



Sefer Etz Haim - The Tree of Life

Gate 42, The Lectures of A'Be'Y'Ah, Chapter 1

By Rabbi Haim Vital

*Introduction, Translation & Commentary by Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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Introduction

The following essay is a translated chapter from the perhaps greatest book of Kabbalah study second only to the Zohar itself. Sefer Etz Hayim, Rabbi Hayim Vital's "Tree of Life" is the larger compendium of its kind and the single most source of Kabbalistic information.

The Etz Hayim is based upon Zoharic teachings and although without claiming itself such is very much a non-linear commentary on the Zohar. Indeed, to understand the Zohar without the Etz Hayim is a virtual impossibility. Some have therefore extended the comparison saying that the Zohar is like the Mishnah whereas the Etz Hayim is like the Gemara that explains the Mishna and opens it up.

Today, in most (kosher) Kabbalistic circles around the world the Etz Hayim is studied daily, often over and over again. Its teachings outline the entire order of creation, stretching from pre-creation and the existence of the Ayn Sof down to the bottom most worlds, even those lower than our own physical plane.

The chapter before us begins the section known as the Seventh Palace of the Etz, the 42nd of the 50 Gates of the book. In order to give you the reader a real feel for the text, I have added notes only sparingly. This selection was originally translated for and published in my journal Panu Derekh #14 in 1996.

Sefer Etz Hayim 42:1

Now, there exists the Emanator and the emanated.¹ The emanated consists of four foundations, which are fire, air, water and earth.² These are the four letters of the Name

¹ The traditional reference to G-d and creation. G-d emanates all into being. All aspects of creation, however, can be summed up as aspects of Atzilut. Therefore, all creation is not called the "Nivrah" (created), but rather the "Ne'etzal" (emanated).

² The four elements are not only the foundation of the physical world; their spiritual counterparts exist in each of the worlds.



Havaya. These are [the four sefirot] Hokhma, Binah, Tiferet and Malkhut.³ These are Ta'N'T'A (ta'amim, nikudot, tagin and otiyot). These are A'Be'Y'Ah (Atzilut, Beriah, Yetzirah and Asiyah). These are also the four aspects of man.

The first aspect (of man) is the inner man, which is his spirituality, which is called his Na'R'Na'H (nefesh, ruah, neshama and haya).⁴ The second aspect is the body. The third aspect is the garments which clothe the body. The fourth is one's home which houses the man, his body and his garments. All of these four aspects include within them aspects of all four.

These are they: The first aspect, which is one's spirituality, includes the neshama of the neshama and the Na'Ra'N. The second aspect, the body, is made up of the bones with the marrow that is within them, the sinews, the flesh and the skin.⁵ This is in accordance with the verse *"With skin and flesh have you clothed me, and with bones and sinews have you covered me"* (Job).⁶

The third aspect is the clothing. It is known that the clothing referred to are the garments that were worn by the regular priest [in the Holy Temple, when it stood]. These four [garments] are the coat, the trousers, the shirt and the hat. The four garments of the High Priest are garments of a higher nature than these; as it is written in the Zohar, these garments [of the High Priest] correspond to the name Adonai, whereas the other garments [of the regular Priest] correspond to the Name Havaya.⁷

³ These four are the foundation of the sefirotic Partzufim. As such these are the essentials.

⁴ These are the four levels of the soul. The fifth and highest level is not included because of what is yet to be discussed.

⁵ I find Rabbi Haim's choice of the four aspects in the human body most interesting. In traditional Jewish fashion he distinguishes between skin and the flesh. I really do not understand exactly to what he is referring; however, my guess is that, by modern terminology, the four aspects of the human body would be defined as 1) bones (with the marrow), 2) organs (possibly the sinews), 3) flesh (muscle) and 4) skin (the flesh surrounding the body).

⁶ Rabbi Haim never quotes chapter and verse from scripture. Why? Because in his day, everyone knew the Bible by heart. He didn't have to quote chapter and verse for everyone knew it. My teacher, Rabbi Meir Levi זצ"ל, when growing up in Jerusalem in the 1930s was also taught the entire Bible by heart. Whenever I would mention a verse, he would be able to correct me if I did not properly pronounce a single word. He did all this by memory. I truly admire this type of learning, and wish to encourage one and all to study and know the Bible with such unquestionable accuracy. In order to give you the original flavor of the Etz Haim, I also have decided not to quote chapter and verse. Those interested in this information can consult a Bible concordance.

⁷ This reading is in accordance with Rabbi Yehuda Fatiyah in his commentary Beit Lehem Yehudah.



Either way, the essential aspect is that there are four in number. The fourth aspect is the dwelling, which also consists of four: the house, the yard, the field and the wilderness.

Within each of the specific aspects there is one aspect that unites them all, and this aspect serves as an intermediary between one aspect and another, and is a part of them both. For example, the secular scientists related that between the inanimate and the vegetable there exists the "Korali", also called the "Almigim".⁸ Between the vegetable and the animal there exists the "Adney Sedeh" that is referred to in Tractate Kelim.⁹ [It is described as] a type of dog that grows from the ground, with a tail that is connected to the earth from which it is nourished. If the tail is cut, it dies. Between the animal and the human is the monkey.

