

An Introduction to the Kabbalah



Kabbalah can be translated from the Hebrew as "received tradition", and is a term applied to a vast and seemingly disparate body of esoteric knowledge and practice. It is used to describe Jewish mysticism in general, or more specifically the tradition which found its impetus in the *Sefer ha-Zohar* ("The Book of Splendor") of the thirteenth century. It is also applied to the Christian or Western Kabbalah which grew from German and Lurianic Kabbalism and found its expression and extension in western Mystery Orders, such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

In its most complete form the Kabbalah can be considered as the "Yoga of the West", complementing the eastern *chakra* system and having counterparts to many of the forms of yogic practice. Indeed, the three main *nadis* (energy channels) in eastern philosophy, *ida*, *sushumna* and *pingala*; and the *yin*, *Tao* and *yang* of Taoist philosophy, find direct expression in the Kabbalistic pillars of severity, equilibrium and mercy on the Tree of Life.

The Kabbalah at its best is a system of esoteric philosophy, psychology and cosmology that allows any aspect of existence to be assimilated and related to any other on many levels, both rational and trans-rational. It may be used profitably by anyone, regardless of creed; and, for those who wish it, it is a key to the control of subtle forces and the attainment of true mystical union.

A Brief History of the Kabbalah

Jewish mysticism has its origins in the *Merkabah* practices of the first centuries AD. Through fasting, meditation, prayer and incantation, the *Merkabah* mystics sought experience of the "Throne-Chariot of God" (*Merkabah*) described in Ezekiel 1.

The Kabbalah itself made its first known appearance in written form with the *Sefer Yetsirah* ("Book of Formation"), though mythologically the oral tradition is said to date back to Abraham or even earlier. The *Sefer Yetsirah* is a short work expounding the basic structure of the Kabbalah, detailing the creation of the universe via thirty-two hidden paths: the ten *sefirot* ("numbers", "emanations" or "spheres" - singular, *sefira*) and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It is attributed to Rabbi Akiba who was martyred by the Romans, but its exact date of origin is unknown (possibly as early as the third century, but no later than the tenth).

What was to become known as German Kabbalism or Early Hasidism began in Italy in 917 with Aaron ben Samuel. This had its roots in *Merkabah* mysticism, involving magical rituals, meditation, prayer and ecstatic experience. Its emphasis on the magical power of words fuelled the development of the Kabbalistic techniques of *gematria* (the study of the numerical values of letters and words), *notarikon* (the study of the first and last letters of words) and *temurah* (the study of the permutation and combination of letters).

The pre-eminent form of Jewish mysticism, sometimes referred to as Classical Kabbalah, began in Provence, France, in the thirteenth century, but flourished most readily in mediaeval Spain. It contains elements of both Gnosticism and Neo-platonism, and is more concerned with the nature and structure of all creation from the divine to the material worlds, than with ecstatic experience.

The most important work of this period is the *Zohar* (*Sefer ha-Zohar* or "Book of Splendor"), written between 1280 and 1286 by the Spanish Kabbalist Moses de Leon (1250-1305), though attributed to a second century rabbi, Simeon bar Yohai. This deals with the ten *sefirot* emanating from the ineffable infinite (*en sof*) through which the universe is created and maintained. The mutual interaction of these *sefirot* and their individual natures are seen both as expressing the nature of divinity and as archetypes for all of creation. The *Bahir* ("Book of Illumination") is the third important Kabbalistic text, appearing in France around the eleventh century.

