

Kabbalah: Divine Catastrophe And Human Redemption

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Synopsis

Kabbalah, the culmination of mystical and esoteric traditions that stretch back thousands of years, has recently taken a more central place internationally as a source of spiritual inspiration. Kabbalah is seen today as Judaism's most important gift to world culture. This may show that people, in an age impatient with more difficult material, still want to encounter works that are spiritually and imaginatively on the heights. Kabbalah accepts catastrophe as a fundamental reality of life, not exactly a vision that fosters positive thinking. It also concentrates on the absolute need for human responsibility, not a very comforting message for those looking for easy answers (and Kabbalah does not yield its secrets easily). Kabbalah as we know it today formed from opposing forces within Judaism, between the rational (represented by Aristotle) and the intuitive (represented by Plato), a dialectic that I will touch on. Kabbalistic teachings, however, were not well-known until very recently and in fact went through a two hundred year exile (exile being one of Kabbalah's great themes), banished by rationalists of the Enlightenment, only to be resuscitated by people searching for their traditional roots and by some of the world's most gifted scholars. Here I will give an overview of a few basic teachings from the central works of Kabbalah, with a focus on catastrophe and redemption. Human goodness as a way to heal the world, a cosmic drama in which everyone plays a part, is perhaps Kabbalah's greatest lesson for global civilization.

Key Words

Tikkun Olam; Kabbalah; the Sefer Yetzirah; the Sefer ha-Bahir; the Sefer ha-Zohar; Lurianic Kabbalah; Kabbalist; Moses de Leon; Isaac Luria; Safed

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1. Introduction

I offer here an orientation to one aspect of Kabbalah, that of crisis and redemption, yet to cover even this modest theme requires some background on the seminal kabbalistic writings and a few of the basic concepts. I will rely mainly on Gershom Scholem, the great scholar of Kabbalah and the virtual founder of Kabbalah as an academic discipline. Scholem's pioneering work *Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, published in 1941, is still the most thorough and beautifully written presentation of Kabbalah. It is so elegant a work, written with such insight and humanity, that it has to be considered among the great intellectual achievements of the twentieth-century. I will make liberal use of it here and will also draw from a second generation of scholars who have followed in the footsteps of the great master.¹⁾

It is a daunting task for anyone attempting to understand Kabbalah from translations of the ancient texts, the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, "Book of Illumination" (c. 1180), the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, "Book of Splendor" (c. 1280), or the teachings of Isaac Luria (1534–1572), from his brilliant student, Hayim Vital (1543–1620), who recorded Luria's teachings in *Shemoneh She'arim*, "Eight Gates" (c. 1660), also known as the *Etz ha-Chaim*, "Tree of Life." From the *Book of Illumination* (twelfth-century) to the *Eight Gates* (seventeenth-century), we have writings, including hundreds and hundreds of treatises extant, that span about five hundred years of intense ferment among communities that stretched from Spain to the Israel, composed with Christian persecution of Jews as the backdrop.

People today think of Kabbalah as a continuum, yet it is much closer to a canon of imaginative literature than to a consistent theology, with the great esoteric writers each putting their individual stamps on these writings and teachings. I use the terms "mysticism" and "esoterism" interchangeably to describe these writings. "Mystical" or "mystic," I should point out, has been a designation from Roman Catholic theologies, of communion with the divine that cannot be described through language, with a goal of oneness with God. In Jewish mysticism, in contrast to the wordless Christian encounters of divinity, language and words—the sacred language of Hebrew, both spoken and written—are always of primary importance and where oneness with the divine is not thought possible (Scholem 1972:203, 204):

Whereas in Catholic mysticism "Communion" was not the last step on the mystical way...in Kabbalism it is the last grade of ascent to God. It is not union, because union with God is denied to man even in that mystical upsurge of the soul, according to Kabbalistic theology. But it comes as near to union as a mystical interpretation of Judaism would allow.

What is a Kabbalist? I will hazard a broad definition. A Kabbalist is someone who has, on some level, internalized the central ethics of these esoteric teachings. Most Jews who practice their religion could be considered Kabbalists, at least to some small degree, with the more orthodox the most kabbalistic. "Chabad," an orthodox movement within the Hasidim of eighteenth-century Eastern Europe and Western

Russia, is an acronym for the three upper Sefirot: *Keter* (Crown), *Binah* (Understanding), and *Hokhmah* (Wisdom), showing their commitment to restoring Sefirotic harmony through good deeds (which I will discuss below). Yet even American Reform Judaism, today's most liberal branch of Judaism, honors the coming of the *Shekhinah*, the divine female presence, on Sabbath Eve, a teaching from the great kabbalistic community of sixteenth-century Safed, Israel.

The visionary states I discuss will seem outlandish, fantastical, even ridiculous, since we are considering them from a more objective point of view. Kabbalists experience the music, while onlookers can only attempt to describe the music without actually listening to it, a very challenging task indeed.

2. What is kabbalah?

The word, "Kabbalah" means "tradition" or "that which has been received." Kabbalists, then, see themselves at the center of Jewish tradition (Dan 2007:5). But Kabbalah places this tradition in context of a deeper understanding, identified as "an oral tradition." Moses, after receiving the revelation on Mount Sinai, passed the more esoteric meanings of the divine revelation to the elders of Israel, who in turn passed them down to other leaders, and on and on to modern times. Kabbalah is always a "discovery" of the original revelation to Moses. Kabbalah is also a unique phenomenon in religious history. It both affirms and challenges normative teachings and sensibilities. It is subversive, even as it is cloaked in orthodoxy, since "mystical religion seeks to transform...God...from an object of dogmatic knowledge into a novel and living experience and intuition" (Scholem 1941:10). Kabbalah today keeps that tension between orthodoxy and the mystical experiential. It begins with questions a child might ask: Why is there a God? How did God first become aware of His Godhood? Why did God create the world? Is God in control of ultimate destiny? What is this destiny? The answers—evolving as Kabbalah is—have often run counter to normative theologies

Kabbalah has three separate, though compatible, realms: the theoretical, the meditative, and the magical (Kaplan 1997: vi). The theoretical has a mathematical (or numerical) orientation. Since each letter of the Hebrew alphabet has a numerical value and these values may be similar to other letters or words that have the same value, theoretical Kabbalists pore over Hebrew letters and words in the *Tanakh* (or Hebrew Bible) to identify these connections; the meanings have redemptive power for the here and now. Essentially, theoretical Kabbalists, who see the entire *Torah* as the name of God (Scholem 1965:38), spend their lives studying, chanting, and comparing texts and they are relatively few in number. Meditative or ecstatic Kabbalah is the most accessible today and has become part of popular New Age teachings. Abraham Abulafia's (c. 1240–1291) meditations, of repeating consonants of God's name, with tones and head movements, similar to meditative practices in other religious traditions, are perhaps the most widely practiced kabbalistic meditation today (Idel 1988:101). Its purpose is to clear the mind and harmonize psychic forces in order to fulfill *Tikkun Olam* (Cooper 2005:2–3). The third is the magical and begins with an early esoteric writing, the *Sefer Yetzirah*, perhaps written between the third and fourth centuries (Dan 2007:18); it contains magical formulas—in addition to meditations—invoked by chanting Hebrew words or letters to direct divine forces. The Aramaic word, *Abracadabra* (perhaps meaning something like "I create as I speak"), used by magicians today, may have its origins in this text. Theologians use the word "theurgy" to describe this form of Kabbalah, yet all prayer in all traditions is on some level a theurgy. Underlying all

Kabbalah is a series of speculations about the inner life of God that have bearing on ethical and moral behavior.

Kabbalah begins with the forbidden realms of Judaism. Since ancient times, some sections of the Hebrew Bible have been off-limits for the faithful, for the faithful's own protection. The *Mishnah* forbids public discussion and even looks askance on private group study of two biblical texts it regarded as spiritually and even physically dangerous (Dan 2007:13): the *Ma'aseh Bere'shith* (the "Work of Creation," Genesis 1 and 2) and the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* (the "Work of the Chariot," Ezekiel 1 and 10). One story from the *Mishnah* underscores this danger (*Hagigah* 14 b):

Our Rabbis taught: Four entered an orchard and these are they: Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher, and Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva said to them: "When you reach the stones of pure marble, do not say 'Water! Water!' For it is said: 'He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before mine eyes.'" Ben Azzai gazed and died. Of him, scripture says: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." Ben Zoma gazed and was stricken. Of him scripture says: "Hast thou found honey? Eat as much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith, and vomit it." Aher cut the shoots. Rabbi Akiva departed in peace.

Even renowned sages were unworthy of the mystical realm--the first died, the second lost his mind, and the third became a heretic. Only Rabbi Akiva (c. 40–137 CE) had the inner resources to withstand the hidden perils of divine realms. The orchard (garden) in the *Mishnah* is called *Pardes* (a Persian word meaning "a royal garden"); its Greek translation, "Paradise," has become another word for "heaven" in most European languages. *Ma'aseh Bere'shith*, *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, and *Pardes*, traditionally the forbidden and dangerous realms, are central themes in Kabbalah (Dan 2007:14). Kabbalah, then, has the aura of both danger and transcendence.

3. Kabbalah's changing fortunes

Kabbalah's career has not been on an even trajectory. By the early Middle Ages kabbalistic ideas had spread from the Middle East through trade routes to parts of the Mediterranean and central Europe (Silberman 1998:34–36). Sporadic and savage Christian persecution of Jews also forced the spread of these ideas. A quote from Isaac Luria (Hayim Vital, *Etz ha-Chaim* f. 89 b, in Scholem 1941:284) shows how some of these communities saw a divine purpose in persecution and exile: "And this is the secret why Israel is fated to be enslaved by all the Gentiles of the world: In order that it may uplift those sparks which have also fallen among them.... And therefore it was necessary that Israel should be scattered to the four winds in order to lift everything up."

In the first crusade (1095–1099), as crusaders marched to Jerusalem, they began the wholesale slaughter of Jews in Northern France and the Rhineland, home to early mystical communities; some fled to Poland and Lithuania, influencing the shape of Judaism there (Silberman 1998:48–52). And again, in 1492, with the expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, where the *Sefer ha-Zohar* and so many other mystical works were created, insular groups that had guarded their secrets found themselves exiled in far away places, where audiences were eager to learn from them. The mystical communities of Safed, Israel,

where these ideas continued to germinate, were aided by the printing press, so that by the seventeenth-century most of the Jewish world “became permeated to an extraordinary degree by the new spirit and the mystic restatement of older principles” (Scholem 1941:282).

Sabbatai Zevi (1626–1676) then arrived on the scene. Nathan of Gaza, a brilliant exegete of Lurianic Kabbalah, announced in 1665 through letters to the Jewish world that the Messiah had appeared in Israel (Scholem 1979:437), declaring Zevi to be the incarnation of the sixth Sefirah, the redemptive *Te’feret*, the Sefirah that harmonizes *Gevurah* and *Hesed* (Dan 2007:88). The Messiah, by descending into the realms of evil, would single-handedly free the captive sparks to complete the work of redemption (Scholem 1941:311), what Scholem called “redemption through sin” (Scholem quoted in Bloom 1992:106). These evil realms (*kliḥpot*) were so well fortified that Jews by their good works alone were unable to do this. Because he had created such a stir among the Jewish population, the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire summoned Sabbatai Zevi. After their second interview, Zevi left wearing a turban, showing he had converted to Islam. Nathan of Gaza’s ideas would not have taken root, however, if not for the almost universal acceptance of Luria’s Kabbalah. Though Luria never mentioned anywhere that a single individual person could or would redeem the world (the Jewish people collectively had this mission), the high (and nearly unreachable) standards Luria had set may have fostered an openness to accepting a Messiah. After Sabbatai Zevi, European Judaism tended to see Kabbalah as toxic. And for those of the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment, which sought to bring Judaism in line with European rational thought, Kabbalah was a multi-layered embarrassment.

