

Understanding the Kabbalah

by Ariel Bar Tzadok

Copyright © 2015 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.

Introduction

Kabbalah is today understood to be a philosophy of Jewish/Biblically based mysticism. However, what today is defined as mysticism was, in its inception, something very much something else. The language, and terminology Kabbalah uses to describe the realities that it represents is very confusing, and thus severely clouds over its authentic meanings. Using an intricate system of symbolic terms, and concepts that have baffled the uninitiated for centuries, the actual intent of the Kabbalah is often missed, even by most of its most ardent students. The concepts, and ideas that have come to epitomize the Kabbalah have ancient origins. Yet, these very same ancient origins are often unknown to those who seek to interpret the Kabbalah, and to make sense of its complex terminologies. The more distant one goes from the source of a thing, the further one also goes from understanding it correctly.

The successful study of Kabbalah depends upon a proper understanding of the terms, and concepts used to communicate its profound lessons. Trying to explain Kabbalistic terms, and concepts with other Kabbalistic terms, and concepts is a sure way to reinforce misunderstanding. Yet, it is this type of misunderstanding that prevails. Every system of study contains its essence, and its essence is clothed in the unique system of words, language, and formulas particular to the system.

The actual ancient origin of Kabbalah is a subject of scholarly debate. Unfortunately, this debate detracts from the study of the meaning of the Kabbalah. Scholarly debate is fine, and appropriate for scholars, but what Kabbalah teaches is one matter, and where these teachings come from is another. Regardless of the mysteries of history, the message of Kabbalah is a vibrant, powerful teaching that, in its own way, reveals many of the inner secrets of the human experience.

Kabbalah is a philosophy, and only secondary is it about religion. Its message, and wisdom is universal in nature. Just because Kabbalah is formatted within a Judaic format does not mean that its place is exclusive to the Jewish religion. One wishing to delve into the true meanings of Kabbalah will eventually come to the point of recognizing that its Jewish framework must be transcended in order for it to be thoroughly understood. This does not mean that one must divorce the Kabbalah from its Jewish body in order to understand its depths. Rather, one will eventually recognize that the message of the Kabbalah is not limited to the confines of one religion in particular, or to any religion in general. Kabbalah is a philosophy for the study of our humanity, both individually, and collectively. Kabbalah endeavors to teach us about ourselves, our world, and how we together interact with, and relate to the inner reality within us, and the outer reality that surrounds us.

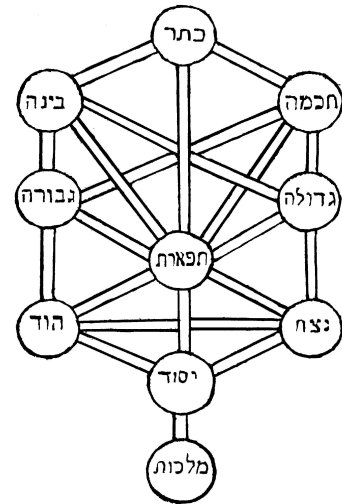
Foremost, Kabbalah endeavors to teach us about God. Yet, there is far more to understanding God than what can be gleaned from a superficial reading of the many stories that talk about God. God exists, but just who is God, or better to ask what is God? The Biblical stories relate that God is the Creator of all things, and that “He” created man in “His” Image. Therefore, humanity reflects the Divine Image. The Bible also says that God created both man and woman in “His” Image. If God created man, male and female, in “His” Image, then God must also be “male,” and “female.” How are we to understand this? What does this say about God? What does this say about humanity? This simple example is one of the many areas of Kabbalistic contemplation. In order to follow the Kabbalistic train of thought, one must follow its internal logic, never losing sight of the symbolic, metaphorical usages of its terms. What Kabbalah teaches about God is most sophisticated and profound. Unfortunately, it can also become subject to multiple layers of misinterpretation, and misunderstanding in the eyes, and minds of those who miss the inner track of its intent, and meaning.