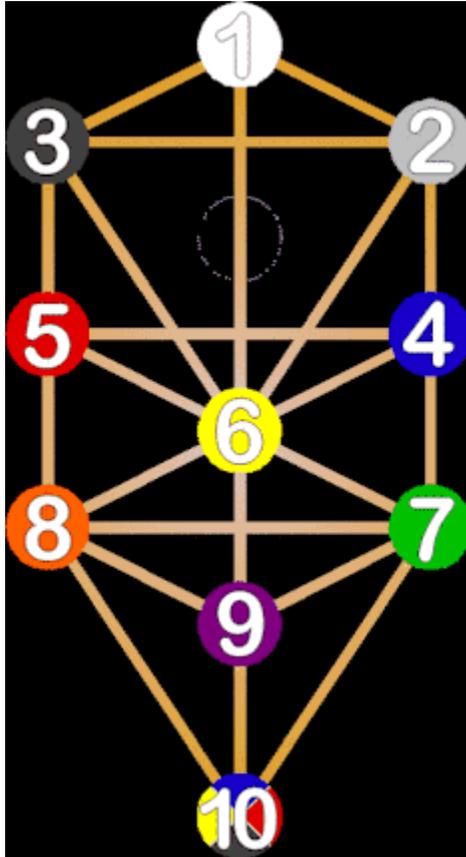
The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 served to spread the Spanish Kabbalah further into Europe. The next major development occurred with the advent of Lurianic Kabbalah, named after its originator, Isaac Luria Ashkenazi (1534-1572). In this, the *en sof* contracts (*tsimtsum*) at the start of creation to allow "room" for cosmic expansion. This also allows "room" for evil, the *qelippot* (literally "shells", singular *qelippa*) in which sparks of the divine light become entrapped after a shattering of the divine receptacles during emanation. Thus freedom of choice is born of the godhead's self-inflicted suffering, and the redemption (*tiqqun*) of the broken world and the reunification of divinity becomes the overriding goal of humanity. The exile of all human beings is symbolized in the exile of Israel, and the *tiqqun* is paralleled in Israel's task to "gather what has been scattered", symbolizing the redemption of the world, crowned with the coming of the Messiah.

This move towards a messianic philosophy fostered the Hasidic movement which made the Kabbalah more widely accessible. The most important figure here was Israel ben Eleazar (1698-1760), known as the Baal Shem Tov, the "Master of the Holy Name".

Western or Christian Kabbalism grew from German and then Lurianic Kabbalism. Mediaeval ceremonial magicians were fond of appropriating Kabbalistic words of power, and in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, western Kabbalists augmented the Kabbalah with aspects of Christian theology and alchemy. The Kabbalah was included in Agrippa von Nettesheim's (1486-1535) key work, *De Occulta Philosophia Libri Tres* (1531).

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen further development of the Western Kabbalah from occultists such as Eliphas Levi, Papus (1865-1916) and members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn such as Aleister Crowley and Dion Fortune (1890-1946). Links between the Kabbalah and many other philosophical, mythological and religious systems have been postulated and detailed; the most important being the links between the Kabbalah, astrology and the Tarot.

The Tree of Life



Central to modern Kabbalistic study is the diagram *Otz Chiim*, the Tree of Life. This is a representation of the thirty-two "paths" comprised of the ten *sefirot* and the twenty-two paths through which they interrelate (introduced in our Introduction to the Kabbalah). Though the tree may be drawn with variations in the location of paths - particularly in pure, Judaic Kabbalah - esoteric tradition is consistent in presenting the tree as above, with the paths in the positions shown.

The Tree of Life describes the descent of the divine into the manifest world, and methods by which divine union may be attained in this life. It can be viewed as a map of the human psyche, and of the workings of creation, both manifest and unmanifest. Indeed, any system can be more fully understood both in itself and relative to any other system by viewing it in relation to the Tree. The Tree allows and requires a more holistic understanding of any topic to which it is applied - reason, spiritual perception and intuition are all needed, as is clear from the structure of the Tree itself.

It is important to realize that the pure nature of divinity is unity, and that the seemingly separate aspects or emanations exist only in view of the emanated, living in a state of illusory separation. This is expressed in the *Zohar*: "in creating this world below, the world above lost nothing. It is the same for each *sefira*: if one is illuminated, the next loses none of its brilliance". The absolute divine light can be said to be refracted through the prism of the *sefirot* into the apparently multifarious world of creation.

The Tree may be viewed in many different ways by grouping the *sefirot* together depending on circumstance. The most important views are the three pillars of severity (*sefirot* 3, 5 and 8), equilibrium (*sefirot* 1, 6, 9 and 10) and mercy (*sefirot* 2, 4 and 7); and the three major triangles: the supernal triangle (*sefirot* 1, 2 and 3), the ethical triangle (*sefirot* 4, 5 and 6) and the astral triangle (*sefirot* 7, 8 and 9). Also worthy of note are the seven planes of the tree and the correspondence between the *sefirot* and the *chakras* of eastern mysticism.