Thus in this same way [is there an intermediary] between the blessed Creator and creation. This is the general spiritual aspect that is the intermediary of which it is written, "You are children to HaShem your G-d" (Deut), "I have said that you are gods" (Psalms); and it is also written, "And G-d arose above Abraham" (Gen), and our Sages have taught, "the Fathers,¹⁰ they themselves are the Merkava". What this all means is that there exists a very small spark which is an aspect of the Divine, which comes down from the lowest level within the Creator. This spark clothes itself within the power of a created spark, which is the most refined level of the soul. Within this spark, called the Yehida, there exists the source of the four aspects of the spiritual, which are the Na'R'Na'H.

Also between the aspect of the soul and the aspect of the body, there is an aspect that combines the two; and this is the "quarter of blood" of the soul.¹¹ For here within resides the final spark of the soul, which his one-quarter of the soul, meaning the nefesh of the nefesh; therefore it is called a "quarter". This spark [of the nefesh soul] is clothed within

⁸ None of the commentaries that I have properly define this. All I can say it that it is some form of vegetation that appears to be inanimate. From the word "Korali", I would venture the guess that Rabbi Haim is talking about coral, which as is known is a form of vegetation, although it appears rock-like.

⁹ This "Adney Sedeh" is a very interesting creature. Note how Rabbi Haim quotes the Mishna so briefly. Again, he expects his readers to be completely familiar with the Mishna. This "Adney Sedeh" is described by Rabbi Ovadiah Bartenura in his Mishnaic commentary as being a form of vegetation that grows from the ground in the form of a man (some say in the form of a dog). This creature is connected to the ground by a root that comes forth from its navel; if this root is cut, the creature dies. I have no idea as to the identity of this creature; I would venture that it is similar to a Venus Fly Trap or a similar breed of flesh-eating plant, but I cannot say for sure.

¹⁰ The Fathers are Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who together with David form the four foundations upon which rest the Heavenly Throne.

¹¹ This references the statement in Leviticus 17 that the life is in the blood. As is known, blood is life; so within one's blood is manifest one's soul. The mention of a "quarter" is a symbolic reference to the life force that resides within the blood.



this “quarter of blood” as described above. All is one, as it is written, “*The blood is the soul*”; this is the “quarter of blood”. This “quarter of blood” is more refined than any of the other four aspects of the body described above, each aspect of which contains four [subjective] aspects. The “quarter [of blood]” is [thus] the first [quarter of the four aspects of the body].

The highest level [within] the bones is the marrow, which is the life that is within it, and is the blood that comes forth from them to enliven them. Within this “quarter of blood” which is the highest level [within the body], is contained the source of all the other four aspects [of the body] mentioned above. This aspect [of the “quarter of blood”] is the intermediary between the [realm of the] spiritual and the [realm of] the body. It is a combination of the two.

There is also an intermediary between the second and third aspects [within the body] and these, as is known, are the hair and the nails of man. For this was the original covering of Adam in the beginning [prior to the fall].¹² These are bound to a person’s skin, and form a part of a person’s body. However, once it (specifically the hair) is removed from the body, the hair can be made into a covering, in the same manner as with the wool of sheep and goats. More than this, even when [hair] is still on the body, it is reminiscent of the covering of the domestic and wild animals, whose hair is their covering. The wonder of this is with Adam regarding his nails. We also find regarding Nebuchadnezzar that this [i.e. hair] was his garment, as it is written, “*his hair grew like eagles, and his nails like birds*” (Daniel 4:31). [This rule also applies] between the aspect of garments and the aspect of a dwelling. These are tents which are made from wool or flax, which are aspects of a garment and are used to construct dwellings...

Now we shall return to discuss the supernal worlds. Now that the example has been given shall the lesson [that is learned from it] be explained. The lesson is that there are only four aspects which are elemental foundations. These are the four letters of Havaya, which are Hokhma, Binah, Tiferet and Malkhut as has been explained. Thus we find that Hokhma is called “beginning”.

With this also will you understand what is written, that the Keter is always defined as an aspect above its specific world and not to be included within it. It is similar to the crown of a King which is above his head and not a part of it. Therefore, [according to this view Keter] is not a sefirah. In its place is counted the Da’at. Therefore is [Da’at] sometimes included among the ten sefirot.

¹² The original body of Adam, prior to the fall, was made of a material similar to what now makes up human nails. This is a most interesting teaching, for throughout Kabbalistic literature Adam’s original body was not physical at all, but made of light from the realm of Yetzirah. It thus appears that Adam’s light (astral) body must have had some type of substance to it that was similar to the substance that forms nails.



This matter can be explained in light of what has previously been discussed regarding an intermediary between one aspect and the next. This is similar to what the secular scientists have said; their words are also quoted by RaMBaN [in his Torah commentary on the verse] *“and the land was void (Tohu) and formless (Bohu)”* (Genesis). It is also written in the name of Sefer HaBahir that prior to the creation of the four elements,¹³ there was created another type of substance called Hiyuli. This substance was prepared to receive the “image” of the four elements, but it did not cloak itself in any image whatsoever. Whatever exists prior to the void (Tohu) is called “nothing”.

