

The Ten Šēfirōth in Diverse Forms

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TEN ŠĔFĪRŌTH or “splendors” from ’ēin sōf was depicted by ancient and medieval Qabbalists in a multitude of ways. Because the whole truth can never be contained in one symbol, nor even in a score of them, it is in the assembly of various aspects of any one teaching that a larger vision may be attained. This diversity of symbol serves on the one hand to widen and universalize one’s comprehension, thus reducing dogmatism; and on the other hand acts as a disciplinary aid to memory development.

In a medieval manuscript of the thirteenth century, unpublished except for portions incorporated by Adolf Jellinek in his *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kabbala* (Contributions to the History of the Kabbala), Rabbi Isaac of Akko of the School of Segovia gives a series of these illustrations, which we quote from Isaac Myer’s translation:*

Illustrations delivered orally, served to explain the mystery

* *Qabbalah*, pp. 251-2, from the manuscript of Rabbi Isaac of Akko: “Enlightenment of the Eyes,” *Has-Sēfer Mē’ērath ’Ēinayīm*.

of the Unity of the Ten Sephiroth in themselves, which is always concentrated in Ain Soph, from Ain Soph to the Ain Soph. . . . Remember that some of the Qabbalists compare it (the Unity) to a chain forming an uninterrupted unity by its joined links; . . .

This is a graphic symbol of the inner being of planets and stars, described in theosophy as a planetary and/or solar chain of globes. Each *sēfirāh* or “link” (be it globe, planet, or sun) is within its own realm an independent, self-contained entity, composed of its own substance and manifesting its unique character; nonetheless each *sēfirāh* is bound with the whole and with the other *sēfirōth* or “links” in unbreakable unity. In *The Secret Doctrine* (2:23) HPB writes: “In the ancient Cosmogonies, the visible and the invisible worlds are the double links of one and the same chain,” i.e., the upper *sēfirōth* and the lower, the “invisible” and the “visible,” are all, individually and collectively, links of the one chain.

The second illustration likens the *sēfirōth* “to *various waters issuing from one source*, and separating into many rivers, which become (again) united in the ocean; from whence they return again, from beneath the earth, to their former divisions; and so on in an uninterrupted unity; . . .” (Myer). On this point the *Zohar* says:

The form in which he is generally depicted is to be compared to a very expansive sea; for the waters of the sea are in themselves without a limit or form, and it is only when they spread themselves upon the earth that they assume a form (דִּמְיוֹן [dimyōn]). We can now make the following calculation: the *source* of the sea’s water and *the water stream* pro-

ceeding therefrom to spread itself *are two*. A great reservoir is then formed, just as if a huge hollow had been dug; this reservoir is called sea, and is *the third*. The unfathomable deep divides itself into *seven streams*, resembling seven long vessels. The source, the water stream, the sea and the seven streams make together *ten*. And when the master breaks the vessels which he has made, the waters return to the source, and then only remain the pieces of these vessels, dried up and without any water. It is in this way that the Cause of Causes gave rise to the *ten Sephiroth*.

— 1:42b, 43a, Ginsburg, p. 95

In this extract we have a profound symbolism: the Waters of Space (ʿēin sōf), without form or shape, as soon as the “last vibration of the seventh eternity thrills through infinitude” (*SD* 1:28) spread and take form (*dimyōn*). The source of the Waters, the current or stream of water that flows from it, and the reservoir into which the stream empties, are the three unmanifest sēfirōth — Kether, Ḥokhmāh, and Bīnāh — from which issue the seven *kēlīm* (vessels), the seven manifest sēfirōth.

Comparing the Qabbalistic statement that “the master breaks the vessels,” with a stanza from *The Secret Doctrine*, “Then the sons dissociate and scatter . . .” (1:30), we see two ways of describing the withdrawal of the life-hosts from the world or chain of worlds for the period of dissolution which follows each period of activity or manifestation. “The waters return to their source,” but not the vessels, the vehicles which the life-waves use, are cast off and broken into pieces, yet the essences endure and “return to their source” as the *Zohar* says; or as the Stanzas of Dzyan have it, they “return

into their mother's bosom at the end of the great day, and re-become one with her."