The Structure of the Tree

The names and numbers of the ten *sefirot* are given in order below. The most usual name for each *sefira* is given first, followed by some alternatives.

- 1 *Kether* (Crown) or *Kether Elyon* (Supreme Crown)
- 2 *Chokmah* (Wisdom)
- 3 *Binah* (Understanding or Intelligence)
- 4 *Chesed* (Mercy or Grace) or *Gedullah* (Greatness)
- 5 *Geburah* (Severity or Power), *Din* (Judgement) or *Pahad* (Fear)
- 6 *Tifereth* (Beauty) or *Rahamim* (Mercy)
- 7 *Netsach* (Victory or Constancy)
- 8 *Hod* (Glory or Majesty)
- 9 *Yesod* (Foundation) or *Tsedek* (Justice)
- 10 *Malkuth* (Kingdom) or *Shekhinah* (Divine Immanence)

In viewing the Tree as comprised of the three pillars of severity, equilibrium (or mildness) and mercy, each *sefira* can be classed as either negative (restrictive, passive and destructive), balancing, or positive (expansive, active and constructive) depending upon whether it lies on the pillar of severity, equilibrium or mercy respectively. It is important to realize that no value judgement is implied in the terms 'positive or masculine' and 'negative or feminine'; each is neither better nor worse than the other. Indeed, it can be said that evil is a synonym for imbalance, highlighting the vital, complementary natures of the pillars.

Each *sefira* in itself has a dual aspect of negative and positive: namely, it is negative or receptive in relation to the preceding *sefira* and positive or transmissive in relation to the succeeding *sefira*. So, for example, *Tifereth* is negative to *Geburah* and positive to *Netsach*. This has the consequence that, taking the Tree in isolation, *Kether* may be considered as entirely positive (masculine) and *Malkuth* entirely negative (feminine), in that they have no preceding or succeeding *sefira* respectively. However, as will be seen from the discussion of the Four Worlds below, "*Malkuth* in one world is *Kether* of the next": even these *sefirot* can be viewed in their dual aspect.

Other positive-negative relationships of the *sefirot* may be considered too. For example, *sefirot* in the same pillar can be viewed in relation to each other. Thus *Chesed* may be seen as negative to *Chokmah* and positive to *Netsach*. *Sefirot* on the middle pillar also have a strong sense of balance, each being a balance or resolving point of one or more of the three dualities (*Chokmah-Binah*, *Chesed-Geburah*, and *Netsach-Hod*) found between the outer pillars.

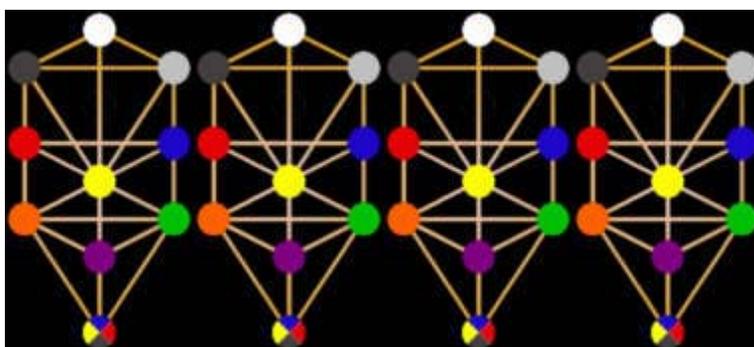
Before leaving the pillars, let us reiterate their use as a means to synthesize the Kabbalah with threefold systems. Examples of analogies between the pillars of severity, equilibrium and mercy and other trinities include Taoist concepts (*yin*, *Tao* and *yang*); tantric energy channels (*ida*, *sushumna* and *pingala*); Hindu (Shiva, Brahma and Vishnu) and Christian (Holy Spirit, Father and Son) trinities; alchemical concepts (Sulfur, Mercury and Salt); aspects of the Goddess (Crone, Mother and Maiden); phases of the moon (waning, full and waxing); and the Hebrew "Mother" letters (*Mem*, *Aleph* and *Shin*). Knowledge of any of these can help enrich your knowledge of the Kabbalah through association with the Tree, and vice versa. This method of analogy can be applied to each *sefira* individually, to the pillars or triangles of the Tree, to the planes, the Worlds or any other way the Tree can be conceived. The balance of structure and flexibility in the Tree gives it its great strength as a means of assimilation, understanding and interconnectivity.

