

Portland, Introduction to Judaism Course
Jewish Mysticism
Rabbi Debra Kolodny, Portland's UnShul
RabbiDebra@AstheSpiritMovesUs.com

I. History

II. G!d cosmology

Spherot-Lurianic Kaballah

D'vekut/cleaving-Hassidut

G!dfield-R. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi-Jewish Renewal

III. Torah

Sefer ha-Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment/Splendor/Radiance (c.1280-1286) (Danny Matt translation, Paulist Press, 1983 or Danny Matt translation, Pritzker edition-Stanford University Press)

Sefat Emet: The Language of Truth, Rabbi Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger (c1905-1908) (R. Arthur Green translation, Jewish Publication Society, 1998)

Torah Journeys, Rabbi Shefa Gold, Ben Yehuda Press, 2006

IV. Lurianic Kabbalah

Four Worlds

7 or 10 spherot

Zohar-Moses de Leon, Spain

V. Hassidism

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VI. Jewish Mystical Prayer and Practice

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Breishit 2:1-2; Shemot 20: 8-11; Shemot 23: 12 Shemot 31:12-7; Dvarim 5:12-15, Maasechet Shabbat B:118a-118b

R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, ***The Sabbath***, 1951, Noonday Press, pp 1-24, R.

Elliot Ginsburg, ***The Sabbath in the Classical Kabbalah***, SUNY Albany Press, 1989, pp 78-138

IX. Cycles of Celebration and Commemoration

Penina Adelman, ***Miriam's Well***, (Biblio Press, NY1986)

R. Arthur Waskow, ***Seasons of our Joy*** (Beacon Press, Boston, 1982)

Sefat Emet (ibid)

X. Deep Ecumenism

Impact of Sufism

Connection with other mystical traditions

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Brief History of Jewish Mysticism

- **200 BCE: Early pietists—Hasidim Rishonim, *B Brachot 32b*:**
The Hasideans would be still (shohin) one hour prior to each of the three prayer services, then pray for an hour and afterwards be still again for one hour. Since they were still and prayed for nine hours each day, how was their Torah knowledge preserved and their work accomplished? Because they were pietists, the Torah knowledge was preserved and their work was Divinely blessed.
- **2000 years ago at Mareotic Lake in Egypt: Therapeutae** (healers) both men and women, studied, prayed, meditated all day by themselves, gathering together for prayer, study and meals only on Shabbat. They also engaged in deep dream work. Of them Philo of Alexandria said: ...knowledge and piety are increased and perfected. They always remember God and never forget Him, so that even in their dreams no images are formed other than the loveliness of divine excellences and powers. Thus many of them, dreaming in their sleep, divulge the glorious teachings of their holy philosophy.”
- **Shimon bar Yochai**, 2nd century, Israel, 12 years in a cave
- **Sefer Yetzira-earliest known Jewish mystical text**
Book of Creation or Formation-Babylonia
Author unknown. Some attribute to Abraham
Historians attribute its origins to 2nd century BCE or 2nd century CE-when the mishna was being written, given the Hebrew grammar that is used in its writing—Babylon-where Mishna was written –Yehuda Ha Nasi-did Rabbi Akiva write it?
Describes how universe was created by the "God of Israel" through "32 wondrous ways of wisdom":
Ten Numbers ('Sefirot,' the origin for the Sefirot of later Kabbalah)
The **Twenty-Two Letters** of the Hebrew alphabet—
 - Three "**Mother**" **Letters** (אמט)
 - Seven "**Doubles**" (בגדכפרת)
 - Twelve "**Simples**" (הוזחטילנסעצק)
- Second century text known as **1 Enoch** describes celestial journeys to 7 heavens, similar to Ezekiel's visions. Practices continued through the second century CE with the Hechalot (Celestial Palaces) practices of Rabbi Akiva, Yishmael and colleagues, ascending to heaven in a Divine Chariot, and in later years with the 16th century Kabbalists.
- “**R. Akiva** said, anyone who wishes to master this authoritative teaching and fully explicate the Divine Name shall sit and fast for forty days. He shall place his head between his knees until the fast has conquered him. Then he shall whisper to the earth and not heaven, for the earth shall hear him, but not heaven.
Hechalot Zutarti, R. Elijah, ed, 36

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- **Spain:** Abraham Abulafia was born in Zaragoza, Spain, in 1240, and died sometime after 1291
Moses de Leon 1250 – 1305 **Zohar Moses de Leon-13th century**
First appeared in Spain in the 13th century—1200's and was published by a Jewish writer named Moses de Leon. Scholar Scholem, based on accounts from De Leon's contemporaries, and on evidence within the Zohar (Spanish idioms and syntax, for example), concluded that De Leon was the actual author.

De Leon himself ascribed this work to a rabbi of the second century, Shimon bar Yochai. Jewish legend holds that during a time of Roman persecution, Rabbi Shimon hid in a cave for 13 years, studying the Torah with his son, Elazar. During this time he is said to have been inspired by Elijah the Prophet to write the Zohar.
- **TSFAT Moses ben Jacob Cordovero or Moshe Cordevero (1522-1570)**
The Ramak was either born in, or moved to Safed in the Land of Israel, Talmudic scholar and a man of mastery in philosophical thought. The young Ramak not only mastered Zoharic text, but he also organized the Kabbalistic themes and presented them in an organized fashion. Wrote: Pardes Rimonim "Orchard of Pomegranates; Ohr Yakar ("Precious Light") - 16 volume commentary on Zoharic literature; Tomer Devorah ("Palm Tree [of] Deborah"); Ohr Neerav; Elimah Rabbati; Sefer Gerushin. Around 1550, the Ramak founded a Kabbalah academy in Safed, which he led for twenty or so years, until his death. According to Jewish legend, it was reported that the prophet Elijah revealed himself to him.
- **Lurianic Kabbala 1570-72**
Isaac Luria, HaAri was born in Jerusalem in 1534
In 1569, Luria moved back to Palestine and settled in Safed, where he studied with the famous Kabbalist Moses Cordovero.
Luria's Kabbalistic ideas were innovative and controversial. He brought forth the notion of tzimzum, the idea that God "shrunk himself" in order to create the void which, in turn, gave birth to the world. Lurianic Kabbalah had a strong Messianic bent which opened the way to some of the heterodox Jewish Messianic movements that followed. Luria died in 1572 during an epidemic.
- **Mid 1700's-Baal Shem Tov-founder of Hassidism, Poland**
- **Piezetzner Rebbe** (Warsaw Ghetto, 1940's)— for those having a difficult time visualizing that they are in Divine Presence..“Look to Heaven and contemplate. Concentrate your mind and think, I am standing (here) beyond the heavens and beyond that is another Heaven, a totally different realm... *Hovat ha-Talmidim 27b*
- **Jewish Renewal Movement** of the past 50 years-including kabbalistic, Chassidic and modern approaches

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Jewish Meditation

Text:

Breishit/Genesis: 24:63 "Yitzchak would go into the field at sunset to commune/ meditate (la-suach) at twilight..."