In the third illustration,

others compare the matter of the union of Mercy and Severity [the two opposing Pillars of *sēfirōthal* power] to a *precious stone* which unites in itself, the various peculiarities of other precious stones of different qualities (colours?) and still remains a perfect unity; . . . — Myer, pp. 251-2*

The myriad facets of the one precious stone remind one of a title of the Buddha — "diamond heart" — which signifies that the Buddha or "awakened one" had so polished and perfected the seven (ten or twelve) facets of his constitution that his whole nature is crystal-clear. The power of this symbol is not so much in the perfection of one or more facet(s), but in the symmetry of the whole, in the interplay of each to each, of each to the whole: each part subordinate to the whole, and yet each part essential to the integrity of the whole.

Fourthly, "others, take as an illustration, the unity of the different colors in *the flame proceeding from a burning coal*, in which, both flame and coal, constitute a unity; . . ." (Myer). This symbol is frequently used in the *Zohar*, as well as in the *Sēfer Yētsirāh*. The *Zohar* further states:

In order to acquire the knowledge of a holy unity, we must examine the flame which rises from a fire-place or from a lighted lamp; we see then, at first, two kinds of light, a glistening white one and a black or blue one; the white light is above and rises in a straight line, the black or blue light is beneath, and appears to be the seat of the first; yet the two

lights are so closely united that they form one single flame only. But the seat formed by the blue or black light is, in its turn, attached to the wick which is still under it. The white light never changes, it always remains white; but several shades are distinguished in the lower light. The lower light takes, moreover, two opposite directions; above it is attached to the white light, and below it is attached to the burning matter, but this matter continually consumes itself, and constantly rises towards the upper light. It is thus that all that is joins again to the one unity.

— 1:51a, Franck, pp. 166-7

Note the sentence that contains the essence of Zoharic thought: “The white light never changes, it always remains white; but several shades are distinguished in the lower light” — i.e., Kether, the first emanation or first Logos, does not change while the lower sēfirōth are distinguished by the variety in quality of their individual lights.

For the fifth illustration, Isaac of Akko chose “the simile of a *bunch of grapes*, in which both bunch and grapes are one” (Myer). The symbolism is universal: that of the wine of the spirit inherent in every aspect of nature. While each grape is a discrete entity, by itself it constitutes nothing permanent; when combined, the bunch then suggests a complete sēfirōthal tree, the unity of diverse elements.

In the sixth illustration, Isaac of Akko states:

I have furthermore heard from the mouth of the most prominent of our learned men, the metaphor of *the tree with its roots* (the Ten Sephiroth) in the earth and its numerous branches, twigs, leaves, veins, fruits, and their rinds and kernels, which all are derived from each other, and yet all

draw from the marrow of the tree, and thus all collectively form a complete and unbroken unity, from the roots to the very top of the tree, because they all are of, and point to, one and the same essential source. — Myer, p. 252

As we have seen, the tree of life or lives, *‘ēts ḥayyim*, is described variously in the *Zohar*: at one time with its roots in the earth and its branches ascending spiritwards, as recorded by Isaac of Akko; at other times “as a tree having its roots in heaven, the trunk and branches being the several Sephiroth” (Myer, p. 253); and still again as a “Tree of Life Below” which reflects a “Tree of Life Above,” as in the following:

But while it is permitted to reveal, now is the time to reveal it, that all the *Neshamoth* [plural of *Nēshāmāh*] souls, go out from that great Tree and from that mighty River which flows out from Eden, and all the *Ru'bin* [plural of *rūah*] spirits come out from that other small tree. The *Neshamah* soul, comes from Above, the *Rua'h* spirit, from Below, and unite in one . . . and nothing is ever lost. — 2:99b, Myer, p. 413

Above in the Tree of Life exist no strange *Q'lippoths* [shells] for it is said: “With Thee dwelleth no Evil” (Ps. v, 5) but in the Tree, Below, exist the strange *Q'lippoths*.

