



Authentic Kabbalah - Sephardic Studies
Benei Noah Studies -- Anti-Missionary/Anti-Cult Materials

The Ten Sefirot

How and Why G-d is Manifest in Creation

by Ariel bar Tzadok.

Copyright © 1996 by Ariel Bar Tzadok. All rights reserved.

Originally published as part of the Panu Derekh Journal (#13)

This essay is also covered in the recorded lecture series:

The Basic Kabbalistic Concepts and Terminologies
available in our online store.

Introduction

This article is addressed to those who truly seek an understanding about the Divine. The great Sage RaMBaM (Maimonides) wrote that no one can really know anything about G-d at the level of His Essential Being. This is true. We can only understand that aspect of G-d that is perceivable here within Creation. An understanding about how G-d is manifest in creation inspires us all to seek Him out, to understand Him better, to draw closer to Him, and to observe His mitzvot. I pray that this small article might accomplish a part of this lofty goal.

In the original edition of this work, published in Panu Derekh Journal #13, many diagrams are included to help visualize the concepts related herein. A tape series on this topic is also available in the catalogue section.

Creation

It is most difficult to describe how the universe came into being. From what vantage point can we possibly speak? The Kabbalists have dwelled long and hard on this issue, and G-d in His mercy has revealed a great many things about the techniques He used in the primordial creation.

In the beginning, prior to the creation of Heaven and Earth, there existed G-d, and G-d alone. Where G-d came from is not a question. G-d is and has always been here (there and everywhere). G-d, in His ultimate essence, is all things, all space, all time, all consciousness, as well as all things that are the opposites of these things. G-d, in His

ultimate essence, is unknowable by anything or anyone in creation, regardless of their level of closeness to the Divine source. G-d's ultimate essence in Hebrew is called the Ayn Sof.

The first question that the Kabbalists ask is being that G-d is all places, where could a universe possibly exist? Simply put, being that G-d is everywhere, there is no place for a universe. For G-d to create a universe, He would first have to create a place where such a universe could exist. Where could there possibly be such a space other than within G-d Himself? G-d, therefore chose (so to speak) to "vacate" a space within Himself so that a void would be created. Within this void, G-d could therefore create His universe.

All this type of talk, I must remind you is completely symbolic. In actuality, there can never be any space void of G-d, not even for an instant. We use this type of terminology simply to roughly explain the process of creation.

The creation of this so-called void, Halal in Hebrew, was brought about by G-d withdrawing His light from a certain place so as to create this other place. This original withdrawal of G-d's light is called Tzimtzum (contraction). For G-d's light contracted within Itself, leaving this so-called void.

The Kabbalists then asked the next logical question. If G-d is everywhere, where in G-d then did this Tzimtzum contraction take place? The answer given is that the contraction began at the very center. However, if G-d is everywhere, then there are no boundaries, therefore there cannot be a center!! If we were talking about physical space, this would be absolutely true. However, physical space did not exist at this time, therefore its laws are not applicable here.

Rabbi Haim Vital, in the first lecture within his master work, Etz Haim, writes that the Tzimtzum contraction of G-d's light occurred at the source of G-d's desire to create the universe. In other words, the "place" of creation arose out of the desire within G-d's ultimate essence. The place of the origin of creation is the desire of G-d. The place is not a physical one but one where mind meets desire. G-d's desire therefore vacated a space, a place wherein which the desire for a universe could become manifest.

One might ask when did this occur? The answer, of course, will always be "in the beginning." When was this? According to the plain meaning of the Torah, creation occurred in six days, each of 24 hours. However, as Albert Einstein has documented scientifically, all time is relative. How time is measured today is not necessarily how G-d measured time during creation. In regards to modern science and how time is today measured in the physical world, creation occurred billions of years ago. The Genesis story in no way contradicts this.

In the 12th century, the master Kabbalist Rabbi Yitzhak D'min Acco calculated, according to the secrets concealed within the Genesis story that the universe is presently some 15 1/2 billion years old. Coincidentally, this is about the same age given

by modern science. Yet, from G-d's point of view, which is above time and space, the universe is only now being created, even as you read these words. At this same moment, G-d sees the universe ending. All is cyclical before G-d, He is both the beginning and the end. Therefore, from G-d's vantage point the universe's beginning, middle and end are all one.