One final attribution of the pillars that is well worth reflecting upon is that of the three precepts to Enlightenment, which can correspond to the pillars of severity, mercy and mildness respectively: Self-control, Self-knowledge and Self-realization.

Da'ath

In addition to the ten *sefirot*, the diagram of the Tree of Life above shows the dark and unlabeled "*sefira*" which is not a *sefira*", *Da'ath*. This "*sefira*" has no number and no position on the Tree in relation to the other *sefirot*, though when it is shown it is located centrally in the Abyss (between the planes of *Binah-Chokmah* and *Geburah-Chesed*) with no explicit connection to any other *sefira*. *Da'ath* is Knowledge, and is sometimes considered as being an expression of *Binah* and *Chokmah* combined. It is a place of balanced power.

The Four Worlds



The *sefirot*, introduced in our discussion of the Tree of Life, can usefully be considered on their own, but Kabbalists further refine the system by viewing them as acting on or through four different levels or worlds which form a hierarchy of their own. Just as from *Kether* to *Malkuth* there is a successive movement from the abstract to the manifest, so there is in the Kabbalistic worlds from *Atziluth* to *Assiah*:

<i>Atziluth</i>	Archetypal World (World of Emanations) or Divine World
<i>Briah</i>	Creative World or World of Thrones
<i>Yetsirah</i>	Formative World
<i>Assiah</i>	Manifest World

These four worlds can be considered as a linear hierarchy, each containing its own full Tree, in which *Malkuth* in one world becomes *Kether* of the world below, and *Kether* of one world becomes *Malkuth* of the world above. *Malkuth* is seen as the complementary fulfillment of *Kether*: the first is Divine Immanence, the latter Divine Transcendence.

An alternative is to view the four worlds as being expressed through a single Tree. *Atziluth* is expressed through the *sefira Kether*; *Briah* through *Chokmah* and *Binah*; *Yetsirah* through the six *sefirot Chesed* to *Yesod*; and *Assiah* through *Malkuth*. (Some prefer to view *Atziluth* as acting through both *Kether* and *Chokmah*, and *Briah* as acting through *Binah* alone.)

Both systems of either one or four Trees are equally valid and are used according to context, rather like the physicist viewing light as a wave of energy or a stream of particles depending on circumstance. A further outlook is that each *sefira* can be viewed as a whole Tree itself, giving ten Trees and one hundred *sefirot*. Kabbalistically these numbers can be considered equivalent as, using techniques similar to numerology, 100, 10 and 1 are fundamentally one ($1+0+0 = 1+0 = 1$).

The fourfold aspect given to each *sefira* by its existence in each of the four worlds allows application of the Kabbalah to fourfold systems such as the western elements (Fire, Air, Water and Earth), the letters of the Tetragrammaton (Hebrew Name of God: *Yod, He, Vau, final He*), the Jungian functions and the Minor Arcana of the Tarot. The latter is very important in the Western Kabbalah: each of the four Tarot suits contains precisely ten numbered cards (as do our modern playing cards which are derived from the Tarot), and so a Tarot deck contains a representation of the Tree in each of four worlds. The four court cards in each suit offer a further fourfold correspondence, and each of the twenty-two Major Arcana cards corresponds to one of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and to one of the twenty-two paths joining the *sefirot* on the Tree of Life.

For use in prayer, meditation or magic, each *sefira* is assigned a Name of God to represent its essence in *Atziluth*, an Archangel for *Briah*, an Angelic Host for *Yetsirah*, and a Mundane Chakra (generally expressed through planetary forces) for *Assiah*.

