

# From the *Zohar* to Safed: Development of the Theoretical Kabbalah

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## Summary

Groundwork for the theoretical Kabbalah was laid in the 13th century by the monumental *Sefer ha-Zohar*, or “Book of Splendor.” But its full potential was realized 300 years later when an elite group of scholars gathered at Safed in Galilee. Moses Cordovero, Isaac Luria, Chaim Vital, and others codified the Zoharic teachings and built the elaborate system of theoretical, or “theosophical,” Kabbalah we recognize today. This article reviews the origins of the *Zohar* and the circumstances that led to the formation of the Safed community. It then proceeds to explore the development of major aspects of the theoretical Kabbalah over the 300-year period. Emphasis is placed on the Kabbalistic doctrine of divine emanation; the story of creation, fall and redemption; and teachings on ethics, the human soul, and spiritual progress. The article also notes that, despite patriarchal attitudes toward women, the Safed scholars articulated in some detail the qualities of the Divine Feminine.

## Objectives and Scope

This article’s primary objective is to stimulate greater appreciation of the Judaic theoretical Kabbalah as it unfolded between the 13th and 17th centuries. The theoretical Kabbalah—often referred to as the “theosophical” Kabbalah—combines traditional Judaic religious beliefs with Gnosticism and other forms of late-Hellenic thought.<sup>1</sup> It provides a conceptual framework for understanding the divine nature and God’s interaction with the universe and humanity. It also provides a roadmap for human spiritual development. The various branches of the Kabbalah overlap, but in

broad terms the theoretical Kabbalah contrasts with the mystical Kabbalah, whose purpose is contemplation of the Divine, and with the “practical” Kabbalah, whose purpose is magical invocation. Although the two latter branches survive to the present, the theoretical Kabbalah is the most familiar to modern esotericists.

During the same period addressed in this article, a “Christian Kabbalah” emerged in Florence and spread to other parts of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Strongly influenced by Renaissance Hermeticism,<sup>3</sup> it provided a basis for 19th- and early 20th-century occultism and for today’s popular Kabbalah. The modern Kabbalah overlaps and interacts not only with Hermeticism, but also with Jungian psychology, Theosophy and its offshoots, and eastern religious philosophy. Commentaries on the correspondences among these esoteric systems and the interactions among them would be welcome contributions to the literature.

## The *Zohar*

From the second century CE onward, Babylonia had been the center of Jewish scholarship, but in the 10th century the

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## About the Author

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Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad went into political and cultural decline.<sup>4</sup> As support eroded, large numbers of Jews left the region and migrated to southern Europe.

Some settled in Provence, in southern France. Provence was Christian, but the feudal jurisdictions that emerged from the breakup of Charlemagne's empire provided a tolerant environment in which orthodox Christians, Cathars and Jews lived together in relative harmony. Many more Jews settled in Moorish Spain, or *Al-Andalus*, as the Muslim conquerors called it. In 912 CE Abd-al-Rahman III proclaimed himself caliph and created a pluralistic society in which Muslims, Jews, and Christians collaborated to move the country toward its cultural apogee. Although discrimination eventually increased as Al-Andalus broke up into independent states, life for Jews remained tolerable until the Moors were driven from the country.

Contacts among the Jewish communities helped mold Sephardic Jewry into something approaching a unified religious and cultural entity.<sup>5</sup> Southern Europe provided a supportive environment for Jewish mysticism and scholarship, similar to what had once existed in Babylonia. Rabbis established elite schools of Kabbalah, first in Provence and then in Catalonia, Castile and other parts of present-day Spain.<sup>6</sup>

The schools' greatest contribution was publication of the classical Kabbalistic texts. The *Sefer Yetzirah* ("Book of Creation") and the *Sefer ha-Bahir* ("Brilliance") were published in Provence, probably in the late 12th century, and the much-longer *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("Book of Splendor") was published in Castile a century later. Whether those texts were newly written, or were compiled from earlier manuscripts or fragments, continues to be debated. But claims of their antiquity are not implausible,<sup>7</sup> and academic skepticism has softened somewhat in recent years.

According to tradition the *Zohar* was written by the second-century CE Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who lived in Safed, Galilee.<sup>8</sup> Under

sentence of death, presumably for complicity in the bar Kokhba rebellion against Roman rule, Shimon and his son Elazar hid in a cave for 13 years. Shimon spent his time pursuing ascetic spiritual disciplines. Tradition recounts that he was taught by the prophet Elijah and that, upon emerging from the cave, he dictated the *Zohar* to Elazar and other close disciples. The text, formatted as a series of discourses on the Torah among Shimon and other rabbis, was written in a discursive, allegorical style.<sup>9</sup> It has sometimes been referred to as the *Midrash of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai*, drawing upon the term for the scriptural commentaries of the late-biblical and rabbinic periods.

Shimon and some of the other named discussants were real people, but we do not know whether the statements were theirs or were attributed to them later. *Pseudographia*, in which authors attribute ideas to prominent historical figures, was a common literary device throughout the centuries.<sup>10</sup> If Shimon really was the *Zohar's* author, he would be the first known Safed Kabbalist, living 1,400 years before those on whom the city's fame rests. Shimon reportedly prophesied that a time would come when even a six-year-old child could study the wisdom of Kabbalah; meanwhile, the *Zohar* would remain concealed for 1,200 years.

In the 13th century a Castilian rabbi, Moses de Léon (c.1250–1305), also known as Moshe ben Shem-Tov, claimed to have in his possession the manuscript of the *Zohar*, discovered in Shimon bar Yochai's grave. Even in Moses' own time, skeptics accused him of concocting the story to inflate the text's monetary value, and many modern historians agree. Supporting the *Zohar's* antiquity is the fact that it is written in Aramaic, rather than the medieval Hebrew of most contemporary Jewish texts; Aramaic was the vernacular language in Roman-era Palestine. However, medieval rabbis knew enough Aramaic to read the Talmud.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, a version of Aramaic survived in Babylonia, along with its close relative, Syriac. If the *Zohar* was not a medieval creation, it might be of Palestinian or Baby-

lonian origin; or it may have been written over an extended period of time by multiple authors in different locations. In any event Moses seems to have re-written the text, adding his own commentaries and giving it his own distinctive literary style.<sup>12</sup>

The newly published *Sefer Yetzirah*, *Bahir* and *Zohar* initially circulated among an elite group of Kabbalists. Nevertheless, publication permitted greater access to the teachings than had previously been possible. The texts communicated a worldview that reflected the combination of biblical Judaism, Gnosticism and Neoplatonism. They established a theology based on the descent of the Divine into manifestation; defined forms of mysticism and magic involving the Hebrew alphabet and divine names; and provided a wealth of teachings on the human constitution, ethical responsibilities, and spiritual development.

Despite its controversial origins, the *Zohar* was particularly well received. Within two centuries of its publication, the text acquired a canonical standing comparable to that of the Torah and the Talmud, not just in Kabbalistic circles but in Judaism at large.<sup>13</sup> To say that Moses de Léon “published” the *Zohar* should not obscure the fact that all texts of the time were copied laboriously by hand. A printed copy of the *Zohar* did not appear until 1558.

## The Safed School

### Cultural Context

The supportive environment of southern Europe came to an end in the 13th century, just as Kabbalistic studies were reaching their peak. The Inquisition came to France in 1233, and religious toleration rapidly declined. Its main focus was on the Cathars, but Jews soon discovered that they too were unwelcome.

