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Kabbalah

THE KABBALAH

The Kabbalah is essentially a collection of methods and teachings that are used in an attempt to understand the nature of the universe, including how and why it was created. The word *Kabbalah* means “to receive,” which implicitly suggests that the primary focus is upon the receiver.

A great deal of emphasis in the spiritual realm is concerned with teachings. We believe that if we simply find the right teacher or the special teachings, we will gain great wisdom. From this perspective, spiritual wisdom can be found in the library. Kabbalah has a very different viewpoint. The emphasis in Kabbalah is directed more to the container than that which fills it. What is accomplished by pouring a library full of wisdom teachings into a vessel that is blocked, unable to receive or hold anything?



On the other hand, when a container is open and able to retain everything that enters, an opportunity then exists for the development of wisdom. The kabbalistic approach is that every blade of grass and every grain of sand contain within it the wisdom of the universe. The teachings of Kabbalah are not so relevant with regard to their substance, for often the information is arcane and abstract. Far more relevant to the Kabbalist is the mindset that arises when one engages in kabbalistic techniques. It is one's frame of mind that creates a clear vessel to receive extraordinary wisdom teachings. Information, as such, is not the gateway to spiritual wisdom. Rather, the crucial element is the person, you, the container that holds the information.

Kabbalah has always delved into unusual realms and has often been misconstrued and misused by those who are misguided about its purpose. Some people are inclined to teach Kabbalah as a form of magic, with the implication that it will provide tools with which one can gain powers to manipulate fate. While it is true that there are stories of ancient sages who created golems and who seemed to have had magical powers, these stories are actually tangential and not the point.

A story that better represents extraordinary wisdom is of a great sage encountering a spiritual devotee who had spent fifty years in intensive practices. When the sage inquired of the devotee what he had accomplished in his spiritual life, the student proceeded to walk on water. The sage's comment to the student was, "If that is all you can show for your practice, what a pity!"

The ability to manipulate reality as we know it may be a "miracle," but it has little to do with the reason realized sages constantly engaged in practice, even after their awakening. The main interest of Kabbalists throughout history has been to understand the "mind of God," so to speak, in order to fulfill one's potential during his or her lifetime. The goal is to become a complete vehicle that is a clear and unspoiled expression of the divine will. So if a student's



motivation to engage in spiritual practices is to develop magical skills, he or she is already trapped in the sticky tentacles of desire for self-attainment.

The reader should be wary of such desires. This book is not designed to teach anyone how to acquire occult powers. Instead, it is a book that describes kabbalistic practices that help to calm a confused mind and that lead to a clear awareness of how things work in this world of ours. This awareness helps us come to terms with our own lives in a way that brings ever-increasing peace of mind.

Peace of mind does not result from the attempt to control our lives. In fact, it is just the opposite. It comes from the wisdom that is illuminated when we learn how to relax in a way that allows us to “be with what is.” In our practice, we learn how to engage in something when it is appropriate and how to disengage as well. Peace of mind comes from recognizing how one fits into the scheme of things, the degree to which all life is interconnected, and the realization that nobody is ever alone.