Dvarim/Deuteronomy 4:4: "For you who adhere (ha-devekim) to HaShem your G'd are all alive today." (From this the Rabbis determine that dvekut/cleaving to God is life sustaining and will result in resurrection. **B. Sanhedrin 90b**)

Psalm 16:8, King David wrote: "I have continuously placed HaShem before me" One who prays will see the Divine Presence before him (**Sanhedrin 22**) (Origins of Shiviti practices)

Talmud (B. Shabbat 31a)

Raba said, When man is led in for Judgment he is asked:

Did you deal faithfully [i.e., with integrity]

Did you fix times for Torah study

Did you engage in procreation

Did you hope for salvation

Did you engage in the dialectics of wisdom

Did you understand one thing from another (Some interpret this as: "Did you learn about mysticism?")

Hai Gaon "...when a perfect individual becomes involved in meditation (*hitbodedut*-seclusion or self isolation) upon wisdom, it is possible for him to predict future events. As a result of his deep meditation, his consciousness and mind fall into a trance, and through his deep probing of the mysteries of existence, he reaches the First Cause (G'd)." Hai Gaon, 939-1038, Religious leader and mystic

Avraham Maimonides, 12th century on Jacob: "Jacob isolated himself (*hitboded*) physically: no servants nor objects remained with him. He ascended from physical self - isolation into a spiritual self isolation. Finally he received a prophetic vision that seemed as if a man was wrestling with him. This was actually an angel, as it is written concerning Gabriel..." *Perush HaTOrah le Rabbenu Avraham ben ha Rambam, 108*

Ramban: "In the souls of some individuals there exists the power of prophecy, through which they can predict the future. No one knows how this comes to them, but they meditate (*hitboded*) and a spirit comes and reveals the future to them." Moses ben Nachman 1194-1270 Legalist, commentator and mystic

Azzulai: "The root of everything is meditation (*hitbodedut*). It is a very great and lofty concept, making a person worthy of all holiness...When a person meditates, he is also attached to G'd, even with regard to his mundane bodily needs." Rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azzulai 1724-1806 Sephardic leader and Kabbalist

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Besht: "One should constantly meditate (*hitboded*) on the Divine Presence. He should have no other thought in his mind other than his love (of God, seeking that the Divine Presence) should attach itself to him. In his mind he should constantly repeat, "When will I be worthy that the light of the Divine Presence should dwell within me." Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov 1698-1760, Founder of Hassidism

Brief but potent bibliography (in addition to books cited above):

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R. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and R. Daniel Siegel, *Credo of a Modern Kabbalist*, Trafford Publishing, 2005

R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, translated by R. Andrea Cohen-Kiener, *Conscious Community, A Guide to Inner Work*, Jason Aronson, 2004

Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, *On the Essence of Chasidus*, Kehot Publication Society, NY, 2003

Mark Verman, *The History and Varieties of Jewish Meditation*, Jason Aronson, New Jersey, 1996

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**Five levels of the soul-Rabbi Menachem M. Schneerson
Meditation practices for each-Rabbi Debra Kolodny**

Shiviti Shechina I'negdi tamid

I place G!d's Divine Presence before me always

- 1/ **Nefesh**/Vitality/Soul: Associated with the body-resting soul-quietude-focus is on generalized **RECEIVING** from the Source

Seated Shiviti: **Yud** **he** **vav** **he**

- 2/ **Ruach**/Spirit, wind: Associated with specific **TRANSMISSION** coming from the Source-a connective place, visions, sounds can come through. This is a place of movement and is the spiritual faculty that animates one's emotional attributes.

Abulafia (b. 1240 in Spain) movement meditation

Adonai melech, Adonai malach, Adonai yimloch le'olam va'ed.
G!d is sovereign, G!d has ruled, G!d will rule, forever and ever.

- 3/ **Neshama**/Breath/Soul: Intimacy with G!d, awareness of the Source-animates the intellect, focus is on **GIVING**.

Breathing shiviti: **Yud** **he** **vav** **he**

- 4/ **Chaya**/Living/Life Force: Focus is on **EXPERIENCING/BEING** in the realm of the Divine

Extending to ancestors, teachers, sages.
Extending to others in the room.
Extending to the heavens and the earth.
Being in the resonant G!dfield.

- 5/ **Yechidah**/Unification-*bitul*: self nullification-entering the mind of God-letting go of Ego/self, beyond action

Silence

Development of Kabbalah

ALL RELIGIONS REQUIRE a "leap of faith," an acceptance of some unprovable axioms. For Jews these axioms are the existence of a transcendent, immanent, unknowable God and the divine origin of the Torah. Once one takes these "leaps" of faith, the rest of Judaism may seem quite logical—so logical that beginning with Philo Judeaus in the first century, and peaking with Maimonides in the thirteenth century, great Jewish thinkers have been able to "prove" that the Torah is rationally consistent with Aristotelian logic. There are, however, parts of Scripture that resist ordinary logic. For example, what is a rationalist to make of Scriptural passages that imply the existence of wisdom beyond human ken, outside human understanding; passages that imply the existence of wisdom as an entity in and of itself?

But wisdom—where shall it be found? And where is the place of understanding? Man does not know its price; neither is it to be found in the place of the living...Where is wisdom from? And where is the place of understanding? The ability to see it is hidden from the eyes of the living... [Job 28:12-14].

Likewise, what does a logician make of the Scriptural description of the throne of God:

Wheel within a wheel ... for the spirit of the living creature was within the wheels ... Above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne... and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness as the appearance of a man... This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord...[Ezek. 1].

Jewish mysticism grew out of speculation on the meaning of these and other passages which could not be penetrated by ordinary reasoning. The mystics looked for other methods of penetration. Most Jewish mystics used speculative methods, imaginative musings on what was behind the literal meaning of the words, to uncover the hidden meanings.