<i>Sefira</i>	Divine Name	Archangel	Angelic Host	Mundane Chakra
Kether	Eheieh ("I am")	Metatron	Chioth Ha Qodesh	Rashith ha-Gilgalim, Primum Mobile
Chokmah	Yah ("Lord")	Ratziel	Auphanium	Mazloth, Zodiac
Binah	Yhvh Elohim ("Lord God")	Tzaphkiel	Aralim	Shabbathai, Saturn
Chesed	El ("God")	Tzadkiel	Chasmalim	Tzedek, Jupiter
Geburah	Elohim Gibor ("Almighty God")	Khamael	Seraphim	Madim, Mars

Tifereth	Yhvh Eloah ve-Daath ("Lord God of Knowledge")	Mikael	Malakim	Shemesh, Sun
Netsach	Yhvh Tzabaoth ("Lord of Hosts")	Auriel	Elohim	Nogah, Venus
Hod	Elohim Tzaboath ("God of Hosts")	Raphael	Beni Elohim	Kokab, Mercury
Yesod	Shaddai El Chai ("Almighty Living God")	Gabriel	Ashim	Levanah, Moon
Malkuth	Adonai ha-Aretz ("Lord of Earth")	Sandalphon	Kerubim	Cholam Yesodoth, Elements

The Qelippot

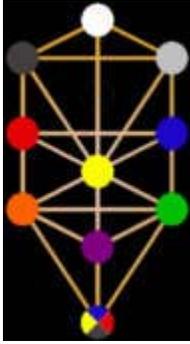
Each *sefira*, introduced in our discussion of the Tree of Life, has its unbalanced aspect; and these are said to form the infernal tree of the *qelippot* ("harlots" or "shells" - singular, *qelippa*). This tree may be viewed as growing down from *Malkuth* of *Assiah* (see the discussion of the Four Worlds) in an inversion of the Divine Tree. Thus the unbalanced *qelippa* corresponding to *Malkuth* stands above that which corresponds to *Kether* - matter as master of spirit, an inversion of the natural order of Creation.

The *qelippotic* equivalent of the supernal triad, *Kether*, *Chokmah* and *Binah*, consists of *Tohu* (the Formless), *Bohu* (the Void) and *Chashek* (the Darkness) respectively. The remaining seven *qelippot* correspond to seven hells. On the plane of *Atziluth*, the *qelippot* have no influence, and so there is no *qelippotic* equivalent of the Name of God. There is, however, *qelippotic* influence in the three lower worlds. In *Briah*, the Archangel of each *sefira* has a corresponding Devil of the *qelippa*; in *Yetsirah* each Angelic Host is matched by a Cohort of Demons; and in *Assiah* each Mundane Chakra has a corresponding Infernal Habitation.

It is important to make the distinction between true and apparent evil. *Geburah* may be considered "evil" in its cruel, destructive aspects; but the true essence of *Geburah* is vital as a balance to the otherwise wanton inclusiveness of *Chesed*. It is an error to view one half of a dynamic duality as "good" and the other "evil": both are necessary for balance, to prevent the true evil of imbalance. It is precisely the unbalanced aspects of each *sefira* that are to be found in the *qelippot*. The *qelippotic* equivalent of *Geburah* really is pure destructive cruelty, not as a balance to anything else, but solely for its own sake. Thus the *qelippot* represent true, active evil, and it is part of the Great Work to neutralize such forces, not by suppression or subjugation, but by bringing them into balance as aspects of their corresponding *sefirot*.

One way of considering the formation of the *qelippot* is to see them as a direct consequence of the "Lightning Flash of Creation" in which the *sefirot* were emanated in order, one from the other, from *Kether* down to its fulfillment in *Malkuth*. At the formation of one *sefira*, and before the subsequent emanation of its successor, that *sefira* was in a sense unbalanced. For example, with *Chokmah* formed but not having yet emanated its balancing successor *Binah*, this unbalanced state of *Chokmah* created a pattern around which the *qelippa Bohu* could later crystallize.