— 1:27a, Myer, p. 436

Another variant of the great tree is seen in the following extract from the *Zohar*:

This Tree goes up to the heavenly clouds and it is hidden between three mountains. From under the three mountains, the Tree goes out and ascends to the Above and comes down to the Below. This House is supplied by it with drink, and there is hidden in it (that House) many hidden things

Above, which are not known. This Tree is revealed in the daytime and covered (hidden) in the night.

— 1:172a, Myer, p. 385

The symbol of the tree of life or lives under whatever form is one of the most ancient. It plays an important part in the great world religions, especially when represented as a tree with its roots placed in the spiritual worlds, its branches descending into matter. The following quotations from *The Secret Doctrine* illuminate this Zoharic concept:

The Norse Ask, the Hesiodic Ash-tree, whence issued the men of the generation of bronze, the Third Root-Race, and the *Tzite* tree of the *Popol-Vuh*, out of which the Mexican *third* race of men was created, are all one. This may be plainly seen by any reader. But the Occult reason why the Norse Yggdrasil, the Hindu Aswatha, the Gogard, the Hellenic tree of life, and the Tibetan Zampun, are one with the Kabalistic Sephirothal Tree, and even with the Holy Tree made by Ahura Mazda, and the Tree of Eden — who among the western scholars can tell? Nevertheless, the fruits of all those “Trees,” whether Pippala or Haoma or yet the more prosaic apple, are the “plants of life,” in fact and verity. The prototypes of our races were all enclosed in the microcosmic tree, which grew and developed *within and under* the great mundane macrocosmic tree, . . .

— 2:97

The tree *was reversed*, and its roots were generated in Heaven and grew out of the Rootless Root of all-being. Its trunk grew and developed, crossing the planes of Pleroma, it shot out crossways its luxuriant branches, first on the plane of hardly differentiated matter, and then downward till they touched the terrestrial plane. Thus, the Asvattha, tree of Life and Being, whose destruction alone leads to immortality, is

said in the Bhagavatgita to grow with its roots above and its branches below (ch. xv). The roots represent the Supreme Being, or First Cause, the LOGOS; but one has to go beyond those roots to *unite oneself with Krishna*, who, says Arjuna (xi.), is “greater than Brahman, and First Cause . . . the indestructible, that which is, that which is not, and what is beyond them.” . . . He only who goes *beyond* the roots shall never return, *i.e.*, shall reincarnate no more during this “age” of Brahmā.

It is only when its pure boughs had touched the terrestrial mud of the garden of Eden, of our Adamic race, that this Tree got soiled by the contact and lost its pristine purity; . . .

— 1:406

Still other analogies for the ten *sēfirōth* are found in the various books of the *Zohar*. A seventh illustration compares them to sparks produced from the anvil or “by steel from the flint, which are always hidden in the latter as a potency and unity, and brought into visibility only by friction” (Myer, p. 252). This has reference in a broad sense to the emanation of “lives,” whether of humans or worlds, from ’ēin sōf; and specifically to the “sparks” which were “old worlds which were destroyed.” The sparks or scintillae are the myriads of imbodying lives which flash forth from ’ēin sōf. Compare this with the Stanzas of Dzyan:

From the effulgency of light — the ray of the ever-darkness — sprung in space the re-awakened energies; . . . And these are the essences, the flames, the elements, the builders, the numbers [i.e., the *sēfirōth*], the arupa, the rupa, and the force of Divine Man [’Ādām Qadmōn] — the sum total. And from the Divine Man emanated the forms, the sparks, . . .

— SD 1:30

As regards the particular sense in which the *Zohar* refers to the “sparks” being “ancient worlds which were destroyed,” the *Hā-’Idrā’ Zūṭā’ Qaddīshā’* (The Small Holy Assembly) states:

421. And therefore were the Prior Worlds destroyed, for the Prior Worlds were formed without (*equilibrated*) conformation.

422. But these which existed not in conformation are called vibrating flames and sparks [*zīqīn nītsōtsīn*], like as when the worker in stone striketh sparks from the flint with his hammer, or as when the smith smiteth the iron and dasheth forth sparks on every side.

423. And these sparks which fly forth flame and scintillate, but shortly they are extinguished. And these are called the Prior Worlds.