Scholars added fuel to anti-Kabbalah sentiment. Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), among the first Jewish scholars in Europe to formally present Judaism from a Jewish perspective (Jews were not permitted to formally study religion in Europe until after the Second World War), identified Moses de Leon (1250–1305) as the writer of the *Sefer ha-Zohar*, herein called the *Zohar* for short, the central work of Kabbalah. Graetz said that de Leon fraudulently claimed his writings were from the venerable second-century Tanna (a contributor to the *Mishnah*—please see index), Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai, to profit by selling sections of the manuscript. Graetz, in proving that the *Zohar* was a literary forgery, was simply following the dismissive attitudes toward Kabbalah that had defined much of Jewish life for over a century. Studies like Graetz’ strengthened Jewish rationalists in their successful attempts to purge Kabbalah from Jewish educational and social institutions. Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform congregations and rabbinical schools in most parts of the Jewish world shunned Kabbalah all together until the nineteen-sixties.

The main exception was the Hasidim of the eighteenth-century, a populist movement among the more uneducated Jews in Eastern Europe and in Western Russia. Israel ben Eleazar (c. 1698–1760), Hasidim’s visionary founder, emphasized an experiential Judaism, based on Lurianic Kabbalah, to encounter the divine in everyday life. The Hasidic movement today remains among the most kabbalistic and has defined much of today’s orthodox Jewish practice.

Jews settling in Israel under the Balfour Declaration (1917) were generally more open toward all Jewish traditions, and many were interested in Kabbalah. Hayim Nahman Bialik (1873–1934), the acclaimed Hebrew poet, included Kabbalah in his anthology of Hebrew literature. And in 1925, Hebrew University of Jerusalem offered Gershom Scholem (1897–1982) a lectureship appointment of Jewish Mysticism (Dan 2007:104), with Scholem becoming Professor of Jewish Mysticism in 1936. Scholem single-handedly resusci-

tated Kabbalah from an obscure, musty corner of Judaism. In the nineteen-thirties he foraged through synagogues in Germany and Eastern Europe, collecting and cataloguing kabbalistic manuscripts, which in some cases had not been read in centuries, works that almost certainly would have been destroyed in the upheaval of the Second World War. Since Kabbalah had been treated with contempt by large segments of the Jewish population, even the most fundamental research in language etymology had not been done (Scholem 1941:xxv):

The task which confronted me necessitated a vast amount of spade-work in a field strewn with ruins and by no means ripe as yet for the constructive labors of a builder of a system (allowing for synoptic and metaphysical observations regarding Kabbalah). Both as to historical fact and philological analysis there was pioneer work to be done, often of the most primitive and elementary kind... I found myself constrained by inclination to perform the modest but necessary task of clearing the ground of much scattered debris.

In contrast to his antipathetic predecessors, Scholem saw Kabbalah as “source of creative power within Judaism” (Mendes-Flohr 1994:12), an attempt to renew traditions by placing new wine into old wineskins (Finkelstein 1992:61). Kabbalah placed the Jewish people at center stage in a role for universal redemption: “Through the life of Torah and mitzvot, the Jews became protagonists in a cosmic drama in which not only the world and Israel are redeemed, but also God Himself” (Mendes-Flohr 1994:5).

Kabbalah is seen today as Judaism’s most important gift to world spirituality, accessible in ways that the other sacred texts of Judaism, the *Tanakh* and the *Talmud*, are not—tied as they are to traditional ethnic practices. The *Zohar*, accepted today by Jews as the third sacred text of Judaism, though originally synonymous with orthodoxy, has transcended ethnic boundaries. Today, at least thirty-two universities and seminaries offer majors in Jewish Studies, all featuring studies of Kabbalah. Kabbalah Centre International in Los Angeles, founded by an orthodox rabbi, Philip Berg, presents Kabbalah as a universal heritage, but de-emphasizes the traditional Jewish practices that have always been connected with it. With over three million members, the center is best known for the number of celebrities as adherents. In Israel, one can turn to the Kabbalah Station to find lectures and studies and there are countless websites devoted to kabbalistic studies.

Below, I will cover a few aspects of the Sefirot central to an understanding of my theme (plural for *Sefirah*, “counting” in Hebrew), a source of wonder and bewilderment over the centuries (I should also point out that not all Kabbalists accept this concept). Their first mention extant is in the *Sefer Yetzirah* (c. fourth-century CE); they next appear in the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, first published around 1180. Scholars can only imagine what took place between the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Sefer ha-Bahir*, a gap of perhaps eight hundred years. After thumbnail overviews of the central works of Kabbalah and quotes from key sections regarding the Sefirot, I will consider a little of Kabbalah’s most compelling theme: divine catastrophe and human redemption.

4. The *Sefer Yetzirah*

Four versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Creation or Formation) have come down to modern times:

from thirteen hundred words to twenty-five hundred words. It is typical of *Ma'aseh Bere'shith* ("Works of Creation," Genesis 1 and 2) literature. Attributed to Abraham, showing its special place in early Jewish religious consciousness, the *Sefer Yetzirah* contains the first mention of any work extant of the Sefirot (translated by Matt 1994:76):

Then sefirot belimah ("numeral entities")--numerals of nothingness, entities of emptiness--and twenty-two elemental letters.

Ten sefirot belimah, corresponding to the ten fingers, five opposite five, with the covenant of oneness precisely in the middle, in the word of the tongue and in circumcisions.

Ten sefirot belimah, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven,

Understand in wisdom, be wise in understanding. Examine them, explore them. Know, contemplate, and visualize. Establish the matter thoroughly, and restore the Creator to his abode. Their measure is ten, yet infinite.

Ten sefirot belimah. Bridle your mind from imagining, your mouth from speaking. If your mind races, return to the place you departed. Remember what is written: "The creatures darting to and fro." Concerning this a covenant has been made.

Ten sefirot belimah. Their measure is ten, yet infinite.

Their end is embedded in their beginning, their beginning in their end, like a flame joined to a burning coal. Know, contemplate, and visualize that the Creator is one, without a second. Before one what can you count?

Ten sefirot belimah. Their measure is ten, yet infinite.

Can the *Sefer Yetzirah* be dated? Its first mention, though obscure, may be a passage in the *Mishnah*, the section by Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya (d. 131): "I can take squashes and pumpkins and with the *Sefer Yetzirah* make them into beautiful trees. These will in turn produce other beautiful trees" (Kaplan 1997: xvii). Incantations that change material forms, it is commonly believed, were first articulated in this work. Others say that Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph (c. 40–137 C.E.), one of Judaism's great sages, whom I mentioned above, composed it (Kaplan 1997: xvii). Most scholars take for granted that the *Sefer Yetzirah* was written in the third or fourth century, though none can find any definitive proof for this.

The *Sefer Yetzirah* is not a work of Kabbalah, as Kabbalah came to be articulated in the twelfth-century, though later Kabbalists made extensive use of its ideas. It makes no mention of any Jewish practices that would later define Kabbalah, but rather elaborates on a singular idea within Judaism: that divine speech created life through combinations of sounds in the Hebrew alphabet (the language of the divine is Hebrew). Literally, God used the word "tree" to create a tree. The *Sefer Yetzirah* is often considered more of an ancient science than a work of transcendental spirituality (Dan 2007:19). Below I quote from a passage showing its vision of the Hebrew alphabet's creative power (translated by Matt 1994:102):

Twenty-two elemental letters. God engraved them, carved them, weighted them, permuted them, and transposed them, forming with them everything formed and everything destined to be formed.

Twenty-two elemental letters. God set them in a wheel with 231 gates, turning forward and backward. How did God permute them? "Alef" with them all, all of them with alef; bet with them all, all of them with bet; and so with all the letters, turning round and round, within 231 gates. Thus all that is formed, all that is spoken emerges from one name.

Out of chaos God formed substance, making what is not into what is. He hewed enormous pillars out of ether that cannot be grasped.

When Abraham our father, peace unto him, gazed-looking, seeing, probing, understanding, engraving, carving, permuting, and forming—he succeeded in creation. Immediately God manifest to him, embracing him, kissing him on the head, calling him "Abraham, my beloved."

5. The Sefer ha-Bahir

Though the *Sefer ha-Bahir* (Book of Illumination), herein called the *Bahir* for short, never uses the term "Kabbalah," referring instead the expressions of mystical tradition I mentioned from the *Mishnah*, the *Ma'aseh Merkavah* or "Mysteries of the Chariot," for the first time in history a work extant presented all the essential teachings of Kabbalah: the Merkavah mystical traditions (please see index), the Sefirot, the *tsu* (magical presence), the power of the Hebrew alphabet and the names of God, and *gilgul* (reincarnation) (Kaplan 197:xix). Included are also three main ideas that later kabbalistic teachings would adumbrate (Dan 2007:23): 1) the ten utterances (*ma'amarot*), later more fully developed in the *Zohar* in the ten Sefirot; 2) the identification of one of the ten powers as feminine—in fact a separate power from the other nine; and 3) the inner life of the divine portrayed as an inverted tree with branches rooted above in eternity, the *Ein Sof*. More importantly for our theme, the *Bahir* introduces the idea that evil is not separate from the divine, but interacts with the left side of the Sefirot, called "the fingers of God's left hand." All kabbalistic texts ascribe authorship to the sages who wrote the *Mishnah* (the Tannaim), and the *Bahir* is attributed to R. Nehunya. Studies on aspects of Merkavah mysticism, a very ancient tradition, as well as Rhineland mysticism from the tenth-century, tentatively show both could be sources for the *Bahir* (Green 2004:16). The minority view is that the *Bahir* originally came from Israel in the second century BCE (Kaplan 1979:19, 32, 186). The *Bahir* is in fragments, skipping from theme to theme, causing some scholars to maintain it was written over many centuries, perhaps beginning in tenth-century Babylon and completed in twelfth-century Provence by an anonymous author.

The *Bahir* is much longer than the *Sefer Yetzirah* and consists of more than sixty thousand words. Its first publication in Provence, France, one of the great centers for Jewish learning during the high Middle Ages, is loosely associated with the family of Rabbi Abraham ben David of Posquieres (c. 1125–1198), an esteemed Talmudic scholar. Associates from this small circle may have chosen to publish the *Bahir*, or at least parts of it in what we have in its present form, a little after 1180 (Green 2004:18) to counter the influence of Moses Maimodines' *Mishneh Torah*, popular among the Jewish populace, a work that challenged the more mystical elements of Jewish tradition (Green 2004:19).