Meanwhile, Al-Andalus was crumbling as Christian armies conquered the Iberian Peninsula. By the mid-13th century, only Granada remained in Islamic hands. Christian rule brought increasing persecution of Jews and Muslims, and their woes increased in

1478 when the Spanish Inquisition was commissioned. In 1492—the year Christopher Columbus discovered America—the armies of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile captured Granada and claimed the whole of Spain for Christendom. One of the monarchs’ first actions was to issue a nationwide decree giving non-Christians an ultimatum of conversion or exile. Many Jews, whose families had lived in Spain for five centuries, accepted baptism,<sup>14</sup> 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 large-scale Diaspora. Some moved to the Netherlands,<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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 spiritual needs. In due course schools of Torah and Kabbalah 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*, or angels. The singular *maggid* (Hebrew: מגיד) is sometimes translated as “mentor-angel,” and some *maggidim* seem to have resembled the “holy guardian

angels” of Ashkenazic tradition.<sup>17</sup> Another widespread belief was 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 rulers.

Within 40 years of the expulsion from Spain, displaced Sephardic Jews began to arrive at Safed, in the mountains of Galilee. Safed already had a small Jewish population, 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 the 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.<sup>18</sup> But Safed was replete with legends. One legend asserted that Shem and Ever, son and grandson of Noah, established their *yeshiva*, or school of Torah, in Safed, and that Jacob had studied there. Another popular legend asserted that the first-century Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai was buried in Safed.

With the influx of 8,000-10,000 displaced Jews, Safed grew rapidly and increased in prosperity.<sup>19</sup> 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 fame soon spread throughout the Middle East and Europe.

### 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 school in Safed where he taught the Talmud and Kabbalah.<sup>20</sup> 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, a maggid urged him to move to Safed. When he arrived 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.<sup>21</sup>

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 under Joseph Caro. Then, at the age of twenty, his maggid urged him to study the Kabbalah with his brother-in-law, Rabbi Solomon ha-Levi Alkabetz. He soon mastered the *Zohar* and completed his first book, the monumental *Pardes Rimonim* (“Orchard of Pomegranates”), in 1548. Cordovero explained the title thus: “[I]t 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.”<sup>22</sup>

Whereas the *Zohar* was written in an often-impenetrable midrashic style, Cordovero’s treatment of the Kabbalah was orderly and logical. His methods were influenced by the scholasticism of Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) who introduced Aristotelian categories into Jewish theological speculation.<sup>23</sup> *Pardes Rimonim* put all that was known of the Kabbalah up to that time onto a systematic basis, and it established Cordovero as a leading Kabbalist. Another famous work was his *Tomer Devorah* (“Palm Tree of Deborah”), a treatise on morality based on Kabbalistic principles. As their reputations grew, Caro and Cordovero attracted other scholars to Safed, and each assembled a group of disciples. Had he not been overshadowed—somewhat unfairly, perhaps—by Isaac Luria, Cordovero 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 Ashkenazic rather than Sephardic roots. 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. It is also said that, every night, angels escorted Luria to "celestial academies" where other ancient sages instructed him.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas Cordovero had taken a rational approach to the Kabbalah, Luria took a more mystical approach. The modern writer 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.<sup>25</sup>

Luria would lead his students—who came to be known as the "Lion Cubs"—on walks through the graveyards in and around Safed. He encouraged them to lie down on the graves of *zaddikim* ("saints") and absorb their wisdom.<sup>26</sup> Luria favored an oral style of teaching, arguing that books could not contain true wisdom. His writings are limited to a commentary on one section of the *Zohar* and a few poems and prayers. 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, the chief of whom was 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 Kabbalistic teachings published. When Luria died, Vital—still in his 20s—demanded that other students give him their notes for safekeeping.<sup>27</sup> According to legend, the teachings only became known because friends 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. 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 early medieval period. 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 the invention of the printing press. The first printed version of the *Zohar* appeared in Mantua, Italy, in 1558,<sup>28</sup> and other important texts were printed soon thereafter.

Sadly, the Safed scholars were accused of sowing the seeds of the Sabbatean messianic movement of the late 17th century. In the 1660s, the charismatic but psychologically unstable Sabbatai Zevi proclaimed himself

messiah and attracted popular support throughout the Jewish world. When Zevi converted to Islam to escape execution by the Turkish sultan, the movement turned into a fiasco.<sup>29</sup> From the lofty heights that the Kabbalah had attained within Judaism after publication of the *Zohar*, Kabbalistic study quickly 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.<sup>30</sup> Accused of messianic ambitions of his own, Luzzatto was persecuted and forced to leave Italy, moving first to Germany and then to the Netherlands. He 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”)<sup>31</sup> provides a concise summary of Luria’s teachings. Whereas Vital captured Luria’s stream-of-consciousness style of teaching, Luzzatto expressed the teachings more logically.<sup>32</sup>

## The Divine Emanations

The Safed scholars’ greatest contribution was to put the theoretical Kabbalah on a firm foundation. Moses Cordovero, Isaac Luria, and others drew upon concepts from the *Zohar* and developed them into an elaborate system of theology. In the spirit of Maimonides’ scholasticism, the rabbis conceived of the Godhead as “Absolute Being.” Moreover the Godhead was deemed to be *necessary*: its very definition demanded existence.<sup>33</sup> The Godhead was referred to as the “Concealed of the Concealed,” entirely unknowable, beyond any power of human understanding. It was concealed behind three “veils”: the *Ain* (“Ultimate”), the *Ain Sof* (“Limitless”), and the *Ain Sof Aur* (אין סופ אור, “Limitless Light”). Strictly speaking, since we can speak of the veils, they cannot be the true Godhead; however,

for convenience we often refer to it as the “Ain Sof.”

## The Sefiroth

Kabbalistic doctrine asserts that the Godhead manifests, or reveals itself, through the *sefiroth* (singular: *sefirah*, ספירה, “number” or “counting”). Cordovero followed classical Kabbalistic teachings in identifying ten sefiroth: *Kether*, *Chokmah*, *Binah*, *Chesed*, *Geburah*, *Tifareth*, *Netzach*, *Hod*, *Yesod* and *Malkuth* (Table 1).<sup>34</sup> Whereas the Ain Sof is without limitation, the sefiroth are limited by their respective attributes and by being differentiated, one from another.<sup>35</sup> Those attributes allow the sefiroth to be apprehended by the human mind.

The sefirothic names were all common words in the Hebrew Bible, but in Kabbalistic teachings they acquired a richness of meaning that is reflected in the etymology of “sefirah.” Four words from the same root are: *sefar* (ספר, “number”), *sefer* (ספר, “text” or “book”), *sippur* (סיפור, “sound” or “pronunciation”), and *sappir* (ספיר, “sapphire” or “light”).<sup>36</sup> Implicit in “sefirah” are notions of divine light, number symbolism, and the written, spoken, or chanted word. Table 1 shows the conventional English translations of the sefirothic names, but Kabbalists prefer to use the Hebrew names to avoid trivializing the underlying concepts.

Explaining why there must be precisely ten sefiroth, Cordovero turned to the Tetragrammaton, the unutterable name of God. He observed that the four Hebrew letters of the Tetragrammaton, (YHVH, יהוה) expand to ten when the letters are spelled out: *yod* (יוד), *he* (הא), *vav* (ווא), *he* (הא).<sup>37</sup> 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 Decalogue 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. On the other hand, the Safed scholars frequently violated the “rule of ten” by speaking of an eleventh quasi-sefirah, *Daath*, interposed between Binah and Che-

sed. Cordovero hinted that Daath served the role of “the Harmonizer” among the ten sefiroth.<sup>38</sup>

An important question addressed by the Safed Kabbalists was whether the sefiroth should be viewed as divine emanations or as the vessels into which the emanations flowed. Cordovero concluded that the two views were both valid and mutually complementary.<sup>39</sup> Each sefirah can be considered as a form and also as the light that dwells within it. The divine light descends from Kether to Malkuth, cascading like water from one sefirothic vessel to the next. At each stage the light encounters denser levels of reality, until in Malkuth it reaches the physical level.