With the creation of the void, through the Tzimtzum contraction, G-d could now begin to manifest His universe. This was accomplished by G-d shining His light back into the newly created void, but not in the same manner as the light was prior to its removal, which created the void. G-d's light had to be differentiated so that when it returned into the void it would not just fill it up as it previously had been. G-d's light, therefore, lessened Himself and began the manifestation of boundary, form and definition. This was all something new, something that did not and does not exist in G-d Himself, but only in His creation.

G-d, in His ultimate essence, therefore is completely unknowable to us. We do, however, experience G-d (and come to know Him) as He chooses to manifest Himself within creation. Being that G-d has created many different levels or phases of creation, so too the levels of G-d's manifestation in creation differ according to these levels and phases.

The Sefirot

The aspect of G-d's light that beamed back into the primordial void differentiated Himself through a series of filters, sort of spiritual transformers that enabled G-d's light to descend from its origins outside of creation to the very center of the void (which now, by definition, is the farthest point from the surrounding field of G-d's ultimate essence). These spiritual transformers that G-d chose so as to filter His light into creation became the spiritual DNA pattern upon which all of creation is based. These filters that form this pattern are called the Sefirot.

The sefirot are the major Kabbalistic symbol used throughout all Jewish literature (Kabbalistic and otherwise). It is necessary that before one embark on a course of study in Kabbalah that one learn the essentials about the interactions of the sefirot. Yet, prior to this, one must learn what a sefirah is, where it comes from and how it does and does not operate.

When G-d began to cause His light to shine within the primordial void, He did not allow His light to enter in the same intensity that the light was on the outside. Such intensity of light would have immediately filled the void nullifying its creation. The amount of light that G-d allowed to penetrate within the void is therefore only a small portion of the brilliance of His absolute essence.

G-d's primordial light contained within it many varying aspects. Within G-d's ultimate essence all of these aspects were completely merged together as one. With the creation of the void each of these aspects of G-d's ultimate light would now be able to manifest their unique manifestations. The absolute unity is never lost or compromised.

G-d's ultimate essence can be compared to a black light. The color black contains within it all colors and possibilities of color. Although these are not clearly seen within the black itself. Yet, when the light is subject to filters then its various shades and hues are able to be individually identified. All of these shades and hues, as different as they are from one another, are still united and one in their essence.

Also, as with color, there is differentiation between one and the other. There are demarcated borders, boundaries and definition. Unlike G-d's ultimate essence wherein there is no such thing as border or boundary, here within the void, demarcation and separation is the chosen manner through which G-d is able to manifest Himself through the creation which He creates. The ultimate light of G-d's essence, therefore, goes through a phase of filters, the purpose of which is to diffuse the light and to allow it to manifest all of its varying hues.

These boundaries and demarcations (of the light) are called sefirot, coming from the root word safar, which means to count. Numbers are the primordial form of demarcation and separation. What is one is not two, nor is it three. Yet, the relationship and unity between the numbers can never be broken. The word safar is related to the word mispar, which means number and to the word sefer, which means book. As the Sefer Yetzirah teaches, G-d created His universe with three sefarim, with sefer, saphar and sippur. These are the differentiation of G-d's light within their vessels the sefirot.

Remember, G-d is one and His Name is one. The sefirot are only tools to G-d. They have no life or holiness of their own other than what G-d gives to them. The sefirot, therefore, manifest to us how G-d chooses to act in His universe. Through the sefirot and their interactions can we come and see G-d, Who is concealed within them.

There is one point about sefirot that must be understood if one ever wishes to truly understand their nature. The order of their manifestation and interaction is twofold. As they emanate from G-d's ultimate essence (the Ayn Sof) they descend into the void in the form of concentric spheres. This form implies that their order is exclusively hierarchical. While this is true, the sefirot also interact with one another in the form of multi-dimensional columns, which transform the sefirot into polarities of active, passive and balance. It is this form of columns that is the most popular form in which the sefirot are presented today.

When the sefirot are in the form of columns they are called the sefirot of Yosher, meaning columns. When they are in the form of concentric spheres they are the sefirot of Agulim, meaning spheres. Much of the beginning of Sefer Etz Haim is devoted to explain these two functions of sefirotic interaction. The holy Zohar and the majority of the writings of the Ari'zal deal with the sefirot from the view of Yosher.