Also known as the "Rambam," an acronym for Rabbeinu Moshe Ben Maimon, Maimodines' *Mishneh To-*

rah: Sefer Yad Ha-Hazaka (The Repetition of Torah: The Book of the Strong Hand, 1180) purges Judaism of anthropomorphism, taming the God of Israel to become more like the God of Aristotle, whose philosophy he brilliantly adapted to *Torah* teachings. An immortal work of Jewish law and ethics, the *Mishneh Torah* was widely accepted in the Jewish world after its publication, except in Spain and southern France, home to Jewish esoteric centers. Indeed, the work shook the Jewish world with its more rational approach for reading Hebrew scripture. It is the only work from the high Middle Ages that gives complete detail of Jewish practices; it consists of nineteen volumes in some translations today. Maimodines also wrote *Guide to the Perplexed* (Moreh Nebhukhin, 1204) to a confused student, Joseph, explaining that Joseph's Jewish religion, based on divine revelation, is consistent with Greek philosophically. *Guide to the Perplexed* influenced many later philosophers in Western civilization, particularly Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who put Roman Catholic theology through the strainer of Aristotelian thought. In his introduction, Maimodines said he wanted to “erase” the *Talmud* (quoted in Kraemer 2008:323):

Rather, this compilation [the Mishneh Torah] will gather together the entire Oral law including the ordinances, customs, and decrees made from the days of Moses our Master until the compilation of the Talmud.... Accordingly, I have titled this compilation “Mishneh Torah” [i.e., repetition of the Torah], because a man who first reads the Written law and after that reads this will know from it the entire Oral law and will have no need to read any other book besides them.

Maimodines, not lacking in confidence nor concealing his contempt for the irrational in Judaism, forced the more mystical celebrants to publicly present their ideas (at least with the *Bahir* and the *Zohar*) to deflect his assault on mystical Judaism.² Yet, even the *Bahir* gave the nod to Maimodines, with its articulation of the *Ein Sof*. Meaning both “eternity” and “nothingness,” and also mentioned in the *Sefer Yetzirah*, the *Ein Sof* is a concept from antiquity: the unknowable God, outside the created universe, beyond any human representations. Maimodines had also affirmed that the divine is only dimly perceived through negative language (quoted in Matt 1995:7):

The description of God by means of negations is the correct description—a description that is not affected by an indulgence in facile language.... With every increase in the negations regarding God, you come nearer to the apprehension of God.

The *Bahir* presented the most complete articulation of the Sefirot to date and I will offer one example of the lower Sefirot, of how it reinterpreted First Chronicles 29:11: “You, O God, are the Greatness, the Strength, the Beauty, All (Foundation) that is in heaven and earth. Yours, O God, is the Kingdom.” The *Bahir* inverts the order of the bottom four Sefirot in this passage (please see appendix) to give further meaning to Sefirotic numerical value: *Splendor* (7), *Foundation* (8), *Victory* (9), and *Kingdom* (10). *Foundation*, further developed in the *Zohar*, here more implicit, represents male sexuality, seen in the interaction of *Foundation* (male) with *Kingdom* (female) (Idel 2005:143–144). Jewish males are circumcised on the eighth day and so *Foundation* (*Yehod* or *Tzaddik*) is the phallus within the Sefirot. Ten represents completion, metaphorical for the ten fingers of the hand; “*Kingdom*,” in Hebrew *Malchut*, also known as *Shekhinah*, is

virtually a separate, feminine, entity within the Sefirot (Kaplan 1979: xix), the part of the divine that wanders in exile.

Armed with the Sefirot--drawn from Neo-Platonic concepts--Kabbalists answered the questions of those unnerved by the *Mishneh Torah*. The challenge for the Jewish mystic had been the incongruity between the unity of God and the diversity of life. How can the one God be manifested in endlessly multiple ways? Further, if God is all-powerful and destines everything, then do people have any say in what happens? If the divine is self-sufficient and unchanging, how is interaction with humanity possible? Does the divine need people, their devotion or their affection (Green 2004:20)? Needless to say, when God is all-powerful, the capacity of people to affect change is nil. When God is not all-powerful, people have greater responsibility. Kabbalah comes down unabashedly on the latter.

I offer a quote from the *Bahir* to give a sense of its mystifying approach. In contrast to Maimodines, who attempted to explain all of *Torah* rationally to the point of claiming that Aristotelian philosophy was synonymous with the Law, the *Bahir* "un-explains." As modern psychologists or hypnotists, it addresses the subconscious by confusing the conscious mind (quoted in Green 2004:17):

Whence do we know that Abraham had a daughter? From the verse "And Y-H-W-H blessed Abraham with all" (Genesis 24:1). And it is writtēn: "All is called by My Name; I created, formed, and made it for My Glory" (Isaiah 43:7). Was this blessing his daughter, or was it perhaps his mother? It was his daughter. To what may this be compared? To a king who had a faithful and perfect servant. He tested him in various ways, and the servant passed all the tests. Said the king: "What shall I do for this servant, or what can I give him? I can only hand him over to my older brother, who may advise him, guard him, and honor him." The servant went to the brother and learned his ways. The elder brother loved him greatly and called him 'beloved': "The seed of Abraham My beloved" (Isaiah 41:8). He too said: "What can I give him? What can I do for him? I have a beautiful vessel that I have fashioned, containing the most precious pearls, the treasures of kings. I shall give it to him, and he shall attain his place." This is the meaning of "God blessed Abraham with all."

This dizzying passage has a similar approach to other Middle Eastern esoteric texts, but it is different indeed from rational "illumination." Like poetry, its suggestive language for those familiar with the teaching in Judaism of Abraham's daughter (alluded to as the *Shekhinah* here), has loose associations with a king and with Abraham's elder brother. It blurs the rational mind, along with confidence in one's learning. One does not know, but needs to start over and see the ancient texts with new eyes, to think of memorized passages in new ways, to be adventurous in extracting new meanings from familiar texts. We see here Kabbalah's essential characteristic: the wildly imaginative speculations that de-center accepted understanding, freeing the mind for greater meanings. Yet, all kabbalistic speculation is within the framework of Jewish orthodoxy.

6. The Sefer ha-Zohar

The *Sefer ha-Zohar* (The Book of Splendor), the crown jewel of Jewish esoteric tradition, consists of about three thousand pages, a sprawling work, as Maimodines' *Mishneh Torah*, that is a virtual encyclope-

dia in itself. Daniel Matt's translation of the *Zohar* (the Pritzker edition completed in 2011) is in six volumes. Written in Aramaic, and like other kabbalistic writings attributed to a Tanna, here to Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai (c. 100–160), many compare the *Zohar* to a novel, though it was written more than two hundred years before *Don Quixote* (1605), Cervantes' (c. 1547–1616) universal masterwork, considered the first novel. The *Zohar* has the contours of a novel, with ample *Midrashim* (biblical interpretations), character development, and short stories or dramas of the main characters. It is the work of absolute mystical genius, an extremely rare phenomenon in world history. Orthodox Jews, always sensitive about the authorship, define orthodoxy as one's certainty the *Zohar* was written by Rabbi Yohai. Rabbi Yohai, known as Rashbi in rabbinic traditions, lived in the Galilee, near Safed, where today his grave is a revered place of pilgrimage. A harsh critic of Rome, legends hold that Rabbi Yohai was forced to live in a cave near Peki'in, Israel for thirteen years to avoid arrest.

Gershom Scholem's numerous studies show that Moses de Leon wrote the *Zohar*, parts of which were first published in Spain around 1280 (de Leon lived near Castile). As a young scholar Scholem had believed the work was written much earlier, perhaps in second-century Galilee. Seeking to disprove Heinrich Graetz' studies, Scholem in fact proved they were true (Scholem 1941:159). Generally, Scholem based his conclusions on the *Zohar's* awkward and eccentric Aramaic grammatical constructions (largely invented by de Leon for his purposes), his use of medieval Spanish and Portuguese words and phrases transliterated into Aramaic throughout the work, with the author's complete lack of topographical understanding of Galilee, where most of the scenes take place (Scholem 1972:222, 225–28). While de Leon took concepts from such works as the *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Bahir*, his original spins have been transformative in ways that continue to alter world religious-consciousness. The *Zohar* is so compelling and so original that it has to be considered one of the great aesthetic triumphs in world literature.

Not much is known of Moses de Leon the person, except that he was a member of kabbalistic circles around Castile and was associated with another great kabbalistic writer, Joseph Gikatilla (1248–1305), a student of Abraham Abulafia (please see index). De Leon had written other works in Hebrew, in which he was more fluent than the Aramaic he penned the *Zohar* with: *Sefer ha-Rimon* (1287), *Ha-Nefesh ha-Hakhamah* (1290), and *Shekel ha-Kodesh* (1292). Though these works show de Leon's unmistakable style, ideas, and phraseology, none comes close to the shimmering brilliance of the *Zohar*. Writing the *Zohar* under a pseudonym must have liberated the brilliant de Leon to creatively soar far beyond all his previous works.

An anecdote, written shortly after Moses de Leon's death, may contain a kernel of truth (Dan 2007:32). De Leon had sold fragments of the *Zohar* to help support his family, claiming he had copied them from an ancient manuscript by Rabbi Yohai. After his death, Joseph of Avila visited de Leon's widow offering to buy the manuscript he had copied from. De Leon's widow explained that her husband had created it "out of his own head." She had repeatedly remonstrated him for not taking credit for it (Heinrich Graetz used this story to castigate de Leon). Yet, de Leon told his wife that he could not take credit for it, since the words "were put into his mouth by a miracle" (de Leon believed he was a channel for Rabbi Yohai himself).

Below I offer a passage from the *Zohar* for its poetic articulation of the emergence of divine primal awareness, the *Ein Sof* (translated by Matt 1997:52, 53):

*When the King conceived ordaining
 He engraved engravings in the luster on high.
 A blinding spark flashed within the concealed of the
 Concealed
 From the mystery of the Infinite,
 A cluster of vapor in formlessness set in a ring,
 Not white, not black, not red, not green, no color at all.
 When a band spanned, it yielded radiant colors below,
 Concealed within the concealed of the mystery of the
 Infinite.
 The flow broke through and did not break through its aura.
 It was not known at all
 Until, under the impact of breaking through,
 One high and hidden point shone.
 Beyond that point, nothing is known.
 So it is called Beginning.*

*“The enlightened will shine like the “zohar” of the sky,
 And those who make the masses righteous
 Will shine like the stars forever and ever.”*

*Zohar, concealed of the concealed, struck its aura.
 The aura touched and did not touch this point.
 Then Beginning emanated, building itself a glorious palace.
 There it sowed the seed of holiness
 To give birth for the benefit of the universe.*

*Zohar, sowing a seed of glory
 Like a seed of fine purple silk.
 The silkworm wraps itself within, weaving itself a palace.
 This palace is its praise, a benefit to all.*

*With Beginning, the unknown concealed one created the
 Palace,
 A palace called God.
 The secret is: “With Beginning, _____ created God.”*

7. The Sefirot

The Sefirot are an unfolding of the divine in space and time to create the universe—the emanations are qualities of the one God that emerged from the *Ein Sof*. From a more rational perspective, the Sefirot are

a vision of dynamism between the changing and the unchanging deity. Traditionally, Judaism has seen the divine as changeable. Why pray if prayer cannot change or move God? Why practice the traditions if they cannot please God? The philosophers' God is unchangeable, like the laws of nature, and cannot be moved by anything or anyone. Long before the Christian era Greek philosophy had forced the religions of the Mediterranean to subsume this idea of the unchanging divinity for the sake of rational consistency. Christianity later solved this provocation with the Trinity: God the Son as the changeable, experiential, dynamic person of the deity, God the Father as the non-descript, unchangeable aspect, and the Holy Spirit as the energizing person, like Kabbalah's *Shefa* (plenty or abundance), between the divine and humanity. The Sefirot, from a purely rational perspective, is Judaism's answer to Maimodines and the Greek philosophers (Dan 2007:14):

The concept of an infinite, perfect supreme being that cannot change, a concept absent from Jewish thought in antiquity, is dominant in both philosophy and kabbalah.... Kabbalistic terminology often used the term "*ein sof*." No end, infinite, to designate this supreme reality. Tishby once wrote that the rationalistic philosophers and the kabbalists presented the same question; only their answers were different. The process of emanation that brought forth the system of the *sefirot* was the kabbalistic answer to the question, "How can anything different emerge from the unchanging and eternal divinity?"