The focus of the earliest of these speculations was Ezekiel's vision of the wheels and the chariot, from which early mysticism got the name *merkabah* [chariot] mysticism. Gradually, mystics expanded their meditations to include the many other mysteries in the whole of Scripture, with special emphasis on the creation story.

The Rabbis of the Mishnah and the Talmud rejected—and avoided—those they called "riders of the chariot." Yet despite the antagonism of the leaders of the Babylonian and Palestinian academies, early mystics produced a significant and influential body of mystical literature. The most important of the early works of mysticism were the *Hechalot* books and the *Sefer Yetsirah*.

Hechalot (Halls) described the heavenly halls or palaces through which the adept passes in his visions. The *Sefer Yetsirah*, the Book of Creation, described the Creation in terms of emanations from God and the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This introduced into Kabbalah the concept of the 10 "lights," "emanations," or *sefirot* as the bridges between the divine and earthly spheres. *Hechalot*, *Yetsirah*, and intellectual constructions such as the *sefirot*, were the beginning of Kabbalah.

Kabbalah, a noun derived from the Hebrew verb *kibel*, to receive, was first used to describe ideas or doctrine received from tradition. The word is used in the Talmud to refer to sacred works outside the Torah; e.g., the *Mishnah* is called a "kabbalah." The term came to refer to teachings outside the accepted texts and, eventually encompassed Jewish mysticism. Most particularly, it refers to the systems developed in the Middle Ages, from the twelfth century onward.

The Torah, or Written Law, records that it was given by God to Israel through Moses at Mt. Sinai. According to Rabbinic tradition, God also gave Moses an Oral Law, a Law that was not written but meant to be passed on by word of mouth—the *Mishnah*. The Kabbalists added another tradition: Moses received a third body of knowledge at Mount Sinai—the esoteric Torah. This is the body of secret knowledge we call Kabbalah, by which we can uncover in the Torah the secret laws of the universe.

The major process for uncovering the secret Kabbalah is speculative, called Kabbalah *iyunit*. There is also a minor process, the practical and magical Kabbalah *maasit*. Kabbalists hold that their speculations and disciplines are not anti-rational, not illogical. They argue that since the logical mind alone cannot truly comprehend God and Creation— notions accepted by all Jews— they are merely attempting to bypass the limitations of logical inquiry.

During the first 10 centuries of the Common Era, Jewish mysticism established strong bases in Italy, Africa, and Spain. Although largely *merkabah*-type speculation based on Scripture, *Mishnah*, and *Midrash*, this mysticism assimilated important ideas from the mystical

systems of the varied cultures in which Jews lived: the notions of angels and demons, transmigration of souls (*Gilgul*), the magical manipulation of numbers (*gematria*), and so on.

In Moslem Spain, Kabbalah assimilated concepts from Islamic mysticism. These, the Jewish mystics, like the early Islamic mystics or Sufis, confined themselves mainly to mystical spirituality rather than to *merkabah* speculations or magic.

In a Christian environment, in northern France and Germany, Jewish mysticism took another turn. There the *Chasidei* Ashkenaz* ("Pious Ones of Ashkenaz") taught total repentance through absolute adherence to the Jewish laws of ethical conduct and ritual observance. Some of the *Chasidei Ashkenaz* added a Christian concept: mortification of the flesh. They supported their argument for asceticism with various esoteric and theosophical ideas, but they were actually merely imitating their Christian neighbors.

Later Kabbalah (it is inappropriate to label as modern a discipline based on medieval ideas) began with Isaac the Blind, who lived in Spain on the border of France in the thirteenth century and was widely influential in the Mediterranean area. The Kabbalah of Isaac the Blind held that among the numberless attributes of God, Divine Thought led the list; that communion with this aspect of God was possible through meditation on the "lights," the *sefirot*. The desired end of this meditation was to be absorbed into Divine Thought, and thus become part of the world above. It was Isaac the Blind who gave to Judaism the mystic's favorite metaphor for God: *Eyn Sof*, the Endless One, the infinite.

This period of the flowering of Spanish Kabbalah was also the age of Maimonides—Maimonides the Aristotelian, Maimonides the rationalist. Inevitably, these two schools of thought—rationalist Maimonist and mystical Kabbalist—were at odds. Yet there were some Kabbalists who agreed with Maimonides and some Maimonists were also followers of the Kabbalah. For example, Abraham Abulafia (Spanish, thirteenth century) was both a passionate follower of Maimonides and a major Kabbalist. He said his work in mysticism was an extension of Maimonides' ideas that he was simply moving beyond Maimonides' preoccupation with philosophy.

It was into this world that Moses de Leon introduced the Zohar, the book that became the bible of Kabbalah.

* These medieval *Chasidim* were not the forerunners of the very different modern *Chasidim*. There is no connection between the *Chasidei Ashkenaz* and the members of the sect founded 500 years later by the *Baal Shem Tov*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Read Ezekiel 1—the description of Ezekiel's vision of the chariot and throne of God. Early Jewish mysticism was based in large part on this formidable description. What is your immediate emotional response? What is your immediate intellectual response? How does contemplating this vision fit within the general definition of Jewish mysticism?
2. What is the definition of Kabbalah? How did the term come to be applied to Jewish mysticism?
3. What are the two types of Kabbalah, and what purpose does each serve?
4. What contribution did Isaac the Blind make to Kabbalah? Why did he choose to describe God in negative terms?

The Zohar

JUST AS MAIMONIDES' Guide of the Perplexed was the watershed in Jewish philosophy, so Moses de Leon's Zohar, unveiled about a century later, was a watershed in Jewish mysticism. Until publication of the Zohar, Jewish mysticism was a disorganized collection of esoterica and theosophy. After its publication in about 1290, Kabbalah became relatively structured and integrated.

According to the traditional story, Moses ben Shem Tov de Leon of Guadalajara came into possession of a manuscript written by Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai of the second century C.E. Rabbi Simeon was sentenced to death by the Romans for continuing to teach Torah after they had forbidden it. To escape death, Simeon and his son Eleazar hid in a cave for some twelve years, kept alive by the Jews of the area and by miracles. During that long imprisonment, Simeon wrote the Zohar. It was hidden, lost, and miraculously uncovered a thousand years later, eventually coming into de Leon's hands.