Finally, it is worth noting briefly that the *qelippot* can also be viewed as being accessed through the "*sefira* which is not a *sefira*", *Da'ath*. This "*sefira*" has no number and no position on the Tree in relation to the other *sefirot*, though when it is shown it is located centrally in the Abyss (between the planes of *Binah-Chokmah* and *Geburah-Chesed*) and with no explicit connection to any other *sefira*.



Da'ath is Knowledge, but consider the use of Knowledge without Understanding (*Binah*).

The Negative Veils

The major problem that Mystics of all eras have come up against in trying to express their transcendental experiences to others is that these experiences lie beyond the bounds of the rational (and even intuitional) mind on which human written and verbal communication is based. Many methods have been tried, including allegory, antinomy, poetry and mundane approximation; but all founder on the fact that transcendental experience cannot be adequately conveyed through sub-transcendental means of communication.

In Kabbalism, this problem occurs especially in discussions of the higher *sefirot* on the Tree of Life, and becomes insurmountable in discussing that which lies beyond or above the Tree. The manifest Tree expressed through the *sefirot* in the four worlds is as much as can usefully be conveyed to the human mind through language; and beyond this, beyond *Kether* of *Atziluth*, are drawn the Three Veils of Negative Existence: *en* (Nothing), *en sof* (Limitless Nothing), and *en sof or* (Limitless Light). (*Atziluth* itself, and even *Briah*, are really beyond human conception, their "structure" being hinted at through the tangible expressions of the *sefirot* in the lower worlds.)

The very epithets "veil" and "negative existence" serve to remind us that what the Veils represent cannot be conceived of by the human mind, let alone expressed in words. The Veils thus serve as a backdrop in front of which we can see more clearly that which it is possible for our minds to apprehend, and as a goal for us to reach for and beyond at a later stage in our personal or collective evolution.

The Veils contain and conceal the unmanifest aspects of the *sefirot*, i.e. precisely those aspects which the human mind cannot comprehend. They are considered as depending back from *Kether*, or as aspects of *Kether* itself, which is brought into being by the concentration of the *en sof or*. Thus we can see the meaning of the important aphorism: "*Kether* is the *Malkuth* of the Unmanifest". So while *Kether* is "the First Cause" in the sense of being the first comprehensible point of manifestation, its cause is unknowable within the confines of the human mind (though this does not mean that it is absolutely unknowable) and this is expressed through the Veils. Though their appellations are meaningless, they are nonetheless carefully chosen to be redolent of that which they represent. Thus, the statement that *Kether* is manifested through the focusing of the *en sof or* is meaningless in itself, but can convey a shadow of its mystery to our transcendental selves.

Further Notes on the Veils

The first *sefira*, *Kether*, is the uncreated and all-encompassing "point" of actionless unity which is both transcendent and immanent in its evanescent reflection: the Creation. The immanence of *Kether* is experienced in progressively more diluted forms in the remainder of the *sefirot*; its transcendence is found in the three Veils of Negative Existence which are generally considered as lying back from unity rather than being separate from it. Thus the same terms are often applied to either the Unity or the Veils: "The Concealed of the Concealed", etc.

Negative Existence is, by its very essence, beyond definition; and the fact that there is considered to be a triad of Negative Veils should not detract from their essential unity: the three-fold process is a fundamental precept of so many occult systems. The triadic unity of the Negative Veils foreshadows the triadic unity of the Supernals. The three Veils may also be named as below, and are sometimes numbered 0, 00 and 000 respectively:

A/N (Ain) Nothingness 0

A/N SVP (Ain Soph) The Limitless 00

A/N SVP AVR (Ain Soph Aur) The Limitless Light 000

These Veils can be considered to hold the transcendent aspects of the manifest *sefirot*, and as the Veils are focused on *Kether*, the first *sefira* can be thought of as the *Malkuth* of the transcendent tree.