1. Introducing the Sefirot

Building upon older teachings, the Kabbalah has developed a model that represents the “Image of God” in which humanity was created. This model also serves as the psychological blueprint that defines our humanity. This same blueprint also purports to be

the structure of the universe, and the “road map” that one follows in order to contemplate, and to experience God. Mind you, this contemplation, and these experiences are internal. They are states of the mind, and expressions of expanded human consciousness. While the domain of the Kabbalah is the entire universe, the access point to both the Kabbalah, and the universe is the human mind. An understanding of the functions, and workings of the human mind is the beginning of the path.

The path, the diagram of the universe, the order of Divine emanations, and the internal “Image” of God are all the same, they are one. This order is illuminated as having ten steps, ten being a sacred number. The source of sacred numbers is an exploration best left for the scholars. For us to detour into their excursions takes our attention away from our own spiritual explorations, and discoveries. Ten is a sacred number, let this suffice, without further elaboration. The ten steps of illumination that reveal to us God, the universe that “He” created, and the Divine Image underlying our humanity is given a Hebrew name. This name is Sefirot.



What exactly are Sefirot? What are they supposed to symbolize? The Sefirot are referred to as Divine emanations. According to Kabbalistic beliefs, the concept goes like this. God is ultimately distinct from all He has made. God exists outside of time, outside of space, and outside of all existence. As such, God is the ultimate Outsider. As the ultimate Outsider, God is, therefore, by definition, both unknown, and unknowable to all here in creation. In order for God to make creation aware of His existence, God has to emanate (express, reveal) an aspect of Himself into creation. Yet, not all of creation is equal. There are higher forms in creation (Heaven), and lower forms of creation (Earth). Therefore, the emanation from God once it reaches creation has to be properly tuned to match the vibratory rate of each, and every dimensional plane. Thus we have many levels of Divine emanations. The Kabbalists have summed them up into ten in number, and called them Sefirot.

The word Sefirot is plural, the singular form is Sefirah. The word Sefirah is related to a number of Hebrew words. Some interpret Sefirah as being connected to the word Mispar,

which means, “number.” Some interpret Sefirah to be related to the word Sofer, which means to “write.” Yet others relate the word Sefirah to the word Saper, which means, “to tell,” or “to relate.” Whatever be the original intent of the inventor of the term, Sefirah today means that which can be counted, enumerated, and expressed. Thus, the Ten Sefirot are the enumerated, and expressed emanations of God in creation.

The Ten Sefirot is the fundamental pattern, and teaching model of the Kabbalah. Understanding the Sefirot correctly is, therefore, vital for all Kabbalistic study. Almost the entire Kabbalistic system is based on this very profound set of metaphors. Without understanding what the metaphors means, and to what reality they are pointing, the Sefirot, and all Kabbalah will remain cloaked under a cloud of confusion and misunderstanding. Kabbalah is supposed to be about clarity, and understanding, therefore, such cloaks of confusion, and misunderstanding are to be avoided at all costs.

In order to avoid the confusion that comes with the literal interpretation of metaphors, and symbols, discussion about the Sefirot must be expanded beyond the realm of religion, which seeks to explain the external world, and placed squarely inside the realm of psychology that seeks to understand the Divine Image within us all. Understanding the Ten Sefirot psychologically, therefore, enables us to learn about our humanity, and from these lessons to then extrapolate on to the other areas of application. In other words, the Sefirot can, and do, teach us about the universe around us, but these lessons begins inside us, inside our minds, and inside the very essence of what makes us human. Only when we understand our humanity will we be able to see the Divine Image reflected within us, and from that Image, penetrate and see the rest of the truths about the universe.