The *Zohar* is written in Aramaic, Rabbi Simeon's language, but modern scholars note aspects of the book that dispute its traditional history. For one, the author of the book shows knowledge of the Babylonian Talmud, of post-Talmudic *midrashim*, later translations of Scripture—all written long after Simeon's time. It even includes some Rashi from the eleventh century. Furthermore, the twelfth century Crusades are mentioned, as is Arab rule in Palestine (which began in the seventh century). It describes customs specific to medieval Spanish Jewry. The Zohar's ideas of Satan, magic, and sorcery are also medieval rather than second century concepts. This all suggests that the Zohar is a late thirteenth century work combining old texts,

current Spanish Kabbalist belief, and the speculations of de Leon.

A major internal clue to the date of composition of the Zohar is its forecast of redemption. The writer says that redemption is near because it is the end of 1,200 years of the Exile (one century for each tribe). The belief that the Exile would end in approximately the year 1300 C.E. was widespread in de Leon's time.

The *Sefer ha Zohar*, or Book of Splendor, took its name from Scripture: "And they that be wise shall shine as the splendor [brightness] of the firmament; and they that turn the many to righteousness [shall shine] as the stars, for ever and ever" [Dan. 12:3]. Zohar is the book of the wise who turn the many to righteousness.

The work is in several volumes; most editions include the *Tikkunei Zohar*, added by disciples of Isaac Luria of Safed, Israel, several centuries after de Leon, and the *Zohar Chadash*, texts added by later Kabbalists of Safed.

The Zohar is a compendium of Scriptural exegesis and stories; a map and guidebook of the mystical landscape of heaven and creation; a key by which the adept can decode the esoteric Torah. Truly, as the Baal Shem Tov said, "When I open the Zohar, I behold the whole universe.

The main part of the work is arranged according to the weekly portions of the Torah read during worship services. This format is followed from Genesis 1 to Numbers 30 and for parts of Deuteronomy. In addition to providing *midrashim*, homilies and discussions on sections of these portions of Torah, it comments on portions of the books of Ruth, Lamentations, and Song of Songs. Like raisins in a cake, discussions and stories on esoteric subjects are sprinkled

throughout. Some are short, some as long as books.

These are the major divisions of the Zohar:

— The *Idra Rabba* or Great Assembly

— Simeon and his ten companions discuss the revelation of God in the form of primordial man (Adam Kadmon). In a kind of parallel to the Talmudic story of Akiba and pardes, three of the 10 companions die in ecstasy after seeing the mysteries.

— The *Idra Zuta* or Lesser Assembly—Another parallel: a description of Simeon's death much like that of Moses' death in the closing chapters of Deuteronomy.

— *Hechalat* or Halls—A discussion of the mysteries of prayer and a treatise on angels. Includes descriptions of the palaces in the Garden of Eden where souls go after death. (For those not quite ready for death, *Hechalot* says that particularly fervent and dedicated and honestly-meant prayers can lift the soul into the Halls.)

— An explanation of chiromancy (palmistry) and physiognomy by which an individual's fate can be foretold by the lineaments of the face and hands.

— A discourse on the nature of the soul derived from a mystical explanation of the laws of slavery, which is metaphorically couched in the story of a meeting of Simeon's companions and a

great Kabbalist who goes about as a poor old man with a donkey.

— The mystical meaning of grace after meals told through the story of a wonder child—the son of the old man with the donkey.

—A description of the world to come which was given to Simeon and his companions by the head of a Heavenly Academy.

—An explanation of the mysteries of the *sefirot*.

— A discourse by Simeon on the secret meanings of the letters that form God's Name.

— An interpretation of the vision of the chariot in Ezekiel.

Essentially, the work is a description of and an explanation of the mysteries of the world of the *sefirot* as symbolic of the world of the divine—which reflects this world, created through the agency of the *sefirot*. It deals with the place of the Jew in both worlds.

There are many lessons in the Zohar, all dependent on faithful acceptance of the first three: (1) There is a secret meaning in every word of Torah, in every commandment—seek it out, (2) there is a supreme value in fulfilling every commandment—learn what it is, and (3) do not read the Torah literally; if you do, you will neglect the commandments.

Lurianic Kabbalah

WITH THE EXPULSION of the Jews from Spain and Portugal at the end of the fifteenth century, the center of Kabbalah moved back to Palestine from Western Europe. There, in the town of Safed, a new Kabbalah was grafted onto the roots of Spanish Kabbalah and the Zohar. This was the Lurianic Kabbalah, so named for Rabbi Isaac ben Solomon Luria. He was called *HaAri*, which means "the lion," and is also an acronym for "Ashkenazic Rabbi Isaac."

The Zohar was the first watershed in Jewish mysticism; it gave Kabbalah a system. Isaac Luria and his school of Safed Kabbalists were the second watershed. Before Safed, Kabbalah was an esoteric discipline, restricted to those already adept in it dealing mainly with other-worldly subjects. After Safed, Kabbalah was almost a mass phenomenon. The Safed Kabbalists changed the form in of Kabbalah so that ordinary Jews could reach for it and could find within it answers to contemporary questions.

The coming of the messiah, which meant the end of the Exile, was no longer a faraway promise but an imminent possibility to the Safed Kabbalists. They gave Israel a special role in the divine order, and they gave each Jew personal responsibility for a part in a God-ordered task. As a result of the changes made by Luria and his followers, notably Moses Cordovero and Chayim Vital, Kabbalah became relevant and available to the average educated Jew.

From the time the First Temple was destroyed and the Jews were taken to Babylon, exile was a constant in Jewish existence. Even though some did return to the land with Ezra and Nehemiah, they were ruled by foreign overlords. Except for the brief period of the Hasmonean kings, the returnees were subjects respectively to Persian,

Egyptian, Syrian, Greek, and Roman princes. So, while they lived in the land that God had promised to them, they were in a kind of internal exile. In 70 C.E. and again in 135 C.E., they were scattered among foreign lands. Throughout these centuries, Jewish prophets and sages proclaim that exile, external and internal, was an abnormal condition. It was, they said, God's judgment on the Jews because they had not followed the commandments. The judgment appeared to be confirmed by the Crusades, the Black Death, the expulsions from this land and that.

Nothing the Jews did seemed to temper God's severe judgment. A feeling of futility became part of the Jewish condition. Kabbalah had no answer to this problem until Isaac Luria of Safed and his companions. The Lurianic Kabbalah confronted and offered answers to the Jewish sense of hopelessness.