From an early date, scholars and mystics explored the rich symbolism of the sefiroth, citing planets, signs of the zodiac, angels, directions in space, and other meaningful correlates. Kabbalists of the 13th century and the Safed period were fond of correlating the sefiroth with parts of the body: Kether with the head, Chesed and Geburah with the right and left arms, Yesod with the phallus, and so on. They also correlated selected sefiroth with biblical figures; for example, Abraham was associated with Chesed, Isaac with Geburah, Jacob and Moses with Tifareth, and Yesod with Joseph.<sup>40</sup> Verses of scripture offered a further fruitful basis for correlation. Cordovero associated the sefiroth with the ten “praise” verses in *Psalm* 150, and these are shown in Table 2.<sup>41</sup> 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.

Another practice dating from early times was to assign divine names to the sefiroth. Table 2 shows the assignments according to the Safed tradition.<sup>42</sup> For example, *YHVH Adonai* (יהוה אדוני, “YHVH Lord”) was assigned to Binah, and *Shaddai El-Chai* (שדי אל חי, “Almighty Living God”) to Yesod. While the divine names served the primary purposes of invocatory magic and mystical contemplation, their symbolism

also sheds light on our understanding of the sefiroth.

The *Zohar* hinted that the sefiroth formed a symbolic structure and referred to three columns or pillars. But it was the Safed scholars who depicted that structure in precise spatial terms and drew the glyph, or schematic diagram, known as the *Tree of Life* (*Etz Chayyim*, עץ חיים). Cordovero and Isaac Luria each proposed versions of the Tree, and many later scholars offered their own. Figure 1 shows the sefiroth linked in numerical order. The zigzag path, referred to in modern works as the “Lightning Flash,” represents the primary line of descent of the divine light from the Ain Sof to Malkuth. As the *Zohar* had suggested, the sefiroth are arranged on three vertical pillars. Chokmah, Chesed and Netzach lie on the *Pillar of Mercy*; Binah, Geburah and Hod lie on the *Pillar of Severity*; and 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.<sup>43</sup> The sefiroth on the two outer pillars represent contrasting divine attributes. As we shall see later, they can also represent contrasting human impulses or experiences.

In most representations of the Tree of Life, the original ten sefiroth are connected by paths, or *netivoth* (singular: *nativ*, נתיב). The paths represent juxtapositions or associations among pairs of sefiroth. Their primary significance is not to the cosmos or even to humanity at large but to individual spiritual challenge.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, as a result, no universally recognized set of paths has endured. Luria proposed the pattern of *netivoth* shown in Figure 2. Building upon suggestions in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, he related the paths to Hebrew letters. Specifically 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.<sup>45</sup>

It should be emphasized that Luria's assignments of Hebrew letters are not the same as the assignments suggested in the 19th and 20th centuries and that remain popular today. Notwithstanding, virtually all modern versions of the Tree of Life continue to restrict the number of paths to 22—the number of letters in the Hebrew alphabet—even though certain pairs of sefiroth have to be left unconnected.<sup>46</sup> For example, in the Lurianic version shown in Figure 2, Malkuth is not connected to either Hod or Netzach. In an alternative version hinted at by Cordovero and formulated in detail by the 18th-century Kabbalist Eliahu Gaon of Vilna, those two connections are made, but Tifareth is not linked to Chokmah and Binah.<sup>47</sup>

Although the sefiroth are differentiated, the Safed rabbis 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.”<sup>48</sup> 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. Figure 3 shows an example of the work of the Christian Kabbalist Christian Knorr von Rosenroth (1631–1689), who drew his inspiration from Isaac Luria.

### The Four Worlds

In addition to the sefiroth, the *Zohar* identified four levels of reality that they termed “worlds,” or *olamin* (singular *olam*: עולם). The four worlds are: *Atziluth*, *Briah*, *Yetzirah* and *Assiah* (Table 3). The divine light descends through the sefiroth from Kether to Malkuth, and it also descends

through the worlds—from Atziluth, the archetypal World of Emanation, to Assiah, the human World of Action. Cordovero explained: “[E]manation (Atziluth) comes from the Emanator, creation (Briah) from emanation, formation (Yetzirah) from creation, and action (Assiah) from formation.”<sup>49</sup>

The intermediate worlds of Briah and Yetzirah are, respectively, the domains of the archangels and lesser angels. Briah is considered feminine, complementing the masculine Atziluth. Luria correlated the worlds with the four letters of the Tetragrammaton (Table 3).<sup>50</sup>

Other Kabbalists correlated the four worlds with the elements of fire, air, water and earth, and therein we find a parallel with Greek philosophy. Plato told us in *Timaeus* that God created the “body of the universe” from fire and earth, but that “two things cannot be rightly put together”—that is, put together harmoniously—“without a third; there must be some bond of union between them.”<sup>51</sup> However, in an interesting subtlety, because the universe is “solid” this bond requires not one but *two* intervening elements: air and water.

Because of the four worlds, the Tree of Life can provide a psychological as well as a theological model. Its symbolism can be applied to both without minimizing the gulf between God and humanity—and perhaps without fear 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 sefiroth above Malkuth and the worlds above Assiah.

**Each sefirah can be considered as a form and also as the light that dwells within it. The divine light descends from Kether to Malkuth, cascading like water from one sefirothic vessel to the next. At each stage the light encounters denser levels of reality, until in Malkuth it reaches the physical level.**



## 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 more insight into the Ain Sof, the sefiroth, and humanity.

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 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.<sup>52</sup>

The explosion of light was expressed through the Hebrew alphabet and the Torah 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 remaining 15 letters.] The *expanse* congealed, folding into shape, forming forms. Torah was engraved there, to shine forth.<sup>53</sup>

Like many philosophers before and since their time, the Safed Kabbalists 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* (צמצום), which left a circular or spherical region of emptiness. That dark void was penetrated by a single ray of divine light. To quote Luzzatto:

[God] 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...<sup>54</sup>

The void became a region of enormous potency. The prototypical *Adam Kadmon* (אדם קדמון, “primordial man”) was formed there, recalling God’s command: “Let us make man in our image.”<sup>55</sup> In turn, the ten sefiroth emerged, aligned with the various parts of his body.

The sefiroth were created by divine utterance. 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” of *Genesis* 1. We should 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.

### Breaking and Repair of the Vessels

The divine light, the creation story continues, flowed into the sefirothic vessels in the highest world of Atziluth. However they were not robust enough to withstand the impact. The upper three sefiroth were damaged but survived; the lower seven did not: “All seven [lower] vessels shattered and collapsed, for they were not able to contain the light.”<sup>56</sup> The “breaking of the vessels:” the *shevirat ha-kelim* (שבירת הכלים), 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*, קל"פ, "husk" or "shell").<sup>57</sup> Separated from the Creator, the *klifoth* constituted the seeds of evil. Through the catastrophe duality came into the world. However, without that duality, perhaps we could not have enjoyed free-will—or even physical existence. Where precisely did the *klifoth* go? They were scattered through the three lower worlds: Bria, Yetzirah and Assiah<sup>58</sup>—or even down to a fifth world below them. Some teachers spoke of a World of Klifoth (*Olam ha-Klifoth*, עולם הקליפות), the underworld, the domain of evil. However each *klifah* retained qualities associated with its *sefirah* of origin; thus it is meaningful to speak of the "klifah of Geburah," the "klifah of Hod," and so forth.

God had to reconstruct the *sefirot*. The cosmic catastrophe was followed by the "repairing of the world," the *tikkun olam* (תיקון עולם).<sup>59</sup> Chaim Vital explained: "[I]t 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."<sup>60</sup>

According to the Safed Kabbalists, the *sefirot* were not repaired directly. Instead, the *tikkun* involved an intermediate stage: the creation of five divine "personifications," or *partzufim*. The *partzufim* (singular *partzuf*, פרצוף, "face") can be understood in much the same way as the persons of the Christian trinity. They are listed in Table 4, and Figure 4 shows the simplified Tree of Life they form. Three of the *partzufim* were built around the damaged, but surviving, Kether,

Chokmah and Binah, and two new *partzufim* were created.