The view of Agulim is very sublime and profound and is best left for more advanced study in the original texts. For this work here, I will explain the Agulim order of emanation from the Ayn Sof. I will then proceed to explain the sefirotic interactions according to the Yosher order.

The First Sefirah

The first aspect of the light to manifest within the void is the expression of G-d's desire to create the universe. This first aspect of light entered the void like a laser beam and quickly formed a sphere surrounding the outermost parameter of the void. This first aspect of creation is the first of ten filters which G-d uses to channel His Divine light from His ultimate essence to the lowest of all lower worlds. It is the primordial essence of all things yet to come.

This first sefirah, the first expression of G-d into the realm of creation is called Keter, which means crown. It is called crown because like the crown upon a head which is above the entire body and is its glory, so too Keter is above all the rest of creation. This first expression of G-d also has other names which better describe its meaning and function.

Keter is also called the Ra'avah Ila'ah, the Supernal Will (of the Divine). For it is the Will more than anything else that defines existence. Will is the force of life. The Will, i.e., Keter, can also be called "Ani", meaning "I". For prior to one being conscious of existence, one already exists. Existence pre-exists the awareness of one's existence. Thus Keter is "I", before the "I" can say "I am". (This analogy is my own).

Keter is also known as Adam Kadmon. As a matter of fact this is the term most often used to describe Keter. Adam Kadmon means Primordial Man. This does not mean that Keter is in the form of a physical man! Rather Adam Kadmon, or A.K. as the Kabbalists refer to this level, is considered the primordial pattern of the universe. A.K. contains within Him all of the lower worlds. These lower worlds will emanate from A.K. just as A.K. Himself emanated from G-d's ultimate essence. In A.K. all things exist in their potential form, waiting to become manifest. Yet, Keter (A.K.) the Supernal "I" is unaware of itself and therefore is in need of revelation. This then leads to the manifestation of the second level (sefirah) within the void, the sefirah Hokhma.

The Second Sefirah

Keter is the Divine Will, the "I" of creation. However, in order that the "I" be realized and actualized, it must be cognizant of itself. The "I" must translate from simply being "I" and become "I am". This "I am" level of self recognition is the second sefirah Hokhma, meaning wisdom.

Although Hokhma means wisdom, I choose to call it intuition. For Hokhma is the initial grasp of awareness, the beginning of consciousness and recognition. Hokhma is like the proverbial light bulb that lights up over one's head revealing a brilliant idea. That idea pops up fully developed, for its source is Keter. Its faculty for recognition is Hokhma. Hokhma reveals inner, subjective knowledge, that which is known because it is an inner truth, not because of an external lesson. Hokhma is the realm of the purely spiritual, that which manifests the essence.

The primordial Hokhma gave form to the latent power lying dormant within A.K. (Keter). Therefore the "I" of Keter became the "I am" in Hokhma. The two are inseparable. Keter and Hokhma are united as are the soul and spirit within the body. The original light that entered the void from G-d's ultimate essence only penetrated to the level of this Hokhma. After this, the light of the Keter, cloaked with the light of the Hokhma, took the place of the original descending light, and continued to descend into the very middle of the void.

Yet, once Hokhma had received an influx of awareness from Keter, the brilliance of that revelation still needed to be properly digested, comprehended and understood. Even the most brilliant ideas needed to be worked out and given form. This takes us to the third of the sefirot, Binah, meaning understanding, where the "I am" can understand what it is and thus say "I am . . . (whatever it is that I am)". Binah is integrally connected with Hokhma and Keter, but the original light from G-d's absolute essence did not directly descend here.

The Third Sefirah

Binah is the cognitive form where the flash of thought that was emanated from the Keter and received in Hokhma can become congealed, comprehended and prepared to be put into action. Binah receives the intuitive insight from Hokhma and dwells on it in the same way a mother receives the seed from the father, keeps it within her until it's time to give birth to that which comes forth from the union of the two of them.

In the language of Partzufim (that will be discussed later on), Hokhma is traditionally called Abba, father, and Binah is called Imma, mother, for just this reason. It is said that Hokhma (intuition) "impregnates" Binah, (which I define as perception). Thus intuition, once received and contemplated with perception, leads to the "birth" or further creation of the universe.