Luria taught that the exile of the Jews was part of the divine order, not punishment for wrongdoing. Creation itself began, not with a positive act, but with a negative act: God withdrew into Himself in order to leave space for the created world (the act of *tsimtsum*). This withdrawal is, in the Lurianic sense, a form of exile. In the Lurianic system, exile is the constant condition of God, of the world, of mankind—and of the Jews.

This Lurianic system was not transmitted to us by Isaac Luria himself. While the master of the Safed Kabbalists was a man of much personal magnetism, with enormous appeal to his followers, he was neither a systematic thinker nor a writer. It was his disciples, Moses Cordovero and Chayim Vital, who gave order to his thoughts. It was they, not Luria, who actually wrote down the systematic explanations of the Lurianic Kabbalah. The absence of certain

intellectual abilities did not lessen the Ari's position as the Master, as pure intellect was of relatively minor importance in Safed. The Safed Kabbalists concentrated on the mystic-mythic elements of Kabbalah, rather than the philosophic elements which had fascinated the Spanish mystics. Luria developed the radical cosmic myths, and Chayim Vital and Moses Cordovero incorporated them in a theology. Luria's function was still the more important one because, as the scholar Gershom Scholem (Kabbalah, page 74) puts it: "A large area of [Luria's] system does not lend itself to complete intellectual penetration, and in many instances it can only be reached through personal meditation."

While the earlier esoteric Kabbalah had been the sole domain of a few scholars, the message of the Safed mystics reached more widely. Whereas original Zohar had been accepted as a kind of Talmud of theosophy, a sourcebook of knowledge of the divine, it had been little known, and certainly had not been read outside the restricted circle of adepts. The report of a Jewish Kabbalist, traveling several years after the appearance of the Zohar, confirms this. He comments that he rarely saw copies of the book, even in the homes of scholars. It wasn't until after the incorporation of the refinements and additions of the Safed school, that this Bible of Kabbalah was found wherever Jews lived.

There were three major reasons for the blossoming of Kabbalah:

First, it was welcomed because it offered hope in a seemingly hopeless situation.

Second, the art of printing had spread widely in Europe by the time the Safed school began to flourish.

Third, the restrictions on study of the Kabbalah were removed. A Safed Kabbalist explained why it was no longer necessary for the Kabbalah to remain an esoteric discipline, open only to special people:

The decree from above not to engage openly in the wisdom of Kabbalah was meant to apply only for a set time, until 1490 [C.E.] From then on is the time of the last generation [before the Messiah]; the decree is rescinded, and permission is granted to engage in studying the Book of Zohar. From 1540 on, the best way to fulfill the divine commandment is to engage in it, young or old...Since this and nothing else will bring about the coming of King Messiah, do not be negligent [Quoted by Matt, Zohar, p. 11].

With this theosophical change of heart, the esoteric element in Kabbalah was drastically reduced although change would likely have come in any case because the sixteenth century was also the century in which printing spread throughout the world. As long as books were handwritten, thus rare and expensive, the knowledge in the books could be controlled. Printing made books and the knowledge they contained universally available.

Jews had been forbidden to practice most trades, but printing was a brand new craft in the fifteenth century. The first major Jewish presses were well established before princes and bishops thought to bar the new craft to Jews. Two editions of the Zohar were printed in 1560, one in Cremona, another in Mantua. The Kabbalah was now available to any literate Jew, as well as to interested Moslems and Christians.

The Kabbalah got its new form, new home, and greatly increased fervor as the result of one catastrophe: the expulsion of the Jews from Spain

and Portugal. Three new catastrophes pushed all Jews, most particularly those of Eastern Europe, to grasp eagerly at the mystical promise inherent in Kabbalah.

In the early 1600's Shabbatai Tsevi, a Turkish Jew, claimed that he was the Messiah and was about to initiate the Messianic Age. Thousands of Jews believed him; many gave up their homes, fortunes, and careers to follow him. In 1644 Tsevi was proved a fraud, and the Jews who believed in this false messiah, who fully expected the immediate end of exile, persecution, war, and want, were thrown into despair.

Four years later, in 1648-49, Bagdan Chmielnicki and his Cossack hordes scourged the Jews of the Ukraine and Poland. It is estimated that one-quarter to one-third of all the Jews in Eastern Europe died at the hands of Chmielnicki's Cossacks. Thousands more died at the hands of those who had sworn to protect the Jews, the Polish nobility.

Betrayed by the self-proclaimed messiah, by kings, pope, and bishops, the Jews could think of no way out of their despair. Nor did they find much succor in faithful practice of the commandments. More than one hundred thousand Jews were martyred; the millions left alive had no hope. Many turned to mysticism and

magic, thinking that perhaps these would bring safety and peace.

When most of the Jews in Eastern Europe became subjects of the Czar (actually, Czarina Catherine the Great) in 1793, their troubles multiplied. It was then that many Jews embraced the newest expression of mysticism's promise: Chasidism.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. According to the prophets and the Jewish sages, what was the reason for the exile? How did Isaac Luria of Safed explain it? In what way did his explanation lead to the popularization of Kabbalah among Jews?
2. What three reasons does the author give for the rapid spread of the Zohar and Kabbalah, following the period of Luria and the flowering of the sages of Safed?
3. How did the expulsion from Spain, the rise and fall of the false messiah Shabbatai Tsevi, and the partition of Poland add further impetus to the spread of Jewish mysticism?
4. 4 According to the Safed school of Kabbalah, why was study of the Zohar forbidden before 1490 and urgent from 1540 on?

The Kabbalists' Universe

THERE IS NO SINGLE normative Jewish theology. Ideas of God, creation, Torah, Law, prayer, evil, and Providence vary with Ashkenazim and Sephardim; with German and Polish Ashkenazim; with Turkish Sephardim and Oriental Jews; among Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform Jews. And Jews of local rites—Yemenite, Bokhari, Roman, etc.—may differ with all the above.

Extensive variation was just as much the pattern with followers of Kabbalah. Spanish, German, African, and Palestinian Kabbalists differed; and within the same geographical area mystics differed over time. From the second century to the twentieth, Jewish mystics have tried to experience God in their own ways. Each used all manner of techniques, ranging from the purely spiritual and speculative to the practical and magical. But regardless of time and place, all Jewish mystics have started their speculative journeys from a common point with a common view of God and man's relationship to Him. All agree that:

- *God cannot be known.*
- *God is both transcendent—separate, above and beyond all else, not limited by time or space—and immanent—indwelling completely within all creatures. Kabbalists appear more interested in God's immanence than His transcendence.*
- *There is within God the desire to be known.*
- *There is within God the desire to create.*
- *God did not create the universe from nothingness.*
- *Man is created in the likeness of God. By moving away from Godly attributes—justice,*

mercy, compassion, love, and so on—man has defaced that image.