The *Arikk Anpin* (אריקן אנפין), the rebuilt Kether, was identified with the Ancient of Days of *Daniel*<sup>61</sup> or, to emphasize its antiquity even more strongly, was presented as the "Ancient of Ancients." The *Arikk Anpin* stood aloof from duality as the presexual manifestation of God—or perhaps as the principle in which all polarities will eventually be resolved. Among the other four *partzufim* gender polarities were vividly portrayed.

Chokmah and Binah were rebuilt, respectively, as *Abba* (אבא, "Father") and *Imma* (אמא, "Mother").<sup>62</sup> In turn, the cosmic parents gave birth to a son and daughter.<sup>63</sup> The son, the *Zeir Anpin* (זעיר אנפין, "son" or "heaven"), customarily referred to as "The Holy One," was compared with the biblical Jacob/Israel, father of the 12 tribes. The daughter *Nukvah* (נוקבה, "daughter" or "earth") was compared jointly with two of Jacob's four wives: the rival but complementary sisters, Leah and Rachel. Invoking yet another system of symbolism, the *Zeir Anpin* was identified with the Sun and *Nukvah* with the Moon.

**The Zohar asserts that "Malkuth is a body to the Shekinah," and "Shekinah" is often considered to be an alternative name for Malkuth. The feminine character of the lowest sefirah is not surprising when we recognize that it receives the divine force from all higher sephirot; receptivity is a primary feminine archetype.**

Allegory took precedence over 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*.<sup>64</sup> 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 at the pros-

pect of an incestuous marriage. However, such taboos were held to apply only to humanity and not to the Divine.<sup>65</sup>

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.”<sup>66</sup>

The Zeir Anpin, centered on Tifareth, expanded to create five additional sefiroth: Chesed, Geburah, Netzach, Hod and Yesod—or six if Daath is included.<sup>67</sup> The six entities surrounding the Zeir Anpin/Tifareth form a hexagram, or Star of David (Figure 4).<sup>68</sup> The plural nature of the Zeir Anpin is reflected in the opening verse of *Genesis*: “In the beginning God created the heavens [shamayim, שָׁמַיִם] 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* and *vav*; the final *he* is associated with Malkuth.<sup>69</sup>

With the recreation of the lower sefiroth, the Tree of Life attained its now-familiar form.<sup>70</sup> According to the Safed Kabbalists, it was only in the “repairing of the world” that the three pillars emerged—and with them the Chesed-Geburah and Netzach-Hod dualities. The four worlds also took their familiar form with ten (or 11) sefiroth on each world (Figure 5).<sup>71</sup> 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: “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.”<sup>72</sup> The notion that the whole Tree of Life is reproduced on all four worlds contrasts with claims by some modern Kabbalists that there is only a two-dimensional Tree, and the “worlds” are comprised of subsets of sefiroth within it.

Although the 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.<sup>73</sup> 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 4).

### 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 (שְׁכִינָה).<sup>74</sup> The latter story had been developing for at least a millennium. In the *Talmud* the Shekinah denoted the immanence of God, the divine glory. Over time, the fact that “Shekinah” was a feminine noun took on more than grammatical significance; she began to acquire a feminine persona. Finally she evolved into a divine hypostatis—a feminine aspect of God. The Shekinah is mentioned no fewer than 1,065 times in the *Zohar*.<sup>75</sup>

The *Zohar* asserts that “Malkuth is a body to the Shekinah,”<sup>76</sup> and “Shekinah” is often considered to be an alternative name for Malkuth. The feminine character of the lowest sephirah is not surprising when we recognize that it receives the divine force from all higher sephiroth; receptivity is a primary feminine archetype. The Shekinah of Malkuth is the “lower Shekinah,” contrasting with, yet connected with, the transcendental, “supernal Shekinah” of Binah.<sup>77</sup> The “combined” Shekinah is a feminine divine expression reaching from the very highest levels to the plane of earthly existence. Here we see a parallel with the link, mentioned above, between Nukvah and Imma.

A common theme was the Shekinah's role during the Jews' exile 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."<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere 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."<sup>79</sup>

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 fled from Palestine or 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. The *Zohar* referred to the Shekinah as the "Mother of Israel" and added: "the exile is considered the nakedness of supernal Israel."<sup>80</sup>

As the story of creation and redemption gathered momentum, the Shekinah's exile began to be associated with the shattering of the vessels. Just as the vessels had been shattered and must be restored, 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.<sup>81</sup> 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."<sup>82</sup> Solomon Alkabetz, Cordovero's mentor, encouraged Jews to "go forth to welcome

the Sabbath Queen."<sup>83</sup> Significantly, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week, and the Shekinah/Malkuth is the seventh of the lower sephiroth.

## Humanity: Constitution and Behavior

### The Soul and Its Destiny

In late-biblical times, Judaism, under Hellenic influence, had warmed to the notion of a threefold, hierarchical soul, consisting of the *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshamah*. That notion was explored further in the *Zohar*. The *nefesh* (נפש) pervades and animates the body;<sup>84</sup> living beings have a *nefesh*, whereas inanimate objects do not. The *nefesh* can be compared to the Egyptian *ka* and the etheric body of Theosophical teachings. The *ruach* (רוח) and *neshamah* (נשמה), both of which can be translated as breath, wind or spirit, are higher aspects of the soul.<sup>85</sup>

The *Zohar* explained that not everyone has the two higher aspects; they have to be earned: "[W]hen 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."<sup>86</sup> Moreover, acquisition of a *ruach* is the key to immortality:

[A]fter 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.<sup>87</sup>

The *Zohar* also hinted that there might be still higher aspects; the soul, it said, has "five names, *Neshamah*, *Ruach*, *Nefesh*, *Chayah*, *Yechidah*."<sup>88</sup> The *chayah* (חיה, "source of life") appears to be a higher correlate of the *nefesh* on a higher plane, while the *yechidah* (יחידה, "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.<sup>89</sup>

The concept that God descended into manifestation through the sefiroth is, of course, central to Kabbalistic teaching. The Gnostics and Neoplatonists taught that the human soul also descended into physical manifestation and must find its way back to spirit. Although the Kabbalists did not concern themselves much with the soul's original descent, they emphasized our need to work our way up through the sefiroth from Malkuth and through the four worlds from Assiah. A parallel can be seen here with ascent through the "palaces" of Merkabah mysticism.<sup>90</sup> Briah was often referred to as the "throne-world," the mystics' destination; a passage quoted earlier provided one example.

In our ascent we are destined to explore both the sefiroth and the paths connecting them.<sup>91</sup> 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 much healthier one than the stark spirit-matter, good-evil dichotomies of Zoroastrianism and classical Gnosticism.

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."<sup>92</sup> 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 be-

neficent 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."<sup>93</sup>

Belief in any kind of personal immortality was slow to develop in biblical Judaism. And certainly the notion of reincarnation was foreign to mainstream Judaism in biblical times and later. But, again under Hellenic influence, belief in reincarnation is evident in the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*, and it continued among Kabbalists in the Safed period. In esoteric Judaism reincarnation was referred to as *gilgul* (גלגול). *Gilgul*, which 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."

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."<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere he observed: "The *tzadikim* [saints] reincarnate up to a thousand generations, the sinners up to four."<sup>95</sup> On the other hand, rebirth was not always viewed favorably; it could be seen as evidence of failure. Interestingly, the worst possible outcome, in the view of the Kabbalists, was exile from the divine presence and the community of Jewish people.<sup>96</sup> The collective suffering of the people—and the empathetic suffering of Shekinah—would all be focused on that hapless individual.