This then is the explanation: The Ayn Sof is called “nothing” for it is impossible to grasp. Therein is no matter or image at all. After it came forth the void (Tohu), which is the Keter. After this came forth [the] formless (Bohu), which included within it the four foundations Hokhma, Binah, Tiferet and Malkhut.

Now there must always be a middle level between the Emanator and what He emanates, because there is a great chasm [of distance] between the two, similar to the distance between Heaven and Earth. How could one possibly radiate into the other? How could the one create the other? The two are opposites. If there was no intermediary between them to unite them, how could the Emanator draw close to the emanated, and vice versa? This [intermediary aspect] is the Keter, which is called the void (Tohu), for there is no foundation within it. [Keter] is not even hinted to in the Name Havaya other than by the crown of the Yod. Even so, it is the intermediary aspect.

Now the Keter is the example of the Hiyuli substance that contains within it the course of the four elements (foundations) in their potential form, but not in actuality...we thus find that [the Keter] can be called Ayn Sof and the Emanator, as is the opinion of a number of the Kabbalists (that the Ayn Sof is the Keter). It is also possible to call [the Keter one of] the emanated; for it is a sure thing that the Ayn Sof is greater than it. Therefore have our Sages warned us, saying *“do not seek that which is above you”*.

However, what we are allowed to discuss is that the Keter is an intermediary aspect between the Emanator and the emanated. The reason for this is that the lowest aspect that is possible within the Ayn Sof emanated one aspect, which is the most concealed and hidden source of the ten sefirot. [This aspect] of the Emanator is its most refined aspect, impossible to be more refined; for above it there is only “nothing”.

We thus find that within this aspect there are two levels. The first level is the aspect of the lowest and most humble level of all the ten sefirot. It is, as if to say, the Malkhut of the Malkhut. Even though it is not this, for therein [in the Ayn Sof] is no form or sefirah at all (G-d forbid). Only to enable us [to understand abstract concepts] do we speak such.

¹³ Water, fire, air and earth.



Now within this, the lowest level of the Ayn Sof, there exists all that is above it; and this level receives from all of the above. For it is known that the Malkhut receives from all above. This lowest level is the one that emanates the second of the two levels. This second level is the highest level of all the emanated. In it is included the source of all to be emanated, and this level radiates to all of them. Thus we find that the lowest level within the Emanator has emanated the highest level within all that is emanated. There is no other level between them; there is nothing closer or more similar to the Emanator than this emanated level.

[This level] thus contains two aspects. The first aspect of the Keter is that some Kabbalists have called it (the Keter) the Ayn Sof. The second aspect is that some Kabbalists have called the Keter one of the ten sefirot.

However, our view is not like either of these two opinions. Rather, [we view the Keter] as the intermediary aspect between the Ayn Sof and the emanated [creation]. Within [the Keter] there is thus an aspect that is the Ayn Sof and there is an aspect that is of the emanated. These two aspects are called [the Partzufim] of Atik and Arikh. Both of which are called Keter, as is known by us. Understand this well.

This then is what is meant that the Malkhut of the world of Atzilut cloaks itself within the head of the world of Beriah, which is the Keter [of that world] and is the Atik of the world of Beriah. Understand this well.

The rule that comes forth from this is that in reality within the realms of the emanated there are only four levels, which are the four letters of Havaya. This is A'Be'Y'Ah. This is Hokhma, Binah, Tiferet and Malkhut. Therefore does the Torah begin with Bereshit (in the beginning). There is no "reshit" (Beginning) other than wisdom (Hokhma), even as our Sages have said. This was said in the negative tense so as to exclude the Keter.

The Keter is the intermediary aspect that unites Emanator and the emanated. This Keter has within it all that is above it, even though it is smaller than all above it and suckles from that which is above it. [Also], within it is the source of all the ten emanated sefirot, and [this Keter] radiates to them all.

Therefore do not be surprised if sometimes we subdivide the ten sefirot of Atzilut into the four letters of Havaya, and sometimes we subdivide into the five sefirotic Partzufim. When we speak of the four we are counting the [realm of the] emanated in actuality. When we count the five sefirotic Partzufim we are counting the source, i.e. the Emanator, along with the emanated themselves.

Now it is like this with the ten sefirot of each and every world, as well as with each and every Partzuf. For with each and every world, that which is above is called the Emanator



and that below it is called the emanated. And there is nothing [in the realm of the] emanated that contains fewer than the four letters of Havaya, regardless of how specific we get. And there will always be the intermediary aspect which is the Keter. Understand this well, for with this [introduction] you will understand all the lectures that are discussed.

This is the meaning [of the verse] *"I am the first and I am the last"*. For the Keter is the first [sefirah] and it is the last. Keter is Ayn (nothing, spelled Alef, Yod, Nun) and Keter is Ani (I, spelled Alef, Nun, Yod); for the Malkhut aspect of the Emanator, which is the lowest aspect, is called Ani (I). With regards to the source of the emanated, it is Keter, the first, and is called Ayn (nothing), which is spelled with the same letters as Ani (I).