In the language of the Kabbalah, the Ten Sefirot are organized in the form of a diagram of relationships. Each individual Sefirah is to be understood within the context, and relationship with the others. No one Sefirah stands alone. Each Sefirah is an essential part of the whole. The diagram of the Ten Sefirot is called by a number of names, the most common being the “Sefirotic Tree of Life.” The image of the Sefirotic Tree is a well known diagram in the world of Kabbalah, yet it must be made very clear that the diagram is a metaphor, and a symbol. There is no physical, or literal Sefirotic Tree, anymore than there are physical, or literal Sefirot.

According to this tradition, the Sefirot are the blueprint, and pattern through which God is revealed to His creation. Yet, it is also taught that this pattern of interactive Sefirot is the very Divine Image in which humanity was created. Essentially, the Divine Image spoken of in the Bible is an internal image, and should not be confused with our present physical human stature. Although the Sefirot are often diagrammed as corresponding to the human body, these correlations are entirely symbolic, and should never be interpreted literally. The Ten Sefirot are within us. It is through this pattern ingrained within our souls that enables us to align with, and become one with the rest of creation. We are the microcosm of the macrocosm. The Sefirot outline and detail the universe, and at the same time, they outline, and detail our inner humanity.

The Sefirot are divided into four general components. The number four corresponds to the number of letters in God's Name YHWH. These four general components, when applied within the metaphorical context of the human condition (the inner Divine Image), correspond to our internal psychological dynamics. These internal psychological dynamics are each given metaphorical names like Olamot (worlds), or Hekhalot (palaces), and are then each defined and described in typical abstruse metaphorical Kabbalistic symbolism.

Stripping away all the symbols, the four levels simply correspond to the intuitive, rational, emotional, and sensory levels of human experience, and perception. The Sefirot, therefore, outline the inner construct of the human psyche, and its internal interactions with the unconscious, the conscious, the emotions, and the physical senses. Essentially, the pattern and teachings of the Sefirot are an esoteric metaphor, that outline an ancient Jewish mystical understanding of human psychology. In this essential light, one can understand why the teachings about the Sefirot transcend their Jewish method of expression, and reach out with universal significance.

The Sefirot are ten, divided into four groups. The Sefirot represent both the levels of Divine emanation in creation, and their corresponding realities within the human personality. The Sefirotic groups are even given metaphorical personifications, with names like Adam Kadmon (Primordial Man), Arikh Anpin (the Long Face), Abba (Father), Imma (Mother), Zeir Anpin (the Short Face), and Nok (the Female). These symbolic personifications of

Sefirotic groups are called Sefirotic Faces (Partzufim). These metaphorical personifications are considered to be emanations of the Unknown and Unknowable God. Yet, what is misunderstood about these is clearly expressed in their names. They are called in Hebrew, Partzufim, which literally means, masks.

These Partzufim masks are not worn by God to cover His Face. Such metaphors would be silly in the extreme. Rather, these metaphors express our human perceptions of the Divine at the individual levels of human consciousness represented by the internal Sefirot themselves. It is we humans that see the Partzufim. It is not God that is wearing a mask. God does not wear masks, however, human consciousness does differ from person to person. There are different orientations to human personalities, and as such, it is we who perceive God through masks of our own psychological making. Thus, we have the Partzufim, and like the Sefirot which they group, we recognize them as being psychological in nature, and thus recognize, and embrace their metaphorical reality. Again, these symbols are the system used in Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah) to help describe and analyze the human mind.

As a pattern of internal psychology the Sefirot (and their structure within Partzufim) help describe our collective human psychological condition. By understanding the Sefirot, one comes to understand one's own inner self, and the inter-workings within one's own psyche. The originators of the Sefirotic system were clearly profoundly adept at understanding the psychological human condition, and were also well versed in the usage of poetic, archetypal metaphors to describe it. It is a shame that over the many centuries since its inception that the metaphors of the Kabbalah have been misunderstood, wrongly interpreted literally, or applied exclusively to the macrocosm, to the exclusion of the microcosm. A proper examination, and analysis of the original psychological meanings of the Sefirotic system is long overdue.