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.<sup>97</sup>

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."<sup>98</sup> 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. Similarly the rabbis of Safed viewed their expulsion from the Iberian Peninsula as a consequence of their own actions. By extension, blame for Nukvah's delayed wedding and the Shekinah's exile and defilement—perhaps even for delays in repairing the sefirotic vessels—could be laid at humanity's feet. 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 for 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.<sup>99</sup>

Similarly, everyone—at least all pious Jews—shared the responsibility for restoring the Shekinah to her rightful place. 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."<sup>100</sup> 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."<sup>101</sup> 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. A man who honored his wife honored the Shekinah; while infidelity prolonged the Shekinah's exile.<sup>102</sup> Jews were encouraged to have intercourse with their wives on the Sabbath; to quote 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.<sup>103</sup>

In these various ways, people 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.<sup>104</sup> Importantly, through their piety, Jews could hasten the appearance of the messiah. Sadly, it was that aspect of the teachings that would be connected with the Sabbatean fiasco of the mid-17th century. The Safed scholars would be blamed for sowing the seeds of that unfortunate episode in European Jewish history.

### Concluding Remarks

Most of the fundamental concepts of the theoretical Kabbalah can be found in the *Sefer Zohar*, but those concepts took definite form in Safed. The gathering of outstanding scholars at the Galilean city—a favorable side-effect of the otherwise tragic expulsion of Jews from southern Europe—created a critical mass of talent unequalled

in the history of Kabbalistic studies. Little has been added to the work of the Safed scholars 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 correspondingly 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.

Gershom Scholem, who launched a renaissance of Kabbalistic studies by leading academic scholars in the mid-20th century, comments that the contents of the *Zohar* “[lie] before us in some measure inaccessible and silent, as befits a work of great wisdom.”<sup>105</sup> Fortunately, for us, the inaccessibility has been eased by the availability of English translations of key texts. While the *Zohar* may not have regained the standing as a sacred text it enjoyed in the 15th century, it remains one of the most important texts of western esotericism. The 22-volume Berg edition is available online, and the five-volume Soncino edition is on CD-Rom, both providing valuable search capabilities. Also 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<sup>106</sup> provides a good introduction for students at an early stage in their Kabbalistic studies.

The heritage of Safed continues to inspire seekers as much as it provides opportunities for academic research. Unfortunately many texts from the Safed era are still inaccessible to most of us. Several important texts are only in manuscript, and most have not yet been translated. As a result we are still dependent on secondary sources or, at best, on extracts from key works. Hebrew scholars who provide more complete translations and publishers who make them available will contribute much to the broader study of an important phase in the development of the western esoteric tradition.

The Kabbalah has become a multicultural system of esotericism, and numerous books and articles approach the subject from different perspectives. Yet the Judaic theoretical Kabbalah remains a vital field of study. While much of the recent work by Jewish scholars has been of an historical nature, modern scientific knowledge has provided new understanding of some traditional concepts.<sup>107</sup> Meanwhile, the topics touched on in this article, along with the context in which they developed, continue to offer valuable insights. If one treads carefully through the archaic religious mindset, cultural context, and language of the *Zohar* and the Safed teachings, one discovers material of great richness and potential.

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- <sup>1</sup> The description “theosophical Kabbalah” is accurate, but the term is not used here because of confusion with the work of the Theosophical Society and its offshoots. In this article “Theosophy” and “Theosophical” (both capitalized) refer to the Society and its work.
  - <sup>2</sup> That development was discussed in John F. Nash, “Origins of the Christian Kabbalah,” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Spring 2008, 43-58.
  - <sup>3</sup> Hermeticism was discussed in John F. Nash, “Hermeticism: Rise and Fall of an Esoteric System.” *Esoteric Quarterly*, Part I: Winter 2009, 39-51; Part II: Spring 2009, 33-44.
  - <sup>4</sup> The Abbasid caliphate, whose rich culture was captured by the “Arabian Nights,” came to an end in 1258 after holding power for 500 years.
  - <sup>5</sup> The Sephardic branch of Jewry lived in the Middle East and southern Europe, and the Ashkenazim in Germany and eastern Europe. The two branches developed different religious and cultural traditions.
  - <sup>6</sup> See for example Daniel C. Matt, Introduction to *The Zohar*, Pritzker Edition, Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, vol. 1, 2004, xli-xliii.
  - <sup>7</sup> Texts written in earlier times were closely guarded as part of the secrecy maintained in the Kabbalistic schools of Palestine and Babylonia. See, for example, Aryeh Kaplan, Introduction to *The Bahir*. Boston, MA: Weiser, 1998, xv. References to the *Bahir* go back at least to the ninth century.
  - <sup>8</sup> The *Zohar* mentions Shimon's teacher, the famous Rabbi Akiba.

- <sup>9</sup> Strictly speaking, the Torah consisted of the five “Books of Moses,” but the term was often applied to the whole Hebrew Bible.
- <sup>10</sup> “Forgery” tends to be reserved for situations in which there is purposeful intent to deceive.
- <sup>11</sup> Both the Jerusalem Talmud and the Babylonian Talmud were written in Aramaic.
- <sup>12</sup> See the discussion in Gershom Scholem, Introduction to *The Zohar*, New York: Schocken Books, 1949, xivff. See also his *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1946, 156-204.
- <sup>13</sup> Gershom Scholem, Introduction to *The Zohar*, viii.
- <sup>14</sup> Accepting baptism, which was usually forced, did not end their problems. For generations the *conversos* were suspected—with or without justification—of being only half-hearted Christians.
- <sup>15</sup> The Netherlands, at that time, was unique among northern European nations for religious toleration.
- <sup>16</sup> During the next 50 years, the armies of the sultans Bayazid II, Selim I, and Suleiman the Magnificent conquered Egypt, and much of southeastern Europe.
- <sup>17</sup> See for example Georg Dehn (ed.), *The Book of Abramelin*, Lake Worth, FL: Ibis Press, 2006.
- <sup>18</sup> Aryeh Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, Boston, MA: Weiser, 1982, 171.
- <sup>19</sup> Eliahu Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation*, Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2000, xviii.
- <sup>20</sup> Kaplan, *Meditation and Kabbalah*, 172.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.
- <sup>22</sup> Moses Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, (Transl: Elyakim Getz.), Monfalcone, Italy: Providence University, 2007, 2. “Pardes” is related to our word “paradise.”
- <sup>23</sup> Maimonides, a Sephardic Jew, is often compared with the Christian Thomas Aquinas, who was born 90 years later.
- <sup>24</sup> Moseh Idel, *Kabbalah*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988, 92.
- <sup>25</sup> Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation*, 105.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, xxv.
- <sup>27</sup> Reportedly, not all of Vital’s colleagues complied, and some writings began to be circulated even in the 1570s.
- <sup>28</sup> The *Zohar* was printed with the approval of Pope Paul IV. Ironically, just a few years earlier, his predecessor had ordered the burning of 12,000 Jewish sacred texts in Italy, including the Talmud.
- <sup>29</sup> See the extensive account of Zevi and his movement in Gershom Scholem. *Kabbalah*. Meridian Books, 1974, 244-286. Also: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 287-324.
- <sup>30</sup> Raphael Afilalo, *The Kabbalah of the Ari Z’al*, Quebec, Canada: Kabbalah Editions, 2004, 15-22.
- <sup>31</sup> Moses Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, (Transl: R. Afilalo), Quebec, Canada: Kabbalah Editions, 2004.
- <sup>32</sup> Eliahu Klein, who translated Vital’s *Sefer Etz-Chayyim* into English, criticized Luzzatto for trying to codify Luria’s discursive commentaries. See *Kabbalah of Creation*, p.114.
- <sup>33</sup> Here we are reminded of the ontological argument for the existence of God proposed by the 11th-century Christian scholastic Anselm of Canterbury.
- <sup>34</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 1, chap. 10, 45-49.
- <sup>35</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 2, chap. 1, 55.
- <sup>36</sup> The *Sefer Yetzirah* begins with a pun relating the first three words.
- <sup>37</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 1, chap. 5, 25.
- <sup>38</sup> For example, Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 1, chap. 1, 6-8.
- <sup>39</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 4, 145-223. See also the discussion in Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 402.
- <sup>40</sup> Matt (ed.), *The Zohar*, Pritzker Edition, frontispiece.
- <sup>41</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 1, chap. 1, 66-78. The wording in Table 1 conforms to the KJB rather than to the translation by Elyakim Getz.
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, treatise 1, chap. 10, 45-49. The assignment of divine names to the sefirot was discussed in the *Sefer Yetzirah*. From then on, some variations appeared from one teacher to another.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, treatise 1, chap. 2, 8-9. Later Kabbalists did not always follow that convention.
- <sup>44</sup> See Aryeh Kaplan, *The Sefer Yetzirah*, Boston, MA: Weiser, 1997, 10-11. Significantly, in classical Hebrew, *nativ* refers to a spiritual path rather than a physical one.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>46</sup> Graph theory asserts that  $n$  nodes can be connected by  $n(n - 1)/2$  line segments; i.e., 45 for ten sefirotic nodes. However some of the possible lines in the Tree of Life are redundant because of collinear sequences, such as *Kether*, *Tifareth*, *Yesod* and *Malkuth*.