424. And therefore have they been destroyed, and persist not, until the Most Holy Ancient One can be conformed, and the workman can proceed unto His work.

— Mathers, p. 301

Many were the attempts to build the worlds, but each was unsuccessful until the Holy Ancient One had assumed control, by producing a “balance” (*mathqēlā’*) between the spiritual and material, for only then could the sēfirōthal tree of lives endure. As the sixth Stanza of Dzyan says:

The older wheels rotated downward and upward. . . .
The Mother’s spawn filled the whole (*Kosmos*). There were battles fought between the Creators and the Destroyers, and battles fought for Space; the seed appearing and reappearing continuously.
— SD 1:199

HPB comments:

The phrase “Older wheels” refers to the worlds or Globes of our chain as they were during the “previous Rounds.” The present Stanza, when explained esoterically, is found embodied entirely in the Kabalistic works. Therein will be found the very history of the evolution of those countless Globes which evolve after a periodical Pralaya, rebuilt from old material into new forms. The previous Globes disintegrate and reappear transformed and perfected for a new phase of life. In the Kabala, worlds are compared to sparks which fly from under the hammer of the great Architect — LAW, the law which rules all the smaller Creators. — Ibid.

Another illustration presents the sēfirōth as a series of concentric circles or spheres, with Kether at the outermost and Malkhūth at the center. The accompanying diagram (between pp. 54-5) of the ten sēfirōth arranged as a series of concentric circles or spheres is both ancient and profound, for the circle (or egg or sphere) has from immemorial antiquity been revered as a symbol of continuous and ever-becoming life. HPB writes:

The Spirit of Life and Immortality was everywhere symbolized by a circle: . . . The incorporeal intelligences (the Planetary Spirits, or Creative Powers) were always represented under the form of circles. In the primitive philosophy of the Hierophants these *invisible* circles were the prototypic causes and builders of all the heavenly orbs, which were their *visible* bodies or coverings, and of which they were the souls. It was certainly a universal teaching in antiquity. (See *Ezekiel*, ch. I.)

“Before the mathematical numbers,” says Proclus (*in Quinto Libro EUCLID*), “there are the *Self-moving* numbers; before the figures apparent — the vital figures, and before

producing the material worlds *which move in a Circle*, the Creative Power produced the *invisible* Circles.”

— *SD* 2:552

Substituting the term *sēfirōth* for planetary spirits or creative powers in HPB’s reference, or again in Proclus’ for the words “numbers” and “figures,” gives an accurate picture of the Qabbalistic approach — which is not strange at all because, if sprung from the same source, each of the world systems of thought ought to prove identic in essentials.

The correlation imbodyed in the diagram of the planetary and cosmic influences with the ten *sēfirōth* is patterned after the generally accepted listing given by most Qabbalistic writers, though slight differences in order are observable among them. In considering the correlation of the seven sacred planets (*shib’āh kōkhābīm*) with the *sēfirōth*, the significant point is not the actual order but the continual interaction of spiritual, intellectual, psychical, and physical energies among the zodiac, sun, and planets with our earth, or among the globes of a planetary chain.

The symbol of concentric spheres is not peculiar to Zoharic thought: it is found in many cultures. For example, in the Sumerian and Babylonian cosmogonies, it survives in the ziggurats or stepped pyramids where each story represents a different planet. It is found in Greek thought under various forms, notably in the teaching of the “crystalline spheres” enunciated by Eudoxus of the fourth century BCE, where the planets were described as

hollow, transparent globes enclosed one within the other and surrounding the quiescent body of the earth; first,

the “primum mobile,” which carried around all the inner spheres and communicated to them a universal motion, next a sphere for all the stars, then one for the sun, one for the moon, and one for each of the five planets then known.

— *The Romance of Astronomy: The Music of the Spheres*
by Florence Armstrong Grondal, p. 199

A ninth illustration of the sēfirōth is archetypal man within an ovoid sphere, where the various members of the human body are depicted as corporeal representatives of the ten cosmic sēfirōth. While this is a graphic symbol, it tends to anthropomorphize the original cosmic conception of the celestial and planetary oneness with man as a living flame, as a compound of spiritual, intellectual, and vital fires. When these elements are included in the diagram of the concentric circles, their universal aspect is apparent: the ten lights or splendors are viewed at one and the same time as the cosmic, solar, and planetary spheres; the seven or ten globes of a planetary chain; the ten numbers issuing from no-number,* as well as the ten elements of the body.