The Sefirot are clearly connected to Plato's ideals in the heavenly sphere and our own mundane world of shadows in time and space. In *The Republic, Book VII*, Plato described a dialogue between Socrates and Glaucon, in which Socrates taught that the human race is imprisoned in a cave, chained only to the back wall and seeing only shadows of reality, the sun. Yes, while early Kabbalists fiercely fought Maimodines' use of Aristotle to define Judaism, they found a home for their mystical orientation in Plato's works.

Can the Sefirot be more described more definitely? Each kabbalistic work has a slightly different take on them, with each using a similar terminology to explain what can be widely different phenomenon—and occasionally the same writer uses the same terms to mean different things (Dan 2007:42). Since fundamentally the Sefirot attest to experiential phenomenon, both emotional and intellectual, language invariably falls short, yet words are all we have. For a poetic sense of the richness and texture of mystical language regarding the Sefirot, I again quote from the *Zohar* (translated by Scholem 1949:53, 54):

In this same wise has the Cause of causes derived the ten aspects of his Being which are known as sefirot, and named the crown the Source, which is a never-to-be-exhausted fountain of light, wherefrom he designates himself Ein Sof, the Infinite. Neither shape nor form has he, and no vessel exists to contain him, nor any means to apprehend him. This is referred to in the words: "Refrain from searching after the things that are too hard for thee, and refrain from seeking for the thing which is hidden from thee." (Ben Sire, as quoted in the Talmud, Hagigah 13 a).

Then He shaped a vessel diminutive as the letter yod, and filled it from him, and called it Wisdom-gushing Fountain, and called himself wise on its account. And after, he fashioned a large vessel named

seas, and designated it Understanding (*Binah*) and himself understanding, on its account. Both wise and understanding is he, in his own essence; whereas Wisdom in itself cannot claim that title, but only through him who is wise and has made it full through his fountain; and so Understanding in itself cannot claim that title, but only through him who filled it from his own essence, and it would be rendered into an aridity if he were to go from it. In this regard, it is written, “As the waters fail from the sea, and the river is drained dry” (Job 14:11).

Finally, “He smites (the sea) into seven streams” (Isaiah 11:15), that is, he directs it into seven precious vessels, the which he calls Greatness, Strength, Glory, Victory, Majesty, Foundation, Sovereignty (the lower seven Sefirot); in each he designates himself thus: great in Greatness, strong in Strength, glorious in Glory, victorious in Victory, “the beauty of our Maker” in Majesty, righteous in Foundation (Proverbs 10:25). All things, all vessels, and all worlds does he uphold in foundation.

In the last, in Sovereignty, he calls himself King, and his is “the greatness, and the strength, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty; for all that is in heaven and in the earth is Thine; Thine is the kingdom, O Lord, and Thou art exalted as head above all” (I Chronicles 29:11). In his power lie all things, be it that he chooses to reduce the number of vessels, or to increase the light issuing therefrom, or be it the contrary. But over him, there exists no deity with power to increase or reduce.

Concepts of the emergence of primal divine awareness, resulting in the Sefirot, were developed over hundreds of years by some of the greatest minds and mystics in Jewish history (Scholem 1991:41, 42, 43). Scholem titled one of his works *The Mystical Shape of the Godhead* (1991), a title that reflects the physicality of the Sefirot: the upper three emanations as the head, the central three the right and left arms with the heart or body, and the lower three the right and left legs with the phallus, and the tenth, *Shekhinah* or *Malchut*, hovering separately, exiled in the lower sphere connected to creation.

To give a bit more detail, the three upper Sefirot: *Keter* (Crown/Divine Thought), the *Zohar* uses the word *Ratson*, or “Will,” *Hokhmah* (Wisdom/Directed Will) and *Binah* (Understanding, Insight, or Discernment/Cosmic Womb) are the upper roots of the tree (please see appendix). These upper Sefirot rather blend into each other, but Will, Wisdom, and Insight performed the primal creative acts, its planning and execution. They are at the level of higher consciousness that corresponds to the thinking and planning processes of a human being.

Next are the lower seven: *Hesed* (Grace or Loving Kindness/Right Arm), *Din* or *Gevurah* (Severity or Harsh Judgment/Left Arm), and *Te'feret* or *Rahamin* (Mercy, Beauty, or Splendor/Heart). Here resides not only the moral and ethical forces of the universe, but also the imbalances—the otherness—even the flaw in the divine; hence, the origins of the catastrophe. At this level, too, redemption must take place, with *Te'feret* balancing and mending the forces that created the catastrophe. To balance justice (*Gevurah*) with loving-kindness (*Hesed*) is also the great redemptive responsibility of human civilization. The left side, where *Gevurah* resides, potentially energizes the forces of evil, the “other side” (*sitra ahra*). *Te'feret*, the center of divinity, what normative religion considers the personal God, is the emanation to which people pray and hope to be heard. Kabbalists believe this emanation indeed responds and grows or weakens in

strength depending on the good or evil deeds of humanity (Green 2004:45).

The final trio is *Netzah* (Eternity or Endurance/Right Leg), *Hod* (Splendor or Majesty/Left Leg) and *Yesod* or *Tzaddik* (Foundation or Righteous One/Phallus). These nine, working in concert to create the universe, are identified with male sexuality (Scholem 1969:43), which unite in the feminine, the Sefirot closest to the world of creation, the *Shekhinah* or *Malchut* (Queen or Divine Presence on Earth). The *Shekhinah*, female receptiveness, is the most volatile of the divine forces, dramatically affected by what happens on earth. Evil on earth diminishes *Shekhinah*, wounding its capacity to harmonize humanity with the divine, catapulting the world into greater darkness. When people follow high ethical norms, and when Jews keep the *Mitzvot*—the Sabbath and other traditional practices—the divine energies of *Shefa* (flow) join in a kind of sexual union, the earth and its people have greater well-being, happiness, prosperity, ultimately leading to the complete restoration of the Sefirot and universal redemption.

One may ask, where is God in this startling vision of the divine energies? If the Sefirot have had a history of disharmony, even of paralysis, where is the God humans would like to have a relationship with? The question, not irrelevant, has vexed Kabbalists. I have already mentioned that the *Te'feret* is considered today as the center of divinity. Moses Cordovero (1522–1570), the most systematic and prolific of all kabbalistic writers and for a time Luria's mentor, believed that the *Ein Sof* was the divine personal God, known by worshippers in the monotheistic religions. Conversely, Luria, who was not very interested in the *Ein Sof* and tended to see it more as the unknowable principle of the divine, is more enigmatic and his three hymns still in liturgical use today honor separate Sefirah, especially the *Shekhinah*, which Luria calls the "holy apple garden" (Scholem 1941:271).

The *Zohar* locates the source of "evil" within the divine, a unique stance among world religions except perhaps in Hinduism. With divine mechanisms seemingly worked out in such detail, what happened to throw the universe out of balance? The *Zohar's* answer is that from the beginning of creation, the Sefirot tended toward disunity and isolation, in reaction to the crisis of creation. This is the source of catastrophe, particularly the disunity between *Gevurah* and *Hesed* (Scholem 1969:62).

Kabbalists often quote Isaiah 45:9 "I make peace, and create evil: I am the Lord that doeth all these things," and locate several sources of disharmony (another vision of "evil") within the Sefirot. Yet, one should remember, that God is love and so love permeates the divine dynamics of the Sefirot, with the divine *Shefa* concentrated on the right side of the Sefirot, opposite severity, self-containment, judgment, the great restricting powers of *Gevurah* or *Din*: "Each one of these in its own way contain something of the two primal qualities of love and severity, which permeate them (the lower seven) and are expressed by them in diverse ways" (Scholem 1969:61). *Te'feret's* unique position at the highest and mid-point of the lower seven (the chest) is the place where physical creation emerged—represented by the seven days of the week—and the place where redemption begins. The *Zohar* is more gentle than Lurianic Kabbalah and reveals the catastrophe as a lack of love (Green 2004:44):

The *Zohar* speaks of a discontent that arises on this "left" side of God. *Gevurah* becomes impatient with *Hesed*, unwilling to see judgment set aside in the name of love. Rather than permitting love to flow in measured ways, *Gevurah* seeks some cosmic moment in which to rule alone, to hold back the flow of love. In this "moment" divine power turns to rage or fury; out of it all the forces of evil are

born, darkness emerging from the light of God, a shadow of the divine universe that continues to exist throughout history, sustained by the evil wrought by humans below. Here we have one of the most important moral lessons of Kabbalah: judgment not tempered by love brings about evil; power obsessed with itself turns demonic. The force of evil is often referred to by the Zohar as *sitra ahra*, the “other side,” indicating that it represents a parallel emanation to that of the sefirot. But the origin of the demonic reality that both parallels and mocks the divine is not in some “other” distant force. The demonic is born of an imbalance within the divine, flowing ultimately from the same source as all else, the single source of being.

The “other side,” much more than a mere loyal opposition, threatens to thwart the entire creative process and to contaminate the divine Himself with evil, something the divine strenuously resisted.

8. Lurianic kabbalah

The most important development for Kabbalah came after the final expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492 (this expulsion was the culmination of smaller expulsions over the previous one hundred years), abruptly scattering more than one hundred thousand Jews around the Mediterranean and Europe. Previously, Kabbalah had been the domain of only a select few who had no intention of spreading their teachings beyond their small circles. Yet the exiles, uprooted from their homes where their families had lived for centuries, took these writings and ideas with them where they continued to bear fruit. Jewish mystics from Spain and Portugal, in particular, began to move to Safed, where the grave of Rabbi Yohai, the assumed author of the *Zohar*, had been a pilgrimage site, home also to mystical communities led by famous Kabbalists. The census of 1555 (Silberman 1997:145–146) showed that Iberian immigrants made up fully sixty-percent of the population, up from single digits in the thirty years since the previous census. Consisting of about two thousand families in its heyday, and lasting at its zenith for a little less than a century, this small community committed to kabbalistic studies and practices would revolutionize Judaism and through it world spirituality. Nothing like the Safed community has happened anywhere in the world since and no Jewish teacher has arisen since then like Isaac Luria.