— *The mystic's task is to rebuild that image, to bring it once again close to God's semblance.*

— *The mystic begins his search by doing what God commands, by faithfully fulfilling God's commandments. Faithful obedience to the Law brings the human likeness closer to God's likeness, thus healing the defaced image of man.*

From this set of givens, Kabbalists tried to penetrate the basic mysteries, to find answers to seemingly unanswerable questions: How could an infinite Being create a finite universe? How could a perfectly good and totally omnipotent God allow evil to exist? How could a just and merciful God allow (condemn?) the Jewish people to suffer a very long and very painful exile?

Speculation produced explanations, varying with time and place. Some were simple and naive, others complex and sophisticated. Some early ideas were disregarded along the way, others expanded. Many were embellished from non-Jewish sources—for example, the angelology and demonology was adapted from the Zoroastrian Avesta texts learned during the exile in Babylonia and Persia.

Over the centuries a Kabbalist's picture of the universe and its creation emerged. The last major refinement of the mystical explanation of creation was that of Isaac Luria and his Safed followers. This was the version accepted and embellished by Chasidism. The Lurianic story of Creation answered some age-old questions; it also answered questions of burning importance to 16th and 17th century refugees from Spain: Why the Exile? How could God allow the expulsion of

the Jews from Spain? In view of these cataclysmic events, what is the Jews' vocation in this world?

Again the warning that must precede all Kabbalistic descriptions: This story of creation is not offered as a description of what actually happened. It is impossible for human beings to know such things. So the story is figurative, a metaphor, not to be taken literally. This metaphor for the beginning of all is limited in two respects: Although the events described did occur in heaven, the story is told from a human perspective, and divine elements are described in human words. Yet how else can human beings communicate with each other? As the Zohar puts it, "All this is said from our point of view, and it is relative to our knowledge" [Zohar II, 176a].

According to the Safed Kabbalists, creation was not a necessary consequence of God's nature or essence. God could have done otherwise. But according to the mystic's view, there is within God a desire to create. A desire, not a need. (How can God have needs?) So creation was, metaphorically, God's decision, an act of Divine Will. It is improper to ask why God made this decision because any possible answer would involve ideas and concepts totally beyond human understanding.

The difficulty in applying the word "why" to God illustrates the basic problem in explaining mystical ideas and concepts to rationalists. To speak of God "acting" or of "God's will" is wrong; it applies human concepts to God. Yet these are the only instruments we have to describe what is by its nature indescribable and undefinable.

Despite limitations, the Kabbalists drew a metaphorical picture of the process and history of creation.

Their picture begins, as all things must, with God, God as *Eyn Sof*, Without Limit, Infinite, Everywhere. It is impossible to imagine any place that is not God since the existence of such a place would mean that God is limited, not infinite. We are left with the paradox of an Infinite God and a finite universe side by side.

This paradox is resolved by the concept of *tsimtsum*, the contraction. In the mystical story of creation, God withdrew into Himself; He concentrated His essence. A space appeared, called *tehiru*. This primordial space, not outside of God but within Him, makes possible the existence of something other than God. In effect, the *tsimtsum* is the self-limitation of God.

When philosophers argued that you couldn't have both Divine ubiquity—everywhereness—and *tehiru*, non-God space, the Kabbalists offered an analogy: Take a deep breath. Gather together within yourself all your breath. Hold it. You now have within yourself a bubble of air, a space. Without lessening yourself you have created within yourself a place that is not you, a kind of *tehiru*.

God expressed the idea of creation; He expressed His will to create. And in the space, the *tehiru*, appeared Adam Kadmon, the primordial man. Adam Kadmon is an emanation of the creator aspect of God. Adam Kadmon is a light, the first and highest of the *sefirot*. Out of Adam Kadmon flow other lights, other emanations; in all, nine *sefirot* in addition to the first *sefirah*.

The word *sefirot* is from the Hebrew verb *safar*, to enumerate. In Kabbalistic literature, the *sefirot* are the 10 stages of emanations from God, each a manifest action of the various attributes of God. Since the human mind deals most easily with physical concepts, the *sefirot* are generally thought of—and spoken of—as "lights." The

sefirot are divided into upper lights—the first three *sefirot*—and six lower lights. The six lower *sefirot* serve as the principle instruments of Creation. The tenth *sefirah*, the *Shechinah*, is necessarily different from the others because it is directly involved in and touches the world of being.

At the Creation each light, each *sefirah*, was contained in a vessel, much as an ocean is contained within the bowl of its shores. The vessels containing the upper lights were strong and held the mighty power of the *sefirot* they embraced. But the vessels that held the six lower lights could not contain their power. They shattered. The shattering of the vessels was the *shevirah*.

In the *shevirah* the vessels containing the lower *sefirot* broke into myriad pieces, shards. In this heavenly explosion, the shards were exploded into the cosmos. These shards, called *klipot* (shells or husks) captured sparks of the unquenchable light released by the *shevirah*. Combined with the celestial light, the *klipot* took on shape and substance and gained enormous power. Because the *klipot* were the products of the *shevirah*, of destruction rather than creation, their power is evil; they are the dark side of creation. Evil became a reality and a force in the created world through the *klipot*.

There are variations in this description of creation, differences in details but not in essentials. In one, the lights did not emanate from Adam Kadmon, but directly from *Eyn Sof* into the 10 vessels. The vessels gave each light, each *sefirah*, an individual character. However, the lights were too intense, too strong, too heavy, to be contained in the vessels. The vessels shattered. The lights that formed the top three *sefirot* flowed back to *Eyn Sof*; the others flowed into the void. Some sparks of the divine light

clung to the shattered pieces of the vessels and fell downward.

The *shevirah*, the shattering of the vessels, was the decisive crisis of all divine and created being. In it the very process of creation was upset; the levels of creation were pushed apart. Even the male and female aspects of God were displaced. Since that cataclysm, nothing in time, in place, or in order is where it was supposed to be in the Divine plan of creation. A thing or a being not in its proper place is in exile. Thus, as a result of the *shevirah*, that moment-of-creation event, all created beings are in exile. Centuries after this version of creation first surfaced in Jewish mystical circles, modern scientists came up with their version of the *shevirah*. They call it the Big-Bang Theory of the beginning of all things.