- <sup>47</sup> Kaplan, *Sefer Yetzirah*, 30.
- <sup>48</sup> A similar situation occurs in connection with the subrays of the seven major rays.
- <sup>49</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 2, chap. 5, 80. Parenthetical inserts by translator.
- <sup>50</sup> Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 5, 228.
- <sup>51</sup> Plato, *Timaeus*, §31C, (Transl: Benjamin Jowett), Internet Classics Archive. See also Peter Kalkavage, *Plato's Timaeus*, Newburyport MA: Focus Publishing, 2001.
- <sup>52</sup> *Zohar*, 1 *Bereshit A*, 1:1, Pritzker Edition, vol. 1. Only the first four volumes of this new translation have been published so far. The corresponding translation in the complete Berg edition is "With the beginning of the manifestation of the King's will... emanated from the most concealed of all concealed things—from the secret of Ain Sof—and took a shapeless form... From within the spark a fountain spouted, from which the shades down below received their colors." The Berg edition is available online at <http://www.kabbalah.com/k/index.php/p=zohar>.
- <sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 123-124. Italics in translation.
- <sup>54</sup> Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 1, 179.
- <sup>55</sup> *Genesis* 1:26.
- <sup>56</sup> Chaim Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, chap. 1, (Transl: Eliahu Klein.), quoted in Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation*, 17.
- <sup>57</sup> In one reference, the klifoth were described as the "bark" on the Tree of Life.
- <sup>58</sup> *Zohar*, 10, *Mishpatim*, 10:403, Berg edition.
- <sup>59</sup> In rabbinic Judaism the term simply meant "maintaining social order." The early Kabbalists gave it its cosmic meaning.
- <sup>60</sup> Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, chap. 2, 31. Italics removed.
- <sup>61</sup> *Daniel* 7:9, 13, 22.
- <sup>62</sup> In the light of the strong affirmation of cosmic parenthood, the commandment: "Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee," takes on new meaning. See *Exodus* 20:12; *Deuteronomy* 5:16.
- <sup>63</sup> Descriptions of the creation of the Zeir Anpin and Nukvah read like a manual of dating behavior, obstetrics, and child-rearing. See Afilalo, *The Kabbalah of the Ari Z'al*, pp. 75-105.
- <sup>64</sup> Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, chap. 3, 58-60.
- <sup>65</sup> Klein, *Kabbalah of Creation*, 25-26.
- <sup>66</sup> *Zohar*, 16 *Vaera* 17: 149. Berg edition.
- <sup>67</sup> Daath was mentioned in the *Zohar*, but it featured more prominently in the work of the Safed scholars. Even there, it was omitted when the paths were drawn among the sefiroth.
- <sup>68</sup> Christian Kabbalists associate Tifareth with Christ. The hexagram retains significance because "six" is regarded as the number of the Christ.
- <sup>69</sup> *Zohar*, 27 *Vayikra* : 41:282. Berg edition.
- <sup>70</sup> Previously the seven lower sefiroth were aligned on a single column. See for example Raphael Afilalo, *Kabbalah Concepts*, Quebec, Canada: Kabbalah Editions, 2006. 48.
- <sup>71</sup> Afilalo, *The Kabbalah of the Ari Z'al*, 115ff.
- <sup>72</sup> Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 5, 227. Parenthesis in translation.
- <sup>73</sup> *Zohar*, 1 *Bereshit A*, 10:114.
- <sup>74</sup> For a discussion of the origins of "Shekinah" see Fred P Miller, *Zechariah and Jewish Renewal: From Gloom to Glory*, Moeller Haus, 1999, chap. 8.
- <sup>75</sup> Statistic based on the Berg edition, which includes some interpolated commentary.
- <sup>76</sup> *Zohar*, 49, *Ki Tetze*: 21:102, Berg edition.
- <sup>77</sup> *Zohar*, 33, *Kedoshim*: 4:36, Berg edition.
- <sup>78</sup> *Zohar*, 9, *Vayetze*: 27, verse 272, Berg edition.
- <sup>79</sup> *Psalm* 137:1-2.
- <sup>80</sup> *Zohar*, 2, *Bereshit A*: 25:268, Berg edition.
- <sup>81</sup> By contrast, in the other story, Nukvah adorns herself for the wedding. See Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 6, p. 229.
- <sup>82</sup> *Zohar*, 21, *Trumah*: 80:789, Berg edition.
- <sup>83</sup> Solomon Alkabetz, "The Pious Customs of Moses Cordovero," quoted in Lawrence Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984, 36, 40.
- <sup>84</sup> *Zohar*, 3 *Lech Lecha*, 12:96, Berg edition. See also the Pritzker edition, vol. 2, *Lekh Lekha*, 1:83b, 31-32.
- <sup>85</sup> In the Pritzker edition, ruach is translated as "spirit" and neshamah as "soul breath." See pp. 31-32.
- <sup>86</sup> *Zohar*, 10, *Mishpatim* 2:11, Berg edition. Elsewhere (1 *Prologue* 12:77), we learn that the four legs of the throne are Chesed, Geburah, Tifareth and Malkuth.
- <sup>87</sup> *Zohar*, 3 *Lech Lecha*, 12:100, Berg edition.
- <sup>88</sup> *Zohar*, 21 *Trumah*, 54:591, Berg edition.
- <sup>89</sup> Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 10, 266. The suggestion that some aspects of the soul reside on Atziluth contrasts with a statement in the *Zohar* (10, *Vayechl*, 81:806) that "souls dwell only in Briah, Yetzirah and Assiah."
- <sup>90</sup> Merkabah mysticism, which developed in the early centuries of the Common Era, envi-

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- sioned mystical journeys through seven “palaces” to the divine “throne-world.”
- <sup>91</sup> The *Sefer Yetzirah* spoke of 32 “paths to wisdom,” consisting of the 10 sefirot and the 22 netivot.
- <sup>92</sup> *Sefer Yetzirah*, §6:4, (Transl: Aryeh Kaplan), 245. See also §6:2, 267.
- <sup>93</sup> *The Bahir*, §195, (Transl: A. Kaplan), 77-78. As in all the classical texts, the statement attributed to Rabbi Shimon may well be pseudographical. Other references to reincarnation in the text can be found in §§122, 155, 184, 185.
- <sup>94</sup> Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 10, 268. Belief in reincarnation emerged in the medieval Kabbalah and continued through the Safed period.
- <sup>95</sup> Luzzatto, *Klalout Hailan*, chap. 10, 267-268. Italics added.
- <sup>96</sup> Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, 250.
- <sup>97</sup> *Zohar*, 3 *Lech Lecha*, 12:96, Berg edition.
- <sup>98</sup> Cordovero, *Pardes Rimonim*, treatise 1, chap. 5, 27.
- <sup>99</sup> Vital, *Sefer Etz-Chayyim*, chap. 1, p. 20. Italics removed.
- <sup>100</sup> Elijah de Vidas, *Beginning of Wisdom*, “The Gate of Holiness,” chap. 7, quoted in Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, 106.
- <sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* 107.
- <sup>102</sup> Fine, *Safed Spirituality*, 13-14.
- <sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34. Emphasis removed.
- <sup>104</sup> By contrast, Christianity—particularly following Martin Luther and John Calvin—insisted that Christ alone procured the redemption, and humanity’s role was limited to the profession of faith.
- <sup>105</sup> Scholem, Introduction to *The Zohar*, vii.
- <sup>106</sup> Scholem, *The Zohar*, 1949.
- <sup>107</sup> For examples of recent work see Kaplan, *The Sefer Yetzirah*, and Leonora Leet, *The Secret Doctrine of the Kabbalah*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions, 1999.