Isaac Luria (1534–1572), known in Jewish history as *ha-Ari* (the Lion), was born in Jerusalem, where his father, a poor scholar, died eight years later. Luria’s mother moved the family to Cairo where Luria was raised by an uncle, Mordecai Frances, one of Egypt’s most wealthy tax-farmers (Luria would marry his daughter). As many saintly figures in nearly all traditions, it is difficult to separate fact from fiction with regards to Luria. At the age of twenty-two, according to legend, Luria retreated to a secluded cottage near the Nile River for seven years to study the *Zohar*, which he quoted and chanted continuously. He visited his family only on the Sabbath and rarely spoke to anyone, but only spoke in Hebrew when he did speak. Documents from Cairo’s Ben-Ezra Synagogue and letters, however, show that during this time Luria was also continuously involved in international trade around the Mediterranean and the Middle East (Scholem 1978:420–421), so Luria was more “this-worldly” than some have given him credit for.

In 1569 Luria moved to Safed, where he remained until he died of an epidemic in 1572 at the age of thirty-eight. As a messianic figure Luria hardly wrote anything down, confessing that he could not write (quoted in Scholem 1941:254): “... because all things are interrelated. I can hardly open my mouth to speak

without feeling as though the sea burst its dams and overflowed. How can I express what my soul has received, and how can I put it down in a book?" Luria could only attempt to tell others a little of what he experienced; the task of recording his insights fell mostly to his gifted student, Hayim Vital (1543–1629). Luria, as he built on the *Zohar*, completely transformed it. This cannot be overstated. Today the *Zohar* is interpreted through the prism of Lurianic Kabbalah in ways similar to how the Christian world today interprets the Hebrew Bible through the New Testament and the Christ event.

Lurianic Kabbalah is as rich as it is complex. When one first studies it, one is overwhelmed by startling concepts and feels like the vessels that I will discuss below breaking apart with the overpowering force of light. Perhaps it will help, as I describe a little of the myth, that there are two processes of divine redemption: the "constriction" of the divine to create an empty space and the "pouring" of divine light into the vessels to begin creation. And I will mention two (of three) creations: the "spotted" and the "speckled," with the first creation, the spotted, making it possible for evil to crystalize and become more menacing. These myths are on the surface of the undersong for humanity's redemptive responsibilities (Bloom 1996: 212):

Everything in Luria's thought moves in great triple rhythm. God contracts or withdraws himself; this absence brings about the cosmological catastrophe that Luria called the "breaking of the vessels"; human prayer, study, and ecstatic contemplation bring about a mending that yet may restore a shattered world.

Luria's first shocking concept--and one hinted at in the *Bahir* and the *Zohar* but not fully developed until Luria--is divine imperfection as an inherent quality--not something external or from imbalances among the conflicting Sefirah. Luria identifies it as "otherness." Where did this "otherness," the *sitra ahra*, come from?³⁾ It began with primal divine awareness. God then decided to create the universe to purge this from within His consciousness. That creation was an attempt for the divine to redeem Himself is a startling concept in monotheism, one that remains heretical for many today, yet this idea was accepted by the Jewish world by the seventeenth-century because Luria masterfully incorporated it into traditional Judaism (Silberman 1998:172):

How did Luria's mystical insights so profoundly alter the nature of all subsequent kabbalistic technique and philosophy? It had to do with a stunning new--even heretical--understanding of the nature of evil as a deep-seated element of history and reality. Indeed, according to Luria, evil was an integral component of the divine character. Some kabbalistic tradition had understood evil as the result of a flawed, primitive emanation. Others had described it as a manifestation of divine judgment destructively ripped loose from its balanced connection with divine mercy. But Luria rejected these ideas of evil, suffering, and misfortune as merely externals to the essence of God... And while earlier Kabbalists had envisioned the act of creation as one of conscious, creative emanation, Luria suddenly recognized creation as a process of purification--primarily aimed at destroying the principle of evil from within.

The divine's thrust for personal redemption began with the *zimzum*, translated as "constriction." This astonishingly original idea, which shows Luria's sweeping genius, answers the accusation that Kabbalah is pantheistic, implicit in the *Zohar*. Yes, Lurianic Kabbalah begins with exile, in this instance the exile of God from Himself (Scholem 1941:261). If God is in all and through all, how can there be a place where God is not? The *Talmud* speaks of the *shkn*, from which *Shekhinah* was coined (Dan 2007:44, 45), the shrinkage of the divine into a space between the Seraphim over the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies, in the First Jerusalem Temple (c. 950 to 587 BCE). Though divine constriction is an ancient and accepted concept in Judaism, the *zimzum* is a much more radical notion, that of God creating an empty space within Himself, and from Himself, in order to create (where creating and purging are one). Luria called this space *tehiru* or "emptiness" in Aramaic (Dan 2007:75).

In the *tehiru*, God first allowed light to enter, then the divine created *Adam Kadmon* (Man Primordial), a perfect mingling of humanity with the divine. Yet, the *tehiru* was not completely empty, but contained some residue—the *reshimu* ("impression" in Hebrew) or the "otherness" God wished to purge—on the edges, similar to the surfacing in a glass after water is emptied from it. God's intention to purge this residue was successful (Dan 2007:77). From a Freudian perspective, this could be considered a divine catharsis, as Scholem and Isaiah Tishby theorized (Scholem 1941:267).

Here the God of Israel yields to Freudian psychoanalysis: civil war within the psyche. This struggle Freud (1923) articulated—the Super-Ego conflicted with the instinctual forces of the Id—results in personal identity. If God is all, how did He know such an otherness existed? Did God understand that purging required other creatures? Of course, the divine may not have been looking for a self-help group, but the desire for companionship, beginning with *Adam Kadmon* (please see index), is an essential divine characteristic. Artists also speak of release through their art and perhaps the greatest artists have been the most conflicted. Is the creation, in all its grandeur and elegance, merely a reflection of God's lunge for wholeness? Lurianic Kabbalah, to some degree, answers this in the affirmative.⁴⁾

The second stage of the purging, the divine pouring of light into the emptiness, went awry. Intending the *reshimu* (the residue of otherness) to participate in this creative act, God found that when He poured light into the Sefirot it rebelled, like bacteria resisting antibiotics. This caused the catastrophe, called in Lurianic Kabbalah the *Shevirat ha-Kelim*, or "Breaking of the Vessels," herein called *Shevira* for short. Had the *reshimu* participated, divine wholeness would have been immediately restored. The resistance of the *reshimu* formed a separate realm that gravitates to the left side of the Sefirot, energized by the severity or harshness of *Gevurah* or *Din*, the beginning of evil in the *Zohar*, multi-dimensionally developed by Luria. Later Kabbalists have not always seen the *Shevira* as a catastrophe, but rather as part of a natural process. As a sprout breaking the crusts of its shell, so the vessels needed to be broken to allow the divine light through (Scholem 1941:268), yet in Lurianic Kabbalah the breaking of the vessels was an absolute catastrophe, creating a flaw in all of matter, permeating even the sub-atomic level, with the "sparks" of the divine (which I discuss below) now controlled by the fiendish nether-world of evil.

I should point out that mere existence is not, per se, evil. In the process of purging, "otherness" became evil. Since the *reshimu* could or would not cooperate, God found He needed to isolate it. In Lurianic Kabbalah this required another act of creation (Silberman 1998:174):

[Luria] explained that God's first act was to distill the dispersed and diluted roots of evil, concentrating them in a single spot "like a grain of salt distilled from the art saltiness of the sea." Once that distillation was accomplished, God "withdrew Himself" from the small space around that spot of concentrated evil, physically distancing Himself from it. [Luria] saw the *tsimtsum* as the first step in an inexorable process of purification. For immediately after the *tsimtsum*, evil took control of the space God had vacated, encasing it with a dark, enveloping shell.... Luria believed that God's continuing acts of creation were designed to isolate evil from all that was good, positive, and holy--and to force it to destroy itself.

Central to redemption in Luria are the lost "sparks" (*netzutzot*). During the first stage of divine purging, the *zimzum*, as evil covered the space that God had emptied, as a husk (*klippot*) over an ear of corn, traces of the divine remained in the form of sparks (energies God used to create the universe). One can think of these sparks as bursting with life and with personality, emanating divine energy in a self-sustaining way, similar to atoms that are themselves the sources of all energy. Yet the sparks, separated from the divine source, have no direction or purpose other than to emit divine energy and wait for salvation. Evil is parasitic; without any vitality in itself it must feed on the sparks, now trapped in the emptiness, to continue to survive (Scholem 1991:77):

It is these sparks (*netzutzot*) that now shine even in those spheres over which evil gains control. There activity is strangely ambivalent: on the one hand, these sparks animate evil, guaranteeing its existence and its power of action; on the other, they are like captives, awaiting their own redemption from evil.

If God is All-Powerful, some may ask, how can anything divine, even sparks, be trapped? Lurianic mythology shows us an innovative divine craftsman, remarkable for His nimble adaptations, working within mysterious limitations, similar to laws of nature that are part of time and space. Why indeed? In Lurianic Kabbalah evil is a force to be reckoned with, a real foe, with even God at His wits-end in dealing with it, now dependent on humanity, not exactly a reliable horde to work with.

How did the Sefirot shatter? Luria details it. The *Ein Sof* poured divine light through *Adam Kadmon's* "eyes, mouth, ears, and nose" into the Sefirot (Scholem 1941:265). The upper Sefirot, *Keter*, *Hokhmah*, and *Binah*, since these were the stronger and closer to the divine source, were able to hold the powerful rushing and energizing flow of light. The seven lower Sefirot, however, weaker and more closely connected to material creation, broke apart from the light's overwhelming force.

Most of the sparks that dispersed into the lower world returned to the upper Sefirot, in a divine self-redemptive process, regenerating the seven lower Sefirot after their initial breaking apart. The mended Sefirot emitted divine light once again and through *Binah* created what Luria called the "speckled" world, distinguished from the first "spotted" world (Silberman 1998:179). In the "speckled" world, our current world, the Sefirot resumed their interconnectedness, harmonizing once again. The first "spotted" world contained a mixture of divine light with evil, so this new world was an improvement, since initially it contained no evil. Evil had crystalized in the first creation, however, in the form of shards. These shards,

predatory to the core, now cut off from the life-giving *Shefa*, aggressively zoomed into the new world to nourish themselves on the sparks that were unable to lift themselves back to the Sefirot (Silberman 1998: 180). One thinks of viruses here, whether biological or technological. The remaining sparks, two hundred eighty-eight to be exact, now trapped in darkness became the instruments of evil, giving life, as it were, to evil.

The divine responded with mending schemes each time the *Shevira* occurred (Scholem 1969:77). In the speckled world, God created the earth, the Garden of Eden, with Adam, himself in God's image (*zelem*), having a duality or a potential for both good and evil. Had Adam fulfilled his divine purpose, the *reshimu*-would have been purged and perfection immediately achieved. Instead Adam repeated the *Shevira*, precipitating another crisis, now within the new world. Israel, whom God chose to finish the work of redemption, came very close to accomplishing it by receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, yet repeated the *Shevira* in worshipping the Golden Calf. God did not un-choose Israel, but merely focused on *Mitzvot*--keeping the Sabbath and the Law--as the way to complete the work of redemption. One concludes that God desperately wants to be completely whole and that the holiness of people will fulfill this longing. I will close with Scholem's summary of Lurianic Kabbalah (Scholem 1941:286):

To sum up, the Kabbalah of Isaac Luria may be described as a mystical interpretation of Exile and Redemption, or even as a great myth of Exile. Its substance reflects the deepest religious feelings of the Jews of that age. For them, Exile and Redemption were in the strictest sense great mystical symbols, which point to something in the Divine Being. This new doctrine of God and the universe corresponds to the new moral idea of humanity which it propagates: the ideal of the ascetic whose aim is the Messianic reformation, the extinction of the world's blemish, the restitution of all things in God--the man of spiritual action who through the *Tikkun* breaks the exile, the historical exile of the Community of Israel and that inner exile in which all creation groans.