Everything in heaven has its reflection here below; all events in this world are reflections of events on high. Scripture records earthly parallels to the heavenly *tsimtsum* and *shevirah*. The *tsimtsum* was a negative act, a withdrawal, and thus a forerunner of exile. Adam's fall in Scripture corresponds to the *shevirah*. When Adam sinned, he was exiled; his great soul was shattered, reduced to sparks. Because of Adam's fall, the *Shechinah*, the tenth *sefirah*, the bridge between this world and the world above, was also shattered into sparks. The mingled sparks of Adam's soul and the shattered *Shechinah* are prey to the husks and shells, the *klipot*. And so, evil is abroad in this world.

The above is written in the past tense; God withdrew; the vessels shattered; the *klipot* burst, etc. It would be equally correct to write it in the present tense because for Jews, creation is a constant, ongoing, unending process.

The Kabbalist's story of creation does not end on this despairing note. If it did, it would mean that

creation had no positive purpose. This is impossible for a God with the attributes of goodness, mercy, and justice. There is a third great critical event: the *tikkun*. The *tsimtsum* and the *shevirah* were heavenly events of the primordial past. *Tikkun* is in the now and in the future. The *tsimtsum* and the *shevirah* occurred in the upper world. *Tikkun*, although in the desire of heaven, is in the hands of man.

Tikkun is mending; *tikkun* is healing; *tikkun* is redemption. On high, the *sefirot*—those healing, constructive lights—continue to issue from Adam Kadmon. They do half of the work of *tikkun*, the heavenly half. This leaves to humanity a vital part in the great restoration of wholeness.

Why us? Because human beings are the apex of creation; because we were created with free will. The endpoint of *tikkun*, the final healing, will be reached when evil is defeated and human beings bring themselves back to *Eyn Sof's* intention. *Tikkun* will be accomplished when we are once again "the image of God."

In order for *tikkun* to take place, the *klipot* must be dissolved and the evil residing in them eliminated. This requires love and mercy on the part of people, as these qualities are the solvents of the *klipot*. When the great *tikkun* has been accomplished, the exile of the Jews and the mystic exile of the *Shechinah* will be over. Only then will there be a true conjunction of male and female—in the upper world in the aspects of God, on earth between human beings.

God has from the beginning offered us opportunities for redemption, for the great *tikkun*. Jewish history is a record of the victories and defeats in this process. Adam could have achieved it, but he failed by sinning. The revelation on Mount Sinai gave the Jews another opportunity; they failed when they rejected God

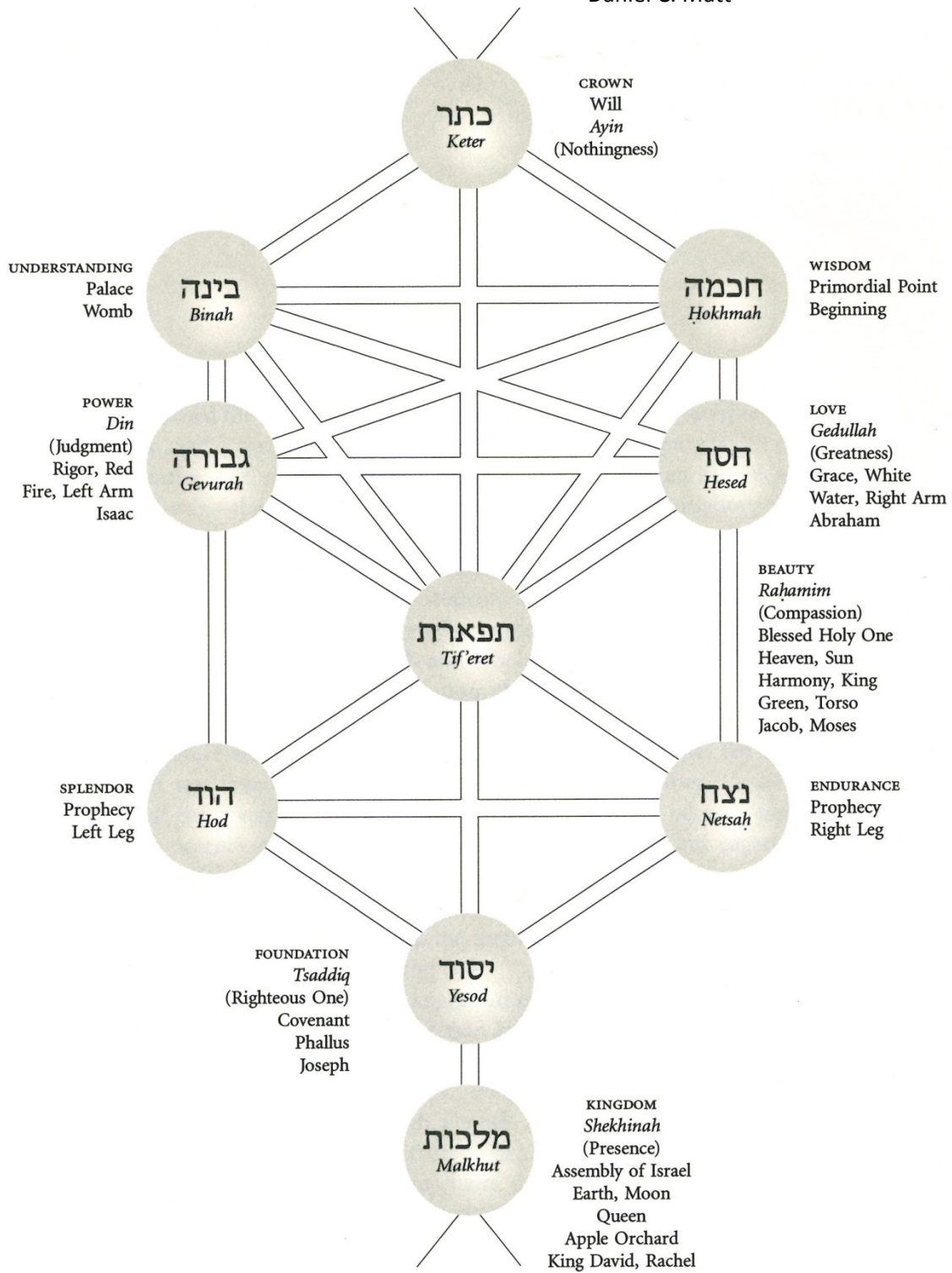
and turned to the golden calf. But God is patient as well as good, so He continues to offer to every human being the opportunity of *tikkun*.