The sefirah Binah is the level of pure cognitive mind. The essence of Keter first takes on form in Hokhma, though this form is completely spiritual and abstract. Within Binah the received aspect of essence becomes clearly understood, conscious and cognizant. Binah, the level of pure mind, pure consciousness, is thus the mother of invention. It is from within "her womb" that the rest of creation is "born".

These first three sefirot manifest aspects which correlate to the power of the mind. In Hebrew they are called the "Mohin", the brains. Binah is the left brain, Hokhma the right brain. Keter is the skull that, like a crown, is on top of them both. Binah transforms the power of pure mind into action. Yet, prior to the physical manifestation of action, there must first be motivation. Motivation is absolutely necessary, for nothing can be built unless the builder is motivated to build. Binah therefore transforms, by the power of cognitive awareness, the essence of Keter as revealed in spiritual, intuitive Hokhma and creates first motivation, and only then physical form, which finalizes and join all the levels together.

The motivation that Binah manifests is the power of emotion. This manifests itself in the formation of the next six sefirot. Although these six are unique and independent of one another, they act together as one.

The first triad of sefirot is called KaHaB, which is the capital letters of the sefirot Keter, Hokhma and Binah. Writing names out all the time is very redundant and unnecessary. Kabbalists always abbreviate by using capital letters to refer to terms. Thus Adam Kadmon is A.K., Keter, Hokhma and Binah is KaHaB, and so on. This method of expression is consistent throughout all Kabbalistic literature.

The Six Sefirot - The Fourth Through The Ninth

These next six sefirot are the primordial forces that underlie the creation of the physical universe. Corresponding to these six were there six "days" to creation.

Anything that exists within the mind, be it in the primordial mind or in the mind of man, must be charged with an almost electric type of force in order to move it from the realm of non-corporeal thought into the realm of corporeal being. Therefore, did G-d form the "midot", the six sefirot which are the primordial source of emotion. Emotions charge that which one thinks and gives the thought emphasis, passion and flavor. This is something that mind alone cannot do.

Essence manifests within spirit. Spirit is perceived within the mind. The mind then forms ideas which motivate and steer the emotional tides. All emotions are based upon preconceived mental notions. One feels a certain way about a thing because one has certain ideas and preconceived notions about that thing. Change the way one thinks about a thing, and the way he feels about it will also change. The six sefirot here, therefore, are the powers that transform thought (the upper triad) into action (the tenth and last sefirah). They are six in number for this double triad reflects the dual nature of Keter's manifestation into Hokhma and Binah. In other words, as the upper triad is made up of three sefirot, so must there be three triads, each one reflecting and congealing the light from that which is above it. These then are the six sefirot:

Hesed

This is the first attribute to come forth from the Mohin (brains). In the form of columns, Hesed is directly below Hokhma. For although Hesed comes forth from Binah, which is on the left column, Hesed's place is on the right. Just as Keter's first manifestation was to the right, so was Binah's. This zig-zag descent of energy is also clear within the relationship of the human brain to the human body. The left lobe of the brain controls the right side of the body. This method of descent was established by G-d so that all polarities would be able to interact with their opposites thus giving rise to the multiple forms of diverse creations.

Hesed is the force of expansion, of free and complete giving. Hesed is defined as mercy, but I choose to call Hesed freedom, for this word more properly expresses Hesed's function. Hesed is always outgoing, always accepting, always forgiving. Hesed is the creative force which is always expanding outward, formless, boundary-less,

without any contraction, constriction, discipline or limitation. Hesed is simply pure, unadulterated abundance. Yet, Hesed by itself cannot create and support a world. For a world without boundaries, definitions and limitations will soon fall into chaos and self destruct. For this reason, Hesed's antithesis came forth next: the fifth sefirah, Gevurah.

Gevurah

This sefirah emanates the force of restriction, severity, discipline and judgment. Gevurah means severity, but it is better described as limitation, within the context of discipline. Where the force of Hesed shines outward without boundary and end, Gevurah describes the boundary and the end. Gevurah says when enough is enough. As such, Gevurah is the source of judgment. Gevurah is also referred to as zechut, merit. For Gevurah will only give forth that which is absolutely deserved. For us in the physical plane we continually rely upon G-d's mercies. We are unable to stand before the unadulterated power of Gevurah.