9. Tikkun Olam

The idea that God does not have complete control will disconcert many, yet Kabbalists have done what they promised to do: to rediscover the ancient oral traditions that date back to Moses, returning to YHWH of the earliest strands of the *Torah*: He walks in the cool of the day with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:8); He closes the door of Noah's ark Himself (Genesis 7:16); He must make onsite inspections to judge whether Sodom and Gomorrah are as wicked as He had heard (Genesis 19); He has a non-kosher lunch of curds, bread, and veal with Abraham and two angels under terebinth trees (Genesis 18:6–8).⁵⁾ YHWH also listens to Abraham's entreaties not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, out of respect for His friendship with Abraham, and He responds affirmatively to Abraham (Genesis 18:22–33). Further, Moses, whose arms when uplifted caused the Hebrews to prevail in their battle against the Amalekites, required the support of Aaron and Hur to keep his arms raised (Exodus 17:8–15), reflecting an ancient theurgy, dating from the origins of Judaism, of people empowering the divine (Moshe Idel quoted in Bloom 1992:105):

The focus of the Kabbalistic theurgy is God, not man; the latter is given unimaginable powers, to be used in order to repair the divine glory or the divine image; only his initiative can improve Divinity...

The theurgical Kabbalah articulates a basic feature of Jewish religion in general: because he concentrates more upon action than upon thought, the Jew is responsible for everything, including God, since his activity is crucial for the welfare of the cosmos in general.

God is also Love. Normative Christianity does not allow for the redemption of Satan, yet in Kabbalah even the great wreakers of havoc, the parasitic and fiendish forces of the *sitra ahra*, are sought out for rehabilitation and reintegration (Scholem 1991:76, 77):

We thus come to a notion that played a major role: namely, that a spark of the divine light shines even in evil. There is no complete separation between the two realms: evil has no existence as pure evil, as the polar opposite of the good; on the contrary, the two realms are interlaced. This point is sharply underscored in the Kabbalists' reflections on evil...ultimately entering into every human action.... There is nothing so depraved that it cannot be returned to its source, thanks to the spark of the divine within it.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, Adam began as a semi-divine personage, a more limited expression of *Adam Kadmon* as a creature with a more focused redemptive purpose. As a pure being, untainted by the *Shivera*, Adam was to fetch the sparks in the darkness and guide them back to the Sefirot (Silberman 1998:184). Adam, unfathomably immense, contained all future souls, though individuation would not have occurred had Adam followed the divine plan. Adam, descending into darkness, also broke apart, first into six hundred-thirteen parts (Scholem 1991:231), the source of "soul roots," then in a second shattering into hundreds of thousands of soul sparks, eventually multiplying into every soul that would ever live (Bloom 1996: 212):

Since all our souls, according to Luria, were once components of Adam's soul, for Luria our authentic catastrophe is Adam's fall, hardly a surprising notion in Augustinian Christianity, but peculiar in a Judaic context. Adam was intended by God to be a mending agent, restoring the broken vessels of the Creation, and Adam's failure therefore showered soul sparks in all directions; some back to the higher realms, some deeper within Adam himself, and most into the world of the broken vessels, the sensible emptiness of our lives.

The *Bahir*, the first comprehensive work of Kabbalah, made public the Jewish teaching of *gilgul* (reincarnation), which became the normative belief of large segments of the Jewish population beginning in the high Middle Ages, although never fully accepted by rabbinical Judaism. In Lurianic Kabbalah, *gilgul* became another vision of redemption for the long-term, a comfort when one was unable to accomplish very much under oppressive times, giving hope to the faint-hearted that there might yet be more opportunities for *Tikkun Olam*; it also reflects a kabbalistic belief that nothing is wasted. *Gilgul* is connected with the soul roots and soul sparks (previous lives), several of which may be incarnated in a single person (Bloom 1996:211):

...the idea called “soul sparks,” which held that the soul, in migrating, does not leave its earlier body, but acts like a candle lighting other candles. Soul sparks, once envisioned, led on to the more imaginative notion that any one of us could be the recipient of sparks from more than one other soul. Indeed, each of us could become a veritable anthology of soul sparks, themselves of three kinds: *nephesh*, *ru’ah*, *neshamah*. Since we have all fallen away from Adam Kadmon, the primal man-god, the function of transmigration is to mend us, and so mend the original Adam.

Tikkun Olam had been the responsibility of Adam alone, a single pristine person. Now, with the breaking apart of Adam, billions of souls would have to work collectively, thus making *Tikkun Olam* much more complicated. The people of Israel, Luria’s focus in his interpretations, had to cooperate in three important ways (Dan 2007:78, 79): 1) to separate themselves from the forces of darkness; 2) to know their “soul root,” in order to become enlightened to their purpose in life; 3) to cooperate with those who share their soul root to precipitate *Tikkun Olam*. People working with those of the same soul root thus restore the original Adam (Adam alone, by fulfilling his original purpose, can restore the lost sparks). Luria said that God would make sure one meets all the soul roots necessary in life to further redemption, whether one welcomes this or not. Needless to say, only a relatively few people, most of whom live in Israel or in some metropolitan areas around the world, follow Lurianic Kabbalah closely, with even fewer sages believed trustworthy to identify the soul roots of others.

Lurianic Kabbalah, spectacular in its mythic formulations that transform nearly all inherited traditions, leaves untouched the ancient Jewish practices, the six hundred-thirteen *Mitzvot*. Mundane, every day responsibilities are redemptive (Genesis 2:15): “The Lord God took the man and placed him in the Garden of Eden, to till it and tend it.” God also told Adam and Eve, “to be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28). These sensible and sane commandments of good stewardship accomplish *Tikkun*, since they establish order in the universe and reduce chaos. One does not have to necessarily understand the eternal consequences of kindheartedness in daily routines; performing good deeds is enough.

How does a person know whether he or she is strengthening evil, callously exploiting a divine spark or raising it for redemption? The inner spirit, connected with the soul root, guides in raising sparks: Justice, goodness, compassion, charity release the sparks while transgression of the *Torah*, injustice, deceit, oppressing others strengthens the power of evil over the captive sparks. The responsibility placed on fragile human beings is great indeed, since it is humanity, and only humanity, that determines ultimate destiny (Dan 2007:79, 80). Luria himself believed that almost all the sparks had been raised and that the time of complete redemption was at hand.

The central message of the *Zohar*, found in the section *Taamey Mitzvot* (Works of Redemption), speaks of how good works were key to redeeming the divine powers (Dan 2007:55, 56). Redemption begins with *Shefa*, the flow of divine love from the *Ein Sof* which brings life forces through the Sefirot and to the world (Dan 2007:56). *Shefa*, as the *Shekhinah*, weakens or grows in strength depending on the deeds, behavior, or attitude of people. Keeping the Sabbath brings the greatest positive influence in the world, a time when the masculine and feminine divine powers join, increasing the rushing flow of *Shefa* (Dan 2007:57). Here God’s role is diminished, since from the *Zohar*’s perspective, the divine does not demand-but absolutely needs-humanity to take part in the drama to restore harmony (Scholem 1991:108):

The Kabbalistic texts constantly use the term *shefa* (literally, “overflow”) whenever discussing this Sefirah (*Shekhinah*) or attempting to describe it in images and symbols. The term is used in two different senses: in that of an overflowing stream, and in that of active inflow or influx. This influx flows from the *Tsaddik* into the *Shekhinah*, and from thence into all the world. The Kabbalists are fond of such usages as *shefa ha-berakhah* (abundance of blessing) and similar phrases that suggest the giving nature of the divine fullness. Such phrases are associated with the sexual nuance of “inflow.”

In contrast to Zoharic redemption through *Shefa*, Lurianic Kabbalah concentrates first on *Kavvanah* (“intention” in Hebrew), mystical prayer to heal both the upper and lower worlds (Scholem 1941:276):

To Luria, the heir of a whole school of thought in classical Kabbalism, which he merely developed further, prayer means more than a free outpouring of religious feeling. Nor is it merely the institutionalized acknowledgment and praise of God as Creator and King by the religious community, in the standard prayers of Jewish liturgy. The individual's prayers, as well as those of the community, but particularly the latter, are under certain conditions the vehicles of the soul's mystical ascent to God.

In Lurianic Kabbalah, a primal, original harmony had never existed. From the very beginning of divine awareness there was conflict, disharmony, and catastrophe. One cannot *restore* a divine harmony but must *create* a harmony that never was, to create a new world in cooperation with the divine. The *Zohar*, by contrast, taught that the upper three Sefirot (*Keter*, *Binah*, and *Hokhmah*) had an original harmony and so the mystic could connect with it. Not so with Lurianic Kabbalah. The mystic's responsibility was to restore the divine through “good deeds.” Without humanity's mending, harmony will never be achieved (Dan 1987 : 272–273). *Tikkun Olam* will only exist in the future, through *Kavvanah* and *Mitzvot*.

The inner communion of *Kavvanah* has the power to transform material reality. Called by Scholem “mystical meditation,” the mystical prayers set at specific times have great power to heal the upper world. The kabbalistic circles of Safed rose at midnight and then again at sunrise to pray, believing that these prayers at regular intervals helped restore Sefirotic imbalance. For these prayer times Luria adapted Abraham Abulafia's theories of meditation (Scholem 1941:277). Here “intention” is of utmost importance. Since *Kavvanah* is at the crossroads between mysticism and magic, special attention must be given for purity and the pursuit of “good,” otherwise Kabbalah could descend into forms of black magic. The Hasidic movements today exalt the quality of “loving-kindness” in all their actions for *Tikkun* (Scholem 1941:276, 277):

The true worshipper, in short, exercises a tremendous power over the inner worlds, just as he bears a correspondingly great responsibility for fulfillment of his Messianic task. The life of every world and every sphere is in continuous movement; every moment is a new stage in its development. At every moment it strives to find the natural form which will lift it out of confusion. And therefore there is in the last resort a new *Kavvanah* for every new moment. No mystical prayer is completely like any other.

Mitzvot, the second important means for *Tikkun*, restores the universe's spiritual structure, beginning with the spiritual structure of one's own personhood, Jews following the 613 *Mitzvot* heal the 613 parts of the physical and spiritual body. This heals others as well, since in all forms of mysticism worldwide, people are deeply connected with each other on a spiritual level: "in everyone there is something of his fellow man. Therefore, whoever sins injures not only himself but also that part of himself which belongs to another" (Moses Cordovero, quoted in Scholem 1941:284).