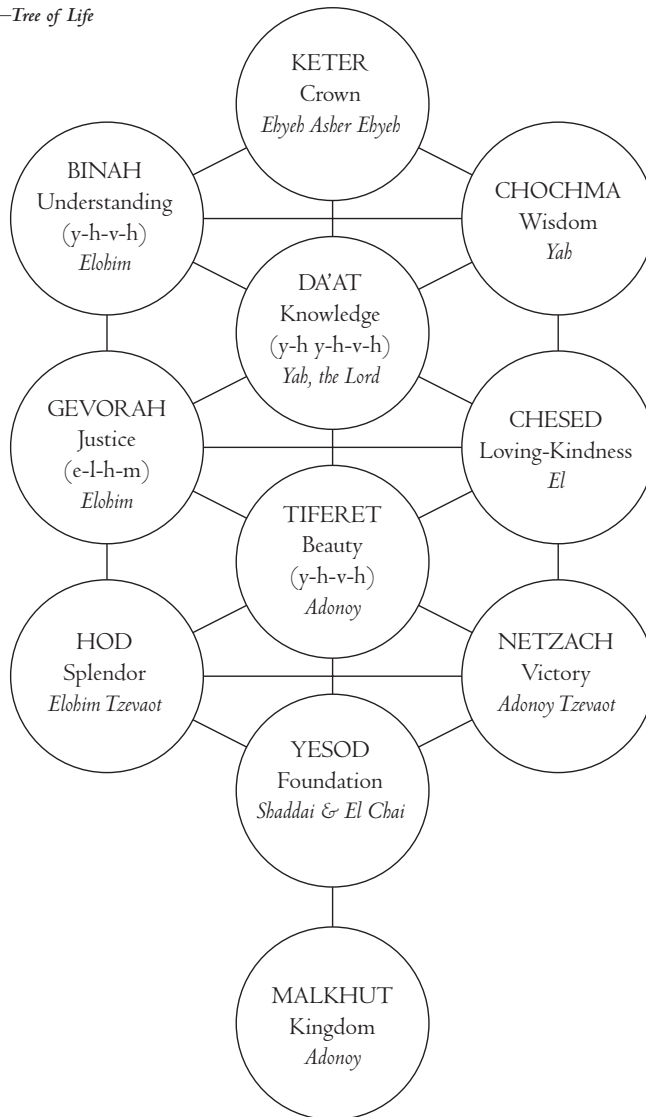
THE TREE OF LIFE

Many teachings of Kabbalah are connected with the Tree of Life. This metaphorical tree is a schematic representation of the mystical view of creation. Just as a physicist regards atomic particles as the building blocks of the universe, a Kabbalist regards the elements revealed in the Tree of Life as the architecture upon which stands all reality as we know it.

The common representation of the Tree is a group of ten (often eleven) “globes” ordered in three columns. The center column is considered the trunk of the tree, while the columns to the right or left of the trunk are viewed as polar opposites. One side is masculine, the other feminine; one side is expansive, the other contractive; one side represents the flexibility and forgiveness, the other represents the tight constriction and severity of absolute causality. Every



Fig. 1—Tree of Life





possible dichotomy, every set of opposites is represented by the branches on either side of the trunk.

From top to bottom, the Tree represents a metaphysical flow of creation, from its source to its actualization of life. It is similar to a biological tree of life that shows the simplest, one-celled organisms on one end and the most complex organisms on the other. Sometimes a Tree of Life is drawn in a way that we would normally call “upside down,” with its roots in the sky. This flip in perspective is the mystical way to make a point: we must balance our normal inclination to view “mother earth” as the source of life with the understanding that the vast universe in which we live must also be viewed as our source of existence.

It should be immediately clear to any observer that the Tree of Life describes ideas that transcend our ordinary sensibilities. The globes of the tree symbolically represent mystical “emanations” that are building blocks of creation. No emanation stands on its own, but is always in some combination with the others.

The globes on the Tree represent every aspect of reality as we know it. This is analogous to the Greek idea that all of reality can be reduced to four elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The Tree reduces not only all of our normative reality but also transcendent universes all the way to the ultimate source, which has no source.

Each globe on the tree is called in Hebrew a *sefira*, which means “emanation.” The idea of emanation is that the universe is created with light and sound vibrations that, in various combinations, form matter. This is similar to the way modern physicists view the universe, with elements divided into a selected number of groups. Subatomic particles are also categorized into groups that have certain identifiable characteristics. So, in metaphysical terms, the *sefirot* (plural of *sefira*) that compose the Tree of Life are the primordial keystones of all creation.



MEDITATION ON HARMONY

It is said that the human body is an excellent paradigm for the Tree. The trunk of the body represents the trunk of the Tree, the arms and legs represent the branches. Along the trunk of the body, the five sefirot of the trunk are located as follows: *keter* (crown), just above the head; *da'at* (knowledge) in the throat; *tiferet* (beauty) in the heart; *yesod* (foundation) in the lower stomach; and *malkhut* (kingdom), just below the sexual organs, between the legs.

Each of the sefirot are associated with vowel sounds. There is a considerable variety of opinions as to which sounds are associated with which sefirot. My own approach is to follow the basic kabbalistic method of associating a sound with the place in the mouth and throat where it is essentially pronounced—the closer to the throat, the higher on the trunk; closer to the lips, the lower on the trunk. Thus, making the sounds Aa, Ee, Ah, Oh, and Uu, I show as descending from the top of the trunk downward.

You can use both the visual images of the sefirot and the sounds of the vowels to develop a strong meditation practice. To do so, sit quietly and imagine a string running through your body, going out of the top of your head, extending upward to the heavens, and extending out below your buttocks into the ground, going to the center of the earth. Imagine five light sources on the string: one above your head (*keter*, the sound Aa), one in the area of your throat (*da'at*, the sound Ee), one near your heart (*tiferet*, the sound Ah), one near the bottom of your stomach (*yesod*, the sound Oh), and one just below the base of your spine (*malkhut*, the sound Uu).

The idea of this practice is to bring all of your thoughts and emotions into balance. The branches of the Tree, as noted above, represent all dichotomies, all opposites, all opinions, all viewpoints, all judgments, and all criticisms. You can work in this arena to bring every tension of polarity to the central trunk of

Fig 2—Meditation on Harmony