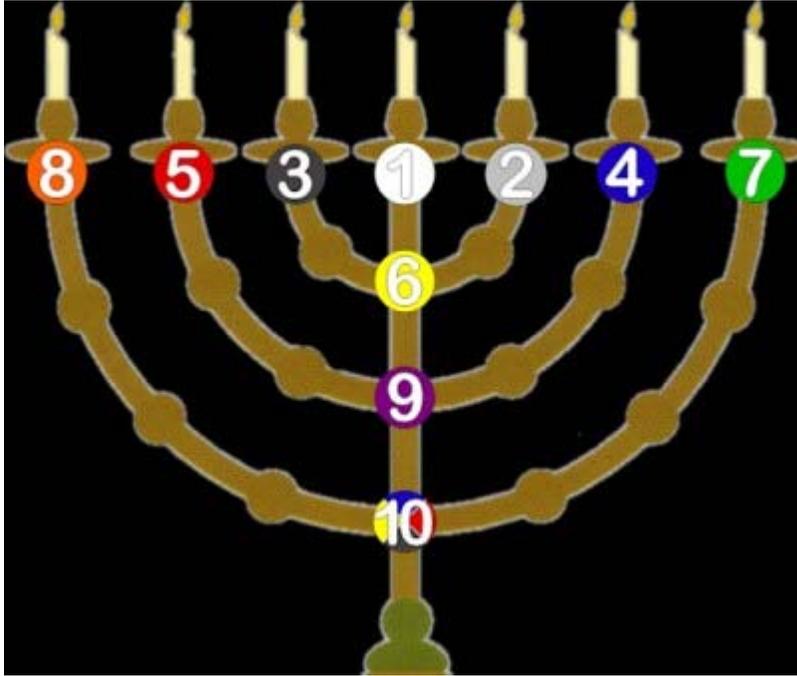
The word *A/N* consists of three letters, and the corresponding first veil foreshadows the first three *sefirot* in their hidden ideas. In the same way, the second and third veils foreshadow the first six and the first nine *sefirot* respectively. Now nine is considered to be a number of completion, beyond which progression is only possible by a return to unity, but on a different level. This is easily seen in the number ten's usual representation in Arabic numerals, where the circle 0 represents the Negative from which the Unity 1 is newly derived. Thus the Limitless Light of Negativity, while not having an origin in a point, does have a focus in the number one of the *sefirot*: *Kether*, which may thus be considered the number 10 or *Malkuth* of the veiled *sefirot*.

"*Kether* is in *Malkuth* and *Malkuth* is in *Kether*."

*The boundless void containing all
Where all is light:
No start, no end
But tending to a point
Of mirrored unity
Which is itself.*



The Menorah and the Tree of Life



One of the most ancient symbols of Judaism is the seven-branched candlestick known as the menorah. While it is an important symbol of the exoteric Jewish faith, the menorah has esoteric associations linking it to *Otz Chiim*, the Tree of Life. The form of the menorah was reputedly given to Moses by God, as related in *Exodus 25:31-37*:

Make a lampstand of pure gold and hammer it out, base and shaft; its flower-like cups, buds and blossoms shall be of one piece with it. Six branches are to extend from the sides of the lampstand - three on one side and three on the other. Three cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms are to be on one branch, three on the next branch, and the same for all six branches extending from the lampstand. And on the lampstand there are to be four cups shaped like almond flowers with buds and blossoms. One bud shall be under the first pair of branches extending from the lampstand, a second bud under the second pair, and a third bud under the third pair - six branches in all. The buds and branches shall be of one piece with the lampstand, hammered out of pure gold. Then make its seven lamps and set them upon it so that they light the space in front of it.

The stress that this passage places on the menorah being constructed from a single piece of pure gold brings home the essential purity and unity underlying creation: the menorah arises from and is an expression of pure unity, just as the Tree of Life arises from and is an expression of the *en sof or*. The seven candle holders and three joints where the branches meet the central column represent the ten *sefirot* of the Tree of Life. The central column corresponds to the central Pillar of Equilibrium (*sefirot* 1, 6, 9 and 10), the holders to its left correspond to the Pillar of Severity (*sefirot* 3, 5 and 8) and the holders on its right to the Pillar of Mercy (*sefirot* 2, 4 and 7).

The names and numbers of the ten *sefirot* are given in order below. The most usual name for each *sefira* is given first, followed by some alternatives.

- 1 *Kether* (Crown) or *Kether Elyon* (Supreme Crown)
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- 6 *Tifereth* (Beauty) or *Rahamim* (Mercy)
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