Redemption in Lurianic Kabbalah is collective and egalitarian. True, some gifted souls, like those of Isaac Luria and Hayim Vital, whom Luria identified as a messianic figure, may affect redemptive change more than others, but no one person, no single Messiah, has any special mission to single-handedly accomplish *Tikkun Olam* by herself or himself. In fact, all are potential Messiahs, whether they know it or not. The burden is great indeed, not only for the Jewish people, who have special responsibilities because some are enlightened regarding the cosmic drama, but also for the people of the world, whom Luria called the "sons of Noah," (Scholem 1941:282), to live up to their highest ideals of healing and bettering the world (Scholem 1941:274):

This historical process and its inmost soul, the religious act of the Jew, prepare the way for the final restitution of all the scattered and exiled lights and sparks. The Jew who is in close contact with the divine life through the *Torah*, the fulfillment of the commandments, and through prayer, has it in his power to accelerate or to hinder this process. Every act of man is related to this final task which God has set for His creatures.

10. Conclusion

If Giambattista Vico's (168–1744) paradigm, *New Science* (1725), is correct, that civilization has three re-occurring stages: the Divine (theocratic), the Heroic (aristocratic), and Human (democratic/rational), then global civilization is lunging toward a new theocratic age, even as it leaves the democratic age, with the transition from the democratic age back to the theocratic a time of chaos, perhaps the world's present state. That Kabbalah is taking a more central place as this new age forms is an absolute benefit. Kabbalah, though inherited from past theocratic ages, is tolerant, humane, universal, and even democratic, since people collectively are the Messiah. It may be the perfect antidote for theocratic totalitarianism. Without dogmas, it is a call to do "good." Though Kabbalah transforms the reasons for normative practices, it returns a person to a very simple orientation, that of love of God and neighbor.

At the heart of Kabbalah is both recognition of the world as a wasteland with a call to transform it into something higher, more perfect—the redemption of all, above and below. The question people ask today is: How to redeem the world? We have many dubious answers today and every ideology at its heart makes a claim for universal redemption, from "socialism" to "free-market capitalism," even "consumerism" where everyone is safe in a bubble of materialism. Kabbalists teach there is a more spiritual path. One can do "good." This not only changes the individual who performs it, but affects people nearby, eventually creating a redemptive flow that extends to the divine above and to all humanity.

How would people live if they believed that every moment is eternal, with eternal consequences? A

teaching from Kabbalah is that Thirty-six Good People (*Lamed Vavnik Tzadikim*), or the *Nistarim* (Concealed Ones), keep the world from falling apart. The world is frozen in an eternal moment. Will it spin back into darkness, the *tohu wa bohu* (without form and void), or will humanity cooperate to bring the world to perfection? Everyone, at every moment, determines the outcome.

Notes

- 1) Scholem, as an historian of religious ideas, theorized that Kabbalah was the ancient origins of an underground spiritual orientation, known today as Gnosticism, that focused on the alien God who is present in the world only deep within the human psyche. Scholem believed that as an organized religion it rivaled early Christianity and that its origins may have been ancient Jewish mysticism. Hans Jonas, like Scholem a German Jew, presented a sweeping vision of this religion in *The Gnostic Religion* (1958). Yet when Scholem died in 1982, aged eighty-five, he had not been able to examine in depth the spectacular discoveries of the Nag Hammadi (1945) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (1948–1955), works that held some tentative answers to this theory. Scholars today continue to puzzle over Scholem's dynamic and sometimes radical "frontier" concepts regarding the development and influence of Kabbalah.
- 2) No doubt Maimodines would be chagrined to find that the *Zohar* is the third sacred work of Judaism today. Not only could Maimodines not banish the *Talmud*, Judaism's second sacred work, but the *Zohar* also superseded him. Poetry does not always triumph over rationalism, but in Judaism it has.
- 3) The *sitra ahra* and the *reshimu* are one and the same. The *sitra ahra*, translated as the "other side," is more organized and forms parallel Sefirah on the left side, next to *Gevurah*. The *reshimu* are unorganized traces of evil, yet to be organized.
- 4) The reader may ask: Was God too hasty in creating the universe, an overreaction to the otherness within Himself? One senses in the divine a frenetic, over-anxious response and Lurianic Kabbalah returns us to the magnificent "J" writer, who composed the earliest strands of the *Torah*, to an impatient deity, anxious in the extreme. If the Sefirot are in time and space, which many Kabbalists say they are, then the otherness, the *reshimu*, may have returned on its own, given that people-and perhaps God-could achieve a harmony given enough time. Did the divine not have enough time? Redemption could very well have occurred without the creation of humanity.
- 5) Today's kashrut (kosher) laws for proper diet forbid the mixing of dairy with meat.

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1. *Abraham Abulafia* (c. 1240–1291) remains an important mystic today with his emphasis on the experiential in Kabbalah. At the age of thirty-one, Abulafia began to have visions, when he also began to study Kabbalah (a work called *Bharuch Togarmi*) and the *Sefer Yetzirah*. After, Abulafia began to focus on the divine name, particularly the consonants of the Tetragrammaton and designing meditative practices, using breathing, tones, head motions to transport people to the higher realms. These meditations, he believed, would aid in *Tikkun Olam*. Perhaps surprisingly, Abulafia did not accept the Sefirot.
2. *Adam Kadmon* (Above/Original Man) is an ancient mystical teaching in Judaism, further developed by Isaac Luria. Standard teachings in Lurianic Kabbalah state that *Adam Kadmon* came before *Keter* (Crown), the Sefirah closest to the *Ein Sof*, in the realm of *Atziluth*.

Adam Kadmon is therefore a fusion of humanity and the divine. In fact, *Adam Kadmon*, abbreviated as A"K, also contained all the Sefirot originally. It is a vision of humanity as theomorphic and the divine as anthropomorphic, as stated in the *Zohar*: "The form of man is the image of everything that is above [in heaven] and below [upon earth]; therefore did the Holy Ancient [God] select it for His own form" (*Zohar*, Idra R. 141 b, quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adam_Kadmon).

Prior to the shattering and the unfolding of the Sefirot and the Four Worlds, *Adam Kadmon's* abode was in the pristine world with God as divine awareness and the material creation unfolded:

A"K (*Adam Kadmon*)
Atziluth (World of Emanation)
Beriah (World of Creation)
Yetzirah (World of Formation)
Assiah (World of Action)

What happened to *Adam Kadmon*? When speaking of divine matters, from the point of view of Kabbalists, everything also exists in the present, where there is no past and future. All that has happened is still happening; all moments reflect that divine moment. The universe, according to the Big Bang theory, began after an explosion. Physicists try to understand what the reality was just before the explosion, with some saying that it may have been a very small point, the size of a pen-head. The point of beginning still exists—yet the universe is scattered for billions of light years. *Adam Kadmon* still exists, both as a point of beginning and in all of humanity. In fact, *Adam Kadmon* is humanity's true identity and in Lurianic Kabbalah humanity's past as well as humanity's future. Lurianic Kabbalah, therefore, tends to be nihilistic, at least in some elements. Yes, humanity has a monumental task of restoration (*Tikkun Olam*), yet even if humanity cannot live up to this, restoration will still take place.

From the perspective of space and time, though, *Adam Kadmon* came apart in the catastrophe of creation and the shattering. The “fall,” therefore, is absolute, both in the lower realms (here on earth) and in the higher, divine realms. For Kabbalists, Enoch is an expression of *Adam Kadmon* in time and space and a source of inspiration and awe (Genesis 5:24): “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him.” While *Adam Kadmon* is the primal person, Enoch is the restored Divine Person who endured mortal existence, an example of the possibilities of complete redemption in the material world of *Assiah*.

This yearning for restoration among Jewish mystics is seen in their meditative formulation: “Enoch is Metatron.” Metatron, the great archangel in Kabbalah, whose presence permeates the universe, as dark matter is everywhere, is also called the Lesser YHWH. Kabbalists, of course, connect Enoch/Metatron with the Messiah, the restoration of the divine with the material world.

3. *The Sefer ha-Bahir* (The Book of Brightness) is attributed to Rabbi Nehunya ben ha-Kanah, a first/second century “Tanna” or contributor to the *Mishnah*. Scholars differ about when it was written: in 2nd century Palestine, 10th century Babylon, or 12th century Provence, France. A probable dating is 1180, the date of the first known publication in Provence, France. The *Bahir*, which crystallized Kabbalah's themes and exerted a great influence on the writer of the *Zohar*, may have come from a collection of earlier materials, even oral traditions.
4. *Israel ben Eleazar* (c. 1698–1760), called the “Baal Shem Tov,” (*Master of the Good Name*) or simply “Besht,” is an important messianic figure (meaning here the bearer of a new revelation). Born in Kameniec, Western Ukraine, and selling clay until he was forty-years old, he took Kabbalistic teachings from the *Zohar* and Isaac Luria, and began a people's movement among ordinary Jews in Eastern Europe and Western Russia. This movement continues as Hasidic Judaism. As Isaac Luria, he conveyed his teachings orally and hardly wrote anything down. Baal Shem Tov gave practical applications to Luria's teaching of “raising the sparks,” which can be accomplished in everyday life, even in the mundane activities of eating. His impact affected nearly all Ashkenazim (Jews of Europe). Like Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677) in some ways, the Baal Shem Tov's teachings have a strong pantheistic orientation. Because God is in everything, all things have something “good” in them. Also, God wants people to be happy and not to suffer.
5. *Isaac Luria* (1534–72) (Isaac ben Solomon Luria Ashkenazi), known today as *ha-Ari* or “The Lion,” is more of a messianic figure than a sage. Luria completely transformed the *Zohar*'s teachings by expounding on the moment of creation, when God created “vessels” to channel the divine energy of the Sefirot. “Raising the sparks,” another Lurianic originality, is the purpose of *Olam Tikkun*, the restoration of both the universe and the divine. A leader of the great kabbalistic community of Safed, Israel, Luria died at aged 38, sending a shiver over the Jewish world about the appropriateness of speaking too openly about divine mystical secrets. While Luria himself wrote very little, students recorded his teachings, mainly Rabbi Hayim Vital (1543–1620).

Isaac Luria was born in Jerusalem, and grew up in Egypt, where at the age of twenty-two he became transfixed on the *Zohar*, which he used as a continuous mantra. For seven years he lived in a small cottage on the Nile, meditating. During this time he received the visions from Elijah.

6. *Lurianic Kabbalah* are teachings from Isaac Luria (1534–1572), who transformed the *Zohar*, written some three

hundred years earlier, by placing the teachings into completely new contexts. Luria's originalities include: *Zimzum* (Contraction), *Shevirat ha-Kelim* (the shattering of the vessels), and *Tikkun* (Repair/Restoration). Luria also transformed the vision of *Adam Kadmon*, found in obscure Jewish texts since ancient times.