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

Sefirah			English Translation*
1	<i>Kether</i>	כתר	Crown
2	<i>Chokmah</i>	חכמה	Wisdom
3	<i>Binah</i>	בינה	Understanding, intuition
--	<i>Daath</i>	דעת	Knowledge, gnosis
4	<i>Chesed</i> or <i>Gedulah</i>	חסד גדולה	Grace, lovingkindness Magnanimity, greatness
5	<i>Geburah</i> , <i>Din</i> or <i>Pachad</i>	גבורה דין פחד	Judgment, Severity Fear
6	<i>Tifareth</i> or <i>Rachamim</i>	תפארת רחמים	Beauty, harmony, heaven Compassion, mercy
7	<i>Netzach</i>	נצח	Endurance, victory
8	<i>Hod</i>	הוד	Splendor
9	<i>Yesod</i>	יסוד	Foundation
10	<i>Malkuth</i>	מלכות	Kingdom, sovereignty, stewardship

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

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

Sefirah	Verse in <i>Psalm</i> 150	Divine Name*	
1 <i>Kether</i>	“Praise God in His sanctuary.” [v. 1]	<i>Eheieh</i> אֶהְיֶה	“I am that I am”
2 <i>Chokmah</i>	“Praise him in the firmament of His power.” [v. 1]	<i>Yah</i> יָה	Yah
3 <i>Binah</i>	“Praise him for His mighty acts.” [v. 2]	<i>YHVH Adonai</i> יְהוָה אֲדֹנָי	YHVH Lord
4 <i>Chesed</i>	“Praise him according to His excellent greatness.” [v. 2]	<i>El</i> אֵל	El
5 <i>Geburah</i>	“Praise him with sound of the trumpet.” [v. 3]	<i>Elohim Gebor</i> אֱלֹהִים גִּבּוֹר	Elohim of Strength
6 <i>Tifareth</i>	“Praise him with the psaltery and harp.” [v. 3]	<i>YHVH Eloah va-Daath</i> יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הַדַּעַת	Lord YHVH of Knowledge
7 <i>Netzach</i>	“Praise him with the timbrel and dance.” [v. 4]	<i>Adonai Tzabaoth</i> אֲדֹנָי צְבָאוֹת	Lord of Hosts
8 <i>Hod</i>	“Praise him with stringed instruments and organs.” [v. 4]	<i>Elohim Tzabaoth</i> אֱלֹהִים צְבָאוֹת	Elohim of Hosts
9 <i>Yesod</i>	“Praise him upon the high sounding cymbals.” [v. 5]	<i>Shaddai El-Chai</i> שְׁדַי אֵל חַי	Almighty Living God
10 <i>Malkuth</i>	“Praise him upon the loud cymbals.” [v. 5]	<i>Adonai</i> אֲדֹנָי	Lord

\* The assignment of divine names varied somewhat from one teacher to another. To reflect the work of other authorities, *Gebor* has been added to the name for *Geburah*, *Eloah va-Daath* to the name for *Tifareth*, and *Adonai* and *Elohim*, respectively, to the name for *Netzach* and *Hod*. *YHVH Elohim* (יְהוָה אֱלֹהִים) is sometimes suggested as the divine name for *Daath*.

**Table 3. The Four Worlds**

World			Denizens	Hebrew Letter
<i>Atziluth</i>	אצילות	Emanation	Divine emanations, names of God, archetypes	Yod, י
<i>Briah</i>	בריאה	Creation	Archangels	He, ה
<i>Yetzirah</i>	יצירה	Formation	Angels	Vav, ו
<i>Assiah</i>	אשיה	Action or "Realization"	Humanity	He, ה

**Table 4. The Partzufim or Divine Personifications**

Partzuf		Significance	Related Sefiroth
<i>Arikh Anpin</i>	אריך אנפין	"Long Face," or "Immortal Face." The "long suffering one."	<i>Kether</i>
<i>Abba</i>	אב	"Father"	<i>Chokmah</i>
<i>Imma (or Ama)</i>	אם	"Mother"	<i>Binah</i>
<i>Zeir Anpin</i>	זעיר אנפין	"Short Face," or "Young Face." The "impatient one." The divine son-bridegroom.	<i>Daath, Chesed, Geburah, Tifareth, Netzach, Hod &amp; Yesod</i>
<i>Nukvah</i>	נוקבה	"Daughter." The divine daughter-bride.	<i>Malkuth</i>