Gevurah stands on the left column underneath Binah. As Binah constricts the expansive force of intuitive Hokhma, so Gevurah restricts the expansive force of all giving Hesed. Gevurah and Hesed function as opposites, constantly tugging on one another. What results from this constant tug of war is the balance and harmony of the next sefirah, Tiferet.

Tiferet

This is the attribute which is called the heart. As such, Tiferet is the specific revelation of G-d to His creation in time and space. Tiferet is the balance created by the proper alignment of Hesed and Gevurah. Tiferet is also called justice. For herein are the basic forces underlying the universe harmonized and brought together into a form wherefrom justice manifests.

Tiferet embodies and unites these six sefirot which are called the midot (attributes). The six are many times referred to as the six appendages of Tiferet. For everything revolves around justice. Justice is the heart of the universe. This is why G-d's holy Name YHWH (Havaya) is associated specifically with this sefirah.

The justice that is Tiferet manifests itself as the written Torah, which is why the Torah deals with laws. The laws of the Torah are the laws of Tiferet. They are the universal laws of the universe and the source of primordial justice. This is why it is paramount for a Jew to observe the commandments of the Torah. Only in this way is the Jew in alignment with the universal force of balance and justice.

Tiferet, as the embodiment of justice, must execute its judgments. This gives rise to the next two sefirot, Netzah and Hod, which while they are two in number act as the unified executors of the judgments of Tiferet. This second triad of sefirot, Hesed, Gevurah and Tiferet are abbreviated as HaGaT.

Netzah

This manifestation of Tiferet comes forth on the Right Column of the sefirot, underneath Hesed and Hokhma. As such Netzah concludes the Right Column by carrying forth and congealing the expansiveness function of the Right.

Netzah means victory, but can also mean conquering. Netzah is the outgoing force that is focused specifically into bringing order and organization. While order itself might be a Left column characteristic, the desire to bring order comes from the expansive, giving nature of Hesed. Netzah, therefore, manifests the outgoing desire that seeks to dominate for the sake of giving good.

Netzah is a product of Tiferet, for it is the nature of justice to want to impose order. And the imposition of proper holy order is an act of mercy, and not severity. Netzah therefore conquers and dominates all so as to impose merciful goodness. Netzah is the force that imposes the justice of Tiferet.

Hod

This sefirah compliments Netzah in that Hod, meaning glory, brings home the benefits of what is conquered. For while Netzah conquers all for the sake of the collective good, Hod benefits from the conquering for its own personal good.

Hod means glory. It is an attribute of the Left column under Gevurah. For like Gevurah, Hod restricts and confines the expansiveness of the Right Column. Hod takes the outgoing benefits of Netzah and focuses those rewards for its own personal benefit. Thus the justice of Tiferet is imposed through Netzah and enjoyed through Hod.

The relationship of Netzah and Hod can best be compared to the traditional role of husband and wife. The husband goes out and makes a living. He expands his energy outwards to create, maintain and expand his business enterprises. The wife, on the other hand, benefits from his work by using the proceeds to fashion and build a beautiful home for her husband, herself and their children. She translates the outwardness of Netzah into an inward form, i.e., the making of a home. This domestic spirit therefore is Hod, it is glory, the fruits of justice, Tiferet. When Netzah and Hod are properly aligned there comes forth the ninth sefirah, Yesod, which balances out the entire sefirotic pattern which is called the Etz Haim, the sefirotic Tree of Life.

Yesod

It is here that all the upper sefirot converge and meet. Yesod is the foundation of the sefirotic tree. It corresponds to the genitals, but not to denote sexuality, but rather to denote the creative energy, i.e., the libido energy that causes both creativity and creation.

Yesod is born of the union between Netzah and Hod. When the forces of justice (Tiferet) rule (Netzah) and its benefit (Hod) is felt throughout, the resulting order leads to the release of the creative spirit; this is Yesod.

Yesod is also referred to as Tzadik, righteousness. For only when there is complete harmony and balance in those spheres (sefirot) which motivate human action can one behave in the proper and correct manner. As a matter of fact, the Hebrew word for correct, Tzodek, is the same root as the word (the) righteous, Tzadik. For only one whose actions and motivations are correct before G-d can be called a Tzadik. This is the one who embodies Yesod. Not only does such a one think the right way, he is also charged (with Netzah) to bring the right way to others. So the prophet and Sage were always at the head of outreach movements, always seeking to impose (Netzah) the proper order (Tiferet) so that the people would benefit (Hod) thereby.