7. *Maimodines* (Moshe ben Maimon) (1138–1204) remains one of the great authorities in the Jewish world from his two most famous works: *Mishneh Torah* (1180) and the *Guide to the Perplexed* (1204). Subtitled *Sefer Yad ha-Hazaka* (“the Book of the Strong Hand”) Maimodines reinterpreted the *Torah* (the Books of Moses) to modernize Judaism, basing this approach on Aristotle's philosophy.
8. *Merkavah Mysticism* (c. 100 BCE–1000 CE) are meditations and teachings based on the Merkavah, usually translated as “chariot” (a thing to ride in, a cart) from Ezekiel's vision of the divine, streaking through the sky above the Chebar canal in Babylon, where Ezekiel lived as an exile (c. 593–571 BCE). Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1) uses the word *hayyot*, (living creatures) to describe the four creatures in his vision, each with four wings and four faces (a man, a lion, an ox, and an eagle) sixteen faces altogether, and one with the “likeness of man” guiding the entire Merkavah. Merkavah mysticism may be the beginning of Jewish Kabbalah, dating back to distant antiquity, according to some as early as the ninth-century BCE. *Hekhalot* (“palaces”) are also part of Merkavah mysticism, with mystics entering other realms, the four worlds I mentioned above. The *Ma'aseh Merkavah*, then, is made up of meditative practices for spiritual ascents.
9. *The Mishnah* (*Repetition* in Hebrew) is the most ancient work of Jewish *Halakhah* (or practices). Rabbi Yehudah ha-Nasi, bringing together oral traditions that were passed down from 536 BCE to 70 CE, organized the *Mishnah* into its present form by about 220 CE. It took about one hundred-thirty years for a rabbinic community in Palestine to collect all the oral teachings. The categories the *Mishnah* discusses: *Zeraim* (seeds), *Moed* (festival), *Nashim* (women), *Nezikin* (Damages), *Kodashim* (holy things), and *Tehorot* (purities).
10. *The Oral Torah/Traditions* in Judaism are the practical interpretations that were passed down from early biblical times regarding questions of how to practice the Law. For example, the Bible says: “Honor the Sabbath.” What does it mean, “to honor”? Can a person “plant” on the Sabbath? Should a person “walk” on the Sabbath? What about attending to the sick? Saving a life? And when exactly is the Sabbath? Questions such as these had numerous answers, with majority and minority views, passed down orally from ancient times. After the Roman/Jewish War (66–73 CE), when the Temple and Israel as a semi-autonomous nation were destroyed, rabbis wanted to collect and write down these teachings for fear they may be lost forever. The Oral Tradition became the *Mishnah*, and later the *Talmud*, with the *Gemara* (later writings) interpreting the *Mishnah*.
11. *The Sefirot* (Counting/Enumeration) are the ten qualities or attributes through which the *Ein Sof* (the unknowable divine) is revealed. The Sefirot (plural of Sefirah) are the divine in time/space. The *Sefer Yetzirah* and the *Zohar* elaborate on the inner life of God. How did divine self-awareness begin? What were the stages of divine self-awareness? How did the multiplicity of the One God emerge? How did “creation” affect God? What is God's ultimate purpose for creation? Is human responsibility important in God's purpose?

Indeed, how did divine self-awareness first emerge? First came an awareness of creativity (in Lurianic Kabbalah it was an awareness of “otherness”), the divine created the space (*zimzum*), then *Adam Kadmon* (the divine/human). From *Adam Kadmon* the ten emanations were manifested, qualities that had always been part of God crystallized in the act of creation. Kabbalists divide the Sefirot into upper (intellectual) and lower (emotional), the upper being *Keter*, *Binah*, and *Hokhmah*, with lower *Gevurah*, *Hesed*, *Te'feret*, *Hod*, *Netzah*, *Yesod*, and *Malchut*, also known as the *Shekhinah*.

12. *The Talmud* (Instruction/Learning) is a record of the Oral Torah. There are two *Talmuds*, the Jerusalem (completed c. 350–400 CE) and the Babylonian (completed by 500 CE). The Babylonian *Talmud* is used almost exclusively for Jewish law and practice today, with some cross-referencing with the Jerusalem *Talmud*. When the two disagree, the Babylonian *Talmud* has precedence. The first part is made up of the *Mishnah* (c. 220 CE). The second part, the *Gemara* (“To Study” in Aramaic), is a commentary on the *Mishnah*. Written in Hebrew and Aramaic, the

Babylonian *Talmud* has 63 tracts and stretches for over 6,200 pages. However, a group of Jews did challenge the *Talmud's* authority over Jewish life. Forming as a group from the seventh to the ninth centuries in Baghdad, known as the Karaites (*Qara'it* meaning "Readers"), it rejected the *Talmud*, insisting instead that the Bible (*Tanakh*) alone direct Jewish life. The Karaites continue today, with from 30,000 to 50,000 living in Israel.

13. *The Tannaim* (teachers, repeaters) are the rabbis who contributed to the teachings and the discussions in the *Mishnah*. One hundred-twenty are identified by name.
14. *The Sefer Yetzirah* (Book of Formation), one of the most ancient mystical texts (outside the Bible), scholars have called this work "gnostic-leaning" because of its focus on inner enlightenment. Parts of it, according to some analyses, are in the same style as the *Mishnah*, and so some date it to the second-century CE. It is also the first known work to mention the Sefirot: "Ten Sefirot of nothingness, ten and not nine, ten and not eleven."
15. *The Zimzum/Tsimtsum* (Contraction/Constriction/Withdrawal) teaches that God withdrew, making an Empty Space (Khalal/Khalal Hapanoi), Luria also called it the *tehiru* ("emptiness" in Aramaic), in order to create the universe (another name for God is *ha-Makom* or the Place); the *Zimzum* was also necessary for human free-will to become a reality (Genesis 1:1): "When God began to create heaven and earth—the earth being unformed and void..." The present creation, in Kabbalah, is God's third attempt (I explain only two creations in my article, the "spotted" and the "speckled"). In both the higher and the lower levels this creation did not go well, since it led to a "Shattering of the Vessels" (*Shevirat ha-Kelim*) and the dispersing of the "sparks" (*netzutzot*) of the divine, which were used for creating the universe. This shattering and scattering resulted in the exile of the divine from the divine and of humanity from the divine.

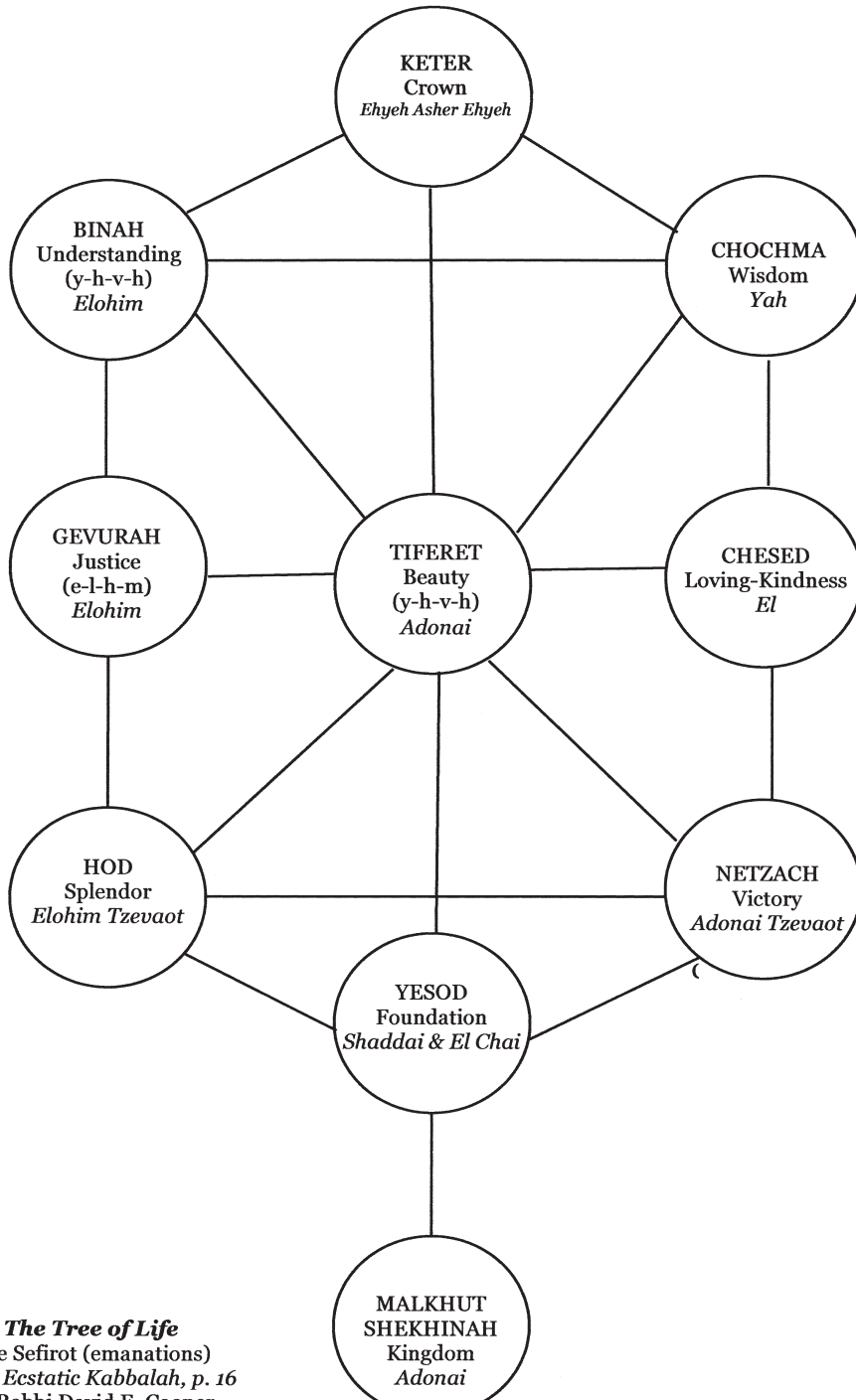
The broken vessels (in Lurianic Kabbalah the vessels are created, not in themselves divine) reveal humanity's responsibility for *Olam Tikkun*, the "World of Redemption." When the Sefirotic harmony is restored, the universe will be redeemed. Once someone perfectly obeys the *Torah*, according to Baal Shem Tov, the Messiah (universal restoration) will come.

In Lurianic Kabbalah the "vessels" (*kelim*) were created for channeling divinity (Sefirot) in the material world. But since they could not contain the power and brilliance of the divine, they broke apart, with divine sparks exiled in the *Olam Tohu* (World of Chaos). When the vessels shattered from the intensity of divine light (*Ohr*), the entire Sefirot became discordant, resulting in a divine paralysis. Kabbalists single out *Gevurah* (judgment) the Sefirah most responsible for the imbalance, with judgment, severity, and harshness increasing the shattering; the Sefirot then became somewhat separate entities and lost something of their original wholeness, yet are mending in the process of *Tikkun Olam*. Restoration involves the central Sefirot, *Te'feret* (Beauty).

16. *The Sefer ha-Zohar* (Book of Splendor or Radiance) is one of the great triumphs of mystical literature. According to Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), Moses de Leon (c. 1250–1305), a member of a kabbalistic community in Castile, Spain, wrote the *Zohar*. A literary and mystical genius, Moses de Leon wrote in a simple Aramaic (a language he was not completely fluent in and in fact re-invented for his purposes). Today the *Zohar* is, with the *Talmud* and *Tanakh*, one of the sacred writings of modern Judaism. Kabbalists, however, attribute the *Zohar* to Rabbi Shimon bar Yohai, a second century sage who lived in Galilee (his tomb in Safed, Israel remains a sacred pilgrimage site today). Moses de Leon may have felt this venerable sage was transmitting the *Zohar* directly to him. The Kabbalists of Castile, in contrast to those of Catalonia, focused on the lower Sefirot, as does the *Zohar*, and this has become normative in Kabbalistic teachings. Hasidic Judaism of the eighteenth century has followed the *Zohar* in this focus.

Appendix

Ein Sof
(Beyond Infinity)



The Tree of Life
The Sefirot (emanations)
From *Ecstatic Kabbalah*, p. 16
by Rabbi David E. Cooper