to spiritual merit in the present life or previous lives. Discuss this progressive acquisition of higher “souls” in relation to the notion of initiations, as viewed by esoteric teachings with which you may be familiar.
- Do you have any questions or comments about this segment of the course?

The instructor will critique the report, respond to questions, offer suggestions for further study, and provide encouragement in your subsequent work in the course.