**Figure 1.**  
**Three Pillars and Lightning Flash**

**Ain Sof**

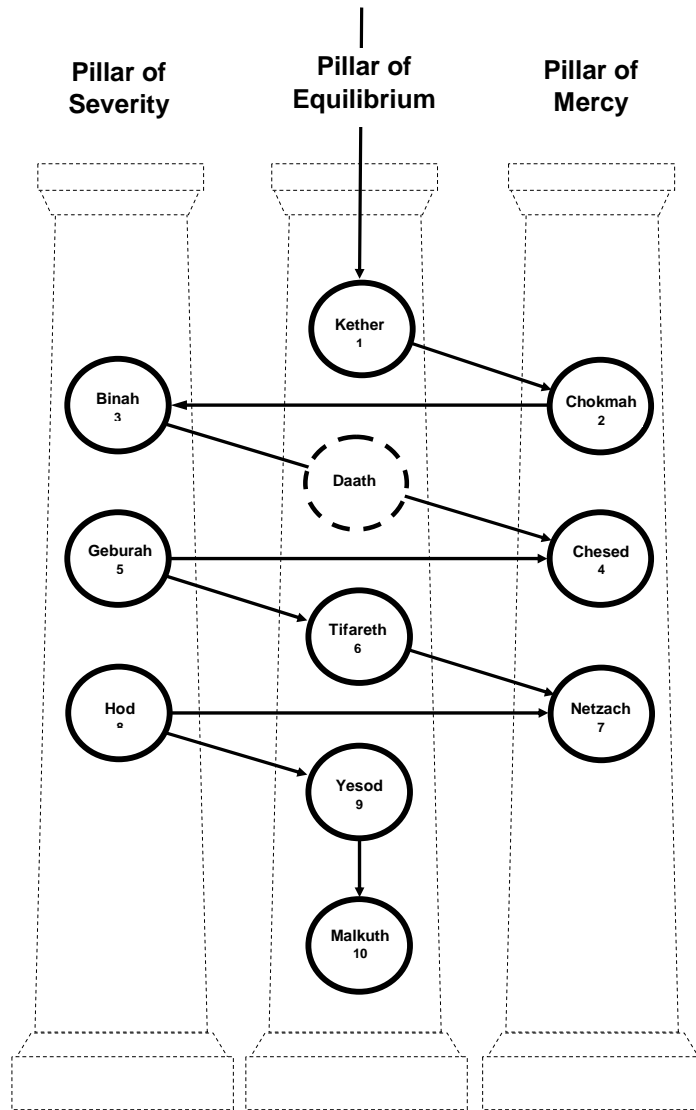
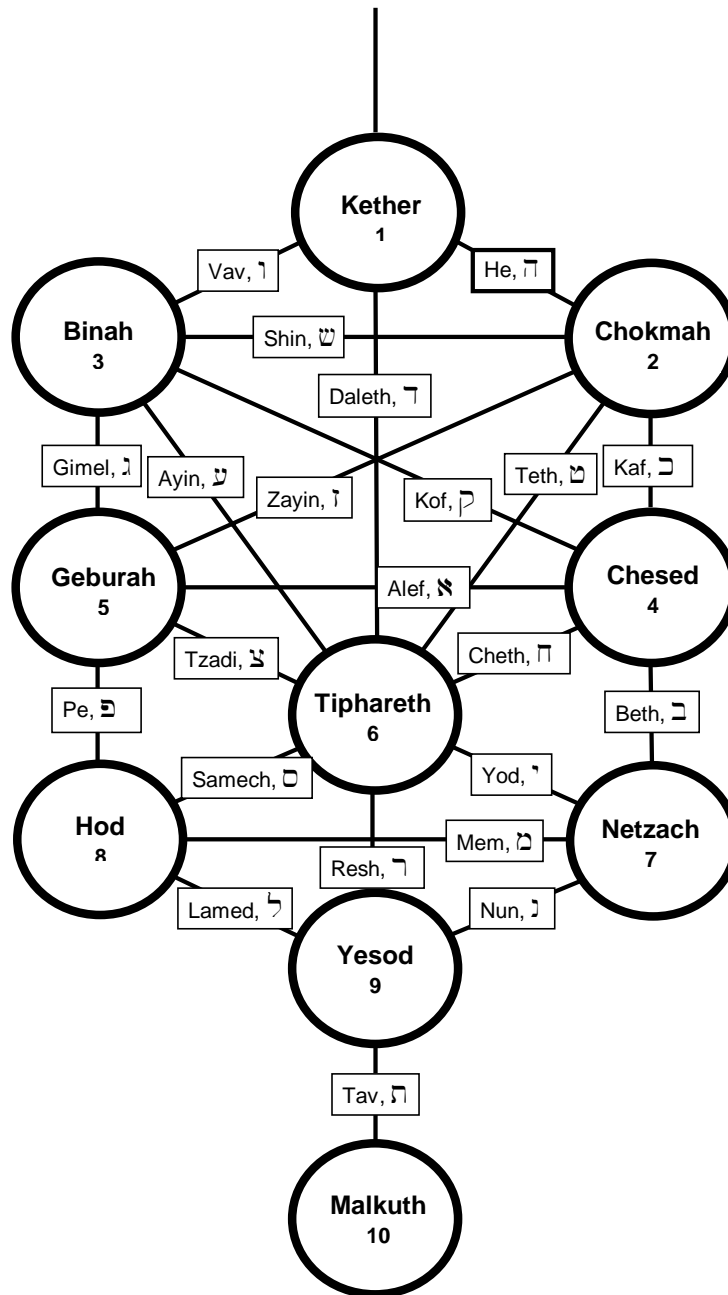


Figure 2. The Sefiroth and Paths  
According to Isaac Luria

# Ain Sof



**Figure 3. Complicated Tree of Life  
in the Spirit of Lurianic Kabbalah  
(after Christian Knorr von Rosenroth)**

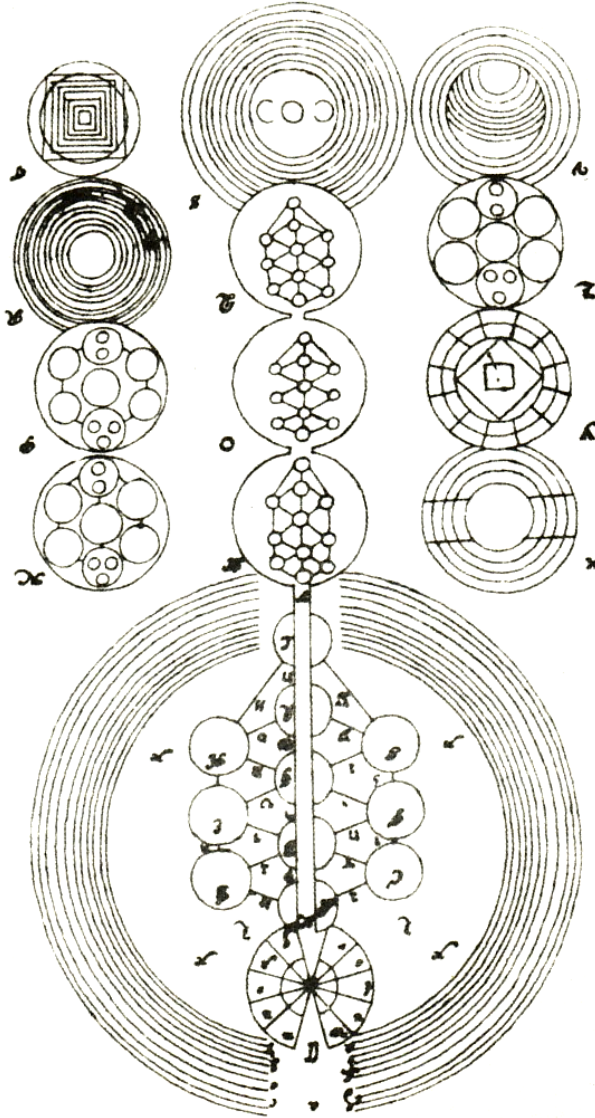
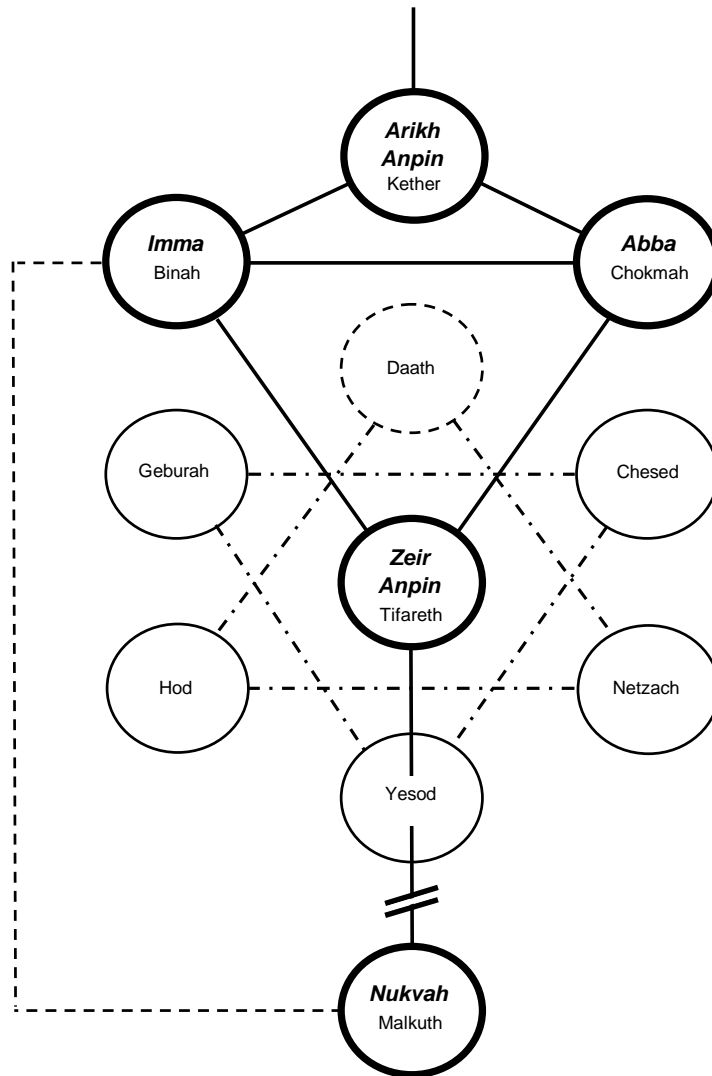




Figure 4. The Partzufim in Relation to the Reconstructed Sefiroth

# Ain Sof



**Figure 5. The Tree of Life and the Worlds**