A tenth illustration depicts the sēfirōth as a nut, the kernel of which is the “light,” sheathed in a series of shells or rinds, which are the “envelopes” or “palaces” surrounding that light. After comparing the world to a nut whose kernel is enwrapped in a series of shells, the *Zohar* says:

It is even thus with the entire universe, superior and inferior; from the mysterious superior point, as far as the extremity of all the Degrees (Sephiroth), all form one whole; of which the parts are formed, one in the other, insomuch that they

*Cf. Stanza 4, *SD* I:30-1.

serve as shells, the one to the other. The first point (the Sefirah Kether, the Ego or Will) was an interior and incommensurable Light, so that we are not able to know its splendour, subtlety and purity, until (we reach) that which has developed itself by expansion. That expansion of the point, becomes a temple or palace, enveloping this same point, that is, the Light which we cannot know because of its great splendour. But that palace (Sefirah) which serves as the envelope of that occult point, is itself an incommensurable Light, without containing equally the same subtlety and splendour, as the first concealed and occult point. That sphere is again extended through a new expansion (forming) a first Light, an expansion which serves as an envelope of that subtle sphere (which is) clear and altogether interior. The portions of existence continued thus to develop, the one from the other, and to envelope themselves the one in the other. So that they each and in totality, served as mutual envelopes, and that they (relatively the one to each and to all the others), are as the kernel and the shell, but yet all are one in totality, because that which is one envelope, is at the same time, a kernel for another degree. All absolutely occurs the same in these inferior regions; and man in this world is made after that resemblance, being (composed) of a kernel and a shell, which are the spirit and the body. Such is in general the order of the universe. — 1:19b-20a, Myer, pp. 190-1

In an eleventh illustration, the sēfirōth are pictured as a lightning flash, in its turn shooting forth flames; or again as a series of “immeasurable lights” or “splendors.” The *Sēfer Yētsirāh* says: “Ten are the sephiroth out of the Void whose appearance is like a flash of lightning” (1:5). In the portion of the *Zohar* entitled *Hā-’Idrā’ Zūṭā’ Qaddīshā’* (The Small

Holy Assembly) occur several passages where the *sēfirōth* are compared to a series of lights, flames, or splendors:

74. He the Eternal Ancient of the Ancient Ones is the highest Crown among the Supernals, wherewith all Diadems and Crowns are crowned.

75. And from Him are all the Lights [*sēfirōth*] illuminated, and they flash forth flames, and shine.

76. But He verily is the Supreme Light, which is hidden, which is not known.

77. And all the other Lights are kindled by Him, and derive (their) splendour (from him). . . .

85. Furthermore, the Most Holy Ancient One is symbolized and concealed under the conception of the Unity, for He himself is One, and all things are One.

86. And thus all the other Lights are sanctified, are restricted, and are bound together in the Unity or Monad, and are One; . . . — Mathers, pp. 267-8

The above illustrations by no means exhaust the fund of Qabbalistic imagery. So fertile was their inventive power, and so profoundly imbued were they with this conception of the *sēfirōth*al energies pouring forth from the Boundless — *'ēin sōf* — the Qabbalists read into even the most ordinary human affairs the symbol of the tree of life. They even compared the unrolling of the *sēfirōth* to peeling the skins of an onion, the layers of the skin, etc.

The predominant thought throughout symbol, diagram, and metaphor was, as HPB expressed it, that “All these personified Powers are not evolutions from one another, but so many aspects of the one and sole manifestation of the

ABSOLUTE all” (*SD* 1:350). Or again, as Krishna explained to Arjuna:

Although (I am) unborn, of imperishable selfhood, although (I am) lord of all beings, yet while abiding in my own natural state, I take birth through the illusion of self (i.e., I take birth by my own power — *ātmamāyayā*).

— *Bhagavad-Gītā*, ch. 4, śl. 6