Torah is the instrument of *tikkun*; it is the map and guidebook to *tikkun*. Every person who acts according to Torah sends a spark of the shattered vessel of the *Shechinah* home to heaven. Every act in fulfillment of the Torah sends heavenward the spark of Adam Kadmon that resides in every human being. The duty of *tikkun* falls on us individually and collectively. Each individual Jew has a personal role to play in this process. Each Jew, by cleaving to God, helps cleanse the world of the demonic *klipot*. Collectively, Israel moves the whole world toward the great *tikkun*, toward the Messianic Age, by accepting the Torah, by following Jewish law.

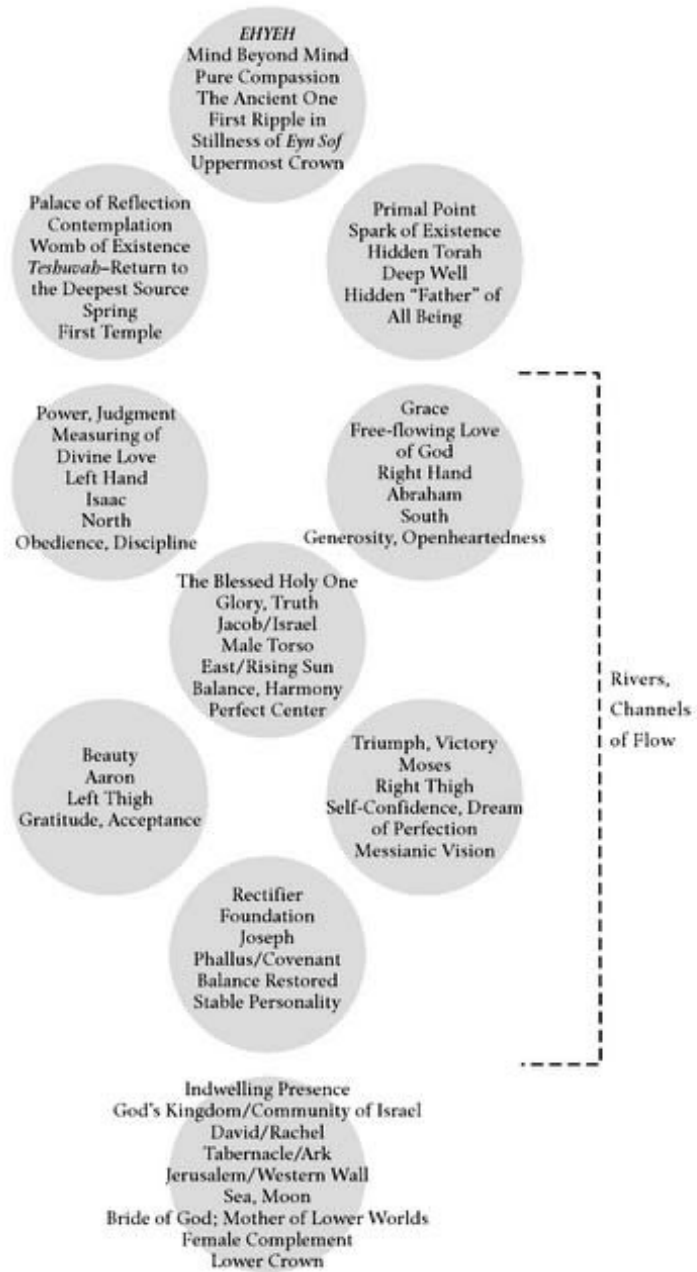
STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the areas of agreement which Jewish mystics share. In what ways do these fit with the general definition of mysticism found at the beginning of this text?
2. Describe the process of creation as Isaac Luria taught it. Why did the vessels shatter? How could God contract to create the primordial space and still remain everywhere?
3. Identify the following terms: (1) *Sefirot*, (2) *shevirah*, (3) *tsimtsum*, (4) *Shechinah*, (5) *klipot*, (6) *Eyn Sof*, (7) *tehiru*, (8) Adam Kadmon, (9) Zohar, (10) *tikkun*.
4. Explain the partnership involved in the mystical explanation of Creation. What part is played by God through the upper *sefirot*? What part is played by human beings through the lower *sefirot*?

From, "The Zohar: Pritzker Edition,"
 translation and commentary by
 Daniel C. Matt



The Ten Sefirot



Key Symbols of the Ten *Sefirot*

From "Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow," by Arthur Green

THE HIDDEN LIGHT

God said, "Let there be light!" and there was light. God saw how good the light was and God separated the light from the darkness.

Rabbi Isaac said,

"The light created by God in the act of Creation flared from one end of the universe to the other and was hidden away,

reserved for the righteous in the world that is coming, as it is written:

'Light is sown for the righteous.'

Then the worlds will be fragrant, and all will be one.

But until the world that is coming arrives, it is stored and hidden away."

Rabbi Judah responded,

"If the light were completely hidden, the world would not exist for even a moment! Rather, it is hidden and sown like a seed that gives birth to seeds and fruit.

Thereby the world is sustained.

Every single day, a ray of that light shines into the world, keeping everything alive; with that ray God feeds the world.

And everywhere that Torah is studied at night one thread-thin ray appears from that hidden light and flows down upon those absorbed in her.

Since the first day, the light has never been fully revealed, but it is vital to the world, renewing each day the act of Creation."

CONCEALING AND REVEALING

WHEN POWERFUL LIGHT is concealed and clothed in a garment, it is revealed. Though concealed, the light is actually revealed, for were it not concealed, it could not be revealed. This is like wishing to gaze at the dazzling sun. Its dazzle conceals it, for you cannot look at its overwhelming brilliance. Yet when you conceal it—looking at it through screens—you can see and not be harmed. So it is with emanation: by concealing and clothing itself, it reveals itself.

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WITH THE APPEARANCE Of the light, the universe expanded.

With the concealment of the light, the things that exist were created in all their variety.

This is the secret of the act of Creation.

One who understands will understand.

From, "*The Essential Kabbalah*" by Daniel C. Matt, pp. 90-91