This third triad of sefirot, Netzah, Hod and Yesod are abbreviated as NaHiY.

When all the sefirot are in proper alignment and thus all manifest creation is in harmony, the result is the final sefirah, Malkhut.

Malkhut

This is the final stage of creation, the lowest of the sefirot and the worlds. In Malkhut all of the above worlds merge in perfect union and harmony. This is possible because the laws of the universe of Malkhut are different from those laws of the worlds above her. Malkhut is the realm of the corporeal, the physical world around us. As such, Malkhut enables all the supernal forces of will, mind, heart and motivation to become united and manifest in the realm of action, this physical world.

Malkhut, being the final stage of creation, completes the filling of the void. As such, Malkhut is the farthest away from the surrounding light of G-d's ultimate essence, the Ayn Sof. However, as far as she is from the Ayn Sof, Malkhut is still the most important of the sefirot. She is the "icing on the cake" of creation. When G-d began to create His universe, He contracted His ultimate essence from a point which was said to be the expression of His Will to create. This center became the focal point from where the original contraction of G-d's light began. This center point became Malkhut. Although she was the last level of creation, Malkhut was the original intent in the Will of the Creator. We refer to this reality in the Friday night Shabat song, "L'kha Dodi" (Come My Beloved). In the second stanza, we sing "Sof Ma'aseh B'mahshava Tehila" [The Shabat, which embodies Malkhut] was the last creation, but was the first thought [in the "Mind" of G-d].

Of all the worlds, only Malkhut is corporeal. All the other (higher) realms are non corporeal. This becomes extremely significant when we come to understand how the worlds interact and by what laws of physics they are governed. In the non corporeal realms, time and space are different from how they are here in the corporeal world. In the non corporeal world there is no space as we understand it. Therefore, in order to define how close two things are to one another, we must redefine proximity. Here in the physical world, when two things are in physical proximity, we say that those two things are close to one another. This is most definitely not true in the non corporeal planes. Without corporeal space, physical proximity cannot exist. Therefore, non corporeal

closeness is defined as similarity. When two things are similar to one another, we say that they are close to one another.

This is not a foreign definition to us. I am sure we can each think of a number of examples to demonstrate this. For example, a husband and wife (or parent and child) are (should be) very intimately close to one another. Whether they be standing next to one another, or living in different cities, their closeness is not diminished by distance (or for that matter by time, true love lasts forever). The bond of love, which is a non corporeal entity, draws two people together regardless of physical space. Therefore, the two lovers are "always together", from a certain point of view.

We can use as another example two people of diametrically opposing points of view (ideas, another non corporeal entity). Two people who are completely different from one another ideologically can be placed in a single room, and can even be physically touching one another. Nonetheless, their physical proximity does not in any way make them any closer to one another. Although their bodies touch, the viewpoints make them to be "millions of miles" away from one another. This, then, is where the benefit of Malkhut comes into play.

The laws of physics in Malkhut are different from the other realms. Unlike the other realms, Malkhut can serve to bring opposites into proximity with one another. These opposites can then be exposed to one another and communicate with one another. The potential herein is that the opposites can find common ground and thus merge together within that aspect of unity that is right for each and every joining. Malkhut can thus unite all worlds, which is something that none of the supernal worlds can do. Although in the upper realms of Keter and Hokhma all realms are united, the unity of that place still only expresses potential. It is not until Malkhut that potential becomes actuality and thus fulfills the purpose of creation.

The sefirot therefore serve as the complete pattern that underlies everything in the universe.

Conclusion

1. *G-d reveals an aspect of Himself into creation. This is His Will (Keter).*
2. & 3. *An Insight (Hokhma) of His Will manifests, and is Perceived (Binah).*
4. & 5. *This Expands (Hesed) outward to a point when it then starts to Contract (Gevurah).*
6. *The result is a state of Balance (Tiferet) which ordains the order of the universe.*
7. & 8. *This state of Balance-Order needs to be imposed (Netzah) upon the universe so that the Benefit (Hod) of creation can be received.*
9. & 10. *When this occurs there is Harmony (Yesod) in the universe, and everything is Complete (Malkhut).*